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Frederick C. Schneid, *Napoleon's Conquest of Europe: the War of the Third Coalition*. London and Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2005. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography and index. ISBN 0-275-98096-0.

Review by Charles J. Esdaile, University of Liverpool.

At the time of writing--8 January 2007--we are well into the bi-centennial of the Napoleonic era. Two hundred years ago Napoleon had made himself emperor of France, humiliated the Austrians at Ulm, beaten the Russians at Austerlitz and shattered the Prussians at Jena. That being the case, it is hardly surprising to find the publishing market deluged with fresh studies of the emperor and his campaigns, and it is much to the credit of Frederick Schneid that he has managed to produce a book that is something other than the biography and campaign narrative that is the standard menu of such fare. For anyone writing a study of the War of the Third Coalition of 1805 the battles of Trafalgar and Austerlitz must represent an almost irresistible temptation, but Schneid seems to have imposed something of a self-denying ordinance on himself in their respect, for the first merits only one page of his book and the latter barely two. This is perhaps just as well--at only 144 pages the text is extremely concise--but nonetheless it was a considerable relief to discover that Schneid had avoided the temptation simply to regurgitate well known stories such as those of the death of Nelson and the capture of the heights of Pratzen.

What we have, then, is a much more interesting and useful book. In extraordinarily short compass, Schneid ranges across the entire history of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars prior to 1805 and in consequence succeeds in placing the events of a war that was, after all, relatively brief, in their full political and diplomatic context. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that what we have here is a study not of the War of the Third Coalition, but rather of the international history of Europe between 1796 and 1805.

What, then, do we get? At war with Britain and Austria, in 1796 France gained a welcome ally in the shape of Spain, and proceeded first to defeat the Second Coalition of 1798 and then bring peace to Europe in 1802. In this process the rising figure of Napoleon Bonaparte was crucial, just as he was crucial, too, in the resumption of hostilities in May 1803 and the subsequent formation of the Third Coalition. In his coverage of these events, however, Schneid is somewhat patchy. Thus, we hear a great deal about the origins of the alliance between France and Spain, Napoleon's fashioning of a new Germany in which the influence of Austria was much reduced and, finally, the negotiations that led Austria and Russia and their allies to go back to war with France in 1805. Yet there are other parts of the story that hardly merit a mention. In no place is this more obvious or, indeed, striking, than the rupture of the Peace of Amiens in May 1803.

This is in many ways the key event in the whole period and has ever since been the very touchstone of discussions of the foreign policy of Napoleon. For those determined to denounce Napoleon, Amiens is proof positive that he did not want to live at peace with his neighbours and that in the end *détente* was not a viable option. Equally, for those determined to defend him it is rather proof positive that the *ancien régime* in general, and Great Britain in particular, were not prepared to accept either the greater France over which Napoleon presided or the idea that one of the oldest thrones in Europe could be possessed by an obscure *par-venu* who based his power on the notion of popular sovereignty. In short, a whole chapter might easily have been devoted to the subject, whereas all we get on it is the following:

The Treaty of Amiens did not insure [sic] a general peace between Britain and France. As Campo Formio in 1797 was considered 'temporary' in Vienna until they regained their strength, so too was Amiens perceived in London. There was little way England could accept many of the territorial provisions. The treaty provided for the recognition of the Batavian Republic...The British agreed as well to abandon Malta to the Knights of Saint John...As Malta was the strategic jewel of the Mediterranean, this was a difficult pill to swallow ... As early as November 1802, not more than seven months after the signing of Amiens, Pedro Cevallos, the Spanish Secretary of State, was informed by Larrea, his *chargé* in London, that it was only a matter of time before the general peace would be shattered. Tensions continued to build, but the peace held until 18 May 1803. (p. 28)

There is, however, much more to be said. Extrapolating from this passage, it is clear that Schneid believes that it was Britain who was responsible for war, but, whilst the point is certainly arguable, the considerable amount of evidence that points in the opposite direction cannot simply be ignored. What, for example, of the fact that, rather than building up her forces, Britain actually disarmed very rapidly in the wake of Amiens and was hopelessly unprepared for a new conflict? To quote Lord Minto: No-one could have imagined the total want of preparation, and the total impossibility of a very sudden preparation, in which this country has been placed...We had till the last fortnight at most one ship of the line able to go to sea. We cannot have five ready for a month to come...The press [i.e. pressgang] has done very little...and there is a want of seamen that one does not at present know how to supply. The hasty and total reduction of all our force, as if it were impossible to apprehend anything from France again, seems a sad infatuation. [1]

And what, too, of those of Napoleon's entourage who were convinced he wanted war? To quote Madame Junot:

Without any doubt Napoleon was set on the rupture with England. Who would think of denying it? He may have wanted to postpone it till an opportune moment, but that was where he wanted to go. He had too many scores to settle with haughty England to set them aside for very long.[2]
These points may all be answered, but they surely cannot be allowed to go by default. But in this respect it cannot but be suspected that Schneid finds himself on the horns of a dilemma. "Napoleon," he says, "did not want war [.]" (p. 143). In short, admiring the emperor, he is inclined to place the blame for war on his opponents. Yet he is also a good historian, and, as such, is too honest to deny the obvious. "Napoleon was Mars. He was Alexander, Caesar and Charlemagne. He was the eternal conqueror whom history resurrects periodically [.]" (p. 1).

This contradiction is something that Schneid seems unable to resolve. The emperor, then, was "an enigma" and something "more complex" than just a conqueror; in fact, "He lived, breathed and embodied the contradictions of his age [.]" (p. 1). But, again, this is no basis for an argument. Even in Schneid's account, the French ruler is seen as being quite unbridled in his willingness to ride roughshod over the interests of other powers and to disregard the provisions of his own peace treaties. Take, for instance, the execution of the Duke of Enghien and the arrest in Hamburg the same year of the British diplomat, George Rumbold. In both cases, French snatch-squads trespassed on neutral territory and displayed, in the author's own words, "blatant disregard for German territorial sovereignty" (p. 62).

Equally, as Schneid notes, Napoleon's acceptance of the presidency of the Italian Republic "clearly violated the provision in the Lunéville accord that expressly guaranteed the separation of the Italian Republic from France" (p. 69). And such behaviour came at a price. In areas contiguous to France and her dependencies, there was little option by to go along with Napoleon, whose actions in any case did not entirely conflict with the interests of the local rulers. But for states such as Austria and Russia, it was a different story. Possessed of greater freedom of manoeuvre and directly challenged by his behaviour, they eventually went to war, not because of the subsidies they could thereby obtain from England, but because it was the only way that Napoleon could be contained. And if they did so, it was, a few firebrands aside, with considerable reluctance, Schneid making it very clear that Pitt had the greatest difficulty in forging the coalition he desired.

To conclude, *The War of the Third Coalition* is a useful work that is full of interesting detail. However, that said, it is a somewhat problematic read. Schneid has certainly made an original contribution to the literature, but he is hampered on the one hand by lack of space and on the other by an inability to shake off the clutches of a Napoleonic legend of which he is in the end too honest a historian to be able to buy in its entirety.

NOTES

[1] *Cit.* Countess of Minto (ed.), *Life and Letters of Sir Gilbert Elliot, First Earl of Minto, from 1751 to 1806* (London, 1874), p. 279.

[2] L. Junot, *Mémoires de la Duchesse d'Abrantes*, ed. G. Girard (Paris, 1928), IV, pp. 285-6.

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See also Frederick C. Schneid's response to this review.

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