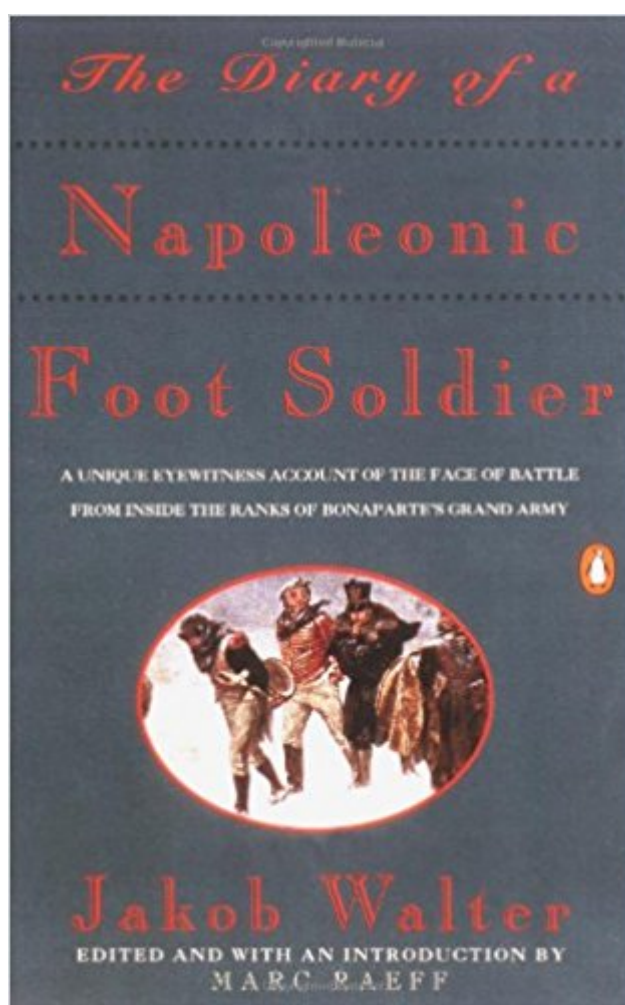


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The Diary Of A Napoleonic Foot Soldier: A Unique Eyewitness Account Of The Face Of Battle From Inside The Ranks Of Bonaparte's Grand Army



Synopsis

Eighteen-year-old German stonemason Jakob Walter served in the Grand Army of Napoleon between 1806 and 1813. His diary intimately records his trials: the long, grueling marches in Prussia and Poland, the disastrous Russian campaign, and the demoralizing defeat in a war few supported or understood. It is at once a compelling chronicle of a young soldier's loss of innocence and an eloquent and moving portrait of the profound effects of all wars on the men who fight them. Also included are letters home from the Russian front, previously unpublished in English, as well as period engravings and maps from the Russian/Soviet and East European collections of the New York Public Library. "Vivid and gruesome … but also a story of human fortitude. … It reminds us that the troops Napoleon drove so mercilessly were actually more victims than victors—a side of Napoleon that should not be forgotten." —Chicago Tribune

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Customer Reviews

This diary reads very fast, maybe not so much because it's a small book with large-ish text but more because it is written with surprising skill-- surprising considering the author was a Napoleonic "foot" soldier, a non-officer (i.e. a common man that most likely had little access to a "quality" education). Walter himself mentions that many of the people he meets on his journey to Moscow are without any schooling whatever, even the simplest of religious teachings, and that many children can not read or write. That realization obviously attests to Walter's own level of learning compared to the average citizen, and Walter's writing is obviously well above that level -- even if it does not approach genius -- making this work very accessible. What I appreciated most about this diary was the point of

view, that of the poor, starving, battered, exhausted soldier in the ranks, which serves as a definite counterpoint to a commanding officer's battlefield or campaign memories. Reading an account by a Napoleonic general's aide on the building of bridges to cross a river during the Moscow retreat and reading Walter's impression of the same event is quite enlightening. The general's experience, one of honor, valor and sacrifice, seems world's away from Walter's experience of horror, squalor and pointless death. Without placing one account or type of account above the other in terms of "rightness," I view it as extremely valuable to be exposed to both. Still, as interesting as this work is, it is necessary to point out that many, very many, of Walter's observations and assertions, particularly those involving his own motives, are questionable.

At this time, just two centuries past, Napoleon led the Grand Armee in his most ambitious conquest. A massive force of approximately 600,000 French and allied troops crossed the Polish border in June of 1812. All summer long, the campaign was an overwhelming success, driving the Russian army before it, ...until Napoleon occupied the burnt-out remains of Moscow in the fall. With no shelter or adequate supplies, Napoleon was forced to withdraw. Only a small fraction of Napoleon's army survived the miserable retreat out of Russia...This is the reminiscence of Jakob Walter, a German enlisted-man who survived not only this infamous expedition, but several shorter campaigns in the years prior to 1812. The bulk of the retrospective centers on the ordeal of trekking westward back to Germany. With the onset of winter (which was exceptionally cold that year, ...even for Russia), all discipline vanished amongst the ranks. Walter describes the various precautions taken toward ensuring one's survival, particularly the advantage of acquiring (stealing) a horse, ...for as long as the horse survived, or until it was stolen from you. Small groups attempted to cooperate for mutual protection, but most of the retreating mass were simply surviving day to day on an individual level. Units of Cossack cavalry and Russian partisans harassed the army endlessly well into Poland, ...but most of Napoleon's soldiers were preyed upon by those who wore the same uniform, or that of their "allies". So they marched homeward, in sub-zero temperatures, with sparse shelter or none at all, very little food, and the hourly potential threat of a violent death at the hands of either the enemy or your own comrades-in-arms.

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