



The Diary of a Napoleonic Foot Soldier: A Unique Eyewitness Account of the Face of Battle from Inside the Ranks of Bonaparte's Grand Army

By Jakob Walter

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Eighteen-year-old German stonemason Jakob Walter served in the Grand Army of Napoleon between 1806 and 1813. His diary intimately records his trials: the long, grueling marches in Prussia and Poland, the disastrous Russian campaign, and the demoralizing defeat in a war few supported or understood. It is at once a compelling chronicle of a young soldier's loss of innocence and an eloquent and moving portrait of the profound effects of all wars on the men who fight them.

Also included are letters home from the Russian front, previously unpublished in English, as well as period engravings and maps from the Russian/Soviet and East European collections of the New York Public Library.

"Vivid and gruesome ... but also a story of human fortitude. ... It reminds us that the troops Napoleon drove so mercilessly were actually more victims than victors—a side of Napoleon that should not be forgotten."

—Chicago Tribune

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Of the half - million men who invaded Russia in Napoleon's army in June 1812, barely 25,000 survived. One who did was the author of this diary, Jakob Walter (1788-1864), a German private soldier from Westphalia. First conscripted in 1806, he was recalled to duty in 1809 and again in 1812. Walter's writing is unemotional and non-interpretive; he describes straightforwardly what he experienced. The account of the 1812 campaign--Napoleon's march on Moscow and inglorious retreat--takes up three-quarters of this short volume and constitutes its most interesting portion. In a chronicle of progressive demoralization, Walter observes how the instinct for self-preservation, under the pressure of Cossack attacks and treachery by erstwhile allies, leads to savagery among Napoleon's troops. The common-soldier perspective is rare among the mass of material left by veterans of the 1812 campaign and the book will be of interest to the general reader as well as the scholar. This edition includes six short letters home by other German soldiers in the Grand Army, all less interesting than Walter's diary. Raeff is professor of Russian studies at Columbia University. Illustrated. Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Library Journal

More memoir than diary, this slim volume contains the reminiscences of a young German conscript into the army of Napoleon in the campaigns of 1806, 1807, 1809, and 1812-13. As such, it represents one of the few historical documents that portray the life and death of common soldiers of the period. As the army fought its way back and forth across Eastern Europe, young Walter encountered Poles, Russians, Jews, and other groups, and his descriptions of his interactions with these "others" illuminates attitudes and prejudices of German troops of the period. The firsthand description of the retreat of a starving army from Moscow and the attendant breakdown of discipline and morale will interest military historians as well. Walter's book is reminiscent of Guy Sajer's World War II memoir *The Forgotten Soldier* (LJ 12/15/70) and should be popular with a similar audience; it belongs in libraries with Napoleonic history or fiction collections.--Stanley Planton, Ohio Univ.

Chillicothe Lib.

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From Kirkus Reviews

As France's empire expanded during its postrevolutionary era, Napoleon began requiring vassal states to supply troops for his acquisitive causes. Among those caught in the conscription net was Jakob Walter, a young German stonemason who marched with the Corsican usurper's foreign legions on three campaigns (including the disastrous invasion of Russia) between 1806 and 1813--and who left an *ex post facto* memoir of his military service, which surfaced as a treasured family heirloom in America's Midwest during the Depression and was first published by the Univ. of Kansas in 1938. Human interest apart, Walter's stolid and narrowly focused account of his life as a soldier is longer on curiosity than historical value. Drafted in 1806, at age 18, to fight against Prussia, he was recalled in 1809 for a war with Austria and in 1812 when Napoleon moved his 600,000-man Grand Army into the heart of Russia. Walter's recollections of this catastrophic expedition, from which barely 25,000 returned, represent the longest and most absorbing portion of his narrative. Totally disinterested in the geopolitical implications of either the advance on or retreat from Moscow, the author bears oddly detached witness to the hardships and dangers endured by the bootless offensive's survivors. Nor did Walter much care about the outcomes of the battles in which he fought. Indeed, the main concerns of the author and his comrades seem to have been getting enough to eat in a country with few agricultural resources, avoiding crippling wounds, and returning safely home. Absent big-

picture perspectives and contextual detail, Walter's recollections amount to little more than an intriguing footnote to 19th-century military history. The text includes an appendix with six unrelated letters home (unearthed by a Soviet researcher in 1978) from six Westphalian conscripts serving in the Grand Army, plus 20 b&w engravings (not seen). -- *Copyright ©1991, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jill Spann:

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Judith Craig:

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