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The Watershed: Napoleon’s Campaigns against Prussia and Russia, October 1806–March 1807

1 Napoleon crushes Prussia (October 1806)

Few campaigns are as justly famous as Napoleon’s against Prussia in the autumn of 1806.¹ Napoleon had always admired Frederick the Great and his Prussian army. Now, two decades after the great king’s death, he faced the same army and Napoleon had a healthy respect for his enemy born of the formidable reputation that the Prussian army had for discipline, leadership and sheer fighting prowess. Napoleon was not taking any chances with Prussia and mobilized the largest army he had ever fielded. The expectation was that the Prussians would defeat Napoleon’s legions and that this time around Napoleon had taken on more than he could handle.²

The reality was that Prussia had not put the breathing space since 1795 to good use. Her once formidable army was now an antiquated and creaking machine of war, poorly adapted to the new mobile Napoleonic style of warfare. Her generals, many of them in their seventies, were going to fight a war from a bygone age and would be singularly unsuited to fight against the French army, which had innovated and improved dramatically since 1795. Furthermore, Prussia was fighting quite alone since none of her perspective allies were in a position to come to her aid.³ Nevertheless the Prussians – for so long in Napoleon’s shadow – seemed both ready and able to take on the French. However, they committed one huge and fatal error of strategic judgement. Like the Austrians and Russians at Austerlitz, they were too eager to attack. Instead of awaiting Napoleon’s move and making a stand along the Elbe, the Prussian army confidently advanced into Saxony where, to
their surprise, the French dealt them a double defeats on the same day. At Jena and Auerstädt on 14 October the entire Prussian field army was outmanoeuvred, outfought and completely routed. The state machinery of Prussia virtually collapsed as the French advanced eastwards into Brandenburg – the heart of the Prussian monarchy. On 27 October Napoleon’s victorious troops entered an undefended Berlin.4

In Sweden, as in the rest of Europe, Prussia’s sudden collapse came as an unpleasant shock. One eye witness to this calamity was the former Swedish ‘dictator’, Count Reuterholm, who was in self-imposed exile and in Prussia at the time. He believed that the fall of Prussia would have greater repercussions for Europe than even the French Revolution and heralded the beginning of the end for Gustavian Sweden.5 Feeling hard done by the king, and resenting that his ‘talents’ had not been appreciated in his home country, Reuterholm hated Gustavus IV with an intensity matched by few other members of the anti-gustavian opposition. He was looking forward to both king and nation getting what they deserved as his claimed that: ‘The All Highest was about to punish the Nation, which was ruled by a king with unlimited power to rule according to his own blockhead, combining Arrogance and Stupidity in equal measure’.6 Reuterholm believed, along with many others of his class and background, that the time was long overdue for Sweden to leave the war.7

The Swedish ministers – and Ehrenheim in particular – shared Reuterholm’s wishes.8 What these men of peace failed to divulge beyond utterances of pious hope was how Sweden was to pull out of the war without causing a conflict with her allies. In the thick of the action, Wetterstedt was more concerned with practical matters than his superior out of the way in Stockholm. How were the Swedish forces in Lauenburg and Pomerania to avoid being swamped by the advancing French forces?9 Gustavus IV had been shocked by the news of the defeats at Jena and Auerstädt – which he had received on 23 October – which seemed to have momentarily paralysed his usual mania for action. He quickly recovered, ordered that the Pomeranian army was to advance on the Elbe and was persuaded by General Toll that this was out of the question. The French had already crossed the river days earlier.10

The collapse of Prussia – as complete as it was sudden and most unexpected – had created a huge power vacuum in northern Germany that the French were filling with alarming rapidity. An entirely new front in the war had been created, which extended the war considerably and now made Denmark, Sweden and Russia – in that order of exposure – frontline states. Napoleon could carry the war into these countries almost at will and by creating privateering bases in its coastal ports he