

H-France Review Vol. 7 (February 2007), No. 16

Robert Goetz, *1805: Austerlitz, Napoleon and the Destruction of the Third Coalition*. Greenhill: London, 2005. 368 pp. Appendices, Maps, Tables, Illustrations and Index. ISBN 1-85367644-6.

Reviewed by Frederick C. Schneid, High Point University.

Operational and tactical military history is not terribly fashionable among academics, despite its popularity with general readers. Even the “new military history” tends to shun the traditional approach. Yet, there is great utility and significance to studying campaigns and battles as the late Russell Weigley, Professor of History at Temple University often said, “armies are for fighting.” Warfare reflects the societies waging it, and armies are in turn, reflections of their societies. Robert Goetz, an independent historian, has produced a comprehensive account of Austerlitz, emphasizing Austrian and Russian perspectives on the event. “The story of the 1805 campaign and the stunning battle of Austerlitz,” writes Goetz, “is the story of the beginning of the Napoleon of history and the *Grande Armée* of legend.”[1] Goetz further stresses, “[n]o other single battle save Waterloo would match the broad impact of Austerlitz on the course of European history.”[2] Certainly, one can take exception to these broad sweeping statements but, in short, they properly characterize the established perception of the battle and its impact. For Goetz, Austerlitz takes center stage, and the diplomatic and strategic environment exists only to provide context for the climactic encounter between Napoleon and the Russo-Austrian armies. Austerlitz was Napoleon’s most decisive victory and as such has been the focus of numerous military histories of the Napoleonic Era. Alistair Horne argued in *How far from Austerlitz*, that the dramatic victory achieved by the French Emperor, led him on a grail-like quest for similar victories which ultimately eluded him.[3] Standard accounts of the battle view it squarely through Napoleon’s eyes. In part this reflects the availability of the historical literature. Not only did Napoleon use the triumph as a significant propaganda tool beginning with his address to his soldiers the following day, later published in French papers, but a great deal of the military sources were published during the course of the Second Empire and many of these were reprinted during the course of the Third Republic. Austerlitz in French memory was critical, because it represented in many ways the ultimate achievement of revolutionary armies, namely the decisive and complete victory over Austria and Russia. In the wake of the humiliating defeat of the Franco-Prussian War and the clear failings of the military leadership of the Second Empire, Bonapartists could thus remain in the guise of conservative nationalists. The French army’s historical section produced an impressive compilation of archival material along with a detailed campaign narrative in five volumes authored by Colin and Alombert.[4] These are critical to studying the French army and its operations and logistics.

Unfortunately, official histories of the campaign and the battle were not as readily forthcoming from Austria or Russia. In the 1878, Moritz von Angeli produced the first Austrian history of the campaign in two extensively detailed articles published in *Mitteilungen des k.u.k. Kriegs Archivs*, but that was it.[5] The Austrian army’s historical section wrote an official history of the War of the First Coalition, 1792-1797, a history of 1809, and one of 1813-14, but none exist on 1805.[6] Gunther Rothenberg, late Professor of History, Purdue University, and the first English-speaking historian to explore the Habsburg Army during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, believed the omission was purposeful, “some things are better left-alone.”[7] Oskar Regele, senior archivist at the Austrian Archives in 1969, addressed the substantial failings of Austrian army leadership, particularly the role of Karl Lieberich von Mack, Quartermaster-General of the Habsburg army, by arguing that the failure of leadership was not limited to Mack, but Kaiser Franz’s ministers, Cobenzl and Colloredo, who created a political climate that contributed to the disaster.[8] Nonetheless, this did not focus on the battle itself, but earlier events. Robert Goetz, however, directly addresses this lacuna in the historiography by providing

historians with perhaps one of the most detailed tactical accounts of the battle from the Austrian and Russian perspectives. The latter is quite important, as the inability of many western historians to read Russian essentially precludes the use of primary source accounts, particularly those drawn from the Russian archives.

Goetz's book is not the first to examine the battle and employ available Austrian and Russian sources, Christopher Duffy's, *Austerlitz 1805*, remains the classic account, and it is this history with which Goetz is in direct competition for a more thorough examination of events.[9] What makes Goetz's account intriguing is that he utilizes Austrian and Russian sources that were unavailable to Duffy in 1977. Of particular value to Goetz are the reprints of Karl von Stutterheim's history of the battle, and Alexandre, comte Langeron's narrative.[10] Both sources are used judiciously, along with material drawn from a published collection of Field Marshal Mikhail Kutuzov's papers, a copy of which resides at the University of Virginia.

There are likewise a number of memoirs and histories that appear in electronic form, scanned from their originals and placed online. Technology seems to have aided Goetz in his quest for these sources, as he did not travel to Russia or Austria to conduct archival research, but encourages others to expand upon his work, and to provide a clearer and more balanced view of the battle.[11] The use of electronic sources goes beyond books available for download such as through *Gallica*, and the like, to include articles and documents drawn from Napoleonic websites and web links via the "Russian Museum" website www.museum.ru/museum/1812/English/index.html. Many historians have benefited tremendously from the increasing availability of books and documents that would otherwise require a great expenditure of time and money to acquire if at all. It has in essence, shortened the traditional lag time between ordering from interlibrary loan and reading the sources. The difficulty, however, remains in assessing the utility and veracity of online sources that have not been scanned from their originals. This reader remains highly suspicious of electronic sources whose validity cannot be independently verified.

Goetz, like Duffy, discusses the strategic and operational plans of the Third Coalition from the origins of the war to the French victory at Ulm in October 1805. Chapters 2 and 3 are largely concerned with the operations of the French and allied armies, as well as with the expressed purpose of setting the stage for the battle. Goetz argues that Napoleon discerned allied plans to turn his flank and push him away from Vienna, trapping him in Moravia. This is significant, because it means Napoleon possessed a pre-conceived battle plan by 1 December, whereas he often rejected such notions in favor of letting the battle develop and applying the appropriate pressure at the precise time by retaining a significant reserve, and possessing superior command and control over his opponents. Goetz conversely presents the lack of cohesion at allied headquarters with Kutusov pushed aside due to his cautious nature, and Tsar Alexander relying upon the "genius" [my word] of Weyrother to coordinate an effective operational plan. These arguments are not new, and Goetz is fair enough to admit that the allied plan almost worked, if not for poor coordination of the column commanders, especially Buxhowden whom Goetz largely blames for the disaster of the afternoon, and Napoleon's foresight in calling Davout from Vienna to shore up his right flank.

What follows are four and a half painstakingly detailed chapters on the events of 2 December 1805. Goetz is determined to provide the reader with a narrative of events at the battalion level; in fact a substantial part of his narrative concerns regimental and battalion tactics. At times, the story appears more as a deconstructed account of the day's events. Although there are points where the utility of such an approach is questionable, and detail for the sake of detail appears to be the sole rationale, Goetz attempts to provide as full a description as possible. There are a number of occasions when the recollection of events is rather turgid, but in the grand scheme, Goetz succeeds in presenting the battle not only with a greater emphasis on the allied armies, but also as a more comprehensible sequence of events. In the place of the traditional discussion, corps deployed, columns moving, divisions engaged, we

find the great battle as a culmination of varied, disjointed, and hard-fought engagements. This is, to Goetz's credit, a service to the history of the battle. Whether intentional or accidental, the focus on the tactical level makes it less likely that Napoleon's genius, or allied incompetence decided the day. On the operational level, the deployment of reserves, the attack onto the Pratzen heights, and the arrival of Davout's corps, are certainly to be attributed to Napoleon's ability to manage the larger picture much better than his opponents in 1805.

While Goetz's determination to provide a detailed account of the tactical engagements provides a new perspective, at the same time it raises some questions that this reader would have thought Goetz should specifically address. First, the tactical narrative does present the reader with a virtually definitive account of the action; yet, for all his efforts to illustrate the desperate town fighting in Tellnitz and Sokolnitz and the intense struggle to wrest the Pratzen heights from the Russian Imperial Guard, Goetz includes a limited discussion of the tactical formations employed by the respective armies. It must be clear to the readers of this review, that this is no mundane issue, nor is it criticism of the minutiae in a very detailed work. The nature of French and allied tactics, (formations on the battlefield, line vs. column, etc.), is central to the traditional military history of the Napoleonic Wars. The extent of his tactical analysis appears in a paragraph in chapter 7:

For some, the tactical proficiency demonstrated by the French at Austerlitz has led to the conclusion that French tactical doctrine was inherently superior to that of the allies.... In fact, the allied armies were using tactics that were essentially the same as those used by the French. In numerous examples throughout the battle, the allied forces demonstrated flexibility in tactical formations, skirmishing, advancing in column and deploying into line to engage the enemy.[12]

The preponderance of Goetz's examples, however, focus on the ability of Russian *Jaeger* (light infantry) to fight in skirmish order and meet the French light infantry head-on. This approach is not new, as the development of Russian light infantry battalions was a reflection of lessons learned on the Russians' frontiers with the Turks and in central Asia during the eighteenth century, and not drawn from the experience of the Russian army in central Europe. The notion that the allied armies did not possess a tactical flexibility equivalent to the French is based upon a misconception by historians laid to rest in the past decade. Allied soldiers were highly trained and well disciplined, and the greatest difference between the allies and the French lay not in tactics, but in organization, operations and leadership.[13] In his final analysis, Goetz places the blame for defeat squarely and properly upon allied leaders. From Tsar Alexander to General Weyrother, to the respective column commanders, there was a failure at all levels to assess the changing situation and address the growing crisis as the morning stalemate gave way by early afternoon to the eventual debacle. Napoleon's ability, and that of his generals to respond relatively rapidly to the changing nature of the battlefield, either through direct orders from the Emperor or on the initiative of the commander on the spot, is rightly identified as a critical factor in the French victory.

Robert Goetz has therefore written a comprehensive, but by no means definitive account of the battle of Austerlitz. There is room for more. He should be congratulated for presenting not so much a new perspective, but for providing greater depth to the Russian and Austrian views. Michael Hochedlinger, archivist and military historian at the *Haus, Hof, Staat und Kriegsarchiv* in Vienna wrote that while the narrative history of the Habsburg army has entered English-speaking histories beginning with Gunther E. Rothenberg's *Napoleon's Great Adversary: The Archduke Charles and the Austrian Army, 1792-1814* (Bloomington: 1982), there remains a critical need for assessment of the army, not in terms of operations and tactics, but an exploration of the social composition of the army equivalent to the extent that the French armies of the Revolution and Empire have been examined.[14] Unfortunately, there is very little in terms of critical narrative and analysis in this work of the Russian army under Tsars Paul I and Alexander I. Alexandre Mikabridze is one of the few historians filling this gap in the historical literature, but there is a desperate need for more. In all, Goetz's book is recommended to students of military history who appreciate detailed battle narrative, an integrated allied perspective, and an enjoyable read.

NOTES

[1] Robert Goetz, *1805: Austerlitz, Napoleon and the Destruction of the Third Coalition* (Greenhill: London, 2005), 13.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 306.

[3] Alistair Horne, *How far from Austerlitz? Napoleon 1805-1815* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998).

[4] P. C. Alombert and J. Colin, *La campagne de 1805 en Allemagne*, 5 vols. (Paris: Teissèdre, 1902).

[5] Moritz von Angeli, "Ulm und Austerlitz," *Mitteilungen des k.u.k. Kriegs Archivs*, III (1878): 283-394.

[6] Kriegs Archiv, Wien, *Kriege unter der Regierung des Kaisers Franz: Krieg gegen die französische Revolution*, 2 vols. (Vienna, 1905); *idem.*, *Krieg 1809*, 4 vols. (Vienna, 1907-1910); *idem.*, 1813-1815. *Österreich in den Befreiungskriegen*, 10 vols. (Vienna, 1911-1914).

[7] Conversation with Frederick Schneid, 1992.

[8] Oskar Regele, "Karl Freiherr von Mack und Johann Ludwig Cobenzl. Ihre Rolle im Kriegsjahr 1805," *Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Staatsarchivs* XX, 1 (1969): 142-164.

[9] Christopher Duffy, *Austerlitz 1805* (London, 1977).

[10] Major-General Karl Stutterheim, *A Detailed Account of the Battle of Austerlitz* (reprint Cambridge, 1985); Alexandre comte de Langeron, *Journal inédit de la campagne de 1805: Austerlitz* (reprint Paris, 1998).

[11] Goetz, *Austerlitz*, p. 14.

[12] Goetz, *Austerlitz*, p. 282.

[13] An accessible overview rejecting the concept of static armies of the eighteenth century is, Peter H. Wilson, "Warfare in the Old Regime, 1648-1789," in *European Warfare 1453-1815*, edited by Jeremy Black (New York, 1999), oo, 69-95.

[14] Michael Hochedlinger, Commentary on, Gunther E. Rothenberg, "The Shield of the Dynasty: Reflections on the Habsburg Army, 1649-1918," *Austrian History Yearbook* 32 (2001): 169-206.

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ISSN 1553-9172