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The diplomatic history of the American Civil War has received uneven coverage in the historiography of the conflict. Though historians have paid considerable attention to the relationship between the United States, the Confederacy, and Great Britain during the war years, comparatively few studies venture to explore American interactions with other European nations, let alone the rest of the world. The history of the relationship between the Union, the Confederacy, and France serves as a case in point. Although the actions of the French had the potential to nearly rival those of Great Britain in influencing the outcome of the Civil War, only a handful of books are devoted exclusively to Franco-American diplomacy during the 1860s. *France and the American Civil War* aims to begin to fill this gap in the literature by introducing the work of a decorated French historian to an English-speaking audience. Stève Sainlaude, associate professor of history at the University of Paris-Sorbonne, published two award-winning works in French, *Le Gouvernement Impérial et la Guerre de Sécession (1861-1865): L’action Diplomatique* (2011) and *La France et la Confédération Sudiste: La Question de la Reconnaissance Diplomatique Pendant la Guerre de Sécession* (2011). *France and the American Civil War* represents a recapitulation of the arguments of those earlier works, rewritten by Sainlaude and translated into English by Jessica Edwards.

Sainlaude’s study sets out to answer one important question that has captured the interest of historians: why did French emperor Napoleon III ultimately choose not to recognize the independence of the Confederacy, even though he privately favored the Southern cause? Sainlaude argues that the answer can be attributed to the cautious diplomacy carried out by the officials in charge of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who concluded that intervention in the American Civil War would be incongruous with national self-interest. “To determine its course of action during the American Civil War,” Sainlaude writes, “the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs relied solely on its assessment of how France could best benefit from the situation created by the crisis, a judgement that it based on its diplomats and consuls” (p. 185).

Sainlaude’s line of argument runs contrary to the interpretation established in previous works by W. Reed West, Serge Gavronsky, George M. Blackburn, Howard Jones, and Lynn Case and Warren Spencer, among others.[1] The traditional position holds that widespread support for the Union from French liberals served as a check on Napoleon III’s pro-Confederate sympathies. Thoroughgoing antislavery sentiment among the French general public in particular made action on behalf of the Confederacy almost impossible to contemplate, especially after Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Sainlaude counters that French leaders routinely ignored public passion regarding the conflict, if that passion even existed at all. “The antidemocratic nature of the [French] regime,” Sainlaude concludes, “meant that decision-makers discussed external affairs in the closed sphere of the Quai d’Orsay or the Tuileries Palace. In any case ... contemporary accounts show that the French paid only marginal attention to the conflict” (p. 184).

Sainlaude agrees with the traditional interpretation in one respect: Napoleon III, he argues, detested the
United States and would have been happy to see the Union torn in two. The French emperor distrusted republicanism, believed American culture was unsophisticated and materialistic, and feared the possibility of further American aggression in Mexico and Latin America. Indeed, a weakened United States would allow Napoleon to much more easily implement his “Grand Design” of establishing a French-backed monarchy in Mexico. According to Sainlaude, however, Napoleon did not always have the final say on foreign matters. The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, led during the Civil War years by two cautious and capable career diplomats, Edouard Thouvenel and Edouard Drouyn de Lhuys, played a key role in setting policy for the empire. Sainlaude argues that Thouvenel and Drouyn de Lhuys looked with skepticism on many of the emperor’s more impulsive initiatives, and that they consistently worked to temper Napoleon’s desire to recognize Confederate independence.

Sainlaude finds that the dispatches written by French consuls in America did much to shape the thinking of the foreign ministers. Alfred Paul, French consul in Richmond, provided especially judicious appraisals of the military situation. Paul consistently stressed the numerical and material advantages enjoyed by the Union, and he carefully documented the deteriorating economic conditions that the Confederacy faced as the war lengthened. Throughout the conflict, Paul retained a firm faith in the likelihood of Northern victory, and his reports impressed on Thouvenel and Drouyn de Lhuys the dangers of making a premature offer of support to the side destined to lose the war. Indeed, the foreign ministers realized that a Union antagonized by recognition of the Confederacy might do even more harm to French interests, including the project in Mexico, than a successfully reunited US might otherwise do.

In several analytical chapters, Sainlaude weighs in critically on a number of matters that have long preoccupied historians of Civil War-era diplomacy. In a chapter on trade, Sainlaude concludes that neither the Union blockade nor Jefferson Davis’s embargo of cotton had much of an impact on the likelihood of French intervention. Though cotton shortages did eventually lead to layoffs in some regions of France, Sainlaude argues that “the effects of the cotton crisis on workers were ... less dramatic than first expected” (p. 151). Even more importantly, France carried on a significant trade with the Northern states, in which Americans exchanged foodstuffs for French wines, silks, and luxury goods. Few officials wished to jeopardize such lucrative commerce by becoming entangled in diplomatic disputes with the North.

Even more surprisingly, Sainlaude finds that the slavery question had little impact on French official policy. Though many French citizens did harbor moral objections to slavery, prior to the Emancipation Proclamation, observers had trouble discerning the relationship between slavery and a war against secession. After emancipation, many French commentators worried that the Federal government was freeing slaves too rapidly and without careful forethought. In general, Sainlaude argues, “the French government treated slavery as a marginal issue that could on no account steer or determine its diplomatic policy” (p. 108).

On the other side of the coin, Sainlaude concludes that Confederate emissaries enjoyed only limited success in cultivating sympathy for Southern planters amidst the French upper class. Realistic dispatches from diplomats on the ground in the Americas went a long way toward puncturing myths about “Moonlight and Magnolias.” Many French observers were shocked by the execution of John Brown, angered that Confederate officials insisted on enrolling foreign nationals in the army, and skeptical that the aggressive and expansionist tendencies shown by the Southern states during the antebellum era would subside in an independent Confederacy. In the end, Sainlaude reminds us, “the defense of national interests always triumphs over feelings. Friendship creates a climate, not a policy” (p. 98).

All in all, Sainlaude’s work offers a revealing glimpse into the inner workings of the French state. He judiciously weighs the factors that led decision makers to lean for or against intervention in the American conflict. In all instances, he sensibly concludes that national self-interest, not ideology, guided imperial policy. Like any revisionist work of history, Sainlaude’s book is certain to attract its critics. Public opinion and its impact on state policy is always difficult to measure, and Sainlaude himself concedes that liberal French newspapers consistently favored the North and used their positions on the war to undermine Napoleon’s regime. Still, Sainlaude astutely reminds his readers that although “democratic nations cannot define their foreign policy without taking into account public opinion ... no such obligation existed during the Second Empire” (p. 184). If we wish to understand how diplomatic policy is formed, especially in an imperial form of government, Sainlaude demonstrates, it is best to start with an understanding of how ministers, diplomats, and consuls viewed the world and went about
their work.

Note


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