And at the moment of writing this, the boredom which is consuming me in cantonments (at Schönbrunn) and four months of marching about, months of fatigue and wretchedness, have proved to me that nothing is more hideous, more miserable, than war. And yet our sufferings in the Guard are not to be compared with those of the line.¹

The 1805 Ulm–Austerlitz campaign ranks among the greatest of Napoleon’s victories. The newly organized, highly trained, and superbly led Grande Armée destroyed two ancien régime armies and shook the European political order in a period of less than three months. It was the display of a new system of warfare, created during the French Revolution and then perfected and systematized at the training camps around Boulogne. The differences between the ancien régime militaries and the new French system would be decisive.

The Treaty of Amiens of 25 March 1802 proved to be nothing more than a trial peace between the French and British governments. Waves of British tourists descended on the continent, able to visit for the first time in a decade. The changes in the balance of power in Europe still needed to be resolved, and the failure to continue further negotiations on outstanding issues such as trade deepened the mistrust over the course of the following year. Great Britain refused to evacuate Malta as stipulated in the treaty, furthering the suspicion between the two countries. To compel British compliance, Napoleon created an army under Général de division Adolphe Édouard Casimir Joseph Mortier at Nijmegen to threaten the Electorate of Hanover, a hereditary territory of the British crown. With Mortier’s “Army of Hanover” threatening the electorate, the British Parliament declared an embargo of France on 16 May 1803. Two days later, a British warship fired on and seized a French vessel. With the peace effectively broken, Napoleon ordered the arrest of British citizens found in

France. On 23 May, Mortier’s army marched into Hanover. The war that would last for over a decade had begun.2

Initially, the war remained a strictly Anglo-French conflict but over the next two years European opposition toward First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte grew into active participation against France. The apprehension of Louis Antoine de Bourbon, duc d’Enghien, by French forces from his home in Baden and subsequent execution at Paris in March 1804 caused immediate repercussions across Europe. In general, the French violation of Badenese territory suggested that Napoleon would disregard other states’ sovereignty with impunity.3 Specifically, the act drew the ire of Tsar Alexander I of Russia, whose father-in-law, Elector Charles Frederick, ruled Baden. Two months later, a new French constitution made Napoleon hereditary “emperor,” a title that implied he would seek to resurrect Charlemagne’s empire in Germany and Italy. His reorganization of Italy and creation of the Kingdom of Italy in June 1805 appeared to confirm this fear. Russia, already angry with what it viewed as a lack of French respect, broke off diplomatic relations with France.

The military changes that had taken place in Revolutionary France during the previous decade had made little impact on the Russian army, which consisted of serfs conscripted for 25-year enlistments. Consequently, service in the tsar’s armies was virtually a death sentence as families had little hope of seeing their loved ones again. When Tsar Alexander opted for war in 1805, almost one-quarter of his army was from the 1805 conscription class, meaning these soldiers had received little training.4 The doctrine of the great Russian general Aleksandr Vasiliyevich Suvorov, stressing the bayonet over firepower with strict discipline to drive home the attack, continued to hold sway with followers such as Field Marshal Mikhail Illarionovich Kutuzov, who had commanded the field army during the 1805 campaign. The army had received extensive combat experience against the Turks in the latter half of 18th century, when the warfare tended to be without quarter. Russian soldiers had a well-earned international reputation for being brave, solid under fire, and well disciplined while the officers were generally considered poorly educated, and the lack of a General Staff with administrative abilities meant that the army suffered from poor planning.5

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