

Review of "Strategy and Command: The Anglo-French Coalition on the Western Front, 1915" by Roy A. Prete

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Recommended Citation

Klobas, Mark "Review of "Strategy and Command: The Anglo-French Coalition on the Western Front, 1915" by Roy A. Prete." Canadian Military History 32, 1 ()

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Roy A. Prete. *Strategy and Command: The Anglo-French Coalition on the Western Front, 1915*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021. Pp. 432

Roy Prete's study of Anglo-French command relations on the Western Front in the First World War, covering the period from the end of the "war of movement" in December 1914 to the installation of the "Robertson-Haig team" in the British high command in December 1915, is the second volume of a planned trilogy, the origins of which date back to the author's 1979 doctoral dissertation. Like the first volume, it rests on work produced over the course of Prete's distinguished career as a historian, which he has revised and updated thoroughly using both the full range of available scholarship and his own subsequent archival research. This he employs to chart the evolution of the command relationship in response to a variety of factors ranging from short-term personal and situational factors to the persistent ones imposed by technology and the scale of the conflict. Foremost among them, he argues, was that of the "differing strategic approach of each country" (p. xx), both of which were born of the separate and often clashing political objectives of the Entente powers, and from which many of the key conflicts stemmed.

Yet both the French and British commanders had to adjust to the shared reality of the drawn-out attritional struggle that had emerged on the battlefields of north-western Europe by the end of 1914. While many of the goals of the two powers remained the same, the strategies pursued to attain them had to change. For France's commander-in-chief, Joseph Joffre, the paramount objective remained to defeat the German army in France. Not only was it imperative politically to liberate French soil from the Germans, but Joffre judged this the best way to aid France's beleaguered ally, Russia. To that end, Joffre began the new year determined to pursue ongoing operations in Artois and Champagne intended to engage and wear down German forces. Joffre's vision was shared by Britain's secretary of state for war, Lord Kitchener, who sought to provide as much support as was possible to French operations on the Western Front. This put him at odds not only with other members of the Asquith Cabinet, most notably the impetuous First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, but with the commander of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), Sir John French, both of whom advocated retaking the Channel ports. Those

ambitions foundered on Joffre's unyielding opposition, who insisted that Sir John conform to Joffre's plans.

The breakdown in relations between the commanders stemming from this led to the first request by the French for a unified command of the Entente armies on the Western Front. The absence of one is a recurring theme of Prete's book, and he ably delineates throughout it the problem from both countries' perspectives. To the French, given that the two partners were fighting a common enemy on a single front, such an arrangement only made sense, just as it did that Joffre should lead such a command. For the British, however, surrendering the very embodiment of their national sovereignty to foreign control was unthinkable politically. Instead, in response Kitchener played up the fiction of a harmonious relationship between Sir John and Joffre, despite the fact that relations became so poor that the French withdrew their support for the British attack on Neuve Chappelle on 10 March 1915, thus ensuring its strategic failure.

In the aftermath of the battle both sides worked to improve command relations. A first step in doing so for the generals was in coming together on matters of common agreement, namely their shared opposition to diverting British reinforcements to the Dardanelles operation. Joffre wanted to use these troops instead to take up more of the front line, freeing up French units for a major offensive in Artois that he was convinced would achieve the breakthrough they sought. Sir John objected to the BEF playing such a passive role, however, and the recently-repaired relations suffered a new blow with the German gas attack at the Second Battle of Ypres in April, which revived old arguments about French failures to support British forces. The collapse of the Artois offensive in June proved a turning point, as fears that their ally was losing the political will to continue led the British to increase their commitment to the fight in France. Though they still rejected French calls for a unified command, they agreed to a full-fledged military conference at Calais in July, which provided for a greater degree of Anglo-French command coordination than ever.

The conference could not resolve altogether the conflicting strategic goals between the two allies, however. This was more evident in disputes over other fronts, particularly in Salonika and the Middle East. In both campaigns the priorities of the two powers were more directly in conflict, and the clash over them often influenced the Anglo-French command relationship on the Western Front. These conflicts were exacerbated by the lack of pre-war planning for operations in

those regions and the difficulties both governments faced in imposing their will on their respective commands. With key politicians in each country pursuing operations on other fronts that promised to circumvent the military stalemate in France, neither side wanted to concede their interests in those regions. The resulting muddle was a persistent corrosive in Anglo-French command relations, and one that brought the two powers no closer to victory.

The coalition leadership closed out the year by making ambitious plans for offensive operations in 1916. They did so with new leaders on both sides, as Aristide Briand had succeeded René Viviani as France's prime minister in October and Douglas Haig and William Robertson replaced John French and Archibald Murray, respectively, as the BEF's commander and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff in December. While these moves and others bolstered Anglo-French command coordination, they still fell well short of the demand for a unified command that was still raised periodically by the latter. Indeed, the book might easily have justified the subtitle "advancing by inches" in terms of chronicling the slow movement towards this almost inevitable goal. As Prete demonstrates, both the British and French appreciated early on the value of coordinated operations in waging a shared war on a global stage. The story of their command relations that he relates is one of finding the golden mean between the level of coordination that would bring about victory while retaining the maximum amount of national sovereignty. It is not a spoiler to say that finding this balance proved elusive, with over two long and bloody years ahead before some semblance of a unified command finally was established, and even then only because of the desperate moment in which the Entente powers found themselves in the spring of 1918. That Prete so effectively shows why it took so long to agree to a unified command is not the least of his achievements with this book, which with its preceding volume offers a superb study of the difficult and awkward command relationship between British and French leadership. One hopes that the final volume is not long in coming to conclude what will likely stand as the definitive study of the subject.

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