

Sir Henry Wilson

Sir Henry Wilson (1864-1922) served as British Director of Military Operations in the years immediately prior to war in 1914, and ultimately as Chief of the Imperial General Staff in 1918.

Born in County Longford in Ireland Wilson entered the army via the militia in 1882. After service in Burma he saw active service during the Second Boer War of 1899-1902.

With a promotion to Brigadier-General Wilson was subsequently made head of Camberley's Staff College in 1906, during which he strived to improve relations with the French army, for which he professed open admiration: the courtesy was duly returned, the French high command appreciating Wilson's fine grasp of the French language.

In 1910 he was appointed Director of Military Operations at the London War Office, during which time he prepared plans for the deployment of a British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to France in the event of war with Germany. Wilson expected to be appointed Chief of Staff to Sir John French - the inevitable Commander-in-Chief - in the event of war. However his support for the Curragh Mutiny made such an appointment unacceptable to the Liberal government.

In the event Sir Archibald Murray was appointed French's Chief of Staff, an appointment that proved uncomfortable for both men, with French much preferring Wilson's company. Wilson himself was given to frequenting French's GHQ, undermining Murray at every opportunity.

Meanwhile promoted to Major-General and then Lieutenant-General, Wilson came out in opposition to Lord Kitchener's plan for an independent BEF in France. With Sir William Robertson's appointment as successor to the unhappy Murray, Wilson found himself despatched to France as liaison officer to the French army, an appointment welcomed on both sides.

In December 1915 Wilson was appointed to (indifferent) command of IV Corps on the Western Front and served thereafter in a variety of appointments until Prime Minister David Lloyd George nominated him as British representative to the Allied Supreme War Council in November 1917, in which role he connived with Lloyd George to undermine Robertson (and therefore Commander-in-Chief Sir Douglas Haig) as CIGS.

The following February Robertson was removed and Wilson appointed his successor, in which capacity he served with energy and brilliance, working well with the Allied Supreme Commander Ferdinand Foch (much helped by a pre-existing friendship, and in stark contrast to his earlier difficulties in working with Henri-Philippe Petain the previous year).

At the Paris Peace Conference Wilson acted as Britain's chief military advisor but found himself in increasing disagreement with Lloyd George.

Retiring from service in February 1922 having been promoted Field Marshal and ennobled Wilson took up a position in Parliament (representing North Down), prominently opposing Irish independence. He was murdered by IRA terrorists in June 1922 while returning home from a formal dinner.