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Roy A. Prete, *Strategy and Command: The Anglo-French Coalition on the Western Front, 1914*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. xvii + 299 pp. Bibliography. Notes. Index. \$95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7735-3522-0.

Review by Michael Neiberg, United States Army War College and The University of Southern Mississippi.

French General Ferdinand Foch, named to command the Allied coalition war effort against Germany in 1918, is supposed to have remarked that after directing a coalition he lost some of his admiration for Napoleon. The quip was intended to serve as notice to the politicians and generals with whom he was working that building alliances and coalitions is never easy, even in the face of a common enemy. Differing national goals and interests, combined with different cultures, languages, and sensitivities create a situation where the members of a coalition act as if are on the same side, but not necessarily the same team.

Nearly a century later, cultural and linguistic differences continue to cloud our understanding of the way that the two major western front allies, France and Great Britain, worked together. Historians continue to debate the nature and efficacy of the coalition, often through their own cultural and linguistic blinders. The intricacies of the alliance are, indeed, often difficult to disentangle. Former enemies with few senior leaders who spoke both languages, the two countries had differing strategic interests and a remarkable residue of mutual suspicion. Senior leaders on both sides, including generals Sir Archibald Murray and Henri Berthelot, seemed at times to have more hatred for their ally than for the enemy. Yet the Anglo-French coalition held together from 1914 to 1918 and formed the core of the alliance that eventually defeated Germany, albeit with extensive help from Russia, the United States, and others.

Roy A. Prete, a Canadian scholar with a solid record of publication on coalition and alliance warfare, gives us the first of what he expects will be three volumes on the Anglo-French alliance of World War I. The product of extensive research, the book makes use of sources on both sides of the English Channel, including Ferdinand Foch's own diary, which is not part of the French archive system (I tried, and failed, to locate it in 2003). The public and private papers of most of the major participants in the senior councils of war and politics are therefore represented.

Prete's analysis is at the strategic level of war; that is, at the intersection of war and politics. Here the British and the French had to make critical decisions about where to fight and what the final purpose of the war was to be. Since both Great Britain and France were global powers with far-flung empires, considerations for both had to extend beyond the limits of the western front. The sometimes

uncomfortable alliance which both countries had with Russia also required British and French leaders to think about the impact of their actions on the Eastern Front. Questions of strategy were therefore extremely complex even for one country to manage, given the number of variables that could impact on strategic decisions. These variables included the availability of resources, the nature of domestic public opinion, and the obvious failure of tactics in 1914 to end the war as promised by Christmas.

The formation of an alliance added greater degrees of complexity to an already difficult problem. While it is tempting, and relatively easy given the availability of diaries and personal papers, to focus on the individual feuds and disagreements between strategic leaders, Prete takes us much further. He argues that the fundamental problem between France and Great Britain stemmed from the differing strategic priorities of the two powers. These differences manifested themselves in the way the two nations looked at the prosecution of the war, of course, but they also extended to the prewar strategic plans of the powers as well as their visions of the postwar world.

French strategy, continental in its focus, stemmed logically from its identification of Germany as its most likely future enemy. Given that Germany had a much larger population and industrial base than France, and given the nature of Germany as a land power first and foremost, French strategy depended upon the formation of alliances to help it narrow the gap. For the French, the alliance with Russia was significantly more important than the alliance with Britain, given the size of the force Russia could place on the German border and the fact that most planners expected that any continental war would be too expensive to last long enough for Britain to build and deploy a large army on the European continent. As late as the outbreak of war, the *Entente Cordiale* with Britain remained little more than a friendship that bound neither side. As a result, the French shaped their war plans without an expectation of a major land contribution from the British, although several senior officers, including Foch, were careful to build relationships with key British generals.

Despite the official end of its policy of splendid isolation, Britain remained wary of any alliances that might drag its army into a war on the mainland that was not in its strategic interests. Nor did British leaders necessarily see Germany as the threat that France did, especially as Anglo-German relations improved throughout 1913 and the first half of 1914. Many senior British officials argued that Britain's role in any future continental war should be a maritime one, leaving the army free to deal with imperial issues or the expected outbreak of civil war in Ireland. The tensions in Ulster, not the situation in Germany or the Balkans, was the most important security issue on the minds of British officials in the summer of 1914.

These varying strategic imperatives, as Prete argues, not personality clashes, were the main source of the friction between the two allies in 1914. Because the origins of the war were in the Balkans, it was not even immediately clear that what people called the "Austro-Serbian" war until the beginning of August would involve Britain and France. It is well worth noting that neither Britain nor France wanted war; the speed with which war came upon them made it even more difficult to develop a common strategic and operational approach to the German invasion of Belgium and France.

The outbreak of war therefore found British and French planners still stumbling for solutions. Prete argues that British concern for the security of the Channel ports eventually led the British to deploy on the left of the French line rather than attempt a risky landing in Belgium or Holland as some British "blue water" advocates urged. The goal of British policy was to defend the Belgian coastline while the French goal was to disrupt the German advance, at least once French General Joseph Joffre awoke to the fact that the main German axis of advance was indeed coming through Belgium. The strict Belgian policy of refusing defense talks with Britain or France before the war (to avoid the appearance of violating its neutrality) further complicated joint planning.

Given all of these problems, failures and frictions in the war's opening weeks are understandable. The Germans, after all, were not hampered by coalition restrictions on the western front and they were fighting with a coherent (if blindly aggressive and foolhardy) plan. British political demands, moreover, required the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to maintain a clear independence from the French and to fall back toward the coast on its own line of communications if necessary. The French general staff did its best to try to bring the BEF under its own auspices, but never fully succeeded in doing so. The British Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener, who possessed probably the best strategic vision of any British leader in 1914, kept to his plans to husband the BEF until it could grow large enough to play a decisive role. Almost alone, Kitchener foresaw how long and brutal this war would be and he set British strategy accordingly.

Prete then takes us through the so-called Miracle of the Marne in early September, which stopped the German advance and proved that in the furnace of war the British and French could work together. He spends little time on the Marne, however, preferring to focus instead on the controversies that surrounded the failure of the allies to exploit their gains on the Aisne River and in front of Lille. Prete is careful to note that national rivalries were not the only conflicts, as the French and British could often not agree amongst themselves. British strategists, for example, were far from agreeing on the wisdom of First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill's plan to send a contingent to Antwerp. The plan, predictably enough, failed, contributing to another great crisis that put allied harmony at risk.

Prete is at his best in discussing the impacts of the lesser-known events at the end of 1914. Upon their own insistence, the British moved to the Ypres sector close to the English Channel and the strategic interests Britain had identified for itself. They could only fight in that sector, however, with French help. That help, on the strategic level, came from Foch, who managed the competing visions and personalities with a skill that marked him as a rising star. This "second command crisis" ended with the British debating strategic alternatives to the western front; one of these alternatives became the ill-fated Gallipoli adventure. For French military and political leaders, however, devoting too many resources in strategies away from the western front was anathema, setting up the debates in 1915 and 1916 that will shape the next volume in Prete's trilogy.

The usual personalities do make their appearances and Prete notes the role that they played. They include Foch, the energetic and Anglophile French general; the Anglo-Irish Sir Henry Wilson, Foch's ardently Francophile close friend whose political intrigues in Ireland undermined his credibility in Whitehall; Joseph Joffre, the confident and imposing French commander who sought to bend the British to his will; and the BEF commander Sir John French who once complained about "the class these French generals mostly come from." But Prete wisely guards against explaining the nature of strategy in 1914 on the basis of personalities alone. Strategic differences and the differences in the nature of each nation's political structure, he argues, provide the best explanation for how the war's first year developed from the allied side.

Almost a century later, far too many students of the war, amateurs and professionals alike, see the events from national perspectives. Whether trying to explain away defeats or claim disproportionate share of the credit for success, writing on the war remains far too national in character. Prete, by contrast, offers a balanced, well-researched and well-argued treatment that looks at both sides of the Anglo-French alliance. His trilogy is therefore off to a fine start and we can look forward to learning more as other volumes appear.

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