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978-0-521-87542-4 - The Fall of Napoleon: Volume 1: The Allied Invasion of France, 1813–1814

Michael V. Leggiere

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The Fall of Napoleon

Crushing defeats in Russia (1812) and Germany (1813) caused the collapse of Napoleon's empire and brought his enemies to the Rhine River at the close of 1813. With a depleted and exhausted army, Napoleon attempted to direct the defense of his frontier from the Alps to the North Sea while he mobilized France. From Paris, the new Prometheus watched helplessly as his marshals conducted a headlong retreat from the Rhine to the Marne in less than one month. The breakdown of the French command structure and overwhelming Allied superiority placed the French marshals charged with defending the Rhine in an impossible situation. Although Napoleon needed them to use their scant forces to make a desperate stand on the Rhine and away from the administrative apparatus that fed his war machine, the marshals believed they had to trade land for time – the exact opposite of what Napoleon needed to maintain his crown.

Dr. Michael V. Leggiere is an associate professor of history at Louisiana State University in Shreveport. He received his Ph.D. from Florida State University in April 1997 after studying at the Institute of the French Revolution and Napoleon under the direction of D. D. Howard. He is also an adjunct professor of strategy and policy for the United States Naval War College's distance education program, where he teaches strategy and policy during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras. His book, *Napoleon and Berlin: The Franco-Prussian War in North Germany, 1813* (2002), won the Société Napoléonienne Internationale's 2002 Literary Award. Dr. Leggiere has published numerous essays on various aspects of Napoleonic history, Prussian military history, and the German Wars of Liberation. His article, "From Berlin to Leipzig: Napoleon's Gamble in North Germany, 1813," which appeared in the January 2003 volume of the *Journal of Military History*, won the Society for Military History's 2004 Moncado Prize for Excellence in the Writing of Military History. In 2005, he received la Société Napoléonienne Internationale Legion of Merit Award for Outstanding Contributions to Napoleonic Studies.

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Volume I

The Allied Invasion of France, 1813–1814

MICHAEL V. LEGGIERE

Louisiana State University in Shreveport



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For Michele, loving wife and devoted friend

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Preface

In October 1813, Emperor Napoleon I entrenched himself in the Saxon city of Leipzig and prepared for a showdown with his enemies for control of Germany. Four Allied armies eventually surrounded the French during the epic Battle of Nations. Napoleon held Leipzig for four days until exhausting his ammunition supply. He then exploited a gap in the Allied lines to lead 70,000 of his soldiers out of the beleaguered city. In the weeks that followed, the Allied armies failed to catch the French army as it retreated to the Rhine River. After Napoleon escaped across the Rhine in early November, the Allies held a great council of war at Frankfurt-am-Main. These deliberations ended with the decision to launch a comprehensive invasion of France from the North Sea to Switzerland.

In late November, 40,000 Prussian, British, and Russian troops invaded Holland. One month later, 200,000 Allied soldiers crossed the upper Rhine to invade Alsace, Switzerland, and Franche-Comté. Shortly after, on New Year's Day, an additional 75,000 men crossed the middle Rhine and drove through Lorraine toward the fortress of Metz. To stop the Allied masses, Napoleon spread approximately 56,000 tired troops in a thin cordon along the length of the Rhine River. Napoleon himself remained at Paris during the Allied invasion to direct a mobilization that he expected would produce a new army of almost 400,000 men. The emperor fully expected that the skeletons of his shattered corps would stop the Allies at the Rhine. After this proved impossible, he implored his marshals to hold the Allies in Alsace, Lorraine, and Holland. However, by the end of January, Holland and Belgium had fallen, and two Allied armies stood at the Marne and Aube Rivers ready to march on Paris. This circumstance forced Bonaparte to leave his capital and finally assume personal command of the army.

This work analyzes the invasion of France from both the French and Allied perspectives. In particular, the performance of the four French marshals

who received the overwhelming task of guarding the “sacred territory” is scrutinized. Gone were the marshals who had helped Bonaparte build the Grand Empire almost a decade earlier. Jean Lannes was dead, a somewhat disgraced André Masséna was in retirement, Louis-Nicholas Davout was shot in Hamburg, and Joachim Murat was on the verge of defecting to the Allies to keep his Neapolitan crown. In their absence, the marshals who held commands on the eastern front had to perform under extremely trying circumstances. Ultimate blame for their failures falls squarely on Napoleon for violating some of the fundamental principles of war that he himself had made famous. Stung by his subordinates’ abysmal record of independent command during the 1813 German campaign, Napoleon refused to appoint a commander in chief to coordinate operations along the eastern front, despite repeated pleas from the marshals themselves. Instead, he issued desperate calls from Paris for his marshals to coordinate their operations. The emperor should have learned the lesson provided by the Peninsular War, in which his subordinates repeatedly failed to support one another. Not only did the French marshals fail to cooperate, they resorted to blaming one another for a retreat that took them from the Rhine to the Marne in less than one month.

Although the lack of unity of command considerably undermined French operations on the eastern front, Napoleon’s inability to provide his subordinates with a clear objective led to the loss of Holland, Belgium, Alsace, Lorraine, and Franche-Comté. The marshals thought they had to preserve their troops for the emperor’s eventual use. Fed by the propaganda machine in Paris, they believed Napoleon soon would field a massive new army. His genius again would direct them and provide them with an escape from what appeared to be the curse of independent command. Thus, it appeared urgent to save every man possible, retreat to the interior, and unite with the emperor. What the marshals did not realize and what Napoleon failed to convey was that every administrative district that fell to the Allies deprived the emperor of the precious manpower and revenue needed to complete this very mobilization – not to mention the damage Allied occupation caused imperial prestige. Soldiers whose homes fell behind Allied lines thought only of deserting rather than marching to the French interior in freezing temperatures with empty bellies.

On the other side of the Rhine, the Allies assembled the most powerful coalition history would see until the world wars of the twentieth century. For the first time during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, Great Britain, Austria, Russia, and Prussia marshaled their resources for an epic showdown against Bonaparte. The victory at Leipzig ended French hegemony by shattering Napoleon’s control of central Europe. Paradoxically, this victory did more to undermine the unity of the coalition than to cement Allied resolve. Austria and Russia emerged as rivals over the issue of invading France and the fate of the French crown. Between these two behemoths stood Prussia,

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whose king and chancellor secretly supported Austria but feared being cast adrift by their benefactor, the Russian tsar. Great Britain had its own unique objectives, which its government feared would be ignored by the continental powers. Consequently, two factions emerged in the Allied camp: one, led by Tsar Alexander I, wanted to invade France, the other, which was dominated by the great Austrian statesman Klemens Wenzel von Metternich, called for a negotiated peace with Bonaparte. The result was hardly a coalition of the willing. The decision was made to invade France, yet the statesmen and generals who belonged to the peace party worked diligently and successfully to direct the war according to their politics.

This work examines the invasion of France from the perspective of a coalition undertaking, in which politics influenced strategy and military operations affected diplomacy. It is also dedicated to the old military history. It is about generals – their thoughts, plans, hopes, and despair. It tells the story of commanders and their operations during one of the most intense periods of European history: the Allied invasion of France in the twilight of the Napoleonic epoch. Although the soldier's perspective certainly has a place in history, this work focuses on the command of armies at the strategic and operational levels. The principal purpose of this work is to fill a surprising gap in the literature concerning the final year of Napoleon's reign. Numerous volumes tell the story of French disasters in Spain and Portugal. Napoleon's catastrophic 1812 campaign in Russia, where as many as 500,000 soldiers may have perished, likewise is told in monumental detail. Yet only a handful of scholarly studies are devoted to the details of the invasion of greater France at the end of 1813 and beginning of 1814.

Between 1814 and 1914, German, French, Austrian, and Russian historians, both civilian and military, published studies that examine various aspects of the invasion of France from a nationalist perspective. The vast majority of works concerning the 1814 campaign begin with the emperor leaving Paris on 25 January to take command of his army, thus ignoring the first critical month of the Allied invasion, during which the French marshals abandoned all of "New France." Based on Austrian, German, French, Russian, and private archival documents, this book provides the first modern comprehensive study of the Allied invasion of France. No previous study presents such an inclusive examination of the military operations that took place from Holland to Switzerland. Against this backdrop, this book expands Gordon Craig's noteworthy treatise on the problems of coalition warfare. Moreover, it will serve as the military supplement to the great works on the diplomacy of the period by Wilhelm Oncken, August Fournier, Henry Kissinger, Harold Nicholson, and Paul Schroeder.

I wrote this book with a Michelin motoring atlas by my side. Although this resource greatly enhanced my understanding of the campaign, I keenly felt the need to provide the reader with excellent maps. With a few exceptions,

every population center mentioned in the book can be found on the maps. I included roads where space permitted. As much as possible I used native, modern spellings of villages, towns, smaller cities, and geographic features. Larger cities, capitals, and rivers such as Antwerp, Geneva, the Rhine, and the Moselle are anglicized; the spelling of rivers is standardized from country to country. Names of persons are likewise native, except for monarchs, whose names are anglicized. To avoid confusion, all generals are referred to simply as “general.”

This six-year odyssey could not have been completed without the generous assistance of several people and institutions. First and foremost I wish to express my sincerest gratitude to Dennis Showalter, whose vision and insight encouraged me to write the complete history of the Allied invasion of France. Next I must express my heartfelt appreciation to my editor, Frank Smith, whose patience and persistent support sustained me during this long project. Geoff Wawro and the superb manuscript reviewers provided valuable insight and constructive criticism; I owe much to their suggestions and corrections. I also especially wish to thank Maggie Meitzler, Elizabeth Budd, Simina Calin, and the countless others involved in the production of this work.

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I am indebted to several friends and colleagues at the Louisiana State University in Shreveport. My former chairman and fellow Napoleonic historian, Milton Finley, provided years of support and advice. Jason Mackowiak offered crucial technical support to prepare the maps. Megan Conway, Cecilia Smith, and Wolfgang Hinck contributed invaluable assistance translating French and German colloquialisms and phrases. The staff of the Noel Library diligently obtained books for me on the shortest notice. John Vassar and Cheryl White provided great moral support. Finally, I want to acknowledge Merrell Knighten, former dean of the College of Liberal Arts, whose financial support made possible three research trips to Europe.

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I have to thank the kind of friend that every European historian should have: Beatrice Watt. Not only did Beatrice help me wade through the more difficult French translations, she also mobilized her extended family to assist me in Europe. Her extremely kind aunt and uncle became my surrogate family in Austria: every day her uncle, Siguy Baumgartner, drove me to and from Klosterneuburg to downtown Vienna. In the evenings, his wife, Lili, prepared a wonderful dinner. As a rule the wine flowed, sacking my plans to catch up on some reading during the crisp December nights in the suburbs of Vienna. I am deeply indebted to the Baumgartners: their kindness to a complete stranger and their willingness to inconvenience themselves and open their home to me represents all that is good in this world. Moving from Vienna to Paris, I had the good fortune of being hosted by Beatrice’s father, Jacques Durantet, and his companion, Florence. Once again, these kind folks did the utmost to assist me as well as to show me the side of Paris that few Americans ever see. In addition, I must thank the Fifth Count Bülow von Dennewitz, Joachim-Albrecht, as well as his son, Hasso. Count Bülow kindly gave me two privately printed volumes of his ancestor’s unpublished correspondence. For several years, both he and Hasso have produced a constant stream of documents and information that have greatly broadened my knowledge of the Prussian army. Lastly, I thank Peter Harrington of the Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection at Brown University for locating the artwork that accompanies the text.

I dedicate this volume to my wife of eight years and companion of thirteen, who patiently endured my absence during numerous research trips to Europe, who coped with endless days of my short temper due to sleep deprivation, and who for years talked to the back of my head because I was facing the computer. While I was writing this book she experienced two pregnancies and gave birth to our beautiful children, Jordyn and Nicholas. Finally, I thank my parents, Rosalie and Tom, who have always been a source of solid support.