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***A Duel of Nations: Germany, France, and the Diplomacy of the War of 1870-1871*, David Wetzel, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012, xvi + 310pp., £17.50 (paperback)
ISBN 978 0299174941**

A Duel of Nations is the second part of David Wetzel's study of the Franco-Prussian War, examining the diplomatic tensions that shaped the outbreak and conduct of war, the international responses and the peace terms of May 1871. The first volume, *A Duel of Giants* (Wetzel, 2001), focuses on the lead-up to war, while this volume deals with the war itself and the negotiations to end the fighting. Arguing that the Franco-Prussian War was one of the most significant turning-points in nineteenth century European history, Wetzel's aim is to provide an updated English-language study that brings together a range of archival and printed primary sources with developments in the secondary literature. The result is an impressive study which is more international in scope than the title suggests.

While the book moves away from the clashes between Bismarck and Napoleon III explored in *A Duel of Giants* to focus on the clashes between the French and German nations, Wetzel continues to emphasise the agency of individual actors rather than what he regards as impersonal forces and structures. Much of the book therefore focuses on the role played by Bismarck. Wetzel does not contest previous portrayals of Bismarck's diplomatic mastery, crediting him with successfully localising the war to bring about German unification.

Alongside Bismarck was Helmut von Moltke, Chief of Staff for the Prussian army, whom Wetzel describes as one of the most brilliant strategists of the nineteenth century. By contrast, France's political and military leaders fare less well in Wetzel's assessment. The Government of National Defence is criticised as having been overcome by nationalism, pursuing self-

destructive and irrational policies. War Minister Léon Gambetta is charged with overestimating the capacity of patriotic will to overcome military and political challenges and with displaying 'high-handedness, tactlessness and personal insensitivity' (p. 199). Others, including Foreign Minister Jules Favre, meanwhile, are condemned not merely for making unrealistic demands but for 'amateurism' and 'emotional erraticism' (p. 108).

In emphasising the role of individuals, however, Wetzel highlights a tension in the book's approach which he does not fully resolve. On the one hand the book presents Bismarck as a supreme political and diplomatic player, successfully manoeuvring his domestic and foreign counterparts, yet it also emphasises how the war and the actions of military and political actors were shaped by the forces of nationalism. Hatred of the old French enemy led Prussian public opinion to welcome the war, while fear of French occupation drew the support of the southern German states. However, it was during the post-Sedan phase that nationalism gained its real significance, threatening to derail Bismarck's attempts to limit and localise the war. On assuming office after the fall of the Second Empire, the republican Government of National Defence claimed that the war was not theirs but Napoleon III's and called for a peace with no annexations or indemnities. At the same time, however, it threatened to unleash an all-out war of the entire French nation if its demands were not met.

A further tension in the notion of a 'duel of nations' is that in examining the roles played by the neutral powers, Wetzel demonstrates that the Franco-Prussian War was much more than a conflict between France and Germany. Napoleon III's attempts to draw Austria and Italy into an entente against Prussia may have come to nothing, but Bismarck remained concerned about the risk of intervention by the neutral powers. Before the war, he manoeuvred to

prevent a French alliance with Russia and fuelled British suspicions of France by releasing a secret draft treaty calling for the annexation of Belgium. The French government's attempts to persuade the major European governments to intervene after the fall of Napoleon III therefore proved fruitless. However, the Russian renunciation of the Black Sea clauses of the 1856 Treaty of Paris threatened to undermine Bismarck's efforts. It was largely because the British government wanted to avoid conflict and because Berlin supported the Russian action that the international crisis did not go further and did not enable the French government to end its isolation.

The tensions between Wetzel's characterisation of Bismarck's supremacy and his characterisation of the pressures of German nationalism re-emerge in the peace negotiations that followed the French capitulation on 28 January 1871. The negotiations provoked another kind of 'duel', namely that between Bismarck and Moltke, the former being driven by diplomatic and security concerns and the latter being driven by nationalist and military concerns. Whereas Bismarck wanted to end the war swiftly and did not seek to undermine the international status of France, Moltke wanted its destruction as a great power. And whereas Moltke wanted to see France dismembered, Bismarck's primary concern was German security. Wetzel presents the final terms as a victory for Bismarck, arguing that they were tough but did not fundamentally alter France's standing. However, the German annexation of Alsace-Lorraine in the 1871 peace terms might be compared with the terms of 1815 when the allies had not demanded any territorial cessions. The five billion francs in indemnities that France had to pay Germany were the largest ever demanded by any victorious state and were significantly greater than the 700 million francs demanded in 1815. Together they were intended to cripple France for decades and prevent it from threatening Germany.

While Wetzel does not offer any significant new interpretation, the book remains important in terms of its scope and engagement with a wide range of sources. Written in a vivid style, it is an engaging read. The book's approach towards the war is, however, somewhat traditional. While the diplomatic history of the Franco-Prussian War may not have been the subject of any major study in recent years, there have been significant developments in the scholarship on the military dimensions, the experiences of the war and the changing nature of warfare. Moreover, while Wetzel often highlights the heightened emotions of key players, it is a shame these avenues are not further developed in light of the growing interest in the significance of emotions in diplomatic history. Wetzel provides a useful bibliographical essay, but at fifty-three pages its length seems somewhat disproportionate to the length of the book itself. Nevertheless, this book remains a major contribution to the field which helps to widen historians' perspectives on the European and international implications of the Franco-Prussian War.

Reference

1. Wetzel, D. (2001). *A Duel of Giants: Bismarck, Napoleon III and the Origins of the Franco-Prussian War*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.