ASPECTS OF MILITARY AND OPERATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS
OF THE ARMIES OF FRANCE, AUSTRIA, RUSSIA, AND PRUSSIA IN 1813

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I. Introduction

The performance of armed forces in warfare is their raison d’être. Popular histories often portray the reason for victory or defeat on the purported smart or stupid mistakes of commanders. Part of the purpose of the study of military history is to view the conduct of war, as the strategic correlation between forces. War is dynamic, and for one side to win it has to be better than the other. Are there deeper reasons beyond the personalities of the commanders? How good were their troops and officers? How effective was their respective organization, command and control, tactics or doctrine? Were there flaws in the strategic objectives and the operations designed to achieve them?

All these factors count in warfare, no less so than in the campaign in central Europe waged in 1813 between the armies of Napoleonic France and the major continental powers of Austria, Russia, and Prussia. As Prussia has already been covered in this volume, this chapter will deal less thoroughly with Prussia and spend greater length on the armies of France, Austria, and Russia. Specifically, it will concentrate on soldiers and officers—their training and experience, doctrine, commanders, organization, and operations.

II. France

Napoleonic France was clearly the foremost military power on the continent headed by the greatest commander of his day. The French had the most experienced corps commanders, but their record at independent

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1 The term “Military Effectiveness,” has been used by Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray as editors of Military Effectiveness: The Interwar Period (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988). Their criterion was political, strategic, operational, and tactical effectiveness of the major respective armies of the period. I use different criteria.
command was limited and mixed. *La Grande Armée* had a tradition of victory 1805–1809. France led in the development of the art of war before the French Revolution. These changes included flexible tactics based on the battalion column, the mixed order of lines and columns, and the use of skirmishers. The Revolution brought both conscription based on the nation in arms and the career open to talent, which gave the Napoleonic armies their particular élan. The French were the first army to formally create divisions, army corps, and an effective staff system to command and control these troops.² Along with Napoleon’s brilliant strategic and operational direction, *La Grande Armée* had a qualitative edge over its opponents in 1805. For example, 91% of the corporals in the *Grand Armée* of 1805 had 12 years experience in the ranks,³ and the period of training at the camp of Boulogne 1804–5, reinforced this source of qualitative superiority. Consequentially, during operations Napoleon could expect that in an even fight a French corps could defeat an enemy force, and do very well even when outnumbered as the campaigns of 1805–7, and in particular Davout’s victory at Auerstadt in 1806, proved.

During the period 1807–1812, the armies of the continental powers made changes that improved their military effectiveness. At the same time, the strains of war degraded the effectiveness of the French army. The easy victories of 1805–7 ended. Although the French could rightly claim that they were never defeated on the battlefield even in 1812, the balance was shifting.

*La Grande Armée* had been wiped out in 1812. Of the 550,000–600,000 that had marched into Russia in June 1812, only 120,000 came back by January 1813. Two thirds of this army had consisted of troops from allied, client and satellite states. Of the remaining 120,000, 50,000 were Austrians and Prussians. Only 35,000 actual French troops remained, most totally unfit for service. The worst of it was in the central army group. All the artillery and cavalry—including 175,000 horses, were lost. Among the French infantry regiments in the line Corps I-IV (the heart of the army), only 6,436 of the original 107,097 remained, sustaining losses of over 90%. In the elite Imperial Guard, the Young Guard had been wiped out.⁴ The Middle Guard

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² The best description of the staff system is in, Martin Van Creveld’s *Command in War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 58–102.