

**SFHS Commentary: The Last Quarter Hour [Geyer]**

*The following commentary was delivered at the recent Society for French Historical Studies Conference at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign [please visit <http://www.conferences.uiuc.edu/french2006/> and click on “Schedule” for the full conference programme.]. H-Diplo would like to thank Professor Michael Geyer for submitting his commentary for posting on our list –Diane Labrosse, H-Diplo Managing Editor.*

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**Panel 7F. The Last Quarter Hour: France’s Contribution to the Allied Victory in 1918**

Chair: Leonard Smith, Oberlin College

Robert Doughty, West Point (Ret.): “Staggering across the Finish Line: The French Army at the End of the Great War.”

Robert Hanks, Wilfred Laurier University: “Georges Clemenceau and the Frustrations of Unified Command, 1917-1919.”

Elizabeth Greenhalgh, University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy: “The Contribution of Marshal Ferdinand Foch to Victory in 1918.”

Commentator: Michael Geyer, University of Chicago

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**Comment: Last Quarter Hour: France’s Contribution to the Allied Victory in 1918. French Historical Studies, April 22, 2006**

**Michael Geyer (University of Chicago)**

Panel-titles are contrivances, but the question is what France’s contribution was to allied victory in World War I and, by extension, to what degree and in which way France shaped the military outcome of the war. We know that France suffered more than any other country, that the war was fought for four long years on its territory, but the issue at stake is not victimization, but agency. What did France do to win the war in 1918?

This question is not least interesting in view of the historiography. It seems only fair to say that British and Commonwealth historiography have successfully swayed historical opinion in favor of thinking that it is British and related forces who have effectively won the war – if only by dint of the sheer overwhelming presence of British accounts on the subject. Of course, there is the American view that pays tribute to the major contribution of the Doughboys to winning the war, but my sense is that, except for American military historians, very few were ready to believe them. (This might change somewhat, although intriguingly, after today’s discussion of Robert Doughty’s paper.) Not least, there is the not inconsiderable matter of the Germans and in how

far they were actually defeated – a question to which there is an answer beyond the “would-have, should-have, could-have” of much of the literature, but that’s not the subject of today’s panel. Suffice it to say that, while the Germans were amazed and awed by the sheer aggressiveness of the Canadians, they thought to the very end that the French forces were the only serious match to their own, with the artillery superior and the infantry quite at par with their own forces. The British, of course, had all the materiel, were quantitatively and technologically vastly superior ever since 1916, which is certainly a factor that had to be considered.

In view of this, what did the French side do to win the war? We have three insightful contributions to this question. The three have a bit of a debate going among themselves as to how exactly to weigh contributions and assessments, especially of Marshal Foch, but also of the French Army overall, which is certainly one of the pleasures of a tightly woven, national history. But I rather would like to press the point of what the choices and possibilities of actions to be taken were in 1918.

Robert Hanks is, of course, right that the question of a unified command was one of the more controversial issues in Allied cooperation and I should think it is one of the more vexed issues of coalition warfare. His argument is straightforward enough that Clemenceau wanted it or, in any case, made it happen, but acted as if he did not need it for the most part and it is, frankly, rather dubious to me, if he wanted it in the first place. However, in the moment of need, at the cusp of the German offensive in 1918, he not only got a supreme commander, but also got his man, Foch, even if he was subsequently not entirely happy with him.

In the first instance, we do have to admire a canny politician doing his work – or really two canny politicians, because Foch is another one – and getting what he wants when he needs it. The kind of backhanded and forehanded politics of supreme commandship is quite remarkable for being so effective, although I would like to hear a bit more on that. But I think that the altogether more interesting problem is with what Robert Hanks thinks of Clemenceau’s politics being at “cross-purposes” as he puts it. For it seems to me that there were a variety of quite incommensurate issues negotiated under the heading of a Supreme Commander. There was first the question of Allied unity of purpose, of the *Kriegsplan* and, in the narrower sense, of strategy and, perhaps, the grander aspects of equity and division of labor. It seems to me that Clemenceau acted not only idiosyncratically, when he scuttled a parliamentary initiative and when he paralyzed the military committee; for a Supreme war Council is neither a legislative nor a military, but a supremely political and, as far as that goes, an executive agency – and whatever kind of big government Clemenceau may have feared, I think he did right resisting a confusion of government. By the same token, what he needed and, in March 1918, desperately wanted is a supreme military field commander – not really a Commander in Chief, but a functioning operational center that could do, what was most difficult to do in terms of military organization, but was essential for the effective pursuit of war – how to spring loose the reserves from the armies that hogged them so as to throw them into the breach, be it defensively or offensively. In 1919 Clemenceau needed something totally different, a working alliance that tied Britain to the continent, which in the event he did not get. Be this as it may, inconsistency seems to me not quite a sufficient interpretation of Clemenceau’s wheeling and dealing. I think he is far more consistent than meets the eye, but in order to understand the consistency of purpose, as well as

political cunning, I would suggest a bit more thought about Command Authority in WWI and more generally.

Elizabeth Greenhalgh suggests that Foch did superbly well what I just indicated was his main job. He deployed his reserves rather effectively. So let me just say for starters that I'd be eager to hear more, much more about how good Foch actually was with regard to getting and deploying reserve formations; for example, how he worked out the logistics. Elizabeth Greenhalgh also suggests that Foch was very good at coordination, preferring direct communication over elaborations of his own staff and, so it seems, over imposing his own will unilaterally. I agree with her, but this observation raises a number of questions. For one, it seems to me that behind a brilliant general, there are usually a few brilliant majors and colonels who do the foot-, hand-, and head-work and I just wanted to know who they are in this case. For another, if the communicative model were indeed true, it is difficult to see what this has to do with Napoleon or a cult of Napoleon to which Foch apparently subscribed. Was Napoleon the "great communicator" and, if not, why would Foch as the actual communicator choose to clothe himself in Napoleonic grandeur? It seems to me that this is a good case for exploring the tension between the actual business of war and the cult of the supreme commander. For a third, if her accolade of Foch were indeed true, one wonders what, if anything, made Foch a "tactically demented Napoleon," which at the very least suggests to me that Foch's people skills did not sway curmudgeons like JFC Fuller. But the real problem I see has very much to do with how to achieve the happiness of the *grande republique* in 1918 as Foch grandly put it in 1918. Granted that he was a prudent military commander, who did not want to expend more blood than absolutely necessary (although this leads me to the unenviable conclusion that his German counterpart, Erich Ludendorff, was the same, because he argued exactly the same case!), was he right, as a military commander, to assume that he could get the Rhine without fighting his way there? He may have been right, as Robert Doughty suggests in his paper that he could not and, therefore would not. But if this is so, he was not at all a prudent strategist insisting on the Rhine as natural border; in fact, he above all should have insisted on making a conciliatory peace, which was beyond him. Given Bruno Cabanes' work this had nothing to do with Napoleon and much more with the French culture of war, in which exhaustion intertwined with hatred and the latter was increased by the former.<sup>1</sup> Be this as it may, it is not the nation, but its leaders who act and it seems to me, and Iraq brings this to mind over and over, that there are ways to lose brilliant military victories and the rot sets in with misjudging what one gains with victory.

Robert Doughty puts all this in perspective in a remarkable paper, whose most problematic statement is that the Germans were closest to victory on June 1, mostly because I don't like the idea that Wetzell, the operations man in the Supreme Command should have been right after all. But this is neither here nor there. I am so absolutely delighted that Robert joins me and others in highlighting the devastating and debilitating casualties of 1918, both of the German and of the allied offensives in 1918 which were second only to the 1914/15 campaigns. It is in 1914 and 1918 that armies were pulverized, the difference being that in 1918 all sides sued for peace, although the Germans did so on the losing and the Allies on the winning side. Now, what we learn is why the French and, above all, why Foch did not pursue a coup de grace – and the answer is because they were not capable of doing so and, inasmuch as they were capable, they

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Cabanes, *La victoire endeillée: la sortie de guerre des soldats français, 1918-1920* (L'univers historique). Paris: Seuil, 2004.

feared the uncertain outcome and preferred what they got, a debilitating armistice with and for the Germans, over what they did not have and were not certain if they could get it – and that is a battle of annihilation, a breakthrough and the resulting roll-up and decomposition of the German field army. But mostly the French forces were exhausted and massively depleted which created a quandary. In order to maintain a capable fighting force, the campaign would have to slow down (which it would anyways because of the approaching winter weather – try to start an offensive in Lorraine in November and December!) or stop entirely; but every pause would give the Germans a chance to reorganize and retrench – and for that matter build another Siegfried line. Perhaps, the operational exigencies of this last campaign would be worth a bit more clarity, but the overall argument seems convincing to me. What you got in November 1918 is two armies (or really three, for the British were not in better shape either) who were too enfeebled for a final blow, one army winning and one army losing, but none better off for it.

So, the war ended in a success of attrition after all (especially if we add that the food crisis, both in Germany and Austria, was crucially responsible for the collapse of the home front.) The big question is in this situation, what kind of peace you make and what kind of peace you can make. This is not the subject of the papers, which are about the last quarter hour of the war rather than the first quarter hour after the war. But much as there is to debate about this last quarter hour, much as we might broach the problem of how to place military action within the culture of war at this late stage, much as we might want to probe military and political leadership — much as all this is the order of our panel, the key question remains how military victory and defeat, in a war of attrition, correlate to the question of peace. In my view, this is a supremely military question; it is the key problem of war.

Let me suggest therefore that all our work – including these three excellent papers, which I had the privilege to discuss – can only get better if we bring the question of peace back in. And as if it were not amply evident, peace-making is the most difficult task of all.

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