

 **Review ESSAY**

Elizabeth Greenhalgh. *Victory through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xv + 320 pp. Tables, notes, maps, index. ISBN-13: 9780521853842, ISBN-10: 0521853842.

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Since 1918, historians have not ignored the issue of coalition warfare during the Great War, but they have viewed it primarily from the perspective of only one country and have focused mostly on questions of command. More ink has been spilled on who “won” the war--the British, French, or Americans--than on how the coalition achieved success. Elizabeth Greenhalgh has written an admirable correction to this by providing a balanced analysis of the Franco-British coalition and by looking outside the narrow question of command. She argues convincingly, “victory was achieved because of, not in spite of, coalition.”

Greenhalgh’s work has two exceptional strengths. First, she has done meticulous research in France and Great Britain and examined not only the papers of the major actors but also those of lesser-known figures such as Etienne Clémentel and Edmond Buat. In the past authors of some of the best-known works in English on the coalition have relied excessively on English-language sources and have done inadequate research in France, resulting in interpretations that lean more toward London than Paris. After spending many hours in French archives, Greenhalgh has consciously and diligently gone beyond a simple Anglo-centric interpretation. Second, as she considered the Franco-British coalition, she looked outside issues of command and considered the far more complex issues of administration and logistics. Hardly recognized in the immediate post-war period, the importance of war-time logistical achievements has received little notice even in recent decades. Greenhalgh explains clearly and convincingly that it was the coalition’s strength in logistics, more than cooperation among French and British commanders on the battlefield, that gave the coalition success. She argues persuasively that the technocrats handling supply and transportation proved more “efficient” than those handling operations. These two strengths alone--her balanced interpretation and her recognition of logistical achievements--make her work valuable and contribute significantly to our broader understanding of the Great War.

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As one would expect, much of Greenhalgh's work focuses on issues associated with command. Very early in her book she acknowledges that the French had a low opinion of the British, especially of their generals, and that very few French generals spoke English. She also notes Field Marshal Sir John French's general disdain for French commanders since so many of them came from lower social classes. With one army using yards to measure distance and the other using meters, even the simplest tasks of firing artillery and moving infantry were difficult. More accustomed to criticizing than cooperating, it took some time for the two allies to deal with their differences and operate together effectively, and only extraordinary demands in the final desperate months of the war caused the two countries to mingle their combat forces significantly. Unity of command became possible only in the face of almost certain defeat.

In her analysis of the war's conduct, Greenhalgh favors neither the British nor the French. She does not defend Sir John French's withdrawing his forces during the Marne campaign and his opening a huge hole in French lines during the crucial days of early September. She acknowledges that this action went on to "poison command relations" and observes, "It is painful to imagine what would have happened had the battle been lost in their [the British] absence." She also examines what she calls the "Antwerp fiasco," when Winston Churchill sent an expedition in October 1914. She observes that this action clearly demonstrated British willingness to act "not only independently but also in opposition." Additionally, she achieves balance in her analysis of General Robert Nivelle's offensive in April 1917. Instead of treating the disastrous offensive as an example of French incompetence, she explains how David Lloyd George used Nivelle to gain greater control over Sir Douglas Haig. Though she reveals a special appreciation for the talents and accomplishments of Marshal Ferdinand Foch, she is remarkably even handed in her criticism of French and British commanders,

One of the most interesting portions of the book pertains to liaison between the French and British. As she notes, it was the liaison officers who made the partnership work and who found ways for the two armies to operate together. One of the most interesting military attachés was Colonel (later General) Victor Huguet, a French officer who played an especially important role in ensuring good communications between the French and British. In his early years he was an ardent Anglophile, accused of being too "pro-English," but after the war he became an Anglophobe, highly critical of British policy. Joffre, however, did not trust Huguet during the war and eventually had him replaced. General Sir Henry Wilson, a British officer who worked closely with the French, had a similar experience, but unlike Huguet he rose to the highest echelons of his army. Yet, he too was not trusted by the British because he seemed too favorable toward the French. Other liaison officers suffered similarly. Greenhalgh notes their work was "lonely" and "looked down on," and the "personal antipathy" of commanders in both armies "worked against true and close cooperation."

For this reader, the freshest part of Greenhalgh's book pertains to the administrative and logistical aspects of the Franco-British coalition. Especially during the extremely cold winter of 1916-1917 the question of coal became one of the most important questions of the war. Though David Lloyd George later claimed credit for having imposed convoys on an unwilling British navy, it was the French who convinced the British to use convoys for shipping coal. To reduce exposure to German submarines, the French shipped coal overland to Italy, and the British shipped coal to France. Instilling order and gaining coordination in allied shipping followed naturally from agreements on financing and purchasing. Whatever successes commanders had on the battlefield, Greenhalgh notes, "allied solutions to the logistics problems were war winning." Yet, solving logistics problems were simple in comparison to resolving the bitter clash over British manpower policies. The French complained loudly about their making more sacrifices in human lives than the British, but somehow the coalition survived. Greenhalgh observes, "All this shows both the limits and the possibilities of Franco-British cooperation."

In a book as broad as this one, it is impossible to cover all topics, and the omission of certain topics suggests much about the interest of the author. Among the topics only cursorily treated are operations in 1915 and friction between the French and British over those operations. Most notably, Greenhalgh explains the battle known as Loos to the British and Third Artois to the French only in the sense of Joffre's attempting to dominate the British. Similarly, she spends little time talking about the Dardanelles or Russia in 1915, two topics that suggest a great deal about differences in French and British strategy. In the same sense that William J. Philpott in his book on Anglo-French relations tells us too much about the early years of the war and too little about the later part, she tells us too little about 1915 and too much about the later part. Her great interest in Foch is very evident in how she treats both phases of the war.

Greenhalgh also tells us a great deal about the battle of the Somme, which she initially describes as "the only joint battle of the war" and then as "the sole example of joint battle fought by equals against a common foe." The second, narrower definition enables her to avoid saying much about the fighting in Artois in the previous year. In one of the few instances where she strays from a balanced analysis, she also allows herself to treat the Somme battle more from the British than the French perspective.

A more balanced treatment, for example, would have explained Joffre's goal and methods in 1915. The French commander first began using the word "attrition" during the May-June 1915 battle in Artois, and he used the Chantilly conference in December 1915 to induce the British to carry a larger share of the war's burden. He strongly favored coordinated offensives on the British, French, Italian, and Russian fronts to wear down the Germans and Austrians and eventually to prevail, and he saw the Somme as the best site for a joint

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Franco-British attack. Whether the Somme was the best place for a battle, however, was clearly suggested by Foch when he read an early French analysis of an attack on the Somme and wrote, "An offensive to do what?" Whatever Joffre wanted to do, he did not expect a breakthrough. At best he expected the coordinated offensives on various fronts to crumble enemy defenses and make significant gains. Ignoring Joffre's strategic design, Greenhalgh says that the battle of the Somme "drifted" in late 1916. She fails to note Joffre's objecting to Haig's narrow-front attacks because they were simple to counter tactically and had only limited strategic effect, and she ignores his continuing French attacks in September because Brusilov's offensive had placed the Austrians in very unfavorable circumstances. Far more than an example of a "joint battle," the battle of the Somme demonstrated important differences in French and British strategy and in operational methods for accomplishing that strategy.

Whatever my criticisms of the book, they are not meant to take away from the great value of the book. Elizabeth Greenhalgh has provided a fine analysis of the Franco-British coalition, the best available in any language. Her work is an outstanding example of how primary research enables an historian to go beyond long-held views and offer a fresh interpretation. Historians of the Great War are indebted to her for her providing new insights not only into what made the coalition work but also into what kept it from working more smoothly.

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