NAPOLEON AGAINST GREAT ODDS

Ralph Ashby

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The Emperor and the Defenders of France, 1814

Ralph Ashby

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List of Abbreviations

CN	Correspondance de Napoléon Ier
ML	Correspondence between Napoleon and Marie-Louise
SH	Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre (Military Archives at Vincennes)

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Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1

The 1814 Campaign—Introduction and Controversy

At the end of 1813, France faced imminent invasion by colossal enemy forces. Three hundred thousand Prussians, Russians, and Austrian Empire troops were on the Rhine. An Anglo-Spanish-Portuguese army of over 100,000 advanced on the Pyrenees. More enemy forces were gathering from all over Europe to attack France. Napoleon's costly campaign in Germany in 1813 had left him with less than 80,000 men to cover the Rhine. His desperate plans for defending France in 1814 involved raising 936,000 new troops. In fact, only about 120,000 recruits arrived in time to serve in active units.[1] This striking statistic is generally interpreted as being due to war weariness and opposition to Napoleon's regime. After almost a quarter century of warfare, France was physically and morally exhausted. Likewise, Napoleon's political capital was tapped out after the disaster of 1812 in Russia and the defeat in Germany in 1813.[2]

But was it as simple as that? Were there really some 800,000 deserters and *insoumis* (draft dodgers) skulking about France in 1814? Did France fall in 1814 because there were few Frenchmen willing or able to defend their country? Were most Frenchmen unwilling to fight any longer for a France ruled by Napoleon? Was war-weariness and disenchantment with the Emperor so prevalent as to cancel out a patriotic response to foreign invasion?[3] These questions are not easily answered. Shedding light on these questions requires more than retelling the story of the Campaign of France in 1814. This book will outline the campaign to establish a context, but the focus is on Napoleon's army in 1814, as well as on partisans and other civilians who defended France. We cannot dismiss 1814 France as war-weary to the point of virtual military helplessness without looking at those Frenchmen who did fight in 1814.

The Campaign of 1814 in France has not received the attention of some other Napoleonic campaigns.[4] In the historiography of the period, accounts of Waterloo and of the 1812 Russian Campaign overwhelm those of the invasion of France in 1814, especially in English-language works. Henry Houssaye's *1814*, originally published in 1888, remains the classic French-language account of the campaign. The best-known English-language history of 1814 is F. Loraine Petre's *Napoleon at Bay, 1814*, originally published in 1914. French-language works on 1814 published in the last one hundred years are more plentiful than English-language ones. For obvious reasons, the Campaign of 1814 has left more of an impression in France than elsewhere, although the campaign remains obscured by what might appear to be the grander triumphs and more catastrophic disasters that marked the Napoleonic era.

This is not to say that the campaign has been ignored. The story of the campaign has been told in fine fashion by a number of authors. The 1814 invasion of France contained elements of drama and pathos that are difficult to ignore. Indeed, a great deal of legend and lore has grown up around the campaign, a tradition that no historian can easily disregard. This quasi-romantic atmosphere is exemplified among English-language accounts by R. F. Delderfield's *Imperial Sunset: The Fall of Napoleon, 1813–1814.* The main protagonists of most accounts of the invasion of France are the French recruits, nicknamed the "Marie-Louises" after Napoleon's second wife and Empress. The embattled Emperor himself becomes a heroic figure again, struggling against overwhelming odds, as his egregious and tragic character flaws fade in the face of the treachery, greed, and pettiness of his numerous enemies.

This book does not intend to dispel the legends of 1814, but rather to help explain them. This is a military history, but one that includes the view from the "ground level." An examination of the people who fought for the Empire in its death throes can provide a particularly revealing picture of Napoleonic France. We can gain a good picture of the conditions of their service. Uniforms, weapons, equipment, and training (matters that are prosaic but important) are explored, as are the backgrounds of the men in service, including a look at their ages and civilian occupations. The "Marie-Louises," it turns out, were not a homogeneous lot. Most importantly, how the defenders of France performed on campaign and in action must be considered. The range of behaviors includes everything from epic heroism to desertion on an alarming scale.

The defenders of France did not fight in a vacuum. Two vital factors affecting them were the attitudes of the French civilians and the leaders who were ostensibly directing the defense of France. Again, the range of behaviors displayed by both leadership and citizenry varied wildly. Napoleon himself, needless to say, played the central leadership role. It is impossible to write about the defenders of France in 1814 without also

discussing Napoleon.[5] The rest of the French military and political leaders were in some instances dedicated, intelligent, and efficient, while in other cases either incompetent or disloyal to the Empire. How civilians responded to invasion depended upon a variety of factors, but we see everything from citizens opening their cities and towns for the advancing Allies, to civilians taking up arms and fighting, either in fortified places or as partisans. The story of the defenders of France in 1814 must include civilians and leaders, as well as soldiers.

Extant histories of 1814 tend to focus on a particular aspect or portion of the campaign. Though not long in duration, the campaign was very complex—militarily, politically, and diplomatically—making it difficult for a history to cover all aspects of the invasion of France in depth. Houssaye neatly divided the campaign into three phases and insists that his history, while covering the entire campaign, emphasized the final phase, "the least well-known and the most dramatic."[6]

The question of who was willing to defend France is both complex and potentially controversial. Despite a certain atmosphere of romance surrounding the heroic "Marie-Louises," it is true that, to some extent, factors of war-weariness and divided political loyalties helped make Napoleon's 1814 *levée en masse* a failure. He commanded only 120,000 new recruits out of a theoretical mobilization of 936,000. Outside of exhaustion and Napoleon's political bankruptcy, how can this be explained? A sober look at the reality behind the figures is necessary. Napoleon's estimates of available manpower were probably optimistic or wishful thinking—a tendency of his later career. The figure of 936,000 called to service is a composite total computed by historians. Napoleon did not attempt to call up so many all at once. The figure includes not only a series of conscriptions in late 1813 and early 1814, but also the mobilization of National Guard units. More importantly, the disruption caused by the Allied invasion, combined with shortages of weapons and supplies, along with the shortness of the campaign, made mobilization extremely problematic, regardless of the willingness of recruits to come forward. Finally, in addition to recruits who made it into their units in time to take the field, the numbers of civilians and partisans who participated in the campaign at one time or another cannot be known with any certainty.

Avoiding military service was nothing new in 1814. Desertion is as old as warfare and draft dodging as old as conscription. Frenchmen called to service under the Republic and Empire had always been able legally to "purchase" substitutes, and prices for *remplacants* were high in 1814 (4,509 francs on average). They were even higher in 1809 (5,167 francs on average).[7] There was much opposition to conscription in 1814, exacerbated by the experiences of over two decades of bloodletting and recent military disasters. Evasion of service occurred, and on a large scale, but interpreting such evasion as a wholesale rejection of Napoleon and

his Empire by the French people may be reading too much into the numbers.

Still, the problem of the popular French response to invasion in 1814 remains a valid question. Why did the people not spontaneously rise up in arms? Why was there not a replication of the early days of 1792 and 1793? Napoleon certainly made attempts to cultivate a patriotic nostalgia for those heady days, even going so far as to have Paris street musicians play the formerly proscribed *Marseillaise.*[8] But 1814 was a long way from 1792. The phrase "bled white" (Bourbon white?) comes to mind. To make matters worse, the enemies of France had armies far more numerous in 1814 than any the First Republic had ever faced, although it is doubtful that most French lads facing conscription knew the size of the Allied armies. Yet there was resistance to the Allied invasion, and it appeared that resistance was on the increase just as the campaign ended. Again, the campaign was very short—far too short, as it turned out, for Napoleon's purposes.

There are several ways to interpret the efforts (or lack thereof) on the part of the French in 1814. In the minds of many Frenchmen in 1814, France was no longer linked to the person of the Emperor. For them, Napoleon had ceased being the embodiment of the glory and progress France had achieved since 1789. Certainly, the quagmire in Spain and the reverses of 1812–1813 in Russian and Germany had done much to damage the idea of Napoleon as the personification of a glorious (and continually victorious) France. His relationship to a redeemed and sanitized Revolution was even more complex and problematical. Worse, the invasion of France could be and was perceived as the Emperor's own fault.[9] This was certainly the point of Allied propaganda, which suggested that they warred not so much against France as against the Emperor. The Allies had learned much about wartime propaganda since the awkward Brunswick Manifesto of 1792. The "liberation" rhetoric long utilized by the French was co-opted in cunning fashion by the invading Coalition in 1814.

Does this mean then that deliberately avoiding service was the rule? Felix Markham describes draft evasion in 1814 as "wholesale," and he is not alone.[10] How many deserters and draft dodgers were there? There is little agreement on the numbers. Estimates vary from 100,000 to "hundreds of thousands." More confusion as to actual numbers of those evading the late 1813 and early 1814 conscriptions is added by the fact that there were significant numbers of deserters and *insoumis* "at large" from the drafts of previous years.[11] There never was a complete tally of all the deserters and draft dodgers in 1814 because there was no way to document them accurately. Only recruits who showed up could actually be counted. The estimates are generally based upon the assumption that the total number of recruits called for, minus those that served in active units, equals the total number of deserters. However, not all of those who failed to serve in

units during the campaign were deliberately avoiding service. There were several other factors that accounted for the shortfall, as subsequent chapters will show. The idea of 800,000 deserters and draft dodgers (an implication rather than a figure cited) is too high an estimate. On the other hand, estimates of only 100,000 deserters are based on the partial figures noted by Napoleon in his own correspondence. The Emperor and his bureaucracy never had the time or resources to tally up the total number of deserters and draft dodgers for 1814.

The best expert on desertion in France in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods, Alan Forrest, presents us with another conundrum. In discussing conscription he states that, "By 1814 there is no doubt that Napoleon had succeeded in implanting habits of obedience that would have seemed inconceivable even twenty years before."[12] This would seem to contradict the idea that draft evasion was the automatic response of the vast majority of those called in 1814. How could it be true that there was "wholesale evasion" on the one hand, and yet that "habits of obedience" prevailed at the same time? What of the recruits that did show up? Did they come forward out of loyalty to Napoleon or out of patriotism? Or was it simply a matter of "habits of obedience?"

There is another dimension to the problem of explaining Napoleon's shortfall of recruits in 1814. John Elting, an American military historian of Napoleon's army, made a casual observation that sounds almost like heresy in the face of most interpretations:

> Because it was a time of harried tribulation, the records are uncertain. But it is evident that most of the young conscripts who actually received their "greetings" obeyed. Of the 50,000 who passed, cold and hungry, through the main depot of Courbevoie in the three months of the 1814 campaign, only one in a hundred deserted.[13]

The figures are based only on desertions among recruits who had already reported for duty, but the implication is that the recruits reflected the mood of many of their countrymen. By this reasoning, the low turnout was the result of bureaucratic incompetence on a massive scale. But why would so many conscripts not have received their summons?

The Allies disrupted Napoleon's plans by not delaying their invasion until the spring of 1814, a course they seriously debated. Tsar Alexander I of Russia and the Prussian Field Marshal Blücher advocated immediate invasion, and these two men would remain the most consistent champions of an aggressive strategy throughout the campaign. Most other Coalition military and political leaders were more cautious, but Alexander's growing prestige and Blücher's lobbying, combined with Napoleon's unwillingness to meet Allied peace demands, finally swung the decision in favor of a winter invasion. The Allied debate was affected by political and diplomatic

Figure 1.1 Tsar Alexander I. (From W. M. Sloane's *Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*, 1901.)

considerations as much as military ones. Ironically, Alexander's and Blücher's aggressiveness were not based so much on a thoughtful, calculated strategy as on a desire for revenge and the ultimate defeat of Napoleon.[14]

When Coalition forces crossed the Rhine as 1813 waned into 1814, they disrupted the Imperial bureaucracy to an extent that is impossible to determine. Although the invasion itself was not entirely a surprise, its timing came before the wheels of administrative machinery had begun to turn. Allied horsemen (especially Cossacks) created a sense of panic, even before they began to fan out across the French countryside. Napoleon's civilian subordinates and military administration were overburdened by his demands for ever greater numbers of new troops. Even had all administrators been completely loyal and enthusiastic (which many were not), they would have had trouble coping with the pressures placed upon them. Because conscription had to be effected by civilian bureaucrats at the local level, one war-weary or politically disloyal administrator could have a disproportionate impact. In the ensuing chaos, a huge number of potential recruits were probably never called upon. Elting's observation is at least partly correct. Most authorities agree that the bureaucracy was in disarray

Figure 1.2 Field Marshal Blücher, Commander of the Allied Army of Silesia. (From W. M. Sloane's *Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*, 1901.)

in 1814, but many have missed the significant impact this must have had on conscription efforts.

Still, of those who were called upon, a significant but unknown proportion declined to report for duty. There simply is no reliable way to determine the breakdown of what percentage never got the call, and what percentage refused to hear it. When reports from local officials were made, they noted with alarm that in some cases only about one quarter the number of draftees called showed up. They also noted, however, that the records were a mess. Many men who were listed as eligible for conscription were in fact ineligible either because they were married, dead, or already serving.[15] If we assume that such reports are roughly representative of the norm, a broad assumption in any case, then nearly half the numbers Napoleon called for were either ineligible or were not notified of their conscription.

Bureaucratic failure goes far to explain the low turnout among draftees, but it does not explain the lack of volunteers. Perhaps the "habits of obedience" had more power than any vague impulse to put oneself in harm's way for the sake of the Emperor and *la patrie.* Along the same lines, is it not more understandable that a potential recruit would avoid service for the simple motive of self-preservation rather than some principled opposition to the tyranny of the Emperor? While this makes common sense, it

should be added that civilian displeasure with Napoleon could have an indirect effect. If a potential recruit was reluctant to serve, a prevailing atmosphere of discontent among the local population might make draft evasion a more socially acceptable choice for him. Civilians (to include veterans) in other localities might look askance at someone who shirked duty. Local political attitudes had been a factor influencing draft evasion throughout the Wars of Revolution and Napoleonic Wars.[16] Indeed, the attitude of the civilian population in any country that practices conscription often has a strong impact, one way or the other, on how acceptable avoiding service is.

The small turnout of recruits to defend France in 1814 was due to multiple causes. Unfortunately, the complex combination of causes has been neglected in attempts to portray a clear picture. Interpretations of the failure of Napoleon's 1814 *levée en masse* have generally been painted in strokes too broad. The failure was not just due to war-weariness and disaffection with Napoleon, although these were vitally important factors. They provide an easy answer, but an incomplete one. In addition to the bureaucratic breakdown, there were logistical handicaps that had little or nothing to do with the attitudes of the French people. The military statistics are skewed by the fact that Napoleon badly overestimated available manpower, although France was far from being completely out of men.[17]

There was a lack of spontaneity in French mobilization efforts, and much of the blame for that can be laid at the feet of the Emperor. The "habits of obedience," however effective they may have been for most of the years of the Empire, were no substitute for genuine patriotic enthusiasm. That there was some genuine patriotism involved in the defense of France is also certain, which adds to the complexity of the overall situation. War-weariness, patriotism, politics, bureaucratic chaos, logistical shortages, localism, Allied military activity, and propaganda all had their effects. Not to be overlooked are the very real human emotions of fear and anger. All of these factors combined to produce the final turnout of defenders of France in 1814.

The most important commodity Napoleon lacked in 1814 was not political support, but time.[18] The rapidity of the Allied invasion left insufficient opportunity for Napoleon to rebuild an army in 1814. It is true that a greater degree of political support would have served to partly alleviate the shortage of time available to the Emperor. Lefebvre describes the machinery of the Imperial administration as "paralyzed." He goes on to note that many officials "foresaw the Emperor's downfall. They were therefore anxious to provide for their future, and made common cause with the royalists or even came to terms with the enemy."[19] Insofar as this was the case, it was more a matter of self-interest than politics. It could also be seen as a matter of self-fulfilling prophesy, rather than prescience on the part of the officials in question.

The Emperor could have chosen other courses of action that would have created more political support and enthusiasm, although it might be bold to suggest that anything he could have done would have created a force able to turn back the huge Allied armies. Whatever policies he chose, he would have benefited from more time in which to implement them. At the risk of counterfactual speculation, it is clear that if the Allies had decided to delay their invasion until spring, Napoleon probably would have been able to create a large new army for the defense of France.[20] In one of the most revealing samples of Napoleon's copious correspondence in the fall of 1813, he spoke of having seven months until May for the mobilization of a new army.[21] It was not simply a lack of men that crippled the French forces in 1814. In fact, a strong argument could be made that a shortage of recruits was the *very least* of Napoleon's problems, as he could not adequately arm and clothe all of those who showed up in training depots. The figure of 120,000 men so often cited refers only to troops who actually made it into the field to fight. It does not include tens of thousands more who remained in depots untrained or without weapons. There was a lack of every kind of military resource, from recruits, to weapons, to uniforms, to training. All of these factors had only one correction: additional time.

Napoleon's defeat in 1814 was at once a military, political, and diplomatic defeat. As with any political or military leader, Napoleon had options, and his choices ultimately led to failure. The fact that he combined the roles of political and military leader only highlighted the intimate connection between war and politics. His political miscalculations led him to military mistakes, and vice-versa. This is not to detract from the brilliance of Napoleon's 1814 campaign. The conduct of the campaign itself is often regarded as one of Napoleon's best in both strategic and tactical terms, although even in purely military terms, Napoleon's 1814 campaign was not flawless, as several authorities have pointed out.[22] In any case, the conduct of war is not only strategy and tactics. Napoleon knew this as well or better than anyone in history, and yet the axiom eluded him at crucial junctures. His efforts to arouse and exploit French patriotism were inadequate. Whether or not French defeat in 1814 was a forgone conclusion is not the point. Napoleon, for all the brilliance of his campaign, could have done better in terms of the coordination of political and military efforts. A study of the defenders of France in 1814 makes this clear.

There were, apart from the Emperor's mistakes, other failures of leadership. Napoleon, after the campaign, blamed a few of his subordinates for the final defeat in 1814. This was of course self-serving (and habitual). Only the most ardent of Napoleon's apologists believe that it was the fault of a handful of "traitors" that France fell. On the other hand, the performance of some of the Emperor's subordinates did leave much to be desired. In some cases, they had a decisive negative impact on the outcome of the campaign. Some of the more important failures of leadership are addressed

in subsequent chapters. This is not done to excuse Napoleon, but to put the performance of the defenders of France into better perspective.

For all of the importance of the political questions of 1814, France was ultimately overwhelmed by a superior combination of enemy forces. Domestic support aside, the Emperor could not continually match military resources against the bulk of Europe. Military resources, it must again be emphasized, involve far more than numbers of men. Much of the story of 1814 reminds one of the old verse, "for want of a nail, etc." Napoleon at one time had at his disposal vast military resources, but he squandered them in Russia in 1812 and in Germany in 1813, not to mention in Spain from 1808 through 1813. Every defeat had political repercussions for Napoleon, but the actual losses in materiel had direct consequences. After the mind-staggering losses in Russia in 1812, the Emperor cashed in his impressive stockpile of military resources to create a new army. The loss of that army in Germany in 1813 left him in the most acute military bind, even had he continued to enjoy overwhelming political support. Indeed, in terms of population rather than influence, Napoleon did maintain significant political support, especially among the peasantry, although the numbers are impossible to quantify. He sometimes underestimated the resiliency of his political support, complaining to Metternich in 1813:

> Your Sovereigns born to the throne can let themselves be beaten twenty times and return to their capitals. I cannot do this because I am an upstart soldier. My domination will not survive the day when I cease to be strong and therefore feared.[23]

If that had been a completely accurate assessment, Napoleon would have lost his throne even before the 1814 campaign began. Despite the enormous political damage caused by the defeats of 1812 and 1813, it would take the capture of Paris by enemy armies to guarantee his downfall. He might well have pondered the injustice of the fact that the "Sovereigns born to the throne" could lose Vienna (twice), Berlin, and Moscow and still rule. Yet even he would return to his capital, in 1815.

The controversies of 1814 will not be settled for all time here. The aim here is to present the defenders of France as evidence and as a crucial part of the story. The fall of Napoleon cannot be completely understood without them. They are a reflection of their Emperor in 1814: generally resolute, often gallant, but ultimately hamstrung and overwhelmed. The next chapter will take a brief look at the series of events that took Napoleon and France from being the dominant power on the European continent to being the battered victim of invasion. Subsequent chapters will examine the creation of a new French army in 1814, and the makeup of that army. Later chapters will look at the actions of the defenders of France in the campaign itself. A final analysis will close out the chapters.