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John H. Gill, *1809 Thunder on the Danube: Napoleon's Defeat of the Habsburgs*. Volume I: *Abensberg*. London: Frontline Books (an imprint of Pen & Sword Books Ltd.), 2008. xvi + 496 pp. Maps, charts, tables, illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. £30.00 U.K. (cl). ISBN 978-1-84415-713-6.

Review by Dale Lothrop Clifford, University of North Florida.

If one can judge from this first of three volumes on Napoleon's 1809 campaign against Austria, it is likely that John H. Gill's will be the definitive English-language work of traditional military history on Napoleon's last victorious campaign for some time to come. It is solidly researched in both French and German archival sources, well-written, and meticulously detailed. This is not a book for the reader unaccustomed to operational history, nor for those who prefer the social and cultural analysis of warfare. The author intends to focus on "the importance of leadership and the moral dimension of war" (p. xvi). In this campaign, he argues, Napoleon could still demonstrate his brilliance as statesman-commander, while his opponent, the Archduke Charles, commanded an army not capable of achieving the goals set for it by his government.

The first three chapters establish the diplomatic buildup to and military preparations for war. After a brief preface, Gill's narrative moves immediately to set up the campaign a chapter entitled "War is Inevitable." The dominant figure is Austrian foreign minister Graf Johann Philipp Stadion, who set himself to create a national war against Napoleon despite the unwillingness of the Emperor, the Archduke Charles, and Metternich, who ultimately replaced Stadion as foreign minister. Gill argues that sheer persistence carried the day: by early 1809 all three had conceded that war was inevitable, despite the fact that neither the Russians nor the Prussians would support Austria, the British would not promise subsidies or commit to specific diversionary military action in Italy or Spain, and the German *Volk* lacked the overwhelming national spirit Stadion had hoped to elicit. Worse, Metternich and Charles were correct in pointing out that although Napoleon's regime had begun to decline, it was not yet weak enough to justify Austria's decision for war in February 1809.

The next two chapters examine the structure, training, and plans of the two opposing armies in careful detail. The Austrians had undertaken important reforms since their previous defeat at the hands of Napoleon, but the regular army had not yet effectively absorbed the changes, and was not up to full strength when war began. The *Landwehr*, a newly-raised militia that in theory embodied the war's national aspirations, was even less prepared. Its martial enthusiasm did not long survive contact with the reality of war. In short, this numerically superior army was incapable of mounting the aggressive attack and sustained pressure required to carry out Stadion's vision.

The French and Allied Army of Germany, on the other hand, began the war far readier for combat despite the fact that the Emperor did not expect war in central Europe. Skillful diplomacy deprived Austria of allies, even if it could not prevent war. As tensions rose, Napoleon assembled a formidable army in very little time: 160,000 mobilized and in place when war began, about half of them German, and more troops en route from as far away as Warsaw. In general Napoleon's troops and commanders--including Marshals Lannes, Davout, Masséna, and Lefebvre--had experience and ability. They could

not take the initiative because Napoleon still hoped to avoid war and stayed away from the army until the Austrians launched their attack. The Austrian army missed its best opportunity by not striking sooner. The French were still at a numerical disadvantage when war began on 10 April, Gill notes, and were vulnerable until the full army had concentrated. But here as in earlier stages of his analysis, Gill asserts French superiority in everything except numbers.

Napoleon did not arrive at the front until the 17<sup>th</sup>. Berthier, placed in temporary command because interpersonal rivalries made the choice of any of the other marshals impracticable, committed a series of blunders that left his soldiers footsore and cold and the army in a weak position. But in Gill's narrative this temporary setback merely sets the stage for Napoleon to demonstrate his brilliance in the eight days that followed. "Napoleon not only soared above his adversaries in the scope of his strategic vision and his terrifyingly intuitive grasp of warfare, he was also far beyond them in seemingly ceaseless activity and ruthless resolution." As soon as he arrived and throughout the following campaign, Napoleon employed "the remarkable relationship he cultivated with his soldiers to imbue the army with . . . determination and drive" (p. 301). He rewarded merit, handed out promotions, and reminded French and German allies alike that he could lead them to victory.

The last half of the text consists of two long chapters, "Eight Days in April, I: The War Opens and the Tide Turns," and "Eight Days in April, II: Four More Victories." Gill writes operational history extremely well, and the reader emerges from 150 pages of close detail about those eight days with a clear understanding of the changing situation, of the options available to the commanders and the reasons for the choices they made, and of the movements and encounters of the various units. The book ends with the French storming of Regensburg on 23 April 1809.<sup>[1]</sup> In this short period of command Napoleon had gained both military and psychological superiority over his Austrian opponents. However, Charles and his army escaped, and in the ensuing campaign leading to the battle of Wagram in July, they would be capable of far better military conduct than they had displayed thus far.

Gill has conceived this multi-volume work as a whole, which makes it difficult to review the first volume by itself. Neither introduction nor conclusion sets the war of 1809 in larger perspective; probably Gill intends that for the concluding sections of the final volume. It is worth noting as well that there is no discussion of the historiography of the war, again, something that may appear in volume three with the complete bibliography—only a brief bibliographic note is included here.<sup>[2]</sup> It is also difficult to comment on the interpretive contributions made by the work. In its major themes and conclusions, Gill's narrative does not differ significantly from most of the standard works on the subject.<sup>[3]</sup> The war itself was a diplomatic and strategic mistake for Austria, and the army was not imbued with German nationalism, despite the presence of the *Landwehr*. Napoleon's army proved itself far superior, even if not up to the standards of earlier Napoleonic campaigns, and the Emperor's own command ability still shone brightly. What Gill's study of the initial campaign of the 1809 war offers is great depth of operational detail, rather than a distinctive thread of interpretation that will be followed through the three volumes.

Nevertheless, this book has many strengths. The topic has been a lifelong passion for the author, whose *With Eagles to Glory* also focused on the campaign of 1809. In the materials that accompany the text he has provided almost everything the avid student of Napoleonic warfare could want. The very fine maps, all of them Gill's own work, make it easy to understand both the broader geographical context and the movements of armies and units in particular encounters. Sixty pages of appendices include a table of comparative ranks and the orders of battle for both armies at critical points in this portion of the campaign. The illustrations, most of them from the author's personal collection, provide portraits of most of the major figures (though not Stadion), as well as the uniforms of various units and a series of battle landscapes. Military history buffs, war gamers, and serious students of Napoleonic warfare will find this an invaluable reference.

## NOTES

[1] The battle is usually referred to as the Battle of Ratisbon, reflecting French sources. Any scholar writing in English on the Napoleonic era faces difficult problems with names. Should one use the commonly seen English form, as Gill does with Archduke Charles, or German names, as he does with Regensburg and with the man more often referred to as Emperor Francis II, here rendered as Kaiser Franz. It is not clear why Gill made the inconsistent choices. It may also be confusing to many readers that Gill uses the title Kaiser Franz I (the correct numbering for the Emperor of Austria), though he is generally referred to as Kaiser Franz II (of the Holy Roman Empire).

[2] The extensive notes—over 100 pages—cite most of the standard works and discuss fine points but do not really discuss larger historiographical issues. A notable omission is Robert M. Epstein's *Napoleon's Last Victory and the Emergence of Modern War* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1994). Whether or not Epstein's thesis stretches the point, one would expect to see it discussed. But since this kind of discussion makes more sense in the context of the entire campaign, probably Gill is reserving it for the third volume.

[3] Gunther Rothenberg, *Napoleon's Great Adversaries: The Archduke Charles and the Austrian Army, 1792-1814* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp.123-146; James R. Arnold, *Crisis on the Danube: Napoleon's Austrian campaign of 1809* (New York: Paragon House, 1990); David Gates, *The Napoleonic Wars 1803-1815* (London and New York: Arnold, 1997), pp.109-127.

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