

Steinhoff on Wetzel (2012)

Wetzel, David. *A Duel of Nations: Germany, France, and the Diplomacy of the War of 1870-1871*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012. Pp. xvi + 309. ISBN 978-0299291341

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On 19 July 1870, the French government made a fateful decision to declare war on Prussia. This action reflected public outrage in France over anti-French remarks contained in a telegram, the so-called "Ems Dispatch," from the Prussian King, Wilhelm I, to his Minister-President, Otto von Bismarck. Students of modern European history know that this war did not go well for France. Prussia's relatively easy victory enabled Bismarck to complete the process of German national unification, which was formally proclaimed at Versailles on 18 January 1871. Moreover, the forced cession of Alsace and part of Lorraine to the new German Empire bred powerful feelings of revenge and resentment in France, thus creating a profound source of tension on the continent and helping prompt the outbreak of general war in Europe in 1914.

Understandably, given its considerable importance for the course of modern European history, the Franco-Prussian war has long aroused the interest of professional historians. David Wetzel made a first contribution to this literature in 2001 with his diplomatic history of the Hohenzollern candidacy to the Spanish throne during 1869-1870 (*A Duel of Giants*, University of Wisconsin Press). He returns to the subject with the present volume, addressing now the diplomacy surrounding the war itself, from its declaration in July 1870 to the approval of the preliminary peace at the beginning of March 1871. In particular, though, he is interested here in recreating "the texture of the [diplomatic] process" (xii), that is, examining the character and motives of the key actors in the events rather than just the events themselves. From the reader's perspective, this approach yields significant gains. Drawing ably on a wide range of published studies and less-familiar archival material, Wetzel has crafted a detailed and often lively account. And yet, his emphasis on individuals also creates some problems. It raises doubts, for example, about the choice of title. Only in a very vague sense does Wetzel examine this conflict in terms of a "duel of nations." More seriously, it means that the book's argument is primarily concerned with validating the method and shedding light on a number of fascinating, but ultimately minor questions, rather than with advancing a major reinterpretation of the war itself.

In its organization, too, *A Duel of Nations* is rather idiosyncratic. The first chapter presents mini-biographies of the key German players--Wilhelm I, Bismarck and Helmuth von Moltke, the Prussian Army's Chief of Staff--in which Wetzel also takes note of each figure's attitudes towards France. Chapter Two then surveys the views of Europe's other leading powers--Austria-Hungary, Italy, Russia and Great Britain--on the eve of the fighting. In Chapter Three, he turns to examine the formation of a League of Neutrals at the end of August 1870, which assured that the rest of Europe would not intervene in the conflict between Prussia and France. Critically, Wetzel demonstrates that Bismarck himself did very little to bring this league about (Italy's Emilio Visconti-Venosta was the driving force), even if the league's position worked very much in Prussia's favor. Thus, it is only with Chapter 4 that Wetzel begins to discuss France, and then only after having examined the first month of the war and Napoleon III's capture at Sedan from the German perspective. Much of what he notes here regarding Jules Favre, Léon Gambetta and Adolphe Thiers and their respective roles in the Government of National Defense is fairly well known, but curiously Wetzel has also decided to present General Louis Trochu, the military governor of Paris, as a key figure in the events. Chapter 5 explores the collapse of armistice negotiations between Favre and Bismarck at Ferrières on 20 September--largely because of French unwillingness to accept responsibility for "Napoleon's" defeat--which soon led to the siege of Paris. In Chapter 6, Wetzel reflects on General Bazaine's capitulation at Metz in late October and on the failure of Thiers's tour of Europe's capitals in search of support for France. Chapter Seven next takes up the rivalry between Bismarck and von Moltke and Bismarck's anxiety that other European powers would soon intervene, a development that seemed likely once Britain called, on 31 October, for a conference to deal with Russia's renunciation of the Black Sea clauses in the 1856 Treaty of Paris.

Having put these worries (and concerns about a Bonapartist restoration) to rest in early January 1871, Bismarck set about negotiating an armistice with Favre. This story and its aftermath--the election of a National Assembly and Thiers's signing of a preliminary peace at the end of February 1871, form the subject of Chapter Eight. In his conclusion, Wetzel reflects on the Franco-Prussian War's legacy, not just the creation of Alsace-Lorraine but also the "absorption" of the south German states into the new German Empire. But even more so he takes this opportunity to rehabilitate Bismarck's reputation as a negotiator and statesman.

All in all, there is much to admire in this volume. Wetzel is a talented story-teller and a gifted researcher, which enables him to

capture and vividly convey the sense of drama that suffused the world of late nineteenth-century diplomacy. Students of the period will also appreciate the bibliographic essay, albeit more for its remarks on the primary sources (the secondary literature cited is rather dated, although that also reflects the general decline of diplomatic history overall). But its shortcomings are also significant. This is a highly German-centric approach to the war and its diplomacy and it ignores entirely the conclusion of the final peace treaty, signed in Frankfurt on 10 May. Moreover, in terms of the big picture of the war, Wetzel's account has provided very little truly new material that significantly challenges prevailing understandings. Finally, to return to a point raised earlier, the title significantly misrepresents the book. While thoughtful and eminently readable, this ultimately is an account of Bismarck and the diplomacy of the Franco-Prussian war and should be billed as such.

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