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John H. Gill, *The Battle of Znaim: Napoleon, the Habsburgs and the End of the War of 1809*. Barnsley: Greenhill Books, 2020. 512 pp. Illustrations and maps. £30.00 (hb). ISBN: 978-1-78438-450-0; £15.59 (eb). ISBN: 978-1-78438-451-7.

Reviewed by Charles J. Esdaile, University of Liverpool.

In any “A to Z” of Napoleon’s battles, that of Znaim (today Znojmo) cannot but come in last place. Curiously enough, however, it would very probably take that self-same place in a list of said battles ordered according to how well they are known. Thus, as John Gill, the author of the work under review—not surprisingly, the first dedicated study of the action ever to appear in English—observes in the very first line, “The battle of Znaim is almost unknown” (p. xix). Why this should be so, though, is unclear: fought over two days on 10-11 July, 1809, involving very considerable forces on both sides and marked by ferocious fighting that cost the troops involved around 10,000 casualties, Znaim was scarcely a minor affair, whilst it was also that most rare of military encounters, namely a “meeting engagement” (in brief, an action stemming from the unexpected head-on collision of two opposing armies that are entirely unaware of one another’s presence). The problem, then, is not that Znaim was a non-event in military terms, nor, still less, that it is one devoid of interest, but rather that it is the victim of circumstance, being overshadowed on the one hand by the much larger struggle waged just a few days before at Wagram and on the other by the fact that the town which gave it its name did the same thing in respect to the armistice which brought the campaign of 1809 to an end.

Given the fact that Znaim is so unknown, it seems worthwhile to begin with a brief outline of events. Amidst growing panic at the implications of Napoleon’s overthrow of the Bourbon monarch of Spain the previous year, in April 1809 the Habsburg regime declared war on France in a desperate bid to reverse the tide of events while the French ruler still had so many of his troops tied down in the Iberian peninsula. After pushing some way into Bavaria, however, the main Austrian army was quickly bundled back across the frontier and pursued by Napoleon as far as Vienna, the Austrian capital then being occupied without incident other than a bombardment which is reputed to have cost the composer Ludwig van Beethoven, his hearing. A surprise Austrian counter-attack inflicted a serious reversal on the French at the battle of Aspern-Essling on 21-22 May, but this set-back was soon avenged. At the climactic battle of Wagram, yet another two-day action fought on 5-6 July 1809, Napoleon turned the tables on the Austrian commander-in-chief, the Archduke Charles, and forced him to retreat with heavy casualties. Most of the previous clashes of the Napoleonic Wars having been fought out over the course of a single day, the succession of two-day battles that marked the campaign of 1809 was something new, the general feeling among scholars being that this was the result of the emergence for the first time

of a situation in which both sides benefited from the greater resilience conveyed by the adoption of the corps system, hitherto a device only made use of by Napoleon.

Though Wagram had been an exceptionally bloody affair that had reduced his forces to a shambles, Charles managed to get most of his troops away intact, much aided by the fact that the *grande armée* had itself been fought to a standstill. Having stolen a march on an emperor who was completely unaware of his exact whereabouts, the Archduke was soon leading the bulk of his men northwestwards into Bohemia. Initially, the plan was for his army to gather in a strong defensive position centred on the town of Jetzelsdorff, but late on 9 July news arrived that a strong French force—the so-called Army of Dalmatia of Auguste Marmont—was approaching Znaim, a town situated on the Austrian line of retreat many miles to the north, from the east. Terrified that he was facing encirclement, Charles immediately abandoned the Jetzelsdorff position and headed for Znaim with all the speed that he was capable, his concern being heightened still further by the fact that just south of the town the road that he was following was encumbered by a natural choke-point in the form of a narrow bridge across the otherwise impassable River Thaya. With Marmont bearing down on Znaim from positions north of the Thaya, the situation was beyond desperate, but, by dint of forcing his weary men to march all night, the Austrian commander got sufficient men across the river to check Marmont and win the time needed for the rest of his forces to cross the bridge.

With matters situated thus, fighting began on the afternoon of 10 July in the form of clashes between Austrian forces pushing east from Znaim and French ones coming in the opposite direction. Both sides fed more and more troops into the action, but on the whole it was Charles who got the better of the day: if his men were driven from several small villages, they had put up a fierce fight and prevented Marmont from seizing control of the heights that dominated the bridge. During the night, then, the numerous Austrian troops who were still south of the Thaya were able to cross to the north bank and reinforce the defenders. Unfortunately for him, however, Charles was not alone in receiving reinforcements. Napoleon had been marching to the sound of the guns with a large part of the many other forces that were available to him, and the morning of 11 July saw him arrive on the battlefield at the head of a large mass of French troops, the Archduke being left with no option but to accept a second day of battle. In the circumstances, his battered army did extremely well in that it managed to beat off several attacks on the high ground just east of Znaim on which it had taken up its position, but, as time wore on, yet more troops arrived in the form of the corps of Marshal Massena, the 14,000 men which made this up having been following the Archduke Charles rather than heading to cut him off. Undeterred by the fact that their only means of advance was the same narrow bridge that had so delayed the Austrians, the leading elements of this fresh force charged across the river and seized the key villages of Klosterbruck and Altschallersdorf, thereby completely outflanking the Austrian defensive line and placing Charles's hold on Znaim in grave jeopardy.

What would have happened had the battle continued cannot be known for certain, of course, but such was the Austrian position that it is difficult not to believe that Napoleon would have secured a great victory, and all the more so because the afternoon and early evening had seen yet more French troops arrive on the field. In the event, however, further bloodshed was averted by the sudden announcement of the armistice to which Znaim was to give its name. To explain this, we must have recourse to a discussion of the political situation in Vienna prior to the outbreak of war. In brief, in line with the claims of those who see the Napoleonic Wars as, above all, the fruit of a fixed desire on the part of the *ancien régime* to bring down not just Napoleon, but also the

French Revolution, the years since 1805 had seen the emergence of a powerful war party headed by the largely-Italian based Este branch of the Habsburg family and the Chancellor, Philipp von Stadion, who were bent on taking the first opportunity that offered itself to hit back at the French. That said, the cause of *revanche* by no means reigned unopposed, for Francis I was both extremely cautious and possessed of a fierce loathing of war and, ironically enough, was joined by the Archduke Charles, the latter being motivated above all by his belief that, despite efforts at reform, neither state nor army were remotely capable of taking on Napoleon. With matters balanced thus, in May 1808 the French ruler broke the impasse by his intervention in Spain, the result being that, in a spirit of desperation rather than confidence, Francis and Charles let the war party have their way.

That it was the Austrians who were the aggressors in 1809 has been widely interpreted, including not least by Gill, as at the very least being strongly suggestive that Napoleon was not the constant war-monger of legend. To argue thus is to miss the point. Not least because much of the forces available to him were currently fighting in Spain and Portugal, that the French ruler did not want war in 1809 is true enough, but what such claims ignore is the fact that Napoleon never behaved in a fashion calculated to reassure his neighbours. As Gill says, the French ruler had no plans to repeat the overthrow of the Spanish Bourbons in Vienna, but that is not the point, the fact being that in the end neither Francis nor Charles nor any other opponent of a new war could trust the emperor; rather, their only hope was to take up arms at the most favourable moment. In short, the fact Napoleon did not want fighting to flare up in central Europe in 1809 is neither here nor there: having squandered the last of the credit that remained to him by turning out Charles IV and Ferdinand VII the previous year, the emperor had sown the wind whose last eddies swirled around the combatants on the field of Znam.

What, then, are we to make of *The Battle of Znam*? The work of a leading specialist—indeed, *the* leading specialist—on the campaign of 1809, it certainly offers a comprehensive account of the fighting, thereby bringing to life a major battle that has been generally overlooked. Setting aside the issue of responsibility for the conflict, most of the judgements Gill offers are sensible enough as witness, for example, his evident belief that the Archduke Charles was a far more lack-lustre figure than has often been claimed. That said, in one area in particular it is the judgement of this reviewer that Gill falls somewhat short of what might have been expected. Thus, over and over again, as is also the case with other treatments of 1809, we hear that Austrian strategic, operational, and tactical doctrine were alike slow, cumbersome, and old-fashioned. Little evidence has ever been produced for this claim and Gill, alas, is no exception in the respect. That there were flaws in Austrian military organization is clear enough, but the reason why in 1805 and 1809 the performance of the Habsburg army was often so fumbling should rather be looked for elsewhere, particular candidates that come to mind here including the mistakes and personal inadequacy (as opposed to out-dated thinking) of many senior commanders and the lamentable standard of training of so much of the rank and file.

To conclude, substantial, well-written, sumptuously illustrated, and provided with plenty of maps, Gill's book will be useful reading for all students of the Napoleonic Wars. That said, it suffers from many of the same limitations as other treatments of the battles of the soldiers of Francis I and therefore cannot be regarded as definitive. As the author of this review has observed elsewhere, then, the Austrian aspects of the Napoleonic Wars remain a subject in search of a new historiography.

Charles J. Esdaile  
University of Liverpool  
[epsom@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:epsom@liverpool.ac.uk)

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