

**Elizabeth Greenhalgh.** *Victory Through Coalition: Britain and France During the First World War.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 304 Seiten. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-85384-2.



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## Coalition Warfare during World War I

Over the past twenty years, the study of Great Britain's role in the First World War, to a large degree, has been turned on its head by a new school of historians attempting to overturn what one can only describe as the "Blackadder" school of thought (from the BBC series). Until recently, this new school of thought has squarely concentrated its attention on the lower echelon of the war. The leading proponent has been Paddy Griffith with his notable work *Battle Tactics of the Western Front* (1994), which looked at the development of lower-level tactics in the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). With the impetus created by this revisionism, in the last few years, attention has turned back to the role of the BEF general headquarters. Several studies have looked at the generals along with the command and control within the BEF, including a collection edited by Gary Sheffield and Dan Todman, *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience, 1914-1918* (2004) and *British Generalship on the Western Front, 1914-1918: Defeat into Victory* (2004) by Simon Robbins. A new edition of Sir Douglas Haig's *War Diaries* (2005), edited by Gary Sheffield and John Bourne, which has added to the debate on his role in the war, has been published. How-

ever, until now, there has been only one major study on the nature of the Allied war effort, William Philpott's *Anglo-French Relations and Strategy on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (1998). This has changed with Elizabeth Greenhalgh's new study, *Victory through Coalition*.

Greenhalgh has recently become well known for her analysis of the higher direction of the Allied war effort and the nature of coalition warfare during the First World War. Most notable among her recent work is a debate in the journal *War in History* with Philpott of Kings College, London, who is another notable scholar on the nature of coalition warfare during the war.[1] This debate shows the differences inherent in the use of sources by these two historians. As Greenhalgh comments in the bibliographical essay in her book, Philpott over-relies on British-based sources and concentrates on the first two years of the war. This inherent structural weakness in Philpott's analysis has left open space for an in-depth and illuminating study of Anglo-French coalition warfare, and Greenhalgh's work ably fits into this space.

The book is split into eleven chapters dealing with various aspects of the nature and development of coali-

tion warfare between France and Britain. It does not, however, deal only with the war on land but also includes a chapter on how the Allies responded to the threat of unrestricted U-Boat warfare by the Germans in 1917. In the book's first section, Greenhalgh discusses the early development of the command relationship between the British and French, not only at a national level but also between the militaries of the two countries. She highlights communications, one of the major problems that dogged the coalition during the first two years of war, and to some extent for the rest of it. As Greenhalgh points out, communication at a personal level, be it with a fellow commander in chief or liaison officer, has to be effective for operations to go smoothly. However, this was not the case for either army. For example, out of 488 graduating officers from Saint Cyr between 1889 and the beginning of the war, only 106 spoke English as a second language; most spoke German. Thus, as the author quite rightly notes, in the face of this statistic, it is not surprising that problems occurred in the first few months.

The next section focuses on the critical period of 1914-15, when France was putting in the majority of effort into the war while Kitchener's New Armies were built up. This period is important in the understanding of the development of Britain's and France's partnership, as it is the period when the two countries moved from entente to coalition. In this section, Greenhalgh offers an informative discussion of the effect on which both the personalities of Field Marshal Sir John French and Marshal Joseph Joffre had on the nature of the command problems that were at the heart of the difficulties that the coalition had in conducting the war with Germany. The key issue identified by Greenhalgh is that neither commander in chief had any confidence in the other, leading to an inability or unwillingness to communicate. Despite the serious strain this problem caused, there was a glimmer of hope for effective coordination between the allies. This came from the politicians rather than the generals, namely Aristide Briand, Francois Mitterand, Lord Horatio Kitchener, Herbert Asquith, and Reginald Esher. A system had been put in place to ensure regular conferences among them to develop policy and to initiate an overriding political body to oversee its direction. In spite of Briand's plea of "Unite de front," this body never existed, due to certain extraneous factors (p. 39). However, Greenhalgh rightly points out that, despite the problems encountered by both Britain and France in creating some form of unifying body, the basis of what would come later in the war was set. The next few chapters of the book deal with the one subject that has become a quagmire for

historians to explain, the Battle of the Somme. As with her article in *War in History*, Greenhalgh attempts to examine the reasons why the British were there and what they contributed to the 1916 campaign. It is in this section where she is most critical of the coalition, and she has presented much of this argument previously in her debate with Philpott. Greenhalgh moves on to the problems of 1917, in which she pays particular attention to the problems outside of the Western Front, especially the war against Germany's U-boats. Greenhalgh comments that the formation of the Allied Maritime Transport Council was one of the few successes of the year, and that, despite problems and pressures from all sides, "greater allied cooperation over the allocation of scarce shipping resources enabled a more efficient use of the ships that had escaped the submarines" (p. 30). This, in turn, led to successfully resupplying the armies from both Britain and the United States, which was critical to the success of the operations in 1918.

Greenhalgh next looks at the failures of the Allied high command structure during the German offensive of early 1918. Here, she argues that changes came about because of a crisis in command, and that, to a large extent, this crisis was the fault of the politicians who felt the war was not being run effectively and desired a greater degree of control. However, what was born was a system that improved cooperation between the militaries, but did not create the hoped-for general reserve, mainly because the generals of both Britain and France were united in fighting their politicians and curbing their control of the war effort. Thus, the Supreme War Council simply became an official "talking shop," which certified private agreements (p. 185). Notable in this is agreement between Haig and Marshal John-Philippe Petain. Greenhalgh also shows that the council proved useful during the German offensives, allowing Marshal Ferdinand Foch to stabilize the Western Front, and then provided functional coordination in the Allied counterattacks from August onward. Greenhalgh's work is a constructive addition to the literature on the higher command of the war, and, to some degree, Greenhalgh shows that the coalition gained the final victory in spite of problems. What comes across in this study is that the generals felt they won even though they experienced interference from politicians—particularly Lloyd George. One reviewer has commented that it was the shock of the crises of 1917 and early 1918 that led to the formalization of the coalition.[2] In my opinion, Greenhalgh has shown that, despite certain cultural and diplomatic problems, the French and British army commanders formulated an effective ad hoc solu-

tion that worked well enough, and that was only modified because of politicians' interference and the need to coordinate the large forces present on the Western Front. The best epitaph is in Greenhalgh's conclusion: "it must be said that the Franco-British coalition, for all its defective mechanism, was effective enough to defeat one of the five perfect institutions that Europe ... produced" (p. 285). Greenhalgh's employment of French sources also helps in understanding the issues. A major problem with previous works on the subject was the lack of French sources and the overreliance on diaries and memoirs of principal players. Yet, Greenhalgh, too, can be accused of relying too much on French sources, and it may be some time until a balanced picture of the higher direction of the war is produced. This work does, however, add to our understanding of the nature of the Allies' coalition war, showing that it was, indeed, won because of cooperation, despite the various minor and major issues that were thrown up in the course of the war. It should be

read in conjunction with Philpott's work and is recommended to all with an interest in the nature of coalition warfare and the First World War.

#### Notes

[1]. Elizabeth Greenhalgh, "Why the British Were on the Somme in 1916," *War in History* 6, no. 2 (April, 1999): 147-173; William Philpott, "Debate—Why the British Were Really on the Somme: A Reply to Elizabeth Greenhalgh," *War in History* 9, no. 4 (October 2002): 446-471; and Elizabeth Greenhalgh, "Debate—Flames over the Somme: A Retort to William Philpott," *War in History* 10, no. 3 (July 2003): 335-342.

[2]. Stuart Halifax, review of *Victory through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War*, by Elizabeth Greenhalgh, H-Soz-u-Kult\_ (December 19, 2006), <http://hsokult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2006-4-209>.

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