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Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xvi + 327 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-521-58436-1.

Review by Gary P. Cox, Gordon College.

I once had the unhappy experience of failing to obtain my “dream job” at a major state institution. One critical reason for my failure was a real disconnect in how I and “they”—the academics—viewed military history. This difference was epitomized in the one question I still remember from the entire set of interviews: all of the good military history in the past decade, it was claimed, had dealt with social history and its concerns, as opposed to the narrow, traditional focus on the battlefield. Why had I persisted in focusing on military operations in my own dissertation? I confess that at the moment, seeing my bright hopes slipping away, I employed any number of tergiversations to plead my case: my adviser made me do it; of course I was interested in how World War II had impacted local race relations; I would love to look at the impact the local military base had on crime and other societal concerns, etc., etc. What I should have said, of course, was what I truly believe—and later heard the distinguished British historian Sir Michael Howard assert—that the focus of military history inevitably must be on the sharp end of the sword. What militaries plan to do, and then do (or don’t do) has deeply influenced, and in some cases decisively shaped, all of history.

The idea that military history ought to focus on war making—at least as much as on the societal impact of the military—informs every aspect of Geoffrey Wawro’s superb *The Franco-Prussian War*, an operational account of perhaps the most fateful combat in modern history, a brief but bloody encounter that unfolded between France and the allied might of all the German states in the summer and fall of 1870. The conflict formed the essential prologue to the “Second Thirty Years’ War” of 1914–1945. It created not only a unified colossus called Germany; it also elevated an all-powerful military establishment above the purview of the civilian government. The war gave birth to the French Third Republic and its loose “alliance” of monarchists, rabid nationalists, moderate republicans, and socialist radicals, held to the most tenuous unity by their fear of Germany and their resolve to maintain France as a great power. Perhaps most importantly, the conflict inspired a new vision of war itself: short, brutal, and bloody, it was directed by narrow technocrats who planned its every operation and developed new and fearsome technologies that industrialized death yet seemingly made possible the management of conflict. And all Europe rushed to copy the tactics and organization of the side that seemed to epitomize these notions, the victorious Germans.

It is not surprising that so important a conflict should generate a long and partisan historiography. Much of this literature, however, was in the inevitable form of memoirs and polemics, generated in the period before the Great War.[1] In modern scholarship, Sir Michael Howard’s *The Franco-Prussian War*, brilliantly conceived and elegantly written, has long served as the conflict’s standard account. Written after World War II, it reflected a healthy respect for the chief of the Prussian Great General Staff, Helmuth von Moltke, and his “demi-gods,” as Moltke’s subordinates became known, even as it proclaimed Prussia’s victory a disaster of the first magnitude.[2] Ultimately Howard attributed the German victory both to a superior command system, and to the idea of the “Nation-in-Arms”—Prussia and most of the German states relying on conscription to fill their regiments, as opposed to the hard-bitten, long-service professionals that, heavily outnumbered by their enemy, fought for France.

To dominate the literature of an event for forty years is no mean achievement, and Howard's work remains a model for narrative military history. Still, four decades is a long time, and in that period historical research in several areas make Wawro's reassessment particularly welcome. First, Roger Williams' delightful *Gaslight and Shadow*, a series of mini-biographies of the men and women of the "World of Napoleon III," marked the beginning of an effort to produce a more sympathetic, or at least more balanced, assessment of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, that strange and enigmatic figure who produced the kind of vitriol in French history that a Clinton or a Bush elicit today.[3] Any effort to rehabilitate the regime of "Napoléon le petit," as his enemies called him, must account for what Zola termed "Le Débâcle" in his eponymous novel on the Franco-Prussian War. Second, developments in German military history also make a fresh look at this seminal conflict timely. Ever since Gordon Craig's *Politics of the Prussian Army* and John Wheeler Bennett's *The Nemesis of Power*, the German general staff has traditionally been viewed as a group of mostly honorable, if exceptionally narrow, technocrats, men whose love of country and army ultimately drove them to a Faustian pact with a devil-Hitler-whom they never fully understood and never truly served.[4] More recent works by scholars like Gerhard Weinberg and Omar Bartov have revealed a much more aware, and culpable, military establishment, which for reasons both mercenary and ideological "signed on" to the Nazi program.[5] The actions of Moltke and his subordinates must be inevitably filtered through a different historical prism than that used forty years ago. Third, the work of a handful of men like Howard and Alistair Horne prompted something of a renaissance in academic military history. Much of the work of such scholars as Dennis Showalter, John Terraine, Patrick Griffith, Hew Strachan, Douglas Porch, and, of course, John Keegan has focused on the critical years of 1860-1914, when war was industrialized and technological advances dramatically increased firepower.[6] Their collective efforts inevitably will inform and improve any retelling of the War of 1870. Finally, the wheel has turned full circle in the western world regarding military establishments. A half-century ago the French professional army was often depicted as an unsavory mechanism designed to allow Frenchmen to escape the burdens of citizenship, and to give the government a group of responsive "praetorians" who would fight when and where ordered, no questions asked. Today the "nation-in-arms" is generally in disfavor; an era of long service professionals, much like the army of Napoleon III, is well under way. One might well wonder how this relatively sudden appreciation for a fully professional military might color our understanding of this epic encounter between German conscripts and French professionals.

Thus there are important reasons why a retelling of the Franco-Prussian War is to be welcomed. Building upon the framework provided by Howard and a host of specialists, utilizing the archives of the governments of Austria, France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States to a greater degree than previous studies, Wawro provides a nuanced and updated retelling of this fateful struggle.

The volume is simply and clearly organized. Roughly a quarter of the book serves as an introduction, sketching the recent political developments in the two countries, their military systems and the causes of the war. Wawro traces the war's origins to the two traditional sources: the French government's domestic problems and Bismarck's need for a war with France to complete the unification of Germany. On the domestic front, the author clearly believes the French republicans were in the ascendant and that the plebiscite that created the "Liberal Empire" was a stinging defeat for Napoleon III (pp. 28-29). For Wawro, the war was from the emperor's perspective "a possible way out of his domestic political embarrassments" (p. 29). This analysis might be challenged by specialists like Roger Price, who assert reviving support for the "Liberal Empire" and who see the war's domestic origins in the pressure exerted by the government's "base," (to use modern, political jargon), the "close circle of courtiers and politicians identified with authoritarian Bonapartism." [7]

Fully half the text focuses on the epic encounters between the armies in August 1870 that culminated in the Battle of Sedan, where Napoleon III and 102,000 French soldiers surrendered to Moltke and Bismarck. It is in this area that Wawro makes his most important contributions.

Dramatic increases in firepower in the mid-nineteenth century made offensive operations increasingly difficult and costly, a development that culminated in the tactical stalemate of the Great War. The alleged ascendancy of the defensive, however, fails to explain why the French, who invariably fought from fixed, defensive positions with a vastly superior rifle, lost so decisively. Nor were the German victories simply the product of brilliant staff work. Moltke was indeed something of a genius, but he was served by ambitious and at times blundering mortals who made critical, if usually unpunished, mistakes. Wawro's analysis illustrates how two conditions produced a series of remarkable German victories. The first was the German tactical doctrine that utilized small-unit offensive flanking operations combined with rapid-deploying, breech-loading artillery to outmaneuver and hammer the immobile French. The second cause for the French defeat was the contrast in the command systems: the wretched collection of senior officers led by Napoleon III still waged war (when they fought at all) as if combat could be micro-managed from a white horse atop a convenient hill. The Germans, on the other hand, had their Prussian general staff with its *Auftragstaktik*--"mission tactics" that permitted an orderly decentralization of combat, with German troop leaders free to improvise their attainment of assigned objectives (p. 54). Even the errors committed by German commanders were frequently redeemed by the system employed by their troops. Over and over again, at Wissembourg and Spicheren, Froeschwiller and Mars-la-Tour, Gravelotte and Sedan, the great battles of the war, the French dug themselves in, often in outstanding defensive positions, inflicted heavier casualties on their attackers, and lost--catastrophically. Wawro insists, however, that while the above analysis describes what happened, it does not adequately describe why the Germans won. Only Prussia's superior artillery validated its command and tactical system by chewing up the massed French infantry in their defensive positions, suppressing their devastating rifle fire, and allowing the attackers to move forward. The massive casualties sustained by the advancing Germans could have presaged battlefield defeat had the supine and virtually somnambulant French commanders counter-attacked when German assaults faltered (p. 309). Wawro's emphasis, on the French side, is with the commanders and their inability or unwillingness to act--the failure of character and the weakness of the system. On the German side, neither the figures of Bismarck nor Moltke really emerge; they are present; they make decisions, but the German story is one of the triumph of system and technology over personalities.

The final quarter of the volume treats the abortive efforts of the French provisional government to generate a *levée-en-masse* as in 1793 to thrust back the hated invader, and the peace treaty exacted by the victors. Wawro seemingly has little use for the efforts of France's hastily created new armies to continue the war after the dynasty's fall. His account of the war's final six months centers on the surrender of the last imperial army in Metz and Bismarck's efforts to conclude the struggle. Regarding the peace treaty itself (the Treaty of Frankfurt), Wawro disagrees slightly with the interpretation of such standard accounts as Otto Pflanze's, which sees the controversial annexation of Alsace and Lorraine as the price Bismarck paid to make the war into a national crusade.[8] Instead, Wawro emphasizes that for once the Iron Chancellor's political pragmatism and *Realpolitik* deserted him in dealing harshly, even emotionally, with a defeated republican France (pp. 300-05).

So how does Wawro assess the significance of the war? On the Second Empire he is clearly a traditionalist, seeing Napoleon III as an inveterate intriguer "gone to seed" by 1870, whose corrupt regime was entirely responsible for its own downfall. His evaluation of the development of the German army pays full tribute to the accomplishments of Moltke and his demi-gods, while asserting that their apotheosis, so fateful for the development of Germany and the world, was perhaps more due to the enemy's blundering than to their own technocratic brilliance. In terms of the overall military history of the period, Wawro illustrates how the contemporary assessments of the war, usually written by the historical sections of the general staffs that were themselves created to emulate the victors' methods, were so narrowly focused on battlefield tactics that they failed to consider the broader implications of the fighting. They helped create the "cult of the offensive" that was seemingly verified in both the Russo-Turkish and Russo-Japanese Wars, and that led to the tactical nightmares of 1914-1918. Finally, Wawro is dismissive of the untrained "enthusiasts" called up by the French provisional government to

face the armies of Germany. Rather than heroic, they are almost pathetic. The corollary for the modern battlefield is obvious.

The Franco-Prussian War is warmly recommended as a model of the best of modern military history. Written with verve and a fine eye to detail, Wawro has married a compelling narrative with thoughtful and solid analysis to produce the new standard account that explains not only the war itself but that informs the fateful half-century that was to follow.

NOTES

[1] François Roth, *La Guerre de 70* (Paris: Fayard, 1990): 552-81.

[2] Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France 1870-1871* (New York: Macmillan, 1969): 456.

[3] Besides Roger L. Williams' *Gaslight and Shadow: The World of Napoleon III* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), see such modern works as Roger Price, *The French Second Empire: An Anatomy of Political Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[4] Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956); John Wheeler Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics, 1918-1945* (New York: St. Martin's, 1954).

[5] Gerhard A. Weinberg, *A World in Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[6] Alistair Horne, *The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916* (New York: St. Martin's, 1962); Dennis Showalter, *Railroads and Rifles: Soldiers, Technology and the Unification of Germany* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1975); John Terraine, *The Smoke and the Fire: Myths and Anti-myths of War, 1861-1945* (London: L. Cooper, 1992); Paddy Griffith, *Forward into Battle: Fighting Tactics from Waterloo to the Near Future* (Chichester, Sussex: Anthony Bird, 1981); Hew Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983); Douglas Porch, *The March to the Marne: The French Army 1871-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Vintage, 1976).

[7] Price, *French Second Empire*, 429.

[8] Otto Pflanze, *Bismarck and the Development of Germany*, vol. I: *The Period of Unification 1815-1871* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990): 484-89.

Gary P. Cox
Gordon College
gary_c@gdn.edu

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