



The Dynamics of Defeat: French Army Leadership, December 1812–March 1813

Author(s): Frederick C. Schneid

Source: *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Jan., 1999), pp. 7-28

Published by: Society for Military History

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/120331>

Accessed: 01/12/2009 03:43

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=smh>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Society for Military History is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Military History*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

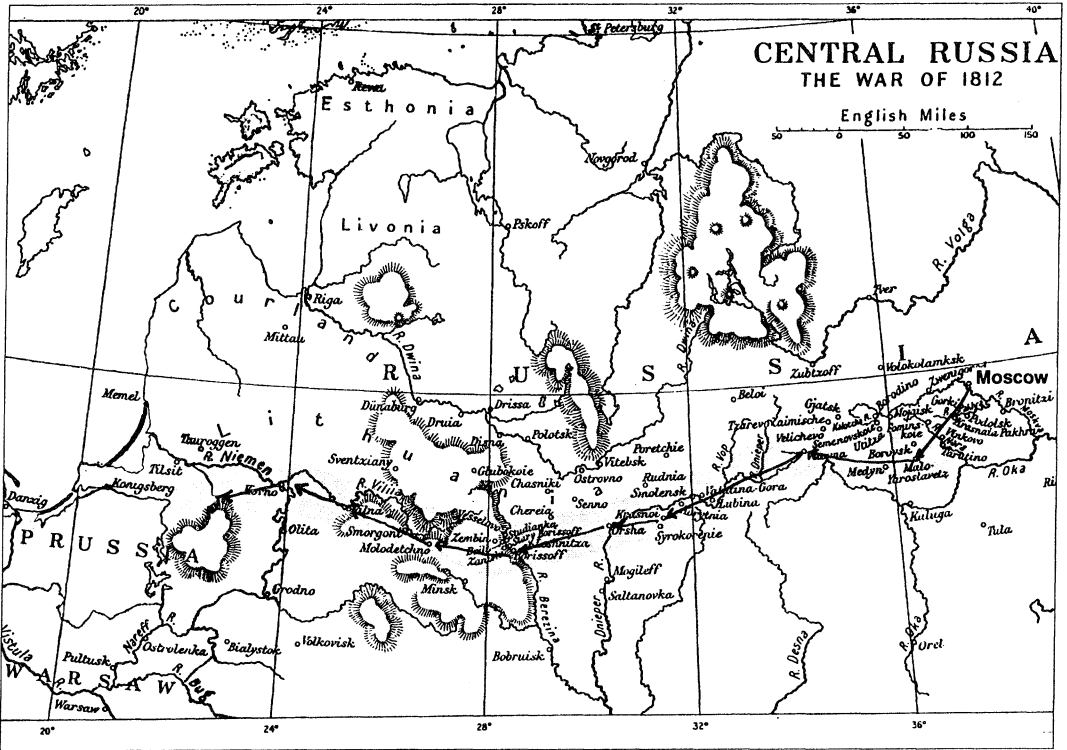
The Dynamics of Defeat: French Army Leadership, December 1812–March 1813*



Frederick C. Schneid

IN June 1812, Napoleon invaded Russia with an army in excess of 400,000 men. Commanding the central column, he reached Moscow by mid-September. Tsar Alexander I remained defiant, refusing to negotiate. After a month in the Russian capital, and no clear victory in sight, Napoleon ordered a withdrawal. The failure of the campaign combined with the ensuing breakdown in discipline during the retreat caused the gradual deterioration of the army. On 5 December 1812, the *Grande Armée* died. Its death was not quick, but prolonged and lingering. The army that left Moscow the third week of October with one hundred thousand men reached the Berezina a month later with sixty thousand. Yet, when Napoleon left the army for Paris on 5 December, the heart stopped and the soul fled the body. At ten o'clock in the evening, the French Emperor departed the small town of Smorgoni and the remnants of his once *Grande Armée*. In retrospect, it appears that the Emperor had every confidence in his army's ability to reorganize once it reached the city of

* The author wishes to thank the following people for their contributions and assistance: G. Lawrence Simpson, Richard B. McCaslin, and Gunther E. Rothenberg. Particular thanks to the staff at Special Collections, Firestone Library, Princeton University, for their generous and friendly assistance in culling the Beauharnais Archive. (The Beauharnais Archive consists of several hundred cartons of documents and correspondence and is the most comprehensive archival collection of Napoleonic documents this side of the Atlantic. It includes Eugène's private collection of official and personal documents relating to his life as a Prince, General of the Empire, and Viceroy of Italy. The archive was donated to Princeton University by an alumnus.) Lastly, part of the research for this article was conducted with the aid of a High Point University Faculty Development Grant.



The *Grande Armée's* retreat route from Moscow, 1812.

Vilna, only a day's march to the west.¹ Before leaving, he made provisions for the transfer of command and gave explicit instructions concerning the direction of the army. Unfortunately, the marshals, generals, and soldiers did not share Napoleon's optimism. His departure removed from the army its greatest remaining asset, the knowledge that the Emperor was with it.

The collapse of morale was the most decisive element in the destruction of the army. Demoralization occurred not only among the soldiers, but more importantly, among the officers. The decimation of the *Grande Armée* and Napoleon's departure affected the marshals and army leadership much more than perhaps they realized when Napoleon consulted with them on the cold night of 5 December.

Napoleon's cult of personality galvanized the rank-and-file, and commanded obedience from his marshals and generals whose inflated egos

1. Armand de Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia* (New York: W. Morrow, 1935), 267.

often collided with one another. As in Spain, his absence led to squabbling and rivalry among his lieutenants, who tended to turn on each other. The stress of the Russian campaign, and the realization of its catastrophic consequences, however, exacerbated tensions among them. When Napoleon left, there was no longer a central figure who had the ability to restore the confidence of the soldiers and their officers. Feelings of jealousy and anger surfaced initially among the leaders of the rag-tag army. In the midst of defeat, however, the responsibility for the survival of the army ultimately fell to three men: Marshal Louis-Nicholas Davout, Prince Eugène de Beauharnais, and Prince Jozef Poniatowski. These men managed to establish some sense of order by turning to each other for support and comfort in this most desperate of times. Indeed, the debacle in Russia was the greatest of Napoleon's reign. The marshals and generals of the Empire had never experienced such a sense of loss, desperation, and hopelessness. The extent of the defeat undermined even Napoleon's confidence in his own abilities and egoism of command. Yet, after the reality of failure had been accepted, the French army leadership conducted itself in the Emperor's absence with a certain level of stoicism. This level-headedness would become manifest only after Napoleon's successors to army command provided the example.

Napoleon's choice of a successor was quite telling of his state of mind. He proposed only two: his brother-in-law, Joachim Murat, King of Naples and a former Marshal of the Empire; and his stepson, Eugène de Beauharnais, Prince of the Empire, Viceroy of Italy, and a general.² Napoleon clearly wanted the army to remain in the hands of a family member. He appears to have been concerned about the potential reaction of his marshals to a new commander.

Murat and Eugène were not the greatest military minds on the scene. Murat had a solid reputation as a cavalry commander and had served Napoleon well on the battlefield. Nevertheless, he rarely excelled when placed in independent command. There is little doubt that he was brave, but he was full of bravado and at times arrogant, especially toward the other marshals. They did not like him, with the exception, not surprisingly, of the cavalry officers. Prince Eugène had a reputation for having a sounder military mind and was more respected by his peers, yet he suffered from the fact that he owed his position to nepotism. Moreover, he was merely a general, and not a marshal. Eugène performed well enough as Viceroy of Italy, heading the Army of Italy independently in 1809, and

2. Ibid., 262–63; Count Philippe-Paul de Ségur, *Napoleon's Russian Campaign* (New York: Greenwood, 1976), 256–57; Murat was removed from the list of Marshals in 1808 after he had received the title of King; John R. Elting, *Swords Around A Throne: Napoleon's Grande Armée* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 144.

later commanding a part of the *Grande Armée* in Russia. All that said, Eugène was certainly not in the first rank of military commanders.

Still with the army were a host of marshals: Alexandre Berthier, Jean-Baptiste Bessières, Louis-Nicholas Davout, François Lefebvre, Jacques Macdonald, Adolphe Mortier, Michel Ney, Nicholas Oudinot, Laurent de Gouvion Saint-Cyr, and Claude-Victor Perrin. Some had held independent command. In the first month of the Russian campaign, Davout, known as the Iron Marshal, had been entrusted with a wing of the main army in Russia, and Macdonald still commanded the left wing. The remainder were good officers, though not as fine as Davout, but none were suited for such a lofty command. Berthier was a chief of staff, not a field commander. His most recent attempt at independent command in 1809 almost led to disaster. The other marshals were a mixed lot whose personalities often collided. Consequently, Napoleon believed that only a member of the imperial family who held title over the other marshals could command the army. Murat was a king, and Eugène a prince.³ If Eugène were chosen, the other marshals might resent taking orders from a mere general.

At seven o'clock in the evening of 5 December, Napoleon met at his headquarters with Murat, Eugène, and those marshals present at Smorgoni. There they were told of his decision to leave the army:⁴

He told them all together what he had already imparted to each one privately: "This night I am leaving for Paris, accompanied by Duroc, Caulaincourt and Lobau. . . .⁵ I leave the King of Naples in command of the army. *I trust you will obey him, as you have obeyed me, and that perfect harmony will reign among you.*⁶

Almost immediately after Napoleon's departure, dissension surfaced among the marshalate. Although he initially desired to return to France with the Emperor, Berthier decided to stay, believing, according to Napoleon's aide General Armand de Caulaincourt, "that he would be of real service to the Emperor by remaining with the army."⁷ Eugène reserved his comments on this turn of events until after the Emperor

3. Louis Davout was also a Prince, but the title was honorific and not associated with the imperial family. Davout's titles were Prince of Eckmühl and Duke of Auerstädt.

4. Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon*, 266–68. Present at the meeting were Berthier, Bessières, Davout, Lefebvre, Mortier, and Ney. Victor was commanding the rear-guard, Macdonald was still commanding the left wing, and Oudinot and St.-Cyr were wounded and on their way to Prussia.

5. Géraud-Christophe Duroc, Duke of Frioul and Grand Marshal of the Palace, had served with Napoleon since 1796. Armand de Caulaincourt, Duke of Vicenza, aide de camp to Napoleon and Grand Master of the Horse, later served as Foreign Minister of France, 1813–14. Georges Mouton, Count of Lobau, general and aide to Napoleon, became Marshal of France in 1831.

6. Ségur, *Russian Campaign*, 259–60 (italics added).

7. *Ibid.*, 257–58; Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon*, 267.

departed, writing bitterly to his wife, Auguste-Aemilia, the following day: "I am not inclined to serve under the king of Naples." Yet, he explained in resignation, that he had to remain at his post despite the deplorable conditions and his new commander. The day after he wrote again, "The Emperor is gone and left me with the king." He was depressed, frustrated and angered: "G-d preserve me," he lamented, "...my corps is reduced to nothing."⁸

Davout too kept silent and did not reveal his true feelings until some weeks later. He believed that the existing circumstances rightly dictated Napoleon's return to Paris. Murat's appointment, however, shocked Davout, who thought the choice unfortunate and blamed it upon Napoleon's personal fondness for Murat, without due regard to the realities of the situation or Murat's limitations. No doubt angered and hurt, he observed that he was never shown such favoritism or consideration despite his exemplary service over the years. Thus, Davout felt deeply slighted by Napoleon's appointment of Murat.⁹ More than this, Davout had very little respect for Murat and had come to count the one-time King of Naples among his enemies.¹⁰

Count Philippe de Ségur later recalled misgivings concerning Murat's appointment:

In the empty space left by his [Napoleon's] going, Murat was hardly visible. We realized then—and only too well—that a great man cannot be replaced; either because his subordinates' pride forbids them to obey another, or because . . . he had formed only able lieutenants, but no leaders.¹¹

Marshal Macdonald believed that Napoleon chose poorly in relying on Murat. Saint-Cyr, who no longer commanded a corps, as he was recovering from wounds, later recalled with displeasure Murat's appointment.¹²

While the command of the *Grande Armée* came undone, the Emperor made his way homeward, confident in the army's resurrection at Vilna and unaware of the reality of the situation. When Murat, Berthier, and the

8. Eugène to Auguste-Aemilia, 6 and 7 December 1812, in Eugène de Beauharnais, *Mémoires et Correspondance Politique et Militaire du Prince Eugène*, ed. Albert Du Casse, 9 vols. (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1859), 8:104, 105.

9. Louis-Nicholas Davout, *Correspondance du Maréchal Davout: 1801–1815*, ed. Charles de Mazade, 4 vols. (Paris: 1885), 3:483–84, #1181, Letter from Davout to Duroc, 3 February 1813.

10. John G. Gallaher, *The Iron Marshal, A Biography of Louis N. Davout* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 215.

11. Ségur, *Russian Campaign*, 265.

12. Gouvion Saint-Cyr, *Mémoires du Maréchal Gouvion Saint-Cyr, 1812–1813*, 2 vols. (Paris: E. Plon, Nouriet et cie, 1892), 2:3; Jacques Macdonald, *Souvenirs du Maréchal Macdonald* (Paris: E. Plon, Nouriet et cie, 1892), 182.

first troops arrived at Vilna on 9 December, they abandoned Napoleon's scheme. Taking stock of the local conditions and the state of the army, Murat ordered the evacuation of the city the following day.

When Murat looked at the actual number of troops available, he found he could not count on more than twenty thousand dribbling into Vilna from the remnants of the central column that had marched to Moscow. Outside of the main column, there were probably no more than another twenty thousand, who were making their way back along their own routes. Macdonald's left wing was still in good shape with some twenty-three thousand Prussians, Poles, and Germans. Prince Karl Philipp Schwarzenberg's right wing numbered forty-three thousand men, more than half of whom were part of the Austrian Auxiliary Corps; the remainder were Poles, Saxons, and French, from the VII Saxon and V Polish corps under General Jean-Louis Ebénézer Reynier and Prince Jozef Poniatowski, respectively. To this, one could add the reinforcements which were already en route to Russia, totalling another sixty thousand. By an objective accounting, the total of available forces would have easily exceeded one hundred sixty thousand men.¹³ Yet, perceptions often obscure reality and consequently the psychological impact of the retreat overrode any sense of rational objectivity.

A level-headed assessment of imperial forces was largely the responsibility of Berthier, but he lost sight of the larger picture and fell victim to despair. In the midst of such a human tragedy, the heart loses hope and the head tends to follow. From Vilna, an overwhelmed and disheartened Berthier wrote Napoleon: "Sire, I must tell you the truth. The army is in a complete state of chaos. The soldiers throw away their guns because they cannot hold them; both officers and soldiers think only of protecting themselves from the terrible cold."¹⁴ Significantly, the French line of communications broke down at this critical juncture. Napoleon did not receive this or any other correspondence from Russia until he was in Paris at the end of December. In the meantime, the army and its leaders were on their own. It was Murat's responsibility to restore order and instil confidence in his men, yet he was not up to the great task.

At Kovno on 12 December, Murat sought the council of the other marshals. Their corps were shells of their former selves, so that to hold there was an impossibility. The marshals had not the will for it, nor perhaps

13. Richard K. Riehn, *1812: Napoleon's Russian Campaign* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), 395. Riehn's numbers are quite plausible, including the return to service of fifteen thousand troops who were sick in hospital.

14. Berthier to Napoleon, Vilna, dated 5 a.m., 9 December 1812, cited in Eugène Tarlé, *Napoleon's Invasion of Russia, 1812* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), 390. The letters from Berthier to Napoleon, published by Tarlé, were all captured by Cossacks and were placed in the Russian archives.

the means. All present determined that the army could only be saved by putting space between themselves and the Russians in effect, trading territory for time. They believed that only then could the army be rallied and reorganized.¹⁵ Hence, the army would retire to the Vistula and abandon all of eastern Poland to the Russians. Berthier vividly conveyed the desperate situation and attitude of the marshals to Napoleon that day:

The measures taken for organizing our stay in Vilna have come to nothing through the lack of discipline. . . . The King [Murat] has given orders to evacuate the city during the night. . . . I am compelled to tell your majesty that the army is in complete disorder. . . . the King does not think it possible to stop at Kovno, for there is no army.¹⁶

It was true enough—the *Grande Armée* had ceased to exist. Marshals marched with their men, Eugène and Ney both carried muskets. When the retreating horde reached the town of Gumbinnen, there was a sense of relief; at last they were on the soil of their Prussian ally. Eugène did not believe the Russians would pursue the army into Prussia. There, they could rest and reform; with luck, he would be ordered back to Italy where he could be with his wife and children.¹⁷ In the meantime, the imperial prince continued his march to the Vistula. Elsewhere, Murat established his headquarters in Königsberg, and Berthier began to take stock of the army. Now he could again attempt to assess the forces available to him.

For all of Berthier's administrative skill, such an accounting was impossible. He sent daily letters to the marshals requesting, and at times, even begging for an official report on the state of their corps. The breakdown of the army and the anarchy which reigned among the rank-and-file made it impossible to determine the exact condition of the imperial army. Responding to Berthier's requests on Christmas Eve, Marshal Davout wrote: "I have no information on the cavalry of the 1st Corps, I presume they have followed with the entire cavalry of the army in the direction of Elbing." The remainder of Davout's corps were still trickling in to his headquarters at Thorn. A stream of stragglers continued to arrive through the end of December and beyond.¹⁸ Lack of knowledge and the uncertainty of dispositions only increased the sense of frustration and hopelessness of the imperial command.

The severity of the situation and the chaos, as well as the lack of confidence in Murat's leadership, agitated tensions which were slowly

15. Beauharnais, *Mémoires*, 8:110–11; Davout, *Correspondance*, 3:432.

16. Berthier to Napoleon, Kovno, 12 December 1812, quoted in Tarlé, *Napoleon's Invasion*, 391–92.

17. Beauharnais, *Mémoires*, 8:111. Eugène would not be sent to Italy or see his family until the end of May 1813.

18. Davout to Berthier, #1143, 24 December 1812, and #1146, 30 December 1812, Davout, *Correspondance*, 3:432–34.

beginning to emerge. Berthier, the great chief of staff, was now fifty-nine and physically exhausted. As the task of reorganizing the army moved from theory to practice, it proved too much even for Berthier. Rallying and reorganizing the army involved more than a head count of those present; it required human resources which were simply unavailable. Once these soldiers reached Prussia, they had to be sorted out and sent to their corps. To do this, however, some organization of officers or *gendarmes* was required to send the soldiers on their way. This was not possible. The retreating masses had no organization. Corps, divisions, brigades, regiments, and battalions were inextricably intermixed. Germans marched with Poles, who followed Italians, who were in turn accompanied by Frenchmen. There was no rhyme or reason, merely chaos. The fleeing remnants had to find their own way back to their regiments, and some decided to continue home instead.¹⁹

The weighty responsibility for the army fell on Murat, who was not equal to the challenge. It is uncertain if anyone would have been, even Napoleon. After settling in Königsberg on the Vistula, Murat made no further decisions. What occurred at his headquarters in the last week of December is unclear. It appears that Murat left everything to Berthier, and what the chief of staff could not do remained undone. Murat gave no direction to the marshals and generals and provided no leadership whatsoever. He appeared to have been paralyzed by the enormity of command. Of all the correspondence that remains from the marshals for this period, there is none from Murat. There are many dispatches from Berthier, but they merely request information on the state of the army and give no direction.²⁰

This immobility of leadership, which became increasingly evident as the weeks passed, was heightened by the unheroic actions of many of the marshals who had led the army to Moscow and back again. Once the remnants of their corps settled into the villages and towns of eastern Prussia and western Poland, the marshals gradually took leave of the army, reasoning that if the Emperor could leave, then they had fulfilled their responsibilities by leading the rest to safety. Of the marshals who were present, Lefebvre, Mortier, and Victor requested relief from their commands and returned to France. Oudinot and Saint-Cyr were recovering from wounds and incapable of command. Ney, the last of the marshals to

19. Aside from Caulaincourt and Ségur, *The Memoirs of Sergeant Bourgogne, 1812–1813* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1979) and Jakob Walter, *The Diary of a Napoleonic Foot Soldier* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) provide vivid accounts of the retreat from Russia.

20. See, for example, Eugène to Napoleon, 18 January 1813, Beauharnais, *Mémoires*, 8:218. Upon assuming command of the army in mid-January, Eugène found unanswered correspondence at Murat's headquarters from the marshals and generals.

leave Russia, remained with the army. His III Corps was merged with what was left of Oudinot's II Corps. Yet, Ney did not return to active command until February 1813. Thus, excluding Murat and Berthier, Davout and Macdonald were the only marshals still in the field by Christmas 1812. Eugène, though not a marshal, also remained at his post, as did Prince Poniatowski and General Reynier.

With the growing vacuum of command, Davout, Eugène, and Poniatowski turned to each other for support and comfort. While there was a lack of communication between Murat and the corps commanders, there was an abundance of letters between the marshals and generals. After reaching the Vistula, a scant few still commanded corps, or what were once corps. Eugène was on the lower Vistula, Davout at Thorn in the center, and Schwarzenberg farther east, withdrawing on Warsaw. Under Schwarzenberg were Reynier and Poniatowski. The Polish prince was the most energetic of the right wing commanders, and he remained in constant contact with Davout and Eugène. Macdonald still led the left wing, but as he was retiring on Königsberg, he was in communication only with Murat and Berthier.

A myriad of dispatches began in earnest almost from the moment the Vistula line was reached. The imperial commanders passed on information on the progress of the Russians all along the line. They also penned numerous reports regarding Cossack raids, and more importantly, the arrival of French and German reinforcements from Europe. By remaining in constant communication with each other, they found solace, partly compensating for the dearth of leadership from Murat. Davout, whose central position made him the natural go-between, was the focus of much correspondence. Eugène in particular had a great deal of respect for Davout, while the marshal was extremely friendly to the Prince. Poniatowski daily apprised Davout of the situation in south-central Poland. The Pole had little confidence or trust in Schwarzenberg, and sought reassurance from the French marshal that Napoleon would not abandon his homeland.²¹ Davout appears to have become the de facto leader at this stage, yet his role as such did not extend beyond his professionalism and ability to present the calmest and most rational front to the other lieutenants. This certainly made him a central figure, despite the fact that his corps numbered no more than two thousand men.

Napoleon's absence became a great liability for the army, although it was initially supported by the marshals and generals. Murat neither rallied the army nor restored confidence to the army's leaders. Reacting to this seeming isolation and abandonment, Eugène, Davout, and Poniatowski

21. Refer to correspondence cited between these generals in *Korespondencya: Księcia Józefa Poniatowskiego z Francją*, vol. 5, 1813 (Posen: n.p., 1929); Davout, *Correspondance*, vol. 3, and Beauharnais, *Mémoires*, vol. 8.

turned to each other, and found some security in the knowledge that all were trying to cope with the catastrophe. Napoleon remained under the illusion that all was well with the army, and did not become aware of the retreat to the Vistula until after he arrived in Paris. In late December, he sent letters to the marshals and generals still in Prussia and Poland, but the dispatches did not arrive until after the first of the year. An entire month passed without direction. Never in the life of the Empire had such a period gone by where Napoleon's lieutenants were without instructions from their master. Despite the hardship and lack of clear direction, the marshals and generals did their best to carry on.

Although the army remained in a critical state, it still might have been able to hold the Vistula line, if not for the unexpected defection of General Johann Yorck, commander of the Prussian contingent of the *Grande Armée* attached to Macdonald's corps. His defection on 30 December 1812 came as a bombshell and had a devastating effect on the French position in Prussia and Poland. The shocking news spread quickly among the marshals, generals, and men. To an angry Macdonald this was an affair of honor that dealt a great blow to his equilibrium. According to his memoirs, the marshal regarded the Prussian defection not only as an act of betrayal, but also as personal shame, since it was he who had been fooled. In fact, it weighed heavily on his conscience for years.²²

Relations between Murat and Macdonald came undone. Macdonald projected his fury toward Murat. He did not blame the King of Naples for Yorck's betrayal, but felt Murat's performance as commander certainly contributed to circumstances that made the defection possible. Poor communications between the two worsened the situation. Murat was no longer at Königsberg, but had withdrawn further west to Elbing, as Eugène observed to his wife: "he [Murat] had quit Königsberg precipitously after the treason of a Prussian general."²³ Summoning Macdonald to Elbing, Murat hotly berated him, blamed him for Yorck's defection, and informed him that he would be relieved of command. Murat ordered Macdonald's entire corps to Danzig, where General Jean Rapp, the commander of the city, would assume command. Murat added for good measure that the Emperor would be apprised of the situation. Macdonald retorted in disgust, "The Emperor is truly completely ignorant about what has occurred and what is occurring."²⁴

Macdonald's alleged remark was the first open criticism of Napoleon since the Emperor left the army. The validity of this statement, however, is open to question as it was recollected in the marshal's memoirs. Regardless of whether such words were uttered at the time, they clearly reflect

22. Macdonald, *Souvenirs*, 185–90.

23. Eugène to Auguste, 5 January 1813, Beauharnais, *Mémoires*, 8:129.

24. Macdonald, *Souvenirs*, 192–95.

Macdonald's feelings toward Napoleon's departure, at least in retrospect. The showdown between Murat and Macdonald not only left the army with one less marshal, but was symptomatic of the complete breakdown of command in the wake of Napoleon's departure. Murat was overwhelmed in directing the army's withdrawal to the Vistula, and with Yorck's defection, he became paralyzed and derelict in his duties.

Berthier too had his problems. The chief of staff could not sort out the administrative nightmare that must have kept him furiously engaged for weeks. The strain of the campaign and the stress of responsibility now took its toll. Berthier's health had not been good; now he was struck with an attack of gout so painful that he was unable to work for long periods of time.²⁵ Consequently, by mid-January 1813, the onus of administration was removed from his shoulders and given to General Count Mathieu Dumas.²⁶

Meanwhile, Yorck's defection also affected Marshal Davout deeply. Throughout the hardship of the retreat, Davout had remained a rock, but it became clear to him that Yorck's defection was merely a prelude to the defection of Prussia. He could not conceive that Yorck could disobey his king.²⁷ Although Frederick William III disavowed Yorck's actions, Davout wrote, "the character known of this sovereign does not permit me to doubt the sincerity of his declaration; but on the other hand all reports concur to say that there is movement in Prussia."²⁸ Eugène concurred with Davout's assessment, and Poniatowski went further, predicting the Russians would shift their military focus from Poland to Prussia to bring Frederick William III into a military alliance.²⁹ Exacerbating Davout's concerns was information that Prussian troops at Graudenz, halfway between Davout and Eugène's positions, had increased to more than ten thousand men. Fearing other Prussian generals would follow Yorck's example, Davout ordered all Prussian mail to Graudenz intercepted.³⁰

25. Davout to Duroc, 12 January 1813, Davout, *Correspondance*, #1159, 3:450–51; Eugène to Napoleon, 21 January 1813, Beauharnais, *Mémoires*, 8:222.

26. Berthier's responsibilities were reduced to such a point that Napoleon no longer wrote him in the capacity of chief of staff. Volume 24 of the *Correspondance de Napoléon I* contains letters to Berthier from December 1812 through January 1813, although they taper off toward the end of that month. There are no such dispatches for February. The order to place Dumas in charge of administration can be found in Napoleon to Eugène, 22 January 1813, *Correspondance de Napoléon I* (Paris: n.p., 1858), #19476, 24:419.

27. Davout to Duroc, 5 January 1813, Davout, *Correspondance*, #1151, 3:439–43.

28. Davout to Berthier, 9 January 1813, *ibid.*, #1157, 3:447.

29. *Ibid.*, 3:447, in which Davout told Berthier that Eugène could support his information on Prussian movements; Poniatowski to Davout, 9 January 1813, Poniatowski, *Korespondencya*, #741, 5:15–17.

30. Davout to Berthier, 9 January 1813, and Davout to Duroc, 12 January 1813, Davout, *Correspondance*, #1157 and #1159, 3:447, 450.

Yorck's defection and the uncertainty of Prussian intentions led Davout to strike out at the incompetence he saw in Murat and Berthier. While a clash of personalities had strained relations between Murat and Davout before 1812, Davout's distaste for Berthier can be traced back to April 1809. Davout was then in command of the Army of Germany, concentrated in Bavaria, while Berthier was given nominal charge of the defense of Germany against the Austrian invasion. At that time Berthier proved unequal to the task, and seemingly ignored Davout's reports on enemy movements and the threat of a Prussian insurrection.³¹ Now, Yorck's defection, reports of a renewed Russian advance to the Vistula, and the lack of direction from Berthier and Murat seemed uncomfortably familiar to Davout.

The marshal had little room to maneuver. Since military propriety prevented Davout from writing the Emperor directly, he turned to his friend General Géraud-Christophe Duroc, Grand Marshal of the Palace, who had returned to Paris with Napoleon. The marshal's correspondence for January 1813 is replete with letters to his friend, asking for the intercession of the Emperor in these desperate and deteriorating affairs. Davout warned that if the Russians suddenly reached the Vistula, the imperial army would have to abandon its current positions and withdraw further west to the Oder. Davout did not believe Berthier had fully apprised the Emperor of how severe the strategic situation had become.³² Fearing that Napoleon was still uninformed, Davout overcame his hesitations and concerns and finally wrote the Emperor. He told him that the Russians had cut communications between Davout and Murat's headquarters. They had done exactly what Davout and Poniatowski expected by placing the focus of their efforts against the French in Prussia. The Vistula could not be held; Eugène's corps had already been forced from its positions on the central Vistula. Some reinforcements were arriving, yet it was quite clear that these additional troops were nothing against the larger Russian columns. Davout claimed his corps numbered eighteen hundred men and concluded he could not hold in the current state of affairs. As well, Davout took it upon himself to inform Poniatowski of recent events.³³

Once again the situation took a dramatic change for the worse in the French camp. As the army withdrew from the lower Vistula, Murat

31. F. Loraine Petre, *Napoleon and the Archduke Charles* (London: Greenhill Books, 1991), 74–84. Petre thoroughly explores the problems of Berthier's handling of the army in 1809 and Davout's anger. "The picture of Berthier . . . hurrying hither and thither himself, marching and countermarching his troops till they were weary and utterly confused, is enough to damn for ever his claims to be a general" (83).

32. Davout to Duroc, 12 January 1813, Davout, *Correspondance*, #1159, 3:450–51.

33. Davout to Napoleon, 13 January 1813, and Davout to Poniatowski, 14 January 1813, *ibid.*, #1160, 3:452–53, #1167, 460–63.

summoned Eugène to his headquarters, now at Posen. Eugène described what happened next in a letter to his wife: "Shortly after I arrived, I was informed that he [Murat] was abandoning the army. . . . He has given me the command of the army, but I did not want to receive it from him. He persisted and I took command then provisionally."³⁴ Murat's decision to leave the army remains controversial. It is clear that he was incapable of duties in these desperate days, yet to abandon one's command in the midst of catastrophe is at the least unprofessional, willfully irresponsible, and perhaps even treasonous. Murat dubiously claimed that he was ill and could not remain at the head of the army. He left Posen on 18 January 1813 and declared that he was returning to Naples. Eugène, however, learned that after leaving Poland, Murat had recovered sufficiently to make an excursion to visit his brother-in-law Jérôme Bonaparte, the King of Westphalia. "For a sick man," Eugène caustically remarked in another missive to Auguste, "he is taking a poor route to Naples. You must recognize that the Emperor is badly served by his immediate family."³⁵

Eugène also wrote to Napoleon and informed him of Murat's resignation. He advised the Emperor that he had temporarily accepted command until someone else could be appointed.³⁶ Describing the state of affairs at headquarters, Eugène declared with some dismay: "There is no marshal of the empire here, and I find myself the sole lieutenant of your majesty."³⁷ The following day, Eugène took stock of the situation and found himself at a loss. "At the present this devil of a king of Naples has left me this great mess," he confided to his wife in a frustrated and angry letter. Eugène was unsure if he was equal to the task. Dispirited, he wrote to Auguste two days later, "I am holding up well, but I find the burden of commander in chief heavy. I have found in all these affairs a great disorder. . . . It cannot be said that it is by an ambition for glory that I have accepted [to be] commander in chief, but it is by devotion to the Emperor."³⁸

Eugène informed Napoleon of the critical condition in which Murat had left the army. He found unanswered correspondence from Schwarzenberg, Poniatowski, and Reynier, and learned that these generals had received no instructions for some time. Eugène vigorously took command, and appointed Dumas as his chief of staff, filling the vacuum of leadership caused by Murat's paralysis and Berthier's illness. His provisional appointment was made permanent by Napoleon on 22 January. The Emperor,

34. Eugène to Auguste, 17 January 1813, Beauharnais, *Mémoires*, 8:133.

35. Eugène to Auguste, 20 January 1813, *ibid.*, 8:220.

36. Eugène to Napoleon, 17 January 1813, *ibid.*, 8:134–35.

37. *Ibid.* Berthier was, by this time, incapacitated by gout and other illness. General Dumas was appointed by Eugène to take over the responsibilities as chief of staff on 18 January.

38. Eugène to Auguste, 18 and 20 January 1813, *Ibid.*, 8:217, 219.

conceding his earlier mistake, wrote, "My son, take command of the *Grande Armée*. I am sorry I did not leave it to you at my departure."³⁹

Even before Napoleon's official appointment arrived, the other marshals and generals greeted Eugène's assumption of command with pleasure, if not relief. Macdonald said "it was unfortunate the Emperor did not give it [command] to him when he left the army." Saint-Cyr recalled that "Prince Eugène succeeded Murat and proved . . . the good qualities which he had been given, and his attachment to Napoleon."⁴⁰ Schwarzenberg told Eugène that he had his unquestioned confidence and loyalty.⁴¹ Congratulations likewise arrived from Prince Poniatowski, who assured Eugène that "the Poles remain loyal to the Emperor Napoleon." Davout, too, was quite pleased with Eugène's appointment. He not only congratulated Eugène, but went on to criticize his predecessor, stating that the army had initially been left in bad hands.⁴²

Both Davout and Poniatowski followed their letters with conflicting advice on strategy. Davout stressed the importance of reinforcing the central Vistula, where he and the remnants of I Corps remained. He strongly believed Eugène should concentrate the army along the left bank of the river. If Thorn fell, he argued, Prussia and Germany lay open to the Russians. Reinforcements under General Paul Grenier were at Berlin, Davout added, and these would be perfect for reinforcing the lower Vistula and Thorn.⁴³ Conversely, Poniatowski lobbied for strengthening the upper Vistula and Warsaw, which he believed would force the Russians to halt their advance through his native Poland.⁴⁴ Neither course, however, was feasible because Napoleon had sent Grenier's divisions to Marshal Pierre Augereau who was forming a new corps in Germany.⁴⁵ Eugène was furi-

39. Eugène to Napoleon, 18 January 1813, *ibid.*, 8:218; Napoleon to Eugène, 22 January 1813, Napoleon, *Correspondance*, #19474, 24:417.

40. Macdonald, *Souvenirs*, 193; Saint-Cyr, *Mémoires*, 2:3.

41. Letter from Schwarzenberg to Eugène, [date unreadable] January 1813, Beauharnais Archive, Firestone Library, Princeton University (hereafter BA), 19/31. Although the exact date is illegible, the letter was no doubt written around the same time as Poniatowski's letter, if not a day or two later, due to Schwarzenberg's position at Warsaw, south of Poniatowski's corps.

42. Poniatowski to Eugène, 21 January 1813, BA 19/3; Davout to Eugène, 18 January 1813, BA 8/4.

43. Davout to Eugène, 18 January 1813, BA 8/4.

44. He wrote Davout earlier, trying to gain his support as well. Poniatowski to Eugène, 21 January 1813, BA 19/3; Poniatowski to Davout, 17 January 1813, Poniatowski, *Korespondencya*, #762, 5:31–33.

45. Napoleon to General Clarke, 25 December 1812, Napoleon, *Correspondance*, #19398, 24:351, states that Grenier's divisions are to be retained by Augereau in Berlin; Napoleon to Clarke, 26 December 1812, #19401, 24:352–53, states Napoleon's intention of creating a *Corps d'Observation d'Elbe*, of which Augereau's corps would be part.

ous and expressed his dismay to Napoleon. Reflecting both Davout's and Poniatowski's advice, he told the Emperor that those troops would have allowed him to hold Thorn, strengthen communications with Schwarzenberg, and thereby permit him to improve the defense of the Vistula line.⁴⁶

The issue of reinforcements was a sore topic for Eugène and the leadership of the *Grande Armée*. After the army's arrival in Prussia and Poland, several garrison battalions had been dispatched to the seriously depleted corps, but they were too few to make a significant impact on the condition of the army.⁴⁷ Napoleon had promised reinforcements back in December, and claimed he "already [had] an army of 40,000 at Berlin and on the Oder."⁴⁸ By the first week of January, however, the "army of 40,000" had still not materialized. Even by mid-January, the only "substantial" reinforcements that had appeared on the Vistula were four to five thousand Bavarians under General Carl Phillip von Wrede, and twelve hundred Westphalians under General André Junot.⁴⁹ Symptomatic of the failure to provide forces and the terrible problems of leadership, Junot resigned his command within three weeks, claiming a "poor state of health."⁵⁰

The lack of reinforcements, the horrible condition of the army, and the difficulties of command perpetuated the strategy of surrendering land for time. Certainly Napoleon had approved of this after he was informed of the abandonment of Vilna, but he expected that Eugène could hold the Vistula, if not the Oder.⁵¹ Napoleon, though, was too far removed from the theater of war to understand the evolving situation in a timely manner. While conditions changed daily, he received letters from Poland approximately one week after they were sent.⁵² On 26 January, Napoleon believed Thorn was still under the control of Marshal Davout, but the marshal had withdrawn I Corps fully five days earlier, leaving only a small garrison.⁵³

46. Eugène to Napoleon, 21 January 1813, Eugène, *Mémoires*, 8:223.

47. Davout to Eugène, 29 December 1812, Davout, *Correspondance*, #1145, 3:433, reports the arrival of a battalion of the 127e *Ligne* from Danzig.

48. Napoleon to Murat, 19 December 1812, Napoleon, *Correspondance*, #19388, 24:341.

49. Davout to Berthier, 7 January 1813, and Davout to Napoleon, 13 January 1813, Davout, *Correspondance*, #1154 and #1160, 24:445, 451–53.

50. Eugène to Napoleon, 21 January 1813, Beauharnais, *Mémoires*, 8:222.

51. Napoleon to Eugène, Napoleon, *Correspondance*, #19480, 24:420–21, discusses the reorganization of various units between the Elbe and Oder, therefore implying that a position east of the Oder (meaning Vistula) was to be defended.

52. Napoleon to Eugène, 24 January 1813, *ibid.*, 24:437: "My son, I have received your letter of 17 January"; Napoleon to Eugène, 26 January 1813, *ibid.*, #19517, 24:455: "My son, I received your letter of the 20th."

53. Napoleon to Eugène, 26 January 1813, *ibid.*, #19518, 24:456; Eugène to Napoleon, 21 January 1813, Eugène, *Mémoires*, 8:222–23. In Napoleon's letter to Eugène, he mentions his orders to establish magazines at Kustrin, a fortress to the

Although Napoleon remained ill informed concerning events in Poland, on 26 January he sent the long-awaited news of reinforcements. Napoleon ordered forty thousand infantry and six thousand cavalry, including Grenier's divisions, now constituted as XI Corps, to the city of Posen. This pleasant surprise was followed with a second encouraging letter which installed Marshal Ney, who had just recovered his health, as commander of the new corps.⁵⁴ Unfortunately, it is likely that these dispatches arrived after Eugène had received Napoleon's letter of 23 January, which ordered Marshal Davout to Magdeburg.⁵⁵ The loss of Davout was a great blow to Eugène. Davout had formed the center, both literally and figuratively, of the army. He was the glue that maintained the integrity of the Vistula line, as well as the confidence of Eugène and Poniatowski. Without Davout, Eugène had no marshals under him, as Ney and the new XI Corps had yet to arrive.⁵⁶ Davout's absence did much to reduce Eugène's ability to maintain order and control during the retreat.

To add to Eugène's difficulties, Poniatowski and Schwarzenberg had come to verbal blows over the conduct of the withdrawal from Poland. Tensions between the two generals had been building since Murat's decision to abandon eastern Poland. Poniatowski complained bitterly to Berthier as early as the first week of January that Schwarzenberg was assuming too rapid a pace of withdrawal, leaving his Polish corps to cover their hasty retreat.⁵⁷ He also wrote to Napoleon, begging the Emperor not to abandon Poland. "The spirit of the Polish Nation, and throughout the army is all

west of Thorn. He clearly foresaw this as a second line of defense, still believing Davout remained at Thorn. Davout, however, was withdrawing to Kustrin on 21 January.

54. Napoleon to Eugène, two letters dated 26 January 1813, Napoleon, *Correspondance*, #19518 and #19519, 24:456–57.

55. Napoleon to Eugène, 23 January 1813, *ibid.*, #19491, 24:431.

56. XI Corps never arrived at Posen. By the time it was ready for operations in February, Eugène had ordered the army behind the Oder. XI Corps remained at Berlin for some time, and did not actively participate in the fighting until Eugène reached the Elbe in March. By that time Marshal Ney had been removed from command of XI Corps and given the newly formed III Corps, which was with Napoleon and the *Armée du Main*. Subsequently, Marshal Macdonald was appointed to take over XI Corps. F. Loraine Petre, *Napoleon's Last Campaign in Germany, 1813* (1912; reprint, New York: Hippocrene Books, 1974), 55. Marshal Bessières at Berlin was recalled to Paris on 24 January, and Marshals Saint-Cyr and Berthier were recalled on 29 January; Napoleon to Eugène, 24 and 29 January 1813, #19499 and #19524, 24:437, 467–68, Napoleon, *Correspondance*.

57. Poniatowski to Berthier, 3 January 1813, and 4 January 1813, and Poniatowski to Davout, 4 January 1813, Poniatowski, *Korespondencya*, #735 and #736, 5:5–8, 9–11. Schwarzenberg commanded the right wing of the *Grande Armée*, which included the Austrian Auxiliary Corps (Schwarzenberg), V Polish Corps (Poniatowski), and VII Saxon Corps (Reynier).

the same,” Poniatowski wrote, “they see in Your Majesty, their Lord, their Protector.”⁵⁸

When Eugène assumed command, Poniatowski had hoped the Vistula line and Warsaw would be maintained. Yet, Schwarzenberg continued to withdraw both his corps and General Reynier’s VII Saxon Corps. Writing Eugène on this matter, Schwarzenberg said that he had allowed detachments of the Polish corps to remain in positions in eastern Poland. Schwarzenberg commented, “the Poles do not take into consideration the Russian advance and their poor position by trying to defend all of Poland.” He justified his actions by claiming that a determined Russian advance against his left flank along the Vistula would force him to move to Warsaw and perhaps abandon the city and the east bank of the river altogether. The abandonment of Poland led Poniatowski to clash with the Austrian general. The Polish Prince patriotically attacked Schwarzenberg, stating that he was too concerned with the superiority of opposing forces and lacked the ability to realize that this was “a glorious cause and glorious to serve.” He went on to declare that his troops would no longer obey any withdrawal order from Schwarzenberg.⁵⁹

Schwarzenberg’s leadership of the right wing of the *Grande Armée* was legitimately suspect. He had plausibly written to Eugène earlier that his corps of twelve battalions was exhausted. Schwarzenberg believed that these troops were in no condition to continue to campaign in February, “without exposing them to inevitable destruction.” More revealing was another letter explaining his withdrawal from Warsaw: “I know *the intention of my Sovereign* [Francis I], who scrupulously observes these engagements” to conserve the Austrian corps and save it from total ruin. Such an admission would not have gone unnoticed by Eugène, who realized that Schwarzenberg was never going to commit his Austrian troops, or any under his command, to a battle, no matter the circumstances. Only Poniatowski was eager to engage the Russians, but he could not conduct such an operation without the support of either Schwarzenberg or Reynier, and neither was willing.⁶⁰

58. Poniatowski to Napoleon, [no day] January 1813, *ibid.*, #732, 5:1–2.

59. Schwarzenberg to Eugène, [no day] January 1813, and Schwarzenberg to Eugène, 22 January 1813, BA 19/31; Poniatowski to Eugène, 28 January 1813, BA 19/3. Schwarzenberg’s rank was Feldmarschall, which was equivalent to a French marshal. He was not, however, considered one of Napoleon’s marshals.

60. Schwarzenberg to Eugène, two letters with unspecified day, January 1813, BA 19/31. It is unfortunate that the Beauharnais Archive does not contain any correspondence between Reynier and Eugène for this time period. For that matter, no published correspondence by Reynier exists. It is therefore impossible to present Reynier in any detail during this crucial time. Reynier’s Saxon Corps was deployed to Poniatowski’s left, and Schwarzenberg to his right flank. When Schwarzenberg withdrew, Reynier

Schwarzenberg's operations in southern Poland clearly reflected his own agenda. He was an Austrian commanding a part of the *Grande Armée*, and his ultimate loyalty was not to Napoleon, but his own Emperor, Francis I. He did not feel bound to follow Eugène's orders as commander in chief if they contradicted the interests of his sovereign. This issue was beyond Eugène's province and could only be resolved by Napoleon and Francis. The contradictions inherent in Schwarzenberg's position manifested themselves when he, like Yorck, signed a secret armistice with the Russians on 30 January 1815. Napoleon, Eugène, Poniatowski, and Reynier were unaware of the agreement and would remain so for the duration of the withdrawal. The convention stipulated that Schwarzenberg withdraw from the Grand Duchy of Warsaw to Austria. Schwarzenberg thereafter continued to act as if he was still under Eugène's command. Francis I, however, had given Schwarzenberg permission to act in Austria's best interests. From this moment, any and all advice or information relayed to Eugène by Schwarzenberg was clearly meant to mislead the French general and confound the withdrawal.⁶¹ His movement forced Reynier and Poniatowski to follow, despite protestations, although they halted in Silesia.

Schwarzenberg's retrograde of the right wing beyond the Vistula compounded the strategic threat to the rest of the army. By the time Warsaw was abandoned in February, the Vistula line was already compromised. For his part, however, Schwarzenberg attempted to convince Eugène to continue the main army's retreat. He contended to Eugène that only by falling back and conserving troops could the position in Germany be saved. To confront the Russians without concentrated forces would be futile, he argued.⁶²

Whether Eugène was aware of Schwarzenberg's ulterior motives is unknown, but Poniatowski constantly informed him of events in southern Poland. It is most likely that a letter from Poniatowski arrived at Eugène's headquarters a day before he received Schwarzenberg's dispatch advising prudence. Poniatowski warned Eugène of possible collusion between the Austrians and Prussians, as well as Schwarzenberg's intention to change

followed suit. Poniatowski was forced to do the same or find himself without support on either flank.

61. General Sir Robert Wilson, *Private Diary of Travels, Personal Services and Public Events: During the Mission Employed with the European Armies in the Campaigns of 1812, 1813, 1814* (London: J. Murray, 1861), 270; cf. Poniatowski, *Korespondencya*, 5:57 n; cf. Gunther Rothenberg, *Napoleon's Great Adversary: The Archduke Charles and the Austrian Army, 1792–1814* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1995), 226. Rothenberg characterizes Austria's stance as an "armed neutrality" after the signing of the armistice.

62. Letter from Schwarzenberg to Eugène, 6 February 1813, BA 19/31.

the direction of the retreat toward Cracow.⁶³ Although Prussia was still technically an ally, as was Austria, the news of a withdrawal upon Cracow was no doubt unsettling. A movement of the right wing toward Austria would leave the right flank of the *Grande Armée* wide open, and allow for a Russian advance into Silesia and Saxony.

To further strengthen his suppositions, Poniatowski informed Eugène that Schwarzenberg was soon to be replaced by another Austrian general, Johann Frimont.⁶⁴ Some days later Schwarzenberg confirmed Poniatowski's suspicions and reported that he was to be replaced by Frimont and that he had been ordered back to Vienna by his Emperor. For his part, Frimont did not acknowledge his receipt of command to Eugène until almost a week later. "By order of His Majesty, The Emperor of Austria, Prince Schwarzenberg has left on the tenth for Vienna," Frimont wrote, "and I have been provisionally given command of the Austrian Auxiliary Corps." He then told Eugène that Warsaw had been evacuated, except for some Polish troops who remained to defend the city. The main Russian army, he said, had managed to cross the central Vistula and move on Posen. Consequently, he claimed that he had been forced to withdraw into Silesia.⁶⁵

The curious actions by the Austrian-led right wing were soon accompanied by what must have been an unwelcome report on the state of the Prussian army. On 10 February, Eugène sent *Chef d'escadron*, Van Zyulen Van Nyevelt, attaché to the Chief of Staff, to obtain horses from the headquarters of Prussian General von Bülow at Stettin on the Oder. Van Zyulen's observations at Stettin were quite troubling, as he reported the presence of Cossacks who were supposedly there to negotiate an exchange of prisoners. The transaction, however, appeared suspicious because it involved the return of four hundred Russian soldiers but no officers. More disturbing than the presence of Cossacks and the questionable prisoner exchange was Bülow's response to Eugène's request for mounts. Bülow told Van Zyulen that he "was not under the orders of His Imperial Highness, The Prince Viceroy." Further, Bülow cryptically informed Van Zyulen that he had been ordered by his king, Frederick William III, to withdraw to Colberg. Lastly, Van Zyulen was told that General Yorck's corps was operating with the Russians and had been given charge of the siege of Danzig.⁶⁶

It was quite clear to Van Zyulen that the Prussians could not be trusted. He ominously told Eugène that "all along the line I have travelled,

63. Letter from Poniatowski to Eugène, 5 February 1813, BA 19/3.

64. Ibid.

65. Schwarzenberg to Eugène, 9 February 1813, and Frimont to Eugène, 14 February 1813, BA 19/31.

66. Van Zyulen Van Nyevelt to Eugène titled, "Note," 12 February 1813, BA 47/11.

the mood is strongly pronounced against us.”⁶⁷ Bülow’s rationale for refusing to send horses, coupled with the news that Stettin was to be abandoned before the Russians arrived, meant only one thing—the Prussian army and the king had deserted the alliance. By then the questionable loyalty of Prussia was obvious to Eugène. On 15 February, Eugène wrote Napoleon concerning Bülow, Yorck, and Frederick William III. He concluded that the movements of the Russians were part of a larger scheme to convince the Prussian king to declare himself against the French Emperor.⁶⁸

The Prussian *volte face* would take some time in coming. As early as 28 January, General Sir Robert Wilson, British military observer with the Russian army, noted in his diary that he expected the King of Prussia to defect shortly. No more than two weeks later, Wilson wrote that Frederick William III promised to defect in early spring.⁶⁹ The Prussian king’s reluctance to change sides likely stems from the fact that the remnants of the *Grande Armée* and their reinforcements still occupied a great deal of Brandenburg, including Berlin. The king would not declare for the Russians until the French military presence in Prussia abated.

King Frederick William III, or at the least his generals, accordingly sought to reduce Eugène’s ability to defend the Oder. Bülow’s withdrawal from Stettin, a strategic fortress on the Oder, made the French position in Prussia less tenable. It also confirmed suspicions in the French camp regarding the Prussian army. Fully aware of the danger he faced, Eugène wrote his wife that his army was in the process of a gradual withdrawal to the Oder, but stated that if the Prussians decided to defect he would have to make a rapid retreat to the Elbe.⁷⁰

Prussian duplicity, Schwarzenberg’s replacement, and the general deterioration of the strategic situation took its toll on Eugène. “You see,” Eugène told his wife, “. . . that my position is not splendid, likewise, I have not concealed from myself the fact that all of this is painful and difficult. You can be sure that I have never lost courage and that I will always do my duty.”⁷¹ Despite his wish to make a stand, Eugène was unable to hold at the Oder and felt compelled to continue his retreat toward the Elbe. The anti-French movement among the Prussian army and population was a major factor in the retreat, as well as the persistent raids by Russian cavalry and Cossacks across the thinly held Oder line. One such raid reached Berlin at the end of February.⁷²

67. *Ibid.*

68. Beauharnais, *Mémoires*, 8:358–60, Eugène to Napoleon, 15 February 1813.

69. Wilson, *Private Diary*, 270, 281.

70. Eugène to Auguste, 17 February 1813, Beauharnais, *Mémoires*, 8:362–63.

71. *Ibid.*, 8:363.

72. Eugène to Auguste, 24 February 1813, *ibid.*, 8:373.

At last, the cautious King of Prussia signed a treaty with the Russians on 28 February 1813.⁷³ Eugène was not aware of this reversal until some weeks later. It is worth noting that he helped matters along by making a rapid withdrawal to the Elbe during the first weeks of March, which meant that Frederick William III need fear no longer for his capital. Napoleon, perhaps unjustly, berated Eugène for abandoning Berlin without a fight, and not concentrating his forces east of the city to slow the Russian advance.⁷⁴ Eugène could have tried to effect some sort of concentration before Berlin, but by this time the mood of the army and the *mentalité* of its leaders were clearly not up to a confrontation with the Russians, despite the fact that their opponents were not in much better shape.

The *Grande Armée* had been in retreat since October 1812. In December it was abandoned by Napoleon and, shortly thereafter, by some of its marshals and generals. The leadership seemed to exhaust itself in coping with the severity of their defeat. Murat and Berthier, the two who were supposed to breathe some life back into the army, failed miserably. Perhaps one cannot blame them, for they too suffered both physically and mentally in the retreat. Never had French arms experienced such a cataclysmic reverse, certainly not during the reign of Napoleon.

The initial choice of Murat as commander of the *Grande Armée* was clearly made to maintain, if not build, the morale of the army. Yet it had the opposite effect on the marshals and generals. Napoleon knew that his lieutenants were difficult to handle, but under his strong and decisive leadership they performed marvels. Murat was not the leader to galvanize a demoralized army, and in this instance he certainly proved incapable of restoring confidence and moral strength to the marshals and generals, who knew Murat well as a solid cavalry commander, but nothing more. Only Murat's relations with Napoleon and his title of king were useful. The generals, Napoleon believed, would obey his brother-in-law, and the ranking officer in the army. Despite some minor complaints, such as those of Davout, Murat might have succeeded in his command. In such a desperate time, reassurance and cooperation were vital and might have saved the army. But Murat fell completely short of restoring the morale by failing to maintain communications, provide constant direction, and serve as an example. Murat's failure to grasp command was indicative of a more general problem that plagued the army: not only the soldiers suffered terrible demoralization, but the marshals and generals as well. They saw in the Russian debacle the end of their boundless and Alexandrian conquests.

73. The treaty was known as the Convention of Kalisch. Petre states that Frederick William III wished to keep the convention secret until Berlin was captured by the Russians and out of French hands. Petre, *Campaign in Germany*, 37.

74. Napoleon to Eugène, two letters without day, March 1813, Napoleon, *Correspondance*, #19688 and #19721, vol. 25.

Eugène's assumption of command briefly breathed a bit of life back into the army leadership—not because the prince possessed the ability to revitalize it, but simply because he was not Murat. Eugène provided competent and capable leadership from the moment he took command until the time he reached the Elbe, but he could not solve the army's vast problems. It is unclear that Napoleon could have done much better had he remained with the army. He, however, could certainly have repaired and revitalized the morale of the marshals and generals. This begs the question—should Napoleon have abandoned the army at Smorgoni?

If the greatest problem experienced by the army in Poland was demoralization and poor leadership, then Napoleon's presence could have been decisive. One must then ask, though, if Napoleon could have rebuilt the French army, as he did, by remaining in Poland. The answer to this is, probably not. The defeat in Russia therefore forced Napoleon into a situation that had no perfect solution. He believed that by returning to France, he could keep Prussia and Austria in line. This was a false assumption. Frederick William III would not proclaim his hostility to Napoleon until the liberation of Berlin. Even if Eugène had defended Berlin, or committed himself to a battle before the city, he would most likely have lost. Berlin would have fallen and Prussia defected regardless. Francis I of Austria also opened negotiations with the Russians and allowed Schwarzenberg to sign the secret armistice in January 1813. The only reason Austria did not declare against Napoleon was that its army was not ready to take the field.⁷⁵

In the end, one can be sure only that Napoleon's presence with the army would have maintained, if not restored, the morale of the army, and more importantly that of the marshals and generals. How many of his lieutenants would have petitioned to be relieved of command if the Emperor remained? In his absence, only a few ultimately stayed with their troops, trying to restore some order to the chaos. They developed hostility toward Murat and Berthier for their inability to lead when leadership was so desperately needed. The dynamics of defeat were such that in the absence of centralized leadership, what emerged was a cooperative effort. What maintained the army after the departure of Napoleon and throughout was the determination of a handful of men, notably Davout, Eugène, and Poniatowski, to work together, rely on and find comfort from each other, and know that they were not alone, when it seemed as if the world had abandoned them.

75. Rothenberg, *Napoleon's Great Adversary*, 227–29.