Centralisation versus Particularism in the ‘Third Germany’

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The evaluation of Napoleon’s influence in Germany has always been coloured by the political climate of the day. This is, of course, true for almost any historical epoch, and therefore by no means unusual. What is unusual is the depth of feeling aroused by what was long exclusively seen as a period of foreign domination and national humiliation of ‘Germany’, which has made it all but impossible to arrive at a dispassionate assessment of the period. This is due not only to an exaggerated emphasis on the moral value of ‘resistance’ and the demonisation of ‘collaboration’ or the resulting (over-)emphasis on Prussia as the spearhead of the ‘resistance’ and thus the only future-oriented German state. The apparent clarity of developments and how they should be evaluated has also long stood in the way of serious study.

Scholarly and popular interest in what happened outside Prussia between 1800 and 1815 depended almost exclusively on how well the idea of a unified German nation state was regarded. After 1871, when almost all German historians celebrated the newly-founded nation state, the Napoleonic era was considered a period of national shame which was best forgotten.\(^1\) It was only when the separation of the German-speaking world into several states appeared to have become a permanent fact of life in the 1970s and 1980s, and when the complex federation of large and small states now known as the European Union began to emerge as the way forward, that federal political organisations of German-speaking central Europe appeared less of a mistake. However, even in this perspective the Confederation of the Rhine was significantly less interesting than the German Confederation, because it was not independent, but somehow part of a Napoleonic master plan for the organisation of Europe as a whole. After 1990, the perspective does not appear to have shifted back to a celebration of unitary nation-states – despite occasional comments in
reviews that research on the German Confederation can now be aban-
doned, as ‘history’ has once again come down against federalist models of Germany. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that research on the Confederation of the Rhine has stagnated. Editions of sources on most states are being published, but these concentrate almost exclusively on the top levels of decision-making – an aspect of Rheinbund history which is fairly well known – and contain little on the implementation of reforms, their effects and the wider public debate. Some attention has recently been paid to foreign policy, press policies and festivals, but there are no monographs which continue the broader approach of Helmut Berding on Westphalia, Andreas Schulz on Hesse-Darmstadt, Eckhardt Treichel on Nassau or Elisabeth Fehrenbach on legal reform. Nor is there any equivalent to the comprehensive examination of the impact Napoleonic rule had on local and regional power structures that Michael Rowe has written for the department of the Roer. It is telling that Charles Schmidt’s work on the Grand Duchy of Berg, first published in 1905, has recently been praised as the most current work on the topic. The current view of the member states of the Confederation of the Rhine is thus still grounded, to a considerable extent, in the political debates of the 1970s and 1980s. Then, historians tended to emphasise the positive aspects of reforms initiated by Napoleon, which were seen as a missed opportunity to bring Germany off its special path and into the mainstream of western historical development. Particular emphasis was placed on such reforms as the introduction of trial by jury and modified versions of the French civil code. Generally, the states of the Confederation of the Rhine appeared to have embarked on a more promising course of modernisation than Prussia. Prussia achieved economic modernisation at the price of stifling political debate and opposition. In southern and south-western Germany, by contrast, large parts of the traditional social and economic order (such as the privileges of craft guilds and localities) were preserved, thus dampening economic progress, but representative assemblies were introduced. Napoleonic influence in the so-called ‘third Germany’ thus created a more open and liberal political style than was to emerge in either Austria or Prussia after 1815. But the long-term effect of this regional peculiarity – still noticeable in the extremely uneven distribution of events commemorating the revolution of 1848 in 1998 Germany, which were concentrated almost exclusively in the south and south-west – indicates that Napoleonic influence has to be related to other historical continuities. As Elisabeth Fehrenbach and others have emphasised, at least some of the ‘Confederation of the Rhine Reforms’ (Rheinbundreformen) had their roots in reform attempts or reform