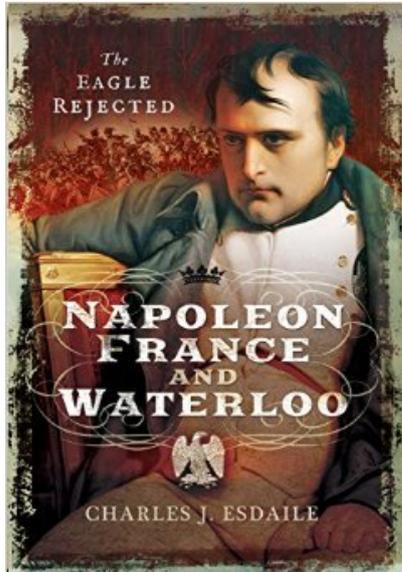


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Esdaile, Charles J. *Napoleon, France and Waterloo: the Eagle Rejected*.
Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2017. 257 pages. ISBN# 9781473870826. Hardcover.
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In his preface to this book, Professor Charles Esdaile seeks to find the answer to, amongst other aspects, three questions: what was the state of relations between Napoleon and the citizens of Europe in the last years of the empire; to what extent was the Emperor himself capable of captaining the sort of fight he now faced; and, what actually happened in France in 1814 and 1815? He further reminds us that ‘the English language literature on France in 1815 is surprisingly thin.’¹ This book addresses that lack and provides a fascinating, and sometimes surprising view into the France of 1814 and 1815. Professor Charles Esdaile is a Professor in History (Napoleonic Europe, Modern Spain) at the University of Liverpool and whilst his premier forte is the

Peninsula War, his extensive knowledge of the social and political aspects of Napoleonic Europe give him the ability to place the military aspects totally within the context of the home front.

As to the state of relations between Napoleon and the citizens of Europe in 1814; those in conquered lands wanted him dead, as might be obvious. But near-neighbours detested him also. Belgians deserted from the Grande Armée in droves at the start of 1814, and citizens were terrified at the prospect of the victorious French sacking Brussels as one of the possible outcomes of Waterloo. The Dutch, bitter about years of civil maltreatment at the hands of arrogant French occupiers, were equally ill-disposed.² We all know about the feelings of the Spanish. France had virtually no friends left in Europe by April 1814, and was not find any in 1815, either.

Was the Emperor capable of captaining the sort of fight he found himself compelled to fight? To fight in 1815, Napoleon needed troops, plenty of them. ‘Over and over again,’ Esdaile states, ‘one is bright back to the simple fact that Napoleon did not have enough troops for the task in hand.’³ Louis XVIII had just abolished conscription in March 1815, and Napoleon dare not reintroduce it. The best he could do was call up 33,000 de-mobbed men from 1814, and issue an amnesty pardoning 85,000 deserters, of whom only some responded. By June he had 125,000 in his Army of the North, but a hopelessly inadequate 73,000 men to

¹ Preface xi.

² Page 49.

³ Page 58.

defend the rest of France.⁴ True, many of the men in the ranks were returned garrison troops and ex POWs who, like the Germans of 1919, considered that they had never been defeated in the field. These were the men providing the military spirit propping Napoleon up. But the prop was far from perfect, and it may have been the least cohesive army of the Emperor's career. 'The interior of the army was torn to pieces by (an) anarchy,' an anonymous French diarist wrote on the march into Belgium, 'no mutual sacrifices, no reciprocal confidence, no common feeling, but everywhere selfishness, arrogance and rapacity.' The problems started at the top. The commanders as a whole did nothing to engender cohesion, and many were openly sceptical. 'I regarded his downcast air as the prelude to a ruin that seemed all too proximate,' wrote a staff officer about Prince Jerome Bonaparte after having lunch with him a week before Waterloo.⁵

And finally, what actually happened in France in 1814 and 1815? Starving French troops ransacked their own countrymen with the same rapacity they had inflicted upon the Spanish and Prussians. French villagers fled before their own army, which had been granted official pillaging rights for years. 'The consequences of this detestable policy now recoiled on his own subjects.'⁶ An uprising of the populace was ordered as the Allies invaded France in 1814. It completely failed to happen. The people in the south of France put white cockades in their hats and welcomed Wellington. It seems the only people who openly wanted Napoleon were his veterans. But then Louis XVIII came to the throne, and after a brief honeymoon period, things proved no better. He placed 13,000 officers on half-pay, and rewarded returned-from-exile Bourbon favourites with promotions and decorations.⁷ Insolence and unrest resulted. If the army was unhappy, the civil population wondered what they had gained since 1791. 'In no country in the world is there found so great a number of beggars as in France,' a British observer wrote. By early 1815, things were so bad that 'a mixture of nostalgia, anger and frustration' was stirring up memories of Bonapartism, although not necessarily across the entire country.⁸ As late as 7 June 1815, the date that Napoleon last donned his coronation robes in public, the calls of '*Vive la France!*' drowned out the cries of '*Vive l'empereur.*'⁹

In the years after Waterloo, France forgot the mess that existed in 1814 and 1815, and embraced the Napoleonic legend. It was a legend which remembered the years 1805 to 1813, with Ligny tacked on the end, and one which was purely nationalist, and military in sentiment. 'The Eagle Rejected' is the most revealing work on the French 'home front' in the last years of the Empire and highly recommended.

Reviewed by [Steve Brown](#)

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⁴ Page 59.

⁵ Page 70.

⁶ Page 113.

⁷ Page 126.

⁸ Page 145-147.

⁹ Page 173.