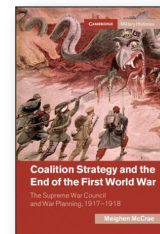


BOOK REVIEW:

Coalition strategy and the end of the First World War: the Supreme War Council and war planning, 1917-1918

by Meighen McCrae

Cambridge University Press: Cambridge; 2019; 292 pp.; ISBN 9781108475303 (hardback); RRP \$62.95



In November 1918, the guns fell silent after four years of fighting which, while centred on Europe, encompassed the globe. The political and military leaders of the allied nations had spent much of 1918 planning and setting the conditions to enable the Great War to be won in 1919. The main forum for this inter-allied co-operation was the Supreme War Council (SWC).

The rapid and unforeseen collapse of the Central Powers in late 1918, however, meant that the SWC, its actions and intrigues, have received relatively little attention when compared to the battlefield actions of 1918 or the political manoeuvring of the peace conference that followed in 1919.

This book, through its analysis of the SWC and its subordinate committees, provides a detailed insight into the formulation of global allied strategy for 1918-19. McCrae examines the motivations and machinations of the key allied powers, namely the French, British, Italians and Americans and how they used the SWC and their Permanent Military Representatives (PMR) to advance their national interests.

Dr Meighen McCrae, an historian, is a lecturer in strategic studies at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University (ANU) and also lectures on strategy and operations at the Australian War College. Prior to ANU, Dr McCrae taught at Aberystwyth University, Kings College London, and the United Kingdom Joint Services Command and Staff College.

The book is based upon the author's PhD thesis and the reader is struck by the quality and quantity of the research undertaken to examine the SWC and its subsidiary committees. It is comprised of six chapters complemented by a short introduction and conclusion. The thematic structure enables the reader to comprehend the complex interplay of military, industrial and personnel pressures. The use of a timeline, maps and tables enables the reader to grasp the complex global nature of the industrial and manpower issues facing the allies. The index is well structured and facilitates quick examination of key personnel, organisations and themes.

The first chapter provides an overview of the environment facing the allies when they formed the SWC. Importantly, the author examines the various PMRs, their construct, and their relationships with their respective national command elements. This provides key context due to their centrality to SWC determinations on the direction of the war.

Chapters two through five examine allied actions in subsidiary theatres and their relationship to the Franco-

Belgian Front. McCrae demonstrates the inter-dependent nature of the various theatres and how the SWC, through Joint Note 37, sought to ensure allied actions in all theatres were premised upon their contribution to defeating the German Army. While the SWC had minimal executive power, the United States' insistence that it be used as a forum, combined with the coalescence of national interests on the Franco-Belgian Front, saw it gain primacy in the planning and direction of the war.

The final chapter focuses on resources, particularly allied shipping. The author's examination of the SWC subordinate committees, particularly the Allied Maritime Transport Council and the Inter-Allied Munitions Council during 1918, is detailed and insightful. McCrae examines the provision of shipping by the British to the Americans and how they sought to leverage this to further their own national interests, namely exchanging shipping tonnage for American formations to shorten the British sector of the line on the Franco-Belgian Front. The chapter also exposes political concerns, particularly those of the British relating to the build-up of a large American merchant fleet which would directly compete with their own after the war. Indeed, McCrae adds to the existing scholarship on allied grand strategy by providing new insights into the tensions, motivations and assumptions which underpinned allied strategy from 1917 onwards.

A key theme examined by McCrae throughout this book is the allies' continual overestimation of the manpower and industrial capacity of Germany. This was premised on their failure to accurately predict the character of the German offensive in early 1918. As the author demonstrates, this continual overestimation of German strength is the primary reason the allies failed to predict the rapid German collapse in late 1918 and were ill-prepared for the armistice. The armistice terms imposed by the allies were premised on neutering German military capability due a fear that Germany would reorganise over the winter of 1918-19 before resuming the war. Thus, the author provides key context to the modern reader who, with the luxury of hindsight, is aware of the subsequent consequences of these terms.

Overall, this is an excellent book examining the tensions among national interests within a coalition and how the various allies exploited the SWC, its committees and their PMRs to further their interests. This book will appeal to serious historians, military professionals and those with an interest in grand strategy.

Luke Holloway