



'Napoleon at Jena' by Horace Vernet



# Lessons of War

*What the Prussians learned at the hands of Napoleon.*

BY THOMAS RID

It must have been an eerie Monday afternoon, on October 13, 1806. Napoleon rode through Jena, where French troops had already started looting. Hegel, in his study, was working on the last pages of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. From a window the philosopher was able to spot “the Emperor” ride out of town: “Truly it is a remarkable sensation to see such an individual on horseback, raising his

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arm over the world and ruling it,” he later wrote to a friend. Europe was on the eve of one of the most momentous battles of its bloody history. Before sunrise on the next day, the fields still covered by mist, Bonaparte ordered an attack.

The previous Friday in Saalfeld, an advance guard under the command of Prince Louis Ferdinand, nephew of

Frederick the Great, became encircled by lead units under the command of Jean Lannes, one of France’s most capable generals. The prince, bravely leading a cavalry attack to break through the French lines, lost his life

and 1,700 men. Morale in Prussia’s army and its Saxon contingent began slipping. The Duke of Brunswick, who faced up to Napoleon, assembled the bulk of his 161,000 troops 140 miles south of Berlin, by Weimar, Goethe’s hometown, and Jena.

In 1806 the Grande Armée was at its apex, mature and supple, not yet worn. Prussia’s traditionalism proved self-destructive against an agile enemy fired up by patriotic fervor. German officers, for example, wore braided hats, sometimes with plumes, and distinctive dress—and thus neatly marked the best targets for French marksmen. When the Prince of Hohenlohe, a hapless Prussian commander, urgently needed reinforcements after Napoleon’s attack at Jena, Ernst von Rüchel, a Prussian general of the old mold, did not rush his reinforcements into battle but orderly marched them in step, aligned, “as on parade,” one witness recorded. Clausewitz, who knew Rüchel well, quipped that the general—whom he called “concentrated acid of pure Prussianism”—trusted that Frederician tactics could “overcome anything that had emerged from the unsoldierly Revolution.” How wrong he was. Prussia lost tens of thousands of men, together with its glory as a formidable military power.

“No one,” Hegel jotted down, “imagined war as we have seen it.”

Prussia’s reaction to what could not be imagined, the shock of 1806, is the subject of *The Cognitive Challenge of War*. In what turned out to be a spectacularly productive quest, Germany’s greatest minds—among them artists, writers, and military intellectuals—went to work and wrestled with the consequences of France’s revolutionary wars. Paret is at his best when he deciphers some of the paintings and engravings that depict the battle. Perhaps the most impressive is Caspar David Friedrich’s *The Chasseur in the Forest*. It is an elaborate allusion to Prussia’s defeat. On a narrow opening framed by a stand of firs, a *chasseur à cheval*, his horse and strength vanished, walks slowly into the dark forest. Watching is a raven on a tree stump, symbols of death.

“The man alone on alien, immeasurable ground, which may hide unseen dangers, will meet death,” Paret writes. *Geht seinem Tod entgegen* is the German expression re-created by Friedrich. Contemporary opinion was in no doubt about the painting’s meaning, although not all appreciated it. Goethe, whose house had been ransacked by French troops in that October of 1806, dismissively called it “new-German-religious-patriotic art.”

Another artistic milestone is *Wallenstein*, Friedrich Schiller’s trilogy on the Thirty Years’ War. Schiller had served as a regimental physician in the army of Württemberg in the early 1780s, but deserted to dedicate himself to writing. The revolutionary government in Paris had even awarded him honorary citizenship. In 1794 he began writing a trilogy on Albrecht Wallenstein, a Bohemian noble who rose to fame as a capable commander. Although Wallenstein had been assassinated nearly two centuries earlier, Schiller was writing contemporary drama as well as a historical one, Goethe noted. Wallenstein, like Napoleon, was a minor noble, energetic, brilliant, who also fought war “in a new way” and was seen as a threat to the established order.

Schiller’s characters discuss the perennial elements of war and politics in depth. In the second play, Count Piccolomini, a general and secret ally of the emperor, has a conversation with his son Max, an idealist. The father, concerned that his son has been “educated” by 15 years of strife and never seen peace, tells him somewhat condescendingly that “even in war, what ultimately matters is not war.” Max, somewhat agitated, stresses the significance of communication with the opponent, and adds: “For if war does not already cease in war, from where should peace return?”

These lines, Paret says, could as well be Clausewitz’s. And indeed, military thought is the actual focus of this absorbing essay. A few years after Jena and Auerstedt, early in 1812, Napoleon demanded that Prussia supply troops for his invasion of Russia. For Clausewitz this was unacceptable and he resigned his commission in the

Prussian Army in order to fight with Russian troops against the French. In an article explaining that decision, next to a sentence on the character of supreme command, he scribbled on the margin, “Wallenstein. Schiller.”



Albrecht Wallenstein

*Germans—most notably Clausewitz—used the ‘mask of history,’ from Arminius to Wallenstein, to come to terms with innovation and war in their own age.*

So frequent were Clausewitz’s references to Schiller that Paret thinks the philosopher of war “takes over some of Schiller’s expressions to formulate his ideas.”

And those Clausewitzian ideas have come to define much of Western military thought. Often they were contrasted with the work of another military writer who served in 1806, Antoine de Jomini, a Franco-Swiss officer with a stellar career under Napoleon. Jomini attempted to find

the eternal rules and “fundamental principles” of warfare, such as the right use of interior lines and decisive points, a winning formula that is “immutable, independent of types of weapon, time, and country.” For his Prussian competitor, this was nonsense. It is not without irony that the discussion between the two titans, like some of their concepts, may be a perennial feature of warfare. “Efforts were . . . made to equip the conduct of war with principles, rules, or even systems,” Paret quotes Clausewitz. But the old master was skeptical. In a section headed “Theory should be Study, not Doctrine,” he writes that theory of war must not be “a positive doctrine, a sort of manual for action.” Theory is meant to guide the reader in his self-education, “not to accompany him to the battlefield.”

Peter Paret’s small book is masterfully constructed. He has set out to “consider specific events” without losing sight of the general issues they exemplify. The reader learns how Germans—most notably Clausewitz—used the “mask of history,” from Arminius to Wallenstein, to come to terms with innovation and war in their own age. The reader, after putting down this book, may wonder, in a moment of reflection, if Paret has not tried to use his own mask of history: We again live in an age where war is fought in a new way, again posing a major cognitive challenge. Yet, Paret tells us through Clausewitz (and through Wallenstein), some common characteristics remain unchanged. War is recognized as a complex and ambiguous social, organizational, and political activity, dominated not just by reason but also emotion.

“Once combat begins and people die, it may be difficult to remember the instrumentality of war,” Paret warns. Sacrifice creates value. And a point may be reached when “war has changed from a tool of policy to a force that imposes—or seeks to impose—its own emotional demands.” It may be of little immediate solace that defeat, as Paret illustrates in 1806, seems to unleash far more creative and productive *esprit* than victory. ♦