

## Response Page

The following responses were posted on the H-France discussion list in response to Charles Esdaile's review of Ralph Ashby, *Napoleon against Great Odds: the Emperor and the Defenders of France, 1814*.

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The original review may be found on the H-France web page at:

<http://www.h-france.net/vol1reviews/vol1no44seidman.pdf>

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I feel compelled to respond to the review by Charles Esdaile chiefly for purposes of clarification, rather than as a matter of unseemly complaint. Obviously, it is a disappointing review from my vantage point, but more than being disappointed, I found myself puzzled by the review. Charles Esdaile is an accomplished and deservedly respected scholar of the Napoleonic Wars (particularly of the Peninsular campaigns) but with all due respect I must say that in his review he misconstrues many of my principle arguments and seems to misunderstand much of my presentation of evidence. I can only assume that this was an honest misreading of my intended points, hence my need for clarification.

To begin, and to quote, Esdaile suggests that I labor under the disadvantage of an "...idée fixée (essentially that France was loyal to Napoleon)." I hold no such idea. My point, only partially evident in the review, was that the issues of war-weariness and lack of political support for Napoleon have been overplayed in most histories. Over and over again, I repeat that war-weariness and a lack of political support were indeed serious problems for Napoleon, but that there were many other factors involved in his ultimate defeat. I most certainly did not intend to replace one over-simplified explanation for Napoleon's defeat with an opposite but equally over-simplified explanation.

In a particularly puzzling perception of my treatment of popular French participation in the campaign (to include partisan activity) Esdaile sees disagreement between us where little or none exists. I emphasize in my book that resistance by French civilians against the Allied invasion was chiefly due to depredations and misbehaviors committed by Allied soldiers, rather than springing forth spontaneously from some sort of deeply-rooted Patriotism or Bonapartist sympathy. Indeed, I was surprised that he did not mention my contrasting treatment of Wellington's operations in southwestern France in 1814. Here, Wellington maintained much tighter control over his troops compared to the lack of discipline displayed by Blücher and Schwarzenberg. Wellington absolutely prevented looting or mistreatment of French civilians, and his army was not harassed by partisan activity. The extent and effectiveness of partisan

activity in eastern France is another matter, but again I would agree with Esdaile that Napoleon in his own mind exaggerated its potential effect.

I will accept Esdaile's critique that perhaps my work would have benefitted from greater use of Allied primary sources. To be clear, I wanted from the very beginning to focus my research sharply on French mobilization efforts (or lack thereof). Allied sources are not entirely absent in my book, although a greater abundance of resources would indeed have been a wonderful luxury. I attempted to use at least some Allied published material for purposes of context and balance, although I think Esdaile would agree that in any case Allied sources are not necessarily or innately more reliable than French ones.

What I find most difficult to accept is the fact that in his review Esdaile virtually ignores the bulk of my evidence derived from French military archives, which I present in chapters three through eight. It was in French inspection reports and situation reports that the most common phrase I ran across was "manque de" (lack of). Lack of uniforms, lack of shoes, lack of cartridge pouches, lack of linen, lack of spare flints – all of these shortages hampered efforts to equip and train recruits. Most vitally, lack of muskets and horses absolutely crippled French mobilization efforts. The arguments regarding numbers of recruits are well off the point as they pertain to this evidence. Napoleon and the French were utterly and physically unable to employ all of the recruits that had in fact reported for duty. Counter-factually, even if thousands and tens of thousands more wildly enthusiastic volunteers had poured into training depots it would have mattered not at all.

There was absolutely nothing Napoleon could have done with the men. Indeed, if anything, it would have complicated matters of food supply and likely exacerbated the typhus epidemic that was playing havoc on French garrisons during the winter of 1813-1814. As things stood, the only way Napoleon could have armed, clothed, equipped, and trained all of the recruits already present in depots in time for them to take the field would have been if the Allies had delayed their invasion until spring. This they did not do, opting instead to take the risk of an immediate winter invasion, rendering many of Napoleon's plans for mobilization moot.

Esdaile also over-simplifies my analysis regarding the proximate causes of Napoleon's defeat in 1814. We are perhaps both guilty of playing "armchair general" regarding potential plans for defense of Paris, and I would suggest that we will have to agree to disagree on certain particulars. Esdaile is wrong to suggest, however, that I see Napoleon's lack of preparation for the defenses of Paris as the vital key to his defeat. I put it forward as only one of a number of strategic and operational errors committed by Napoleon in 1814. These errors were compounded by Napoleon's mishandling of the diplomatic and political situation, as I tried to make clear in my book. Indeed, Esdaile mentions Napoleon's flawed statesmanship, but here once again seems to see disagreement between us where there is little or none.

What my book intends to do is to present French defeat in 1814 as due to a complex combination of factors. Various factors involved in the defeat I examine in my book are indeed too numerous to discuss in detail in this response. Only one example of an important factor I examine throughout is the enormous impact made by the overwhelming advantage the Allies had in numbers of trained mounted troops. In every regard, I made the most strenuous possible efforts

to avoid over-simplification of explanations, and had hoped that I had not dismissed anything out of hand. I was fully aware that this could result in controversy and contradiction, and I accept that. I would even agree with Esdaile that my book raises questions while answering others. This was intentional. Meanwhile, a constructive discussion of these issues is only possible if my arguments are accurately understood.

Charles Esdaile mentions that he just became aware of another recent work on 1814 in English, that by Andrew Uffindell. I would also mention Michael Leggiere's book *The Fall of Napoleon: The Allied Invasion of France, 1813-1814*. Leggiere is working on a volume to follow this first book, detailing the invasion of France up to the point when Napoleon resumed command in the field in late January 1814. The second book will pick up the campaign from there. Leggiere's exhaustive work focuses on military operations, and in terms of that focus will likely remain definitive for the foreseeable future. The gap in Anglophone literature regarding 1814 is in the process of being filled, and that can only be good news. These recent works on 1814 can and should be seen as complementary. I regret being compelled to write this clarification by way of response. I emphasize again that I mean no disrespect to Charles Esdaile, but I could not let his review pass as an accurate depiction of my book.