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The Lives of Soldiers

It is tempting to assume that the traumas of twentieth-century wars, resulting in well-documented psychiatric conditions such as mutism, were produced by the unparalleled destructiveness of such conflicts. Yet it is worth re-examining such an assumption. In terms of their scale, the revolutionary and, especially, Napoleonic campaigns, which began with the invasion of Italy in 1796 and culminated in what German historians later called the ‘wars of liberation’ between 1806 and 1815, were extraordinarily bloody. Between 1800 and 1815, just under a million French soldiers—or about 40 per cent of those in arms—died or disappeared.¹ Up to 400,000 from vassal states and allies, including many Germans, were also lost on the French side.² Alone the *Grande Armée’s* invasion of Russia in 1812 might have resulted in a million deaths.³ At the battle of Borodino during that campaign, about 70,000 were killed from a total of 250,000 on the field. At Austerlitz, 35,000 out of 163,000 were killed, at Preussisch-Eylau 48,000 were left dead or wounded from 125,000, and at Waterloo 54,000 dead or wounded from 193,000. The chances of survival in such battles differed little from those in the First World War and were worse than those of other nineteenth-century conflicts. Death would usually occur during close combat, through untreated wounds, or unsuccessful amputations, disease, or freezing. With poor medical treatment and lack of provisioning, it is arguable that conditions were as bad as or worse than during twentieth-century wars.

WAR STORIES

Our understanding of soldiers’ reactions to such conditions depends to a great extent on the interpretation of combatants’ own accounts in the form of corre-

¹ G. Best, *War and Society in Revolutionary Europe, 1770–1870* (London, 1982), 114. The figures are contested: see, for instance, Owen Connelly’s criticism, in *The Journal of Military History*, 71 (2007), 921, of David Bell’s claim that the French had lost 1 million soldiers killed in action: ‘the French lost only 86,500 killed in action, not one million, which is the *casualty* figure, including killed, wounded, deserters, captured and missing. By contrast, in World War I, in four years, 1,400,000 French were killed in action.’ Many more soldiers and civilians died in the revolutionary and Napoleonic periods of wounds, war-related diseases, and freezing, complicating direct comparisons of this kind.

² G. Best, *War and Society*, 114.

³ S. Förster, ‘Der Weltkrieg, 1792–1815: Bewaffnete Konflikte und Revolutionen in der Weltgesellschaft’, in J. Dülffer (ed.), *Kriegsbereitschaft und Friedensordnung*, 22–3. Also for the figures following.

spondence, diaries, memoirs, and other descriptions of battles and campaigns. These sources are often inaccurate, as Carl von Ploto, who went on to become one of the principal military writers of the Napoleonic Wars, made plain in 1811: ‘so many different views and judgements of [military conflict] arise that falsehood and untruth establish themselves more and more firmly’.⁴ What made any measure of the ‘completeness of my work’ doubtful was the fact that ‘every individual, or every class of readers, makes a different judgement, has different opinions, and therefore makes different demands of the work, not counting those who perhaps merely want to enjoy the pleasure of criticism itself.’⁵ All that Ploto could do was to acknowledge the ‘incompleteness of the work’ and to ‘offer it to the public (*das Publikum*) with great modesty’.⁶ The majority of memoirists were less modest, with the record of even the most famous—the Prussian staff officer Carl von Müffling—being discounted by one scholar as the ‘self-serving’ version of ‘a vain man’.⁷ Compared to letters, which form the basis of Alan Forrest’s seminal study of the soldiers of the revolution and empire, ‘the evidence of memoirs and reflections published after the event may be very different’, allowing ‘for so much more conceit and literary flourish; they may be seen as a man’s own memorial to the years he had spent in the army, and that memorial is often carefully scripted’.⁸ Whereas personal letters, which themselves often passed on false information from official bulletins and gave a misleading account from a particular point of view, were ‘hastily composed and despatched in time for the next post’, memoirs ‘necessarily lack spontaneity’, being ‘the product of mature reflection, with all the advantages and shortcomings which reflecting implies’.⁹ It is notable, however, that many contemporaries’ testimony, of various types, gives a similar account of combatants’ experience of warfare, especially of exposure to violence and killing, despite disagreement about events and their meaning.¹⁰ Thus, although many authors challenged Ploto’s ability ‘to put right falsehood and untruth’, with one Bavarian critic pitting a ‘return-recollection’ against his Prusso-centric memory of events, they coincided unexpectedly in other respects, putting forward a limited range of descriptions and narratives of their feelings, thoughts, and actions during campaigns, even though they fought on different sides.¹¹ In part, this convergence

⁴ C. v. Ploto, *Tagebuch während des Krieges zwischen Russland und Preussen einerseits und Frankreich andererseits in den Jahren 1806 und 1807* (Berlin, 1811), iv. See M. Hewitson, “‘I Witnesses’”, 310–25, for further literature.

⁵ Ploto, *Tagebuch*, v.

⁶ *Ibid.*, iii. Even unpublished memoirists such as Otto Sauerborn, who wrote up his recollections in 1827, were conscious of the difficulties of writing ‘history’: his jottings ‘can only serve as raw material for the history of war’, he conceded. Otto Sauerborn, ‘Waffentat eines Husaren-Wachtmeisters im Feldzuge von 1813’, *Kriegsbriefe* Archive, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn.

⁷ G. E. Rothenberg’s review in *Journal of Military History*, 62 (1998), 396. On the unreliability of memoirs, see also T. S. Anderson, ‘Memoirs of the Wars of the French Revolution and Empire’, *Journal of Modern History*, 2 (1930), 288–92.

⁸ A. Forrest, *Napoleon’s Men*, 23. ⁹ *Ibid.*, 23–4.

¹⁰ This includes private letters and diaries; see, for instance, the *Kriegsbriefe* Archive, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn, or the collections of letters and other material used by Leighton S. James, *Witnessing the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars*.

¹¹ Ploto, *Tagebuch*, v. For a Bavarian ‘reply’, see anon., *Rück-Erinnerungen an die Jahre 1813 und 1814* (Munich, 1818).

Table 4.1. First editions of Autobiographies and Memoirs by Publication Date

Up to 1829	1830–49	1850–69	1870–89	1890–1909	1910–15	Total
19	61	66	37	43	38	269

Source: derived from data in K. Hagemann, *Revisiting Prussia's Wars against Napoleon: History, Culture and Memory* (Cambridge, 2015), 304.

can be explained by the novelty and urgency of the situations in which they found themselves, suffering from hunger and confronting death. In part, it was the result of the vestigial, heterogeneous character of military reportage, testimony, and histories, leaving many memoirists, like the octagenarian Jean Garnier, able to 'do no more than draw upon some of the jottings I made at the time'.¹² In contrast to later wars, which inspired a flurry of writing, the revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were reported initially in diaries and correspondence, and only later in a gradually increasing flow of memoirs (see Table 4.1).¹³

Although contemporary observers noted an increase in the number of 'tales', 'stories', and 'histories' of military campaigns during the early nineteenth century, war literature constituted a minority interest and pursuit, with fewer conventions than during the period after the 1860s. Writers appear to have drawn on different literary genres and traditions, including the military reporting and regimental histories of battles, manoeuvres, and marches, which were adapted and popularized by Plotho. Here, technical descriptions of the movements of mass armies were combined with portrayals of the heroic or inglorious actions of commanders. August von Thurn und Taxis, an officer in the Bavarian army, provided a typical instance of this type of account, reducing even the retreat from Moscow in 1812 to a series of military details. On 11 December, he recorded, camp was struck at 2.00 in the morning, with the Bavarian contingent marching to join the corps of Marshall Ney at Evio, where they were ordered to help the rearguard:

All kinds of defence measures were now taken in that place, although I freely confess that both its position and the condition of our men (most unfortunately had fingers so stiff that it was, so to say, physically impossible for them to cock their guns) did not seem to me to be conducive to tenacious resistance.¹⁴

During the afternoon, 'the first Cossacks appeared on this side of a wood before our front', followed by cavalry, which simply left the main road and went round

¹² J. Garnier, *Souvenirs de guerre en temps de paix*, in A. Forrest, *Napoleon's Men*, 25. Examples of German memoirs based on contemporaneous notes are F. Mändler, *Erinnerungen aus meinen Feldzügen 1809–1915* (Nuremberg, 1854), ed. F. J. A. Schneidawind; R. v. Meerheim (ed.), *Erlebnisse eines Veteranen der Grossen Armee während des Feldzuges in Russland* (Dresden, 1860); F. Steger, *Der Feldzug von 1812* (Essen, 1985), first published in 1845; L. v. Wolzogen, *Memoiren* (Leipzig, 1851); W. Meier, *Erinnerungen aus den Feldzügen*, 93, who simply stopped his account at the point when his papers had been confiscated.

¹³ See the various published letters and *Tagebücher*. Regimental histories drew on these sources, too, together with contemporaneous official reports of battles and manoeuvres.

¹⁴ A. v. Thurn und Taxis, *Aus drei Feldzügen 1812–1815. Erinnerungen* (Leipzig, 1912), 114.

the village, ‘so that we soon ran the risk of being cut off’.¹⁵ Since ‘we, so to say, had no cavalry at all, we couldn’t attack the enemy’s’, leading the Bavarian commander Carl Philipp von Wrede to advise a withdrawal but pushing Ney to attack—at the risk of death—‘in order to produce elan through his own example’.¹⁶ Finally, ‘after the enemy artillery began to create more damage’, Ney reluctantly gave the order to retreat, which was carried out ‘in good order’.¹⁷ The next day, camp was struck at 3.00 in the morning and the movement of the army continued in the same fashion until Thurn und Taxis met Wrede again on 17 December and delivered his report, after which ‘nothing interesting’ happened.¹⁸ For many authors, the return to Germany and the survival of an ordeal was the climax of the story, but for Thurn and Taxis it had no military significance. The majority of officers, particularly high-ranking ones, produced variations on this military theme of a war of movement. Even Plotho, who gave himself greater licence to use colourful adjectives and to depict the heroic actions of battle, continued to concentrate on the attacks and counter-attacks which brought about victory or defeat. Accordingly, from his description of the opening battle of 1813 in Großgörschen on 2 May, during which ‘they had pushed forward in the most violent and bloodiest fighting, conquered several villages and already forced the enemy to retreat’, to his summation of the last day of fighting at the battle of Leipzig on 19 October, which was followed immediately by ‘rapid marches’ after the fleeing French forces, the Prussian military writer focused on the heroic actions of entire armies.¹⁹

The other principal type of account was also heroic, but it was concerned largely with the adventures of individual soldiers. Such ‘reminiscences and fragments’ were frequently marked, in the opinion of one officer and memoirist from Braunschweig, by ‘such a romantic stamp that they have served rather to entertain than to teach’.²⁰ Typically, they followed the fortunes of the protagonist from country to country and army to army in the form of a travelogue. Thus, Wilhelm Freiherr von Schauroth, in ‘the regiment of the *Rheinbund*’, travelled from Coburg to Salzburg and into the Tyrol (1809), before embarking for Spain (1809–10), returning to his *Heimat* (1810–11), laying siege to Hamburg (1811–12), setting off for Russia (1812), passing through Königsberg on his way home (1812–13), and marching back to Magdeburg (1813), where he was taken prisoner by Russian forces.²¹ The hardy ‘heroes’ of these tales were regularly buffeted by one set of adverse circumstances and then by another, as they accumulated experiences of foreign countries and unusual conditions. Their reports home were couched, whether deliberately or not, in the long-established conventions of the picaresque. One Prussian officer’s account of the battle of Borodino, the worst battle of the 1812 campaign, was characteristic, revealing at the same time the extent to which soldiers were inured to the hardships and suffering of war at the turn of the nineteenth century. Having been

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15. ¹⁷ *Ibid.* ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁹ C. v. Plotho, *Der Krieg in Deutschland und Frankreich in den Jahren 1813 und 1814* (Berlin, 1817), vol. 1, 105–23, vol. 2, 422.

²⁰ E. Heusinger, *Ansichten, Beobachtungen und Erfahrungen* (Braunschweig, 1825), 1.

²¹ W. v. Schauroth, *Im Rheinbund Regiment während der Feldzüge in Tirol, Spanien und Russland 1809–1813* (Berlin, 1905), 1–291: each chapter heading indicated a new stage on his journey.

present at Prussia's defeat at the battle of Auerstedt in 1806, in which he was shot, he vowed to continue the fight for his country's resurrection, sailing to Britain, before going on to Spain with the Duke of Wellington.²² When Napoleon invaded Russia, he joined the forces of the latter, notwithstanding Prussia's agreement to contribute troops to the *Grande Armée*. Only the most hardened soldiers, he remarked, were present at Borodino, since the weaker ones had died en route. 'It could be predicted with certainty that the 7th September 1812 would be one of the bloodiest that the history of modern warfare had known, and many thousands of the warriors gathered here would cover the ground as stiff corpses or as forever dismembered wounded,' he gloated retrospectively. During the battle, 'as the fighting raged more and more terribly' as if 'hell had opened its gates', the officer had his cheek ripped open and his earlobe chopped off by a Polish cavalryman, yet he continued to fight, commenting that 'this was really not very dangerous, but bled very copiously and left such a nasty scar that I henceforth could make no further claims to beauty'.²³ 'I must have been a hideous sight, my left ear hanging off in shreds, my cheek gaping open, and everything covered with a runny crust of blood and dirt,' he went on: 'But I didn't have much time to do my toilette.'²⁴ It is difficult in such accounts to separate military bravado from insensitivity to violence. It is also true that victory at Borodino, which was hailed as 'a day of honour for the entire Russian army for all time', seemed to make suffering worthwhile, in spite of the cavalryman's own injuries and at least 40,000 dead or wounded on the Russian side.²⁵ However, the officer's tone in his diary is consistently matter-of-fact or nonchalant throughout, whether experiencing defeat or victory in the armies of Prussia, Britain, or Russia. It was redolent of a heroic adventure.

Despite incorporating repeated motifs and articulating common attitudes, the content and form of different types of testimony were surprisingly open, betraying the inchoate nature of this field of publishing. Platho was not alone in lamenting that the 'wars of freedom' lacked a Schiller, unlike the Thirty Years' War.²⁶ Many authors seem to have been influenced, at least indirectly, by the conventions of the epic, embodied in eighteenth-century works such as Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea* (1798), in which a hero struggles against fate within a chronicle serving as 'a "book of the tribe", a vital record of custom and tradition, and at the same time a story-book for general entertainment'.²⁷ 'The double relation of epic, to history on the one hand and to everyday reality on the other,' had become more pronounced within war reports as a result of patriotic mobilization and popular representations of warfare.²⁸ As in the *Iliad* and *Beowulf*, the predicament of the hero in many accounts of the revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars appears to be external, as the soldier fights against impersonal opposing forces in the same way that individuals struggle against nature and, by their actions, against their own

²² F. M. Kircheisen (ed.), *Wider Napoleon!*, vol. 1.

²³ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 137.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁶ K. v. Raumer, *Karl von Raumer's Leben von ihm selbst erzählt* (Stuttgart, 1866), 186. Also, H. v. Jordan, *Erinnerungsblätter*, 28, on the use of Schiller's verses in Wallenstein during the Napoleonic wars.

²⁷ P. Merchant, *The Epic* (London, 1971), 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.* See Chapter 2.

limitations.²⁹ Heroism, it could be held, resides in these accounts in the historical reputation—or eternalization—of the protagonist, as he defends the greater good of the tribe even at the risk—as in the cases of Achilles, Hector, and Beowulf—of his own extinction.³⁰ The notion of a wandering, introspective romantic hero, from the romances of the Middle Ages to the novels of the late eighteenth century, is overshadowed in the majority of accounts by that of an active one. Many witnesses of combat also referred to battles as a ‘drama’ or *Schauspiel* and as a painting, with action staged or framed, occurring on a grand scale and intelligible only to an outside observer. Here, the incomprehensibility and repulsiveness of the spectacle seem to have provoked contradictory feelings of distance and fascination. Thus, for Christian von Martens, in Württemberg’s contingent of the *Grande Armée*, the battle for Smolensk in 1812 was characterized by one ‘storm’ after another, ‘with great loss and, for a long time, without success’: ‘the cries of the attackers, the ever increasing thunder of artillery and the constant fire of small arms, beside the thick cloud of gunpowder, made a cruel drama of the battlefield, strewn with corpses.’³¹ On reaching Moscow, Martens saw ‘the immeasurable city before us’, ‘still and silent, like a dead painting’.³² The perceived significance or emotional immediacy of the events confronting commentators—mostly officers but also some civilians, on opposing sides and from different lands—provoked various responses, which went beyond the norms of a literary genre and revealed, however imperfectly, the sentimental, intellectual, and psychological dispositions of combatants.

HARD FACTS

Compared to later reportage, the letters, diaries, and memoirs of the soldiers of the revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars seem matter-of-fact. As in earlier eighteenth-century chronicles, a practical attitude to killing appears to have been combined with a heightened sense of military honour during the 1790s in accordance with the established practices of the main German armies. ‘On the move!’ wrote the young Hessian officer Wilhelm von Conrady in 1792 in his diary:

What magical words these are for every soldier, and especially for the young cavalry officer! The perpetual solitude of peacetime service in the garrison is over, the boredom of days which all seem the same is over. . . . Reputation and honour beckon; in glorious attacks and bold patrols, one can show that one’s arms are strong and one’s eyesight is acute! No one thinks of death or wounding, illness and imprisonment, and it is good like this.³³

²⁹ The classic analysis of this interpretation, contrasted with the heroes of romance, is W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance* (London, 1896).

³⁰ Ferdinand von Varnbuler, *Beitrag zur Geschichte des Feldzugs vom Jahr 1796*, 241, concluded that the campaign of 1796, which had ‘again ended gloriously for the German army’, had bestowed ‘immortality’ on ‘the universally loved commander Grand Duke Karl of Austria’.

³¹ C. v. Martens, *Vor fünfzig Jahren*, 104.

³² *Ibid.*, 133.

³³ W. v. Conrady, *Aus stürmischer Zeit*, 9. See also C. Klein to his father, 1 July 1794, *Kriegsbriefe* Archive, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn: ‘many Franks have been sent to another republic other than France in these last four days’.

The young Prussian officer Ludwig von Reiche, born in Hanover in 1775, left a similar record:

One can easily imagine with what jubilation we greeted the first news of the happy victories of our arms, the capture of Longwy and Verdun! In our minds, we saw our troops on a victory parade before the gates of Paris. We only regretted that we, so close to the scenes of war, were not with them.³⁴

Such elation disappeared as Reiche realized that the advance of the Coalition armies had been halted, with wounded soldiers starting to come back across the Rhine from Champagne: 'It was a pitiful sight to see those unfortunates in their lamentable condition.'³⁵ 'The sad course of the campaign of the Allies in Champagne in 1792 is well-known,' wrote Conrady: 'Persistently bad weather; the disunity of the leaders; lack of care – of the worst sort – and maladies soon left the troops of the Allies in such a condition that they had to come back from Chalons via Trier and Coblenz and to cross the Rhine again as quickly as possible.'³⁶

When Conrady's regiment had gone to war in 1792, 'I, too, dreamt of reputation and honour, promotion and decoration, without suspecting that this war would merely bring me, like so many others, endless punishments and disappointments,' he noted: 'But anticipated military honours failed to come into being.'³⁷ Once the prospect of victory and glory had receded, soldiering reverted to a routine carrying out of duties and advancement, as another Prussian officer wrote home to his wife between 1794 and 1797, in the hope that 'this business will soon be over'.³⁸ 'God be praised that we have brought this year to an end, too,' he declared on 31 December 1797:

What can be a source of comfort for us in this is the fact that we don't have to look back on our actions in shame, but rather every one of us can stand forward proudly and without hesitation. One can only live happily in the reliable fulfilment of one's duties, and this, of course, is our communal desire, the fulfilment of which is closer to my heart than anything else.³⁹

In these laconic reports of the 1790s, honour—and, indeed, a lack of honour—became a mundane affair and military manoeuvres a regular activity. Little mention was made of suffering, killing, and death. 'My strong body had overcome all trials successfully, but the depressing events of the last months had impressed themselves on my spirit,' recorded Conrady simply.⁴⁰ After being taken prisoner by the French, he experienced 'the heavy burdens' of war and succumbed to a 'severe fever', losing consciousness and believing, 'in lucid moments, that the end was

³⁴ L. v. Reiche, *Memoiren* (Leipzig, 1857), ed. L. von Weltzien, 43. ³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ W. v. Conrady, *Aus stürmischer Zeit*, 10. ³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ M. v. Eberhardt (ed.), *Aus Preussens schwerer Zeit*, 13.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15. Another business-like account of the revolutionary wars can be found in C. C. Zimmermann, *Geschichte des 1*, vol. 1, 16–85. Doing one's duty and not letting down relatives—especially fathers—at home were common motivations, as one official's son made plain in a letter home in 1794: C. Klein to his father, 12 Dec. 1794, *Kriegsbriefe* Archive, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn.

⁴⁰ W. v. Conrady, *Aus stürmischer Zeit*, 10.

near', yet he passed over this period of physical suffering, too, without further comment.⁴¹

The majority of the depictions of the wars of 1805 and 1806 diverged little from earlier narratives and descriptions.⁴² One Prussian cavalry officer, who fought at Auerstädt, recalled how his father had taken leave of him in 1792, 'as if an inner premonition told him that he would find his death in this campaign'.⁴³ Having shed tears, despite never tolerating 'crying, even amongst children', his father nonetheless went on to tell his 'boy' to 'be brave' and 'become, if I should not see you again, a virtuous soldier who brings honour to our name'.⁴⁴ Military service at that time, reflected the officer in the mid-nineteenth century, 'was hard and strict, and one knew nothing of the luxury and softening, such as that which unfortunately is threatening to work its way increasingly into the army, too, in our times, was unknown at that time'.⁴⁵ Junkers, in particular, were brought up severely and sent off to the army, 'without the slightest thing being overlooked or excused'.⁴⁶ Correspondingly, during his first military action in 1806, skirmishing with French hussars, 'an unusual feeling pressed against my chest, as I now suddenly found myself opposite an enemy of much greater strength', but it 'lasted only a few seconds, then I drew my sabre and called to my own hussars: "Forwards, finally we have the Frenchmen we have been wanting"', and so it went, under the jubilant cry of "Long live the King of Prussia", against the equally surprised enemy'.⁴⁷ In contrast to morale in the infantry, where some regiments had already witnessed 'critical levels of desertion' before the battle of Auerstädt, 'the mood in our cavalry regiment, indeed in the entire cavalry of Blücher's corps, was still good and bellicose'.⁴⁸

In the battle itself, the 'thunder of heavy guns', mixed with that of rifles, 'increased our desire to fight', albeit counteracted by anxiety at 'the prevailing disorder'.⁴⁹ With some Prussian infantry in flight, the officer's regiment was ordered to attack French *tirailleurs*, 'whose bullets were already beginning to pester us':

We surged forward at a gallop. The French sharpshooters shot down some amongst us and wounded several horses, but we pushed them back and struck down several dozen men. Several cavalrymen were so angry that they didn't think of granting pardons.⁵⁰

In the next attack, the Prussians were shot down by French *carrés*, leaving 'the feeble remains of our squadrons in a wild flight' and 'the whole field around me full

⁴¹ Ibid., 104. There were many examples of stoicism: C. Klein to his father, 12 Dec. 1794, *Kriegsbriefe* Archive, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn: 'I prefer to bear my fate with patience and look forward to a happy future'.

⁴² See M. v. Eberhardt (ed.), *Aus Preussens schwerer Zeit*, 61–3; C. v. Plotho, *Tagebuch*; C. C. Zimmermann, *Geschichte des 1*, 96–133; T. v. Barsewisch, *Geschichte des Grossherzogthum*, vol. 1, 1–60; W. v. Conrady, *Aus stürmischer Zeit*, 131–69; A. v. Blumröder, *Erlebnisse im Krieg und Frieden in der grossen Welt und in der kleinen Welt meines Gemüths* (Sondershausen, 1857), 23–31; L. v. Reiche, *Memoiren*, vol. 1, 166; K. von Wedel, *Lebenserinnerungen 1793–1810* (Berlin, 1911), vol. 1, 32–47; G. v. Diest, *Aus der Zeit der Not und Befreiung Deutschlands in den Jahren 1806 bis 1815* (Berlin, 1905), 16–18, citing the diary of General v. Cardell.

⁴³ F. M. Kircheisen, *Wider Napoleon!*, 10.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 90.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 91.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 93.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 95.

of dead or wounded men and horses'.⁵¹ Tears streamed down the officer's cheeks: not out of pity for the dead, which were not referred to again, but 'out of anger' at the disorder of the Prussian army, which created within him a 'mood of desperation'.⁵² This narrative coincided with others such as that of the young Prussian officer Karl von Suckow, who had also looked forward anxiously in 1806 to his 'baptism of fire', wanting 'to earn his spurs before the enemy':

we wanted to show that we were worthy of serving in the ranks of an army which, under its great king, had so often fought for glory and victory; and no one doubted, at least amongst the younger generation, enthusiastic for the cause of Prussia, that this would finally be the result of this day, too.⁵³

After the battles of Auerstädt and Jena were lost, panic ensued, as the remnants of the army streamed northward, plundering Prussian villages along the way and gathering in Magdeburg, where a 'very unappealing agitation' occurred, which was comparable to scenes at Vilnius during the retreat of the *Grande Armée* in 1812.⁵⁴ For officers at least, who remain the principal commentators, it was not the losses or, even, defeats of 1806 which were most galling, but the disorder of defeat. Wounding, killing, and dying seem to have been accepted as the normal activities of war: what caused distress to many officers was that they had not been carried out well.

The accumulation and escalation of the Napoleonic Wars of 1809, 1812, 1813–14, and 1815 moved many onlookers to alter their opinion of military conflict. Many soldiers, especially officers, continued to view combat as an honourable, sometimes heroic, but also as a technical, practical, and unexceptionable activity. Having entered the Bavarian army as a conscript in 1808, Friedrich Mändler left a typical record, based on contemporaneous notes, of his first fighting near the Danube in 1809:

This fighting was the start of my life of actual war and struggle, and the first moment in which I stood opposite a killing abyss of fire. I openly acknowledge that I was unable to avoid, at this first taste, an anxious, if also only temporary, apprehension. A similar feeling affects everyone on their first contact or fighting with the enemy – something that truth-loving old men of war and comrades in arms would not deny. In addition, it is a fatal position for a soldier to be in when, as in this case at the edge of a wood, he remains immobile as cover for a battery and stands there, so to speak, serving merely as a target for the enemy, so that he hears – and has to hear – every bullet of the enemy. This affects the courage of an otherwise brave man in a quite different way from sorties on the training ground or on manoeuvres.⁵⁵

The 17-year-old Wilhelm von Hochberg, the second son of the Grand Duke of Baden, gave a similar account of his first fighting in 1809, when he served as Masséna's adjutant. His tone was unemotional and his reporting supposedly factual, although written up—using his diary and other sources—in the decades after 1815. He experienced combat near Augsburg and then Landshut in late April, recording without further elaboration that 'the fighting began very violently' and

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 101.

⁵³ K. v. Suckow, *Aus meinem Soldatenleben*, 64.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵⁵ F. Mändler, *Erinnerungen*, 6.

‘the enemy’s bullets struck us in thick volleys’.⁵⁶ As the French cavalry pushed forward and attacked, Hochberg noted that they left ‘many a brave man’ on the battlefield, but he passed over them to conclude that ‘many soldiers gained rich pickings’ from the ‘machines of war’ which had been left behind in this ‘last struggle, which ended with the defeat of the enemy army’.⁵⁷ His detached reporting of events started to give way to expressions of feeling—above all, pity and repulsion—as the fighting continued and the casualties increased during May, June, and July, but his memoir remained a military history, interlaced with introspective recollections. It ended with a description of fighting on 9 July at Hollabrunn, which ‘was taken after a bloody engagement’, with Badenese troops playing a ‘glorious part’ despite ‘considerable losses’, and with a final attack by Austrian troops on 11 July, during which ‘a cannonball ripped off the head of my neighbour, so that his brain sprayed me in the face’: ‘Since no gun would fire because of the rain, the [Austrian] battalion of grenadiers was soon taken prisoner, and the cavalry pushed on to Znaim’, where they heard that a ceasefire had been declared.⁵⁸

Such apparent indifference to wounding and death can be found in most accounts of 1809, including that of the Prussian writer and officer Rühle von Lilienstern, who had been forced to accompany the French forces against Austria, since he was the tutor of the King of Saxony’s son. After a straightforward description of the battle of Wagram on 5–6 July, he recounted the death of a friend, injured during the fighting: “Thank God”, he said, “that I see you still standing... Who would have thought that I would die from indigestion; yet two bullets are too much even for the best stomach.”⁵⁹ ‘However deeply the loss of a true friend and companion shook me,’ continued the writer, ‘I was, at this moment, too affected by everything which was going on around me and I was too exhausted bodily to be able to give myself over, undivided, to a single mood.’⁶⁰ Rühle’s depiction of the war went on unabated.

Reports of the ‘ordeal’ of 1812 were more mixed than those of previous wars, yet many were still matter-of-fact for the most part (see Map 4).⁶¹ Although most diarists and memoirists paid tribute to the ‘suffering’ and ‘horrors’ of the battlefield, they did so only in passing. A good example was the young Mecklenburg officer, Otto von Raven, who barely mentioned combat at all in his letters to his wife, despite having just returned from the gruelling campaign in Russia in 1812. Most of his regiment had not returned, as he noted in a joint letter to the Duke of Mecklenburg:

As the small residue of the Mecklenburg contingent returned to the fatherland last year from the wasteland of the dead in Russia, it was still possible to entertain the faint

⁵⁶ Wilhelm, Markgraf von Baden, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, vol. 1, 71.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 95, 97.

⁵⁹ J. J. O. A. Rühle von Lilienstern, *Reise mit der Armee 1809* (Vienna, 1986), ed. J.-J. Langendorf, 161.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁶¹ A good unpublished example is the ‘Reisebuch’ of Johann Wichterich, from Poppelsdorf, *Kriegsbriefe* Archive, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn, who commented simply after finally meeting the ‘enemy’ (Russian troops): ‘we were very hungry and looked at the dead bodies’.

hope that at least a part of those left behind would return one day. A full fifteen months have passed, however, and no one has appeared.⁶²

‘All – all have been stolen by that distant blood-curdling grave, which has swallowed thousands and hundreds of thousands’, concluded the letter.⁶³ Yet, even in the privacy of his diary entries, Raven expressed very little disgust or complaint about his lot. On 7 December 1812, as the routed *Grande Armée* fled before the advancing Russian and allied forces, the officer was approached unexpectedly by a young man in civilian clothing who rubbed snow violently in his face in order to stop his nose getting frostbite. Raven’s ‘disgust’ (*Entsetzen*) was directed at himself for failing, as a soldier, to notice his own plight.⁶⁴ He rushed back to the monastery where he had been staying, only to find its aisles full of dying soldiers whose clothes and shoes had been looted by their fellow soldiers. His comments were laconic: ‘the frozen and starved were lying piled high on one another, partly having been brought in from adjacent rooms, partly having given up the ghost in front of the doors towards which they had struggled with the last effort of their expiring lives.’⁶⁵

Throughout the invasion of Russia, in both summer and winter, the officer’s diary entries were of a similar tenor, remarking at the siege of Vilno in August, for instance, that four ‘robbers’ and ‘murderers’ had been summarily executed by his own regiment, or recording at Valutina-Gora in October that the regiment had set up camp in the middle of the battlefield, surrounded by corpses, including that of ‘a French field officer who had given up the ghost during an amputation’, with the removed stump of his leg ‘simply lying there’.⁶⁶ Corpses on the road generally showed the way to the advancing troops, with dead horses and humans ‘in such a pile that they polluted the air’.⁶⁷ During the retreat, Raven commented laconically that one of the first dead bodies which the troops had seen was a Polish lancer in a blue and red uniform: ‘a powerful blow had cut the poorly fastened *Czapka* in two and had split the skull down to the mouth.’⁶⁸ As the Cossacks and other Russian troops attacked, ‘we suffered a lot’, he wrote on 21 November, ‘but we could also stand a great deal, for we were already used to hardship’.⁶⁹ Raven’s sole acknowledgement of discomfort was ‘the sight of steaming cartridge cases coming out of the bodies’ of executed opponents, which he found ‘repugnant’ (*widerlich*).⁷⁰ The rest of his diary is consistent with his later letters to his wife, in which he wrote—immediately after the blood-soaked battle of Leipzig in October 1813—that ‘everything is going very well’, apart from having to stand in ‘terrible enemy fire’ for three hours.⁷¹ He was, he ended, proud to enjoy ‘the friendship and trust of all his comrades’.⁷²

⁶² K.-U. Keubke (ed.), *Otto Gotthard Ernst von Raven: Tagebuch des Feldzuges in Russland im Jahre 1812* (Rostock, 1998), 177.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 156–7.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 104 and 121.

⁶⁷ 20 and 21 July, *Ibid.*, 99.

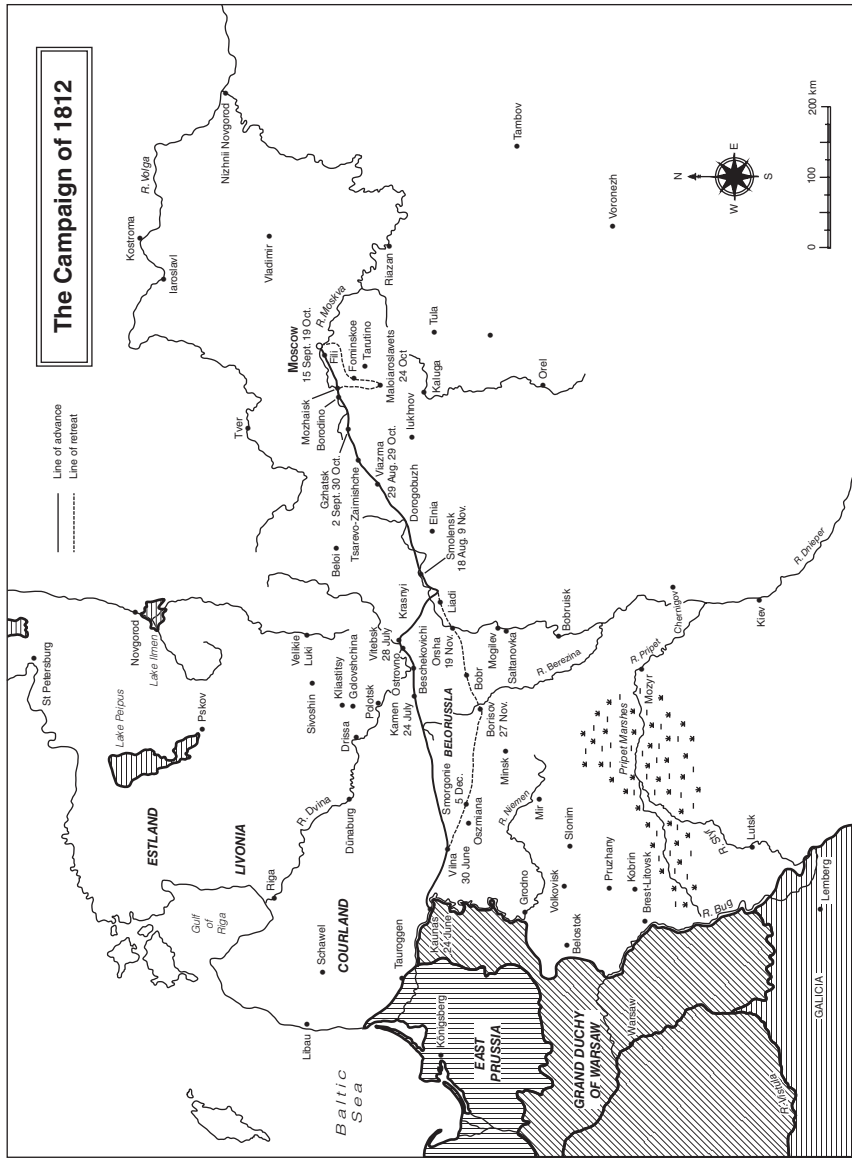
⁶⁸ 23 Nov. 1812, *Ibid.*, 137.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁷¹ Benno von Knobelsdorff-Brenkenhoff (ed.), *Briefe aus den Befreiungskriegen. Ein Beitrag zur Situation von Truppe und Heimat in den Jahren 1813/14* (Zurich, 1998), 192.

⁷² *Ibid.*



Map 4. The Campaign of 1812

Source: D. Lieven, *Russia against Napoleon: The True Story of the Campaigns of War and Peace* (London, 2010), xviii–xix.

Such testimony, which seemed to betray hardiness or even indifference to suffering and violence, remained common until 1815 and beyond.⁷³ It derived from several sources, including the harsh conditions of life in *ancien régime* armies. Most officers accepted unsentimentally that war involved losses and death. The majority of their reports alternated between tactical details and references to killing, in the manner of Gneisenau's correspondence about the 'wars of liberation', which praised the 'courage of our troops' at the same time as noting that the fighting had 'cost a lot of blood'.⁷⁴ Karl von Wedel's description of the campaign of 1806 was similar, notwithstanding an often-perceived distinction between victory in 1813 and defeat seven years earlier. At Auerstädt, his horse was shot in the mouth, leaving the Prussian officer to make his way back between the two armies, 'on which dangerous route a *tirailleur* stabbed me through my tunic and undergarments, without really wounding me' and, 'finally, a cannonball, which caught my hat and plume, deafened me and ripped me from my horse'.⁷⁵ Returning to another battalion, he was put in charge of 'a crowd of assorted people, from different regiments and in flight', who were asked to cover the flank of another attack.⁷⁶ 'This attack, however, went badly, and the battalion was repelled with such great losses that it did not think of carrying out a second one,' he continued: 'My people, who had likewise lost many, again fled in different directions'.⁷⁷ Returning to his own brigade, 'I heard with pain that my father and brother had been brought back fatally injured', leaving him to start the retreat with a 'remorseful heart', yet he went on immediately to record the number of dead and wounded of the battle in formulaic terms, with the defeat described as 'this terrible news', not the death of his closest relatives.⁷⁸

It was common in such reports to turn, without comment, from descriptions of violence to mundane details of a campaign. Thus, the Bavarian Major-General Maximilian von Preysing-Moos wrote in his diary on 20 August 1812 that he had to march through Smolensk, 'where I saw nothing but smoking ruins and thousands of dead and dismembered corpses', before going on in the same sentence to remark that he had crossed the River Dneipr and continued on his way.⁷⁹ Two days earlier, at Polozk, another Bavarian officer, Joseph Maillinger, had talked in similarly unexpansive terms of a battlefield 'strewn with dead and wounded from both sides', before proceeding to note drily that the battle had lasted from four o'clock to half-past nine and then revealing that 200 guns had been trained on a small area

⁷³ See, for example, H. v. Brandt (ed.), *Aus dem Leben*; Louis von Weltzien (ed.), *Ludwig von Reiche. Memoiren*; Joachim Kannicht, *Und alles wegen Napoleon. Aus dem Kriegstagebuch des Georg von Coulon, 1760–1815* (Coblenz, 1986).

⁷⁴ 3 and 7 Oct. 1813, in J. v. Pflugk-Hartung (ed.), *Briefe des Generals Neidhardt von Gneisenau 1809–1815* (Gotha, 1913), 131–2.

⁷⁵ K. v. Wedel, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 43. Ordinary soldiers like Wichterich, 'Reisebuch', *Kriegsbriefe* Archive, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn, gave similar accounts.

⁷⁶ K. v. Wedel, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 44. ⁷⁷ *Ibid.* ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷⁹ M. v. Preysing-Moos, 'Tagebuch des Generalmajors Graf von Preysing-Moos, Fuehrer der Bayerischen Kavallerie-Division im Felzuge nach Russland 1812', *Darstellungen aus der Bayerischen Kriegs- und Heeresgeschichte*, 21 (1912), 32.

with ‘murderous’ effect.⁸⁰ Although this type of juxtaposition is characteristic of diaries, it also suggests that the violence of battle was unexceptionable, even if unusual. Accordingly, the autobiographical records of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had rarely mentioned wounding at all.⁸¹ As one young Prussian officer, serving in France’s army in Spain, put it: in battle, ‘one can only be shot or wounded’.⁸² ‘In war, where human life has such a low value, one pays little attention to it and often treats it lightly,’ wrote another after the battle of Leipzig in October 1813.⁸³

In many instances, senior officers appeared less concerned by the prospect of wounding and death than their juniors, despite being much closer to combat than their counterparts in later conflicts.⁸⁴ Many were killed, including Gerhard Johann Scharnhorst and the Duke of Brunswick (*Braunschweig*). When the former—Carl von Müffling’s own superior—had died after the battle of Großgörschen in May 1813, the memoirist had ‘seen him in the evening after the battle for the last time; he considered his wounds of no consequence and hoped soon to rejoin the army’.⁸⁵ Scharnhorst’s insouciance had not been justified and he had died shortly afterwards in Prague. At the death of the latter, Müffling was also present: ‘For me was reserved the heart-rending meeting with the Duke on his bed in Braunschweig, with bloody bandages over his sightless orbits, and the equally melancholy sight of his body on the day of his death in Ottensen,’ recorded Müffling, who was serving in the royal headquarters: ‘With deep pain I viewed the remains of a Prince who, since the Seven Years’ War, had played such an important part in the history of the world, who possessed many great and excellent qualities, and deserved a better fate.’⁸⁶ But Müffling’s melancholy was arguably prompted by the Prussian army’s loss of a great commander more than by the Duke’s suffering per se. Certainly, this was the impression given by one of Brunswick’s successors in the ‘wars of freedom’, General Gebhardt Leberecht von Blücher, who was injured in May 1813, but who was more concerned that the French forces had been defeated. ‘Whatever news you have received, please don’t worry, for although I got three bullets and also had my horse shot from under me, it is not dangerous, and I am and remain fully active’, he wrote to his wife shortly afterwards: ‘I have satisfaction enough that I attacked Herr Napoleon two times and both times pushed him back. The battle was so murderous that both sides were exhausted and both lacked ammunition. . . . I got a shot in the back, which is very painful. I’ll bring you the bullet.’⁸⁷ Thus, although

⁸⁰ J. Maillinger, ‘Tagebuch des Hauptmannes Joseph Maillinger im Feldzug nach Russland 1812’, *Darstellungen*, 97.

⁸¹ M. Dinges, ‘Soldatenkörper in der Frühen Neuzeit. Erfahrungen mit einem unzureichend geschützten, formierten und verletzten Körper in Selbstzeugnissen’, in R. van Dülmen (ed.), *Körper-Geschichten* (Frankfurt, 1996), 89.

⁸² H. v. Brandt (ed.), *Aus dem Leben*, vol. 1, 281.

⁸³ L. v. Reiche, *Memoiren*, 345.

⁸⁴ A. Adam, *Aus dem Leben eines Schlachtenmalers*, 185, comments that even Prince Eugène de Beauharnais, Napoleon’s adopted son and heir to the Kingdom of Italy, could be found in the thick of the fighting in 1812.

⁸⁵ C. v. Müffling, *The Memoirs of Baron von Müffling: A Prussian Officer in the Napoleonic Wars* (London, 1997), 32.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁸⁷ W. Capelle (ed.), *Blüchers Briefe* (Leipzig, n. d.), 41.

they were involved in the thick of the fighting, officers like Blücher were prepared to countenance large-scale loss of life, even if this also included their own. None of the officers made many references to common soldiers, other than to say that they would desert or flee, if conditions were bad.⁸⁸ There is little indication that either generals or statesmen took much notice of the vast bulk of their armies, much of which had been recruited from amongst the poor and the powerless.

The reactions of ordinary soldiers to violence are difficult to judge, given the dearth of written evidence, but they were likely to have been at least partly conditioned by the harshness of life and the severity of discipline within the various armies. The introduction of new articles of war in Prussia in 1808 was heralded as an act of humanity, but the articles continued to sanction corporal punishment, 'severe arrest', and a range of death penalties. There would always be a place, declared Gneisenau, for 'sensitive disciplining'.⁸⁹ Before 1808, and in other armies, 'invective, beatings in the stocks and other harsh corporal punishments' remained in place.⁹⁰ Thus, when the Bavarian commander Wrede lamented

that it is not the right moment to train soldiers in times of war, that one cannot demand the peasant becomes a soldier immediately, even if you put a soldier's tunic on him, give him a musket to carry on his back and make him march, and that such people can neither be made to put up with exhaustion nor be receptive to feelings of honour, patience and hardship

he was acknowledging that such disciplining, which distinguished the military from the civilian sphere, occurred routinely within armies under normal conditions.⁹¹ One soldier, who joined the Prussian army voluntarily during peacetime and initially served in the ranks after the turn of the century, noted that he 'adapted to the unaccustomed compulsion', with 'habit' making 'the many hardships and limitations of natural freedom, which soldiery inevitably brings with it, less oppressive'.⁹² To Joseph Schrafel, conscripted against his will into the ranks of the Bavarian army in 1807, the soldier's life, which was greeted as 'a strike of lightning', meant that 'all sustenance, every expectation of future well-being, all sweet hopes, in which we indulged, were at once destroyed'.⁹³ 'What sudden deprivation after – for someone from my estate (*Stand*) – a happy, even overflowing, way of life,' he went on:

And what a terrible prospect before me. At that time, military institutions were not as humane as they are now. Ordinary soldiers were almost entirely at the mercy of crude, often cruel NCOs. The regulations were extremely severe. Barely a day passed without corporal punishment. Not infrequently, it was used for quite inconsequential infractions, which would now be punished only with a warning. Thus, the terror and anxiety of the people for the life of the soldier was universal. One imagined the evil to be even greater than it really was. I thought of myself as a condemned criminal.

⁸⁸ See, for instance, F. M. Kircheisen (ed.), *Wider Napoleon!*, 91.

⁸⁹ G. Förster and C. Gudzent (eds), *Gneisenau. Ausgewählte militärische Schriften*, 116.

⁹⁰ J. F. v. Koenen report, 26 May 1808, in R. Vaupel (ed.), *Die Reorganisation*, part 2, vol. 1, 431.

⁹¹ Wrede, 9 Nov. 1812, cited in J. Murken, *Bayerische Soldaten im Russlandfeldzug 1812*, 143.

⁹² A. v. Blumröder, *Erlebnisse im Krieg und Frieden*, 23.

⁹³ J. Schrafel, *Merkwürdige Schicksale*, 6.

Outwardly, I behaved calmly and quietly, but an indescribable feeling of anxiety, a dull melancholy, which moved me to apathy, had gained control of me internally.⁹⁴

Discipline was strictly enforced, with one general threatening the Swabian officer Christian von Martens with arrest in late July 1812 during the disastrous campaign in Russia because one of his men, suffering from dysentery, had not tightened his belt.⁹⁵ Usually, soldiers refrained from showing their emotions, despite their ‘fears of death’ and ‘of coming things’.⁹⁶ One corporal admitted to his wife that ‘tears and suffering are my daily bread’, but he also remarked that he was ‘no longer’ ashamed of such displays of feeling, ‘for you and my children are fully worthy of them’.⁹⁷ Toughness and taciturnity were arguably more typical. ‘We were scarcely down there when it started again – boom, boom, boom – and the cannon shots greeted us so regularly that I had soon had enough, I was so hungry,’ wrote the Rhenish soldier Johann Wichterich phlegmatically in his ‘travel diary’ in 1812: ‘But there were some amongst us who had had quite enough, when their heads flew in the air and their legs danced around on the floor. I thought I had eaten my last bit of army bread there, but I hadn’t.’⁹⁸ One Austrian soldier, who had been ‘half forced’ into the army in 1809, gave an insight into how combatants mourned their dead after the battle of Aspern: ‘The conversation at the fire of the watch turned partly on the dangers overcome and was partly devoted to the commemoration of missing comrades, with each making an observation about how this or that comrade had found his death or, as a wounded soldier, had left the ranks of combatants.’⁹⁹ ‘These reminiscences were the only commemoration of the dead which we could bring ourselves to mount for our fallen brothers,’ he concluded.¹⁰⁰ Even though the fallen were like ‘brothers’, the soldiers’ response to their death, perhaps because of exhaustion or the frequency of mourning, was matter-of-fact.

The rank and file of German armies were still seen to be expendable, as the increased levels of killing of the Napoleonic Wars had demonstrated. Napoleon himself, who combined the toughness of a career officer with the hierarchical attitudes of the *ancien régime*, had boasted of the numbers of troops which he was prepared to sacrifice in his struggle for supremacy. In Germany and elsewhere, reports of war losses routinely distinguished between commanders, who were usually named, officers, who were sometimes named and always treated as a separate group, and ‘men’, whose losses—frequently in the thousands—were merely counted or not mentioned at all. In regimental histories and in the individual accounts on which such histories rested, troops were a military resource, often enumerated in the same sentence as horses and pieces of artillery.¹⁰¹ Friedrich Giese, a 24-year-old junior

⁹⁴ Ibid., 6–7. ⁹⁵ C. v. Martens, *Vor fünfzig Jahren*, vol. 1, 81.

⁹⁶ Grasmann, *Tagebuch*, 20 Oct. 1812, and Layrer to his wife, 19 May 1812, cited in Murken, *Bayerische Soldaten*, 140.

⁹⁷ Layrer to his wife, 1 Mar. 1812, Ibid., 144.

⁹⁸ Johann Wichterich, ‘Reisebuch’, *Kriegsbrieft* Archive, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn.

⁹⁹ F. A. Brandner, *Aus dem Tagebuch eines österreichischen Soldaten im Jahre 1809* (Löbau, n. d.), 65.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Johann David von Dziengel, *Geschichte des Königlich Zweiten Ulanen-Regiments* (Potsdam, 1858), 343, on the losses of the battle of Leipzig.

officer in the Westphalian army in 1812, provided insights into the way in which ordinary soldiers were viewed, noting laconically on 20 August that there were 8,000 casualties on the Russian side, along with 1,200 prisoners taken, 5,000 on ‘this side’, together with 400 prisoners.¹⁰² At the battle of Borodino in early September, Giese reported that the Westphalian contingent, which was ‘12,200 men strong’, was composed of an ‘infantry of 9,870 men, a cavalry of 1,530 men, foot artillery of 474 artillerymen, a mounted artillery of 56 artillerymen, 229 supply soldiers and 493 horses’ and it went on to sustain a ‘loss of nearly 500 dead and 3,500 wounded’, including ‘18 officers killed, amongst whom were Generals Lepel and Damas’, and 146 officers wounded, amongst whom were Generals Tharreau, Hammerstein, and Borstel, ‘of whom many had since died of their wounds’.¹⁰³

Likewise, the Swabian officer Christian von Martens, who proved in his diary entries to be particularly close to his men, remarked that the ‘French’ forces had lost ‘at least 15,000 men’ and ‘the enemy’ ‘at most 10,000 men’ in three days of fighting at Smolensk in August 1812:

Generals Friant, Dolton, Grandjean and Zajonschek were wounded, Grabowski remained on the field. From ours [Württemberg’s contingent], Captain v. Herwig and Lieut. v. Rüdts; General v. Koch, Lieut.-Colonel v. Bartruff and v. Bauer, Major v. Seybold, Captains v. Notter, v. Schaumberg and v. Woldenfels, die Lieuts. v. Rottenhof, v. Dobeneck, v. Parrot und v. Wächter – the last died several days later. The loss of NCOs and soldiers amounted to 684 men. The enemy lost 2 generals and several were wounded.¹⁰⁴

As the Russians withdrew, the losses on either side from continued fighting were ‘roughly the same’, with 6,000 dead and wounded.¹⁰⁵ Martens again listed the names of all Württemberg’s wounded officers but omitted to give the number of dead and wounded troops.¹⁰⁶ A similar tally was provided after Borodino. By the time of the ‘victory’ parade in Moscow on 20 September, which the officer conceded was no cause for pride, only 1,000 men from Württemberg’s initial contingent of 16,000 were present, yet Martens had made few allusions to such a depletion of forces and he passed over the harrowing statistics on this occasion without further comment.¹⁰⁷ Such apparent callousness was consistent with the strict division between largely noble officers and ‘men’. Under the special conditions of the retreat from Moscow in October, November, and December 1812, this division broke down, with Napoleon’s order that only officers and armed soldiers be allowed to cross the pontoon bridge at Beresina on 27 November proving unenforceable. After that point, Martens continued,

we dragged ourselves laboriously through great forests and over fields of snow, the entire brotherhood of arms; every feeling of humanity and pity disappeared before the

¹⁰² F. Giese, *Kassel—Moskau—Kuestrin 1812–1813* (Leipzig, 1912), ed. Karl Giese, 109.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 123. K. v. Wedel, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 44–6, gives a similar account for the Prussian army, listing dead and wounded officers at the battle of Auerstädt but not giving the number of casualties amongst the rank and file.

¹⁰⁴ C. v. Martens, *Vor fünfzig Jahren*, vol. 1, 101.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

instinctive drive for survival; one saw only faces bearing the marks of hunger, cold and the smoke of the camp fire; many generals and higher officers were lost in the mass and were pleased to be able to warm themselves before the bivouac fires of the soldiers and to be able to find protection from the barbarities of the Cossacks amongst them.¹⁰⁸

Normally, though, officers had not been part of the mass, as the Swabian officer had hinted at the start of the 1812 campaign, when he had been billeted in burgher's houses, the castles of Polish aristocrats, and even in hotels, complete with *table d'hôte*.¹⁰⁹ By 1813, the distinction between officers and men had been re-established.¹¹⁰

The expendability of ordinary soldiers derived in part from the distance between ranks in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century societies. This sense of distance was most evident within royal courts and state governments, whose willingness to dispose of and sacrifice their subjects' lives surpassed that of the officer corps. Carl Bodo von Bodenhausen, who had been a courtier of the Queen of Westphalia between 1807 and 1811 before becoming a servant of the king and an officer, left a telling record of how insulated such circles were from the suffering of combatants. Having followed Jérôme, the new King of Westphalia, to Moscow in 1812, the courtier observed the retreat from the Russian capital from the vantage point of his carriage, although walking during the day to save his horses. Thus, when he described 'the attacks of the Russians almost every day from all sides', causing the army to lose, 'through frost and hunger, as well as in constant fighting, all of its equipment and its horses', he was speaking as an outsider, who spent 'the nights by a bivouac fire or in my carriage, wrapped in several furs which I had bought. I was lucky enough to buy several poor-quality items of food and also received some in the imperial headquarters'.¹¹¹ At the river crossing at Beresina in late November, as the entire *Grande Armée* was trapped by the river, Bodo von Bodenhausen finally had to leave his carriage and his servants, crossing the bridge on foot with all his gold and some beans to eat. Just before his departure, he reported detachedly how 'a cannonball landed between me and the cook and tore off his lower leg'.¹¹² The cook had had 'the courage to ask for his kitchen knife... in order to cut off his destroyed leg completely'.¹¹³ The crush to get over the bridge was so great that the courtier had had to wade through the freezing water and then ask a French guard—'very politely'—to be allowed to cross.¹¹⁴ Once on the other side, he had found the other Westphalian forces, having bought and plundered food, and he had prevailed on the commander, a relative, to allow him to travel in advance of the main army, together with a Westphalian officer and a Polish soldier, who could translate for them. They left the army on 3 December, avoided the poorly policed Russian lines, and travelled on French courier horses, paying for nights in individuals' houses and inns. Having procured a carriage in Vilnius, they made their way with

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 209, 218. ¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 6–39.

¹¹⁰ Amongst many sources, this can be seen in the second volume of C. v. Martens, *Vor fünfzig Jahren*.

¹¹¹ C. Bodo von Bodenhausen, *Tagebuch eines Ordonnanzoffiziers von 1812–1813* (Braunschweig, 1912), ed. B. v. Cramm, 27–8.

¹¹² Ibid., 30–1. ¹¹³ Ibid. ¹¹⁴ Ibid., 32.

three horses and supplies of food to Warsaw, where, because ‘we were all extremely tired’, they ‘rested for five to six days in a guesthouse’.¹¹⁵ They then rode to Berlin by 28 December in another carriage acquired in Warsaw. The picture which the courtier painted of life behind the Russian lines was tranquil and comfortable, in contrast to the horrific conditions within the retreating *Grande Armée*, from which Bodo von Bodenhausen had been protected, with the exception of the crossing of the Beresina itself. Although physically close to the suffering of soldiers, the courtier remained socially detached.

CITIZEN-SOLDIERS

Not all onlookers were as indifferent to the fate of ordinary soldiers as Bodo von Bodenhausen. National-minded soldiers from the middling strata, a number of whom joined units of volunteers such as the Lützower corps, were more conscious of the fate of the ranks. In contrast to regular troops, these ‘volunteers’ (*Freiwillige*) came preponderantly from towns, not the countryside, with manual workers and journeymen making up 40 per cent of their number and the ‘educated orders’ 12 per cent.¹¹⁶ It is possible that just under half of all Prussian students had joined units of volunteers—constituting 5 per cent of the total—by the summer of 1814, when *Freiwillige* comprised 30,000 troops of Prussia’s total force of 280,000.¹¹⁷ It is likely that educated sections of society were similarly over-represented amongst Bavaria’s 6,000 volunteer soldiers and 230 volunteer officers, who enlisted in late 1813 and early 1814.¹¹⁸ Although such soldiers carried out peripheral military duties, they enjoyed significant public support and played a significant symbolic role, prompting Napoleon to order troops from Württemberg to attack the Lützow corps during the summer ceasefire of 1813 and provoking one of the troops’ German commanders to protest, ultimately in vain, that ‘it is not right to move against these people in hostility’.¹¹⁹ Certainly, Prussian officials talked of the volunteer corps without further explanation, for the benefit of a wider ‘public’, as part of the army.¹²⁰ The corps were supplemented by the recruitment of 12,000 cavalry (*Jäger*) and by the formation of the *Landwehr*, which came to number 120,000 conscripts in Prussia. By the end of the Napoleonic Wars, many other German states had created similar forces, albeit with varying functions and in different states of readiness. Bavaria, for instance, already had a National Guard of 10,000 men in late 1813.¹²¹

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹¹⁶ P. Brandt, ‘Das Freikorps Lützow’, in J. Dülffer (ed.), *Kriegsbereitschaft und Friedensordnung*, 214.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* ¹¹⁸ U. Planert, *Der Mythos*, 600.

¹¹⁹ O. Gerhardt, *Die Württemberger*, 63. They were later forced to attack the Lützow corps anyway, *Ibid.*, 67–9.

¹²⁰ T. to A. v. Schön, 1 May 1813, in G. A. Klaus (ed.), *‘Schnlich erwarte ich die morgende Post’*, 113 (Cologne, 2005).

¹²¹ See Chapter 1. On the readiness of the Bavarian *Landwehr*, see G. Kirchmayer, *Veteranen-Huldigung*, 65–6.

The conditions in these units were often chaotic, relying on the recruitment of old soldiers and officers, whose methods were ten to twenty years out of date and whose training often amounted to little more than ‘a military manner and a mechanical, once-inculcated, rudimentary capability’, in the words of Wilhelm von Knobelsdorff, who was responsible for raising a cavalry squadron in the Prussian Neumark during the summer of 1813.¹²² The *Landwehr* lacked money to pay the troops, material to manufacture their uniforms, manual labour, surgeons, guns, shell cases, and pots and pans, he continued: ‘And yet, gradually, they succeeded.’¹²³ Knobelsdorff sometimes felt like a pawn, being moved around northern Germany in 1813, but he eventually took part in the battle of Leipzig, where he won an iron cross, which ‘brought me great joy’.¹²⁴ Although he had persuaded former officers out of retirement and had recruited ‘day labourers, tailors and carpenters etc.’ who had already served in the army, he had also had to muster a much wider range of men, who—like conscripts in the regular army—came from most sections of society.¹²⁵ Some of these new recruits saw the wars of 1813–15 in a patriotic or national light. Even those disillusioned with the *Freiwillige* such as Friedrich Rückert, who—after earlier support—had come to denounce the Lützow corps as the ‘crashed toy of the *Burschen*’ and to declare himself merely ‘for the Franks’ and not for Prussia by May 1815, continued to consider it their duty to join the *Landwehr*, remaining in contact with and speaking on behalf of ordinary soldiers and citizens.¹²⁶

For a vocal minority of combatants, war seemed to offer the possibility of patriotic or national regeneration through the necessity of much wider participation and mobilization.¹²⁷ Henrich Steffens, a Norwegian who had been to university in Germany and had become a professor at the University of Halle, gave a good, if contested, impression of new attitudes to and conditions of war which such participation had caused. Like many of his contemporaries, the physicist was ‘not indifferent to the political conditions of Europe’ during the late 1790s and early 1800s, sympathizing with the Jacobins, but he remained oblivious ‘of a political present which would demand action’, viewing politics as ‘doctrine, theory, principle and future’.¹²⁸ Prussia’s defeat by French forces in 1806 altered his view, proving that the state was the repository of power and an expression of popular will. Until then, the violence of the state, despite being ‘the most vital source of enthusiasm’, had resembled ‘sources which have no outlet and, hidden by the mountain, stay on the inside’.¹²⁹ ‘A belligerent, national feeling’ had been ‘the burgeoning source of life

¹²² B. v. Knobelsdorff-Brenkenhoff, *Briefe aus den Befreiungskriegen*, 32. ¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 90. ¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹²⁶ F. Rückert to F. Schubart, 2 May 1813, in F. Rückert, *Briefe* (Schweinfurt, 1977), vol. 1, 72.

¹²⁷ Their sentiments were shared by at least some private correspondents and were not merely a matter of ‘publicity’. Johann Gottlieb Carl Krahnert, ‘Tagebuch’, *Kriegsbriefe* Archive, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn, was not unusual in talking of ‘Germany, especially Prussia, [which] had sighed for long years under the forced rule of the French Kaiser.’ ‘Napoleon’s continuing, planned oppression had no end, he placed no limits on his demands. Thus, the desire to become free of the slaves’ shackles had sunk deep into the breast of every German.’

¹²⁸ H. Steffens, *Was ich erlebte*, 163. ¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

of the people (*Volk*),’ he went on, but ‘it had lost all higher significance’ within succeeding regimes:

The national, belligerent feeling, which was not to be articulated, became more and more powerfully pressing, more and more elastic, under external pressure, and a calm awareness emerged that the popular-belligerent sense would also have to infuse and revive the military one, if the state were to be regenerated by a new enlivening form out of the existing discredited one. Each true Prussian citizen began to realise that all higher spiritual and material interests were tied directly to a belligerent sense.¹³⁰

A national campaign led by Prussia in the name of Germany made war ‘holy’ for Steffens, helping to offset his greater sensitivity to and lack of knowledge of combat: ‘From now on, it became, as it were, an axiom of my civilian (*bürgerlich*) life, the most sacred thing to me, that Germany in the most eminent sense could only be saved by the Prussian state.’¹³¹ Thus, when he did become acquainted with war, as French troops entered the sleepy Prussian town of Halle in 1806, Steffens remained certain that the events had a greater purpose. ‘It is, in my opinion, unfair to pay so little attention to the manifestations of civilian life when it is pressed by the circumstances of war,’ he wrote:

The game of war in recent times has, in its harsh form, excluded all poetry, but the excited emotions of the oppressed nation (*Volk*) visible on many thousands of countenances, the rapid transition from fear to hope and back again, . . . allow signs of the most secret life to come to light and have, we should believe, themselves an historical significance.¹³²

‘The terrible collapse of the country and the irreversible destruction, so it seemed, of everything which was sacred and dear to us loomed before our souls like a dark mass of the most diverse, sinister imaginings’, helping to transform subjects’ opinions of war and the state.¹³³ By his own reckoning, Steffens was one of many educated burghers to alter their estimation of ‘the Prussian soldier, this slave-like hireling’, who had enjoyed ‘no respect amongst the people’.¹³⁴

Steffens’s response to the ‘particular, anxious feeling’ of subjugation ‘to a foreign power’ was to form a unit of volunteers, sanctioned by Scharnhorst and the King of Prussia.¹³⁵ Thousands, according to his own recollection, tried to join.¹³⁶ Unlike Jahn, who was recruiting the Lützower corps at the same time in Breslau, where the Norwegian academic had taken up a post, Steffens avoided ‘utterances about the future shape of Germany’, which were ‘doubly suspect because they were being expressed – not rarely – by the most noble, courageous and daring men’, and he recruited soldiers for the *Landwehr* as part of the regular army, ‘even though I was not ignorant of the value of this free element’ of the *Freiwillige*.¹³⁷ ‘It was not difficult for me to make our youth believe that they would be closer to the most important events serving in the regular army (*in dem grossen Heere*)’, he continued: ‘I believed . . . that my age and position allowed . . . me to turn to where the great, ordered masses, led by outstanding army commanders, had to decide the momentous

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 163–4.¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 164.¹³² *Ibid.*, 168.¹³³ *Ibid.*, 174.¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 333.¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 334.

fate of the peoples.¹³⁸ A regular army was more likely to win, he calculated. Nevertheless, Steffens and others like him were convinced that German armies and German public opinion had changed, becoming national, patriotic, or, at least, popular:

For the first time, as the pressure of an enemy, rightly vanquishing its slaves, as institutions were affected, threatened to thwart that burgeoning national idea, that anticipation of a special civic freedom in the innermost core of the soul, the original character of the *Volk* close to collapse, began to oppose the pressure, elastically, with a counter-pressure. The war was not one which – entered into superficially by a ruler – was fought out by an unwilling group of men: it was decided on by every honourable man; it was borne many thousands, after every one had declared it self-evident. How the internal moral struggles of every person oscillate uncertainly so that the combatant is uncertain about where to turn, and enemies remain concealed from one's own camp, until the point comes when the question forces itself upon him as to whether he can be saved morally or whether he should give up. . . . So, the moment of a great, pure opposition became manifest; the question which confronted everyone was strict, clear and decisive, but the answer also had to be the same. It is well-known that a large part of Germany was still allied to Napoleon, that Germans fought against Germans still, encouraged and dominated by France, as during the disastrous Thirty Years' War: but how very different things were now. What could never become clear in the fatefully murky, internally confused conditions of the ruined German Reich now manifested itself very decisively: the opposition between France and Germany was no longer in doubt.¹³⁹

The 'historical greatness' of Napoleon, wrote Steffens, rested on the fact that he had obliged 'every German' to decide whether he wanted to prostrate himself completely before French forces or maintain his independence.¹⁴⁰ 'This moral, even religious, civic renaissance would not, admittedly, be an absolutely purifying one, even if obstacles were successfully overcome,' he concluded: 'But a national transformation had taken place'.¹⁴¹ Although its course and outward aims often appeared contradictory, a war 'only had a meaning for me insofar as it was animated by that which inspired me internally'.¹⁴² It was too early, in Steffens's opinion, to wage war for explicitly and narrowly national aims, but it was necessary to recognize 'what I would call the legitimate mass of war'.¹⁴³ The struggle against France had become a matter of concern to the mass of the people, with burghers serving as soldiers for the first time. Thus, 'I regarded it as an excellent, fortunate circumstance of the great era in which we lived that the more educated youth of the higher orders mixed with those of the lower orders,' he recalled: 'the latter felt themselves honoured in this way, and a morally formative element, as I hoped, was bound to enter into the mass of warriors, albeit slowly, and raise them up'.¹⁴⁴ Everyone wore the same uniform and considered themselves equal 'throughout the whole war'.¹⁴⁵ From this point of view, the experiences and the lives of ordinary soldiers had become more visible and more valuable.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 334–5. ¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 341. ¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* ¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 342.
¹⁴² *Ibid.* ¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 334. ¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 333. ¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

The available accounts of volunteers suggest that they were motivated to fight, but also that they were profoundly affected by the actual conditions and violence of combat. Heinrich Bolte, a student of theology from Fehrbellin near Berlin, was a volunteer in a *Jäger* detachment of fusiliers. His diary of 1813 reveals his early excitement at the prospect of following ‘the call of my besieged fatherland’ (23 February), leaving his beloved family with a heroic ‘Lebt wohl’.¹⁴⁶ ‘What were his thoughts’, he asked rhetorically as he rode over his first battlefield on 6 March: ‘Oh, I shall experience the bloody erasure of the name of Auerstädt from the annals of Prussia! How many of my brothers will have fallen by that time!’¹⁴⁷ Despite being homesick, he still welcomed the spilling of blood, rejoicing in his metamorphosis from civilian to soldier: ‘How the times have changed! Earlier destined by fate to be a herald of peace, now I am seeking to do everything to spill blood in abundance’ (8 April). The commencement of fighting, reported verbally to his regiment, was greeted excitedly—‘Now the course is set’—and seen, once more, as an opportunity to ‘wipe the stain of shame of Jena from the bloody table of history’ (11 April).¹⁴⁸ Bolte was prepared to put up with worsening homesickness—‘I have never felt such a longing for my *Heimat* as I have during the last days’ (14 April)—and to endure ‘all these hardships’ (15 April), including forced marches, for the sake of his ‘loved ones back home’.¹⁴⁹ Thus, when his regiment was told ‘that it would certainly come down to battle today’, ‘All welcomed this news with joy.’¹⁵⁰ His experience of the battle of Groß-Görschen on 2 May, after coming under fire at two o’clock, began to alter his opinion of warfare, however:

The major ordered an attack on the burning village of Klein-Görschen, where the French were defending themselves like desperate men. We took it and now shot at fences and graves, in the process of which I received three shots through my clothing. The rain of bullets was terrible... At about 5 o’clock we left the village again and gathered in a wood behind a small rise, with only 30 men remaining. The terrible bullets had raged to such an extent. The field was covered with corpses and wounded men. We Prussians have few dead, but many injured; the French, the reverse. Here, I received another two shots, which did no damage, but I got another in my right foot, during another advance, which wounded me. I limped forwards slowly now and met a Russian battalion, whose chief embraced me and told me to be brave in broken German. In this way, I fled from danger. With rock-steady trust in you, my God, I went into the fire. I wasn’t mistaken. I have not yet seen your protecting hand with greater wonderment. It is a wonder that I’m alive. God, I thank you with an inflamed heart. How my parents will rejoice when they hear from me. How anxious and troubled they will be until they learn of it.¹⁵¹

Battle had been so shocking that only a strong faith in God, previously unmentioned, gave it meaning. Bolte rarely mentioned his fatherland after this point,

¹⁴⁶ H. Lem von Zieten (ed.), *Tagebuch von Heinrich Bolte, Adjutant Blüchers 1813–14* (Berlin, n. d.), 14. See also W. Krimer, *Erinnerungen eines alten Lützower Jägers*, vol. 2, 27–69, and C. E. V. Krieg (ed.), *Vor fünfzig Jahren. Tagebuch eines freiwilligen Jägers der Jahre 1813 und 1814* (Wesel, 1863), who give similar accounts.

¹⁴⁷ H. Lem von Zieten (ed.), *Tagebuch*, 14.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 25–6.

other than as an object of pity and lament: ‘The road was covered with the wounded and with troops. Five Russian cavalry regiments went by, God knows where to. I am in a terrible state of unrest. My poor, poor fatherland, will you be betrayed again or be lost? I could not survive your fall’ (4 May).¹⁵²

From his first experience of battle onwards, Bolte’s tone was melancholic. At Bautzen on 9 May, ‘I could not staunch my tears at the sight of these powerful young people who were to be sacrificed to death.’¹⁵³ When fighting recommenced in August, he professed to be ‘curious about the coming campaign’, but wondered immediately whether tonight would ‘not cost many a bride bitter tears’ (11 August).¹⁵⁴ As the campaign proceeded, he became more and more pessimistic, irrespective of the outcome of the war, which was now overshadowed—although not completely obscured—by the spectre of the killing and the brutality of life in the army:

28 August: Everywhere, war had left behind the most terrible traces, which made me shiver, seen at such close quarters. Truly, the most terrible thing about war is not the battles, with their horrors; it is the raging soldiery (*Soldateska*). Even when one wants to help with an honest will, one is not always able to do so on the low military rung, on which I am standing. This is something that I have felt and regretted deeply. How happy I would feel if I could, in the circumstances of a civilian, no longer be a witness of things which disgust my feelings. . . . Oh, sweet times, when I lived in my *Heimat* in the Johannistal; how bitter you have become. And all these thousands of sacrifices don’t help at all, or at least they seem, once again, to have been in vain!

29 August: I rushed in [where looting was taking place] and saw the horror of the very greatest devastation. The Austrians distinguished themselves outstandingly by their savagery. I helped, where I could, giving beatings bravely and limited this dreadful state of affairs, where I could, but mostly came too late, unfortunately. Oh, how the touching thankyou of these unfortunates made my heart well. Ah, father and my good mother, today I don’t feel completely unworthy of you. An ugly act must have taken place here in this city. A fusilier – if one is thinking horrific thoughts – came forward with a smoking human foot, which he had found in the chimney. Perhaps the superstition of the brewer has led to the smoking of the human foot!

1 September: There was a dead person after every tenth step. . . . In the burned-down mill, I saw a half-burned cadaver. Numerous corpses were already black and had begun to rot. The stench was disgusting.

8 September: God, a heart full of feelings is often appalled during wars. How devastating war is now, compared to earlier times! . . . When will this dreadful war end; I am very much longing for it. If only I were with my own family. In the moment of strain, the life of the soldier is a peculiar thing. Once the moment is over, however, life also shows its wonderfully appealing sides.¹⁵⁵

War had become fascinating to a volunteer such as Bolte because it permitted a ‘view of danger’ and a ‘proud fearlessness of the soul’, ‘bending the world’ towards its own purposes, but only after injuring, repelling, and re-educating him.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 26.¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 28.¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 41–50.¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

Given the relative scarcity of such contemporaneous reports, it is difficult to determine how representative Bolte's reactions were. The responses of other civilians to the conditions of combat during the Napoleonic era suggest that many volunteers and other conscripts, particularly the significant minority coming from the educated sections of Germany's towns, probably experienced similar feelings of fervour and revulsion. Certainly, artists, writers, and doctors, who accompanied the armies but were not soldiers, seem to have been profoundly disillusioned by the Napoleonic conflicts.¹⁵⁷ Many would have agreed with the Badenese doctor Wilhelm Meier that 'the richer experiences which people gain in tempestuous times are bought at a high price'.¹⁵⁸ Like others, the painter Albrecht Adam, who witnessed the campaigns of 1809 and 1812 with the Bavarian army, set off for Russia in 1812 in a sanguine mood, taking 'a very heroic . . . leave of his fiancée': 'It was in the air at the time. Before I mounted my horse, I extended my hand to her again and said, "In eight months, if I am still alive, I am coming back."' ¹⁵⁹ Adam had already been shocked by the killing in a series of engagements near Regensburg in late April 1809, as 'the first wounded came from the battle' and 'elicited my pity in the highest degree'.¹⁶⁰ 'Amongst many seriously wounded I came across a group which was aesthetically pleasing but looked dreadful,' he continued:

Two men and two horses lay in a tangle; they had been standing behind one another and had been blown up by a cannonball, which hit their ranks from a Bavarian battery. This had ripped off the hip of the first man and the left leg of the second, and had mortally wounded the one horse on the neck and the other on the chest and shoulder. The whole group literally swam in blood.¹⁶¹

The man who had lost his leg, which was still hanging on by 'strips of flesh', had the 'presence of mind to cut it off with a knife'.¹⁶² Having no liquor, he had ridden away to find some, even though he was sure that the soldier with the hip injury 'would scarcely make it to the evening'.¹⁶³

In the 1812 campaign, such scenes became much more common. Lice, heat, squalor, mud, disease, and disorder had already depleted the Bavarian forces by the time that they arrived at the battle of Smolensk on 17–18 August. Thus, although the burning city presented 'magical effects of light' and 'an outwardly beautiful spectacle', there 'was nothing pleasant to say' about it: 'the fire debris, which was still smoking, and the stink of carrion of the many dead horses and bodies, which were all still lying there unburied and were, in the terrible heat, all black within twenty-four hours and had started to rot, polluted the air'.¹⁶⁴ Adam noted later that 'one gets used to things in war from which one would turn away with a shudder and in disgust in normal life', but he revealed at the same time that he was

¹⁵⁷ Examples of doctors are Wenzel Krimer, *Erinnerungen*, and Wilhelm Meier, *Erinnerungen aus den Feldzügen*; J. J. O. A. Rühle von Lilienstern was a writer and Prussian officer who took part in the campaign of 1809 on France's side as the governor of Prince Bernhard of Weimar, in J.-J. Langendorf (ed.), *Rühle von Lilienstern. Reise mit der Armee 1809* (Vienna, 1986).

¹⁵⁸ Wilhelm Meier, *Erinnerungen*, 28.

¹⁵⁹ A. Adam, *Aus dem Leben eines Schlachtenmalers*, 153. ¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 63. ¹⁶² *Ibid.* ¹⁶³ *Ibid.* ¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 178.

deeply affected by such sights, as ‘the suffering and the sad consequences of this war of destruction’ continued to mount.¹⁶⁵ At the battle of Borodino in September, he looked at the ‘terrible picture’ of the field ‘with shudders’: ‘Between dismembered corpses and severed limbs, the wounded struggled with death, groaning in their own blood. . . . Nobody cared about the others, for each was preoccupied with his own suffering.’¹⁶⁶ What was worst, the painter went on, was the feeling of isolation, dying ‘in a desolate land so far from one’s *Heimat* and one’s dear and loved ones’: ‘However great a hero one is, in such a deathly silence such feelings weigh down on him. In the turmoil of battle, they disappear; one doesn’t have time to reflect.’¹⁶⁷ War accustomed soldiers to much hardship and suffering, so that ‘they even go to their death courageously and with a bold countenance’, yet it also altered them.¹⁶⁸ Adam himself confessed that ‘the transition from the life that I led for such a long time back to the narrow constraints of daily life was not as easy as I had initially thought’.¹⁶⁹ ‘It required a lot of time until I had again got used to a more comfortable life’, retaining ‘until old age’ ‘a decided aversion to anything soft’, he concluded.¹⁷⁰

Many officers, despite recent experience of combat, shared the experiences of civilians and volunteers. The Prussian officer and military writer Rühle von Lilienstern, who was travelling with the French and Saxon armies as a civilian observer in 1809, seemed to perceive warfare as both an outsider and an insider. He admitted that war was a ‘tragedy’, yet he went on defending war—‘this rich harvest of death’—as a sign of ‘the undevastatable life force of human will’.¹⁷¹ Moreover, his gaze was unflinching and his nerves intact:

I have meanwhile found a great truth confirmed here once again. All pain and all discomfort that people suffer on earth do not become increasingly unbearable in the same proportion as their incidence and duration are multiplied. Time and reason assuage all mental discomfort and, even for bodily pain, there seems to be a specific measure, not too great, beyond which consciousness, and with it sensitivity, disappears – partly also [because] the nervous system can only retain the original irritability up to a certain point, or up to a certain degree of pain. . . . In the same way, thousands of people dead in a pile make for an almost less horrifying sight than a single person on a hospital bed whose soul has already departed. Granted, reflection, distraction, preoccupation, exaltation and other spiritual and moral powers do their bit to produce a completely different mood from the start on a battlefield than that in a hospital ward, but I won’t be talked out of believing that the repeated and multiplied view of lifeless forms mitigates one’s instinctive aversion to them, and makes the phantom of the fear of death disperse, in that it lowers it to the status of something quite usual and quotidian, which makes our animal nature tremble because of its rarity. It is precisely those most seized by timidity before death and the dead who have looked death in the eye most rarely. The common soldier, who has grown old in the tumult of battles, the sailor, who as a cabin boy has already been rocked by the most horrific waves, go with

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. ¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 195. ¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 188.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. ¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 261. ¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Cited in J.-J. Langendorf, ‘Der Krieg als schöne Kunst betrachter’, in J. J. O. A. Rühle von Lilienstern, *Reise mit der Armee 1809* (Vienna, 1986), ed. J.-J. Langendorf, 258; Ibid., 145.

unreflecting indifference in the face of dangers the very thought of which makes the blood of the peaceful burgher run cold.¹⁷²

Like many officers, Rühle quickly overcame his aversion to killing and examined physical suffering with a detached curiosity. Nonetheless, he also reflected at length on death and suffering. His account of the aftermath of battle betrayed his own emotional involvement in the soldiers' deaths:

It is scarcely possible to give you a comprehensive description of the suffering that we came across on this stretch [of the road] alone, and of the dreadful prospect which a battlefield like this one offers. Think of a great, mile-wide plain covered with parched straw and perhaps twenty-thousand corpses, villages turned into piles of rubble and ash, with all the inhabitants having fled, no tree or water far and wide, in the burning heat of the dogs' time of day – and in the middle of this Libyan, plague-infested desert perhaps a couple of hundred fatally wounded people languishing for three days in ignominious loneliness and helplessness, without company, without food and drink, without a human sound other than the distant wailing cries of similar despair from fallen brothers, and instead of the hope of imminent salvation, nothing but the certain prospect of a slow, suffering and tortured death.¹⁷³

A significant number of officers reacted to the killing of the Napoleonic Wars in a similar fashion. In retrospect, battles such as Borodino became scenes of horror: 'It presented a vision so terrible that it was as if, not people had fought here, but rather cannibals had murderously torn themselves into pieces.'¹⁷⁴ 'Limbs without flesh, devoured skulls stuck out of the earth here and there, completely exhumed, in truth whole hills of the dead with weapons and machines thrown one on top of the other, fronts of corpses leaned against sheer walls of earth in rows,' recalled the same Saxon officer in the mid-nineteenth century: 'here and there, a skeleton, which could no longer be called human, crawled out of the half-decayed residence of a horse's stomach and stammered mad words'.¹⁷⁵ The *Grande Armée* had resembled a swarm of locusts, 'which – after it had eaten everything in its vicinity – had once more to consume itself', recalled one Badenese soldier after the event.¹⁷⁶ At the time, too, scenes from the 1812 campaign had seemed to resemble 'hell', in the words of one former Prussian officer, who had joined the army of Württemberg after defeat in 1806.¹⁷⁷ Borodino was a 'murder-battle' (*Mordschlacht*) which had secured the victory of 'the dictator of Europe', but which had been 'bought with such sacrifices of human lives' that it was seen as a defeat: 'About twenty-thousand corpses covered this side of the battlefield alone.'¹⁷⁸ Under these conditions, soldiers became de-sensitized:

It is extraordinary how lacking in feeling we had become, I would like to say through habit, in tolerating the most horrible scenes indifferently and in quietly meting out the most objectionable treatment. Here are just a few examples, a greater number of

¹⁷² Ibid., 171–2. ¹⁷³ Ibid., 169–70.

¹⁷⁴ R. v. Meerheim (ed.), *Erlebnisse eines Veteranen*, 222. ¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ C. F. C. Pfnor, *Der Krieg, seine Mittel und Wege, sowie sein Verhältnis zum Frieden, in den Erlebnissen eines Veteranen* (Tübingen, 1864), 67.

¹⁷⁷ K. v. Suckow, *Aus meinem Soldatenleben*, 176. ¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 197.

which I could cite. Thus, I recall how, waking up by the bivouac fire, I once quite carelessly caught my head on a dead Frenchman, who had already lain close by my side before going to sleep. Certainly, the poor creature, albeit very different shortly beforehand, had not slipped himself under my head, for he was dead, but rather I had used him as a pillow, drunk with sleep and therefore unconscious.¹⁷⁹

Such passages did not show that soldiers lacked emotion, but that they were conscious of and affected by what they had seen and how they had come to feel. In contrast to earlier eighteenth-century reports, many officers' narratives gave frank descriptions of tears and homesickness—'Many tears flowed on my side, but only because of the separation from my dear ones', as another, young, Prussian officer put it—and of fears and disillusionment, as a consequence of the hardship, suffering, and violence of Napoleonic warfare.¹⁸⁰ For Martens, an officer in one of Württemberg's contingents in 1812, the sight of Moscow burning on 18 September was symptomatic of the campaign in its entirety, 'a drama of horror and grandeur'.¹⁸¹ The carnage of the battle of Borodino a few days earlier, as 'corpses fell over corpses', was said to be indescribable: 'Who can describe the destruction and suffering, which unfolded before my eyes', he asked as he surveyed the battlefield:

The nearer I came to the redoubt, the more the pile of corpses on the field increased; I could easily recognize the hill attacked by our people by the dead, who lay around – there, the corpses of friend and foe lay on top of and beside one another peacefully, and the deathly silence of this blood-soaked, sickening field was only disturbed here and there by the groans of the dying.¹⁸²

In this context, authors like Martens were repelled by what confronted them but not deterred from describing it: their frequent doubting of whether anyone could describe such scenes accurately and completely resulted from their dogged attempts to do so.

SURVIVING INVASION AND LIBERATION

There is evidence to suggest that some soldiers' perceptions of and attitudes to war were altered by the conditions and violence of combat during the Napoleonic era. These perceptions corresponded to overlapping narratives which referred to the escalation of conflict after 1805, culminating in the ordeal of 1812 for the soldiers of the Confederation of the Rhine and in the 'wars of freedom' in 1813–14 for those of Prussia and Austria. Although later histories often depicted the campaign in Russia as the nadir and that in Saxony, Bohemia, and France as the zenith of the German states' military fortunes, few—if any—combatants offered such a reading of events. Those soldiers who fought in both 1812 and 1813, such as the Bavarian officer Friedrich Mändler, usually described the campaigns as part of a series—in this case, the war against Austria (1809), the invasion of Russia (1812), and the

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹⁸⁰ H. v. Jordan, *Erinnerungsblätter*, 17.

¹⁸¹ C. v. Martens, *Vor fünfzig Jahren*, vol. 1, 139.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 121, 125–6.

war against France (1813–14)—and they treated the transition from one to the next as inevitable: after the long march home from Moscow, ‘we can only have been in Innsbruck eight to ten days when the order arrived that all officers at the post who were fit for service should present themselves to the new field division immediately’, he recorded.¹⁸³ Such observers also barely commented on the *Rheinbund* states’ switching of sides in October 1813.¹⁸⁴

Those soldiers in the Prussian and Austrian armies who either did not participate in the Russian campaign or were part of Habsburg and Hohenzollern forces guarding the rear of the *Grande Armée* frequently viewed the wars of 1813 and 1814 as threatening—rather than redeeming—events, from which officers like Heinrich von Jordan implored God to be returned safely, and as an extension of a period of hostility which had begun in 1805 (Austria) or 1806 (Prussia).¹⁸⁵ As one volunteer cavalry officer put it, prior to his departure in the spring of 1813:

My father suppressed a tear by saying: ‘God be with you.’ ... My mother complained, turning to me: ‘I have already struggled so hard to keep my eldest son from entering the military ... and now I have to see you being taken away to descend in the blossom of youth into a grave. ... Your grave on the battlefield will leave no trace’.¹⁸⁶

A few weeks later, only 86 out of 200 or so of the volunteer’s comrades remained. Although such losses did not shake his conviction that 1813 was a ‘time of patriotism’ and that it was an ‘honour’ to camp on the battlefield of Leipzig, he conceded that soldiers ‘broke like a bent blade of grass as soon as [the] noises of war fell silent or [they] had to leave the fighting’.¹⁸⁷ Others who fought at the battle of Leipzig were struck by ‘the terrible losses’ which had been incurred: ‘It was truly horrific how everything had melted away’.¹⁸⁸

Narratives of 1813 were regularly laced with such laments and were rarely unambiguously heroic.¹⁸⁹ Some Prussian authors had switched sides after 1806 and had fought in 1812 with French or Russian forces, going on to fight in Saxony in 1813 after a gruelling campaign in the winter of 1812 in Russia and Poland.¹⁹⁰ A larger number had heard—in Carl Ernst Wilhelm von Canitz and Dallwitz’s opinion—‘all kinds of rumours’, which were later confirmed as the remnants of the *Grande Armée* reached Prussia in December 1812, that ‘Napoleon’s project’ had failed in terrible

¹⁸³ F. Mändler, *Erinnerungen*, 104.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 126–8. Ordinary soldiers often simply referred to ‘the enemy’, without specifying what that enemy was: for instance, Wichterich, ‘Reisebuch’, *Kriegsbriefe* Archive, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn, who was fighting—as a Rhinelander—for the French in 1812, only mentions a specific opponent when he encounters ‘Cossacks’. He comments later in his diary, in 1815, that he was ‘forced’ by the Prussians to serve in a Silesian battalion, which he then did without further complaint.

¹⁸⁵ H. v. Jordan, *Erinnerungsblätter*, 162.

¹⁸⁶ C. E. V. Krieg (ed.), *Vor fünfzig Jahren*, 9.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁸⁸ F. M. Kircheisen (ed.), *Wider Napoleon!*, 227.

¹⁸⁹ K. Hagemann, ‘“Unimaginable Horror and Misery”: The Battle of Leipzig in October 1813 in Civilian Experience and Perception’, in A. Forrest, K. Hagemann, and J. Rendall (eds), *Soldiers, Citizens and Civilians* (Basingstoke, 2009), 157–78.

¹⁹⁰ The officer portrayed by Kircheisen joined the Duke of Wellington in Spain after Prussia’s defeat and went on to fight for Russia in 1812; *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 131–42. Heinrich von Brandt had fought for France; H. v. Brandt (ed.), *Aus dem Leben*, 280–485.

circumstances.¹⁹¹ The majority of these officers had been secret or public opponents of France in the period before 1813. As a result, few accounts of the ‘wars of freedom’ were triumphal. Even Plotho’s ‘historical’ description of ‘the battle of the peoples’ (*Völkerschlacht*) at Leipzig, which was held ‘clearly’ to constitute ‘a turning-point in the history of the world’, admitted that ‘great misfortune and painful experiences’ had been produced.¹⁹² Such conclusions derived at once from an immediate reaction to the changed conditions of warfare and from an extended narrative of military campaigns during the Napoleonic era.

For German soldiers belonging to the Confederation of the Rhine, the decisive campaign was that of 1812.¹⁹³ Many troops had already fought in Prussia in 1806, Spain in 1808, and Austria in 1809.¹⁹⁴ In each instance, from the forced marches and rapid collapse of Prussia, via ‘the horror of the war’ in Spain, marked by guerrilla warfare and civilian casualties, to the battles and killing of the conflict with Austria, with any ‘description of the battle’ of Wagram—the largest in history until that point—bound to occasion ‘mourning’, soldiers had experienced different forms of combat and slaughter, but nothing which compared to those incurred during the failed invasion of Russia in 1812.¹⁹⁵ Most accounts of the ordeal of 1812, as it was widely portrayed, were composed of separate parts, encompassing the massing, departure, and early adventures of the *Grande Armée* in the spring and early summer, the horrific battles of Smolensk and Borodino in August and September, and the retreat from Moscow in October, November, and December. Because of the toll of earlier campaigns and resentment of French demands in some cases, the mood of departing troops varied. ‘I have never gone to war with so little enthusiasm and, even, without hope,’ remarked one veteran Westphalian officer, his anguish heightened by his recent marriage to a young wife.¹⁹⁶ As Badenese regiments passed through Prussia, the hard-pressed residents had ‘prophesied disaster and unavoidable destruction for them from the coming Russian campaign’.¹⁹⁷ Nevertheless, in spite of fatigue and forebodings, the majority of military observers appear still to have been sanguine, with the Badenese soldiers themselves, according to one of their commanding officers,

¹⁹¹ C. E. W. v. Canitz und Dallwitz, *Denkschriften*, vol. 1, 85.

¹⁹² C. v. Plotho, *Der Krieg in Deutschland und Frankreich*, vol. 2, 424.

¹⁹³ Sixty-seven of Hagemann’s 129 German-language military memoirs published before 1875 and dealing with the Napoleonic wars concentrated on the Russian campaign in 1812: two-thirds of them (forty-five) were written by members of the armies of the Confederation of the Rhine: K. Hagemann, *Revisiting Prussia’s Wars against Napoleon*, 311.

¹⁹⁴ See, for instance, W. v. Conrady (ed.), *Aus stürmischer Zeit*; A. v. Blumröder, *Erlebnisse*; F. Mändler, *Erinnerungen*; A. L. v. Ardenne, *Bergische Lanciers Westfälische Husaren*; K. v. Suckow, *Aus meinem Soldatenleben*; H. v. Brandt (ed.), *Aus dem Leben*; Jakob Walter in B. Hildebrand (ed.), *Drei Schwaben unter Napoleon*, 9–94.

¹⁹⁵ G. Muhl, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 68, on Spain; J. J. O. A. Rühle von Lilienstern, *Reise mit der Armee 1809*, ed. J.-J. Langendorf, 257, on Austria. K. Hagemann, *Revisiting Prussia’s Wars against Napoleon*, 311: 26/129 military memoirs concentrate on the war in the Iberian peninsula, 23/129 on 1806–7, four on Schill and three on the uprising in the Tyrol, both in 1809.

¹⁹⁶ W. v. Conrady (ed.), *Aus stürmischer Zeit*, 196. Others barely mention their departure: for instance, F. Giesse, *Kassel—Moskau—Küstrin 1812–1813*, 4–5; J. Schrafel, *Merkwürdige Schicksale*, 44.

¹⁹⁷ T. v. Barsewisch, *Geschichte des Grossherzoglich*, vol. 1, 93.

looking forward to ‘winter balls in Moscow or St Petersburg’.¹⁹⁸ In Bavaria, ‘the departure was celebratory and touching, as if the people suspected that scarcely one half of the third part of this truly handsome regiment would return,’ wrote one officer from Nuremberg with hindsight.¹⁹⁹

In neighbouring Württemberg, ‘from the highest to the youngest soldier everything was in cheerful suspense; nearly all were already familiar with service in the field, but few thought how very differently this imminent campaign against Russia could turn out, compared to earlier campaigns,’ noted Martens: ‘it occurred to no one to compare those fertile lands of Austria, which the soldier had traversed in 1809 with the desolate steppelands of the frozen North.’²⁰⁰ Officers like Martens appear to have viewed much of the rest of the march into Poland and Russia during the early summer as a voyage to a foreign land, for which they adopted some of the conventions of travel-writing, referring to the weather, topography, agriculture, towns, villages, and people along the way.²⁰¹ Ordinary soldiers seem to have been less inclined to enjoy the landscape as they left Frankfurt an der Oder, ‘where the German language stopped and where *mores* and culture made a peculiar impression’, for ‘adversity and hunger increased from day to day’ from that point onwards, in the words of one Swabian combatant.²⁰² Before they arrived at Smolensk in August, the rank and file had experienced ‘hardships’, which ‘were increasing daily’.²⁰³ ‘People became weaker and weaker and the companies daily became smaller’, reported the same soldier in July: ‘Marches were continued day and night, and one man after another lay down dead tired on the ground; most of them died over several hours and some of them suddenly collapsed to the ground dead.’²⁰⁴ Heat and lack of food and water had already had a severe effect on the condition and morale of the troops—if not of the officers—of the *Grande Armée* before they went into battle.

The principal battle of the 1812 campaign, which was joined at Borodino on 7 September, seemed to many combatants to be different from earlier military encounters. The battle of Smolensk on 16–18 August, which many like Martens estimated to have left 15,000 dead or wounded on the French and 10,000 on the Russian side, had already produced sights, if not numbers of casualties, which provoked awe and disgust amongst survivors.²⁰⁵ Wounded soldiers were burned alive ‘in a sea of flames’, leaving the rest of the troops after the battle to step ‘over piles of debris and ash, over glowing rubble and the skeletons of burned corpses’, identifiable only by the insignia of their helmets, which had not been burned and through which ‘we learned with pain that those half-charred remains were our comrades of war’.²⁰⁶ The battle of Borodino, with at least 70,000 casualties in a single day’s fighting, seemed to the Saxon officer Ludwig von Meerheim to be an event without precedent ‘over the millennia’, which was ‘bloody, great and unique

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ F. v. Furtenbach, *Krieg gegen Rußland und russische Gefangenschaft* (Nuremberg, 1912), 21.

²⁰⁰ C. v. Martens, *Vor fünfzig Jahren*, vol. 1, 6. ²⁰¹ For instance, Ibid., vol. 1, 760.

²⁰² Jakob Walter in B. Hildebrand (ed.), *Drei Schwaben unter Napoleon*, 38–9.

²⁰³ Ibid., 41. ²⁰⁴ Ibid., 44. ²⁰⁵ C. v. Martens, *Vor fünfzig Jahren*, vol. 1, 101.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 101–2.

in the military history of the world'.²⁰⁷ The slaughter was such that even the Bavarian commander Wrede lacked words to describe for the King 'the pain over the loss of so many brave men, which both army corps have suffered in these bloody days'.²⁰⁸ While the general was comforted by the thought that 'the glory' which 'Your Highness's army has gained' and 'the successful, illustrious outcome of this bloody battle, which alone can dry the tears that we shed for our fallen comrades in arms', could compensate for the losses, many other commentators arrived at a less forgiving verdict.²⁰⁹ Meerheim was typical of officers in describing his excitement and the honour of battle, which were gradually overwhelmed by the scale of the killing:

It must have been about seven o'clock when the battle, which had already become a general one, tested us, too. . . . Here, the first bullets began to strike our ranks; at the same time, we had the advantage of having the entire battle of the centre in view, although everything, enveloped in the thickest pall of gunpowder, was only apparent as the movement back and forth of tightly closed masses against enemy heights, under the roaring of several hundred throats of fire and, now, very audible small-arms fire. . . . We. . . . suffered greater and greater losses the nearer we came to the enemy's position.

As we found ourselves right in the middle of the area of case-shot fire, we saw the milling crowd of the French infantry in the depression before us become much more animated, and what the smoke of the gunpowder concealed, the wild cries of the combatants betrayed: that hand-to-hand fighting with the enemy was taking place. . . . Terrible fire from all sorts of guns told us that we were now the sole target of the enemy. . . . Nothing could constrain the rage burning within us and we rushed without stopping through the highly dangerous site of the fire towards the enemy, which was already waiting for us with its favoured bayonets. . . . Scarcely through it, we found ourselves in the middle of the enemy, which was attacking us, and the bloodiest massacre began in mutual, embittered rage. The bayonets snatched away many of our people, but our sabres ensured that they paid three times the price. One enemy *Karree* was barely knocked down, when another was once more so near that we had to keep at our uninterrupted, murderous work of killing (*Mordarbeit*). . . . The struggle was terrible! . . . in the inner space of the redoubt, we saw in the most horrible milling crowd cavalry and infantry, inflamed with the rage of killing (*Mordwut*), colourfully mixed with one another, strangling each other and tearing each other to pieces.

The duration of this murder scene was not to be measured in moments, since the enemy, which was far superior in number, used all means possible and, even, those pieces which were now falling silent to exact revenge, with its last breath, for its inevitable death.²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ R. v. Meerheim (ed.), *Erlebnisse eines Veteranen der Grossen Armee*, 212.

²⁰⁸ Cited in J. Murken, *Bayerische Soldaten*, 146.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. See also M. v. Preysing-Moos, 'Tagebuch', *Darstellungen*, vol. 21, 36–7, for a similar account by a senior Bavarian officer.

²¹⁰ Cited in P. Holzhausen, *Die Deutschen in Russland*, 92–101.

For Martens, who saw the day as one of ‘groaning and horror’, all the corps of the French army ‘had been completely victorious in themselves’, but ‘the army had not achieved a complete victory or many trophies’:

The Russian army, beaten with such great losses but not destroyed, retreated slowly and ready for battle, and the victors, instead of the promised successes, surpluses, good winter quarters and an imminent return to the fatherland, found after the battle the same shortages as before, they found Moscow, the prize of the battle, in flames and a pile of ash, and they found during the march back, for the most part, death on the snow fields of Russia, succumbing to cold and hunger.²¹¹

The soldiers’ suffering at Borodino was so great that Martens broke with his habit of reporting events contemporaneously and gave his readers—for the first time—a glimpse of the disastrous end of the campaign.

Such an end was caused by the manner of the *Grande Armée’s* retreat from Moscow during the autumn and winter of 1812. After the battle of Borodino and the fire of Moscow in September, no German diarist was sanguine about the prospects of the invasion of Russia. ‘With the destruction of Moscow, our last hope disappeared; whilst the enemy armed itself for a new campaign, our strength increasingly dwindled,’ wrote Martens with hindsight.²¹² The march back to Germany began in mid-October, shortly after the first snowfall on the 13th. It was the first time that ‘Napoleon saw the need to begin a retreat, which at once was destined to become the most unfortunate and most terrible in the entire history of the world’.²¹³ The main French army, wrote the Westphalian infantry officer Friedrich Giese, had ‘penetrated deep into the heart of Russia and [was] provided with a single supply road’, in what could be compared to ‘a desert’.²¹⁴ Marching back along that road, soldiers were unable to venture out into the hinterland in search of food: those who did, ‘as occurred daily’, found either ‘the most torturing death’ or ‘the most degrading imprisonment’ at the hands of the pursuing Russian army.²¹⁵ ‘The repetition and multitude of such fighting, with all its other entanglements, resembled a picture of a *kleiner Krieg*, which only rarely passed without blood flowing,’ recorded Giese: ‘The result of this, with the attacked mounting a defence, was always a struggle of life and death’.²¹⁶ Throughout, the weakest or most exposed were picked off by Russian cavalry, with ‘the mere call of “Cossacks” making ‘whole columns get a move on’ by the end of the march, when ‘all defence had stopped’.²¹⁷ The term ‘Cossacked’ came to denote a state of panic and terror,

²¹¹ C. v. Martens, *Vor fünfzig Jahren*, vol. 1, 122–3.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 135. See also W. Meier, *Erinnerungen*, 87, who called the fire a foretaste of the army’s ‘downfall’.

²¹³ C. v. Martens, *Vor fünfzig Jahren*, 167. Also, F. Peppler, *Schilderung meiner Gefangenschaft vom Jahre 1812 bis 1814* (Darmstadt, 1834), 6–7.

²¹⁴ F. Giese, *Kassel—Moskau—Kuestrin 1812–1813*, 167.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 167. ²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 242. Also, W. Meier, *Erinnerungen*, 92–3; C. v. Martens, *Vor fünfzig Jahren*, vol. 1, 180, 197; K.-U. Keubke (ed.), *Otto Gotthard Ernst von Raven: Tagebuch des Feldzuges in Russland im Jahre 1812*, 133–6; M. v. Preysing-Moos, ‘Tagebuch’, *Darstellungen*, vol. 21, 48; Wilhelm, Margrave of Baden, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, 202, 219.

hinting at the isolation of the French and German troops and their confrontation with an unknown and supposedly barbaric enemy.²¹⁸

The crossing of the Beresina became the symbol of the soldiers' isolation and exposure, with the *Grande Armée* pushed by the advancing Russian army against a half-frozen river on 26 November, which it needed—but was unable—to cross in order to get home: the incident, claimed Suckow, had become a by-word for the horror of war, recounted repeatedly over the following fifty years.²¹⁹ Between 30,000 and 45,000 troops and others in the baggage train were killed or captured on the French side, unable to cross the makeshift bridges erected by military engineers. 'From the overview which we had from our camp at the time of the valley, the river and the two bridges, one was confronted only with unpleasant images,' wrote Giesse, describing the disordered 'mass' of 'people, horses and carriages, colourfully entangled'.²²⁰ Pushing towards the bridges with his four friends, he was caught in

a turbulent ebb and flow, coming from behind to the front, from left to right, where in the most favourable case one could arrive at one's desired destination, but in another case one would be led away from it and be pushed back, if one remained standing at all and was not trampled underfoot.²²¹

This reduction to survival at the expense of comrades, with approximately 40,000 managing to cross in time, became emblematic of much of the march home, with soldiers plundering carriages, removing clothing from fallen comrades, and eating horse-meat. Starving in cold temperatures, troops simply fell by the roadside and died in their sleep: 'Each morning, one saw bivouacs turned into fields of corpses'.²²² In these circumstances, the chaos and social levelling of the final stage of the retreat merged with fantasy, as the ordered world of the army metamorphosed into the upside-down world of a carnival:

What shocked me most was the realization that this kind of forgetting, which had already revealed itself to me a while ago in a different form, was purely a result of the lifelessness and shattering of my bodily and mental strength, and shuddered before the consequences which this could have for me! For thousands in the army, such a mental weakness had already reached its zenith and manifested itself in each person in strange ways. One witnessed scenes which no pen could describe! The whole mass of the army was without weapons and its procession was the most adventurous and bizarre that human fantasy has ever imagined. Most, lacking shoes, had bound their feet with rags, torn pieces of tablecloths, bits of fleece or hat-felt, held together with threads of straw or knitting. To protect themselves against the horrendous cold, many had covered their hollowed-out, vermin-eaten bodies with sacks or straw mats, furs or fleeces of all kinds, women's dresses, shawls of all colours, rags of cloth, horse covers or freshly

²¹⁸ See, above all, C. v. Plotho, *Die Kosaken, oder Geschichte derselben von ihrem Ursprunge bis auf die Gegenwart* (Berlin, 1811). Wilhelm von Hochberg was accused of using the methods of 'Cossacks' in 1814: T. v. Barsewisch, *Geschichte des Grossherzoglich Badischen Leib-Grenadier-Regiments*, vol. 1, 160.

²¹⁹ K. v. Suckow, *Aus meinem Soldatenleben*, 278.

²²⁰ F. Giesse, *Kassel—Moskau—Kuestrin 1812—1813*, 222.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 221. ²²² *Ibid.*, 177.

slaughtered animal hides. Under fur hats and head decorations of the most unusual composition, hollow-eyed, pale, haggard faces, covered in dirt and blackened by smoke, grinned out... With arms hanging down, sunken heads and profoundly shrouded faces, officers and soldiers went along beside each other, all similarly costumed, sighing at their terrible fate in a dull daze, without caring for one another, since hardship had long ago removed all rank... The army resembled an extended, ragged band of refugees from the land, provoking horror and disgust.²²³

Pictorially, the end of the campaign of 1812 was represented by masses of entangled bodies in the manner of well-known Renaissance paintings of biblical scenes or it was portrayed in the form of small groups struggling to survive in empty landscapes. *Übergang über die Beresina* (28 November) by Christian Wilhelm von Faber du Faur, an officer and official artist of the Württemberg contingent of the *Grande Armée*, depicted corpses, injured soldiers on the ground, a woman with a child beside a high-ranking officer, and cavalry and infantry of all ranks and in all kinds of clothing jostling for salvation.²²⁴ Unlike in religious images of suffering and salvation, in which believers look up and climb towards the light of heaven, the painting showed imploring soldiers separated from each other by snow and gazing upwards towards a leaden grey, stormy, winter sky. The same theme of isolation and helplessness was examined in *Zwischen Dorogobusch and Mikalewka* (7 November), which showed soldiers in full military garb around a fire and against a backdrop of blackened masses of limping troops; in *Biwak bei Mikalewka* (7 November), which envisaged two soldiers uncovering the frozen, snow-covered, peaceful bodies of a bivouac; in *In der Gegend von Bobr* (23 November), which displayed an officer transporting his wife amongst the wreckage of their sleigh with a handful of other soldiers, defending themselves against circling Cossacks on a snow-covered plain; and in *Bei Evé* (11 December), which revealed a group of troops huddled together in the foreground, with their muskets aimed haphazardly at an unseen enemy, in front of a column of anonymous comrades filing into the distance.²²⁵ The contrast between these scenes, which were dominated by featureless expanses of white and grey, and the bucolic impressions of the start of the campaign, which could be seen in *Am Niemen* (25 June), was stark: in June, the soldiers and their commanders were depicted on a hill overlooking the river, in a verdant, classical landscape framed by lush, old trees.²²⁶ This vision of a pastoral campaign was repeated in *In der Gegend von Jenolani* (12 July), which sketched soldiers loading sheep and geese onto a horse, with the farmer, dressed in a kaftan, looking peacefully on, and it was continued in works such as *Vor Polotzk* (25 July), *Bei Beschenkowitschi* (28 July), and, even, in *Vor Smolensk* (18 August), which made reference to human civilization—often in the form of classically proportioned churches—within an ordered landscape.²²⁷

²²³ Ibid., 241–2.

²²⁴ C. W. v. Faber du Faur, *Napoleons Feldzug in Russland 1812* (Leipzig, 1897), 302.

²²⁵ Ibid., 266–322. A similar written account is given by Friedrich Mändler, *Erinnerungen*, 95.

²²⁶ C. W. v. Faber du Faur, *Napoleons Feldzug*, 3–130. ²²⁷ Ibid.

As Faber du Faur's composition of 18 August demonstrated, with its background of smoke filling the sky, the battle of Smolensk marked a break between romantic visions of an adventure in a rural idyll and darker premonitions of a menacing, sometimes fantastical, at other times man-made, world of destruction and suffering. Thus, *An den Mauern vor Smolensk* (18 August) represented a cannon surrounded by artillerymen, in front of a watchtower and a high, obliquely angled, city wall, which faded into nothingness on the right-hand side of picture.²²⁸ 'An den Mauern vor Smolensk' (ten p.m., 18 August) showed the same tower and wall within a much wider panorama of the city, with clouds of smoke emanating from the distant buildings and forming a swirling pattern of dark clouds, which loomed over the viewer.²²⁹ A few weeks later, a burning Moscow was portrayed in an almost identical smoke-filled or ethereal light, juxtaposed now—for example, in *Moskau* (24 September)—with razed houses and rubble, burghers, and soldiers.²³⁰ These images were interspersed with unblinking representations of killing and death in *Auf dem Schlachtfelde an der Moskwa or Semenowskoi* (7 September), which showed a disordered assemblage of individual and grouped soldiers slaughtering each other, and in *Auf dem Schlachtfelde an der Moskwa* (17 September), which displayed the piles of bodies left on the field after the battle.²³¹ At around the same time, Faber du Faur's most explicit depiction of death, *An der grossen Strasse von Mosbaisk nach Krymskoje* (18 September) (see Figure 4.1), portrayed a group of soldiers huddling behind the shelter of a destroyed house, surrounded by skeletons and decaying corpses.²³² All such images of the cold ordeal of the march home contrasted with the light and warmth of *Lichtensteins Kaffehaus* (7 December), which represented a return to the comforting familiarity of German culture.²³³

The effects of the disastrous campaign of 1812 in Germany are disputed. The majority of soldiers died, preventing them from telling of their experiences directly. Within the German armies, however, memories of the campaign seem to have played an important role in shaping the attitudes of new recruits. 'In the entire regiment, only a few officers were familiar with service in the field,' recorded Martens of Württemberg's reconstituted army: 'the dreadful facts of the campaign in Russia, which we have just survived, has made such a deep impression that our young, for the most part newly recruited unit is not leaving its *Heimat* in as happy a mood as our long-serving soldiers used to do.'²³⁴ In other *Rheinbund* states such as Bavaria, soldiers seem to have had similar attitudes, as a non-commanding officer like Georg Kirchmayer made plain, commenting in August 1813 on the establishment of a new force of 36,000 troops:

The constitution of this army took place for the sake of the internal security of the fatherland, because increasingly unfavourable news was coming in about the great

²²⁸ Ibid. ²²⁹ Ibid. ²³⁰ Ibid., 224–6.

²³¹ Ibid., 130–223. ²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid., 316. The coffee-shop was in Vilnius, from which the French forces were expelled by Russian troops shortly afterwards.

²³⁴ C. v. Martens, *Vor fünfzig Jahren*, vol. 2, 6.



An der grossen Strasse von Moshaisk nach Krymskoje, den 18. September 1812.

Figure 4.1. Christian Wilhelm von Faber du Faur, *An der grossen Strasse von Moshaisk nach Krymskoje*

Source: C. W. v. Faber du Faur, *Napoleons Feldzug in Russland 1812* (Leipzig, 1897), 316.

Napoleonic army, which fought in Russia and within which 30,000 valiant Bavarian soldiers were incorporated, out of which the majority, partly as a result of the cold, partly as a result of murderous fighting, were wiped out.²³⁵

There is evidence that the circumstances of France's defeat in 1812 had consequences beyond the armies of the Confederation of the Rhine, affecting public opinion and wider society in southern and western Germany.²³⁶

In Baden, wrote one abbot in February 1813, the authorities had already started to recruit a new army, given that 'only 400 are left from 6,000 Badense troops', but most states were beginning to waver as a consequence of the losses and costs of the war:

In Germany, people seem to be taking fright in many places. It appears that the princes themselves no longer trust. It is said that Württemberg is refusing to put further troops at the disposal of the French outside the country. In Hesse and Hanau etc., things are very unsettled; in Berlin, it has come to actual conflicts.²³⁷

By April 1813, the scale of Napoleon's defeat was beginning to reach a reading public: 'For several weeks, a piece called "Retreat of the French from Moscow" has

²³⁵ G. Kirchmayer, *Veteranen-Huldigung oder Erinnerungen*, 13.

²³⁶ U. Planert, *Der Mythos*, 578–612.

²³⁷ Diary entry, 5 Feb. 1813, U. Engelmann (ed.), *Das Tagebuch von Ignaz Speckle. Abt von St Peter im Schwarzwald* (Stuttgart, 1965), vol. 2, 417–18.

been circulating, in which the horrific defeat of the French army is depicted by an eye witness; [the army] was actually destroyed in battle and by hunger and cold, so that scarcely a single man escaped.²³⁸ As such rumours turned into realities, with most communities affected directly by the losses, many subjects of the *Rheinbund* states appear to have been influenced by the new vision of war presented by most myths of 1812. In Austria and Prussia, the same rumours circulated, but with more varied effect. A significant number of returning German soldiers in the *Grande Armée* had been attacked by Prussian peasants.²³⁹ Nonetheless, the conditions and types of warfare encountered by troops in 1812 seem to have been widely known in the Hohenzollern and Habsburg monarchies, especially within military circles. Partly as a consequence, subjects' and soldiers' expectations of the Prussian and Austrian campaign against France in 1813 appear to have been mixed.²⁴⁰

Such doubts and fears are not salient in the testimony of commanding Prussian and Austrian officers in 1813.²⁴¹ Their anxieties were concealed by a desire to carry out their patriotic duties and to remove the dishonour of previous defeats. 'Setting off to fight for our independence, we do not wish to oppress a neighbouring people which speaks one and the same language as us, [and] feels the same hatred against the foreign oppressor', ran Blücher's proclamation to the Prussian corps under his command in the spring of 1813: 'Be gentle and humane to this *Volk* and view the Saxons as friends of the holy cause of German independence, for which we have picked up our weapons, and see them as future allies'.²⁴² The fight for Germany against a foreign occupier appeared to supersede other enmities and to banish fears about new forms of warfare. Even Clausewitz, who had resigned from the Prussian army—along with about a quarter of all officers—in protest at the terms of the Hohenzollern monarchy's alliance with France in February 1812, remained an enthusiastic supporter of a war in 1813, despite having witnessed the death and killing of the 1812 campaign as an officer in the Russian army.²⁴³ Thus, the Prussian officer had seen 'nothing other than burned-out sites', including Moscow, which was 'turned into ashes', after the Russian command had decided to pre-empt the actions of the French advanced guard, which had taken 'a cannibalistic pleasure' in setting alight villages: 'Under these conditions, the burdens of the campaign were extraordinarily great for both sides; a lot of bloody battles came on top; both

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 422.

²³⁹ J. Maillinger, 'Tagebuch', *Darstellungen*, vol. 21, 145, claims that 'every day' he met those who had been attacked and that his own party was confronted by 'maltreatment' in 'almost every village'.

²⁴⁰ For instance, C. v. Clausewitz to his wife, 29 Nov. 1812, in K. Linnebach (ed.), *Karl and Marie von Clausewitz. Ein Lebensbild in Briefen und Tagebuchblättern* (Berlin, 1917), 305: he had seen the 'corpses and dying men among smouldering ruins' with his own eyes, reporting to his wife in November 1812 that 'thousands of ghost-like men pass by screaming and begging and crying for bread in vain'.

²⁴¹ K. Hagemann, *Revisiting Prussia's Wars against Napoleon*, 311: 63/129 German-language military memoirs concentrate on 1813–14, with nearly two-thirds written by Prussian authors.

²⁴² Cited in T. Crepon, *Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher. Sein Leben, seine Kämpfe* (Rostock, 1999), 222.

²⁴³ G. A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army*, 58.

sides have suffered enormous losses in this way.²⁴⁴ Nonetheless, he continued—in October 1812—to long for ‘action in the German fatherland’, which was perhaps ‘closer than we think’.²⁴⁵ Clausewitz was an unusual though not unique case, faced with the confiscation of his property because of his allegedly treasonous decision to fight on Russia’s side against Prussia, leading him to defend his patriotic motives in a long ‘Bekanntnisdenschrift’ in February 1812:

I believe and profess that a *Volk* can acknowledge nothing higher than the worth and freedom of its own existence. . . .

That the stain of a cowardly subordination can never be removed.

That this drop of poison in the blood of a *Volk* will be passed on in succeeding generations and will lame and undermine the strength of later kin.

That the honour of the king and government is one with the honour of the *Volk* and the sole safeguard of its well-being. That a *Volk* cannot be overcome in the courageous struggle for freedom.

That even the downfall of this freedom after a bloody and honourable struggle secures the renaissance of the *Volk*.²⁴⁶

The majority of commanding Prussian officers in 1813 had either left their posts in 1812—with Boyen travelling to Vienna and St Petersburg and Gneisenau to London, for instance—or they had sympathized with Yorck’s signature of the Convention of Tauroggen in December 1812, which had ‘neutralized’ the Prussian corps and saved it from Russian attack without the permission of Friedrich Wilhelm III.²⁴⁷ On 13 January, Yorck had written to the military Governor-General in East and West Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm von Bülow, advising him that

the time is now or never to regain our freedom and honour. With a bloody heart, I am tearing up the bonds of loyalty and conducting war by my own hand. The army desires a war against France. The *Volk* desires it and the king desires it, but the king does not have a free will. The army must give him a free will.²⁴⁸

Bülow in turn wrote to the King, backing Yorck’s claims and contending that ‘this will become the cause of the nation; the greatest sacrifices will be made voluntarily; and sources will appear which one had long believed to have run dry.’²⁴⁹ Many officers had already congregated in the Silesian capital of Breslau, from where—according to the Austrian envoy—‘the military and the heads of different sects have taken complete control of the reins of government under the mask of patriotism’ and under the ‘unlimited influence’ of Scharnhorst.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁴ C. v. Clausewitz to A. N. v. Gneisenau, 16 Oct. 1812, in C. von Clausewitz, *Schriften, Aufsätze, Studien, Briefe* (Göttingen, 1990), ed. W. Hahlweg, vol. 2, 134.

²⁴⁵ C. to M. v. Clausewitz, 15 Oct. 1812, in K. Linnebach (ed.), *Karl and Marie von Clausewitz*, 127.

²⁴⁶ Cited in C. von Clausewitz, *Schriften, Aufsätze, Studien, Briefe* (Göttingen, 1966), ed. W. Hahlweg, vol. 1, 688–9.

²⁴⁷ For example, H. v. Boyen, *Denkwürdigkeiten und Erinnerungen*, vol. 2, 222–3.

²⁴⁸ Cited in K. Hornung, *Scharnhorst. Soldat—Reformer—Staatsmann* (Munich, 1997), 267.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 267–8. ²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 269.

Whether such officers were ‘patriotic’ was a moot point: they certainly wanted to restore Prussian honour and independence, which was seen to be compatible with the interests of ‘Germany’. Like Clausewitz, they argued in favour of a patriotic war—Prussian and German—against France and they viewed France’s defeat as a military opportunity for the Hohenzollern monarchy rather than as a warning. ‘All the news which I receive from the Russian army says that the French army is almost completely disbanded,’ wrote Gneisenau to Hardenberg on 17 December 1812: ‘The present moment is unique for liberation; don’t let it go unused! It might not reoccur in such a fashion. . . . National honour, which has suffered so terribly, must be restored by something glorious.’²⁵¹ On his way to St Petersburg from Austria, Boyen witnessed the consequences of the 1812 campaign for himself, but his observations were entirely strategic, concluding that Napoleon had become preoccupied with frontal attacks at the expense of manoeuvres and that he had been stranded in Russia with too small an army.²⁵² ‘Large areas’ of Moscow ‘scarcely contained traces of the buildings that had once covered them’, wrote the general:

From Moscow the route to Kiev passed through a section of the military road, along which the French army had retreated and on which the Russian army had chased it, and so there were new signs at every moment – the wounded, wagons of prisoners, destroyed bridges and the like – that a great act of war was reaching its final act.²⁵³

The cost and bloodletting of Napoleonic conflicts had not deterred a significant proportion of Prussia’s military leaders, who came to power in 1813, from waging war. They had, however, convinced those leaders, in the words of Scharnhorst and Gneisenau’s memorandum for Hardenberg on 8 April, that ‘A war like the present one is not a normal war’:

[it was] not fought, for instance, for a province, but for the security of the throne, for the independence of the nation, for the holiest goods of life, for liberation from a disgraceful yoke, which destroys the entire well-being of the nation, demands the nation’s blood for the subordination of foreign peoples, deprives the same of all noble culture and takes them back to a state of savagery.²⁵⁴

Similarly, Austrian officers, a smaller number of whom had resigned in protest at the Habsburg monarchy’s alliance with France in March 1812, were convinced that war against Napoleon in 1813 was a ‘holy war’, as Radetzky called it, on which Austria’s ‘future life or its downfall’ depended.²⁵⁵

Even reforming officers doubted that the ‘public’ shared their conception of the ‘wars of freedom’ or ‘liberation’. ‘In such a struggle, the greatest effort must be made,’ Scharnhorst and Gneisenau continued in their memorandum of 8 April 1813:

²⁵¹ A. N. v. Gneisenau to K. A. v. Hardenberg, 17 Dec. 1812, in G. Thiele (ed.), *Gneisenau. Eine Chronik* (Berlin, 2007), 158.

²⁵² H. v. Boyen, *Denkwürdigkeiten und Erinnerungen*, vol. 2, 201–10. ²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ G. v. Scharnhorst and A. N. v. Gneisenau, memorandum, 8 Apr. 1813, in G. Thiele (ed.), *Gneisenau*, 173.

²⁵⁵ O. Regele, *Feldmarschall Radetzky*, 117. On officers’ resignations, see G. E. Rothenberg, *Napoleon’s Great Adversaries*, 176.

‘Each citizen (*Staatsbürger*), whether he belongs to the army or not, must participate, whether in an indirect or direct way. . . . However, it seems as though not every citizen shares such a view.’²⁵⁶ In the course of the spring and early summer, many Prussian officers—in contrast to their Austrian counterparts, who were more sceptical—altered their opinion, as a large number of volunteers came forward.²⁵⁷ Scharnhorst welcomed the fact that ‘the success of the recruitment [of *Freiwillige*] has certainly exceeded all expectations’.²⁵⁸ ‘The king called,’ rejoiced Gneisenau, ‘and all, all came.’²⁵⁹ Many who came seem to have looked forward, albeit fearfully, to the campaign of 1813 and to have seen themselves as representing a Prussian or German people. ‘The *Volk* knew against which enemy this general levy of the nation (*Nation*) was directed, even if no name was mentioned,’ recorded one volunteer of Prussia’s call for *Freiwillige* in February 1813:

The holy fire, produced in the halls of science, nourished in the hearts of the youth, burst into bright flames; the *Volk*, full of vitality and rich in actions, rose up, awakened by the trumpeting mood of the battles, and everyone gathered resolutely together in order to pass jubilantly through the German homelands (*die deutschen Gauen*), to follow the call of the king, to free the fatherland from the weight of foreign domination.²⁶⁰

Like their commanding officers, such Prussian volunteers were convinced of the magnitude and significance of the war against Napoleon, continuing to talk of their patriotic duty and heroic actions throughout the campaign. Having left ‘the *Weltstadt*’ of Paris behind in 1814, the same volunteer trekked with ‘imperishable memories back into a beloved fatherland.’²⁶¹ ‘Like returning conquerors, like beloved compatriots (*Landsleute*), we were welcomed here with kindness, even with jubilation,’ he wrote of the troops’ reception in Elberfeld, in contrast to that in the pro-French cities of Aachen and Düsseldorf.²⁶² In Berlin, the soldiers took part in a ‘celebration, the likes of which have not been seen since.’²⁶³ As in Saxony during the previous year, ‘it needs no repeating that enthusiasm for a general uprising, in this era of patriotism, manifested itself in all strata of the populations of most German lands,’ he recollected.²⁶⁴

In combat, soldiers’ patriotic conceptions of warfare were challenged and modified. For some volunteers, the perceived momentousness of the war against Napoleon in 1813 was linked to an awareness of different norms in the civilian and military spheres—with the ‘spilling of human blood’ only acceptable in the latter—and to fears of the slaughter occasioned by new forms of warfare.²⁶⁵ Nervousness about violence was characteristic of the first weeks of the campaign, with one

²⁵⁶ G. Thiele (ed.), *Gneisenau*, 173.

²⁵⁷ Officers’ commentary in Austria seems to have focused on the lack of preparedness of their troops in 1813; O. Regele, *Radetzky*, 114–18.

²⁵⁸ Cited in K. Hornung, *Scharnhorst*, 270.

²⁵⁹ In T. Crepon, *Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher*, 217.

²⁶⁰ C. E. V. Krieg (ed.), *Vor fünfzig Jahren*, 9. ²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 169. ²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 171.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 79. See also Jordan, *Erinnerungsblätter*, 28, 328–31.

²⁶⁵ H. Lem von Zieten (ed.), *Tagebuch von Heinrich Bolte*, 13.

detachment of *Freiwillige* shocked by ‘close fire’ on 8 April, only to find that the French were still eight miles away.²⁶⁶ Correspondingly, volunteers’ accounts of fighting betrayed anxiety—‘the fire which confronted the battalion was terrible’—combined with self-aggrandisement:

in a short period of time, at least six of my neighbours had disappeared from my side [and]... one of my people in front, v. Sch., was shot in the head and fell down dead on the spot. We barely noticed all that, however, with no wounded man making a sound, and the village was taken with a loud hurrah.²⁶⁷

As one young Prussian soldier’s sister recalled, in a report based on conversations with him, her brother had ‘distinguished himself with glory’ at the battle of Groß-Görschen, after which he had been made an officer, but he ‘had also been in great danger’.²⁶⁸ ‘Oh, God! What experiences my dear brother had in this short period!’ she went on: ‘When you hear how his life was in danger a thousand times over, how he always dived into the greatest vortex and how 1000s of bullets whistled around him, ... then we can drop onto our knees and thank the Almighty God whole-heartedly for the preservation of our dear one.’²⁶⁹ The brother himself could also be found praying for ‘a quick, good outcome of the affair’.²⁷⁰ Battle was always different from representations of it ‘in descriptions and paintings’, ‘which never do justice to reality by far’, wrote the academic and volunteer Karl von Raumer, before adding that ‘I was so captivated by the drama that I quite forgot myself.’²⁷¹ On 26 August, he regretted not being able to go into battle.²⁷² Once there, however, he was confronted by sights that remained with him:

On the battlefield near Wartenburg, I found a handsome Neapolitan soldier, whom a flint bullet had hit directly on the temple so that his brain was hanging out. His pale face, his desperate, pained look, with which he seemed to beg us to take pity on him and put an end to his torture – I will never forget that.²⁷³

In combat, wrote another volunteer, death ‘piled up terribly’, in victory as well as in defeat.²⁷⁴ The suffering of those who were injured was ‘dreadful’, he went on.²⁷⁵

Because of such ambiguous recollections of conflict, the report which volunteers gave of the battle of Leipzig on 16–19 October 1813 differs markedly from those of later historians. By the time it was over, ‘we had had no food for five days’, wrote one member of the *Lützower Jäger*: ‘in fact, it was a sad day after such a glorious victory.’²⁷⁶ Earlier, events had turned quickly from the acts of a magnificent spectacle to scenes of horror: ‘The clash of the two sides was imposing. At a considerable distance, one could feel the earth shake as if in an earthquake. The Hungarian cavalry began the dance; here, one saw what these troops could do.’²⁷⁷ Soon, confusion and disorder started to dominate the picture, succeeded by the

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 14. ²⁶⁷ C. E. V. Krieg (ed.), *Vor fünfzig Jahren*, 32.

²⁶⁸ H. v. Jordan, *Erinnerungsblätter*, 72. ²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 73. ²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁷¹ K. v. Raumer, *Karl von Raumer’s Leben*, 169. ²⁷² *Ibid.*, 171. ²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 180.

²⁷⁴ W. Krimer, *Erinnerungen eines alten Lützower Jägers*, 45. ²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 67. ²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

inescapable realities of conflict: ‘The whole soon consisted of one great tangle, with everything mixed together colourfully. This mad rush did not last long; the French began to tear themselves away, and soon the flight was general, the bloodbath terrible.’²⁷⁸ Only ‘a small number escaped’, continued the volunteer: ‘whoever wasn’t chopped down or shot was taken prisoner’: ‘The defeat was decisive’, but it did not feel like a victory.²⁷⁹ After the battle, ‘one saw the horrifying consequences of the over-hasty retreat of the enemy and the premature demolition of the bridge over the Elster’: ‘Overall, destruction, laying waste, death and desperation. Hundreds of emaciated, starving opponents lay with death all around them; hundreds of corpses swam down the Elster – an immeasurable field of death.’²⁸⁰

Steffens’s description of the aftermath of fighting at Möckern, near to Leipzig, was similar:

I crossed the battlefield and had trouble getting any further, for the bodies were piled up... I had a horrifying feeling; in increasingly compressed piles, the spirits of the fallen surrounded me, and involuntarily I saw myself in the middle of the waiting families, who were anxiously following each of their steps in the great struggle.²⁸¹

In pursuit of fleeing French troops after the battle of Leipzig, where he came across many combatants dying in bushes at the side of the road, the academic confessed ‘that I wanted to be far away, that this misery appeared more horrific than the greatest defeat in the fiercest conflict’.²⁸² The ‘killing spirit’ of temporary military hospitals and the plague of typhus, which prevailed ‘in all the areas behind the army’, as well as the actual killing of battle, meant that Steffens’s earlier expectations of the ‘war of freedom’ were now ‘strangely mixed with mourning’, as were those of other survivors: this feeling ‘set the innermost reaches of the soul into vital movement and it could only make sense of itself through profound religious contemplation’.²⁸³ ‘The small remainder of Yorck’s corps’ was held to typify a more general sentiment: ‘evening prayers took place, and as important as the victory was, the great losses nevertheless summoned up a quiet, troubled mood.’²⁸⁴ For volunteers such as Raumer, ‘complaints about the fallen were combined with joy that their blood had not flowed in vain, and we had won’.²⁸⁵ Yet ‘our joy was, admittedly, bought at great cost’.²⁸⁶ The fact that ‘the struggle was dreadful’ was not lost from view, even after the event.²⁸⁷ For German soldiers on the side of the French, the cost of the campaign was arguably more obvious, since it was not offset by a patriotic victory. To one Swabian participant, the human consequences of the battle of Leipzig were comparable to those of Borodino.²⁸⁸

The suffering of ordinary soldiers during the campaigns of 1813–15 entered the official and popular historical records of the conflicts, but it was marginalized by a narrative of Prussia’s, Austria’s, and ‘Germany’s’ heroic victory over Napoleon and

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 64. ²⁷⁹ Ibid. ²⁸⁰ Ibid., 69. ²⁸¹ H. Steffens, *Was ich erlebte*, 357.

²⁸² Ibid., 368. ²⁸³ Ibid., 355. ²⁸⁴ Ibid., 354.

²⁸⁵ K. v. Raumer, *Karl von Raumer’s Leben*, 189. ²⁸⁶ Ibid., 188.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 187. ²⁸⁸ C. v. Martens, *Vor fünfzig Jahren*, vol. 2, 145.

France.²⁸⁹ Plotho's story of the battle of Leipzig was at once symptomatic and influential. He concluded his description, interrupting a long history of the war, with an evaluation of the event's world-historical significance:

And history will place the *Völkerschlacht* near Leipzig, which grounded – after a four-day struggle – the freedom of the Germans (which had withstood so many attacks from the *Hermannschlacht* to Napoleon) perhaps for centuries once more, on an equal footing with those great battles of the past, by means of which great states were overthrown or maintained; and the reputation of the monarchs, commanders and armies, which have fought here, will not be forgotten. The battle itself was fought on both sides with every tactical effort and with the most persistent bravery, and in the midst of its fire a German *Volksgeist* was purified, and the eternal law was proven that peoples of one descent and language should be tied, in the transfer of most German fighters to the German army.

And its consequences were still more important, and will be so in future, for they constitute a turning-point of world history. . . .²⁹⁰

The rest of Plotho's narrative gives a vivid depiction of the events of the conflict, paying more attention to their strategic and historical importance than to their impact on individual soldiers, as his account of the end of the battle on 19 October demonstrates:

Although the retreat of the French army had already begun yesterday, very many troops, a lot of artillery and baggage had been left behind until today, and all of this now crowded together into the narrow streets of Leipzig, on the narrow route to Lindenau, and blocked all the exits for those who were fleeing. Everything ran into everything else in terrible confusion, with every individual seeking salvation. Since Emperor Napoleon left the city – it was 10 o'clock in the morning – after completing a visit to the King of Saxony, he wanted to leave through the *Ranstädter Thor*, but he, too, could no longer get out and needed to clear a way out for himself to the *Petersthor*. And as he had crossed the bridge with his entourage . . . , he blew it up behind him; thus, as always, he indifferently sacrificed all the others, only thinking of himself, with unpardonable cruelty. An emergency bridge constructed in the *Richterschen Garten* collapsed under the weight of those in flight, and so all the troops were left without a means of escape, and in the hands of the victors. The victors pushed forward relentlessly in great masses from all sides. A defence was unthinkable, but the fleeing soldiers still hoped to escape through Leipzig park and common over the conjunction of the Pleisse and the Elster; here, thousands met their death in the water and through the unrelenting pursuit of sharpshooters from all sides and through the heavy artillery fire of the Allies. . . . All who were not drowned had to give themselves up to the victorious arms of the allied armies. . . .

Everywhere, forced marches were ordered, single shots were fired, and Prussians, Russians, Austrians and Swedes descended on the *Transädter Steinweg*; and before the *Ranstädter Thor*, there lay countless dead and wounded men and horses. . . .

²⁸⁹ Even 'patriotic' ordinary soldiers like Johann Gottlieb Küpper, 'Marschroute und Tagebuch', *Kriegsbriefe* Archive, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn, who had recorded that he was fighting for 'our king' at the start of his diary, showed little ardour in their description of the actual events, noting that he had been dealt with, after capitulating in battle, in an 'indescribable' way.

²⁹⁰ C. v. Plotho, *Der Krieg in Deutschland und Frankreich*, 424.

And the anxious inhabitants, who a few moments earlier had feared for the fate of a city conquered by storm, found their expectations of a pardon on the part of great-hearted monarchs, and of the humanity of their brave troops, exceeded by far; all property was protected and every citizen found his life and goods secure. Order was quickly restored and anxiety and fear turned into joyous nostalgia.

Thus, the hard work of the blood was done, victory fought for. The superiority of Germany over France had been decided from now onwards, and the foundation stone of the new edifice of European freedom was laid.²⁹¹

In this and in other similar accounts, the human suffering, killing, and death of the Napoleonic Wars is portrayed in passing, as part of an epic, historical struggle of states, armies, and peoples. The tone and meaning of such representations ran counter to the recorded experiences of a large number of soldiers. These experiences were largely drowned out during the post-war era.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 420–2.