

Greenhalgh, Elizabeth: *Victory Through Coalition: Britain and France During the First World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005. ISBN: 0521853842; 304 Seiten

Rezensioniert von: Stuart Hallifax, National Army Museum, London

English-language histories of the First World War tend to focus on the success of the British in 'winning the war', or their muddling through to an unexpected victory that was actually 'won' by the Americans¹, or somewhere between those two views. In all this, the coalition element of the conflict (and often the role of France more generally) is largely ignored outside references to arguments between Sir Douglas Haig and the French commanders and the appointment of Ferdinand Foch as 'Generalissimo'. Elizabeth Greenhalgh has set out in this book to show the importance of the Franco-British (to use her term) coalition to the victory in 1918, although it took almost four years and two major crises to make the system work. Her survey of relations between the two countries is much more broad and more complete than the only other major recent work on the subject² and questions many assumptions made in British histories of the war.

On the military front, Greenhalgh recounts the familiar story of the lack of pre-war planning and thus of real co-operation early in the war. „Suspicion and distrust ruled“ (p. 41) between the military and political leaders in 1914 and 1915. Indeed political interference led to the private arrangements between commanders that formed coalition strategy in 1914-15 and again in 1916 and 1918 (p.185). Greenhalgh's coverage of the Battle of the Somme repeats the main arguments of her 1999 article on the subject, without some of the more extreme elements like her oddly circular argument that the use of New Armies in 1915 proves that they were not originally intended to be used later³. What remains is an interesting new view on the reasons for the battle and a convincing refutation of Haig's claim that it was supposed to relieve the French at Verdun. Greenhalgh shows clearly that the battle was not brought forward to accommodate the French (rather

General Joffre dramatically rejected its postponement (p. 49)) and, importantly, that the objective of 'rescuing' the French appeared in British correspondence only after a crucial conference on 31 May 1916 (p. 51).

The story of 1917 is dominated by the political interference of British Prime Minister David Lloyd George and his politically-motivated attempts to remove or sideline Haig (p. 184). This he did by first subordinating Haig to French commander Robert Nivelle and later helping to create a „trilingual talking shop“ (p. 179) in the shape of the Supreme War Council (SWC), which Colonel E.M. House termed „almost a farce“ (p. 178). The failure of Nivelle's offensive and the lack of a single Allied commander saw each of these 'plots' fail – though the SWC laid the ground for later co-operation. Liaison (another area Greenhalgh covers in some depth) largely reflected the general lack of co-operation during this period, characterised as „a complete failure“ by one diplomat and undermined by French liaison officer Pierre des Vallieres' anti-British feelings in 1916-17 (p.157-58).

It took the shock effect of the German 1918 offensives to provoke a genuine military coalition in the last year of the war, just as the catastrophic effects of the German U-Boat campaign of 1917 forced co-operation in shipping. The latter was „a coalition at its best“, with the Allied Maritime Transport Committee subordinating national interests to coalition needs (pp. 130-31). Sadly, even with a „General-in-Chief“, military co-operation never reached this level, remaining a „defective mechanism“ (pp. 281-85) throughout. The French and British commanders both felt hard done by in their relations with the other

¹ For example see Terraine, John, *To Win A War: 1918, the Year of Victory*, London, 1978, and Travers, Tim, *How the War Was Won: Factors That Led to Victory*, London, 1992, for competing views on the British and Mosier, John, *The Myth of the Great War*, London, 2001, for a (rather bizarre) version of the American victory.

² Philpott, William, *Anglo-French Relations and Strategy on the Western Front, 1914-1918*, Basingstoke, 1996. Philpott's work deals almost exclusively with the effect of Anglo-French relations on British strategy (based largely on British sources).

³ Greenhalgh, Elizabeth 'Why the British Were on the Somme in 1916', in: *War in History*, 6 (1999), 147-73, p. 150.

and with Foch (pp. 220, 225). Continuing interference by Lloyd George came to an almost farcical reversal when he demanded that Haig assert his powers as British commander against Foch's requests (the latter had no power to order the British to act) (p. 225). Another insight offered here is the extent to which Haig was responsible for Foch's appointment, showing that the contemporary evidence does not back up his claim to have been the driving force in the creation of the new arrangement (p. 192)

Though this comprehensive and broad-ranging account is hard to fault on its overall message, there are some weak points – particularly regarding the author's noticeably pro-French slant on the numerous disputes⁴. The first instance is when we see the British commander in 1914 threatening to withdraw his forces from the fighting line (p.19). This is, perhaps rightly, denounced as reckless, but is presented without reference to his explicit instructions to avoid 'undue risk' or to the perilous and risky position British forces were left in when French troops retreated in late August 1914⁵. Similarly, much French criticism of the British part in the joint (or in Greenhalgh's term 'joined') offensive of 1916 is given from private correspondence and diaries, while on the British side only Haig's official despatch is quoted (p. 70-71). It seems somewhat unfair to compare private comments on one side with a public announcement on the other. Moreover, it is not hard to find similar negative comment in Haig's words, as in his May 1916 diary comment that the French leaders were, „indeed, difficult allies to work with“; in fact his diaries caused controversy for just such comments when published in 1952⁶. One further, less obvious, criticism is the reliance in the narrative on books by Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson. While they are two of the more analytical (and critical) historians of the war, Greenhalgh's reliance on their biography of Sir Henry Rawlinson and history of the Third Battle of Ypres [8] seems out of character with her generally critical attitude towards historical works on the war.

In all, this book shows that an inherent lack of trust between the Allied powers was only overcome (and in the case of military co-

operation incompletely) in the face of grave crises. Military commanders did not submit entirely to central control, but in 1918 accepted its necessity for to win the war. In her argument that the war was won because of the coalition (when it started to work in 1917-18) rather than in spite of it, Greenhalgh is very convincing and provides plenty of interesting evidence and insights to support the thesis. Moreover the scope of the study and the use of French primary sources make it a very valuable insight into the way the war was won.

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⁴ It should be noted that this weakness is much less obvious than the Anglo-centrism of Philpott's work.

⁵ For Lord Kitchener's instructions: Sheffield, Gary/Bourne, John (ed.), Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918, London 2005, pp. 512-13; for the French withdrawal and exposure of the BEF; Strachan, Hew, *World War One, To Arms*, Oxford 2001, p. 222.

⁶ Sheffield/Bourne, Douglas Haig, pp. 188, 15.

[7] Prior, Robin/Wilson, Trevor, *Command on the Western Front: the military career of Sir Henry Rawlinson, 1914-18*, Oxford 1992.