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Pierre Charrier, *Le Maréchal Davout*. Millau: Foundation Napoléon, 2005. 831 pp. Maps. 34 € (pb); ISBN 2-84736-111-1.

Review by Frederick C. Schneid, High Point University.

Louis-Nicholas Davout was arguably Napoleon's most skilled lieutenant. Yet while his martial prowess was lauded by admirers, his reputation for iron discipline and his sometime draconian policies as military governor in Hamburg won him the derision of the civilian population. Davout was a consummate military professional whose personality rarely won him friends among the marshalate and senior officers of Napoleon's empire. That Napoleon trusted him implicitly is clear, and Davout's sternness was easily overlooked as his efficiency and military skill outweighed the negative. He was thirteenth in the list of seniority of the marshals of France when Napoleon reestablished the rank in 1804, and remained loyal to the end. There is little controversial about Davout, and while a man of honor and professionalism, he was not a colorful figure. Pierre Charrier writes in the introduction that Davout's service to France was substantial, but his biographers are few in number, and following the First World War there were none until the 1970s. It is his desire to present a thorough if not definitive biography of the French marshal and to integrate recently republished recollections, memoirs and histories, adding archival documentation to those areas of Davout's life and career that remain unclear.

The list of Davout's victories on the battlefield is impressive, and on more than one occasion the performance of his Third Corps—referred to by Davout as the Tenth Legion—gave Napoleon the triumphs he sought. Davout's timely arrival at Austerlitz in December 1805 saved the French right flank against concerted Russian attacks. The marshal's victory at Auerstadt in 1806 was the most dramatic. With 30,000 men, he defeated the main Prussian army under the Duke of Brunswick on the same day that Napoleon engaged a smaller force at Jena. In 1807, Davout again arrived in time at Eylau at the moment Napoleon's center was threatened. For his exemplary service Davout was awarded the military governorship in the Grand Duchy of Warsaw (Prussian Poland). Shortly thereafter Napoleon appointed him commander of the Army of Germany, prior to the Emperor's invasion of Spain. In this post he accurately informed Napoleon of the impending Austrian war, and in 1809 Davout's corps kept the Archduke Charles' army at bay at Abensberg-Eckmühl, giving Napoleon time to carry out a *manoeuvre sur la derrière*. Ten weeks later the marshal's corps turned the Austrian flank at Wagram, securing the hard-fought victory north of Vienna. For his achievements Napoleon elevated him to the rank of the Napoleonic nobility, first as Duc d'Auerstadt and later as Prince d'Eckmühl.

Davout commanded the largest corps of the *Grande Armée* in Russia, comprising more than 70,000 men. He fought at Borodino and was initially appointed to lead the rear-guard during the retreat. His methodical nature was poorly suited for this task, and for the first time in his career Napoleon replaced him with Marshal Michel Ney. Davout held steadfast in Germany during Napoleon's return to Paris and was given command of Hamburg and the Imperial forces in northwest Germany during the 1813 campaign. He spent many months under siege in Hamburg through 1814 and refused to surrender the city until Louis XVIII, recently restored to the throne, ordered him to do so. Upon Napoleon's return in 1815, Davout offered his services and was appointed Minister of War.

Davout's military career lends itself to hagiographic accounts of his life and exploits. Charrier explicitly rejects the idea that his biography is hagiographic, pledging instead to provide a balanced picture of the marshal. In general he succeeds. It is a conventional biography, but Charrier does well to integrate

Davout's life and experiences into the context of the age. He spends time providing the reader with the political and social background needed to better understand Davout's circumstances and decisions. It is a sympathetic biography, but again, Charrier, as with virtually all of Davout's recent biographers, recognizes the marshal's austere character but finds little fault with his actions as a military commander and governor. The burgers of Hamburg would sorely disagree.

Davout's role in Poland and north Germany provides valuable insight into civil-military relations in Napoleonic Europe. The marshal's reputation as an able administrator was known in Imperial circles. After Tilsit, in 1807, Napoleon appointed him military administrator in the Grand Duchy of Warsaw. Although Frederick August of Saxony became Grand Duke, Napoleon ensured this satellite's army would conform to his standards. Davout was charged with the organization, equipping and training of the 30,000 man Polish army. The task was immensely frustrating, particularly in regard to financing the endeavor. His post in Poland came to an end when Napoleon invaded Spain and elevated Davout to command the Army in Germany. He was tasked with the maintenance and security of central Europe while the Emperor was away. In this latter role he butted heads with Napoleon's brother Jérôme, recently elevated to King of Westphalia. Davout's relationship with Jérôme would continue to deteriorate through the invasion of Russia in 1812. In both cases, however, Davout did not transcend his role as military leader. These posts were inexorably tied to French military hegemony. In 1810, as the borders of Imperial France expanded to include Holland and northwest Germany, Napoleon appointed Davout military governor of the Thirty-Second military division, giving him sweeping police powers to enforce the continental system in the Hanseatic cities, particularly Hamburg. Davout's relations with the merchants of Hamburg and the German population in general were poor to say the least. Charrier does not color this, but prefers the French perspective, explaining Davout's actions as a reflection of Napoleon's confidence in his ability to deal decisively with the frequent violations of his economic blockade of Britain. Davout did just that. His efficiency and determination to punish violators extended to the condemnation of his friend and subordinate, General Friant, who had commanded one of Davout's divisions since 1803, for failing to carry out his duty to the marshal's satisfaction.

One of the great strengths of this biography is Charrier's ability to provide more than a simple narrative of events. He cites largely from memoirs and correspondence, the former not always being reliable. What is refreshing is his ability to qualify his sources, and for the Napoleonic scholar one of the most valuable aspects of the biography is the tracing of historical debates over Davout's actions and those of his detractors back to their nineteenth-century primary sources. The discussion of Auerstadt plays prominently in Charrier's biography, and he spends far greater time and detail examining the context and character of this battle, analysing Davout's decision-making process in the course of fighting. He relies heavily on Daniel Reichel, *Davout et l'art de la guerre* (Delachaux, 1975). Charrier takes great pains to trace the historiographical origins of the criticism of Marshal Bernadotte to those officers who served on Davout's staff in 1806 and published their memoirs afterward. The secondary literature on the battle that appeared in the early twentieth century was largely drawn from those earlier recollections. By no means does Charrier exonerate Bernadotte for failing to march to Davout's aid, but he does indicate that Bernadotte technically fulfilled his orders by arriving at the point specifically designated by Napoleon while ignoring the conditional order to support Davout if necessary.

On analyzing Davout's victory at Auerstadt, Charrier offers a relatively fresh approach to the battle by looking at the Prussian perspective and then examining how Davout responded to their assaults and wrested the initiative from them, ultimately compelling the Prussians to abandon the field. Auerstadt is given greater space than any other battle fought by Davout. His conduct at Thann in 1809 against overwhelming numbers is explored, as are Abensberg-Eckmühl and Wagram, but neither is covered to the extent of 1806. This is understandable as Auerstadt clearly established Davout in the premiere rank of the marshalate. In his now classic and lone English biography of the marshal, John Gallaher recalled the visit of King Wilhelm I of Prussia to *Les Invalides* in 1867. He asked his host, Marshal Canrobert, to

identify the officer in a portrait. "When Canrobert replied that it was Marshal Davout, the Prince of Eckmuhl, the King exclaimed: 'Marshal, you have not named all of Marshal Davout's titles; he was also called the Duke of Auerstadt. Prussia has not forgotten!'"[1]

Charrier concludes that the secret to Davout's military skill was his ability to rapidly assess the situation, respond accordingly, and place himself at the most critical position at the right time. Despite this, Charrier argues that Napoleon did not like Davout, but trusted him and respected his abilities. Napoleon's confidence that Davout would carry out orders made him vital to the French-Imperial army. This is all the more reason why the marshal was chosen as Minister of War during the Hundred Days, despite his protestations and desire for a field command.

In the sum total of biographies of Napoleonic marshals there remains a significant lacuna in the narrative and analysis. Many, Charrier included, approach the early life as often incidental to the future career. It is only with the experience of the French revolutionary wars that greater details are explored. The marshals' military education on campaign is discussed, but there is minimal attention to the political sentiment of the participants. When addressed, it is often in passing or part of the narrative, with little critical examination as to the individual's motivation. The roots of Davout's support for political reform in 1789 are addressed by Charrier, but only briefly. Davout admired Montesquieu, he explains, and exhibited those ideas that were symptomatic of the age and advocated by contemporaries such as "Lafayette, Robespierre, Manon Rolland and other actors..." (p. 59). Davout's devotion to the Revolution was clearly illustrated on numerous occasions—his earlier association in 1789 with revolutionaries in his garrison town of Hesdin, and his attempt to prevent Dumouriez from fleeing the army in 1793—but this affinity for the Revolution clashed early on with his sense of military duty. For his pains he lost his commission in August 1789 and only returned to service in 1791 as a volunteer in the battalion de la Yonne. Charrier covers this period but spends most of the time exonerating Davout from the charges that led to his arrest and discharge in the summer of 1789. He then moves on to examine Davout's military service in 1793.

Davout is a curious fellow because he was a member of the French nobility, although of a lesser noble family, which had historically tied itself to the martial splendor of France. Napoleon's marshalate was drawn from wide social strata, and their experiences before and during the Revolution differed significantly. Charrier paints Davout and Napoleon as cut from similar cloth: "Same social origin, same mediocre fortunes, same strict and studious life, same sympathy for the *philosophes* and similar desire to be taken seriously" (p. 34-5). This point is overdone. Certainly one cannot accept Charrier's consideration that in eighteenth-century France a Corsican noble was equivalent to the established nobility of the d'Avout family. The patronage of the Comte de Marbeuf, governor of Corsica, had far more to do with Napoleon's entrance to Brienne and the *École militaire* than his social status. Contrary to this, Davout's ability to receive a commission in the Royal Champagne cavalry regiment was one of distinction, and a substantial cost to the soldier. The artillery, while an increasingly significant and revitalized branch of the Royal army, lacked the status of the aristocratic cavalry. Yet, Davout readily and early on adhered to the political revolution all the while remaining a military professional. It is here that there is substantial commonality between Napoleon and Davout's attitude toward the military profession. Both attended the *École militaire*, but more importantly both were products of a reformed pre-revolutionary Royal Army.[2]

Biographies of the marshalate often overlook the reasons behind these soldiers' support for the *coup of Brumaire*. Was their support for Napoleon a rejection of the political revolution or an acceptance of the French army as a better representative of the Revolution? Very few of the senior officers of the French army rejected the legitimacy of Napoleon's assumption of power. Only Moreau and Pichegru later refused to accept it. What did these men see in Bonaparte that enabled them to transition from the

Directory to the Consulate, and then accept the abrogation of the Republic in favor of the Empire? Isser Woloch briefly addresses this issue in *Napoleon and his Collaborators*, explaining that the army's sympathy for the Empire was unclear and that petitions in favor of its creation were encouraged by Napoleon's senior officers. This is insufficient, however, to explain the phenomenon of support from generals and marshals. Although Woloch concludes his study by arguing that Napoleon's collaborators benefited from "political security, financial advantage, social prestige, and one's sense of honor..."[3], only the latter may hold some weight with those who became the military leadership of the Empire. Davout and quite a number of marshals found Napoleon's financial expectations of a new patriciate beyond their means. Charrier is quite explicit that Davout was in financial duress at the height of the Empire and had to borrow substantial funds from the Emperor to bail himself out of debt. This experience was not unique to Davout, and the rapaciousness of other marshals such as Masséna and Soult during the course of the wars may well have been a reflection of their increasing personal financial demands.

With this said, Pierre Charrier has written an enlightening and comprehensive biography of Marshal Louis Nicholas Davout. It is clear, and in many cases definitive. His mastery of the French literature related to the marshal and his career is impressive, and his ability to place the marshal within the context of Napoleon's Empire, is one of its greatest strengths. The uninitiated will find the biography a treasure trove of information, but it is highly recommended that those unfamiliar with the subject matter read a general military history of the Napoleonic Wars before attempting to tackle the book. For the scholar and student of the Napoleonic era, the biography will not disappoint. Charrier brings insight and detail to a pillar of Napoleon's *Grande Armée*.

NOTES

[1] John Gallaher, *The Iron Marshal: A Biography of Louis N. Davout* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1976), p. 134.

[2] On this point readers are encouraged to look at David Bien, "The Army in the French Enlightenment: Reform, Reaction and Revolution," *Past and Present* 85 (1979): 68-98; and Harold T. Parker, "Napoleon and French Army Values: The Early Years," *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* 18 (1991): 233-242.

[3] Isser Woloch, *Napoleon and His Collaborators: The Making of a Dictatorship* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), pp. 110-113, 242.

Frederick C. Schneid
High Point University
fschneid@highpoint.edu

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