

*Conquer We Must. A Military History of Britain 1914-1945*, by Robin Prior, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022, xxi, 803 pp. + maps, illustrations, £30.00, ISBN 9780 300 23340 7

The relationships between politicians and the military during the world wars is scarcely untilled territory, but Robin Prior offers not only a successful summary of the field but also a work offering a host of valuable assessments. It is scarcely surprising that there is much strife to consider, but that reflected not only the structure of devolved authority and power, but also the complexities of the issues at stake as well as the degree to which these changed in a dynamic and unpredictable fashion not only due to circumstances but also to the impact of the decisions of allies and opponents alike. In his account of the First World War, Prior in large part follows traditional guidelines in his narrative. He argues that on the British side, it was the political leadership that made a series of decisions concerning manpower that were crucial, an assessment that benefits from noting comparable French developments.

There is considerable scepticism about Sir John French who is seen as a cause of tension with the French. Prior correctly points out that the BEF played a limited role but to describe it as 'miniscule' (p. 49) is misleading, not least because it operated on the important German right front. This is an aspect of what might be seen as a wider misreading of the opening campaign. Prior is overly inclined to see a new age of warfare which underplays important precursors to the mode of fighting, while to argue that 'in 1914 it was soon found that where there was much fire there was little movement' (p. 47) could be qualified by discussing the Eastern Front. That, of course, is not Prior's subject, but he can be a little over-inclined to read too widely from what he works on.

There is a valuable consideration of 1915-16. Prior sees the Gallipoli operation as discrediting civilian-directed strategy leading to a return to military dominance. That is certainly an element, but another way to consider the question is to underline the differing roles of policy and strategy necessarily involved in moving beyond the Western Front and then in planning for operations there. The latter of course was also in part linked to the tensions within the British ministry.

Prior understands that Haig, despite his grumbling, made the best of the situation created by Lloyd George, while the political leadership also provided the means, both portable firepower and supporting artillery, to enable the troops to reach a higher effectiveness in the absence of the mass that Haig would have preferred. Possibly Prior is at fault in devoting so much attention to Haig, who comes out as dim, at the expense of the other generals, and also for consistently underplaying the French example. Effective civilian control emerges as necessary both on land and at sea. Prior argues that the civilians intervened more in military matters in the First World War than is often thought. He suggests that the failure of civilian control came in the long drawn-out slogging matches from the Somme to Cambrai where there were long intervals when, despite the paucity of results, there was no civilian intervention. Indeed, Prior can be highly critical on this point.

This discussion brings out an area in which it might have been useful to offer an historical perspective, a perspective that can be somewhat absent from this book. In particular, the officer corps looked back via the Boer War, the Indian Army, and more general service in the cause of Empire, to systems in which there was certainly civilian intervention, but of a certain type. And so also for the navy. As far as European conflicts were concerned, the collective ‘wisdom’ of the wars of the eighteenth century, the Napoleonic War and the Crimean War, was one in which civilian intervention had often been in pursuit of partisan political ends, and anyway affected by changes in ministry.

There is also the more general point about the difficulties of working the policy/strategy distinction, not least with reference to the problems in producing an effective institutional context and practice. These are points that continue to the present, and Prior’s important book would help contribute to the present-day debate if it also drew on it. At times, instead, there can be a rush to judgment that does not devote sufficient attention to contemporary difficulties, ones seen with other powers, albeit, as Prior valuably shows in the case of Germany, with other forms and outcomes.

The discussion of the Second World War is interesting, but more could have been made of the learning experience from its predecessor. Moreover, the impact of differing alliance durations and strengths in the case of America and France repay attention. So, a first-rate book, but, in part, because of what it suggests would have repaid more attention.

(796 words)

Jeremy Black

University of Exeter

Jeremy.martin.black@gmail.com