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Roy A. Prete, *Strategy and Command: The Anglo-French Coalition on the Western Front, 1915*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021. xxii + 441 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$44.95 CAD (pb). ISBN 9780228006640; \$35.96 CAD (eb). ISBN 9780228007692.

Review by Michael S. Neiberg, United States Army War College.

A great deal has changed in the Anglo-French relationship since Roy Prete published volume one of his planned trilogy (covering coalition warfare in 1914) in 2009.^[1] Great Britain, of course, has since left the European Union amidst great acrimony. Brexit in turn set back French plans for a European Union defense force capable of operating semi autonomously from the United States. Tensions between the two nations rose so high that for a moment in May 2021 the British government dispatched two Royal Navy patrol vessels to the Channel Islands in order to enforce its understanding of its post-Brexit fishing rights. Most recently, the British joined with the United States to sell nuclear submarines and other advanced technology to Australia in a deal that infuriated French diplomats.

The time is right, therefore, for a fresh examination of coalitions in general, and the Anglo-French coalition during the period of the world wars, in particular. Prete, whose focus here is exclusively on the western front in 1915, argues that seven factors shaped the Anglo-French relationship in that crucial year. First, the relative strength of each army at the outset of the war gave the French, who had a massive conscript-based force, the upper hand in the direction of grand strategy. As the British built their all-volunteer New Armies in 1915, however, British voices began to count for more, when, that is, the British could themselves agree on what they wanted those New Armies to achieve.

Second, preconceived ideas about war and strategy persisted into the war years, even after the frustrations of trench war proved many of them to be obsolete, suicidal, or fantastical. The British, and their ill-starred command team under Sir John French, never fully abandoned pre-war ideas about landing the British Army somewhere behind the lines on the Belgian or Dutch coastline. Not only were such ideas incredibly difficult to execute, they flew in the face of French desires for a concentration of British manpower on the western front, setting up bitter disputes that were critical for the British, but existential for the French.

Third, the personal relationships between senior leaders mattered. These relationships were multi-layered and depended upon both nationality and the role people played within the system. Prete thus focuses not only on the relationships between the French generals and their British

counterparts, but the often-fraught civil-military relationships within the French and British commands. In many cases, the military figures saw past their national differences to present a unified front against interfering politicians. Most of the time, though not always, they found ways to subordinate their intense dislike of one another to pursue the common interest of defeating the Germans.

Fourth, each side came into the war with stereotyped views of the other. The Anglo-French relationship had its ups and downs, but the aristocratic senior British leadership could never quite get past their discomfort at having to work with middle-class French leaders. The French, for their part, took time to be convinced that the British would in fact commit to fighting a long, costly ground war. The Entente Cordiale between the two nations had only been in place for a decade; few French and British generals had had the time to get to know one another, or even learn the other's language. The utilitarian friendship between Henry Wilson and Ferdinand Foch proved the exception.

Fifth, the war itself kept changing, forcing the two sides to adapt and adjust. Perhaps the most important change involved the Russian collapse in the face of the Gorlice-Tarnow offensive in spring 1915. That disaster forced the British and French to debate the best ways to keep the reeling Russians from signing a separate peace with the Germans. The French generally preferred renewing offensives in the west while the British favored peripheral approaches, most notably at the Dardanelles. The entry of Italy into the war and the collapse of Serbia forced similar heated debates.

Sixth, the trenches became a permanent feature of the war, destroying optimism in a single war-winning campaign and forcing the British to abandon Prime Minister Asquith's "business as usual" strategy. By the end of 1915, leaders on both sides knew they were in unfamiliar intellectual territory as they all groped for answers. As Lord Kitchener famously said to Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, "I don't know what is to be done. This isn't war" (p. 58).

It is in discussing the seventh factor that Prete's work makes its most valuable contribution. He argues that the domestic political environments in London and Paris drove coalition strategy to a much greater extent than most previous historians have recognized. Prime Minister Asquith's desperate attempts to hold together first his Liberal government, then his unstable wartime coalition government, drove elements of British strategy as various members of the Asquith coalition argued for either "western" strategies (on the front in France) or "eastern" strategies on the periphery in places like the Dardanelles. Asquith had to keep them all happy if he hoped to remain in power.

For the French generals, all military logic argued for a concentration on the defense of the homeland and on driving the Germans from French soil. But the desire of socialists to exert more control over strategy and to find a sufficiently important role for their preferred general, Maurice Sarrail, led to government support for an operation with unclear goals in Salonika. More research is needed, but Prete argues strongly that the parliaments (normally considered as minor actors) in fact distorted military strategies to serve their own political and partisan ends.

In both democracies, leaders looked to create new governing structures to overcome or at least neutralize partisan rancor. These structures, usually committees run by civilian politicians with minimal military knowledge, did not come close to the kind of unified military command

structure that French general Joseph Joffre had demanded. Instead, they sought to solve the political problems that the war constantly generated. Prete argues that as these structures evolved to meet the immediate political need, they had an impact, usually a negative one, on the nature of military strategy.

For the First World War case, Prete's great contribution is twofold. First, he builds upon work he has already done on the 1914 case study to show how the nature of the coalition changed over time. Second, and probably most importantly, he has, through meticulous research in multiple archives, brought to life new sources. They include the private correspondence of several leaders, including the illuminating letters between Sir John French and Winnifred "Wendy" Bennett. The two began a love affair early in 1915, and Sir John often used his letters to her to vent his frustrations. In the course of doing so he revealed some pieces of the puzzle that scholars have not fully considered until now.

Prete develops his argument chronologically, taking his readers through 1915's repeated cycle of strategic debate, optimism that generals had found the right plan to win the war, and tragedy when optimism turned into battlefield disaster. Plans to defeat the Germans (either on the western front or on the periphery) all came to naught in 1915, forcing a belated realization that Kitchener had been right all along: this war would be long and require a massive effort by the British and French as individual belligerents and as a coalition.

By the end of 1915, Prete argues, the British and French had made progress and learned some costly lessons. For the time being, peripheral strategies fell out of favor. The Chantilly conference of late 1915 led to an agreement to concentrate Anglo-French efforts in 1916 in France, specifically along the Somme River. The third and final volume of this series will deal with 1916 when the coalition applied these lessons in the cauldron of some of the war's bloodiest battles. Prete's incisive use of archives and sharp analytic eye will no doubt make that book as valuable as the series' first two.

NOTES

[1] Roy A. Prete, *Strategy and Command: The Anglo-French Coalition on the Western Front, 1914* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).

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