Introduction

On 2 December 1804, Napoleon Bonaparte crowned himself emperor of the French. Three days later, he held an elaborate ceremony on the Champ de Mars in Paris. In front of the École Militaire, the academy where Napoleon had received his formal training to become an officer in the French army, workers erected an elaborate pavilion modeled on the headquarters of a Roman emperor. On a dais in the center rose the throne of the new Caesar. As a self-made man lacking dynastic legitimacy, Napoleon engineered this spectacle to align his regime with the military ethos and traditions of the Roman Empire. On his signal, deputations from the regiments of his army approached the throne. Napoleon rose and issued orders for the distribution of new battle standards and regimental colors to replace those of the republic that he had toppled. Atop each blue regimental flagpole perched a bronze eagle with outstretched wings and head turned to the left. Again borrowing from ancient tradition, Napoleon modeled his Eagles after the *aquila*, or eagle – the symbol of Rome’s legions dating back to 104 BC. Likewise having outstretched wings, the Roman *aquila* looked to its right. After distributing the Eagles, Napoleon spoke to his warriors: “Soldiers! Behold your colors! These Eagles will always be your rallying point. They will always be where your emperor will judge necessary for the defense of his throne and his people. Swear to sacrifice your lives for their defense; and, by your courage, to keep them constantly in the path of victory. You swear.”

Like Rome’s storied legions, those of the French Grande Armée created a vast continental empire. During the conquest, the French vanquished opponents whose dynasties had ruled not for a handful of years but for centuries. Like the upstart Napoleon, the rulers of these venerable dynasties claimed to be the heirs of the glory that was ancient Rome. Their titles alone affirmed the link: the Russian “tsar” and German “kaiser” both derived from the Latin “caesar.” Although not bearing eagles atop their standards, the
coats of arms for the Habsburgs of Austria and the Romanovs of Russia featured double-headed eagles. On 2 December 1805, the Eagles of the new Rome triumphed over the Austrians and Russians at the battle of Austerlitz. Success allowed the French Imperator to dissolve the 1,000-year First Reich: the Holy Roman Empire. Its ruler, Francis II of Austria, renounced his title of Holy Roman Emperor, yet retained an imperial mandate with the title of Kaiser Francis I of Austria.

Victory drove the ambition of the French god of war. In the wake of shattering the Holy Roman Empire, he reunified Charlemagne's empire by adding Germany and Italy to his Grand Empire. In 1806, his soldiers carried their Eagles into Germany for a showdown with another state whose ruling dynasty used an eagle for its symbol: Hohenzollern Prussia. Relatively new to the exclusive club of great powers that included Britain, France, Austria, and Russia, the Prussian state had recently celebrated its centennial anniversary of becoming a kingdom. For many years the weakest of the powers, Prussia vaulted to military prominence during the reign of Frederick the Great (1740–1786). Although some forty years had passed since Frederick's masterful victories in the Seven Years War, the Prussian army still enjoyed the reputation of being Europe's finest. Many thought the brash French Imperator and his Eagles would receive a hard lesson.

Like so many military institutions throughout history, the Prussians had prepared their army to fight the previous war rather than the next war. Although they had had the best eighteenth-century army on the continent, few Prussians recognized that the French Caesar had pioneered a new era of warfare. At the twin battles of Jena–Auerstedt on 14 October 1806, Napoleon finally laid to rest the army frozen by time. In less than two weeks, the French Eagles paraded through the Brandenburg Gate and into Berlin, the capital of Prussia. King Frederick William III, the grand-nephew of Frederick the Great, fled eastward with his family, including his two young sons: the future King Frederick William IV and Kaiser William I. He halted at Königsberg (Kaliningrad), hoping that the approaching Russian army could save him. Fortunately for the Prussian king, he did not have to witness the looting of Frederick the Great's tomb by Napoleon, who visited his shrine at Potsdam's Garnisonkirche. He confiscated Frederick's sword, decorations, sash, and the colors of his Royal Guard, all of which went to Paris as trophies. At Berlin, the Eagles stripped the Prussian capital of its wealth and few treasures, including the Quadriga, which the Prussians had only recently placed atop the Brandenburg Gate: the goddess of victory went to Paris and did not return until 1814. Napoleon could suffer no rival, dead or alive.

After vanquishing the Russian army in June 1807, Napoleon accepted a request from Tsar Alexander I to negotiate. Frederick William did not receive an invitation to the first day of negotiations, when the epic meeting
between Napoleon and Alexander took place on the great raft moored in the middle of the Niemen River. Prussia’s envoys could not sign the Treaty of Tilsit (Sovetsk) until two days after the Russians had concluded their negotiations with Napoleon – a symbolic act for all of Europe to see. The French dictated peace terms to the Prussian delegation that reflected the totality of Napoleon’s military victory. At Tilsit, Napoleon purposefully humiliated the Prussians at every opportunity. The resulting peace treaty left Prussia a tertiary state at the mercy of Napoleon’s iron fist.

From the ashes of old Prussia, a cadre of progressive military officers and civil servants such as Heinrich Friedrich Karl vom und zum Stein, Gerhard von Scharnhorst, August von Gneisenau, Hermann von Boyen, and Karl von Hardenberg initiated a reform movement with the king’s conditional blessing. They sought to resurrect the state to one day enable the Prussians to wage a war of liberation against the hated French by unleashing the powers of the nation just as the French had done during their Revolution that spanned the decade of 1789–1799. Napoleon’s indifference to extending French reforms – Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity – to Prussia left the Prussians free to mold the ideals of the French Revolution into Frederick William’s authoritative monarchy. Thus, any reforms granted by the king as a response to French oppression and neonate nationalism earned him the gratitude of his subjects. While falling short of the gains made by the French during their Revolution, the Prussian reformers successfully negotiated the issue of providing top-down social, political, and military change within an absolutist system. In terms of military reform, the Prussian army of 1813 more than matched the French in organizational and tactical proficiency. A combination of social and military reforms elevated the soldier to a position of respect that transformed him into a savior of the “Fatherland” in 1813. Civic responsibility and submission to lawful authority replaced feudal terror as a means of maintaining discipline. A meritocracy opened the officer corps to men of talent while a revamped General Staff provided unity of command and direction. Prussian success in 1813 is testament to the army’s complete overhaul and the success, albeit incomplete, of the social and political reform movement.

Five years after Tilsit, Napoleon prepared to lead his legions into Russia to punish Tsar Alexander for breaching the 1807 treaty. By this time, the French emperor so thoroughly controlled Prussia that he forced Frederick William to contribute 20,000 men to the invasion force. Many Prussian officers resigned rather than take up arms against their former allies. In June 1812, Napoleon led the 600,000 men and 1,300 guns of the Grande Armée into Russia. At the end of the year, unbelievable news rocked Europe: the Grande Armée had ceased to exist. Of the original invasion force, only 93,000 men and 250 guns returned from the unforgiving Russian steppes: an unprecedented human tragedy. Napoleon abandoned the wreck
of his army in Russia and returned to France with a handful of followers. Meanwhile, Russian armies slowly pursued the survivors toward Prussia’s eastern frontier. Some Prussians viewed Napoleon’s monumental disaster as an opportunity to begin a Befreiungskrieg (war of liberation), while others viewed it as a chance to earn his goodwill by assisting him in his hour of need.

In early 1813, Frederick William faced a difficult choice: honor Napoleon’s demands for help or side with the approaching Russians to fight for freedom. Placed in this unenviable situation, the king discovered that one of his generals had signed a neutrality pact with the Russians. Losing control of his army and confronted by increasing anti-French sentiment among his subjects, he allied with the Russians and chose to wage a Befreiungskrieg. Mobilization of the regular army then accelerated, augmented by decrees creating a national militia, the Landwehr, and a civic defense force, the Landsturm. To provide time for his army to mobilize, he delayed issuing a formal declaration against France until 16 March 1813.

In the spring of 1813, Frederick William embraced a people’s war: a Franco-Prussian war. Anti-French demonstrations decisively influenced public opinion, especially among the intelligentsia. This suggests that the Prussians viewed the war as a struggle between peoples and nations. On 17 March 1813, the king established his own symbol to counter the French Eagle: the Iron Cross. Based on the icon of the Teutonic Knights, Frederick William declared that the decoration would be awarded for acts of bravery and leadership in Prussia’s upcoming struggle for freedom. In 1813, the Iron Cross of a resurrected Prussia confronted the Eagles of the new Rome. While the eagle continued to represent the Hohenzollern dynasty, the Iron Cross represented the nation’s struggle for liberation. After Prussia emerged victorious, it came to symbolize the glory and might of Prussian arms, a tradition that became transposed onto the newly unified German Empire, or Second Reich, by the Hohenzollerns and the “blood and iron” of the Prussian army. Ever since 1813, the Iron Cross has served as the symbol of Prussia’s armed forces, even to the present day. The Iron Cross is the only remnant of the Prusso-German military tradition that survived the Second World War.

The Prussians embraced the new patriotism “not for reform, constitutional liberty, and Prussian and/or German unity, but out of hatred of the foreign invader and a religiously based traditional loyalty to God, king, and country.” This made the Prussian movement akin to those in Calabria, Spain, the Tyrol, and Russia. Although falling far short of the Spanish, Calabrian, or Tyrolean uprisings, Prussia’s popular revolt helped persuade the king to renounce his alliance with Napoleon. The fact that the army appeared to be pursuing its own agenda also influenced Frederick William. Due to French oppression and the associated hardships of foreign
occupation and exploitation, the Prussian people perceived the struggle as their war. Public opinion, especially aided by the events in East Prussia, helped move the cautious king to fight for Prussia's liberation.3

After losing 500,000 men in Russia during the failed invasion of 1812, Napoleon needed a brilliant strategy to produce a decisive victory over his enemies. His planning for operations in 1813 suggests that he believed a strategy of maneuver in North Germany could produce this victory. First and foremost, a drive across North Germany to the Vistula (Wisła) River would jeopardize Russian communications that stretched across Silesia and Poland. Napoleon speculated that such a threat would prompt the Russians to withdraw from Central Europe faster than they had come. Moreover, he would be able to expel the Russians from the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, which they had invaded following his setback in Russia. Napoleon also desired to relieve his besieged garrisons on the Oder (Odra) and the Vistula Rivers to augment his armies with these veterans.4 Control of the plain between the Elbe and Oder Rivers provided another consideration. If he transferred his base of operations northeast to Pomerania or West Prussia, the Elbe and Oder fortresses would protect his right flank while he fell on the Russians.5 An operation in North Germany would also keep the war far from Austria’s borders. Although Napoleon did not believe his father-in-law, Kaiser Francis, would break the Franco-Austrian alliance, he did not want to give the Austrians any cause to do so. Finally, after Frederick William declared war against him, Napoleon sought to cripple Prussia through a morale-breaking conquest of Berlin.6 He believed an offensive against Berlin would prompt the Prussians to abandon the Russians and race toward their capital. In this case, he would take a central position and crush the Russians and Prussians in turn.7 Should the Prussians remain united with the Russians, a weakly defended Berlin would fall and presumably disrupt Prussian mobilization. Most commentaries agree that the emperor never relinquished this “master plan.”8

Napoleon’s first plan to confront the Russians envisioned Prussian assistance in a drive across the North German plain to Danzig (Gdańsk) on the Vistula River. Success would reassert Napoleon’s dominance over his reluctant Prussian ally and rescue the besieged fortresses along the Oder and Vistula. The emperor noted that, “after conducting demonstrations to convince the enemy that I will march against Dresden and into Silesia, I will probably march to Havelberg, reach Stettin [Szczecin] by forced marches with 300,000 men, and continue the march to Danzig, which I could reach in fifteen days. On the twentieth day of the movement . . . I will have relieved that place and be master . . . of all the bridges over the lower Vistula.”9 Napoleon planned to lead his new army from the Main River to the Elbe, unite with the forces commanded by his stepson, Eugene, south of Magdeburg, proceed through Pomerania, and move across the lower Oder.
By thus threatening the Russian line of operations, Napoleon would force them to abandon the Oder and retreat to the Vistula, where he would be waiting for them.

Frederick William’s decision to break the Franco-Prussian alliance undermined Napoleon’s plan. Prussia’s defection and the ensuing Russo-Prussian drive across the Elbe to the Saale threatened to destabilize Napoleon’s empire. Had Napoleon executed the master plan, he would have achieved the success he desired. The Russians would have retreated, forcing the Prussians to either follow or face Napoleon’s wrath alone. Instead, he decided to cross the Saale and seek to overwhelm the Allies in battle. Unable to organize his new army fast enough, he missed the opportunity of taking a central position between the two Allied armies as they converged on the Saale from different directions. The first marched southwest through Königsberg and Berlin while the second advanced northwest through Dresden and Leipzig.

Subordinated to the Russians, the leaders of the new Prussian army – Scharnhorst, Gneisenau, and Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher – soon became frustrated with the slow pace of the Allied war effort. Although the Prussians complained about the Russians, the community of interest that solidified the Russo-Prussian alliance persisted. Had the Prussians abandoned the Russians in Saxony and raced northward to defend Berlin, the alliance most likely would have imploded. Remembering the fate of their armies in the mountains around Zürich in 1799, the Russians might have reacted to such a retrograde movement by the Prussians by withdrawing from the war, just as Tsar Paul I had done during the War of the Second Coalition. Moreover, Russian sacrifices, which included Moscow, had been immense during their own war of liberation the previous year. Fortunately for the Allied war effort, Frederick William remained committed to fighting Napoleon in Saxony; no Prussian units left the theater to participate in the defense of Berlin. Only after the Russians appeared intent on leaving this community of interest – albeit temporarily – by withdrawing to Poland did the Prussians contemplate a separation. Unfortunately for Napoleon, the needs of his army compelled him to accept the Armistice of Pläswitz just when the goal seemed within his grasp. Napoleon’s great hope of reliving his 1796 campaign by taking a central position between two enemy armies and defeating each in turn never materialized.

As for the Allies, after reaching the banks of the Saale River in early April, they largely remained idle for the rest of the month. Lack of Russian support stymied their ability to do more than send raiding parties into the heart of Germany. Finally, after Napoleon led his young Eagles across the Saale in late April, the Allies engaged him at Lützen on 2 May 1813. Still the master of operational warfare, Napoleon came within two hours of effecting a double envelopment that would have ended the Sixth Coalition.
on that day. Fortunately for the Allies, they escaped before the net could close. Although a victory for Napoleon, the struggle cost him double the casualties he inflicted on the Allies. More detrimental to the French cause, Napoleon’s lack of cavalry prevented Lützen from becoming another Jena. The Allies retreated from Lützen convinced they had taught the French a hard lesson.

Napoleon realized his weak cavalry arm and inexperienced infantry could not maneuver the Allies into accepting battle under conditions favorable to him. Therefore, he hoped an operation in North Germany would create the strategic opportunities that his army had not been able to produce in Saxony. He emerged from Lützen convinced that the legs of his young conscripts would have to compensate for his lack of cavalry. Thus, he returned to maneuver on the operational level to force the Allies into a second battle. In so doing, the master plan provided the emperor with the guidelines he needed to achieve success. Immediately following Lützen, he directed Marshal Michel Ney to Leipzig with orders to cross the Elbe at Torgau and Wittenberg with almost 85,000 men. Numerically superior French forces would allow Napoleon to place an army in North Germany considerably larger than any units the Allies could muster in opposition, while the army under his personal command still outnumbered the main Russo-Prussian army in Saxony. He believed Ney’s movement toward Berlin would induce the Prussians to separate from the Russians and march with all possible speed to cover their capital.13 Napoleon would then mask the Russians, reunite with Ney, and lead 175,000 men against an estimated 60,000 to 80,000 Prussians as they marched to save Berlin.14 Should the Russians and Prussians remain united and decide to again confront Napoleon in Saxony, Ney would be within supporting distance. In addition, if the Allies remained united and continued to retreat, Napoleon could drive them out of Saxony, through Silesia, and as far as Poland. After taking Berlin and rolling across North Germany, Ney might reach the Vistula before the Allies, in which case they would be caught between two numerically superior French armies.

After Lützen, inadequate French cavalry and stubborn rearguard actions by the Russians prevented Napoleon from determining whether the Prussians and Russians had separated. Regardless of his uncertainty, he selected three main objectives to achieve by month’s end: occupy Berlin; relieve the fortress of Glogau (Glogów) on the Oder; and take Breslau (Wrocław), the provincial capital of Silesia. He held Ney’s operation as crucial to the achievement of these goals. On 13 May, he ordered Ney to Luckau, the halfway point between Berlin and Bautzen. From that position, the marshal would either advance against the Prussian capital or support Napoleon in Saxony. Twenty-four hours later, confirmed reports arrived that the entire Allied army stood at Bautzen on the Spree River. Napoleon
believed the Allies would continue their retreat eastward perhaps as far as Silesia rather than remain at Bautzen. For this reason, he wanted Ney to continue east, parallel to Napoleon’s march, to prevent the Allies from making a stand at the Spree, Neiße (Nysa), Queis (Kwisa), or Bober (Bóbr) Rivers. In addition, Ney could proceed as far as Głogau on the Oder to sever Russian communication through Poland to Russia. Consequently, Ney received orders to divide his army. While he led III and V Corps to within one day’s march of Bautzen, Marshal Claude Victor would advance against Berlin with II and VII Corps.

After surrendering the line of the Elbe to Napoleon, the Allies prepared for a second battle at Bautzen some 110 miles east of Lützen. Napoleon welcomed the opportunity. He intended to launch a frontal assault on the Allied position at Bautzen while Marshal Ney moved southeast to completely envelop the enemy’s right. Meanwhile, Victor would advance against Berlin. However, an incompetent Ney frustrated the master plan by bringing II and VII Corps with him to Bautzen. Nevertheless, the emperor demonstrated his operational superiority by massing 144,000 soldiers against 96,000 Allied troops. The battle commenced on 20 May and continued on the 21st with Napoleon gaining the advantage. Yet another costly mistake by Ney robbed him of a crushing victory that could have destroyed the Coalition.

After this second indecisive victory, Napoleon pursued the defeated Allies into Silesia. He ordered Marshal Nicolas-Charles Oudinot to conduct a second offensive against Berlin. Oudinot marched his XII Corps northwest toward Berlin while Napoleon followed the Allies southeast into Silesia. The marshal’s subsequent inability to dislodge the Prussians and take their capital did little to undermine Napoleon’s belief in the master plan. In Silesia, meanwhile, cooperation between the Russians and Prussians nearly collapsed. Each side blamed the other for continued failure. A change in command did little to assuage the Prussians, as one Russian commander replaced another. Retreating into Silesia, the Prussians hoped to meet Napoleon for a third battle. Instead, they learned that the Russians intended to retreat to Poland for six weeks of rest and reorganization. Frederick William and his army could either follow or face Napoleon alone. As the Russo-Prussian army approached the banks of the Oder River, the choice of separating from the Russians to defend Silesia or following them and abandoning the Prussian heartland confronted the Prussian king. After having retreated almost 270 miles, his generals demanded that they remain in Silesia. Frederick William issued orders for a Prussian Army of Silesia to be formed from his units currently serving with the Russian army. Yet before the separation of the Allied army could occur, he learned that Napoleon had accepted an Austrian-brokered armistice. Thus, Frederick William was saved from having to cross his Rubicon.
My 2002 work, *Napoleon and Berlin: The Franco-Prussian War in North Germany, 1813*, builds on Gordon Craig’s assertion that the Prussian military establishment wanted to wage an almost fanatical holy war against the French for emancipation and freedom. While *Napoleon and Berlin* focuses on the Prussian defense of their capital, *Napoleon and the Struggle for Germany: The Franco-Prussian War of 1813* will continue to develop Craig’s thesis by exploring the role played by the Prussians in the main theater of war and particularly their relations with the Russians. Prussia’s foremost commanders at the start of the war, Scharnhorst, Gneisenau, and Blücher, struggled to fight a different kind of war – a war guided by “mystical nationalism,” according to Craig – than their Russian allies, many of whom believed Russia should play only an auxiliary role following the great exertions of 1812. After six years of French occupation, the leaders of the Prussian military establishment labored to restore both national and international honor to their profession, their army, and, most of all, their state. Prussian generals took the initiative to precipitate a rupture with France, and personal feelings translated into political action. Frederick William allowed himself to embrace the nationalistic fervor that it aroused and summon his people to arms. To the Prussians, the war against Napoleon was not a political struggle, but an ideological “fight against evil, a struggle against the anti-Christ and his minions.” More so than the Russians and later the Austrians, the Prussians turned their war against Napoleon into a holy crusade, a total war between two peoples: a Franco-Prussian war. Enthusiasm and popular support did vary greatly, yet Prusso-German patriotism permeated the public mind.

The weakest of Napoleon’s adversaries, the Prussians managed to field an army of only 65,000 men in March 1813. Nevertheless, the Prussians truly fought a war of liberation, acknowledging that another defeat at Napoleon’s hands probably would result in the end of the Prussian state. Although languishing under Russian leadership during the Spring Campaign of 1813, the Prussians willingly shouldered the weight of the conflict and demanded the opportunity to take the war to Napoleon. This volume explains how Russian war weariness conflicted with Prussian impetuosity, resulting in the crisis that almost ended the Sixth Coalition in early June. In a single campaign spanning only one month, Napoleon drove the Russo-Prussian army from the banks of the Saale to the banks of the Oder. On reaching the Oder, the Russo-Prussian alliance came perilously close to imploding, only to be saved by an eleventh-hour armistice.

The hundred years between 1813 and 1913 witnessed the publication of numerous Prusso-German, French, and Russian official General Staff histories of 1813 as well as a plethora of works written by military officers and contemporaries of the period. They borrowed from each other freely but in general the Prusso-German Staff histories were viewed as authoritative.
The North German and Polish theater of war, 1812–1813

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