

with a mixed population: Slovene and ethnic German. The outbreak of the war and national tensions on the rise created the first massive organization of Slovene women in Carinthia.

With this book the editors wanted to create a starting point for a discussion of gender issues in the First World War. Most of the studies employ a wide range of sources: diaries, letters, newspapers, military or administrative records, church records, while some draw on just one category of sources, like the more than 2,000 letters written by the members of the Braun family. Using a large but not very diverse sample, the study “Imagining and Communicating Violence: The Correspondence of a Berlin Family, 1914–1918” reaches some conclusions also applicable to most educated persons in Germany.

The centenary of the First World War was a good occasion for a historical re-discussion and re-writing of different topics within conferences, books, or projects. The editors introduced a topic which has been less discussed, but was nevertheless embraced and developed by others. As mentioned earlier, in this book there are no studies related to Eastern Europe, but the echoes of this topic have also reached this part of Europe. An example is the recent book by Alin Ciupală, *Bătălia lor: Femeile din România în Primul Război Mondial* (Iași: Polirom, 2017), where he discusses the role of women in the Romanian war effort, during the First World War.



ANGELA CRISTINA LUMEZEANU

LOUIS JOSEPH VIONNET

**Retragerea lui Napoleon din Rusia:
Memoriile maiorului Vionnet, 1812**

Translated from English by GABRIEL STOIAN,
foreword by FILIP-LUCIAN IORGA, introduction
and notes by JONATHAN NORTH
Bucharest: Corint, 2015

THE TWO centuries separating us from the French Revolution have not diminished in any way the power of these events to generate debates involving historians as well as specialists from other fields. Once the interpretations grounded in dogmatic Marxism lost their ideological dominance, Romanian writing became once again connected to the flow of European ideas which, in their turn, accommodate a wide range of interpretations, from the unfettered enthusiasm with the revolution, cultivated by the supporters of the liberal ideology and taken up by its Marxist successors, to the historiographical approaches that tend to reconsider the conservative reactions from the time of the French revolutionary turmoil or from the period immediately following it. The fascination with the events of 1848 and with the manner in which they stimulated the modernization and political development of the Romanian lands has shaped a generally positive approach to the events of the French Revolution and of the Napoleonic period, as indicated even by a mere statistical analysis applied to the translations from the specialist literature. The sympathy for the revolution and its protagonists has also been influenced by subjective factors, such as the fascination with personalities and their role in history, the recent tradition that tends to overrate the Jacobin dimension of the revolution, seen at a time as a forerunner of the communist discourse on

power, or the role played by France under Napoleon III in the political unification of the Romanian Principalities. The admiration for the heroes of the revolution and for the military brilliance of the emperor have remained prevalent in Romanian historiography, even amid the tentative revival of some reflections on monarchy and the rediscovery of Junimea's theses, likely to question the tremendous historical importance previously granted to these structural mutations marked by violence and ideological exclusivism.

A similarly antithetical vision also stems from the relations between Russia and Europe and from the first crisis they experienced in the modern era, during the French invasion of 1812. The challenges generated by this asymmetrical proximity, and particularly the fact that this event coincided with a tragedy for Romania, namely, the loss of the Moldavian territory between the Prut and Dniester rivers, led Romanian authors to support the French cause, even at a time when the European liberal intellectual elites (whose outlook on contemporary events is best described by Madame de Staël) equated the patriotic resistance of the Russians with the struggle for a freedom threatened by the authoritarian turn of a movement born of the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The same generation altered its outlook on the old Empire of the North, admired by the thinkers of the Enlightenment and detested by the European enlightened despots, ceasing to defend freedom and choosing instead to support the reactionary approaches of the Holy Alliance. The same happened with the Romanians' collective perception of the Russians, as the protection inspired by a shared religious denomination and seen as an alternative to Ottoman domination became a major

threat against the political independence of the Principalities. The ideological overtones of these topics place them at the intersection of history, ideology, and state interests, casting doubts on the objectivity of the authors interested in piecing together the past in an unbiased manner. One of the strategies available to the authors interested precisely in this kind of objectivity is the recourse to the primary sources left by the participants in those political and military events, whose subjectivity as people owing allegiance to one side or the other is superseded by the presumption of authenticity that comes with the testimony of a genuine eyewitness.

Louis Joseph Vionnet (1769–1834), viscount of Maringoné, participated in Napoleon's campaign in Russia and eventually reached the rank of lieutenant-general. His memoirs were published posthumously in 1899 under the title *Campagnes de Russie et de Saxe (1812–1813)*. The present Romanian edition is translated from the English version, *With Napoleon's Guard in Russia: The Memoirs of Major Vionnet, 1812*, translated and edited by Jonathan North (Barnsley, South Yorkshire, England: Pen & Sword Military, 2012). The originality of the text comes from the nearly complete absence of any ideological or propaganda elements, which were otherwise beginning to make their presence felt during the early modern era. The testimony is that of a soldier who makes no secret of his moderate monarchism and of his Catholic allegiance, a source of ethical guidance amid a conflict that was beginning to favor a denial of the human condition and where the instinct for self-preservation prevailed over any axiological choices. The moral profile of the author is completed by a deliberately objective narrative discourse that shows

no hostility towards an enemy whose organizational and behavioral merits are recognized in certain moments of the campaign. Furthermore, the liberties he takes in assessing the behavior of some superior officers and even of the emperor himself are less manifest in the writings of other military memoirists.

The preface written by historian Filip-Lucian Iorga briefly surveys the historiographical debates concerning Napoleon's career and makes an interesting parallel between the career of the soldier-emperor and that of the author of the memoirs, both people of the modern era and members of the meritocracy. Jonathan North's introduction provides a brief history of an elite corps of the French revolutionary army, the French Guard, set up in the early years of the Consulate and renamed Imperial Guard once the First Empire was proclaimed on 2 December 1804. The survey of the units that made up this elite corps over a decade of its existence is accompanied by digressions regarding the social background of its soldiers and officers, their political views, or the economic challenges faced by soldiers during campaigns. The history of the guard regiments follows the chronology of military actions, from the glorious battles of 1805–1806 to the exhausting Spanish guerilla war. The authenticity of these testimonies is given by the recourse to fragments of the correspondence between some soldiers from Major Vionnet's regiment and their families, presenting to the readers the everyday aspects of military life and the difficulties faced by those who had to cope with indifferent superiors and rapacious locals.

The notes of Major Vionnet focus mainly on Spain, where his regiment was trying to wipe out the partisans who were

attacking the supply convoys and the encampments of the French army. These preliminary notes indicate that the major was paying attention to the specific features of local life, to the attitude of the local population in regard to the French forces and to the social origin of the opposing forces, chiefly associated with destitute or criminal environments. The author openly blames some French commanders for the atrocities perpetrated against the partisans and the civilian population, also indicating that the redeployment of the regiment from the Spanish theater of operations to the Russian campaign was welcomed by the soldiers eager for military actions likely to bring them great material and moral benefits. His account of the battles fought at Smolensk and Borodino differs from the other contemporary testimonies, but the historical value of his notes stems from the observant eye of the author who provides a minute description of the architectural features of Moscow, accompanied by chronological considerations, indicative of a place with a lively cultural and spiritual activity. His opinions regarding one of the most controversial moments in modern history, the burning of Moscow, follow the official French line, in the sense that it was done in keeping with the detailed plan set in motion by Governor Fyodor Rostopchin and carried out with the help of inmates released during the evacuation of the capital city. The account reaches a deeper level, as the author considers the shift from the conflicts occurred during the Old Regime, when the lives of civilians and neutral parties were spared, to the total war that sought the annihilation of the enemy at any cost. The validity of these conclusions is confirmed by the account of the retreat of the guard regiments, which challenged

even the human condition of the soldiers faced with extermination by starvation and cold, an extreme situation marked by acts of cannibalism and mass suicide. The narrative becomes increasingly personal, and the battles of Smolensk and Berezina are mentioned only in connection to the attempts made by a physically exhausted author to find the remnants of his regiment. His return to activity occurs when the so-called Young Guard is set up and a new campaign begins in 1813, fighting with varying degrees of success the anti-French coalition and marked by a deterioration of the previous camaraderie between soldiers and officers. Thus, the end of the empire comes not only as a consequence of military defeats, but largely has to do with in-

ternal dissolution and with the emperor's failure to understand the new reality that emerged in the aftermath of his disastrous campaign in Russia.

This rather unique digression into the history of an event well-known to the interested public provides the opportunity for a reflection on the responsibility of politicians towards those whom they govern and on the incalculable effects of military conflicts, while bringing us into direct contact with a profound dimension of the past, a genuine life experience outlined by the reflections, the emotions, and the conclusions expressed by an eyewitness. □

FLORIAN DUMITRU SOPORAN