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Olivier Podevins, *La France et la Tierce Allemagne à l'exemple de la Saxe entre 1814 et 1866*. Friedberg: Edition Atlantis, 2001. 390 pp. Tables, maps, bibliography, and index. 25.15 Euros (cl). ISBN 3-932711-53-X.

Review by David Wetzel, University of California, Berkeley.

In an essay on the German Confederation some years ago, one of the many fine pieces he has written on this subject, Paul W. Schroeder began by recounting the experience of the American humorist Robert Benchley, who faced an examination at Harvard that included the question: "Discuss the Canadian-American Fisheries Treaty of 1921 from the standpoint of the Canadians and the Americans." Benchley retorted that he could not bring himself to discuss it from either the standpoint of the Canadians or the Americans and would therefore discuss it from the standpoint of the fish.[1]

Olivier Podevins could well have used a similar lead to open this book, a sensitive and carefully argued work that surveys the relations of France and the middle sized German state of Saxony from the time of the downfall of Napoleon to the end of the Austro-Prussian War in 1866. Its central question, stated forcefully and repeatedly, is why France was unable to establish with Saxony a relationship that would have resulted in a third Germany, a Germany dominated neither by Austria nor by Prussia in which the territorial integrity of the weakest states would have been maintained (pp. 11-22, 121, 211, 316-17).

The book takes for examination three critical periods of French history in the nineteenth century: the Bourbon restoration, the July monarchy, and the Second Empire. It attempts a critical appraisal of the actions and policies of the two governments (especially the French) in their relations with each other over this span of time. Despite the existence of several valuable works on the various phases of Franco-Saxon relations in some of these periods, there is no modern treatment of this subject, tapping all the sources available today, that can serve as an adequate foundation for critical judgment. In these circumstances, Podevins saw no alternative but to delve into original source materials and to attempt to unravel, for his own instruction and that of the reader, the tangled web of what actually occurred (pp. 11-32).

Any answer to the German problem, Podevins points out, had to take into account the three natural elements of the German state system: Austria, Prussia, and the totality of the small and medium sized states (pp. 11-12). This is precisely what "*trias*" (the German term for the third Germany) did, but in his view, it failed for three overriding reasons.

To begin with, during this period the French were bent on achieving quick success first in ending the Napoleonic wars and the occupation that followed and then restoring France's international position and self-confidence and reconciling, until the time of Napoleon III at any rate, the army and people to the various regimes (pp. 121-22, 211, 316-17). The concerns of the smaller states of Germany had little place in this scheme. When the French thought of Germany, they thought Austria and Prussia and how they could keep them at loggerheads. Their German policy was inattentive and unrealistic and at times bellicose. Charles X, for instance, dreamed constantly of overthrowing treaties, redrawing the map of

Europe, expanding in Belgium and the Rhineland, restoring French preponderance in Italy, and uniting the Continent against Britain. Thiers did the same thing in 1840 when a wave of chauvinism arose in the French press. The symbol round which the French rallied was the Rhine. This drove the governments of states such as Saxony to near panic and hamstrung the development of a constructive German policy.

The second reason why *trias* failed was that, when all is said and done, the French never took the idea seriously. To search for new ways to reform the Confederation—whose strengthening, Podevins notes, was the fundamental prerequisite in the absence of which *trias* could never be realized—required a seriousness of purpose and an expenditure of time and effort that they were not ready to commit. The Confederation remained to the minds of the vast majority of Frenchmen a *jus publicum*, not a viable solution to the German question (pp. 322-23). They were dismayed by the seeming instability of the Confederation: the woeful disunity among its various components, the confusing, kaleidoscopic quality of the changes in the political and military fortunes of the various states that made it up. A population wholly unfamiliar with the concepts, procedures, and responsibilities of democracy, schooled only in the arts of dependency on higher authority—how could such a population be aroused out of its profound apathy and moved to accept the responsibilities of political initiative in the managing of its affairs?

Here Podevins's judgment may be too harsh. As Wolf Gruner has noted, at least some French figures, especially in the time of Napoleon III, pushed for a third Germany, considered it important for French security, and launched sustained efforts to bring it about.[2] On the other hand, Gruner's work backs Podevins's in a more important way: it shows that the pattern established by the Bourbon and Orléanist governments persisted throughout the Second Empire. The Confederation was regarded a potential danger; it could be mobilized against France, as appeared likely to happen in 1859. Napoleon III and his ministers had no idea how it could be reformed, let alone strengthened. And, in fact, they used its break up in 1866 as a major justification for their policy of non-intervention in the Austro-Prussian War.

Podevins shows that a reshaping of power relationships that recognized Prussia's ambitions while guaranteeing Austria's integrity and admitted popular involvement without precipitating revolutionary upheavals was the aim of several prominent Saxons during this period, of whom Friedrich Ferdinand, comte de Beust, prime minister from 1848 to 1866, was most outstanding (pp. 239-55). Beust's plan for a tripartite executive (composed of a Prussian, an Austrian and a representative of the third Germany) was complicated but not unrealistic. But, like all experiments of the *trias* question, its intrinsic merits mattered less than whether it could attract the necessary power to put it into effect. The small and middle-sized states were characteristically disunited, but the Austrians were sympathetic, and clearly the plan had some chance of success if found French support. It did not. In fact, France used the proposal as a wedge to drive between Austria and Prussia. Their approach was characteristic of the German policy of the government of the Second Empire. That Napoleon was not hostile but on the whole favorable to Germany is well documented. But the idea of promoting French security by reforming the Confederation never crossed his mind; a far better way was to set his sights higher and aim for a Germany permanently divided between Austria and Prussia, with France in alliance with one of them—preferably Prussia in the north.[3]

The third reason for the failure of *trias* had to do with the weakness of the institutions of French power during the period in question. Until the *coup d'état* of 2 December 1851, France's institutions remained in a condition that can only be described as fragile, chaotic, unstable, and singularly bereft of widespread popular acceptance. The chronic instability of her governments, the bewildering multiplicity of their numbers, the division of opinion, the belief on the part of many Frenchmen that the Confederation was little more than a Metternichian police—all these hamstrung French policy and prevented any concerted effort to develop with Saxony a third Germany. Riveting attention to such burning internal problems as relations with the papacy prevented deeper involvement with the affairs of Germany. Among the radicals, twenty-three years of exclusion from power in the years before 1848 had bred no small

measure of desperation and much questioning as to whether they could ever reconcile themselves to monarchical rule (pp. 324-25). In the face of these smoldering discontents, the political atmosphere of France during much of this period was one of nervousness, uncertainty, and potentially explosive political opposition.

The book is based on a wide range of materials, and I have no doubt that it will fill an important gap in the literature addressed to this subject. I share Podevins' general outlook and approach, and I endorse the great majority of his conclusions, including some that are implied rather than explicitly asserted (for example, that the chances for *trias* were better with a Franco-Saxon partnership than with a Franco-Bavarian one). A work concentrating on the relations of a major power and a mediatized state cannot do full justice to those of other powers, yet I felt that the portrayal of Austrian policy was at times too harsh, especially in the period before 1854 (pp. 75-76). Austria's German policy was driven not by reactionary obsession with revolution but by a desire to be secure in an area where she possessed life and death interests. This fear was basically justified; Austrian policy may not have been wise or practical, but it is certainly understandable.

This point is connected with Podevins's at times too harsh view of France's policy in general (pp. 85-86, 318-25). The demise of *trias* cannot exclusively be laid at her doorstep; in some ways the Saxons and the other German states promoted it. What really killed *trias* was Austro-Prussian dualism and the fact that the lesser states, Saxony included, pursued their own rivalries and agendas. Austria and Prussia, assuming the right to represent German foreign policy abroad, routinely excluded Saxony and the other states from active participation in international affairs. Regularly backed by the great majority of the lesser states, they had, time and again, set their faces against pressure to allow the general European guarantee of the treaty of Vienna to be turned into a guarantee of its specific provisions and frustrated every Great Power effort to intervene in German affairs (e.g., 1819-22, 1832-34, 1840, 1851). The Russians, too, must be held to account. Alexander I considered himself the arbiter of Germany and lorded over it; Alexander II and his foreign minister, Alexander Gorchakov, were mainly concerned to avoid a German threat to Russia.[4]

Yet the idea of *trias* was surely not an ignoble one. *Trias* was an element in European politics for which no distribution of power could substitute. It might have given security not merely to Germany but also among the smaller non-German peoples of Central and Eastern Europe. In using the example of French relations with Saxony from 1814 to 1866 to show how it failed, Podevins has rendered international history a distinct service.

NOTES

[1] Paul W. Schroeder, "Europe and the German Confederation in the 1860s," in *Deutscher Bund und deutsche Frage*, ed. Helmut Rumpler (Munich, 1990), p. 284.

[2] Wolf Gruner, "Frankreich und der Deutsche Bund 1851-1866: Aspekte französischer Deutschlandpolitik zur Zeit des Second Empire," in *Aspects des relations franco-allemandes à l'époque du Second Empire*, eds. Raymond Poidevin and H. O. Sieburg (Metz, 1982), pp. 39-61.

[3] Schroeder, "Europe and the German Confederation," p. 285.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 286.

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