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Kevin F. Kiley, *Once There Were Titans: Napoleon's Generals and Their Battles, 1800-1815*. London and St. Paul: Greenhill Books, 2007. 320 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 US (hb). ISBN 978-1-85367-710-6.

Review by Ralph Ashby, Eastern Illinois University.

Kevin Kiley is an unabashed admirer of the late John R. Elting and of Napoleon as well. Elting as a writer of military history is deserving of admiration, although Kiley's *Once There Were Titans* succeeds more as homage than as emulation. Kiley, like Napoleon and Elting, is a former artillery officer (while this reviewer served as a humble sergeant in the artillery), and his service experience is his main qualification for writing military history.

Kiley's central thesis is that Napoleon was extremely well-served by his military subordinates and that they were an exceptionally able group of commanders. While Kiley may not unearth startling new research in this field, he does make a persuasive case. He does not attempt to denigrate or diminish Napoleon's military reputation, nor does he claim that his study is exhaustive or beyond dispute. Most remarkably, Kiley succeeds in the difficult task of moving Napoleon away from center stage. The protagonists here are indeed an ensemble cast. Napoleon's chief-of-staff, Louis Alexandre Berthier, receives lavish praise in Kiley's book. Emmanuel Grouchy, one of Napoleon's infamous scapegoats for the Waterloo debacle, is rehabilitated. Jean Lannes, Louis Suchet, and Alexandre de Senarmont figure prominently and emerge as heroes. All of these personalities have been favorably treated many times before in Napoleonic literature, but Kiley uses an approach at once more sympathetic and more analytical from a military point of view.

Kiley's target audience certainly includes Napoleonic buffs, and all but younger ones will already be familiar with most of the characters and basic narrative facts. Military historians, buffs, instructors, cadets, military personnel, and amateur historians round out the target audience, and for them some of the material presented in *Once There Were Titans* may be new. Kiley does a thorough job explaining French military reforms and theories as they developed in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War, relying mostly on the original published works of French military theorists of the period for his research. This period, when combined with the political and military upheaval of the French Revolution, created an environment that was extremely conducive to the development of military talent in France. This is not a new notion, but Kiley handles the analysis well, and emphasizes the relevance of his study to military history. *Once There Were Titans* employs a chronological format, although some of the "major" battles and campaigns are deliberately skipped in favor of less well-known campaigns. This is in fact a strength of the book and serves Kiley's purpose of examining Napoleon's subordinates as well as the nature of warfare and command in the period. Rather than treating each commander separately or organizing the chapters around them, Kiley examines them in the course of describing battles and campaigns.

Kiley attempts to emulate Elting in several respects, using colorful anecdotes, lively style, and earnest analysis. Elting's Francophile and Bonapartist sympathies, while obvious, were always expressed with a metaphorical twinkle in the eye, if not entirely tongue in cheek. Kiley's sympathies, on the other hand, are anything but subtle. Likewise, his writing style shuns subtlety. Descriptive nouns, modifiers, and action verbs are hurled about like artillery shells, and sometimes they land with effect. Kiley at his best has a nearly poetic style and employs clever turns of phrase, but at his worst he is guilty of redundancies, sloppy sentences, non sequiturs, and other egregious errors that will have professors reaching for their red pens. Some of the organizational decisions are equally questionable. The novelized introductions at the beginning of chapters are an interesting device, but the "character sketches" of commanders placed after battle descriptions are not particularly compelling or helpful. These perhaps would have been better as appendices, since in any case they are essentially paraphrased versions of entries from various Napoleonic encyclopedias and dictionaries.

Kiley is not helped by the astounding number of typographical errors appearing in *Once There Were Titans*. This is extraordinarily disappointing coming from Greenhill Books, a publisher especially known for books on military history of the period. Greenhill has produced nearly immaculate publications of lengthy and complex works on the Napoleonic Wars. The culprit here may be Palindrome, a subcontractor responsible for the editing and typesetting of *Once There Were Titans*. The errors that riddle the book are of all kinds, and could be very misleading to a reader unfamiliar with the period. For example, when we are first introduced to the Legion of the Vistula (a Polish contingent in French service) they become the "Legion of the Fistula" (p. 67). This cannot help but conjure up an amusing image, but it would be pardonable only if it were a rare instance of error in the book. Twice, cavalry are found to be "sobering" enemy gunners rather than sabering them (pp. 28 and 222), a shameful bow to computer spell checking. Elsewhere, dates are transposed, past tense becomes present tense, and words are obviously changed from the original intent. Apart from the typographical errors, the illustrations and maps are quite good, especially for a volume this size. Some of the images used in *Once There Were Titans* are rarely seen and very useful.

Kiley does not intend to call Napoleon's military genius into question, but readers might. Since Kiley makes a strong case that Napoleon's subordinates won many of his battles for him, does this mean that Napoleon does not deserve the image of one of the greatest military commanders of all time — at least not to the extent Napoleon and his most rabid adherents would have it? While Kiley goes to great pains to show that Napoleon used his subordinates wisely and usually delegated tasks well, any praise for the Emperor's lieutenants must be more than mere reflected glory. This becomes an issue in *Once There Were Titans* precisely because Kiley explains so well the nature of the warfare of the period and the hard school through which so many French commanders came to excel. Further, the toughness of the French soldiers of the period is a matter that Kiley comes back to again and again. Glory may be fleeting, as the Romans said, but it also must be shared in armies such as Napoleon's. Napoleon sometimes was willing to share glory for political purposes. Giving titles, decorations, or praise in the Bulletins (official battle reports) were all means to this end. More often, the Emperor made certain to embellish the legend of his own military genius, again for political purposes, and also because of his self-conscious historical awareness. Napoleon knew that the value of his subordinate commanders involved far more than victory on the battlefield itself. Kiley, however,

is focused on the battlefield. Regardless of his obvious admiration for Napoleon, Kiley shows just how much Napoleon relied upon some of his lieutenants for his victories in the first place. This is nowhere more apparent than when it comes to Berthier. Berthier, as Napoleon's chief-of-staff, is shown in *Titans* to be in very many ways the essential subordinate. With Berthier recently deceased, Napoleon attempted to function without him in the Waterloo campaign and lost. Once again, this is hardly a new theory, but it is ironic that Kiley raises the question, intentionally or not.

Kiley acknowledges that his book raises at least as many questions as it answers. He is interested in the subject of military leadership and command in general, for understandable reasons, and expresses the hope that his work may spark more research and writing on the topic. Kiley may not have himself in mind for such a task. His research does not extend to the use of archives or unpublished material such as those available at the *Service Historique de l'Armée du Terre* in the Vincennes Chateau. He prefers to use published works, including rare originals in French, secondary authorities, and the Napoleonic Wars periodical *Carnet de la Sabretache*, in publication since the 1890s. Kiley is a good military analyst with a decided literary bent. Given the fairly humble intent (despite a grandiloquent style) of *Once There Were Titans*, the book has to be classified as a success. This does not necessarily mean that it is destined to become an English-language classic of the Napoleonic Wars.

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