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Jordan R. Hayworth, *Revolutionary France's War of Conquest in the Rhineland: Conquering the Natural Frontier, 1792-1797*. Cambridge Military Histories. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xviii + 340 pp. Map, notes, bibliography, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781108497459.

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Anyone who studied Latin in high school or university is likely to be familiar with the opening phrase of Julius Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars*: "Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres." While dealing more with its internal subdivisions, Caesar's text could also be taken to infer the outer frontiers of Ancient Gaul: the Pyrenean mountains in the south and the great rivers Rhine and Rhône to the east.[1] Writing about a generation later, and using Caesar as one of his sources, the Greek geographer Strabo defined the boundaries of Gaul as the Pyrenees, the Rhine, and the Alps.[2] Many years later, these venerable classical authors were given a new lease of life. Taken out of context and cited selectively, the physical boundaries of ancient *Gallia* were evoked as the appropriate political frontiers for her modern successor state. But how early and to what extent did this desire for "natural frontiers" enter French political discourse? The Pyrenees have left little room for interpretation, while in the south east Caesar's Rhône was typically substituted with Strabo's Alps--albeit the former was prominently quoted to give Roman imperial flavour to modern territorial ambitions. The place where the natural frontiers really came to matter was the river Rhine. According to Albert Sorel, the push to the Rhine was one of the driving forces of French political history, dating back at least to the sixteenth century, if not earlier.[3] In other words, the Revolutionary Republic and the Napoleonic Empire both pursued the long-established *ancien régime* objective to restore and then preserve the historic French lands lost to German westward expansion in the early Middle Ages. In spite of its initial prominence among politicians and historians alike, Sorel's thesis did not go unchallenged. Writing in the 1930s, Gaston Zeller demonstrated that the Rhine boundary did not figure in French political discussion before 1792 and that the entire concept of "natural frontiers" was, in fact, one of the many innovations of the Revolutionary period.[4] Nevertheless, current scholarly convention errs on the side of Sorel. To quote David A. Bell, the Rhine frontier was "the long-frustrated dream of the monarchy" which the Revolutionaries finally managed to achieve.[5] In his debut volume, Jordan Hayworth puts this view to the test.

*Revolutionary France's War of Conquest* makes three fundamental claims: First, when several Revolutionary leaders embraced the natural frontiers framework, "they brought the idea into the political mainstream for the first time in French history" (p. xi): Sorel's thesis must be discarded

for good. Second, while natural frontiers did come to play a noticeable role in French military strategy, “practical and more conventional military concerns often predominated” (p. xi). Subsequently it became a more dominant concern contributing to the prolongation of the war and the overall failures in the German theatre in 1796. Third, the debate of the natural frontiers question did not unite the warring political factions. Rather, it caused further conflict and political strife which served to undermine the French Republic, contributing to the overall failure of its democratic experiment.

These arguments are presented by means of a chronological narrative which artfully weaves together two strands: the debates of the French policymakers in Paris, and the operations of the French forces along the Rhine front. Standing out is the first chapter in which Hayworth re-examines the supposed old-regime roots of the “natural frontiers” by revisiting the evidence discussed by Sorel, Zeller, and, more recently, Peter Sahlins.<sup>[6]</sup> Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern intellectuals did make parallels between ancient Gaul and the kingdom of France, and a few did advocate for French expansion eastward. However, when it came to actual politics, writings such as Pierre Dubois’s *On the Recovery of the Holy Land* (c. 1306) or Jean le Bon’s *The Rhine to the King* (1568) fell on deaf ears.<sup>[7]</sup> French monarchs and statesmen could be opportunistic or even predatory, but their aims were guided by “pragmatism and self-interest” rather than “mystical conceptions of national history and ideology” (p. x). Cardinal Richelieu, widely regarded as the father of the French *raison d’etat*, is a good example. Richelieu welcomed a permanent French foothold on the Rhine in order to project power into Germany. The eventual conquest of Alsace did offer France a military corridor into the Holy Roman Empire, but this was only part of a broader strategy of alliances, subsidies and control over key fortresses. The Treaty of Münster in 1648 saw France relinquish its other conquests in the region. According to Hayworth, this geopolitical trend of trading wider territorial conquests for “more modest” but surer “gains and compensations” remained essentially unchanged until the fall of the Old Regime (p. 21). Stressing rational and natural forces, the new Enlightenment discourse did eventually contribute to the development of the *limites naturelles* by suggesting that natural frontiers make for more logical borders between states than those determined by old wars and dynastic treaties. Nevertheless, one still needed to have a revolution to give these ideas any political traction whatsoever.

The main part of the book can be divided into two halves. Chapters two to four tell a more familiar story. Following the early upheavals of 1789, the new French regime was clearly set on peace. Prompted by the Nootka crises, in May 1790 the National Assembly even issued a formal declaration disowning foreign conquests. However, less than two years later, war was declared against the Habsburg Monarchy. Tim Blanning and David Bell have produced excellent accounts of this spectacular political U-turn. Hayworth’s contribution to our understanding of the outbreak of the French Revolutionary Wars and their first three campaigns is by unravelling the convoluted way in which France’s wartime strategy developed. Whilst marketed primarily as a military history, Hayworth’s volume is in fact a superb example of an intellectual history of war. Hayworth agrees with previous scholarship that, although it was also prompted by presence of *émigré* forces in the Rhineland, the initial decision to go to war was inspired by the militant republicanism of Pierre Brissot. Together with the other Girondins, Brissot believed that a short victorious war would unite and reinvigorate the French nation, while helping to export revolution to Europe. The failure of the first offensive into the Austrian Netherlands in spring 1792 was followed by the successful repulse of the allied invasion from the east, bringing the troops of the newly declared republic to the middle Rhine for the first time. Nevertheless, the

experience of the first campaign forced the Revolutionaries to rethink their aim. “[W]ar of liberation [wa]s replaced by war of expansion” (p. 66). This was to be achieved by setting *réunions*: friendly republics, which were—naturally—to remain under French tutelage until their population was judged sufficiently free to govern itself. Renewed allied offensive from the north in early 1793 prompted the creation of the Committee of Public Safety which was soon to fall under Maximilien Robespierre. From 1790, Robespierre consistently argued against the war and the dangers of reckless foreign expansion (pp. 40, 55, 58, 69 82, and 89). Charged with dragging France into a desperate conflict, the Girondins were sent to the Guillotine and in March 1794 they were followed by Anacharsis Clootz, a Francophile Prussian ex-pat who was one of the few contemporaries of note supporting French expansion to the Rhine before 1792. A radical at home, Robespierre’s war aims were more consistent with traditional old-regime strategy: France should not over-exert herself. Annexation of key frontier areas was acceptable as long as it strengthened France’s borders. As for the rest of the occupied enemy lands, they should be kept as bargaining chips for the peace to come and in the meantime their resources should be exploited to support the French war machine. These ideas were shared by Lazare Carnot who followed them also after Robespierre’s downfall in the Thermidor coup.

The Thermidorian reaction corresponded with French victory in the Low Countries. Too many accounts of the Revolutionary Wars jump from the glorious summer of 1794 to the meteoric rise of Napoleon during the Italian campaign of 1796, neglecting other events. Contemporary French policymakers did not have the benefit of this hindsight. For them, Germany remained the main theatre of operations, and larger forces were committed to it in the expectation that the conflict would be decided there. Chapters five to eight of Hayworth’s book cover this very period. His use of archival sources is particularly effective here, revealing the toxic dynamics which developed within the armies of the Republic. Raised under the motto *la patrie est en danger*, the French soldiers, who were now lining the Rhine from the Alps to the North Sea, expected an imminent end to the war. However, France’s foreign policy was now controlled by Jean-François Reubell and Charles-François Delacroix, who insisted on a “glorious peace” in which the Rhine was to become France’s new frontier (p. 269). The next campaign ended in a stalemate: the remaining allied fortresses on the west bank were taken, but the French armies failed to press across the river. Ironically, the separate peace with Prussia, signed in Basel in April that year, brought little relief as it substantially limited the area from which the French could draw supplies (p. 159). Already in 1794 it was becoming harder to sustain French armies from requisitions alone. Failure to gain new territory in 1795 brought a logistical crisis. Discipline was undermined, as the hungry and disenchanted soldiers compensated themselves by pillage and rape, often with the collusion of their officers, who kept their fair share of the spoils. The weakened French armies invaded Germany again in summer 1796, penetrating deep into Bavaria, only to be defeated and rolled back to the Rhine by the Habsburg army under the young and talented Archduke Charles.[8]

This defeat exacerbated previous problems. The loyalty of the French troops now lay firmly with their commanders rather than with the Republican regime, which was sending its men into battle without ensuring that they were paid and fed. The balance of power between civilian and military authorities became reversed. Previously, representatives-on-mission made quick work of defiant generals by sending them to trial and execution. Now, the generals become simply dismissive. Already in December 1795, General Jourdan had signed an armistice with the Austrians, before receiving permission from the newly established Directory (p. 208). One of the most amusing parts of Heyworth’s book tells how Lazare Hoche, who was put in command of the defeated

*Sambre et Meuse* army, worked to create himself a Cisrhenan Republic while openly flaunting instructions from Paris. Hoche was more concerned not to fall behind Napoleon, who was already establishing his own republics in Northern Italy (pp. 290-92). Having carved their military fiefdom in the occupied lands, the generals now became embroiled in politics. Unhappy with the elections of April 1797, which gave monarchist delegates a majority in the Council of the Five Hundred, three of the Directors (including Reubell) made a pact with Hoche to purge the legislature. One of the victims of the resulting Coup of 18 Fructidor was Carnot, who had played a moderating influence on Republican foreign policy since 1793. With Carnot in exile, the proponents of the “glorious peace” got their way. The Treaty of Campo Formio gave the Republic the Rhine frontier, but this came at a price. Whatever was left of France’s politics now lay at the mercy of her warlords. Edmund Burke’s early warning about what would come of the Revolution could not have rung truer.[9]

As my readers will surely gather, I think Hayworth has produced a fine volume. Considering the complexity of the events described in the two-pronged narrative, the account is lucid, and the arguments are easy to follow and consistently carried through. Had it been a research monograph dealing with the “natural frontiers” alone, I would have stopped here. However, since Hayworth has written one of the best histories of the First Coalition War currently available on the market, I would like to suggest two points which I hope Hayworth would like to address in more detail in his future publications. The first is whether the initial decision to declare war against the Habsburg Monarchy was also prompted by recent events in the north: the Brabant Revolution of 1789 and the fate of the short-lived United Belgian States (*États-Belgiques-Unis/ Verenigde Nederlandse Staten*). Revolution in the Austrian Netherlands started when a small but well organised army of political exiles, commanded by a retired Habsburg colonel, entered the province. Their initial success against Imperial troops provoked a general uprising in which many of the locally recruited Walloon soldiers went over to the rebel side.[10] It was clearly not a good idea to dismiss *émigré* armies, no matter how small, especially if they had pre-existing links to the local military. Further lessons offered by the Belgian Revolution were the danger of internal division and of foreign intervention. While being a simplification of more complex political dynamics, crackdown by the *Statists* on the more liberal-minded *Vonckists* prompted the latter to prefer the return of a mildly reformist Austrian rule rather than to accept a regime of their conservative countrymen. The successful Habsburg invasion of autumn 1790, demonstrated that old-regime monarchies were quite capable of enforcing political restoration whilst exploiting local differences.[11] With this in mind, perhaps, the decision for pre-emptive strike against the Royalists and the Habsburgs might not appear so outlandish. However, more research in the French legislative debates is required to determine whether these considerations also figured before the declaration of war in April 1792.

In his analysis of the peace treaty with Prussia (pp. 155-159 and 199), Hayworth rightly points to the growing prominence of the “natural frontiers” concept in French diplomacy in 1795. However, the wording of the treaty was still vague. According to Article 3, Prussian territories on the west of the Rhine were to remain under French control until their fate would be determined by a general peace with the Holy Roman Empire. In case of French expansion to the Rhine, secret Article 2 guaranteed that the Republic would help Prussia to receive adequate indemnity for any lost territory, although the nature of this compensation was left unsaid. However, Basel witnessed two further treaties that year—with Spain and with the Landgraviate of Hesse Kassel. Signed on August 28, 1795, the text of the latter treaty makes for an interesting comparison. Among the possessions of landgrave was the lower County of Katzenelnbogen,

which included an enclave on the west bank of the Rhine, centred around the town of Sankt Goar. Above it stood the strong fortress of Rheinfels, renowned for its successful defence against the armies of Louis XIV in 1692-93. In November 1794, the fortress was fully furnished and ready for siege, but its governor panicked at the French approach and evacuated the garrison east of the river without a fight. This area is referred to specifically in the Third Treaty of Basel. Repeating the conditions of the earlier treaty with Prussia, Article 5 determined that the fortress, the town, and the part of the Lower County of Katzenelnbogen west of the Rhine were to remain under French occupation until a general peace settlement in Germany was concluded. The secret Articles 1 and 2 are even more specific. If France was to have the west bank of the Rhine, Hesse Kassel may compensate itself from the ecclesiastical territories on the east bank. Furthermore, France was to help Hesse Kassel to acquire the enclaves of Amöneburg and Fritzlar from the Electorate of Mainz, whose Prince-Archbishop happened to be the Archchancellor of the Holy Roman Empire.[12] In other words, it appears that, with the growth of the French desire to retain the west bank no matter what, its diplomats started to ponder more seriously how (and at whose expense) they could mollify their future neighbours across the river, when peace was to come.

Finally, I remain unconvinced about the role which the “natural frontiers” came to play in undermining the French democratic experiment. Without going too deep into counterfactual scenarios, I agree that an earlier peace on more moderate terms would have contained the rise of the warlords, resulting in a longer survival of the republican regime. If one is to take the programme of the early Revolutionaries, however, they were not just instituting a new form of government but a new system of values. The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* did not stop at the radical expansion of political participation, but also established certain unassailable rights, which changed forever the relationship between the individual and the state. Unfortunately, these soon became irreconcilable with the growing use of indiscriminate violence, which was first condoned, then sanctioned and, eventually, celebrated. According to one prominent historian, the Reign of Terror “was but 1789 but with a higher body count.”[13] A less determinist interpretation would point to the misguided decision to go to war, which sets France on a downward spiral toward political brutality and internal conflict. Whether one prefers 1789, 1792 or 1793, the *mitraillades* of Lyon, the *noyades* in Nantes and the harrowing of the Vendée by the *colonnes infernales*, compromised France’s new politics well before her troops reached the Rhine in late 1794. In his final paragraph, Hayworth justly calls the subsequent conquest of the natural frontiers “revolutionary” and “a key dimension in French foreign policy and warfare” (p. 310). But to conclude the entire book by saying that “It was also one of the Revolution’s most unfortunate ideas” (p. 310) is somewhat exaggerated.

## NOTES

[1] Gaius Julius Caesar, *De bello Gallico*, I.1.1-7.

[2] Strabo, *Geographica*, II.5.28.

[3] Albert Sorel, *L’Europe et la révolution française, première partie: les mœurs politiques et les traditions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Paris: Plon, 1887), 244-336, in particular see: pp. 245, 248, 258-60.

[4] Gaston Zeller, *La France et l'Allemagne depuis dix siècles* (Paris: Colin, 1932), 153-55; Gaston Zeller, "La Monarchie d'ancien régime et les frontières naturelles," *Revue d'histoire moderne* 8 (1933): 305-33.

[5] David A. Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 194.

[6] Peter Sahlins, "Natural Frontiers Revisited: France's Boundaries since the Seventeenth Century," *American Historical Review* 95 (1990): 1423-51.

[7] Pierre Dubois, *De Recuperatione Terre Sancte: Traité de politique générale*, ed. Charles-Victor Langlois (Paris: Alphonse Picard, 1891); Jean le Bon, "Le Rhin au roy" reprinted in: Auguste Benoit, ed., *Notice sur Jean Le Bon, médecin du cardinal de Guise*, (Paris: Martin, 1879).

[8] For a good account in English of this campaign from an Austrian perspective, see: Lee W. Eysturid, *The Formative Influences, Theories and Campaigns of the Archduke Carl of Austria*, Contributions to Military Studies 202 (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 2000), 69-83.

[9] Edmund Burke, *Reflection on the Revolution in France* (London: Dodsley, 1790), 317-18.

[10] Jane C. Judge, *The United States of Belgium: The Story of the First Belgian Revolution* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2018), 144. For concrete archival evidence on mass desertions from the Habsburg *régiments nationaux*, see my forthcoming "Military Recruitment in the Habsburg Monarchy 1740-1792," in William Godsey and Petr Mat'a, eds., *The Habsburg Monarchy as a Fiscal-Military State, c. 1648-1815: Contours and Perspectives*, Proceedings of the British Academy (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Chapter 7, (Expected in 2021).

[11] As did the Prussian intervention in the Dutch Republic in 1787, which came to play a role in the outbreak French Revolution itself, see: T. C. W. Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars, 1787-1802* (London: Arnold, 1996), 24-27.

[12] Jules de Clerq, *Recueil des traités de la France, 23 Vols.*, (Paris: Durant et Pedone Lauriel, 1880-1917), 1: 232-6 and 264-6 for the treaties with Prussia and Hesse Kassel Respectively.

[13] Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 447.

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