H-France Review Vol. 14 (February 2014), No. 28

David Wetzel, *A Duel of Nations: Germany, France and the Diplomacy of the War of 1870-1871*. Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012. xvi + 310 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographical essay, and index. $26.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-299-29134-1; $9.59 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-0-299-29133-4.

Review by Robert Tombs, University of Cambridge.

This is the sequel to the same author's *A Duel of Giants: Bismarck, Napoleon III, and the Origins of the Franco-Prussian War*, and it takes the story to its formal conclusion with the ratification of the Treaty of Frankfurt in May 1871.[1] What Victor Hugo called *l'année terrible* is one of those odd episodes that historians often claim has been neglected, which means in this case that there is a vast quantity of nineteenth-century writing of all kinds--memoirs, official publications, biographies, polemics--and a good deal of monographic material scattered across the twentieth century, but relatively few recent works of synthesis that try to knock it all into shape and give it some context and meaning. This is what David Wetzel has set out to do in his two books, and he undoubtedly makes a significant contribution to our understanding and to the accessibility of the subject to non-specialist scholars and to students.

His approach is unambiguous: this is unapologetic diplomatic history, which asserts that crucial events were decided by a few individuals reacting together in private, and not by "forces and structures beyond the play of human personality" (p. xiii). His aim, therefore, has been to write a history of "the diplomacy of the war in high detail, as though through some sort of historical microscope" (pp. xi-xii). His story thus revolves around a restricted cast of politicians, soldiers, diplomats and monarchs. The hero is undoubtedly Bismarck, not only for his skill and intelligence, but for his rationality and (as Wetzel sees it) moderation. The villain, from this Bismarckian perspective, is Moltke, presented as the proponent of a rather obscure design of total war. King-Emperor Wilhelm is also something of a hero, a decent old buffer who finally sees things from Bismarck's point of view. The French, perhaps rightly, are depicted as rather a sorry lot--misguided, irrational, extreme, yet powerless: Napoleon III, Empress Eugénie, various defeated generals, hack politicians, and, standing out far above the crowd, Léon Gambetta and Adolphe Thiers. This account is so far so familiar.

Where Wetzel takes us into less familiar territory is in his analysis of the wider diplomatic stage, populated by Gorchakov and Alexander II, Beust and Franz-Josef, Gladstone and Granville, and Visconti-Venosta, of whom a rather memorable pen-picture is given. The activities of the neutrals, and the anxieties and annoyances these caused for Bismarck, are given extended treatment. Here the book constitutes a rounded account of the international context, drawing on much printed and archive material, and scholars and students interested in this subject will be glad to have it readily available.

Despite these undoubted merits, I have to admit not being wholly convinced either by the general approach or by the detailed treatment. First, I do not find the purely diplomatic issues as dramatic as Wetzel tries very hard--with lavish rhetoric--to make them. It was pretty clear from late August 1870 that the Germans were going to win, and there was consequently no serious prospect of outside intervention or even forceful diplomatic pressure. Bismarck was annoyed and sometimes alarmed that foreign governments were expressing views about the war, but surely his peace of mind was all that was involved. Thiers's trip round the capitals of Europe (which Wetzel recounts in part) showed clearly that

no significant assistance was on offer, and Thiers reported this unambiguously to the new French Government of National Defence in a series of pithy dispatches.

As Wetzel argues, Bismarck preferred a quick and tidy end to the war by an agreement with any French government that could deliver. The barrier to a deal was not diplomatic, but political. Diplomacy, as well as military strategy were side-lined by the politics of a very unusual and possibly unique situation: an improvised national government was cut off in a besieged city in which its authority depended on voluntary acceptance by an armed and insubordinate population. What could the Germans do when they had won the war but the French refused to accept that they had lost it? What could French politicians do (other than try to shift the blame on to someone else) when they realized that 200,000 armed people in Paris would not allow peace negotiations? This was the main conundrum faced not only by successive French politicians, but by Bismarck and Moltke, too. Bismarck's solution was to bombard Paris to intimidate its people into surrender, and the reluctance of Moltke and other generals to do this is condemned by Wetzel in an extraordinary passage which seems to accuse the soldiers of some nefarious scheme: "One sees in the annals of European history, few parallel writings that approach, in cynicism, if not in heartlessness, this appalling attitude" (p. 157). I thought they were just short of heavy guns and shells, and realized (quite rightly, as it turned out) that cannonading the city would do no good--but this is not discussed in the author's espousal of Bismarck's choleric opinions. What he describes as a "rain of ruin [that] engulfed the city" (p. 180) did only minor damage: the main recipient of German shells was Montparnasse Cemetery.

There are inevitable disadvantages in trying to write a diplomatic history of this war when diplomacy was subordinated so completely on the French side to politics, and moreover to the politics of the street. Here I think is the weakness of this book: the author does not, perhaps by choice, get to grips with the political situation faced by his protagonists, nor does he really elucidate their different ways of understanding and trying to solve it. Jules Favre, the foreign minister, for example, at first had great hopes of the solidarity of the Latin nations--soon disappointed. Gambetta, France's war and interior minister, for Wetzel a flawed hero, was certainly, like all republicans, misled by the mythology of 1792: that saga of a nation in arms made invincible by patriotism and galvanized by inspiring leadership. But he was not simply a hothead: he calculated that if the French could just hold out long enough, the Germans would have to make concessions--a miscalculation, but not lunacy. The miscalculation was that the Germans had decided what to do (not mentioned by Wetzel): to annex Alsace and part of Lorraine unilaterally, and occupy and exploit northeastern France indefinitely until the French gave in.

Wetzel's analysis of politics and of combat is at best impressionistic. Moreover there is too great a scattering of (admittedly minor) errors and distortions to enable the reader to feel confident that he has a firm grasp of the reality on the ground. We are told, for example, that rumours of negotiations with the Germans provoked in Parisians "an orgy of heavy drinking, sexual adventures [sic], and wanton violence" (p. 112), and that to provide their daily fare "cats, rats and newts [sic] were slaughtered" (p. 180)--this last presumably a substitute for frogs' legs! But there is a serious point here: the food situation in Paris was a central French preoccupation, and a recurring element in negotiations with Bismarck. The French asked for an armistice when the food stocks fell to danger point--as simple as that. This is not made clear. As an example of how military policy too was consciously subordinated to politics, the Paris National Guard had to be allowed to try a sortie against the besieging army, which none of its commanders thought could succeed, before the government dared ask for an armistice. The diplomatic history of the war cannot fully be understood without these formidable constraints.

This is a German-centred book in its fundamental intellectual and historiographical perspective. Practically all the recent major secondary works referenced are German, and it is striking that even the final summing up of the meaning of the war for France refers only to German authors. Very little recent French research is referred to in the text, even works that are listed in the bibliographical essay (see below)--although not all important works are. There is no mention anywhere, for example, of Stéphane

Audoin-Rouzeau's *1870: La France dans la guerre* (1989), the major French study of politics and public opinion, or of several other relevant recent French monographs.

Wetzel really ends the book with the armistice and preliminary peace treaty of January-February 1871. Surprisingly for a work that promises a "microscopic" diplomatic history, the Treaty of Frankfort receives only a couple of sentences. Wetzel goes on to provide an extensive (fifty pages) bibliographical essay. It seems to have been prepared after the main text was completed, as several important new works are listed and commented on that do not appear in the footnotes. The essay displays forthright likes and dislikes with which not everyone will agree (perhaps I should mention that it is polite to the present reviewer); but the careful and informative listing of the main archival sources and of a vast quantity of old and much new secondary material is itself a valuable contribution to scholarship and an adornment to the book.

NOTES

[1] David Wetzel, *A Duel of Giants: Bismarck, Napoleon III, and the Origins of the Franco-Prussian War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2001).

[2] Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *1870: La France dans la guerre* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1989).

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ISSN 1553-9172