

# Decisive Battle and the Ghost of Napoleon

by Williamson Murray

*Through history, 'decisive' victory has more often than not proved elusive; yet, this has not stopped the quest.*

The time is 1300 on a cold 5th of December 1805. The battle has already begun. To the east, massive columns of Austrian and Russian troops can be seen pressing toward the forces commanded by Marshal Davout. A worried Marshal Soult hurries to the side of the Emperor and suggests that his corps be unleashed on the allied center. Napoleon queries the marshal as to how long it will take him to move his corps to take the heights opposite. "Twenty minutes," the marshal replies. "Then we can wait another 15," the Emperor comments. The time passes like an eternity, but the French wait. Then the Emperor gives the signal, and Soult's corps rolls forward to smash the allied forces on the Pratzen heights and entirely envelop the allied left wing. Only a portion of the allied right wing managed to escape the field of Austerlitz. The next day, the Austrian emperor himself sued for an armistice, while a broken Russian army pulled back to Russia to lick its wounds.

Less than a year later, Napoleon's Grand Army won the double battle of Jena/Auerstadt. In a single day, the bulk of the Grand Army wrecked the advance guard of the Prussian army, while one corps of the French Army, commanded by Marshal Davout, sufficed to destroy the Prussian main body. The defeat of the Prussian army on the field of Jena/Auerstadt was immediately followed by a ruthless pursuit that saw French cavalry in Berlin in a matter of days. Within 2 weeks, Marshal Murat, commanding the lead cavalry squadrons, reported to the Emperor that the pursuit had ended since there were no enemy left. The

French victory had destroyed the Prussian state, created so laboriously by Frederick the Great and his ancestors, in a matter of weeks. As a result of these two victories, France bestrode the continent like a colossus.

This was indeed as decisive a set of victories as any commander has won in the 2,500 years of military history of the Western world. And they have served as a beacon for military commanders seeking to emulate the triumphs of the great Napoleon. But they have also served to mislead generations of military commanders, because, in fact, decisive victory, even in the time of Napoleon, soon proved to be a chimera. As Clausewitz noted in his classic, *On War*, the other nations of Europe, confronted with interminable French rule, addressed the French in their own terms: They called on their own nations to fight the French. With far greater resources of manpower and national will at their disposal, the armies of the European powers were able to remain in the field despite the savage defeats the French administered to them and eventually to wear the French down to defeat.

In the 1813 campaign, Napoleon won a series of strikingly successful battles. Lützen, Bautzen, and Dresden all were Napoleonic victories on a tactical and operational scale with Austerlitz and Jena/Auerstadt. In fact, they may have been even more impressive because the forces available to execute the Emperor's designs were greatly inferior to those of 1805-06. But by 1813, war had evolved into a contest between nations in arms; there was no longer any such thing as "decisive" victory. The campaign culminated in the massive battle of Leipzig, and all of

Napoleon's skills could not overturn the great superiority of the allied armies in manpower and resources. The Emperor was thus forced to retreat back to France. Ironically, he became the first victim of his own legend. Over the course of the 5 months after Leipzig, the Emperor again and again sought another Austerlitz, while turning down a series of reasonable terms offered by the allies, especially the great Austrian statesman, Prince Metternich, to make peace. Half a loaf was simply not acceptable to a man who believed that his extraordinary talents would allow him to replicate his earlier successes. But the political conditions that had rendered Austerlitz decisive no longer pertained, and Napoleon was soon off to St. Helena and an early death.

If anything, the Napoleonic legend grew in the aftermath of his death. In the American Civil War, Robert E. Lee pursued decisive victory on innumerable occasions. It led to impressive victories, the cost of which the Confederacy could not afford. And that pursuit led Lee to take the immense risk of invading the North and risking his entire army in search of a decisive victory that would break Northern will and win the Confederacy the recognition of the European powers. Always a risk taker, Lee split his army on enemy soil and twice flirted with catastrophe. At Antietam, he barely managed to reunite his widely dispersed forces before the battle. Even then, it took the extraordinarily poor generalship of George McClellan to snatch a draw for the Union out of the jaws of victory. Gettysburg replicated the mistakes of Antietam, except this time the pursuit of decisive victory

led to Pickett's charge and terrible defeat. Had Meade been a more aggressive commander on the order of U.S. Grant, that defeat would have turned into a Southern catastrophe. For almost another 2 years, Lee and other Confederate commanders like Hood would seek decisive victory as Union armies hammered the South down to defeat.

The cost of the pursuit of decisive victory in the 20th century has been etched in the dark memorials across Europe. The Schlieffen Plan sought decisive victory in one massive campaign designed to crush France and its army in a single month. Its defeat, however, ensured a stalemate—a stalemate in which the odds were stacked against Imperial Germany, because the violation of neutral Belgium ensured that the British would enter the war on the side of the French and the Russians. Thus, the war would proceed over 4 terrible killing years. However, the ghost of Napoleon never left the minds of the commanders. While intractable tactical problems remained unsolved, Douglas Haig launched the disastrous assaults on the Somme in 1916 and at Paschendaele in 1917 in pursuit of Napoleonic decisive victory. Ludendorff, the following year, launched a series of massive blows that sought decisive victory before the Americans could arrive, but which in the end inflicted such heavy casualties on German troops that his army collapsed before the winter of 1918 arrived.

In the largest sense, World War I combined the effects of the French Revolution with those of the Industrial Revolution. The modern state could support the conduct of military operations with unimagined amounts of manpower as well as technologically advanced weapons of war. Ironically, where the fundamental lesson of World War I should have been that decisive battle was no longer in the cards, given the political and technological-industrial framework with-

in which war now occurred, the exact opposite happened. Instead, the leading theorists of war pushed for the use of technology as a means to reintroduce decisive battle back into warfare. Douhet and the thinkers at the Air Corps Tactical School in Montgomery, AL, evolved complex airpower theories that “proved” that modern technology allowed the development of long-range bomber fleets and destroyed the enemy's will to fight, almost before war had begun. But the reality of war, as Clause-



**Napoleon not only originated the modern idea of decisive battle, he also became the first victim of the myth he created.**

witz suggested, has a nasty habit of turning on those who dismiss the past. In World War II, the advocates of strategic bombing discovered that their approach to war involved attrition of the “best and the brightest” on a scale that fully equaled the worst of what happened in World War I—except that attrition now came in terms of aircrew.

The situation with regard to the theorists of land war was similar. J.F.C. Fuller and Basil Liddell Hart in Britain both pushed for the tank as the solution to the stalemate of

the trenches and the means to reintroduce decisive victory into the conduct of land war. The Germans, heavily influenced by the writing of both men, followed a more careful path in innovation, one that was closely tied to the lessons of the past war. The result was the real breakthrough of combined arms tactics. That innovation in turn led to the great victories of 1940 and 1941, but here the Germans were misled. Their reading of the next war in the interwar period had suggested that the next conflict would be a wearing, drawn-out struggle, similar to the last conflict. And to the extent they could, they prepared for such a struggle through to 1940. But their incredible victories in 1940—Guderian termed the French campaign “almost a miracle”—led them to make a series of egregious errors in 1941: They invaded the Soviet Union; they declared war on the United States; and they failed to mobilize the European economy (especially the areas they conquered) for a prolonged struggle.

To many, in the current debate over the direction of U.S. defense policy, the Gulf War appeared to promise the return of “decisive victory.” Much of the advocacy within the Pentagon of a revolution in military affairs has articulated a vision of short decisive victories in which there are few U.S. casualties, and the enemy lies so prostrate and defeated that he has no choice but to accept peace on our terms. In fact, the Gulf War promised no such thing. Despite an incredibly inept opponent on all the levels of war, the victory of 1991—no matter how impressive in military terms—failed to remove the dictator, the threat Iraq posed to the Gulf and the world's oil supply, or Iraq's ability to manufacture weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, U.S. military strategy in the war aimed at ensuring that U.S. forces would not move deep

into Iraq's populated zones despite the fact that was the one glaring military lesson of this century—to make the results permanent, occupy the ground.

History appears to have little influence on the thinking of the American military, and so we may be sowing the seeds for developing military and technological capabilities that seem to promise decisive victory against generic opponents. In the real world, the U.S. military is going to come up against opponents who have prepared for war in a serious fashion

and whose size and political complexities are going to present intractable problems. For example, how many aim points would it take to disable India's or China's will to resist, ignoring the fact that the Indians and Chinese possess nuclear weapons? In the end, the United States is going to have to fight real countries, with real military organizations, with real abilities to mobilize popular support. And in the end, no matter how successful the American military appears to have been on the field of battle, it will have to convince America's opponents

they are beaten and that resistance is futile. Russia's experience in Chechnya and our own in Somalia suggest that even against relatively primitive countries, "decisive" battles will not turn out to be all that decisive when the dust settles.



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## Thinking About Cities and War

by Williamson Murray

*Cities will be important in future warfare, but not necessarily for the reasons Marines believe . . .*

The importance of cities to the military operations in which the United States will commit its forces in the future has been the subject of considerable debate over the past decade. A number of senior Army leaders have stated explicitly that the U.S. Army does not "do" cities. The Air Force suggests that it only does cities from an altitude above 15,000 feet. The Navy, likewise, will only involve itself in cities from a distance—well offshore with cruise missiles or like the Air Force from above 15,000 feet with carrier aircraft. Only the Marines have indicated they will do cities, but largely because, they argue, the urbanized portions of the globe are expanding as the populations of even Third World countries flock to urban areas. There are, thus, considerable differences in how the Services view the problem of cities in their operational concepts. Not surprisingly this has considerable implications for how they will, or will not, cooperate in the joint arena, especially if the United States finds itself involved in a major conflict in which cities are an important factor.

History suggests a great deal about the importance of cities, re-

gardless of whether or not increasing percentages of the world's population move to urban areas. The reality is that, since the 17th century, armies have focused on the capture of cities in their military campaigns—not on the mere capture and occupation of terrain. This is because cities represent not only the state's economic and financial heart, but the psychological heart of national resistance as well. Thus, in the 19th century, Napoleon focused his military operations on the destruction of enemy armies as a means to move against enemy capitals. The destruction of the enemy's army served as a means to open the way for the French armies to seize the enemy's main cities. In 1805, the goal of the Ulm campaign was Vienna; in 1806 the aim was Berlin. Thus, the brilliant victories of Ulm and Jena/Auerstadt enabled French forces to seize the Austrian and Prussian capitals. Similarly, Napoleon's campaign of 1812 targeted Moscow in the hope that the seizure of the Russian capital would break Russian resistance. It did not, as Tolstoy's brilliant novel *War and Peace* underlines, but, as with the capture of Madrid, the con-

tinued resistance of the Russians and Spanish reflected the primitiveness of their societies as well as xenophobic nationalism.

In the case of 1812, the failure of Moscow's fall to end Russian resistance did not end the centrality of cities to military operations. The vast battles of 1813 centered on cities like Berlin, Dresden, and Leipzig because the occupation of those cities possessed psychological as well as logistical importance. (Dresden was the capital of Saxony, while Berlin was the capital of Prussia.) Allied offensives aimed at the major cities of central Germany forced the French to fight a series of battles that eventually wore them to the breaking point. Similarly, the campaigns of 1814 revolved around allied efforts to isolate and then to capture Paris. In the end, the fall of the French capital spelled the end of Napoleon's hold on power and forced his abdication and eventual exile to Elba.

The other major wars of the 19th century also revolved around major cities. During the American Civil War, Union operations in the east targeted Richmond from the beginning of the conflict in 1861 through