

This is by way of a belated book review. Its resonance in this anniversary year stems from its topic; a reflection of the Franco-British relationship in the run up to, and in the early days of the Great War. 'Britain and the war' was written by the French Military Attaché who was 'in the room' as those fateful events unfolded.

General M. Huguet was appointed in December 1904 as Military Attaché to London. Whilst recent television histories tend to suggest that the outbreak of war in August 1914 came as something of a surprise, this book reminds us that military conversations between Britain and France had begun sometime beforehand. The entente cordiale, signed in 1904, was a typically pragmatic response to developments in the international arena, writes Nick Watts.

Britain had managed to remain un-entangled in European wars during the second half of the 19th century. However, the result of those various wars had seen the rise of what was perceived as a very militaristic Germany. To which had to be added the expanded British Empire, which needed defending. Britain, France and Russia had all rubbed up against each other as their empires expanded. The British priorities were to keep the Russians out of Afghanistan, from where they could threaten India; and to placate French colonial ambitions in central Africa, where they threatened Britain's 'Cairo to the Cape' policy. Making an alliance with France, which had an alliance with Russia seemed to square this particular circle. Solving one problem, however, created another.

The British military in 1904 was not held in very high esteem by the French. The recent Boer war had shown it up in a poor light. However, as he got to know his counterparts Huguet saw that the British Army was putting its house in order and learning the hard lessons of its recent campaign. The new Liberal government of 1906 coincided with the commencement of military conversations about what the nature of British military assistance to France, in the event of War with Germany, might consist of. Britain insisted on the right to reserve its freedom of action, which was based on its wish to avoid any entanglement if possible. This constructive ambiguity was to bedevil the relationship from then on, even after the war had begun.

Huguet reflects at some length in the opening chapter on what he perceives as the essentially insular nature of the British – something which has resonance today. The separation by the channel deprives most inhabitants of these islands of any experience of dealing with neighbours from other countries. The safeguarding of a strong navy meant that the army was smaller than many of its continental neighbours. The thought of committing this force to the defence of another country was difficult to conceive of in the popular imagination - something which was again to bedevil planning in the days leading up to the outbreak of war.

This book, albeit very subjective, provides a useful counterpoint to the British narrative as the events of August 1914 unfolded. To the British view the BEF was despatched with alacrity and efficiency. Huguet who had returned to Paris in 1912 was appointed Chief of the French Military Mission to the BEF when the war started. Upon his appointment he found that there was still uncertainty in Paris about what help, if any, the French army would receive. German forces facing France numbered some 36 fighting corps. The Germans mobilised 1,850,000 fighting men in 1914. France mustered some 20 corps plus reserve elements; 1,650,000 fighting men.

The BEF initially despatched in August 1914 comprised 150,000. This was a reflection of the need for British troops to garrison the empire, as well as to safeguard the homeland. Of more pressing need was the question of where the BEF could be of most use. The orders issued to General Sir John French the commander of the BEF, from Lord Kitchener who had been appointed Secretary of State for War, was eerily reminiscent of the orders given to Arthur Wellesley some 100 years earlier. These stated that the size of the army was such that it should be used with care, as it would not withstand substantial casualties.

Huguet found himself to be a rather perplexed envoy shuttling back and forth between British and French senior commanders in the anxious opening moves of the war. The bad relations which developed between Kitchener and French, which were witnessed by Huguet, did not make matters any easier. French did not enjoy good relations with General Joffre, whilst he managed to work well with Foch. Huguet paints entertaining pictures of the main characters as they seek to make coalition warfare work under acute pressure. He proceeds to chronicle the subsequent events in a way that students of the 1914 campaign will find interesting, as he looks on as an observer as the BEF copes with the pressures placed on it.

Apart from the chronology, the epilogue at the end of the book is worth study. Written four years after the end of the war, Huguet notes that France, which had in his words 'emerged as the most bruised' sees with dismay the rate at which Germany is rebuilding her commercial strength and her allies have deserted her. In particular 'English rivalry shows itself against her the world over, just as in the bad days before the Entente Cordiale.'

The reflection we can draw from this point of view, must of necessity be coloured by the events of the 1930s, when Britain sought to avoid another war with Germany. The enfeebled democracies were confronted by an ever increasing sense of powerlessness in the face of Bolshevik Russia and the several varieties of fascism that had erupted in Europe and Asia. However inevitable we now know the march to 1939 was, at the time statesmen bent their every effort to avoid another war.

The Echoes from that distant summer of 1914 resonate today, as Russia has shown that it is prepared to use force to further its ambitions. Putin's calculation was in no small part informed by the indecisiveness of the war weary western allies over how to respond to an attack using chemical weapons by the Syrian government. The advent of the 'Entente Frugal' in 2010 represents a pragmatic response to the economic pressures on defence budgets. So far the operational experience has been encouraging, but the political leadership needs to retain the original vision for such a demarche. However economic policies deliver increasing prosperity in the years ahead, the imperative for co-operation should remain a shared set of values.

The US pivot to Asia means that European powers will increasingly be called upon to deal with problems in our part of the world, whether this be in the Maghreb, the Sahel, or the near east. If defence budgets are not going to increase, then capabilities must. This will of necessity mean more pooling and sharing of equipment and 'enablers' such as tankers and strategic lift. Political neuralgia about whether future capability has a NATO or a European label on will only encourage autocrats and tyrants and other malevolent actors.

Britain and France have taken a necessary first step. But it is only a first step. Let us hope that we do not repeat the mistakes of the 1920s and 30s. The dual anniversaries of 1914 and 1944 call on policy makers and citizens alike to ensure that the silent gravestones in Normandy and Flanders serve as memorials to past wars, not as harbingers for future ones.

[Britain and the war by Gen M Huguet: English translation by Capt. H. Cotton Minchin. French edition published Nov 1922. English version published by Cassell in 1928]