

The Politics of Prussian Neutrality 1795–1805

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Introduction

In April 1795, Prussia withdrew from the First Coalition by concluding a separate peace with France at the town of Basle in Switzerland.¹ One of the stipulations of the treaty was the provision of a demarcation line which roughly followed the river Ems, the Old Yssel, and the Rhine, and included Frankfurt and all of Franconia where Prussia had the important possessions of Ansbach and Bayreuth. The line was completed by following the northern boundaries of Bavaria, the Upper Palatinate and Bohemia, to Silesia. Prussia was to guarantee that no army would use the territories behind the line as a staging point for an attack on France, while France was to promise that none of its armies would cross over in pursuit of the enemy. This was the beginning of a neutrality policy that was to last in one form or another for over a decade and was to end by Prussia resuming war against France in 1806.

Prussia's withdrawal from the First Coalition sparked off a wave of bitter criticism against the policies of the King, Frederick William II, from his former allies. To many contemporaries, the treaty of Basle was seen as a betrayal by Prussia and its past cooperation with the Coalition was considered to be no more than a tissue of faithlessness and deceit. The Austrian government was so upset at this withdrawal of support from the Holy Roman Empire that it employed pamphlet writers to criticize ceaselessly both the treaty and Prussia's King.² It is reasonable to assume that the opinions circulated by these writers coincided with those of Europe's conservative political élite, but one can only speculate as to how much this anti-Prussian campaign actually influenced European opinion and its perception of Prussian foreign policy. One German historian, Otto Tschirch, has argued that the Austrian version of events had such a malevolent effect on contemporaries that later historians fell sway to

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² For the pamphlet war between Austria and Prussia see Otto Tschirch, *Geschichte der öffentlichen Meinung in Preußen vom Baseler Frieden bis zum Zusammenbruch des Staates, 1795–1806* (Weimar, 1933–4), i. 64–107; Ludwig Häusser, *Deutsche Geschichte vom Tode Friedrichs des Großen bis zur Gründung des deutschen Bundes* (Leipzig, 1854–8), ii. 9–14; Alfred von Vivenot, *Herzog Albrecht von Sachsen-Teschen als Reichs-Feld-Marschall. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Reichverfalls und des Baseler Friedens* (Vienna, 1864–6), ii. 278–470.

this influence and that, consequently, the opinions expressed by the opponents of the treaty of Basle and of Prussia's neutrality policy were often unthinkingly repeated by them.³ The same argument is valid today. German nineteenth-century historians who were especially harsh in their criticism of this period of Prussian history have often been unquestioningly echoed by their twentieth-century counterparts.

The number of German historians who have condemned Prussian neutrality are far too numerous to mention but it is worth pointing out a few of those who are better known. The biggest criticism that can be levelled at most of them is that the use of primary sources has often been either very selective or exiguous and that, therefore, the picture they present is inevitably inadequate. Sybel, in his monumental *Geschichte der Revolutionszeit*, described Prussian neutrality as an act of political suicide,⁴ while Treitschke, in his blatantly biased work on German history, did not even deign to linger on Prussian neutrality in any detail. His attitude towards it is expressed, however, when he commented on Napoleon's 'profound and justified contempt for the timid policy of the court of Berlin'.⁵ Rudolf Ibbeken believes that the Prussian neutrality policy allowed Napoleon to dominate Germany, while Franz Mehring argues that Prussia withdrew from world politics under the protection of a 'cowardly' neutrality in order to lead a 'sham life'.⁶ Much more recently, Golo Mann wrote that Prussia gained a decade of profitable peace but that it was gained through a pernicious ('*verderblicher*') neutrality.⁷ There are, of course, exceptions to this historiographical trend and even a number of historians who defend Prussian neutrality but, in my view, for all the wrong reasons. Leopold von Ranke and Friedrich Meinecke defended the ten years of peace gained through the treaty of Basle as the classical period in German literature.⁸ Walter Trummel⁹ is one of the few German historians who considered Prussian neutrality to have been a success simply because it kept war out of northern Germany for over a decade; but, as a general rule, historians

³ Tschirch, *Geschichte der öffentlichen Meinung*, i. 109. He cites Alfred von Vivenot's *Herzog Albrecht* as an example.

⁴ Heinrich von Sybel, *Geschichte der Revolutionszeit von 1789 bis 1800* (Stuttgart, 1898), iii. 376: '... daß Preußen durch das System des Grafen Haugwitz sich selbst zu politischer Nichtigkeit verurteilte. Ein solcher Akt politischen Selbstmordes ist nie zu rechtfertigen.'

⁵ Heinrich von Treitschke, *Deutsche Geschichte im Neunzehnten ten Jahrhundert* (Leipzig, 1894), i. 207.

⁶ Rudolf Ibbeken, *Preußen. Geschichte eines Staates* (Stuttgart, 1970), pp. 106 f; Franz Mehring, *Zur Preußischen Geschichte vom Mittelalter bis Jena* (Berlin, 1930), p. 291. Similar arguments were put forth by him in his book *Deutsche Geschichte des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1973), which was used as a manual at school.

⁷ Golo Mann, *Deutsche Geschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), pp. 62–3.

⁸ Leopold von Ranke, *Denkwürdigkeiten des Staatskanzlers Fürsten von Hardenberg* (Leipzig, 1877), i. 332; Friedrich Meinecke, *Das Zeitalter der deutschen Erhebung (1795–1815)* (Leipzig, 1941), p. 39.

⁹ Walter Trummel, *Der Norddeutsche Neutralitätsverband* (Hildesheim, 1913).

tend to neglect the politico-economic aspects that played a role in the maintaining of neutrality.

On the whole, the subject of Prussian foreign policy between 1795 and 1805 has either been avoided, or has received no more than a brief mention in passing, if at all, in general histories of Prussia or Germany. A few specialized monographs on particular aspects of the period exist but none of them significantly contributes to an understanding of overall policy.¹⁰ As such, some of the central issues surrounding Prussian foreign policy for this period still remain unanswered: why did Prussia choose the path of neutrality when the rest of the European world was locked in a long struggle with France; why did Prussia remain neutral for so long in spite of incredible diplomatic pressure from the Great Powers to join one side or the other; what precise role did the Prussian king and his foreign minister play in this choice of policy; what interests, if any, were served by this policy; and finally, was neutrality in some way related to the fall of the Prussian state? With these questions in mind, this article will survey and re-evaluate Prussian neutrality in the hope of gaining a new perspective on the events of the period.

1. The creation and consolidation of north German neutrality

Prussia had entered the war of the First Coalition in 1792 not only out of a genuine desire to help Louis XVI but also in the hope of obtaining some territorial acquisitions while doing so.¹¹ Its participation, however, soon aroused dissatisfaction at home and scepticism abroad. A number of influential people at the court of Berlin were against war with France, and during its course were to put an ever-increasing amount of pressure on the King, Frederick William II, to end it.¹² The military were never really enthusiastic about a coalition that made them the allies of their traditional enemy, Austria, while some foreign diplomats were sceptical about whether an Austro-Prussian alliance would last and about the wisdom of a war that was not only quickly

¹⁰ For Prussian neutrality one may consult: Jacques Droz, 'L'idéologie, facteur de la politique internationale. La neutralité prussienne et l'opinion publique de 1795 à 1806', in *Mélanges Pierre Renouvin* (Paris, 1966), pp. 97–106, in which Droz writes that the politics of neutrality found support in a large section of the population in favour of a Franco-Prussian *entente*, but there is little evidence to support this argument; Guy Stanton Ford, *Hanover and Prussia, 1795–1803: A Study in Neutrality* (New York, 1903); Trummel, *Norddeutsche Neutralitätsverband*. A good general survey is to be found in Reinhold Koser, 'Die preußische Politik, 1786–1806', in *Zur preußischen und deutschen Geschichte* (Stuttgart, 1921), pp. 202–68.

¹¹ Kurt Heidrich, *Preußen im Kampfe gegen die französische Revolution bis zur zweiten Teilung Polens* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1908). Cf. T. C. W. Blanning, *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars* (London and New York, 1986), pp. 72–3, for Prussia's aggressively expansionist behaviour.

¹² These people included the King's uncle, Prince Henry, (although his influence was minimal); the Prussian foreign ministers (there were three at this stage), Count Philipp Alvensleben, who had always been against the Austro-Prussian treaty, Count Christian von Haugwitz, who was initially in favour of the war but began to have second thoughts, and Count Karl von Finckenstein; Marquis Girolamo Lucchesini, *de facto* ambassador to Vienna, who had considerable influence in foreign affairs; the finance ministers Count Karl von Struensee, Werder, and Blumenthal.

proving to be the ruin of Prussia's army and treasury but was allowing Catherine II of Russia a free hand in Poland. Public opinion, for what it counted for, was also more inclined towards sympathy with the French Revolution, and against the war.

Although the war against France started out relatively well for the Coalition, by 1793 it had ended in a series of military reversals on the Rhine and in Flanders. Austro-Prussian bickering was at the heart of these failures. They came to a head in August when the Prussian diplomat, the Marquis de Girolamo de Lucchesini, and the Austrian envoy sent on a mission to Prussian headquarters, Count Konrad Ludwig von Lehrbach, quarrelled over the question of Poland which was then at the mercy of its neighbours, Russia, Austria, and Prussia. Shortly after, Frederick William II decided to give priority to the East and came to an agreement with Catherine II over a new Polish partition in January 1793. Austria was excluded from what was to be the Second Partition, placing a greater strain on Austro-Prussian relations and aggravating the mistrust which already existed.¹³ In March the following year, the Poles revolted under Thaddeus Kosciuszko and within a month had driven the Prussians out of Warsaw. This inevitably drew Prussia's attention and resources even further to the East, and placed a heavy strain on its overall military capacity. Although Prussia had received approximately £1,200,000 from Britain to help subsidize the campaign against France in the West, the state of its finances was catastrophic.¹⁴ The King, torn between Prussia's interests in Poland and his sense of duty towards his allies, decided to leave the subsidized forces on the Rhine and to move the rest of his army to the East. His hatred of the principles of the French Revolution, his desire to appear as champion of the Empire's integrity, and his idealized interpretation of the goals the Coalition had set itself, made him hesitant to renounce his engagements. But lack of money eventually prevented him from fighting on two fronts, and Frederick William II was forced into withdrawing a large part

¹³ Sydney Seymour Biro, *The German Policy of Revolutionary France. A Study in French Diplomacy during the War of the First Coalition, 1792-1797* (Cambridge, Mass, 1957), p. 90.

¹⁴ Much has been made of the disastrous state of Prussian finances being one of the principal motives for Prussia withdrawing from the Coalition. Karl Otmar von Aretin, *Heiliges Römisches Reich, 1776-1806* (Wiesbaden, 1967), i. 318, writes: 'Es ist kein Zweifel mehr, daß Preußen seiner finanziellen Lage wegen den Frieden abgeschlossen hat.' Kurt Holzapfel, 'La Prusse avant la paix de Bâle. Le torpillage du traité des subsides de La Haye par le "parti prussien de paix", 1794-95', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 54 (1984), 229-39, on the other hand, argues that Prussia did not go to Basle because Britain stopped paying subsidies, but that Britain stopped paying because Prussia signed a treaty at Basle. There is some reason to believe that money was not a decisive factor in the decision to withdraw from the Coalition and that lack of finances was used rather as an excuse by the Prussians to extricate themselves from an affair that no longer held any interest. In 18th- and early 19th-c. European politics, lack of money was not usually a factor taken seriously into consideration when it came to questions of prestige and territorial conquest. One should not forget that years later Prussia indebted itself enormously during the *Befreiungskrieg*. Nevertheless Willy Real, 'Die preußischen Staatsfinanzen und die Anbahnung des Sonderfriedens von Basel 1795', *Forschungen zur brandenburgisch-preußischen Geschichte* 1 (1991), 53-100, highlights Prussian financial difficulties and their relation to a peace movement within the court of Berlin.

of his forces from the West. By the beginning of 1795, those who favoured peace at the court of Berlin were in the majority, although the King still favoured the continuation of the war against France.

The military, however, acted independently of the court of Berlin to take matters into their own hands. General Wichard Joachim Count von Möllendorff, commander in chief of the Prussian forces in the West, motivated to some degree by the belief that the Revolution was coming to an end and that Austria was already negotiating with France, commenced negotiations with the French military without his royal master's knowledge.¹⁵ It was not until much later that Frederick William II, coming under increasing pressure from his entourage to withdraw from the Coalition, agreed to the principle of talks with France in the hope of negotiating peace for the Holy Roman Empire. The King was realistic enough to appreciate the benefits that could be drawn from a cessation of hostilities with France, but his sense of honour made him reluctant to negotiate separately for peace. Affairs in Poland, however, made matters pressing. The Austrians and Russians had come to an agreement over the final partition of Poland leaving Prussia in the cold by signing a convention on 3 January 1795. If the Prussian king was to defy both Catherine the Great and Austria, then wisdom dictated that he have his hands free in the West. Another reason that made itself felt was the fear of an Austro-French peace agreement by which Austria would receive Bavaria in exchange for the loss of the Netherlands. Prussia would then virtually be encircled by unreliable, if not outright hostile powers. What Frederick William II hoped for was a long truce, not necessarily a peace treaty, during which he could solve his problems in the East.

Official negotiations between France and Prussia were opened at the Swiss town of Basle in December 1794. The choice of a Prussian negotiator at first fell on Count William Bernd von der Goltz who, already sick and ailing when he arrived in Basle, died on 5 February 1795 of gout and bilious fever aggravated by an excess of good living. Baron Karl August von Hardenberg, future minister for foreign affairs, in charge of administering the Franconian provinces of Ansbach-Bayreuth and still relatively unknown at this stage, was sent to replace him. After four months of discussions, a peace treaty between Paris and Berlin was signed on 5 April 1795.¹⁶ In particular, three articles

¹⁵ Biro, *German Policy*, pp. 247, 266–78 for negotiations preceding Basle.

¹⁶ Negotiations lasted from 23 January to 6 April 1795. The negotiations leading up to the treaty, one of the most controversial subjects in Prussian history, have been more than adequately treated. The most recent and probably the best account is Willy Real's 'Der Friede von Basel', *Baseler Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Altertumskunde* 50 (1950), 27–112 and 51 (1951), 115–228, with bibliography, and his *Von Potsdam nach Basel* (Basel and Stuttgart, 1958), pp. 117–37; and Biro, *German Policy*, pp. 312–64. Cf. George F. de Martens (ed.), *Recueil des principaux traités [. . .] conclus par les puissances de l'Europe [. . .] depuis 1761 jusqu'à présent* (Göttingen, 1817–35), vi. 495 f.; A. de Clercq, (ed.), *Recueil des traités de la France* (Paris, 1864–1900), i. 232 f. A *convention additionnelle* consisting of the inclusion of a few new articles was signed on 17 May but historians normally refer to these two treaties as one and the same.

were agreed upon which were to have far-reaching consequences for the course of Prussian foreign policy over the next decade. The first (Article V) concerned the fate of the Prussian provinces on the left bank of the Rhine, which were at that time in French hands. Although the French were to continue to occupy the Prussian states, their fate was to be decided at a later date when a general peace had been concluded between France and the Holy Roman Empire. However, a secret agreement (Article II) stipulated that if France should keep the Prussian provinces at the conclusion of a Franco-Imperial peace, Prussia was to receive territorial indemnities beyond the Rhine. The third important article was also contained in the secret agreement (Article III) and defined the neutrality of north Germany. France would not allow its troops into that part of Germany designated by a demarcation line and would consider all those countries behind that line to be neutral.¹⁷ Prussia, on the other hand, was to guarantee that no hostile forces would emerge from behind the line to attack France.

It is a little difficult to say with whom the idea of neutrality originated. The Prussian foreign minister, Count Christian von Haugwitz, considered the neutrality policy to be his *enfant chéri*.¹⁸ It seems, however, that it was Möllendorff who first proposed a line of neutrality, and did so as early as February 1795. It was this suggestion which was eventually adopted when, in the following March, Hardenberg proposed the insertion of an article in the treaty neutralizing the whole of north Germany.¹⁹ Although the French envoy, François Barthélemy, wanted a separate convention on neutrality, Hardenberg insisted on the inclusion of an article in the patent treaty. The fact that he was a native of Hanover and that he wanted to spare his country from the ravages of the French revolutionary armies almost certainly had something to do with this. Also, by fixing a demarcation line the Prussians hoped that the other Princes of the Empire would follow suit and withdraw from the Coalition, thereby isolating Austria and leaving Prussia in a dominant position in the Reich (to a great extent this is actually what happened). At

¹⁷ The demarcation line was roughly to follow the river Ems, the Old Yssel, and the Rhine, and included Frankfurt and all of Franconia where Prussia had the important possessions of Ansbach and Bayreuth. The line was completed by following the northern boundaries of Bavaria, the Upper Palatinate, and Bohemia, to Silesia.

¹⁸ Comte de Haugwitz, 'Fragments des mémoires inédits du comte de Haugwitz, Ministre d'état et du cabinet de S. M. le Roi de Prusse', *Minerva: Ein Journal Historischen und Politischen Inhalts* (Berlin, 1837), p. 17. In general, historians consider neutrality to be Haugwitz's hobby-horse. Cf Koser, 'Preußische Politik', p. 250; Paul Bailleu (ed.), *Preußen und Frankreich von 1795 bis 1807. Diplomatische Correspondenzen* (Leipzig, 1881 and 1887), i. 439, 440, 539; Ford, *Hanover and Prussia*, p. 141.

¹⁹ Biro, *German Policy*, pp. 329, 343–5; Albert Sorel, 'La paix de Bâle', *Revue Historique* 7 (1878), 35; Jean Kaulek, *Papiers de Barthélemy ambassadeur de France en Suisse, 1792–1797* (Paris, 1886–1910) v. 117, 127–8, 149–50. Shortly after arriving in Basle, Hardenberg received the order to include an article in the treaty neutralizing north Germany; he was undoubtedly acting in accord with his royal master's desires. The demarcation line and the question of neutrality were to become the most important points in the negotiations.

the same time, the King would be free to deal with the Russians and Austrians over the Polish question.

The neutrality convention, it could be argued, was a measure directed against Austria not only because it permitted the north German states, already disillusioned by war with France, to withdraw their forces from the imperial army, but also because the region declared neutral was the 'staging area' for Austrian forces. But then nothing obliged Austria to respect the demarcation line.²⁰ To be respected the line necessarily had to be defended, and to do so an Observation Army of about 42,000 men from Prussia, Brunswick, and Hanover was formed.²¹ This corps, at first under the command of Prince von Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen and later under the Duke of Brunswick, marched about, making a show of protecting north Germany from the incursions of foreign troops, but was never really put to the test.

As for the other north German states, at first only the Landgrave of Hesse-Cassel followed Prussia's example by signing a separate peace with France (28 August 1795) and withdrawing its contingent from the Imperial Army. But throughout the year 1796 Haugwitz busied himself getting other states to adhere to Prussia's neutrality system. In the spring of that year he signed a treaty with Hanover and a number of other smaller *Reichsstände* which warmly embraced the opportunity to withdraw from their military obligations towards the Holy Roman Empire, and on 5 August 1796 he signed the treaty of Berlin with France. This was a definite diplomatic victory for Haugwitz and Prussia as it clearly showed the dominance of the court of Berlin over the north German states and may even be considered a crucial moment in the disintegration of the Holy Roman Empire.

The original demarcation line was an extremely ambitious concept and took in almost the whole of north Germany. But the impracticability of defending such a large area soon made itself felt. The line was violated by both the Austrian and the French armies on a number of occasions. The first time occurred exactly five months after the signing of the treaty when general Jean-Baptiste Jourdan crossed the Rhine into neutral territory and took possession of the town of Eichelskamp (5–6 September 1795). The following month he was instructed by the Committee of Public Safety to do whatever he liked inside or outside the demarcation line. The Austrians ignored the demarcation line totally as they advanced on the French that same month crossing the river Main. Even the British violated neutrality when they landed troops at the port of Cuxhaven at the mouth of the Elbe to intercept ships sailing with provisions to France. The demarcation line, it seems, was respected by no one. In principle, the only means by which Prussia could maintain respect for north German neutrality was by a willingness to go to war, either against

²⁰ Cf. Karl A. Roeder, *Baron Thugut and Austria's Response to the French Revolution* (Princeton, 1987), pp. 177–8. Austria did not acknowledge the neutrality zone until the end of 1800.

²¹ Trummel, *Norddeutsche Neutralitätsverband*, p. 49. The Observation Army never reached full strength, however, and its probable number in men was around 33,000.

Austria, or France, or both, but this is not what Frederick William II wanted to do. He found himself in a critical situation in the East and could not risk friction with either power. The last and final Polish partition was coming to a head and an agreement had been concluded between Berlin and St Petersburg over the question. As a result, the Prussian government decided to abandon the southern border of the demarcation line. And so, after renewed negotiations between France and Prussia, a new line was drawn up on 5 August 1796.²²

As usual, the treaty consisted of two parts—one public, the other secret. The new demarcation line was to follow the Dutch frontier to the town of Anholt, then turn west to the Ysel and down the Rhine to the Ruhr, across to the Eder, then follow the Fulda to its source. The secret articles concerned eventual indemnifications and are of significance because Prussia thereby bound itself to France in any future negotiations concerning territorial indemnities. Berlin had literally come to an agreement with Paris to despoil other German states in order to compensate itself for the loss of its provinces on the left bank of the Rhine. This second, and greatly reduced, demarcation line was held with a reasonable degree of success until the treaty of Lunéville in February 1801 when, with the signing of peace between Austria and France bringing the war of the Second Coalition to an end, the Observation Army was formally disbanded.

Neutrality as a policy and as formulated under Frederick William II was no more than a political expedient used to extricate Prussia from its military impasse in the west so that it could freely pursue its territorial ambitions in the east. A perfectly legitimate exercise in *Realpolitik* and which, for this very reason, has been unjustifiably condemned. In 1797, however, there was a change of reign and a marked change in attitude towards court life and finances. But there was no change as far as foreign policy was concerned. The new King, Frederick William III, resolutely refused to adopt any new treaties or alliances or to budge from the neutral policy introduced by his father. The temporary political expedient became a foreign policy objective as Frederick William III remained implacable in his observance of this inherited system for reasons that have as much to do with his personal character as with the structure of the Prussian court and the lack of viable political options facing Prussia at the time.

2. The transformation of a political expedient into a foreign policy objective

Over the next six years, France had to compete with Britain, Russia, and Austria in attempting to entice Prussia away from its neutrality system into

²² Biro, *German Policy*, pp. 615–21. When Grenville learned of the treaty of Berlin eight months later he called it a 'line of conduct repugnant to every principle of publick [sic] honour and good faith' (Hartmut Gembries, 'Das Thema Preußens in der politischen Diskussion Englands zwischen 1792 und 1807' (PhD dissertation, Freiburg, 1988), p. 33).

an offensive alliance. There were many offers of alliance but the various diplomatic manoeuvres came to a head on at least two occasions: in 1799 during negotiations in Berlin preceding the formation of the Second Coalition against France; and again in 1805 when Prussia signed the treaty of Potsdam with Russia and looked like joining the Third Coalition. The first of these occasions was probably the most significant and the closest Prussia ever came to openly siding with the allied powers against France.

At the beginning of 1799, four-power talks were opened in Berlin between Haugwitz, the Russian ambassador Count Nikita Panin, the British diplomat Thomas Grenville, sent especially to Berlin for the purpose of wooing Prussia, and the Austrian *chargé d'affaires*, Josef von Hudelist. The allies had to compete with the French envoy, the Abbé Sieyès, who was also trying to tempt Prussia into an alliance with France.²³ Haugwitz actually considered adhering to the coalition against France, and at one stage managed to convince the King to send troops into Holland in order to oust France from that country.²⁴ Much to Haugwitz's regret, Frederick William III changed his mind a few days later and reiterated his firm intention not to take up arms unless Prussian territory was violated. It was this kind of see-saw hesitation between neutrality and war that exasperated foreign diplomats and generated much bad blood towards the court of Berlin. Indeed, the very fact that Frederick William III insisted on remaining neutral created palpable feelings of ill-will towards Prussia and its policies, although its virulence fluctuated according to circumstances.²⁵

A little more than a year after coming to the throne, Frederick William III had to make the difficult choice of either going to war against France (since a French alliance was never a serious option at this stage) or remaining neutral in the coming conflict. He wrote to the cabinet minister, Count Philipp

²³ For Panin's mission to Berlin see Clara Jean Tucker's dissertation, 'The Foreign Policy of Tsar Paul I' (Syracuse University, 1966). Thomas Grenville's mission is outlined in D. C. Elliot, 'The Grenville Mission to Berlin, 1799', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 18 (1954–5), 129–46; cf. J. D. Spinney, 'Some Vicissitudes of a V.I.P.', *Blackwood's Magazine* 265 (1949), 301–12, on the difficult voyage to Berlin; Gembries, *Das Thema Preußens*, pp. 36–7; Piers Mackesy, *Statesmen at War. The Strategy of Overthrow, 1798–1799* (New York, 1974), pp. 51–4, 61–6. John M. Sherwig, *Guineas and Gunpowder. British Foreign Aid in the Wars with France, 1793–1815* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), pp. 115–16, writes that Pitt's greatest desire at the beginning of 1799 was to form an alliance with Russia and Prussia to free Holland from French rule; it led him to abandon the idea of financially aiding Austria. Sieyès's mission to Berlin has been studied by Marcelle Adler-Bresse, 'Sieyès et le monde allemand' (PhD dissertation, Université de Lille III, 1977). The French were probably suffering from an interpretation inherited from the Ancien Régime in which the Austrians were the traditional enemy, and Prussia the traditional ally, of France. But, as Sieyès was to discover, Berlin no longer considered this to be the case.

²⁴ *Denkschrift* from Haugwitz, 15 Jan. 1799 (Bailleu, *Preußen und Frankreich*, i. 271–2), in which he suggests an alliance with Russia and Britain. Mackesy's reproach in *Statesmen at War*, p. 31, that Haugwitz 'lacked the nerve to choose' and 'took refuge in neutrality', does not coincide with available documentary material which shows him to be in favour of Prussia's adhesion to the coalition.

²⁵ For a rather different conclusion, see Thomas Stamm-Kuhlmann, *König in Preußens großer Zeit. Friedrich Wilhelm III. der Melancholiker auf dem Thron* (Berlin, 1992), p. 169.

Alvensleben, to say there was at least one advantage in neutrality in that it held open the option of going to war at a later date.²⁶ If he chose war now there would be no turning back. Frederick William III saw this delay as a gain, and indeed it would have been if it had been put to better use by reforming the army, but in the long run it only delayed the inevitable clash between France and Prussia over the domination of north Germany. It is possible that his wife, Queen Louise, influenced him in his decision to remain neutral or at least gave him some badly needed confidence to help him stick to his decision. In a *mémoire* dated 13 July 1799, Louise wrote that Prussia would become stronger by waiting and that this time could be used to fill up the treasury. If Prussia were to enter upon a war against France now, then it risked becoming the satellite of Russia.²⁷ Beyme argued the same thing a number of years later.²⁸ Furthermore, there are indications that the decision not to go to war found a popular echo within the Prussian populace but this probably counted for very little in the decision-making process.²⁹

One can argue that Prussia's decision not to adhere to the Second Coalition was perfectly justified. There was no pressing need to wage war against a France that did not, at this stage at least, present a danger to Prussian interests in Europe. One of the major reasons why Prussia refused to get involved in any alliance was that the issues involved were simply outside of its immediate sphere of influence, namely north Germany. In return for an alliance it was offered prizes that were politically unrealistic and which did not either allay or satisfy Prussia's concerns in the north. Great Britain offered Prussia Holland if it should side with the allies in the Second Coalition, while at one stage Napoleon even offered Frederick William III the imperial title if he should side with France. The nature of the Second Coalition was similar to that of the First in that all the powers involved were out to further their own political interests. Plunder was often their primary motive and was hardly likely to inspire a sovereign as principled as Frederick William III who was governed by far more moderate views of the world.

The stubbornness with which Frederick William III refused to undertake any new treaty obligations, or agreed at the very most only to renew those engagements taken during his father's reign, is more easily understood when we consider the King's character. Neutrality seemed to suit the King's natural disposition for peace and his concept of the role of a king towards his people.

Examples of the King's peaceful character and intentions are numerous. In October 1798, almost a year after coming to the throne, he wrote to his uncle,

²⁶ Bailleu, *Preußen und Frankreich*, i. 302.

²⁷ Stamm-Kuhlmann, *Friedrich Wilhelm III.* p. 170.

²⁸ Karl Disch, 'Der Kabinettsrath Beyme und die auswärtige Politik Preußens in den Jahren 1805–1806'. *Forschungen zur brandenburgischen und preußischen Geschichte (FBPG)* 41 (1928), 345.

²⁹ Stamm-Kuhlmann, *Friedrich Wilhelm III.* p. 167.

Prince Henry: 'Everybody knows that I abhor war and that I know of nothing greater on earth than the preservation of peace and tranquillity as the only system suited to the happiness of human kind . . .'³⁰ Hardenberg pointed out that 'all idea of glory or aggrandisement which would flatter or decide another Prince was far from the King's mind', and that this was absolutely due to his character.³¹ The Russian ambassador to Berlin between 1800 and 1802, Baron Aleksei Ivanovich Krüdener, remarked that the King's foreign policy system seemed to be 'to prefer peace to any other interest, resolved not to draw the sword if it is not for the defence of his own state or at the very most for the neutrality line'.³² And indeed the King often spoke of maintaining peace in the north of Germany as being the main object of his policy,³³ and it is incontestable that he had an ingrained dislike of what he called the '*Raub- und Plündersystem*' (the system of robbery and plunder) of the Great Powers.³⁴

The principles by which Frederick William III was guided were most certainly commendable, although admittedly not politically ambitious, and may be summed up in the phrase 'peace, neutrality, and the defence of north Germany'.³⁵ Shortly before ascending the throne he wrote: 'The greatest happiness of a country dependably consists in a lasting peace; the best policy is therefore that which continuously has this principle in view, in so far as our neighbours want to leave us in peace. One never gets mixed up in foreign quarrels which do not concern one, gladly differentiates between true and false interests and does not let oneself be blinded by a supposed gain in glory. . . . But in order not to get mixed up in foreign quarrels against one's will, be on your guard against alliances that could sooner or later get us involved.'³⁶

This was written by the Crown Prince at the age of 26, and should accordingly be viewed with circumspection. But everything suggests that foreign policy, during the first decade of his reign at least, was subordinated to this ideal.³⁷

³⁰ Bailleu, *Preußen und Frankreich*, i, p. xlvii, n. 2.

³¹ Duroc to Talleyrand, 19 Sept. 1805, A[rchives des] A[ffaires] E[trangères, Correspondance politique], Prusse 236.

³² Krüdener to Panin, 1 Dec. 1799, Alexander G. Brückner (or Brickner), *Materialy dlia zhizneopisaniia grafa Nikity Petrovicha Panina, 1770–1837* (St Petersburg, 1888–92), v. p. 209.

³³ Bailleu, *Preußen und Frankreich*, ii. 160, 303. Cf. Frederick William III to Alexander I, 7 July 1803 (Paul Bailleu, *Briefwechsel König Friedrich Wilhelm III. und der Königin Luise mit Kaiser Alexander I* (Leipzig, 1900), p. 32), in which he writes that even the most fortunate of wars would mean the ruin of his provinces.

³⁴ Duke of Cambridge to the Regency, 2 Mar. 1801 [Niedersächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv], Hanover, Cal. Br. 24, 1004.

³⁵ Numerous examples of the King's readiness to maintain his neutrality system and defend north Germany during this period may be found in the diplomatic correspondence. Cf. Dropmore Papers, iv, De Luc to Grenville, 6 and 13 Feb., 21 Mar. 1798, pp. 72, 82, 137, and *mémoire* from Haugwitz, Feb. 1800, p. 90; Hajo Holborn, *A History of Modern Germany, 1648–1840* (New York, 1964), p. 380.

³⁶ Richard Dietrich, *Die politischen Testamente der Hohenzollern* (Cologne, 1986), 'Gedanken über die Regierungskunst', p. 734.

³⁷ Cf. Otto Hintze, *Die Hohenzollern und ihr Werk* (Berlin, 1915), p. 425.

Unlike his father and great-uncle, it would seem that Frederick William III was more interested in the welfare of his people than in the glory of the nation and as such tenaciously maintained what he would later call '*mein passives System*'.³⁸

One may well ask, however, whether the King's political stance can be attributed to a love of peace or simply to a reluctance to engage in war. Any number of accounts can be found that accusingly point at the King's lack of firm resolve when deciding for one side or the other.³⁹ The King feared, quite rightly, being dragged into a conflict by committing himself to one or the other belligerent party through an alliance and there was certainly a personal reluctance on his part to commit himself to war.⁴⁰ This helps explain his dislike of entering into any kind of new engagement and the stubbornness with which he maintained those already contracted before coming to the throne.⁴¹

On the whole, foreign diplomats residing in Berlin, obviously more interested in seeing Prussia adopt a warlike stance, had a tendency to regard Frederick William's motives in an unfavourable light. For example, the former Russian ambassador to Berlin, Count Nikita Panin, thought the King opted for a peaceful solution through indolence.⁴² The British diplomat, Thomas Grenville, also spoke of the 'natural indolence of the King's character,' as did Sir Francis Jackson a number of years later.⁴³ But others closer to his person describe how conscientious he was in fulfilling his duties.⁴⁴ Timidity and fear of committing an error were also considered to be distinctive traits of the royal character (although one diplomat attributed them to a commendable motive—the King's conviction of the importance and difficulty of the task

³⁸ Bailleu, *Preußen und Frankreich*, ii. 304.

³⁹ A few examples will help illustrate the point: Lady Jackson (ed.), *The Diaries of Sir George Jackson, from the Peace of Amiens to the Battle of Trafalgar* (London, 1872), i. 229, ii. 64–5, thought that the inertia of the King paralysed the whole state; Duroc to Napoleon, 8 Sept. 1805 (Bailleu, *Preußen und Frankreich*, ii. 377); Alopaues described the King as 'undecided, inflexible, without energy [and] weak' (Koser, 'Preußische Politik', p. 253).

⁴⁰ Krüdener to Panin, 8 July 1800 (Brückner, *Materialy*, v. 358); Thomas Grenville to Grenville, 8 July 1799 (Dropmore Papers, v. 126).

⁴¹ The Danish *chargé d'affaires* to the court of Berlin between 1792 and 1796, Major Ludwig von Knoblauch, was also told by the duke of Brunswick that the King disliked alliances and was most reluctant to enter upon new ones (Knoblauch to Bernstorff, 5 June 1800, in cipher, [Rigsarkivet], Copenhagen, [Gesandtskabsarkiver, Preussen II], Depecher). At least one court diplomat attributed this to a reluctance to take active measures (Thomas Grenville to Grenville, 18 July 1799, Dropmore Papers, v. 153). It seemed an axiom at the court of Berlin that no new alliances were to be formed before the conclusion of a general continental peace (Knoblauch to Bernstorff, 15 Nov. 1800, in cipher, Copenhagen, Depecher).

⁴² Fedor Fedorovich Martens (ed.), *Recueil des traités et conventions conclus par la Russie avec les puissances étrangères* (St Petersburg, 1874–1919), vi. 262. Panin never tired of criticizing the Prussian government and its royal master. Cf. Brückner, *Materialy*, iv. 25, 31, 217.

⁴³ Thomas Grenville to Grenville, 18 July 1799 (Dropmore Papers, v. 153); Jackson, *Diaries*, i. 138, in which he uses the word 'slothful' to describe the King.

⁴⁴ Cf. Eugene Anderson, *Nationalism and the Cultural Crisis in Prussia, 1806–1815* (New York, 1939), p. 281.

which duty imposed upon him),⁴⁵ and are used to explain why Prussia remained neutral for so long.⁴⁶

Quite naturally, the neutrality system also came in for criticism. Some foreign ambassadors, such as Francis Jackson, did not consider neutrality to be a system at all but thought rather that the policy was founded upon the 'absence of all system, the determination not to be guided but to be governed entirely by events as they arise and to submit with resignation to whatever, at the moment of unavoidable choice, may appear to offer the least immediate danger'.⁴⁷ He further criticized it as a system of isolation that had no logic to it.⁴⁸ Even Duroc's aide-de-camp, who stopped off in Berlin in May 1801 on his way to St Petersburg and whose diplomatic experience was minimal, described the Prussian policy as being '*insidieuse et fausse*'.⁴⁹

However much the King controlled foreign policy (this varied according to the period, at times the King having more direct control than others) and however much the King's rule was a personal one, not all the responsibility for neutrality can be laid at his feet. Except on one occasion, none of the leading political figures in his entourage (except for Haugwitz) ever pressed for war against France before 1805.⁵⁰ The exception that gave rise to a great deal of bellicose talk is known as the Rumbold affair.

During the night of 24/25 October 1804 the British *chargé d'affaires*, Sir George Rumbold, was kidnapped by a group of French infantry from his residence in Hamburg. The town fell within the Lower Saxon *Reichskreis* (Circle of the Empire) and not only was Frederick William III the Director of the Circle in his capacity as duke of Magdeburg but Rumbold was officially accredited to his court in Berlin. The incursion of French troops into north Germany and the violation of Hamburg was also seen as a slap in the face to Prussian neutrality. The implications then were quite serious and the King was expected to act accordingly. On this occasion, a conference was held to discuss the matter in Potsdam on 30 October. Three men, Hardenberg, Johann Wilhelm von Lombard, the King's private secretary, and General von der Schulenburg all spoke out in favour of energetic measures against France, demanding that Napoleon release Rumbold immediately. While it is clear that none of them wanted to rush headlong into war with France, they were

⁴⁵ Rosenkrantz to Bernstorff, 10 Mar. 1800, Copenhagen, Depecher.

⁴⁶ Cf. A. W. Ward and G. P. Gooch (eds), *The Cambridge History of British Foreign Policy, 1783–1919* (Cambridge, 1922–3), i. 283; J. R. Seeley, *Life and Times of Stein, or Germany and Prussia in the Napoleonic Age* (Cambridge, 1878), i. 195; Ford, *Hanover and Prussia*, p. 190; Hintze, *Die Hohenzollern*, p. 65.

⁴⁷ Jackson to Mulgrave, 10 July 1805, P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice], F[oreign] O[ffice] 64 Prussia, 68.

⁴⁸ Jackson to Mulgrave, 27 July 1805, PRO FO 64 Prussia, 68.

⁴⁹ Duroc to Bonaparte, 26 May 1801, in Brückner, *Materialy*, vi. 174–7.

⁵⁰ The exception to the rule occurred at the time of the Rumbold crisis in Oct. 1804 during which a number of leading political personalities at the court of Berlin opted for war against France if the matter was not settled to Prussia's satisfaction. In the end, Napoleon's attitude was quite conciliatory.

manoeuvring Prussia into a position from whence it could not retreat if Napoleon remained impenitent. Fortunately for the King, the crisis was averted when Napoleon, behaving quite reasonably for once, wrote to him to say that Rumbold would be released.⁵¹

The implications of this affair on Prussian high politics have been pointed out by Brendan Simms in his insightful thesis on Anglo-Prussian relations. Ever since the invasion of Hanover by the French in 1803, Prussian policy had two clearly defined objectives: the elimination of the French presence from the electorate, and the prevention of a Franco-Russian rupture. At the same time, however, Prussia was seeking to reaffirm its position in the north after the terrible blow that had been dealt its prestige with the French invasion of Hanover in 1803. One of the outcomes of the French invasion, and the consequent rejection of a French alliance offer in April 1804, was a Prusso-Russian *rapprochement* which culminated in the signing of a convention on 25 May 1804, a military agreement that jointly guaranteed the neutrality of the north. The Rumbold affair was almost a test case for the convention and it was obvious that Prussia had to take a firm stand against France if it wanted to remain on good terms with Russia; and Russian friendship, it should be emphasized, was of far more strategic importance to Berlin than that of France. Nevertheless, an open rupture with France over this question was not on the top of the agenda and was to be avoided if at all possible. Although the *Kabinettsräte* pressed for firm action they were also doing their best to facilitate a Franco-Russian *rapprochement* which was, without a doubt, one of the cornerstones of Prussian foreign policy for the whole period under consideration. The Rumbold affair was no more than a hiccup in this all-important policy.

It is quite easy to say retrospectively that France presented a danger to Prussian interests in north Germany but this was not at all obvious to contemporaries before 1803. On the few occasions when voices were raised in favour of an offensive alliance against France, they were in the minority and were relatively easily outmanoeuvred by their political opponents at court. This is what occurred in 1799 when Haugwitz's efforts to persuade the King to join the Second Coalition came to nought because Lombard was able to monopolize the King's ear.⁵² At other times, as with the events surrounding the French invasion of Hanover in 1803, those at court in favour of intervention against France were in a distinct minority. Haugwitz was probably the only member of the King's entourage who clearly saw the danger of a French invasion and who found the isolation in which Prussia had cornered itself

⁵¹ Cf. Wohlwill. An interesting perspective on this event is to be found in Brendan Simms, 'Anglo-Prussian relations, 1804–1806: the Napoleonic threat' (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1992), ch 2.2.4.

⁵² Bailleu, *Preußen und Frankreich*, ii. 621. Although his biographer's interpretation of events is a little more subtle; Hüffer, *Die Kabinettsregierung in Preußen und Johann William Lombard* (Leipzig, 1891), pp. 99–100.

worrying.⁵³ Opposition then to the King's neutrality policy was never substantial enough to sway him from that course. Unlike his father, who found himself obliged to come to terms with France in 1795 in spite of his unwillingness to do so, Frederick William III never really had to contend with a dissatisfied opinion among the court's political élite. On the contrary, there was a remarkable lack of court intrigue with a view to promoting one particular political option over that of another, at least until 1805–6, and a marked tendency among the favourites to spare the King anything that might upset his tranquillity.⁵⁴ Moreover, Frederick William's entourage was made up of men who, rather than advise the King as to what was the best policy to follow, reflected the King's own thoughts and fears and reinforced the idea that he was following the right path.⁵⁵

Apart from Hardenberg, who did not begin to play an influential role at the court of Berlin before 1804, there was really only one exception to the rule. The leading figure in Prussian foreign policy for most of the period under study was Christian von Haugwitz, who dominated foreign policy from 1792 until his dismissal in 1806. As he was prevented from pursuing a more aggressive policy on the side of the allies (he had vigorously pursued a policy of war against France in 1799 and 1803) he followed the path of reconciliation between France, Russia, and Prussia essentially in order to have a free hand to carry on with the extension of Prussian hegemony in north Germany. In the political crises which occurred before 1803, Haugwitz was successfully able to defend Prussian interests in north Germany against French and, to a lesser extent, Russian threats, not out of any particular liking for the north German states, but because he fully appreciated Prussia's geographical and territorial interests.⁵⁶ Unfortunately for Haugwitz, the complex diplomatic game this entailed drew him out of his depth, and although both the French and Russian governments were willing to take advantage of Prussian offers of mediation when it suited them, Prussia was always brushed aside once it had served the interests of the Great Powers. This policy of holding both France and Russia at a distance (although there was a preference for Russia) was born of the realization that Prussia was not powerful enough to impose itself on the European scene.⁵⁷ As was so aptly put by Bailleu, from about 1799 on Prussian politics was dependent on the prevailing state of Franco-Russian relations.⁵⁸

The King's personal inclinations can only partly explain Frederick William III's foreign policy choices. Other reasons help shed light on Prussia's political

⁵³ *Denkschrift* from Haugwitz, 28 June 1803 (Bailleu, *Preußen und Frankreich*, ii. 174); De Luc to Grenville, 21 December 1797 (Dropmore Papers, iv. 32).

⁵⁴ Simms, 'Anglo-Prussian relations, 1804–1806'. His thesis, and his findings in the article in this issue, disprove the generally accepted notion of a 'pro-French, anti-French' division within the court.

⁵⁵ Koser, 'Preußische Politik', p. 239.

⁵⁶ Bailleu, *Preußen und Frankreich*, i. 68; ii. p. xxxi.

⁵⁷ Stamm-Kuhlmann, *Friedrich Wilhelm III.*, p. 181.

⁵⁸ Bailleu, *Preußen und Frankreich*, ii. p. xii.

stance. One should not forget that Frederick William III inherited a disastrous financial and political situation from his father. On coming to the throne in 1797, the state treasury was in deficit to the sum of 55 million thaler and the King was making every effort to restore finances and put the treasury back in order. By 1806, he not only had reduced the debt by 22 million but had set a further 17 million aside in reserves.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the state's administrative resources were stretched to the limit with the incorporation of the Polish provinces into the Prussian state after the second and third partitions.⁶⁰ One could very well speak about 'imperial overstretch' and the fact that the bureaucratic and economic infrastructures had not evolved to keep up with the vast territorial expansion brought about by military conquests. Also, the incorporation of the Polish provinces into the Prussian state sandwiched Prussia between two potentially hostile powers, France and Russia, as a result of which the threat of foreign intervention in Prussian affairs continually loomed large. At the court of Berlin, French and Russian reactions to possible Prussian foreign policy choices were always taken into consideration and, to a large degree, dominated the Prussian political decision-making process.

Prussia's geographical position, occupying as it did a central place in northern Europe, and caught as it was between two powerful and aggressive states (France on its western border and Russia on its eastern border), was also a determining factor in the formulation of foreign policy. Before 1802, Prussia's conciliatory foreign policy was in part governed by the fact that France and Russia had a decisive say in how the map of Germany was going to be shaped by the secularization of Church property, and it was important for Prussia to remain on good terms with both powers if it wanted to profit from the reorganization of territory. Also there was the constant danger of Prussia either becoming the battlefield of the Great Powers or being used as a kind of battering ram by one or other of the belligerents. There are numerous quotes from Prussia's political élite showing their preoccupation with just such a predicament.⁶¹ Under these circumstances, neutrality seemed to offer a solution to the dilemma posed by Prussia's geographical position. Neutrality was tempting in so far as one did not have to make a choice between the warring parties,⁶² and served the King's desire not to be used by other powers to further interests that had nothing to do with Prussia.⁶³

⁵⁹ H. W. Koch, *A History of Prussia* (London, 1978), p. 156.

⁶⁰ Cf. William W. Hagen, 'The Partitions of Poland and the Crisis of the Old Regime in Prussia, 1772–1806', *Central European History* 9 (1976), 115–28.

⁶¹ Bailleu, *Briefwechsel*, p. 52; id., *Preußen und Frankreich*, ii. 296, Lombard to Hardenberg, 2 Oct. 1804; Zastrow to Frederick William III, 27 Apr. 1799, memoranda from Le Coq, 3 Oct. 1801, GStA, Rep 92 Frederick William III, B VI 4, in which Russia is seen as a very real threat at the time; instructions to count Goltz, 5 Apr. 1804, Rep. 92 Hardenberg L 12; 'Mémoire sur les objets d'indemnisation', 26 Jan. 1801, Rep. 92 Schöll; 'Propositions of Prussia to the Elector of Hanover . . .', 1806, PRO FO 64 Prussia, 71: 'Un coup d'œil sur la carte fait voir l'urgence de procurer à la monarchie prussienne des arrondissements et des frontières plus sûres surtout du côté de la France.'

⁶² Stamm-Kuhlmann, *Friedrich Wilhelm III.* p. 163.

⁶³ Frederick William to Alexander I, Mar. 1805, GStA, Rep. 11 Russland 175 a 1, 155C.

In short, the neutrality to which his father submitted as an expedient in 1795 by signing peace with France suited Frederick William III's character very well. That he elevated it into a principle was the result of his own personal inclinations and was not in the least due to the advice of his ministers.⁶⁴ What is surprising is not that Prussia chose to remain neutral for so long, but that it succeeded in doing so in the face of so much opposition from the Great Powers.

Neutrality did not mean, however, the absence of any territorial ambitions. The court of Berlin was still alert to any opportunities that might serve to increase its territory without incurring the wrath of the other powers. Although no clear-cut policy was ever formulated concerning Prussia's foreign-policy objectives, a few indications can be gleaned from diplomats' reports and from Haugwitz's memoranda.

Prussia did not have any long-term foreign-policy objectives, but then few countries, if any, at this time did. Haugwitz, and even Hardenberg who was more of a supporter of neutrality than he has been portrayed by historians,⁶⁵ simply tried to take advantage of situations as they presented themselves, sometimes pandering to French interests, sometimes to allied interests. In that manner Prussia was able, with varying degrees of success, to save most of the north of Germany (with the exception of the electorate of Hanover invaded by the French in 1803, and even then the occupation was exceedingly mild compared to what other European countries were suffering at the hands of foreign troops) from the horrors of war for over a decade. It was also hoped that, regardless of the fact that they were pursuing a neutral policy, advantageous territorial gains could be had. Hardenberg was also of the opinion that Prussia needed to aggrandize, realizing that it could not maintain its position *vis-à-vis* the other Great Powers if it did not.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, Prussia's foreign-policy ambitions were limited and during the neutrality period often did not go beyond the demarcation line. Indeed, at one stage Haugwitz admitted to the British ambassador, Lord Carysfort, that 'Prussia would not concern herself, directly or indirectly, with any object beyond the line of demarcation'.⁶⁷ One of the principal preoccupations within that line was the striving after secular indemnities for the loss of its provinces on the left bank of the Rhine. The negotiations concerning German indem-

⁶⁴ It was considered to be a personal system by many of the leading figures at the court of Berlin. Cf. Duroc to Napoleon, 8 Sept. 1805 (Bailleu, *Preußen und Frankreich*, ii. 377), who refers to the 'système personnel du roi'; Francis Jackson in a letter to Mulgrave (PRO FO 64, 67, 20 Apr. 1805) reports a conversation with Hardenberg in which he repeatedly spoke of the neutrality system as being exclusively that of his royal master.

⁶⁵ On one occasion Hardenberg referred to Prince Henry as a 'vieux fou' because he talked of scrapping the demarcation line (GStA, Rep. 92 Hardenberg L 24, Tagebücher IV. Theil, 17 Aug. 1798).

⁶⁶ Bailleu, *Preußen und Frankreich*, ii. 329. He was thinking of course of Hanover.

⁶⁷ Carysfort to Grenville, 27 Sept. 1800, PRO, FO, 64 Prussia, 58.

nities and the secularization of Church territory ended in a secret convention being signed between France and Prussia on 23 May 1802.⁶⁸ It has been argued, most notably by Reinhold Koser,⁶⁹ that the gains in territory were offset by the loss in political prestige and that Prussia's hegemony over north Germany slid out of Frederick William III's hands. During the intrigues and negotiations leading up to the *Reichsdeputationshauptschluß* the small and middle German states no longer looked towards Berlin, but Paris for political patronage. As a result, the demarcation line and Prussia's role as protector of north Germany became redundant.

3. 'Qui veut le but doit vouloir les moyens':⁷⁰ the decline of the neutrality principle

Frederick William II had withdrawn from the First Coalition in 1795 partly in the vague hope of bringing peace to the Holy Roman Empire and partly in order to pursue a policy of expansion in the East. In doing so, he drew a number of smaller German states out of the Coalition with him, thus enhancing and reinforcing Prussia's influence in the north. His son and successor, Frederick William III, continued to uphold his father's neutrality system but for very different reasons and in a modified form. The demarcation line which had been drawn up to protect the north of Germany nominally ceased to exist with the signing of the treaty of Lunéville (9 February 1801) concluding a temporary peace between Austria and France. However, the threat of a French incursion into the north, and especially into Hanover, was ever imminent so long as France remained at war with Britain. Bonaparte considered the electorate of Hanover to be a British continental possession and, therefore, fair game in his efforts to subdue that maritime power. And so for a little while longer Prussia maintained its position as the nominal protector of the north German states from foreign, and especially French, incursions.

Following the treaty of Lunéville there are three significant dates that mark the slow erosion of Prussian neutrality. The first came with the signing of

⁶⁸ The lot falling to Prussia was considerable. Prussia had only lost about 48 square miles, a population of about 127,000, and an income of about one and a half million florins to the French. On the other hand it gained the Bishoprics of Hildesheim and Paderborn, the better part of the diocese of Münster with the town itself, Erfurt, properties in Thüringen, Eichsfeld, the Abbeys of Herford, Quedlinburg, Elten, Essen, Verden, und Kappenberg, and the towns of Mühlhausen, Nordhausen, und Goslar. Altogether over 230 square miles, more than half a million inhabitants, and almost four million florins in income. It was Haugwitz, and not the King, who was the driving force behind Prussia's indemnity policy. To all intents and purposes, Frederick William III would have let the matter of indemnities drop and only weakly insisted on a policy so as not to seem to play too humiliating a role (Krüdener to Panin, 12 May 1801 (Brückner, *Materialy*, vi. p. 238); Elgin to Grenville, 12 Sept. 1798 (Dropmore Papers, iv. 307)). Haugwitz, on the other hand, used the loss of the left bank as a lever by which Prussia could further its territorial aggrandizement in Germany. He had no objections against detaching the left bank of the Rhine as an excuse for gaining even more territory for Prussia elsewhere in Germany.

⁶⁹ Koser, 'Preußische Politik', pp. 248–9.

⁷⁰ The remark is taken from Frederick William III to Alexander I, Mar. 1805, GStA, Rep. 175.a.1 Russland, 155 B. The letter, however, seems never to have been sent.

peace between Britain and France at Amiens (25 March 1802). One cannot overemphasize just how important this treaty was for the course of Prussian foreign policy. As France and Britain were no longer at war, France no longer posed a threat to the electorate of Hanover, and thus Prussia had no valid reason in maintaining a neutral north. The second occurred some eighteen months later in 1803 when Prussia failed to prevent a French occupation of Hanover after war had resumed between Britain and France. The French invasion struck an enormous blow to Prussian prestige and reduced the neutrality system to the potentially dangerous concept of one limited to the scattered Prussian states. Finally, neutrality came to an inconspicuous end when the court of Berlin decided to sign a secret agreement with Russia in 1805 adhering to the Third Coalition. Although nothing ever came of it and although Prussia was forced to sign an alliance with Napoleon a short time later, it nevertheless marks the final stages of neutrality. The first of these points is self-evident and need not be treated in detail here; the discussion will limit itself to the second and third points.

Bonaparte's designs on north Germany and the rupture of relations with Britain in May 1803 resulted in the French occupation of Hanover the following month and the installation of a blockade against British shipping in the rivers Elbe, Weser, and Ems. This was quite naturally a great blow to Prussian prestige since it made the pronouncements about neutrality appear empty rhetoric. Moreover, the court of Berlin had been forewarned of the invasion of Hanover by one of Bonaparte's closest aides, the Grand Marshal Michel Duroc, who was sent to Berlin in March 1803 to speak of the eventuality of a French occupation if negotiations with Britain floundered. The political and military consequences of a hostile incursion into the heart of the north were more than obvious; a foreign power occupying Hanover and hostile to Prussia would virtually cut the Prussian Rhineland provinces from Brandenburg and would be within easy striking distance of Berlin. Frederick William III was once again faced with the decision of pre-empting a French strike by occupying the electorate with his own troops (as he had done in 1801 during the Second Armed Neutrality)⁷¹ even if this meant the inevitable accusation of using events as a pretext to further Prussian territorial ambitions. The choice not to act vigorously, which occurred partly as a result of rebuffs from both the British and Russian governments when Prussian propositions for a temporary occupation of the electorate were put to them, and partly as a result of the King's desire to avoid war at all costs, shattered Prussian claims to hegemony over north Germany and forced the badly maimed neutrality policy to retreat into its country of origin. Prussia's reputation as the protector of the north was shown to be impractical without the support of at least one other Great Power. The question of whether or not to act to forestall a French invasion

⁷¹ Cf. Philip G. Dwyer, 'Prussia and the Armed Neutrality: The Invasion of Hanover in 1801', *International History Review* 15 (1993), 661–87.

was discussed at a conference that took place in the village of Körbelitz, not far from Magdeburg, on 28 May 1803.⁷²

At this conference it seems that Haugwitz was alone amongst the King's ministers in favour of a pre-emptive strike. The King, however, accused Haugwitz of being too pessimistic ('*de voir trop noir*'),⁷³ and argued that after having consulted Generals Möllendorff, Brunswick, and Geusau, it would not be 'prudent' to provoke a country as dangerous as France.⁷⁴ However, the decision not to act to protect Prussia's military integrity cannot simply be explained by the King's peaceful disposition. A number of political considerations came into play that have not to date been adequately taken into account by historians. For one thing Russia was, at least initially, averse to a Prussian occupation of the electorate and made its views known to Berlin through its ambassador, Magnus Alopaeus. Second, Great Britain did not at all view the prospects of another Prussian occupation kindly and, as has been pointed out in a recent article, adopted an active pro-Hanoverian stance that was not characteristic of traditional British foreign policy.⁷⁵

The French, however, did not wait around to see which way Prussia would sway and at the beginning of June 1803 French troops under the command of General Edouard Mortier marched into Hanover. On 5 July the commander-in-chief of the electoral forces, General Johann-Ludwig Wallmoden-Gimborn, capitulated. Prussian diplomatic efforts after that date limited themselves to obtaining a reduction in the French occupation force to a maximum of 16,000 men.

It is obvious that one of the underlying motives governing Frederick William III's behaviour throughout the ordeal was the desire to avoid a repeat of the 1801 invasion of Hanover when Prussia came under so much pressure from Britain and Russia to withdraw its troops, but there was also an unwillingness to occupy the electorate without the express approval of either of these two countries. Even if Prussia's military had been eager to clash swords with France, which patently they were not, it would hardly have been advisable to do so without the support of at least one other power. Inevitably, the King's inaction resulted in Prussia finding itself in a precarious military position, but even more importantly it led to a diminution of its influence in north Germany.

In 1805 a coalition was again forming to attack France and this time Frederick William III was going to find it nigh on impossible to remain outside of the

⁷² The original Prussian documents concerning the conference at Körbelitz are no longer to be found. Cf. F. Martens, *Recueil des traités*, vi. 309–24; Bailleu, *Preußen und Frankreich*, ii. xxxiii, who considered it to have decided the fate of Prussia for a long time to come; Stamm-Kuhlmann, *Friedrich Wilhelm III.* pp. 182–3. The conference has been called the turning point in Prussian history for the next decade (Ford, *Prussia and Hanover*, p. 306).

⁷³ Haugwitz to the King, 4 June 1804 (Bailleu, *Preußen und Frankreich*, ii. 153).

⁷⁴ F. Martens, *Recueil des traités*, vi. 319.

⁷⁵ Brendan Simms, '“An Odd Question Enough”'. Charles James Fox, the Crown and British Policy during the Hanoverian Crisis of 1806', *English Historical Review* (forthcoming Nov. 1994.)

conflict. It had become an accepted axiom among the allied powers that, if Prussia did not become a willing member, then it should be forced into joining the coalition. The idea had originated at the court of St Petersburg as early as April 1804.⁷⁶ Frederick William III, however, was determined to uphold his neutral system and announced on a number of occasions his determination to defend it against any encroachments.⁷⁷ Indeed towards the end of August 1805 when it looked as though Russian troops were going to force a passage through Prussian territory the King ordered the mobilization of some 80,000 men.⁷⁸ At the same time negotiations were started with the duke of Mecklenburg and the Hanse towns for a Prussian occupation that would forestall either a British or a Russian landing,⁷⁹ and attempts were made to get France to evacuate Hanover.

That Frederick William III was sincere in his determination to resist any encroachments upon his territory is demonstrated by his behaviour when news of the French violation of the Prussian territory of Ansbach arrived in Berlin on 5 October.⁸⁰ Angered at this blatant abuse of his sovereignty, his first reaction was to dismiss the French envoys then present in Berlin, Duroc and Laforest, an act tantamount to a declaration of war. He was dissuaded from doing so by Hardenberg and also, one is to assume, from an inherent reluctance to commit himself to one side or the other. Nevertheless, the King wrote to Alexander I to proclaim that his neutrality system was now at an end and that he would no longer oppose the passage of Russian troops through his territory.⁸¹

Prussian foreign policy began to adopt a cautiously aggressive tone. At a conference held on 17 October Brunswick was ordered to drive out the French from Hanover,⁸² and shortly after, on 3 November, an alliance was signed in Potsdam between Prussia and Russia, committing Prussia to the Third Coalition. All of this was concluded with remarkable swiftness considering the King's dislike of treaty commitments (although it is interesting to note that he signed it with a heavy heart).⁸³ With the signing of the treaty, over a decade of Prussian neutrality came to an end and this should normally have rendered Prussia's intervention on the side of the coalition inevitable. But the

⁷⁶ Harold C. Deutsch, *The Genesis of Napoleonic Imperialism* (Cambridge, Mass, 1938), pp. 362–4.

⁷⁷ Bailleu, *Preußen und Frankreich*, ii. 159, 387; Ranke, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, ii. 221.

⁷⁸ Bailleu, *Preußen und Frankreich*, ii. 376; Ranke, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, ii. 209.

⁷⁹ Bailleu, *Preußen und Frankreich*, ii, p. lx.

⁸⁰ Ranke, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, ii. 262; Jackson, *Diaries*, i. 334. Cf. Emmanuelle de Las Cases, *Le Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène* (Paris, 1983), i. 739, which relates Frederick William's complaints about this episode at Tilsit, 18 months later!; Marcel Dunan, *Napoléon et l'Allemagne* (Paris, 1948), pp. 188–9; Deutsch, *Napoleonic Imperialism*, pp. 369–73.

⁸¹ Bailleu, *Briefwechsel*, n. 75.

⁸² Stamm-Kuhlmann, *Friedrich Wilhelm III.* p. 198. This played right into French hands, however, since they were only too willing to abandon Hanover to the Prussian army which marched into the electorate on 25 Oct.

⁸³ Ranke, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, i. 536, ii. 317.

shattering defeat of the Austro-Russian army by Napoleon at Austerlitz in December 1805 put a damper on the whole business.

A month or so later the tide was dramatically turned. Haugwitz, having gone to notify Napoleon of Prussia's adhesion to the Third Coalition and hearing of the allied defeat at Austerlitz, signed a treaty with France and thus placed his country in the incredible position of having treaties of alliance with two opposing armies. Haugwitz was quite probably acting under the impression that he had his royal master's approval but also in the belief that a continuation of neutrality would undoubtedly lead to an attack by Napoleon. An attempt to revise the treaty a few months later, during which Prussia made the gross tactical error of standing down its army, only resulted in even harsher terms being imposed. According to the terms of the treaty of Paris signed in February 1806, Prussia was obliged to close the mouths of the Elbe and Weser to British shipping, something which would almost certainly bring it into open conflict with Britain.

The fact that Prussia now had two allies whose armies were likely to clash with each other at some time in the near future is significant of the almost schizophrenic policy that the King had been trying to pursue ever since the allied powers' rejection of Prussian offers to occupy Hanover temporarily in 1803. On the one hand it had signed a treaty with Russia out of sympathy for the allied cause and out of a conviction, however vague, that Prussian interests in north Germany were being threatened. On the other, it was obliged to come to terms with a country whose military might had proved indomitable. Prussia was to continue to lead a dual life, pandering to French interests while cultivating links with Russia, until Napoleon's impossibly insensitive treatment of Prussian interests in the north led to war.

Conclusion

Neutrality would, at first glance, seem to be an ill-suited foreign policy for a country whose army was considered to be one of the most powerful in Europe and at a time when the other Great Powers were locked in a struggle against Revolutionary and then Napoleonic France. One might consider Frederick William III's single-minded desire to remain neutral almost obsessive but it was also a tool used to play off Prussia's neighbours against each other and whose end result was the acquisition of considerable territorial gains in Germany, all acquired without a single shot having to be fired. Also Prussian foreign policy was remarkably consistent right until the end of 1805 and resulted in a number of other advantages: the period of peace was used to fill the empty treasury and to build up the money reserves; there were attempts at reform, no matter how tentative; and Prussia's influence in north Germany remained all-powerful up until 1803. Up to that time, France did not represent a direct danger to Prussian interests in Germany and even after that date Frederick William III did all he could to conciliate French interests with his own. Although he did not underestimate the seriousness of the French threat

to Prussia in north Germany, he was incapable of acting decisively to counter that threat.

Nevertheless, it is quite unjustifiable to condemn the neutrality period outright, as so many historians have done, simply because it is seen—quite incorrectly—as one of the causes of the military disaster at Jena and Auerstädt. Given the lack of preparedness amongst the Prussian military, any war with France was almost a foregone conclusion. One cannot conclude, however, that neutrality was the root cause of Prussia's collapse in 1806. Neutrality was, in a sense, merely symptomatic of a far greater structural malaise that had plagued and weakened the Prussian state ever since the second half of the reign of Frederick the Great and which was evident in the failure of Prussia's political élite to modernize the administration. At the time of Frederick William II, Prussia's neutrality policy was a viable option, and it remained so up until 1803. One might even argue that neutrality was a necessary foreign-policy choice because of Prussia's catastrophic financial situation, its apparent military unpreparedness, and, up to 1797, its involvement in Polish affairs. By 1800 there had been a dramatic change in the military balance of power on the continent⁸⁴ and when French troops entered Hanover a few years later, the continuation of neutrality became pointless since it was obvious that Napoleon would respect neither Prussia's territorial nor its regional interests. It is perhaps this which Frederick William III failed to see and we can reproach him for not having the foresight to conclude an alliance with Russia sooner to protect north Germany. The failure to do so occurred partly because of the King's obsessive desire for peace and partly because he and his entourage did not realize that relations between the Great Powers had altered to such an extent that the neutrality of 1795 was no longer tenable in 1805. The real weakness of Prussian foreign policy lay not in its desire to maintain neutrality but in its failure to assert that principle aggressively in the face of external threats. Neither Frederick William III nor most of Prussia's political and military élite possessed the strength of character or the foresight to oppose a man like Napoleon, and in a country like Prussia the monarchy was only as strong as the monarch.

⁸⁴ In June 1800 the Austrians were defeated by Napoleon, and the timely intervention of General Desaix, at the battle of Marengo. It is worth noting that news of the battle caused a sensation in Berlin and was received with a great deal of apprehension and consternation. HStA, Cal. Br. 24, 1001, Reden to the King, 1 July 1800, in cipher; RA, Depecher, Knoblauch to Bernstorff, 5 July 1800, in cipher.