

# NAPOLEON & EUROPE

The soldiers of Weimar lay down their arms before the all-conquering Napoleon in October 1806.



## NAPOLEON AND GERMAN IDENTITY

How Napoleon laid up trouble for future generations of Frenchmen by kick-starting Prussian and German domination of Eastern Europe, by **Tim Blanning**.

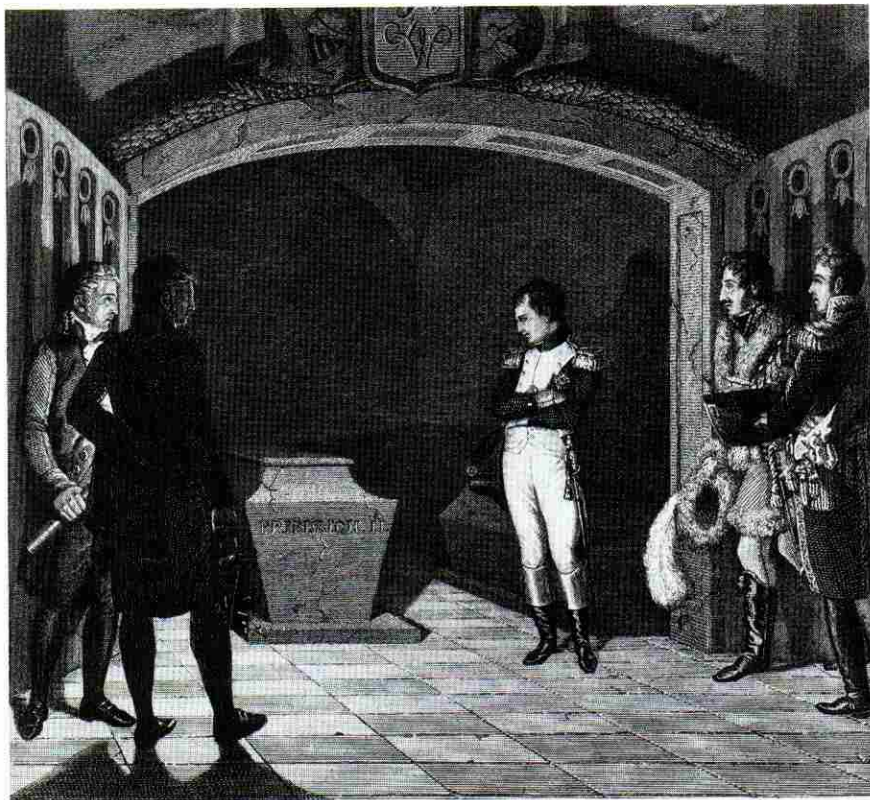
**I**n the beginning was Napoleon' – with these words the late and much-lamented Thomas Nipperday began his masterly account of the history of Germany in the nineteenth century (recently translated as *From Napoleon to Bismarck*). Like most lapidary phrases, it begs as many questions as it answers. Many of the forces which turned Germany into the greatest power on the European continent went back far into the eighteenth century and beyond. But, as we shall see, there is certainly a great deal to be said for taking Napoleon as the starting point.

There is a fine irony here, for it was Napoleon who brought Germany as low as it had ever been. During the early years of the French Revolutionary wars, military fortunes had been mixed. The German powers had lost battles but they had also won battles, so if they had lost territory, they had also won it. When Prussia left the war in 1795 it was not as a vanquished but as a satiated power, looking for a respite in which to digest her

enormous gains in Poland. The Austrians fared less well perhaps, but even they could point to gains in Italy to counter-balance losses north of the Alps.

It was Napoleon's crushing victories at Marengo in 1800, at Ulm and Austerlitz in 1805 and at Jena and Auerstedt in 1806 which put Germany at his mercy. He remodelled it in three ways. One part – all the territories on the west bank of the Rhine – he annexed to France. Another part he turned into fiefs for his relations – the Kingdom of Westphalia for his brother Jerome and the Grand Duchy of Berg for his brother-in-law Joachim Murat. In the third and largest part he allowed a number of German princes to continue but only as his obedient puppets. In short, Napoleon destroyed the Holy Roman Empire.

This represented the greatest upheaval in Europe since the Reformation. The Holy Roman Empire was just over a millennium old when it was put to death, having been founded on Christmas Day 800 when Charlemagne



**How are the mighty fallen:** Napoleon contemplates the tomb of Frederick the Great after defeating his descendant Frederick William III at Jena in 1806. Despite the humiliating settlement he forced on Prussia at Tilsit, Napoleon created the opportunity for Prussia to win ascendancy over its old rival Austria in Germany.

was crowned by Pope Leo III at St Peter's in Rome. In more recent centuries it had come to serve as Europe's soft centre, a loose confederation of princes and city-republics under the nominal sway of the Emperor. With the advantage of hindsight, we can see that it presented the best solution to the 'German problem', for it was cohesive enough to give German-speaking Europe a sense of identity but too fragmented to allow the concentration of German power. Although much derided by contemporaries over-impressed by the achievements of nation-states such as France and England, the Holy Roman Empire still possessed many assets and still commanded much loyalty. Although it had often looked like floundering in the past, the self-balancing mechanism of the European states-system had always intervened to save it. But the victory obtained by Napoleon was so total that this time there could be no White Knight waiting in the wings.

The destruction of the Holy Roman Empire proved to be an act of consummate folly on the part of Napoleon, although more than half a century was to pass before all the chickens came home to roost. In 1748 the great Scottish philosopher David Hume had travelled through Germany. Mightily impressed by what he saw, he had commented:

Germany is undoubtedly a very fine Country, full of industrious, honest People, and were it united it would be the greatest power that ever was in the World.

French policy-makers under the *ancien regime* agreed and were careful to avoid anything which might bring about that potentially fatal unification. As one diplomat boasted, the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648, which had brought the Thirty Years' War to

an end and thus confirmed German disunity, was 'the finest jewel in the King of France's crown'. Driven by their anti-clerical, rationalist and egalitarian ideology, the French Revolutionaries were blind to this asset and set about destroying it, a task which was completed by the man who was both their heir and their executioner – Napoleon.

The Holy Roman Empire was like Humpty Dumpty. Once it had been torn from its wall, not even the most conservative German could dream of putting it back together again. The 'Restoration' of the Congress of Vienna (1814-15) was not a restoration at all but essentially a continuation of Napoleon's Germany, albeit with his relations removed, the west bank of the Rhine taken back from France, and Prussia and Austria rewarded. Although the thirty-eight surviving states which now formed the 'German Confederation' looked old, in reality they were new creations, with correspondingly shallow roots. The kingdom of Bavaria, for example, incorporated no fewer than eighty-three former territories of the Holy Roman Empire, with all the problems of assimilation that involved. In trying to win credibility in the bleak post-war world, when even such a stable country as the United Kingdom was wracked by social and political problems, the new German states were handicapped by another Revolutionary-Napoleonic legacy: the association of the two great ideologies of the age, liberalism and nationalism, with subversion. Directed by the iron hand of Metternich, the princes turned reactionary, alienating those who could so easily have become their allies.

The result was that any chance the 'German Confederation' had of proving as long-lived a solution to the German problem as its predecessor was scotched at the start. The new regimes never succeeded in establishing their credentials; while the Holy Roman Empire had been weak but benign, to many Germans the new creation seemed weak and oppressive. The number of dissidents grew rapidly after 1815, as literacy rates increased but opportunities for employment stagnated or even declined. The two thousand-odd territories of the old empire had needed a correspondingly large number of officials of various kinds to run them. Simplification brought redundancy on a massive scale, intensified by the need for retrenchment after two-and-half decades of warfare. After a wave of unrest in 1830 hoisted a warning signal that was not heeded, the revolutions of 1848-49 exposed the bankruptcy of the 1815 settlement for even the most blinkered to see.

By this time, the German Problem had become much more acute. Modernisation was not invented by Napoleon, for it had been underway for a century or more, but there can be no doubt that he did give the process an enormous impetus. So brutally did he treat the old regimes in Germany that he made radical reform not an option but a necessity. Nowhere was the lesson more harshly imposed or better learnt than in Prussia.

Desperately trying to restore legitimacy to their system and to make it capable of meeting the Napoleonic challenge, the Prussian reformers sought salvation in a flight to the front. Whatever qualifications need to be made about their motives and achievements, the fact remains that they turned their state into the most modern in Europe and the best fitted for the continuing struggle for mastery in Germany.

While the German states led by Prussia were forging ahead, France was going backwards. So many institutions of present-day France date back to Napoleon that there is a natural tendency to think of him as the great moderniser. In reality, his social and economic policies helped to put his adopted country into lead boots. In particular, his confirmation of the practice of partible inheritance ensured that French agriculture would remain subsistence-based and French society conservative. It was the Prussians who grasped that modernisation demanded not the protection of the peasantry but the emancipation of the landlords. In the short-term this involved a painful social cost for the dispossessed peasants, but in the long-term it paid dividends in the shape of higher agricultural productivity, which in turn accelerated urbanisation and industrialisation. It was the same sort of story in other branches of the economy. Conservative social legislation ensured that French manufacturing would remain dominated by the small family-run unit. The disastrous naval wars against the British virtually eliminated foreign trade. The greenhouse-effect created by Napoleon's



**Man out of time: the last Holy Roman Emperor from 1792, Francis II, in imperial regalia prior to Napoleon's abolition of the Empire and Francis' abdication in 1806 (he remained Emperor of Austria, as Francis I). The archaic qualities of the Empire had helped keep Germany disunited and weak: with it gone modernisation became possible.**



**A bridge too far: Napoleon's troops drive on towards Vienna during the campaign against Austria in 1809 that was settled by the battle of Wagram.**

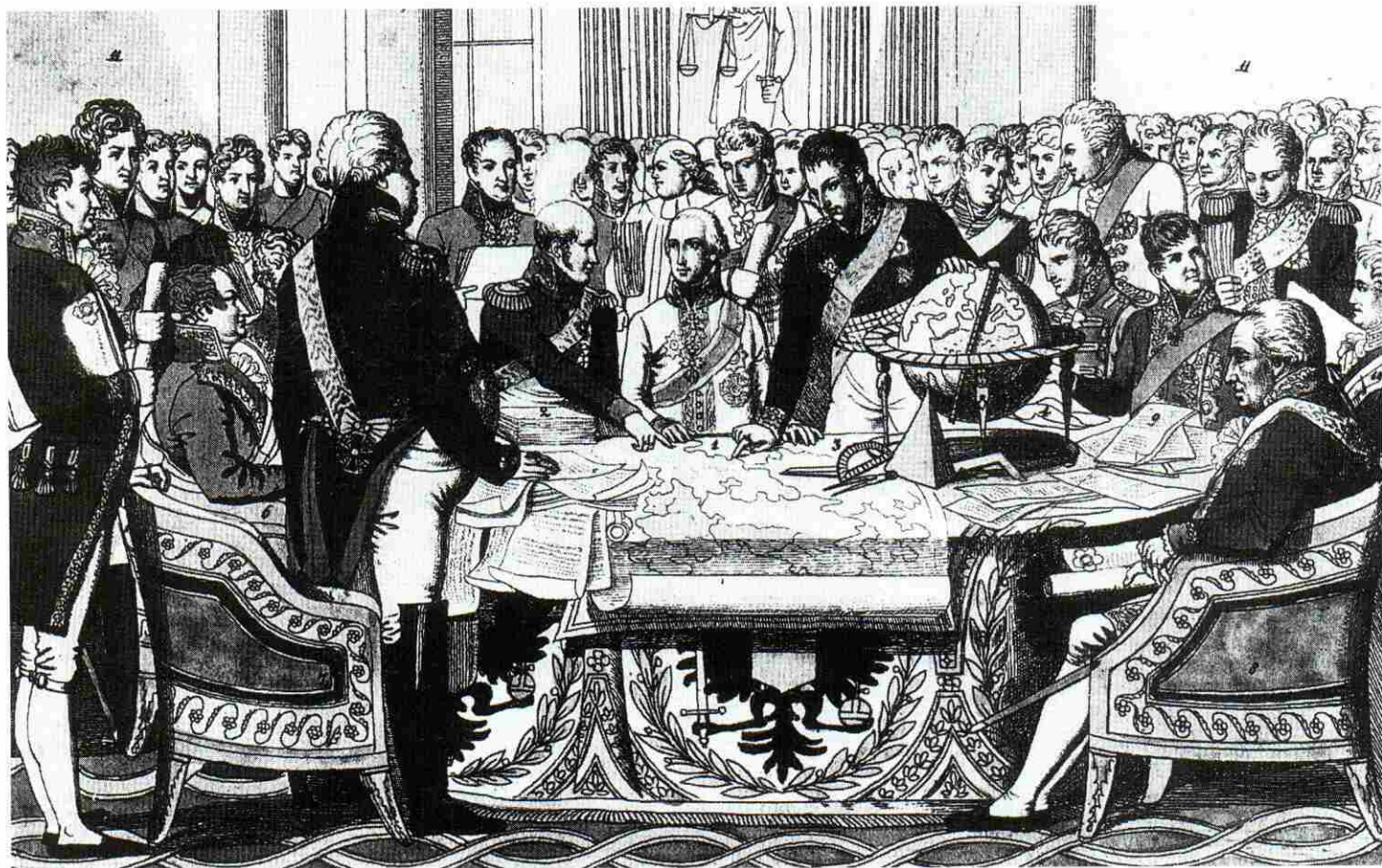
Continental System, together with his exploitation of the lands he conquered, allowed favoured French manufacturers to flourish in the short term, but when his empire collapsed so did these hot-house blooms wither on the vine. The Prussian reformers, by contrast, opted for low tariffs and deregulation, suffering the immediate pain of competition in the interests of sustainable growth in the future.

Especially important was the demographic gap which opened up between the two countries. At the time of Louis XIV, France was easily the more populous; by 1815 they were about equal; by 1850 the Germans were beginning to move ahead; by the time of the decisive showdown twenty years later they had established a clear lead. Although this may well have happened anyway, Napoleon had a negative contribution to make here too. The best guess is that about a million Frenchmen died during the wars he inflicted on Europe, fertilising foreign fields when they should have been at home doing their bit for French demographic statistics. Probably even more serious, although less spectacular, than this terrible blood-letting was the conservative social legislation already described, which encouraged late marriages and small families. In Germany, on the other hand, social emancipation brought something of a population explosion. Between 1815 and 1850 in only six of the thirty-eight states of the Confederation was the increase in population less than 50 per cent, while in another six it was over 80 per cent, the average rate being about 40 per cent.

The map of Europe is pored over at the Congress of Vienna by Francis I (seated centre) and Frederick William III (standing with one hand on the globe), watched by Castlereagh and Talleyrand among others. The new political geography of Germany saw a weak and unsatisfactory compromise that led inevitably to future disputes between the major powers of the region.

If Napoleon gave a kick-start to German power in general, he was especially helpful to the Prussians. From the time Frederick the Great had invaded Silesia in 1740, the German political scene had been dominated by the struggle between Prussia and Austria (as we shall call the Habsburg Monarchy for the sake of convenience). Hitherto neither side had been able to achieve a decisive advantage. It was Napoleon's reconstruction of Germany which gave Prussia a decisive advantage, indeed it might be said that the road which led to Sedan in 1870 began at Jena and Auerstedt in 1806. At first sight, this seems most implausible, for Austria emerged from the debris of the Napoleonic Wars very much in charge of the German Confederation. The Emperor of Austria was its president *ex officio*, the Federal Diet was dominated by Metternich, and even Prussia seemed to have come to terms with a subordinate status.

The Austrian position was much weaker than it looked. Partly this was a problem of a bifurcation of what can best be called the 'political cultures' of the two powers. After their shattering defeats at Ulm and Austerlitz in 1805, the Austrians had reluctantly grasped the nettle and had set about introducing a reform programme, directed by Count Stadion. Their further failure in the war of 1809 discredited that process, led to Stadion's dismissal and the appointment of Metternich. Eventual victory in the wars of 1813-15 seemed to suggest that the old ways were the best ways. In short, in Austria the Napoleonic experience strengthened the status quo.

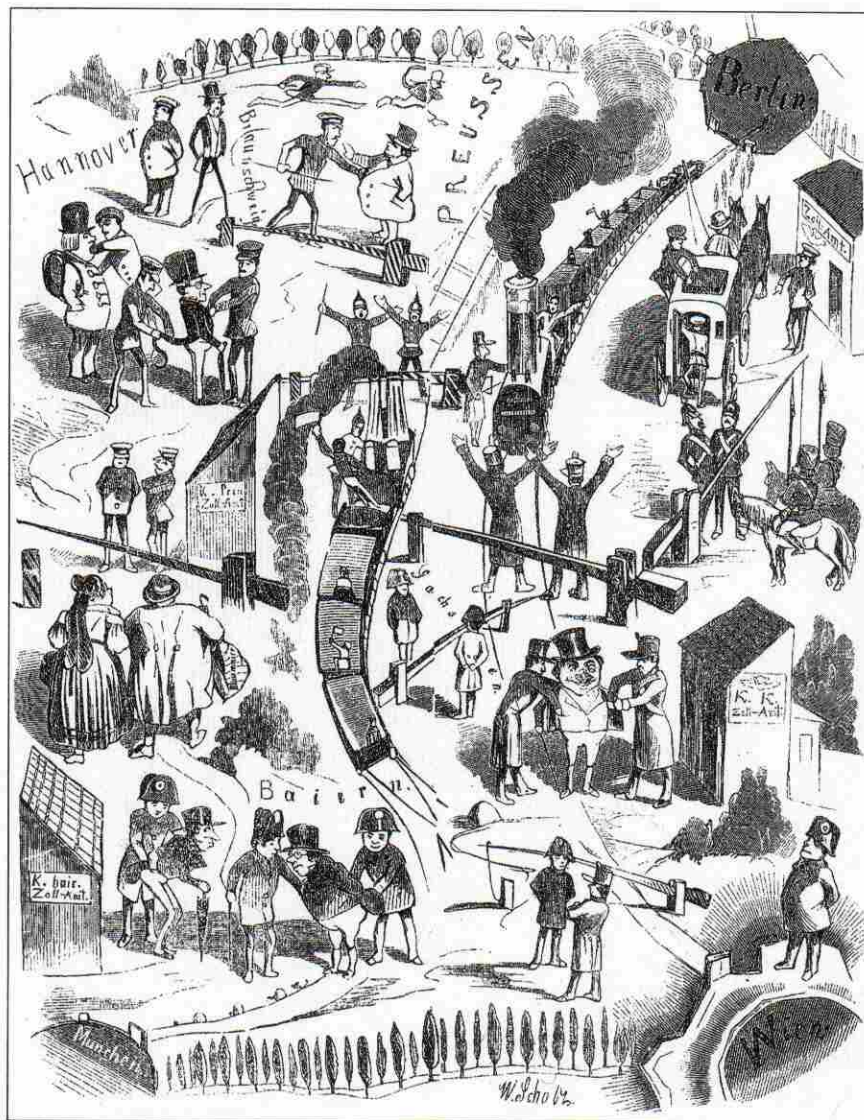


Encouraged by the personal conservatism of the long-lived Emperor Francis I (r. 1792-1835), Austrian political culture became static if not reactionary.

The Prussians learned a very different lesson. As we have seen, their own humiliation at Jena and Auerstedt in 1806 also prompted a reform programme, the difference being that when they next went to war, in 1813-15, it was not to be defeated again but to make a particularly powerful contribution to the defeat of Napoleon. For them, it was modernisation which was franked by success, with the result that their political culture took a different direction. For all the political repression which characterised the Prussian government after 1815, social, economic and cultural reforms continued. Not the least important consequence was the fact that by 1850 Prussia had the healthiest finances in the Confederation – and Austria had the weakest.

A date of special importance in Prussia's rise to hegemony in Germany was the foundation of the Customs Union (*Zollverein*) in 1834 which brought together eighteen states of the Confederation in a single free-trade area. Conspicuously absent was Austria, deliberately excluded by the Prussians and unable to form an effective rival because of her relative economic backwardness. If the *Zollverein's* importance is now downplayed by many economic historians, there can be no doubt that it was both a symptom of the growing gap between the two rivals and a cause of its further widening. It might well be asked what Napoleon might have had to do with something which happened thirteen years after his death. The answer is that his destruction of the Holy Roman Empire created the opportunity for Prussia to acquire from the debris territory with great economic potential. Among other things, the Vienna settlement allocated to Prussia northern Saxony, the Saar region (rich in coal and iron ore), the Aachen-Cologne-Krefeld triangle (textile manufacturing) and the Ruhr (one of the world's largest coalfields). Prussia was given the western territories for political reasons, so that it could become a buffer against French expansion, but their acquisition also set it on the path to become the industrial powerhouse of the continent.

After 1815 Prussia was more of a German power than ever before. After 1815 Austria was less of a German power than ever before. Guided by the fell hand of Metternich, the Austrians turned south and south-east. The acquisition of Lombardy, Venetia, Parma, Modena and Tuscany (the last three being ruled by junior members of the Habsburg dynasty) brought hegemony in Italy. It also brought the certainty of eventual conflict with France. Ever since Charles VIII descended on Italy in 1494 to make good his claim to the throne of Naples, the rulers of France had aspired to control of the peninsula. In 1815 France was exhausted, but it could only be a matter of time before she recovered suffi-



ciently to try another fall with the old enemy. The moment came in 1859 when Napoleon's nephew, Napoleon III, allied with Sardinia-Piedmont to eject the Austrians from Lombardy and to create the Kingdom of Italy. If not mortal, the wound gravely weakened the Austrians on the eve of the end-game in Germany.

Less obvious, but perhaps even more serious, was the incipient conflict with Russia which the Vienna Settlement made likely if not inevitable. The acquisition of the old Venetian territories along the Adriatic to the west of Bosnia-Herzegovina made Austria more of a Balkan power than ever before. The implications of this geopolitical shift were also worked out in the 1850s, during the Crimean War (1853-56) when Austria's Balkan interests made it impossible for her to give the Russians the support they expected. As a result they blamed their defeat on Austrian 'treachery' and found an early opportunity for revenge by giving Napoleon III the green light for intervention in Italy in 1859. Their ill will continued to have harmful effects in the following decade. As the events of the twentieth century have demonstrated, the two powers with most to lose from the creation of a powerful Germany are France and Russia. Yet the Russians stood by and did nothing as the

**Anything to declare?**  
This Berlin-originated cartoon of 1852 lampoons the restrictions on internal trade and movement in Germany if the Prussian-dominated Zollverein were abolished. Only the Emperor in Vienna seems content with the situation.



'Chasseur in the forest' (1814) by Caspar David Friedrich, a symbolic evocation of French military ambitions abandoned and engulfed in an archetypal Teutonic forest.

Prussians defeated first Austria and then France on their way to the creation of a united Germany. Once again, the baleful effects of the destruction of the Holy Roman Empire had made themselves felt.

Napoleon was also responsible for ensuring that Germany's march to unity after 1815 would have an anti-French orientation. In theory, the new order he created in Germany was based on impeccably rational principles. 'What people will wish to return to the arbitrary rule of Prussia once it has tasted the benefits of a wise and liberal administration?', he asked, when sending the new constitution of the Kingdom of Westphalia to his brother Jerome. The answer might well have been 'none', if wise and liberal administration really had been on offer. In the event, the reality of Napoleonic rule was ever-increasing taxation, economic exploitation, conscription

and oppression. Even if his intentions had been good, which may be doubted, they foundered on the rock of the military imperative. Like the Revolutionaries before him, Napoleon was trying to rule a European-wide empire on the basis of French demographic resources that were too narrow and too shallow. To keep the Grand Army in being, the unfortunate Germans (and Italians, Belgians, Dutch, Spanish etc.) were required both to dig deep into their pockets and send their sons off to war. Almost 200,000 Germans marched into Russia in 1812 but few returned.

The result was a growth of Francophobia at all levels of society, concentrated on the Emperor of the French but extended to embrace the nation as a whole. Even someone as intelligent and humane as Baron von Stein, the great Prussian reformer, could rail against the 'moral filth' which had culminated in the Revolution of this 'vile nation' and call for a veritable crusade against 'the obscene, shameless and dissolute French race', which would be crowned by the razing of Paris. Well-publicised atrocities such as the execution in 1806 of the Nuremberg bookseller, Johann Philipp Palm, for distributing the pamphlet *Germany in her Deep Humiliation*, inflamed public opinion and made control of the country increasingly difficult. The depth of feeling was revealed through all manner of media. Some were aimed at the masses, such as the deluge of cartoons and pamphlets directed against Napoleon. Some were literary, such as Heinrich von Kleist's *Herman's Battle*, one of the most bloodthirsty plays ever written. Some were musical, such as Beethoven's *Battle Symphony*, celebrating the Duke of Wellington's victory at Vittoria in 1813. Some were visual, such as Caspar David Friedrich's haunting painting 'Chasseur in the forest', which depicts a French soldier lost in the German pine-forest, as a raven on a tree-stump croaks out his impending doom.

The result was the creation of a political myth of great power and duration. Whenever it looked again as though Napoleon's spirit was reviving in France, there was a passionate reaction in Germany – in 1840, for example, when fear of invasion provoked 'the Rhine crisis'. There was no war then, for the French backed down, but the explosion of feeling showed that Francophobia had lost none of its ferocity. It was a collective emotion so strong that it helped to prevent the total rupture of state and society in Germany. The aura created by the Prussian Reform Movement and the War of Liberation against Napoleon faded in the era of reaction after 1815, but never disappeared altogether. The result was that the attitude of German liberals towards the restoration regimes was less hostile than elsewhere in Europe. Even in Prussia their attitude to the state was equivocal: they detested its autocracy, aristocracy and militarism, but admired its promotion of culture, its rule of law and its economic liberalism.

Friedrich Dahlmann found the perfect phallic image for this ambivalence when he commented that the Prussian state possessed 'the magic spear which heals as well as wounds'.

At no time was this ambivalent relationship under greater strain than during the attempt by William I to reform the Prussian army by making it bigger, better trained and more professional. He was opposed by the liberal majority in Parliament, who sought to use the crisis to turn Prussia into a constitutional monarchy. At the end of his tether by 1862 and seriously considering abdication, William turned to the notoriously conservative Junker, Otto von Bismarck. It was Bismarck's genius to learn all the right lessons from Prussia's previous history. He could see that the Napoleonic experience had made the German Confederation unviable, that Prussia held the strongest cards and that German public opinion could be



wooed by military success, especially if it were scored against the French. The successful and enormously popular wars against Denmark (1864), Austria (1866) and France (1870-71) showed that he was right. When the German princes proclaimed William 'German Emperor' at Versailles on January 18th, 1871, the ghost of Napoleon should have been watching despondently from the wings, for it was he who had made it possible.

**FOR FURTHER READING:**

T.C.W. Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars* (Arnold, 1996); Geoffrey Ellis, *The Napoleonic Empire* (Macmillan, 1991); M.R. Broers, *Europe under*

*Napoleon 1799-1815* (Arnold, 1996); Charles J. Esdaile, *The wars of Napoleon* (Longman, 1995); Paul Schroeder, *The transformation of European politics, 1763-1848* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

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**Role reversal: the defeated Napoleon III capitulates to Bismarck the day after the disastrous battle of Sedan in September 1870.**



**Humiliation completed: on January 18th, 1871, Versailles is the scene of the proclamation of the German Empire, with William I proclaimed Kaiser and now the dominant power in mainland Europe.**