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Michael V. Leggiere, *Napoleon and the Struggle for Germany, the Franco-Prussian War of 1813, I: The War of Liberation, Spring 1813*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xii + 488 pp. Preface, maps, figures, notes, bibliography and index. £24.99 (hb). ISBN: 978-1-107-08051-5.

Michael V. Leggiere, *Napoleon and the Struggle for Germany, the Franco-Prussian War of 1813, II: The Defeat of Napoleon*. Cambridge University Press, 2015. xiv + 887 pp. Preface, maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography and index. £29.99 (hb). ISBN: 978-1-107-08054-6.

Review by Charles J. Esdaile, University of Liverpool.

In the early months of 1813 King Frederick William III of Prussia, a mild-mannered figure who abhorred war and wanted only peace and security for his much-trying subjects, faced a desperately difficult decision. In the wake of the French disaster in Russia, the chief Russian field army had crossed the frontier and pushed westwards accompanied by none other than Tsar Alexander I himself. For all Napoleon's defeat, however, Prussia was tied to France by a military alliance, and Frederick William therefore knew that he was bound to come to Napoleon's aid. Yet, matters were not so simple. Setting aside the fact that he owed Alexander a debt of gratitude for Prussia's very survival in the wake of the terrible defeats of Jena and Auerstädt in 1806, he was rapidly losing control of his dominions.

Thus, led by General Yorck von Wartenburg, the Prussian auxiliary corps that had seconded the invasion of Russia had effectively risen in revolt against the alliance with France and established a liberated area around Königsberg. Here, he was joined by the initial leader of the Prussian reform movement, Heinrich vom Stein, who, after the last few years of exile in Russia, had just been appointed by Alexander as his commissioner in occupied Prussia, the latter immediately persuading the local estates to decree the formation of a popular militia or *landwehr*. On top of this, throughout the land, outraged not just by Prussia's humiliation in the war of 1806-1807 but also by the devastation wrought by the concentration of 500,000 troops on Prussian territory prior to the invasion of Russia, educated opinion was up in arms and demanding action, even warning that the result of staying loyal to Napoleon would be revolution. Finally, if the king chose to fight Russia, too, Prussia could expect to be punished without mercy should it end up on the losing side.

Yet, who was to say that Napoleon would lose? There was nothing to suggest from the French defeat in Russia that there was anything fundamentally wrong with the French war-machine, since it was clear from the desperate state of the pitiful survivors who had trickled across the frontier in December 1812 that the real victor had been the terrible winter. Meanwhile, the Russian forces had also been hard hit by the snow and ice and were not present in any great strength. Might not Napoleon recover, and, if he recovered, what would then be the fate of Prussia? Small wonder, then, that Frederick William responded by trying desperately to temporise, and, indeed, to play for time.

By late February, however, time had run out—already, the leading Russian troops were as far west as Posen—and the last day of the month saw Frederick William's envoy, Gerhard von Scharnhorst, sign a

treaty with Russia that committed Prussia to war with Napoleon and guaranteed the mobilization of an army of 80,000 men in exchange for a promise that after the war Alexander would restore the country to a size equivalent to the one it had enjoyed in 1806. With most of the French forces now out of the way across the Elbe, Prussia declared war on 16 March 1813. Thus began a conflict that in scarcely more than six months would bring the Prussian army to the Rhine after some of the most terrible battles in the whole of the Revolutionary Wars. This is a story on which Michael Leggiere has already written extensively.^[1] With the publication of these fresh works, which together constitute some 1,400 pages of text, he surely must be regarded as the leading expert on the subject.

This is a considerable personal achievement. Archival research for the project was undertaken in London, Paris, Moscow, Berlin, and Baden-Baden (though it would have been helpful to provide a list of the files that had actually been consulted), while the bibliography is, beyond doubt, overwhelming. Nor, meanwhile, can it be argued that the story is told in anything other than the utmost detail—the author is painstaking to a fault—or indeed, that it has ever been presented to an English-speaking audience in such detail before. The only readily available source that treats it in anything more than a few paragraphs is the chapter in David Chandler's increasingly venerable *Campaigns of Napoleon*.^[2] And, last but not least, the subject is scarcely one that can be described as trivial: the *Befreiungskrieg* of 1813 was, after all, both the crucible and the central epic of nineteenth-century German nationalism.

Beyond doubt, then, Leggiere has made a major contribution to the literature, and military specialists will read his work with profit. His command of the narrative is assured and his judgements acute and sensible. That said, however, sincere praise and honest respect must be tempered with a degree of criticism. It is not given to all historians to be great writers, but behind every great writer there usually lurks a great editor, and in this respect it has to be said that Leggiere has been done something of a disservice. In brief, the work is extremely long, far longer, indeed, than seems strictly necessary, and one has to ask whether many passages could not have put to, if not the sword, then at least the blue pencil. Eager as Leggiere is to get his message across, he has a tendency to labor the point, and this has the effect of making an already dense read still denser. Cutting down the two volumes featured here to just one would therefore have been a wise move. If Chandler's work has survived so well, it is in part because it can genuinely be read for pleasure.

Important though the question of accessibility is, it is not the only criterion on which a book should be judged. There is also the question of approach. For the past fifty years or more, military history has been studied not just in terms of battles and campaigns, but also in its wider social, political, and economic context. Of this development, however, there is little sign in Leggiere's work. These two volumes could very easily have been written a century ago. Indeed, on occasion, even the narrative is not handled especially convincingly. I began this review with a brief account of the very difficult decision faced by Frederick William III in the first months of 1813, but Leggiere tends rather to suggest that Frederick William was quietly moving toward the decision to side with Alexander from the very beginning. This is, perhaps, the fruit of a tendency to view the history of Prussia between 1807 and 1813 as deterministic. In brief, according to the traditional account, while ardent nationalist intellectuals preached a war of revenge against France, a group of reformers consisting of civilian ministers, bureaucrats, and angry military men banded together to re-fashion the institutions of the Prussian state so as to make a conflict feasible. At no time, however, is the alternative possibility discussed or even considered, namely that, especially in the hands of its more effective proponents (one thinks here not of Vom Stein, but of his eventual replacement, Karl von Hardenberg), the reform movement was above all aimed at securing Prussia a place at the Napoleonic table by convincing the emperor that Potsdam could provide him with international support that was as sound as it was effective.

In fairness, such complexities are not entirely absent from Leggiere's discussion of the long-term background to the War of 1813. With regard to the war scare of 1811, for example, the excited Prussian voices that called for insurrection are shown to have been faced down by a prudent Frederick William III. Yet, there is a strong suggestion that the deciding factor here was calculation, that in his heart, the king

wanted revenge as much as any of the war's more exaggerated proponents and only backed away from the prospect in this instance because Napoleon's forces were closer to Potsdam than were those of Alexander I. Indeed, there is throughout a certainty about Leggiere's writing that is a little disturbing. Consider, for example, this passage from *The Defeat of Napoleon*: "Similar to Volume 1, *The War of Liberation*, which focuses on Prussia's role in 1813, the current volume ... describes how Prussia played a pivotal role in the multinational coalition that formed during the armistice [of Plösswitz] and wrested Germany from Napoleon's control by the first week of November. It continues to expand Gordon Craig's assertion that the war against Napoleon was not a political struggle, but an ideological 'fight against evil, a struggle against the anti-Christ and his successors.'" [*The Defeat of Napoleon*, p. 11].

Eminent though he was, Craig was publishing in the immediate post-Second-World-War era, and it is alarming to see Leggiere seeming to accept his views so uncritically. As is well known, the *landwehr* (a force composed, like the vast majority of Prussia's soldiers, of conscripts rather than volunteers) suffered enormously from desertion, while many areas of Prussia had been experiencing considerable social unrest. As for volunteers from the lower classes of society, we know that for the most part the men who joined the famous Lützow *Freikorps* were Silesian weavers rendered destitute by economic decline. In other words, they were fighting Napoleon not so much because they hated him, but because they had no other means of gaining their daily bread. Thus, the concept of a patriotism-fuelled rush to the colors is a little hard to accept. One does have to say that the Prussian army is generally credited with fighting with a ferocity in the campaigns of 1813-15 that quite distinguished it from most of the other forces alongside which it served, but it would have been good to see Leggiere explore these issues, and all the more so as they have never been adequately discussed in any of the copious English-language historiography.

Also troubling are several other issues of this nature. For many years, for example, historians have been commenting on the limitations on the ostensible Prussian drive to conduct a revolutionary war of liberation in 1813. For example, if Frederick William III issued a proclamation calling the German people to arms when he went to war in March 1813, it is clear that the last thing he wanted was crowds of armed civilians taking to the fields and woods. Rather, his object was to pressure the princes of the Confederation of the Rhine into abandoning Napoleon (a policy that for a long time proved singularly lacking in results). Equally, there was on the surface considerable institutional change in the Prussian army that appeared to replicate that seen in the France of the French Revolution. One thinks here, of course, of the career open to talent, universal conscription, and the formation of the militia forces known as the *Landwehr* and the *Landsturm*, all backed up by the massive social reform represented by the abolition of feudalism. Scratch the surface just a little, however, and these developments appear open to considerable question. Thus, in practice, the officer corps remained dominated by the *Junkers*, liability to military service remained uneven, and the peasantry sank into a state far more miserable than that which had pertained prior to the edict that supposedly freed them in 1810. None of this is to say, of course, that the Prussian state did not throw itself into the *Befreiungskrieg* with a savagery born of desperation, but it does suggest that the subject needs to be approached with a critical eye. Not for nothing has the Prussian war effort been described as a "people's war without the people."

To this Leggiere would doubtless respond that his subject is not the context of war but rather the manner of its waging, and, in so far as this last is concerned, his work is genuinely full of insight. One thing that comes over very strongly is the manifold tensions that beset the alliance against Napoleon. Yet again, indeed, this reader was led to marvel at the sheer incompetence that marked the emperor's conduct in 1813-14. While Napoleon could improvise armies out of nothing and even still win battles, he is shown to have been utterly incapable of cutting his coat to suit his cloth, of recognising that politics is the art of the possible (and, indeed, that there was always a "possible" in the form of a negotiated peace that almost to the end was his for the asking). Even then, however, the fight to bring him down was long and hard, and, for all that one might doubt whether it really was the Prussians rather than the Russians who took the leading part in the war. No author has worked harder than Leggiere, a fine scholar in every way worthy of respect, to recount the details of that struggle. One can

only wish that he had taken a little time to consider the lessons of Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812: the way to win great victories is not to heap up armies so huge that they break down under their own weight; sometimes, less is more.

NOTES

[1] Michael Leggiere, *Napoleon and Berlin: the Franco-Prussian War in Northern Germany, 1813* (Norman, O.K.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002).

[2] David Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (New York: MacMillan, 1966).

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