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0521853842 - Victory through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War

Elizabeth Greenhalgh

Excerpt

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1 Coalition warfare and the Franco-British alliance

Britain and France had no history of cooperation, yet the Entente they had created in 1904 proceeded by trial and error, via recriminations, to win a war of unprecedented scale and reach. In the vast and growing literature of the Great War this victory through coalition has not received the attention it deserves, mainly because so many scholars view the war from various national perspectives.

The two countries overcame the multifarious problems of coalition warfare because fighting a war of survival made patent the necessity to overcome the centuries of mutual antagonism complicating an already complex alliance relationship. They put in place mechanisms to overcome those obstacles and complications, deriving from differing language, customs and organisation. This book examines the huge problems that the war created between 1914 and 1918 and the solutions that were proposed, fought over and finally agreed. It demonstrates that victory was achieved because of, not in spite of, coalition.

Problems with coalitions

As Baron Jomini put it in 1836, 'Of course, in a war an ally is to be desired, all other things being equal.' This ironic maxim underlines the fact that allies are valued only in proportion to the scale of the external threat. Thus the unlikely Franco-British coalition of 1914–18 survived over four years of war because the Allies feared that a victory by the Central Powers dominated by Prussian militarism would constitute an overwhelming threat to their great power status and their evolving democratic institutions (something that France and Britain *did* have in common).

Alliance politics are 'woven', according to one historian, from four strands: 'muddled perceptions, stifled communications, disappointed expectations, paranoid reactions'.¹ All four strands were present in the

¹ Richard E. Neustadt, *Alliance Politics* (New York / London: Columbia University Press, 1970), 56.

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young and inexperienced military coalition that ranged its forces against the Central Powers in August 1914. The temporary nature of the coalition was unremarkable, because all military coalitions change with changing circumstances. They are constituted either for offensive or for defensive purposes, and the partners support each other practically (with men and munitions), financially and morally, thus ensuring that in combination each might survive longer than in isolation. Clausewitz was sure that coalitions were the 'proper means to resist a superior power'. 'What better way is there?', he asked rhetorically in 1803, at a time when French power in Europe was at its height and it required a coalition to bring Napoleon down.²

The great benefit of mutual support in any coalition relationship is attenuated by a number of problems. They include questions of sovereignty; the reconciliation of different, if not actually conflicting, interests; personal and power relationships; language; and the management of unilateral action by one coalition partner which might be seen by one or more of the others as dangerous to the combined endeavour. All these coalition problems were present in the Franco-British relationship which sought to overcome the habits of ten centuries of enmity and to unite in the face of the common danger posed by German militarism.

Coalition solidarity is often difficult to maintain, because one of the most corrosive problems facing its members is that most destructive of emotions, suspicion. The fear that one member might leave the group and come to an arrangement with the enemy, to the disadvantage of those remaining, is ever present. Thus French fears of the failure of Russian support, for example, contributed to France's decision to accept the risks of war in July/August 1914; and Britain was so afraid that French political instability would lead to a ministry that might make peace with Germany that London was reluctant to quit Salonika despite wishing to do so. Fears were widely expressed among the French that Britain was deliberately prolonging the war because of the economic profits that they believed were being made. Such suspicions led to, but were not allayed by, the agreement, made but one month after the outbreak of war, that none of the three Entente partners should conclude a separate peace.

Given the lack of any history of harmonious relationship between the Entente powers, it is not surprising that the question of who was to lead the Entente predominated and bedevilled relations. Despite enormous manpower reserves, Russia was too backward economically and too distant from the main theatre of the war to pretend to the title of coalition

² Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings* (ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 238.

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leader. In any case, the concept of an autocracy leading democracies, however nominally, was unacceptable. Belgium, Italy and the smaller powers that joined the coalition later were equally out of contention, and the United States 'associated' itself too late. This left France and Britain, the only major Entente powers to be involved from start to finish. France had been invaded and made the greater manpower contribution; but Britain had the economic might and controlled the seas.

So who was to lead the coalition's armies? In a coalition of unequal partners, such as that between the Central Powers, the question of who was to control the alliance did not arise. The German rider dominated the Austro-Hungarian horse. Such coalitions are easier to manage: the Austrian resentment of German arrogance could be ignored, even though Germany had needed to maintain the prestige of its only powerful ally by supporting the Austro-Hungarian actions in 1914 against Serbia. In this coalition, unification of military command under the German Supreme Command (Oberste Heeresleitung) came about in September 1916. Britain and France, however, made differing contributions to their coalition. Creative (and destructive) tension was the result; hence it was only in the last months of the war, in the face of the extreme peril of a German onslaught which threatened to separate the Franco-British armies and thus leave them vulnerable to individual extinction, that France and Britain were able to sink their differences. They agreed on unified command – under a French general, despite the weakened state of the French armies by this stage of the war. If the Allied military had read their Clausewitz, they had hitherto ignored his dictum that the 'only' two ways of ensuring that an advantageous alliance leads to advantage in war are the concentration of all forces under a single commander and the drawing up of a common strategic plan. Where it was impossible to separate the major armies, so that each had its own theatre of war, those armies should be united 'as completely as possible'.³ Three-and-a-half years of war passed before Britain and France adopted this recipe for success.

Some saw unified command, leading to greater unity of purpose, as necessary long before it was implemented. General Tasker H. Bliss, the American representative on the Supreme War Council and later at the peace conference, stated that the cause of the failure to halt the German progress towards a 'Mitteleuropa' after more than two years of war was 'the manifest absence of unity of purpose on the part of the Entente Powers'. National governments had exerted themselves nationally, not as members of a coalition; and their army commanders reflected this attitude by

³ Ibid., 245, 246.

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restricting their responsibility to their own areas of front despite having agreed broad, comprehensive plans. Bliss concluded that throughout the entire war 'no Allied plan was ever attempted under such conditions that did not result in dismal failure'.⁴ The French Commander-in-Chief, General Joffre, had indeed attempted to create a better allied command structure, under his own stewardship, during 1914 and 1915.⁵ The examination of the tangled path from Joffre's stewardship to unity of command occupies a large part of the pages that follow.

Linked to the issue of coalition leadership is the question of coalition effectiveness. Military effectiveness operates at four levels – political, strategic, operational and tactical – and the balance of power may be different in each.⁶ Satisfactory resolution of problems at all these levels, or at least an agreement to reduce conflict as far as possible, is vital for the successful prosecution of war. In order to be effective (and, thereby, successful) differences must be settled not only in the political arena where grand strategy is decided, and in the field in military operations, but also in economic matters. Yet it was not until March 1916 that an inter-allied political conference of *all* the Allies took place in Paris. There was no allied political machinery for decision-making. Questions of operational command were settled at inter-allied military conferences which were led, until the end of 1916, by the victor of the Marne, the French Commander-in-Chief General Joffre.

At the operational and tactical levels in the field, combat efficiency is the goal and harmonisation the problem. How may armies speaking different languages, using different and incompatible equipment, and with vastly different cultural traditions be made to operate as a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts? Interpretation (French was the accepted common language at allied conferences), liaison between contiguous units, supply of food and munitions, personality clashes between commanders – all these problems fall into this category. One simple, practical example will suffice. The tactic of firing a creeping or rolling barrage to enable attacking infantry to get forward evolved during the course of the war. The British timed their barrages at so many hundreds

⁴ Tasker H. Bliss, 'The Evolution of the Unified Command', *Foreign Affairs* 1: 2 (December 1922), 2.

⁵ Roy A. Prete has argued that Joffre has not received sufficient recognition for his contribution to allied leadership: 'Joffre and the Question of Allied Supreme Command, 1914–1916', *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* 16 (1989), 329–38.

⁶ The phrase 'military effectiveness' comes from Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray (eds.), *Military Effectiveness*, 3 vols. (Boston: Unwin Hyman for the Merghon Center, 1988).

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of yards per minute or minutes; the French at so many hundreds of metres per minute or minutes. Any attempt to carry out a joint barrage meant that the French had to factor into the calculation a delay every so often in order to allow the shorter British measurement to catch up to its longer continental cousin.

To put such operational difficulties into perspective, the modern concept of RSI (regularisation, standardisation and interoperability) was equally absent from the mini-coalition represented by the British Empire forces. Australian, Canadian, New Zealand and South African sensibilities were not always respected and the resultant clashes have informed such films as *Breaker Morant* and *Gallipoli*, to cite only the Australian case. In a lecture given a few years after the end of the war, a Canadian artillery officer concluded that the Imperial military relationship was 'deficient' as regards 'mutual knowledge and understanding', despite a 'similarity of organization' which was present at least 'on paper'.⁷

The lengthy and very costly war highlighted economics as a vital factor in military effectiveness. Britain's traditional role as coalition banker, at least for the first two years of this costly war, caused resentment over such matters as the supply of raw materials for munitions. Equally, the loss of the industrialised and wealth-producing areas of France to enemy occupation meant constant outflows of French gold to London and enormous imports of coal from Britain, thus giving rise to bitterness. Britain's great shipping resources were a source of both strength and resentment. Yet, here, once again, the peril from the havoc wrought by the German submarine, especially in 1917, was so great that mechanisms were sought and found to combat the peril. The chapters on the shipping crises and the measures put in place to counter them put the Franco-British coalition in a new light.

Such problems at all levels are endemic in coalition war, but they became much more acute during the First World War, simply because of its scale. Railways enabled the engagement in battle of unprecedented numbers of men, and ships brought the raw material resources from across the globe to feed those battles and the new weapons systems. It is not, therefore, surprising that the resolution of coalition problems should have taken so long; and it was human nature that the experience of how to resolve them should have been forgotten so thoroughly at war's end. The

⁷ Lieutenant-Colonel H. D. G. Crerar, 'The Development of Closer Relations Between the Military Forces of the Empire', a lecture delivered on 31 March 1926 to the Royal United Service Institution and published in the *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* 71 (August 1926), 441–53. Crerar was Counter-Battery Staff Officer of the Canadian Corps in 1918.

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military coalition that opposed Hitler a generation later had to face the same problems and experienced the same frustrations, this despite the early creation of a Supreme War Council and the placing of the British force under the orders of a French commander-in-chief. Later conflicts, in Korea, Vietnam and the Gulf for example, revealed that the wheel of what is now called interoperability had to be re-invented.

The generals who held supreme command in both world wars made similar judgements on the disadvantages of coalitions. General Foch is reputed to have commented: 'I lost some of my respect for Napoleon when I learned what it was to fight a coalition war.' (A similar comment is attributed to General Maurice Sarrail who led the forces at Salonika, and also to General Pétain.) In the second conflict, General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote in 1948 of the 'ineptitude of coalitions in waging war'. 'Even Napoleon's reputation as a military leader suffered', he continued, 'when students in staff college came to realize that he always fought against coalitions – and therefore against divided counsels and diverse political, economic, and military interests.'

The Franco-British coalition: specific problems

In addition to these general problems of coalition warfare, British and French faced additional difficulties that resulted from the history of the two countries' relationship. Centuries of enmity from 1066 and all that, through the Hundred Years' and Napoleonic wars, had not been erased by the mere signing of an *entente cordiale* in 1904. The Crimean War had been the only major occasion when Britain and France fought side by side; and French public opinion regarded Britain's South African War highly critically. Further barriers to effective cooperation were created by the accumulation of stereotypes and prejudice, particularly in the military sphere.

In pre-Entente days, the French had had a low opinion of the British Army, especially given its poor showing in South Africa. This led to the judgement that it was nothing more than a colonial police force with a nice sideline in high ceremonial. When Colonel Huguet took up his appointment as military attaché in London at the end of 1904, 'no one' in the French War Office 'thought that it could ever be of the slightest use to us from a military point of view'. Huguet soon changed this estimation, however, on discovering the extent of the British reorganisation after the Boer War. He concluded that 'an army which could so well profit by its lessons was worthy of respect no matter what its size might be'.⁸ Indeed,

⁸ General Huguet, *Britain and the War: A French Indictment* (trans., London: Cassell, 1928), 3, 4.

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in French political circles, the British system served as a model of a professional army (particularly in its recruitment of native troops) and had proved its worth at Fashoda.

As the possibility of war increased, there was greater contact between the two armies. Sir Douglas Haig's future French aide-de-camp, for example, spent three months with the British infantry early in 1914.⁹ Huguet and his successor sent frequent reports on manœuvres and technical developments. Foch went to England in 1912 to review that year's army manœuvres, and made a favourable report: 'one of the best armies in existence'. Much less favourable, however, was the judgement on British commanders. Generals were criticised for their poor performance, even though their lack of experience was some excuse. If war were to be declared they would be 'hesitant and indecisive'. This judgement lies at the heart of the attitude of the French high command until 1917: British generals represented no threat to the French conception of their strategic supremacy.¹⁰

Relations between French and British officers were friendly despite, or perhaps because of, this perceived superiority which was fed by the open francophilia of Henry Wilson who, as Director of Military Operations at the War Office, played a key role in the prewar staff talks with the French military. The friendliness stemmed from mutual enthusiasm for fighting Germany. The main difficulty came from the fact that there were simply too few British, and conscription was most unlikely. A further difficulty was thought to lie in the British psychology. Huguet made a particular point of emphasising how different the French and British were. Lacking imagination, creatures of habit, slow to change, suspicious of things foreign – such was the Englishman who 'drifts from day to day without looking beyond the needs of the moment', wrote Huguet after the war.¹¹ He described in 1913 the British qualities, in essentially the same terms although with rather more charity, when he described the British as insular and therefore mistrustful of whatever came from outside. Lacking the intelligence and native wit to adapt speedily to new circumstances, they were tenacious and energetic, thus being always able to emerge victorious from any challenge. The British foot soldier was, despite being among the best in the world, less intelligent, had less 'healthy gaiety' and was physically weaker than his French counterpart. The former made up for these deficiencies, however, by

⁹ Patricia E. Prestwich, 'French Attitudes Towards Britain, 1911–1914' (Ph.D. thesis, Stanford University, 1973), 303.

¹⁰ 'Report on the British Manœuvres of 1912 by General Foch, Chief of the French Mission', and 'Report on the British Manœuvres, 1913' (unsigned): both cited in English translation in *ibid.*, 297.

¹¹ Huguet, *Britain and the War*, 10.

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a perseverance, a tenacity and unshakeable confidence in his officers that made him, if well led, a valuable tool. The military implications of this character analysis were clear: the British, unprescient and slow to change, were not likely to adopt conscription or declare war immediately, but once committed, they would provide consistently loyal, if not imaginative support. While the French devised grand strategy, the British would doggedly hold their positions.¹²

The British commander-in-chief in 1914, Field Marshal Sir John French, could match Huguet. After the British had had some considerable experience of ‘doggedly’ holding their positions, he wrote on 15 November 1914 of his experience of the French commanders: ‘*au fond* they are a low lot, and one always has to remember the class these French generals mostly come from’.¹³

The greatest difference between the two countries lay in attitudes to military service. Britain was never the ‘nation in arms’ that France was, with conscription marking the divide. The French 1913 military service law was equitable. All Frenchmen from the age of twenty had to serve three years in the ‘*armée active*’, followed by eleven years in the reserve, seven years in the Territorials, and a further seven years in the Territorial reserve – twenty-eight years in all. This law meant that between 1914 and 1918, 20 per cent of the population served in the armies: more than 8.19 million men.¹⁴

In the island nation, on the other hand, voluntarism ruled until 1916, when conscription was introduced after much soul-searching. Liability for military service was applied to all men, married and unmarried, between the ages of eighteen and forty-one, although so far as possible eighteen-year-olds were not to be sent overseas. The crisis of 1918 imposed two further military service laws that extended the age of service to fifty-one years, cancelled exemptions for certain classes of employment and those under twenty-three, and (this last never implemented) extended conscription to Ireland. The wartime enlistments of 4.9 million men amounted to 10.73 per cent of the population as a whole.

All these national differences – not only military, but political, economic and cultural – were accentuated by the problem of language. Colonel Charles à Court Repington, military correspondent of *The Times*, described

¹² ‘Conférence au Centre des Hautes Etudes militaires’, April 1913, cited in English and analysed in Prestwich, ‘French Attitudes Towards Britain’, 299–300.

¹³ Cited in Philip Magnus, *Kitchener: Portrait of an Imperialist* (London: John Murray, 1958), 302.

¹⁴ Generally speaking, more than 60 per cent of the cohort were judged to be ‘bons pour le service armé’ between 1872 and 1914: see Jules Maurin and Jean-Charles Jauffret, ‘L’Appel aux armes, 1872–1914’, in André Corvisier (ed.), *Histoire militaire de la France*, 4 vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), III: 83.

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the lack of a common language as 'a real hindrance to relations' at political and senior military levels, although the British Army's rank and file, 'though not knowing a word of French at the start and uncommonly little at the finish, seemed to get on very well with the French people, and especially with the girls'.¹⁵ (Indeed the instructions of the Secretary of State for War to every soldier going on active service, which were pasted inside his paybook – 'You must entirely resist both temptations [wine and women], and, while treating all women with perfect courtesy, you should avoid any intimacy' – seem to have been ignored.)¹⁶ At the first formal Franco-British 'summit' meeting, held in Calais in July 1915, the problem was apparent. Prime Minister H. H. Asquith wrote to his wife that he had never heard 'such a quantity of bad French spoken in all my life – genders, vocabulary, & pronunciation equally execrable'.¹⁷ But the Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener, received credit for managing 'not to parody too outrageously their language'.¹⁸ As Maurice Hankey remarked of the conference: 'We were still in a sort of Stone Age; an age when it was considered necessary to talk in French or not to talk at all.' Certainly amongst the military, as General Sir C. Callwell recalled, 'far more of our officers could struggle along somehow in French than French officers could, or at all events would, speak English'.¹⁹ A recent biographer of Foch's chief of staff, Maxime Weygand, wrote: 'Very few French generals spoke English ... At Saint-Cyr the compulsory language was German. Neither Foch nor Weygand could sustain a conversation in English.'²⁰ Of the 488 French Army officers promoted to the rank of general between 1889 and the opening months of the war, 347 (71 per cent) had language qualifications in German, and a mere 106 (or 21 per cent) had similar qualifications in English.²¹

Hence the ability or willingness of British officers to speak French was critical. The British Expeditionary Force's first commander, Sir John

¹⁵ Lieutenant-Colonel C. à Court Repington, *The First World War 1914–1918*, 2 vols. (London: Constable, 1920), I: 32.

¹⁶ Cited in Sir George Arthur, *Life of Lord Kitchener*, 3 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1920), III: 27.

¹⁷ H. H. Asquith to Margot Asquith, 6 July 1915, fos. 191–2, Ms.Eng.c.6691, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

¹⁸ Leroy Lewis [British military attaché in the Paris embassy] to B. FitzGerald [Kitchener's military secretary], 24 August 1915, Kitchener papers, PRO 30/57/57, PRO.

¹⁹ Lord Hankey, *The Supreme Command 1914–1918*, 2 vols. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961), I: 350; Major-General Sir C. E. Callwell, *Stray Recollections*, 2 vols. (London: Edward Arnold, 1923), II: 285.

²⁰ Bernard Destremau, *Weygand* (Paris: Perrin, 1989), 104.

²¹ See Table 11–10 in Walter Shepherd Barge, Sr, 'The Generals of the Republic: The Corporate Personality of High Military Rank in France, 1869–1914' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1982), 124.

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French, spoke a French that 'was not of a kind readily intelligible to a Frenchman'. His successor, Sir Douglas Haig, despite (or perhaps because of) his inarticulateness in his native tongue, made a special effort to learn French and became surprisingly competent. He attended several high-powered conferences as the sole British representative amongst a large group of Frenchmen.²²

Liaison officers and interpreters were meant to compensate for any inability to communicate directly. Henry Wilson, appointed Chief Liaison Officer with the French in 1915, had been instrumental in the prewar joint staff talks. He spoke French, as he did everything, with panache if with a pronounced Irish accent.²³ Other liaison officers, such as General Sir Sydney Clive or Edward Louis Spears, spoke excellent French. The heads of the French Military Mission to the British Army were able to communicate in English, even if their accent was less polished. Yet, even as late as 1918, liaison officers were being appointed with no regard to their ability to speak the language. General Sir John DuCane was 'amused that nobody took the trouble to ask me whether I talked French', when he was taken from his brigade and sent as a high-powered officer to the Allied commander's headquarters in 1918.²⁴ And Lord Derby went as ambassador to Paris in April 1918, where 'he dines out with people whose faces he doesn't know, whose names he can't remember and whose language he is unable to talk'.²⁵

Thus, in the light of all the complications affecting coalitions in general and the British and French in particular, the lack of mutual comprehension in August 1914 is not to be wondered at. In April 1913, when the French Commander-in-Chief, General Joffre, had presented his strategic plan to the Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre, he expressed the view that British support remained doubtful: 'We shall therefore be acting wisely in not taking the British forces into account in our plans of operation'.²⁶ The Irish crisis of the following year served only to confirm the wisdom of Joffre's caution.

²² Liaison officer G. S. Clive remarked that Haig was 'able to discuss things tête à tête with the French Commanders without anyone else present': Clive to Lord Esher, 9 January 1916, Esher papers, ESHR 5/51, CCC.

²³ On Wilson's fluent French, see Bernard Ash, *The Lost Dictator* (London: Cassell & Co Ltd, 1968), 9, 71, 74. See also Peter E. Wright, *At the Supreme War Council* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1921), 40.

²⁴ Lieutenant-General Sir John DuCane, *Marshal Foch* (privately printed, 1920, copy in the IWM, London), 2.

²⁵ David Gilmour, *Lord Curzon* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 490, citing the diary of the Earl of Crawford.

²⁶ *AFGG* 1/1, 19, citing 'Bases du plan XVII'.