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David Wetzel, *A duel of giants: Bismarck, Napoleon III, and the origins of the Franco-Prussian War*. Madison and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001. xvi + 244 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographical essay and index. \$24.95 US (cl). ISBN 0-299-17490-5.

Review by William E. Echard, York University.

In *A duel of giants* David Wetzel, author of *The Diplomacy of the Crimean War*, summarizes concisely, clearly, and in a graceful style what we know about the origins of the 1870-1871 conflict. His reading, as evidenced by the notes and the excellent thirty-seven-page bibliographical essay, is impressive; and while the bulk of the documentation comes from secondary works and printed sources in English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish, Wetzel has also made use of the foreign office archives in London, Paris, Vienna, Rome, Florence, and Milan, as well as the Clarendon, Gramont, and Ollivier papers. He especially is to be commended for his location and use of secondary works in German and Spanish. The book is illustrated with thirteen carefully selected portraits of the major participants in the drama and concluded by a useful index.

The essential question, according to Wetzel, is: "To what extent...were the various responses of the actors in the French and Prussian capitals to the pressures that they faced the product of well-considered and compelling national interests and to what extent the product of self-interest, prejudice, and intrigue?" (p. xiii). And the "fundamental assumption" of the work is: "that the circumstances in which the Franco-Prussian War unfolded contradict, wholly and emphatically, the determinist view of history, the conviction that the fate of humankind is beyond the influence of the accidental and the personal; that it is shaped by forces beyond the play of human personality. On the contrary, these circumstances encourage the view that things happen because individual and discoverable people decide things and do them; that greatness in politics can exist; that there are overwhelming personalities in history; and that the activities of a few have been disproportionately important for all" (pp. xiii-xiv).

Accordingly, Wetzel begins his work with short but perceptive and judicious introductions to the most important players—William I, Bismarck (Wetzel's view of whom is largely that of Gordon A. Craig), Napoleon III (to whom, in fact, somewhat less attention is paid than to any of the other major figures, except, perhaps, William I), Ollivier (for whom Wetzel has a pronounced contempt), and Gramont (who, with Bismarck, is the chief figure and, perhaps, villain). The author devotes thirteen pages to the Prussian side, nineteen to the French. Although he notes the decline in Napoleon's health and the role played by Empress Eugénie, Wetzel concludes that French decisions and actions cannot be shown to have been shaped either by Eugénie's influence or by the emperor's ill-health (pp. 24-25).

Chapter Two traces, with commendable attention to accounts and sources in Spanish, the aftermath of the Spanish revolution of 1868 and, especially, the role of Napoleon III in his efforts to assure that no candidate would succeed to the vacant throne of Spain who was not fully acceptable to France. Not without skill as well as duplicity, the emperor contrived to block other candidates while maneuvering to secure the throne for a Bourbon. In the process, as Wetzel shows, Bismarck could have been left in no doubt that the most unacceptable candidate for France would be a Hohenzollern prince and that the French would perceive any such candidature as resulting from Prussian intrigue (p.53).

In Chapter Three Wetzel discusses succinctly, comprehensively, and clearly what he thinks we can know of Bismarck's role in the Hohenzollern Candidacy. While Bismarck did not originate it, he was, other than Juan Prim, its chief advocate (even against the wishes of William I) and responsible for its adoption. [1] His purpose (which remains far from clear) was not war but, arguably, to present France with a *fait accompli* that would curb its aggressiveness by creating a potential enemy on its southwest frontier (pp. 72-73). Wetzel argues that Bismarck, who believed that Napoleon would not go to war (p. 94), was in no hurry to achieve German unity, was certain that it would come, and did not expect the Liberal Empire to resist final unification with force (p. 83). However, Wetzel does not deal with two critical questions: did Bismarck expect to achieve German unification peacefully or through coercion of the South German states? And could the French (and Europe) be expected to react in the same way in either scenario? In fact, Wetzel's argument would be stonger if he had included in his survey a consideration of Bismarck and South Germany from 1866 to 1870. Perhaps, too, in his otherwise excellent portrait of Bismarck, Wetzel should have called attention to the fact that, when the odds seemed favorable, the usually cautious diplomat was not disinclined to gamble.

In his final two chapters Wetzel gives an account of the events between 3 July and the French declaration of war. While this section offers little that is new other than the more than usually detailed treatment of the role played by Visconti-Venosta, whom Wetzel admires, it is justified by its combination of comprehensiveness with brevity and careful documentation with readability. In fact, as a narrative of events Wetzel's work seems unlikely to require repetition in the foreseeable future. Interpretation is, however, another matter.

Wetzel concludes that, "the French rulers blundered into a war that was not unwelcome to them, and that Bismarck, though taken by surprise, turned their blunder to his advantage" (p. 180). Two French "blunders" are given special emphasis--Gramont's declaration of 6 July to the Corps législatif [2] and the French "additional demand" of 12 July (that William should approve of Leopold's withdrawal of his candidacy and promise that it would not be repeated). In Wetzel's view the declaration served to enflame French public opinion (p. 120), and the additional demand was unnecessary. Critically, however, he does not examine the question of French public opinion in any detail or attempt to compare the state of that opinion before and after 6 July. Instead, several facts he signals appear to support the contention of Gramont and others that in making his declaration the French foreign minister was responding to an *already* enflamed public opinion which would not accept a more moderate reaction: in March 1869, at the mere suspicion of a Hohenzollern candidacy, French opinion was enraged and the French press "went wild" (p. 53); Gramont's declaration "evoked widespread approval all over France" (p. 159); and, as early as 9 July the French government had to fear that if it did not achieve a resolution of the crisis satisfactory to French opinion it might be overthrown (pp. 118-120), for, after all, the Liberal Empire was now a parliamentary democracy. As for the additional demand, Wetzel gives a number of excellent reasons why it was necessary for the French government to require, at the very least, that William I associate himself with Leopold's supposed withdrawal of his candidacy (pp. 135-137, 145), and he makes clear that France was not prepared, in the end, to make the demand a *casus belli*.

Finally, Wetzel seems reluctant to draw the conclusions regarding Bismarck's role and actions to which the facts that he cites appear to point. Bismarck knew from March 1869 how violently the French would object to a Hohenzollern candidacy (p. 53), and yet he continued to promote it. From the moment that the crisis broke he was opposed to withdrawal of the candidacy (p. 140) and "willing to use any means to prevent a French diplomatic triumph" (p. 104), including the use of Gramont's 6 July declaration to provoke France to war should the question of the candidacy be resolved peacefully (p. 110). Moreover, seeing the danger to himself in William's approval of the withdrawal of the candidacy, Bismarck not only edited the Ems telegram [3] to give a misleading interpretation of events but, more significantly, published it in a way that was deliberately provocative--a fact which Wetzel seems to pass over too lightly (see p. 176).

And so the debate continues. While Wetzel's interpretation is not unreasonable, a careful reader might well conclude that the evidence he presents leads to a quite different conclusion: the French government did not blunder into war; it was deliberately provoked by a usually cautious diplomat who, first (and inexplicably), laid a trap for the French which he knew must result in a crisis and then, when the scheme miscarried,[4] preferred war to diplomatic defeat and a serious personal set-back. Elements in the French ruling circles might also have welcomed war, but it can be argued that the government did no more in the crisis, and perhaps somewhat less, than public opinion demanded. It is regrettable that in the mid-nineteenth century national sensibilities could be so easily provoked and play so major a role in government decisions, but that is another story. It is one of the awkwardnesses of history that the actions of those who lived in the past must be judged by the standards of the past, and not by those which, hopefully, hard lessons have led us to adopt.

NOTES

[1] Juan Prim, hero of the Mexican War, was the strong man in the Spanish provisional government set up after the overthrow of Queen Isabella.

[2] In his declaration the French foreign minister directed his remarks not to Madrid but to Berlin and made it clear that France would not tolerate a Hohenzollern candidacy.

[3] William had telegraphed to Bismarck, from Ems, an account of his meeting with the French ambassador, Benedetti. By his editing, Bismarck made it appear that the ambassador had importuned the king who then abused him.

[4] The original plan had been to present the French government with a *fait accompli*, but, by accident or design, news of the candidacy was made known before the Spanish Cortes could ratify the nomination of Leopold.

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