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Ralph Ashby, *Napoleon against Great Odds: the Emperor and the Defenders of France, 1814*. Santa Barbara, Cal., Denver, Co., and Oxford: Praeger, 2010. xiii + 230 pp. Maps, tables, notes, bibliography and index. \$44.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN978-0-313-38190-4.

Review by Charles Esdaile, University of Liverpool.

Napoleon's last-ditch defence of France in the campaign of January-March 1814 is beyond doubt one of the most gripping episodes in the long series of wars that, largely at his own doing, ravaged Europe between 1803 and 1815. Even hardened opponents of the Napoleonic admiration are moved to grudging admiration by the extraordinary virtuosity with which the embattled emperor hurled his outnumbered and tattered army against the legions of his opponents, while for the French ruler's many admirers and apologists the story of his endless marches and counter-marches is an epic tragedy that yet serves to emphasise one more time his personal genius and devotion to the cause of France. However one looks at it, then, the narrative is an exciting one, and it is therefore a little surprising that, prior to Ralph Ashby, no recent Anglophone author has made it the subject of a monograph. [1]

Yet the subject is not just cannon-fodder for battle-buffs. On the contrary, the campaign of 1814 also sits at the very heart of debates on the Napoleonic Empire for it was at this great moment of crisis that the emperor's hold on his people was most truly put to the test. For both supporters and detractors of the emperor, then, establishing what went on in France as the forces of Britain, Austria, Russia and Prussia flooded across the frontier in search of a final day of reckoning is crucial. Clearly, if Napoleon can be shown to have had the enthusiastic backing of the French populace, his claims to represent the will of the nation cannot but receive a considerable degree of legitimisation, but, by the same token, if France can be shown to have refused to fight for the emperor, it follows that they are reduced to little more than empty verbiage.

This being the case, the absence of a scholarly monograph on the campaign of 1814 is all the more surprising. What is more, the results of this neglect are clear in that the many authors whose work-- biographies of Napoleon, studies of Napoleonic Europe or campaign histories of the Napoleonic Wars -- has necessarily led them to discuss the episode have been left free to formulate their views in accordance with their own preconceptions and even prejudices. In this respect, the author of this review is a good example. Thus, wholly unsurprisingly, for him 1814 is a story of disintegration: "Even the few enthusiasts for Jacobinism who still remained [were] not taken in by the attempt to recall 1793, whilst the bulk of population was desperate for peace. As a result guerrilla resistance only took place when the more unruly elements of the Allied forces got out of control; if anything, in fact, the depredations of the half-starved French army, which was now living almost entirely by pillage, made the populace downright hostile. Nor, of course, were the *notables* any more enthusiastic ... the result being that on all sides expressions of support for the restoration of the Bourbons began to multiply dramatically." [2] In fairness, it must be said that these lines were not just the fruit of anti-bonapartist invention, but were rather rooted in substantial reading in the memoir sources and the specialised secondary literature alike. Yet, as the author was well aware, until such time as they could be verified by reference to detailed archival studies, in the end they could be little more than assertion, however plausible.

All this being the case, the publication at long last of a study of the campaign of 1814 cannot but be welcome news for the historical community. That said, alas, it cannot be said that this work is the answer to its prayers. Ashby writes well and, in fairness, has striven hard both to produce a work that is something more than a campaign history and to keep such military narrative as he includes to a necessary minimum. At the same time his efforts are buttressed by a considerable amount of work in the French military archives. Yet in the end the work promises more than it delivers, not least because from the beginning it is clear that Ashby has his own *idée fixée* (essentially that France was loyal to Napoleon).

Let us begin with the notion of war-weariness. As Ashby observes, both those in favour of Napoleon and those opposed to him have been inclined to push this as an explanation for the emperor's downfall: for the former it is a convenient way of stressing that the emperor only came to grief because he was betrayed by the very people for whom he was sacrificing himself so heroically, just as for the latter it is an equally convenient way of emphasising the emperor's despotism, not to mention the way in which he had long-since lost touch with reality. So far, so good, but Ashby does not really succeed in reducing the importance of the phenomenon in the manner which he seems from the beginning to want. As he points out, the most tangible method of measuring war-weariness is to compare the number of men called up in the winter of 1813-1814 with those who actually took the field.

However, in Ashby's eyes, the figures commonly quoted in this respect - 936,000 on the one hand and 120,000 on the other -- are wildly misleading: just as the 936,000 men included large numbers of men who for various reasons were never actually conscripted, so the 120,000 did not include men who either reported for duty but were never fully mobilised for want of arms or uniforms or were simply never able to reach their depots. According to Ashby, then, assuming that around 500,000 men were actually called up, the real shortfall was likely to have been something in the region of the much smaller figure of 300,000. Yet even if these figures are correct, they still remain bad news for the Napoleonic Empire: a shortfall of three men in every five hardly suggests a polity that enjoyed the avid support of its population.

This, however, is not the end of it. In the first place, many of Ashby's calculations seem wrong. Following the battle of Leipzig Napoleon ordered the conscription of 580,000 men and, in addition, decreed the permanent mobilization for war of 180,000 men of the National Guard. The total number of men the emperor tried to mobilise for the campaign of 1814 was therefore about 760,000, but in addition there were the assorted *gensdarmes*, coastguards and other auxiliaries who, as Ashby rightly shows, were also pressed into service. A total of 936,000 men--a figure first put together by the die-hard Napoleonist, Henri Houssaye-- is therefore certainly too high, but it is by no means so far out as Ashby suggests. Let us say, however, that, as he says, only 500,000 men were actually called up. What we do not know is the number of conscripts from previous levies--specifically that of August 1813--who were still at depots in France at the time of the battle of Leipzig and therefore immediately available for service when Napoleon got back to France. In short, it is impossible not to suspect that some of the 120,000 new recruits had already been inducted when the campaign began, and therefore that the number of conscripts gathered in the winter of 1813-14 was even smaller than at first sight appears.

Given that a number of works are absent from the bibliography that provide specific information on the question of draft evasion - one thinks here of Woloch's important article on conscription in *Past and Present* or Daley's brilliant study of Napoleonic Seine Inférieure<sup>[3]</sup>--it is, then, clear enough that Ashby is open to challenge with respect to draft evasion, but what about that of desertion? This is very much the next plank in Ashby's campaign to persuade the reader that war-weariness was by no means the problem that has been painted in the literature: for example, he cites with apparent approval an entirely unsubstantiated claim by the American Napoleonist, John Elting, that only one man in every hundred of the soldiers who actually fought in the campaign of 1814 deserted in the course

of the fighting.[4] To buttress this view, Ashby produces statistics taken from the records of the 28<sup>th</sup> and 54<sup>th</sup> Regiments of Line Infantry which suggest that, of a total of some 900 men, of which no fewer than 881 were raw conscripts, just eight deserted in the period January–March 1814. Elting, then, appears to be vindicated, but the figures come from just two regiments, while even Ashby has to admit that such a rate appears to be very low (though on what grounds he does not say).

Similar methodological problems appear with the issue of popular participation in the struggle. Over and over again we hear of the populace helping to build fortifications, assisting with the transport of munitions and supplies, helping the wounded, supplying food to hungry soldiers and on occasion even taking part in the fighting. All of this would be well enough if it could be substantiated, but time and again we find that the accounts on which they are based come from later writers such as Houssaye, while no attempt appears to have been made to interrogate the extensive memoir literature, the bulk of which paints a picture of fear and panic in which popular resistance figures not at all. Here and there, doubtless, violent tussles ensued between small parties of marauding Allied troops, while there were also isolated attempts to set up units of *francs tireurs*, but to suggest, as Ashby does, that irregular resistance reached such a height that by the end of the campaign Napoleon was taking serious note of it as a factor in his military planning is to go too far: the emperor certainly did come to entertain the hope that partisan activity might seriously incommode his assailants but the fact that he could do so bears witness far more to the febrile state of his imagination than it does to the actual situation on the ground. Had the reader been provided with Prussian, Austrian or Russian letters complaining of substantial irregular resistance, then Ashby's position would have been more plausible, but, again, the necessary evidence is simply not forthcoming.

Where Ashby is on safer ground is in his evident desire to emphasise the courage frequently showed by Napoleon's forces in the campaign of 1814. This need not be doubted, on battlefield after battlefield the French armies performing extraordinarily well in the face of great odds. This, however, should not surprise us, while, further, it certainly does not speak to the state of France as a whole: even in the desperate circumstances of 1814 the French army's powers of socialization were very strong while Napoleon appears almost to have cast care aside and reverted to the intensely charismatic figure he had cut in the Italian campaign of 1796. Starving and exhausted though they may have been, the troops were flattered and cajoled, and therefore (as the current author has always admitted) performed prodigies of valour even when a few short weeks before they had been the most unwilling of recruits.

In short, then, though he admits that war weariness was certainly present, Ashby insists that neither France nor her army buckled before the enemy onslaught in 1814. If that was so, however, to what reason are we to ascribe the collapse of the emperor's position? In so far as this is concerned, Ashby is in no doubt whatsoever. Having rejected offers of a compromise peace that might have kept him on his throne, Napoleon then utterly mishandled the situation with respect to the key bastion of Paris, not only leaving this in the feeblest of hands—essentially, those of his brother, Joseph—but also failing to make any attempt to fortify it.

It is, however, easy to demolish such arguments. Even had Paris been placed in the hands of a doughtier champion than Joseph, the issue of its defences was utterly insoluble. There simply was no time to throw up a complete line of defences around the city, while, even had the task somehow been performed, the perimeter would have been so huge that it would have absorbed a good half of all the troops that Napoleon had available to him. As matters transpired, a shorter line of defences, built, say, between St Denis and Vincennes so as to close off the great bend in the Seine on which Paris is situated, would have been of some use, but even then there would have been nothing to stop the city's assailants from simply switching their attentions to another sector, assuming, that is, that they had not approached it from another direction in the first place. In this respect, then, Napoleon was quite right: Paris could only be defended from a distance. That does not mean, however, that he can,

after all, escape the responsibility for what occurred. On the contrary, if Napoleon was indeed facing great odds in 1814, they were odds that were entirely of his making and, indeed, odds that were so great that he had no hope of prevailing. If his tactical genius survived untrammelled to the very end, the same cannot be said about his statesmanship.

To conclude, then, while Ashby is to be thanked for opening up a subject that has great potential for historical debate, the book that he has written begs more questions than it answers, and certainly does not succeed in making the case which it seeks to advance.

## NOTES

[1] Since writing this review, the author has become aware of the recent publication of a second volume on the subject, viz. A. Uffindell, *Napoleon, 1814: the Defence of France*, (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2009), 978-1-84415-922-2. Even the briefest reading of this work lends force to the criticisms made in this review. In a chapter entitled "Resistance," for example, Uffindell shows that the most famous partisan generated by the Napoleonic legend, an Alsatian by the name of Nicholas Wolff who tried to organise a guerrilla band in the Strasbourg region, was in reality a complete failure who obtained almost nothing in the way of popular support.

[2] Charles J. Esdaile, *The Wars of Napoleon* (Harlow: Longman, 1995), pp. 279-80.

[3] The works referred to are as follows: G. Daly, *Inside Napoleonic France: State and Society in Rouen, 1800-1815*; I. Woloch, "Napoleonic conscription: state power and civil society", *Past and Present*, No. 111 (May, 1986), 101-29.

[4] Ralph Ashby, *Napoleon against Great Odds: the Emperor and the Defenders of France, 1814* (Oxford: Praeger, 2010), p. 5.

Charles Esdaile  
University of Liverpool  
[epsom@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:epsom@liverpool.ac.uk)

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