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Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command. The Forging of a First World War General*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xviii + 550 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$110.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-521-1956-4.

Review by Robert J. Young, University of Winnipeg.

In little more than a decade, Elizabeth Greenhalgh has established herself as a leading expert in the history of World War One. Research Fellow at the Australian Defense Force Academy in Canberra, she has produced an impressive collection of scholarly articles, some appearing before and some since the completion in 2005 of her book, *Victory Through Coalition. Britain and France During the First World War*. That work, published in the Military History Series by Cambridge University Press, is a forerunner of the work produced by the same press and appraised here. Both retain a disciplined focus on the period between August 1914 and November 1918, both fix on the military and civil politics of high command, both concentrate on the theme of coalition warfare and, for that very reason, both explore in great depth the promise, perils and consequences of conducting war within an Allied framework. Both also devote roughly half of their respective texts to the last year of the war when Foch served as Supreme Allied Commander.

To ensure that readers are thoroughly misled about my intentions, I will continue with this quality of “sameness.” Temporally identical to the first book and, like it, thematically dependent on coalition warfare, *Foch* immerses us once again in the strategic challenges posed by a Western Front on which the Germans had seized a tremendous, initial advantage, and in the high-level politics—civil and military—that would make and break careers. The time frame is deliberate, only the war years, which means that we see next to nothing of Foch’s first sixty years or, at least directly, the decade before his death in 1929. Not a biography, it is rather a narrative of how, and an analysis of how well, Ferdinand Foch became and then fulfilled his unique responsibility as Supreme Allied Commander. Fortunately for him and, given its 550 pages, for her, this is a sympathetic appraisal of France’s great *maréchal*.

The fact that it is also a balanced assessment will not surprise readers of Greenhalgh’s previous work. Neither will they be surprised by the extent of her familiarity with published and, especially, archival sources. This book, like her first, is meticulously researched. And let no one think that the sameness comes from only a light reworking of old sources. Naturally, unavoidably, there are source overlaps between her first and second book, but there is also much new material, including some from Belgium, much in the way of expanded materials from American and British archives, and so much more from the three major Foch collections in Paris—to mention only a fraction of her French archival material. Like the first, exhaustively researched and analytically measured, this book, too, offers a tight and lucid prose. Those qualities are all part of the “sameness” referred to earlier. As is the high quality of the overall production, another handsome volume that, in this case, provides twenty detailed sector maps and an assortment of photographs and other graphic materials.

The book unfolds in three parts. The first, in nine chapters, takes us from Foch as commandant of the *Ecole de Guerre* in 1914—a general who had never led troops in battle—to his elevated role by 1916 of wartime army group commander. While some two hundred pages of text are devoted to this two-year period, any abbreviated summary would include reference to the German offensive of August 1914, the Paris-saving battle of the Marne, the bloody, gas-ravaged battles of First and Second Ypres, the series of troubled Artois offensives in 1915, the creation of an extended front across northern France—inadvertent product of repeated attempts to outflank the enemy—and the grinding, failed offensive on the Somme in late 1916. The latter seemed to have claimed Foch's career as one of its late casualties. Convinced that the approaching offensive lacked sufficient human and materiel resources to succeed, he had spoken his mind. And he had paid a price. His reservations had been judged incompatible with the ascendant spirit of *offensive à l'outrance* and better suited for someone worthy of a desk job. In December, having been proven right, he lost his coveted title of *adjoint* to the Commander-in-Chief, General Joffre, and was effectively demoted to the office of Chief of the Army General Staff. At the same time, having been proven wrong, Joffre was replaced as Commander-in-Chief and kicked upstairs to an isolated, face-saving position as consultant.

Thus began 1917, a year of Foch's intended disgrace, and the year Greenhalgh calls "Intermezzo" in anticipation of his elevation to the position of supreme Allied commander. It was a renaissance not by chance, for he had learned much since war's outbreak: three things in particular. First, to survive against a demographically and industrially superior enemy, France needed the human, financial and industrial resources of allies, especially those of Britain. She also needed allies who had the potential to relieve pressure on the western front by distracting Germany and Austria-Hungary in other theatres—Russia in the east and, from the summer of 1915, Italy in the south. Thus, within the circumscription of an army group commander, Foch had learned the importance of liaison officers skilled enough to ensure reliable communications among Allied commanders, and he had refined his own talents for instilling confidence in foreign counterparts, especially, again, those in the British Expeditionary Force. Second, he had learned that the 1914 strategy of headlong offensives into fixed fields of fire had been too costly and ineffective, that the 1915 attempts to outflank such defenses had produced no better results and, accordingly, that only a meticulous and time-consuming offensive plan—complete with the accumulation of vastly superior infantry and artillery force—would ever secure the war-winning breakthrough. Rephrased, well before the Somme battle in 1916, he had learned some of the principal elements of both coalition and industrial warfare. Third, the necessity of reversing Germany's inherent superiority with Allied support had taught him that politics, too, were a necessity.

Indeed, while there is much here to satisfy historians interested in strategic planning, including terrain-based appraisals of sectors deemed vulnerable to attack or promising for offensives, or appraisals of the firepower potential of modern artillery, armored vehicles and aircraft, those more interested in politics will also have a feast. When we are told that Foch had no interest in politics after 1919, (p. 509) it seems likely that he had had his fill in the preceding four years. Were one to invoke a familiar sports analogy, he was only one member of a senior military team committed to the liberation of French territory and the defeat of Germany and her allies. But like any team, it had its stars, in this case generals intent on greater glory. Their names are familiar: Castelnau, Fayolle, Pétain, Nivelle, Foch and, until late 1916, their superior, Joffre. Inside relations were often tense, a tension aggravated by the fact that they were on a battlefield not a pitch. Therefore, it is unsurprising that exchanges were often tactless and that each remained alert to the rumored maneuverings of the others. Then there was the English team, it too with headstrong stars like Field-Marshal Douglas Haig, or the Italian squad under General Luigi Cadorna or, as of 1917, that of the Americans captained by General John Pershing.

But these uniformed politics of inter-allied command—the incessant negotiations over command responsibilities, intelligence sharing and disposition of scarce resources—was child’s-play compared to the complexities imposed by state politics when cabinet ministers and parliaments tried to influence the conduct of operations by backing the views of their chosen star or undercutting those of his rivals. It grew more complicated still when 1917 brought into wartime prominence those three political vanities, Premier Georges Clemenceau, Prime Minister David Lloyd George, and President Woodrow Wilson. All of this, and them, Foch was to experience throughout the war, and to which he responded with craft of his own. In the early years, he relied on influential intermediaries to circulate his views among political decision-makers: voluntary agents like former aides, now deputies, André Tardieu and Charles Meunier-Surcouf. Later, in 1916–1917, he and Clemenceau found common cause in their misgivings about the government’s handling of the war, at least until the Tiger formed his own government in late 1917.

The symbiotic relationship of Foch and Clemenceau in 1916–1917 was based on their shared convictions that wars were never won by the defense, that victory depended on the accumulation of a massive superiority in offensive firepower, that Philippe Pétain, Joffre’s successor, was not the man to launch such an offensive, and that Robert Nivelle’s spring 1917 offensive had failed because he had not waited for the requisite edge in men and machines. So it was that both men, Foch and Clemenceau, spent the better part of 1917 working in their respective worlds and ways to build an Allied army that could overwhelm those of the Central Powers. That meant, they agreed, more money, more industrial output of arms and munitions, more manpower. For Foch, specifically, it meant continuing to lay the groundwork for that breakout offensive. It meant continuing the complicated business of ensuring that Italy’s lacklustre campaign against Austria-Hungary was, on balance, more of an asset than a drain on the stretched resources of the Western Front; and it meant preparing a defensive plan to repel any German drive through neutral Switzerland. All this is recounted in chapter ten of Greenhalgh’s part two.

Part three, and its eight chapters, takes us to the climax of war and book. In mid-November Clemenceau became Premier, with two clear intentions: first, of creating a unified Allied command under a single Allied commander, and second, of ensuring that the post went to General Foch. That appointment, which Foch later likened to that of a harried orchestra conductor (p. 452), happened in March 1918, just in the nick of time for him to oversee a desperate but successful Allied defense against a series of powerful German offensives between March and July. Thereafter, the momentum shifted. The Germans were exhausted and dispirited, and the offensive Foch had long contemplated was finally thrown into first gear. By the end of the summer it was under full speed, he had been awarded the dignity of *maréchal*, and soon there were signs that Germany was prepared to sue for peace. Battlefield hostilities on the western front ended on 11 November.

Well before then, as the German threat diminished and Allied victory seemed probable, more cracks in the wartime alliances broke the surface. Each participating government began drafting its own vision of the postwar world, and re-arming with weapons better suited for peacetime jousts with recent allies. Haig, for example, declined an invitation to ride in one triumphal procession “with Foch & a pack of foreigners” (p.495). Cracks the size of chasms were now separating Foch and Clemenceau, the latter upbraiding the former: “You think the whole world revolves around you. [T]hat was the case during the war, but it’s all over now” (p. 503). Certainly no one felt the transition more than Foch, whom Clemenceau excluded from the French delegation to the peace conference that began in Paris early in 1919. In his postwar capacity as president of the Armistice Commission, Foch remained determined to ensure that Germany remained de-clawed in perpetuity, but too many of his recommendations did not sit well with the assembled statesmen, including his own Premier. Relations between the two continued to deteriorate until the treaty of Versailles was finally concluded at the end of June 1919, a treaty the Marshal predicted would last no more than twenty years.

Greenhalgh, and everyone else, knows that he was right. Indeed, and on balance, she considers him to have been right more often than he was wrong. In his unrelenting quest for more arms and munitions, he never fully appreciated the implications of insisting on a large industrial workforce and, at one and the same time, a steady increase in the numbers of infantry manpower—one “blind-spot” that severely complicated his relations with the British (pp. 209-210). His “over-bearing command style” (p. 103) with respect to both peers and subordinates in the French army, clearly left a residue of resentment that sometimes constrained his effectiveness. And certainly one might wonder whether his well-publicized candor during the Paris negotiations proved potentially counter-productive. As familiar as he was by then with politics, he still failed to appreciate the limitations on Clemenceau’s negotiating position relative to Wilson and Lloyd George. That failure ensured the enmity of his previous patron and now prime minister. Indeed, the latter made sure that a number of leading French newspapers omitted any reference to Foch in their coverage of the unveiled Versailles Treaty. That, Greenhalgh concludes, was mean-spirited and a travesty, for throughout the war this general had displayed the requisite characteristics of an exceptional commander, including a clear-sighted strategic vision and personal qualities like persistent optimism and steadfastness.

Few, I believe, would disagree with this assessment of Ferdinand Foch, and fewer still would hesitate to welcome this high-resolution snapshot of a military commander in wartime crisis. But when the applause recedes, there could be a whisper or two of ways in which the work could be even better. One would suggest that both introduction and conclusion might better situate the book, interpretively, relative to the most recent historiography on Foch. Of five such works published since 2000, none is actually invoked in the closing summary, and only one in the introductory remarks. In short, the historiographical contextualization is not quite as clear as it might be. Another suggestion for “more” emerges from the closing chapter, “Losing the Peace.” One accepts that this is a book explicitly about wartime leadership, but the twelve-page chapter awarded to seven post-Armistice months seems symmetrically short-changed compared to the forty pages awarded, for example, to two months in 1914 or thirty-plus pages to another two months in pre-Armistice 1918. And it is more than a matter of symmetry. This abbreviated closing chapter really is about Foch’s failure to win the peace, a failure despite his outspoken criticism of the direction in which the statesmen were going. Wedged between the thirty pages of chapter seventeen, on the successes of October-November 1918 and a conclusion crafted to celebrate Foch’s overall success as wartime commander, the abbreviated chapter eighteen appears more as an obstacle to be skirted than an opportunity to appraise his overall effectiveness on and off the field. But these, to be sure, are no more than whispers, fading as the applause returns.

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