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Review of *Great Hatred: The Assassination of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson MP* by Ronan McGreevy

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In some places she seems to accept what she elsewhere treats as myth, but her wonderfully written and engaging book is an outstanding piece of scholarship.

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Ronan McGreevy, *Great Hatred: The Assassination of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson MP*. London: Faber & Faber, 2022. xxii + 442pp. ISBN 978-0571372805 (hardback). Price £20.

On 22 June 1922 Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson unveiled a memorial at Liverpool Street Station in London to Great Southern and Western Railway men who had died in the Great War. Soon afterwards he was shot dead on the doorstep of his Belgravia home. The two assassins, who were chased through the streets by a baying crowd and wounding two policemen and a civilian before being apprehended, were members of the London Irish Republican Army (IRA). Ronan McGreevy's book explores this sensational killing and its wider ramifications for Ireland in 1922.

Two days after Wilson's large and widely attended state funeral, the provisional government of the Irish Free State ordered that fire be opened (with artillery supplied from London) on opponents of the recently-signed Anglo-Irish Treaty, then encamped in the Four Courts in Dublin. The British government, which blamed the Four Courts faction for Wilson's killing, had demanded action though the provisional government was also motivated by events in Dublin, not least in avoiding the impression of being led by London. A different spark would likely have been found elsewhere eventually, but Wilson's death certainly hastened the outbreak of civil war in Ireland.

Following his lively description of the events of 22 June, McGreevy provides a wide-ranging survey of Wilson's family background and military career. From a middling Protestant gentry family in Currygrane, County Longford, Wilson failed the Sandhurst entrance exam three times and the exam for Woolwich twice, but entered the army through the Longford Militia and proved himself a capable officer. He ended the Great War as Chief of the Imperial General Staff. The Wilsons were staunchly unionist, but not unpopular landlords in a majority nationalist community and Wilson's brother Jemmy, who remained in Longford, even earned grudging respect from local republicans. Henry Wilson's own unionism was uncompromising, and he considered the Irish unsuitable for self-government.

As an advisor on insurgency in Ireland, Wilson favoured firm and open military action against the Irish Republican Army, baulking at covert assassinations and reprisals ('If these men ought to be murdered, the Government ought to murder them'). The Anglo-Irish Treaty that followed was, for Wilson, an 'abject surrender to murderers'. An 'imperialist above all', as McGreevy describes him, Wilson saw secession in southern Ireland as a step towards the loss of the British Empire. His public pronouncements on Irish policy ultimately contributed to his death.

One theme that emerges from the book is the complexities of allegiance and identity. Wilson, though born into a southern Irish unionist family, declared himself an Ulsterman by lineage and saw no contradiction between his Irishness and his imperialism. The men who pulled the trigger on Wilson, Reginald Dunne and Joseph O'Sullivan, were London-born (privately educated) Irish republicans. Both were veterans of the Great War. The most original chapters in the book draw on testimonies and recently released pension applications from republican contemporaries to paint a picture of Dunne and O'Sullivan, their world, and their demise. Dunne, a veteran of the Irish Guards, has left us with much a greater written record and makes for an interesting and complex character. Described by McGreevy as possessing the 'worldview of an English Catholic intellectual, not an Irish revolutionary', he was widely read, devoutly Catholic, and could mentally recite classical music from memory. Born in London into an Irish immigrant family from a long Fenian tradition, O'Sullivan (the 'silent partner') was one of six brothers to join the British armed forces after 1914. He lost a leg at Passchendaele in 1917.

Shortly after retiring from military life in February 1922, Wilson was elected unopposed as MP for North Down and acted as a security advisor to government in the new Northern Ireland. Notwithstanding a tendency to militancy in his public rhetoric (he could be more circumspect in private correspondence), McGreevy suggests that Wilson was unfairly associated with the actions of the paramilitary Ulster Special Constabulary and blamed for draconian Special Powers legislation introduced by the Belfast government. Wilson had already been damned in republican eyes in 1920 for his role in blocking the passage to Dublin of the body of Terence McSwiney, who had died in Brixton on hunger strike, and also blamed for calling for the execution of eighteen-year-old Kevin Barry. Privately, he had opposed the latter. In a notorious letter to the prime minister of Northern Ireland, Sir James Craig, published in the press after his election as an MP, Wilson called for the reconquest of southern Ireland. McGreevy writes that this and his support for the northern government was to the detriment of his reputation and 'eventually cost him his life' (p. 120).

One of the burning questions surrounding Wilson's killing is on the responsibility for the order to carry out the assassination. It is a question for which McGreevy ultimately

– and perhaps unsurprisingly – fails to provide a definitive answer. At a meeting at a pub in Holborn the day before, Reginald Dunne was said to have declared that he would 'do something'. This perhaps suggests the killing was, as is most commonly suggested, carried out on the initiative of the killers. Their guilt was, though, never in question and – ultimately half-hearted – plans to rescue the two men were hatched and aborted alongside a public campaign for clemency. Dunne and O'Sullivan were executed on 10 August 1922.

McGreevy's study builds on the late Keith Jeffery's masterful biography of Wilson, drawing effectively on British and Irish newspapers and newly released archival material. Long passages of background material will, however, offer relatively little that is new to scholars of the period. Some of this – a discussion of republican assassinations going back to 1798 in Chapter 7, for instance – may even feel a little superfluous to the casual reader. But, on the whole, this is a well-written, engaging, and handsomely produced book. While we may never be able to fully attribute responsibility for the decision to shoot Wilson, *Great Hatred* is a timely reminder of its wider significance.

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Bastiaan Willems, *Violence in Defeat: The Wehrmacht on German Soil, 1944-1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Xvii + 348pp. 4 maps + 27 illustrations. ISBN 978-1108479721(hardback). Price £29.99.

When looking at the Eastern Front towards the end of the Second World War, specifically at how German civilians suffered once the front line crossed the German frontier, most work focuses on the Red Army's actions and little else. Since there were many atrocities committed by Red Army soldiers following the suffering forced upon them by the Nazi invaders, they are the easy target for the majority of the blame when considering acts of violence against the German populace. For the longest time the actions of the retreating Wehrmacht, full of battered and traumatised soldiers who were numbed to the war of extermination between the opposing ideals of National Socialism and Communism, were not examined in depth. The actions of Nazi Party officials and their policies up to and during the invasion of Germany have similarly often escaped scrutiny.