

Austerlitz

Barely a decade before, he had been a young officer in the army of the French Republic. A victory over the British propelled him into notoriety. In a short period of time, Napoleon Bonaparte rose to become a general, then First Consul of the Republic, and finally Emperor Napoleon I. The “little Corsican” had led numerous wars against the powers of Europe, spreading his version of the Revolution throughout the continent. This self-proclaimed Emperor had long been seen as a threat, but now it was believed that an all-out effort was needed to put him back in his place. The Emperors of Austria and Russia agreed to join their forces in a push to throw Napoleon out of the lands he had conquered and restore the power that he had taken from them. The Corsican was ready to meet the challenge and massed his forces for an attack of his own. When the dust settled, the end of the year 1805 saw a sensational victory by the French forces which ended the Alliance against him (at least for the time being), virtually dissolved the thousand-year-old Holy Roman Empire, and confirmed Bonaparte as master of Europe. The Battle of Austerlitz has been seen by historians as Napoleon’s finest hour and his greatest victory, and his enemies saw this as their most devastating loss, which took years from which to recover. Austerlitz also is a good example of nineteenth-century wartime reporting, as the reader shall see.

The year before the battle of Austerlitz first saw the coronation of Napoleon Bonaparte as Emperor Napoleon I of the French Republic. Assuming this title (and being acclaimed as such by the people due to the peace which he had brought France), he subtly declared his desire to extend his rule to new areas. The new monarch began his moves against his hated allies the British on their home turf, viz. the high seas. October 1805 saw the British navy decimate the Franco-Spanish navy of Cape Trafalgar, confirming the United Kingdom as queen of the seas and scrapping any idea that Napoleon may have had about invading Britain. At the same time, France’s ground forces were having considerably more success against their enemies on the mainland. Around the time of Trafalgar, a large Austrian force had surrendered to Napoleon at the battle of Ulm in the German duchy of Bavaria. The Austrians had joined Russia and Britain’s Third Coalition somewhat hesitantly, and only did so when Napoleon took a second crown, that of his

Kingdom of Italy.

The Kingdom of Prussia was also being pressured to join the coalition, but had decided to bide its time. French military movements through Prussian territory, however, induced Prussia to allow Russian troops to march across its land to meet Bonaparte's forces. By November, Prussia had agreed to join the coalition against the French. Napoleon then moved toward the Austrian capital of Vienna but was met on the way by Tsar Alexander's Russian force near the village of Austerlitz in the Austrian province of Moravia, where one of the great battles of history was fought and where Napoleon saw his greatest triumph.

As a ruse, Napoleon had made it appear that his forces were falling back upon learning of the Russian movement into Austria and the Prussian moves toward the Coalition. The Russians knew this was a trick, but decided to send a full force against France anyway. Napoleon had only recently heard the news of the failure at Trafalgar, so he felt that a good victory was needed to offset the failure at sea. His falling back made the Tsar confident, and the Russian leader turned down Napoleon's request for a direct meeting between the two. Napoleon sent this message with the Tsar's representative: "If this is what you have to say to me, go and tell the Emperor Alexander that I had no notion of these expectations when I asked to see him; I would only have shown him my army, and referred to his equity for the conditions of a peace: if he will have it so, we must fight: I wash my hands of it." Napoleon then bragged to his men, "Let [the battle] end as God pleases; but by my faith, before eight-and-forty hours are over, I shall have given them a sound drubbing!" Meanwhile, The Russian force was confident in its own right and was only worried that the French force would escape during or after the coming battle.

Napoleon's top generals and marshals were with him in this battle. Marshall Lannes got the left wing, Marshall Soult the right, and Marshall Bernadotte (who would later become King of the Swedes) was given command of the center. Prince Murat was placed in charge of the French cavalry, while the Corsican General himself commanded twenty battalions in the reserve. In the dark morning hours of 1 December the emperor made a visit through the soldiers' bivouacs and was applauded with shouts of "Vive L'Empereur!" He went to bed late that night and woke up early on the foggy morning of

the 2nd. The fog cleared, however, as the sun rose, and the two armies prepared for the glory of battle.

The Allied forces (mainly Russians but some Austrians as well) numbered over 87,000 compared to the combined 73,000 of the French forces. The battle began almost as soon as the sun rose on 2 December - the first anniversary of Napoleon's coronation as Emperor of the French. He allowed the Russians to move first, but waited a short time before giving his commanders the order to respond. General St. Hilaire made moves toward the hills of Pratzen, which was held by a large number of the Russian left. This attack lured the Russians down from the hill. Soon, General Soult led some forces around the right side of the Russian force that fought St. Hilaire's men and took Pratzen; they then attacked the Russian left which had held the heights and surrounded them, taking the Russian left out of the battle.

The Russian right continued to fall back and reached the town of Austerlitz. This town was the headquarters of the Russian and Austrian Emperors, from where they looked upon their defeat. The victor in the battle was not in question after one in the afternoon, as the French continued to pound away at the remaining Coalition forces and continued to advance. Bernadotte and Napoleon's respective forces sealed the French victory that afternoon. By this time Allied troops were surrendering and giving up the fight. By the end of the day, France had taken over a hundred cannon and 43,000 prisoners. Up to forty thousand Coalition troops were now dead, including as many as a dozen or more generals. The French wounded were returned to their base at nearby Brunn, and their dead numbered less than ten thousand.

On the morning of 3 December, Prince John of Lichtenstein (one of Austrian Emperor Francis' commanders) arrived at Napoleon's headquarters seeking a meeting with Bonaparte on behalf of his master, which the victorious Corsican agreed to. This was not exactly generosity on Napoleon's part, since he knew that more Austrian troops as well as the Prussians were not terribly far away and might perhaps avenge themselves of Austerlitz if he lingered there if he decided to press on. Emperor Francis of Austria met with Emperor Napoleon of France the next day for two hours. Francis began by denouncing England on his and the Tsar's behalf, and stated that neither would assist Britain's war effort any longer, and then Napoleon and Francis agreed to peace. The

Habsburg was able to convince Napoleon to spare the lives of his Russian prisoners so long as the Tsar would promise to withdraw from Austrian and Prussian territory with haste.

The Austro-French armistice was signed on the 6th. The opening statement declared that it was “to exist till the conclusion of a definitive peace, or the rupture of the negotiations.” The first article established the French and Austrian lines, and also stipulated the areas of the Austrian Empire that France was authorized to occupy, including Austria proper and Austria’s Italian possessions. Article two gave the Russians one month to vacate Austria’s territory and to do so in routes that were given them by the French. In the third article France promised that it would not try to instigate a revolt in Hungary or Bohemia and also forbade any other foreign troops to enter Habsburg territory. The last clause called for a conference to be held for a final peace to be established between Austria and France.

Napoleon was overjoyed at his victory. As he looked back on it, he called it the “Sun of Austerlitz” and went on further calling it “of all the pitched fights I have won that of which I am the proudest... The most remarkable tactical battles are Austerlitz, Rivoli, and Dresden.” His victory at Austerlitz enabled Napoleon to solidify his ties with his German allies in Bavaria, Baden and Wurttemberg. Prussia left the coalition and allied with the French within two weeks of the battle. Austria signed a peace treaty with the French the day after Christmas (this will be dealt with later)

Word took awhile to get from central Europe to the British Isles, and when it did reach it took even more time to be confirmed and to sink in. On 23 December the London *Times* reported that the aftermath of the battle was up in the air, and while it was believed that the French won there was considerable doubt that is was a smashing victory. They question this due to the fact that in places such as Berlin, the outcome of the battle was still in doubt, while the “great victory” was being touted in French satellite states such as Holland, and even here it was said to be “questioned.” On Christmas day the *Times* continues to question what had happened due to lack of intelligence and French gloating:

“We augur favourably, from this silence on the part of the enemy. Had the intelligence from the *Grand Army* been satisfactory – had the Russians been overwhelmed, or any decisive advantage been obtained by the

French – we should have heard of it from either M. Robin or Admiral Kikkert, or their zeal and activity must have relaxed very much indeed.”

On 30 December, the British press accuses Napoleon of deception:

“for, great as may be the necessity of Buonaparte to blind and delude the French at this moment, it is no less his policy and his interest to deceive, and if possible debauch the simple and honest subjects of the Emperor of Austria. What more effectual mode could he adopt of doing this, than by representing his enemies as annihilated?”

The last day of 1805, however, saw the reality of the situation hit the British press: “The Emperor of Germany requested an armistice for his troops, which has been granted to him... Of eighty thousand Russian, forty thousand no longer exist.” Later in the paper, the editors go on to state that the armistice was “little better than a surrender at discretion of the Allied Army to the French.” The paper does call into question (and rightfully so, as we have seen) Napoleon’s magnanimity at allowing the Russians to leave with their weapons if the victory was so great. They do finally concede, however, that France won a great victory and obtained an armistice with the Austrians. The editorial ends by stating that virtually all the rulers of Europe hold their rule by the grace of Napoleon and that “we, who despise his power, are not to expect peace from his moderation...” and expect Napoleon to try once again to attack Britain.

The Treaty of Pressburg ended the Third Coalition against Napoleon and virtually set him up as master of Europe. The first clause of the treaty declared that a permanent peace between Austria and the French domains has been established. France’s conquests and incorporations of several territories are recognized, as is the incorporation of Venice into the client Kingdom of Italy, which is recognized along with its king, Napoleon, with the promise that Italy’s and France’s crowns will be separated when the time is right. For their assistance to France, Baden, Bavaria, and Wurttemberg are recognized as sovereign states (the latter two as kingdoms), awarded various territories from Austria, and Emperor Francis renounces all sovereignty or viceroy thereof over these states, separating them from the Holy Roman Empire. (This was the last nail in the coffin of that ancient empire.) The treaty ends with a guarantee of Austrian territory by France as well as reparations stipulations.

This was near the peak of Napoleon’s power. Some time after this, he did

conclude peace with Russia. He was master of Europe and attempted to strangle England with trade restrictions. This, however, would lead to his downfall as British goods were in demand by many of these lands, and Russia's violation of the continental system incited Napoleon to launch an invasion, which decimated the French army and set up the final downfall of the Corsican General. Austerlitz was Napoleon's shining moment, and it can not only shine light on what happened then, but as we are in war now this is also a good example of how foreign media can portray a war to its audience.

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