

---

H-France Review Vol. 9 (December 2009), No. 141

Michael V. Leggiere, *The Fall of Napoleon, Volume One: The Allied Invasion of France, 1813-1814*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 704 pp. Portraits, maps, appendices, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U. S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-521-87542-4.

Review by Ralph Ashby, Eastern Illinois University.

Michael V. Leggiere has produced a massive monograph that extensively explores an area of Napoleonic military history that has received relatively little attention, especially in English-language works. Waterloo and the Russian Campaign of 1812 have been hashed and rehashed in English, but not so Napoleon's penultimate campaign. Leggiere himself points out the "...surprising gap in the literature concerning the final year of Napoleon's reign" (p. xv). This reviewer couldn't agree more that the Allied invasion of France has been neglected, and indeed full disclosure compels me to indicate that my own book on the 1814 campaign will be going to press in the near future.

The campaign that led to Napoleon's first abdication was not of long duration, but was sufficiently complex to allow for several different approaches of study. The "gold standard" in terms of histories of 1814 for the last 120 years has been the French-language account 1814 by Henry Houssaye.[1] Houssaye divided the campaign into three phases, and explicitly gave most emphasis to what he identified as the final phase. Leggiere, in this English-language volume of unprecedented scope, basically does the reverse, and focuses on the diplomatic and military events of the earliest part of the Allied invasion of France, setting the stage in the waning months of 1813. As well as restricting his first volume on the "Fall of Napoleon" chronologically to the last few months of 1813 and the first few weeks of January 1814, Leggiere specifically emphasizes matters of high-command. As Leggiere points out, "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" (p. xv). This approach serves the author's purposes well, and happily leaves room for other studies and discussions of 1814.

After the Russian disaster of 1812, Napoleon's rebuilt 1813 version of his Grande Armée was defeated and mostly destroyed at the hands of the strongest coalition the French had yet faced. The 1813 campaign in Germany drove Napoleon and his decimated survivors finally over to the French side of the Rhine and brought the Coalition armies into position to invade France. Napoleon wistfully expected that the Allies would not invade before spring and, instead, go into winter quarters. This would give him time to recover, regroup, and rebuild for a campaign in the spring of 1814. Some of the Allies (especially the Austrians) were in fact thinking along such lines. There was even, unsurprisingly given the situation, hope for a negotiated peace. Negotiations ultimately proved futile in light of Napoleon's unwillingness to compromise and disagreements among the Allies. Leggiere examines the Allied discussions and disagreements in thorough detail, tracing their ultimate decision to invade France and wage a winter campaign at the beginning of 1814.

The perspective in Leggiere's book is at least as much from the Allied side as from that of the French. In terms of utilizing Prussian, Austrian, and Russian sources, Leggiere has outdone even Houssaye. The author has exhaustively researched German-language archives and correspondence. Likewise, Leggiere has scoured the correspondence of the French military leaders in charge of the initial phases of

the defense of French frontiers. Indeed, the operations of the small French forces on the frontiers against the first advances of the invading Allies take up the bulk of Leggiere's book. These operations did not directly involve Napoleon, because he was in Paris for most of this period. Napoleon's hopes for a reprieve from invasion until spring having been dashed, he subsequently hoped his subordinate commanders would be able to hold back or at least delay the initial Allied advances. Meanwhile, he would organize mobilization efforts from Paris until he deemed it prudent to take command of the army in the field personally once more. This overly optimistic scenario did not materialize. To put it mildly, Napoleon was disappointed by the inability of his subordinate commanders to hinder in any significant way the progress of the Allied invasion. Leggiere essentially ends this volume at the point when Napoleon did take command of the main field army towards the end of January 1814. In Leggiere's words, "The invasion of France had ended, the war for France was about to begin" (p. 488).

One of the reasons 1814 has not hitherto received the scholarly attention of other Napoleonic campaigns is that the odds seem in retrospect so badly stacked against Napoleon that one could assume that there is not much to discuss. The invading Coalition now consisted of virtually all of the rest of Europe arrayed against a French army decimated by the disasters of 1812 and 1813. Allied forces were many times the size of French forces immediately available to oppose the invasion. Therefore (and too often) the final outcome of the campaign has been regarded as a foregone conclusion.

Leggiere realizes that such assumptions ignore matters of contingency and human agency. Nowhere is this more evident than in his treatment of the various courses of action available to the Allies, especially in light of their incongruous agendas. Examining these agendas and potential courses of action is not the same as counter-factual speculation, but in fact is necessary to an appreciation of factors of contingency.

For example, Metternich, as presented by Leggiere, was one of the main reasons that the Allied invasion of France was not launched full-scale even sooner, and more aggressively, than it turned out to be in actual execution (pp. 45-47). Leggiere points out that some Allied commanders, including Prussian chief-of-staff Gneisenau, thought that a quick advance on Paris before Napoleon could even catch his breath was militarily (if not diplomatically) feasible (pp. 132-133). Leggiere agrees that an invasion launched sooner would have resulted in an even quicker Allied victory. Metternich had Austrian interests as his priority, and the quick elimination of Imperial France did not necessarily bode well for balance of power purposes. Other works have discussed Metternich in relation to 1814, but Leggiere draws especial attention to the actual impact of the Austrian's diplomatic maneuvers upon subsequent military operations. Napoleon had the barest of breathing space in which to accomplish at least some minimal military mobilization with which to oppose the invasion—an invasion he had hoped would not be launched until spring.

While the Allies were divided in terms of diplomacy and agendas, the French frontier armies were divided by a lack of unity of command. Consistent with his obsessive and protective regard for his own military authority and reputation, Napoleon studiously avoided delegating any sort of supreme operational command to any single subordinate. This problem on the French side is one of the main themes of Leggiere's work in this volume. Lack of coordination and cooperation between the thinly spread French forces only exacerbated their lack of numbers and resources. This is not only Leggiere's assessment, but was identified as a problem by French officers at the time (pp. 444-463).

A characteristic of the book throughout is that Leggiere's research is exhaustively thorough. Very often he brings forward reams of evidence and lets that evidence essentially speak for itself. For the target audience, this is quite helpful. The dozens of small actions during the early part of the Allied invasion of France are reconstructed in painstaking detail from the reports and correspondence of the various officers involved on both sides. Supporting this approach is a series of appendices at the end of the book in which Leggiere includes relevant correspondence.

Scholars and students of the Napoleonic period who wish to pursue further study of 1814 will need to examine Leggiere's work. They should be encouraged by the fact that there are aspects and issues of the 1814 campaign that still need to be examined. Political and social aspects of 1814 remain inadequately explored, especially in English-language accounts. Military history from the soldiers' point of view deserves more attention as well. Writers wishing to pursue further study of 1814 should also be aware that in terms of thoroughness and scholarly research, Leggiere has set the bar quite high.

## NOTES

[1] Henry Houssaye, *1814* (Etrepilly: Presses du Village, 1986)

Ralph Ashby  
Eastern Illinois University  
rwashby@eiu.edu

Copyright © 2009 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172