

Chapter 13 : French Legacy (V) – "The Serpent We Nourished at Our Bosom".

During his stay on the island of St. Helena 1815-1821, Napoleon and his entourage spent much time securing their legacy. Charles John was a special object of hatred. This so-called St. Helena literature became so troublesome to him that Charles John had several people employed to refute the claims of his deceit and incompetence. However, the Napoleonic version seems to have settled. French Napoleon scholar Jean Tulard begins his article on Bernadotte in *Dictionnaire Napoléon* (1987) with the following summary: "A remarkable fate for this opponent of the Brumaire coup, this man who was showered with favours by Bonaparte and who was a mediocre strategist, a disappointment at Jena, Eylau and Wagram, and yet elevated to Marshal, this Republican general who became king of Sweden, this cautious politician who took the role of the traitor, alongside Talleyrand and Fouché, in the epic poem of Napoleon."¹

Napoleon started from "Mémoires pour servir à l'Histoire de Charles XIV, Jean, Roi de Suède et de Norvège" (1820) by the Coupé de Saint-Donat & Bonaventure de Roquefort and picked it to pieces pointing out what he considered inaccuracies or empty praise of Charles John, a total of 13 pages. According to Napoleon, both he and Wrede preferred the adoptive son Eugène de Beauharnais but it fell through on the religious issue. de Beauharnais believed that his wife would never forgive him a conversion to Protestantism. There remained Bernadotte, a self-taught military with at least 20 generals more qualified. Also unpopular because of his Jacobin sympathies. Bernadotte had everything to thank his marriage.

Napoleons memoires, *Mémorial de Sainte Hélène*, written down|edited|authored by his chamberlain Emmanuel de Las Cases, were published in 1822-1825. Some of it was true. Some not:

His *Mémorial de Sainte Hélène*, published in 1823, was one of the most popular and influential books of the nineteenth century. ... Las Cases presents the Emperor (with the help of forged letters) as a friend of peace, a defender of the different nationalities of Europe, a representative of 'the principles of 1789' and a guardian of religion. He wrote that 'Napoleon was the type, the standard, the prince of liberal principles. If his actions occasionally seem to have been in contradiction, it is because circumstances were too powerful for him.' This fantasy Napoleon was immensely useful in creating the popular Bonapartism which was to help sweep the Emperor's nephew to power in 1848: few courtiers have done more for their master than Las Cases did for Napoleon.²

Charles John ordered his adjutant Bernt von Schinkel (1794-1882; b. Bergman) to collect material for his own memoirs. This never materialized, but the drafts were distributed to friendly writers. In 1838 Georges Touchard-Lafosse published a biography on this basis. It was a compilation of letters, documents, memoir fragments, rumours and interviews with Charles John's literary agent Joseph Izarn. It was released in French and German. It was intended to be translated into English and Swedish, but this never happened. Charles John was dissatisfied with the battle reports and sent corrections which, however, could not be introduced in the French edition. This is the closest thing to Charles John's intended memoirs. It has a reputation for being biased but reliable. As far as I can check, the description is correct.

¹ Jean Tulard. I: Juselius-Rosse 2005.

² Mansel 1987: ss. 201-202.

Through Gustaf Löwenhielm Charles John also managed to prevent many unwanted publications. Löwenhielm proceeded very thoroughly through remuneration, lavish dinners, gifts to wives, threats, extortion, take down pieces, purchases, theft of manuscripts, etc. This concerned for example Fournier's widow who claimed to have less flattering information about the succession election, Benjamin Constant's heirs who claimed to have compromising letters, Hudson Lowe's St Helena memoirs that were redacted, etc.³

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As Napoleon's accusations are still passed down, they are about: (1) Charles John's Treaty with Russia in 1812 and his military participation in the 6th & 7th Coalition. (2) There were at least 20 generals who were more qualified than Charles John to command. (3) Charles John's actions on the battlefield at Jena-Auerstedt on October 14, 1806, at Eylau on February 7-8, 1807, and at Wagram on May 21-22, 1809, were negligent or treasonous:

- On point one, there is nothing to add. One might afterwards wish that Charles John was a selfless French patriot, but neither was Napoleon.
- On point two, Charles John commanded troops as a general during three periods: 1794-97, 1805-09 & 1813-14. His two months in 1799 as minister of war usually are usually also included. During the first period, Charles John led a combination of guerrilla warfare with the elite troops (loose formations, sniping & rapid relocations) and regular war with raw recruits - the so-called *Carnot* system. The number of soldiers under his command increased throughout his career. As battalion commander he commanded 500 men. As *Générale en chef*, he commanded up to forty thousand. It is therefore difficult to generalize on his competence.
- In 1802 Charles John was known as an exemplary military: energetic, reckless & ingenious.⁴ There are several studies.⁵ These boil down to his tactics resembling the other French generals. The opponents followed the rule book. They themselves adapted to the terrain and the circumstances. However, this demanded that they were at the front and exposed themselves to enemy fire. Charles John was lucky and escaped without serious injuries. In a letter to his son Oscar he compared himself to Napoleon - it was about politics, but was also applicable to the battlefield: "Even though he was the greatest military thinker of his time, I surpass him in the minutia."⁶ - "I always explore the terrain in advance and from a distance. When I put my foot down, I check if the ground is firm, only when I find it so, I put the other foot down. Then, when I am absolutely sure, I take a big step forward and no one can believe otherwise than me making my way without hesitation."⁷

The military historian Keefe is of the opinion that Napoleon's marshals sought to mimic his "method" of holding the entire battlefield in their heads, but did not have

³ Kermina 1991: s. 319.

⁴ d'Anglesy 1802: ss. 371-383

⁵ Headley 1846: vol 2, ss. 149-161; Griswold m.fl. 1885: vol 2, ss. 329-344; Walsh 1895: ss. 39-43; Dunn-Pattison 1909: ss. 72-92; MacDonell 1934; Chardigny 1946; Delderfield 1962; Heathcote 1987; Palmer 1990; Skarstein 1998 & 1999.

⁶ Hagberg 1953: s. 181.

⁷ Brev 1813 (?) från Jean Bernadotte till politikern Roussel de Saint-Albin. I: Lindqvist 2009: s. 381.

his capacity. As junior officers with a non-com background, they were competent to command a regiment, but not an army. They needed a higher officer training & a better staff. Their renown physical courage and ambition was no merit to lead armies of 50-100 thousand men. In current parlance: The Marshals advanced to & above their level of competence.⁸ Perhaps Charles John with all his self-studies was an exception, but it doesn't look that way. The Russian sources, however, attribute to him a decisive influence on strategy during Napoleon's Russian campaign & during the Battle of Leipzig.⁹ Unclear what advice he gave, but his military legacy is flattering:

[No] contemporary did justice to the extraordinary range of the Marshal's military gifts. His personal courage, generosity to the enemy, concern for the welfare of his troops and inspiring leadership are apparent in his surviving letters and in every memoir of the campaigns. Added to these talents were a shrewd economy in manpower, concern for the minutiae of planning, and a sense of grand strategy as broad-ranging as Napoleon's but less inclined to lose itself in a distant perspective of remote horizons.¹⁰

Several circumstances would have contributed to Charles John's strikingly cautious and hesitant warfare [at Leipzig 1813]. The former French Marshal was, for his entire military orientation, more strategic than tactical; his command was characterized more by manoeuvres than by battles; it had little in common with the offensive and death-defying approach that characterized Napoleon or Blücher.¹¹

In a letter he addressed to Crown Prince Oskar in 1824, Bernadotte developed his military doctrine: "If you are at war, save the blood of your soldiers and care for them when they are sick. avoid petty battles, but when the glory and happiness of the homeland is at stake, use your army to the utmost... Many battles have been lost because of excessive economizing with the elite troops". The allusion to Napoleon is clear in these lines, but it is not the most important part of the quote. Bernadotte was never a "general à dix milles hommes par jour" (a general willing to sacrifice ten thousand soldiers per day). As a former non-commissioned officer in the royal army, he maintained this basic attitude and approach. Despite his courage, he never seems to have shared the tactical and strategic outlook of the officers of "l'An II" (year two of the revolutionary calendar, i.e. 1793): a costly offensive, based on mass action, the bayonet and patriotic enthusiasm. While he admired Hoche, it is unlikely that he shared his definition of war: "What is crucial is not manoeuvres or martial arts, but cold steel, fire and patriotism." As a patriot and great leader, Bernadotte's background was certainly quite similar to that of the other Marshals of the Empire, one third of whom were former non-commissioned officers like he was, but his military philosophy was almost comparable to that of a soldier under L'Ancien Régime.¹²

- The Battle of Jena-Auerstedt on October 14, 1806, was between three French and two Prussian armies that were completely destroyed. Charles John was positioned between the two battlefields. The reason seems to have been Napoleon's central control so that his generals did not have enough information about his plans to be able to act on their

⁸ Keefe 1994.

⁹ Johnson 1985; Johnson m.fl. red. 1985.

¹⁰ Palmer 1990: s. 251.

¹¹ Johnson 1985: s. 119.

¹² Desplat 1998: ss. 21-22.

own. Charles John was waiting for a marching order that for some reason never came. When Napoleon moved the battle forward one day, Charles John heard the canon's, but he did not arrive in time for the main battles. However, he distinguished himself in the aftermath.¹³ T:son Höjer has reconstructed the delay from another perspective: Charles John's position and pace were so unclear that the decision of which battle he would engage in - Jena or Auerstedt - was left to him. Afterwards, he was criticized for ignoring an order that was never issued.¹⁴

- A similar criticism was directed against Charles John after the Battle of Eylau on February 7-8, 1807, that Charles John ignored an order to attack, but is rejected by T:son Höjer with the same arguments as above, that the order was intercepted and never arrived.¹⁵
- The Battle of Wagram (May 21-22, 1809) was fought between an Austrian and a French-German army. It was very bloody which has been explained by the enemy adapting to Napoleon's combat technique - to divide the enemy and through his greater mobility concentrate his forces & defeat them one formation at a time. Instead, the Austrians, as at the earlier Battle of Aspern-Essling, held their positions. Charles John at the time commanded the Saxons. These were motivated but inexperienced and took heavy losses. There was a day order for wounded soldiers to be left where they had fallen to maintain pressure on the enemy. On a visit by Napoleon during the battle, the two quarrelled. Charles John is said to have been ordered to leave the battlefield but that is a fabrication. He was in service until July 10 when the regiment was disbanded as a fighting unit due to the losses and he himself was relieved of command. The French newspapers printed a day order from July 8 where Charles John tried to liven up his Saxons through exaggerated praise. Napoleon later criticized him for this day order which, in addition to its bombastic formulations, gave his Saxons too great a share in the victory.¹⁶

T:son Höjer has reconstructed the dismissal: "The internal context of Bernadotte's resignation is partly unclear. As has been shown above, the fact that in some French depictions Napoleon would have deprived him of command on the battlefield is completely incorrect. The Marshal continued his command until the morning of July 10. It is a mystery, however, if the dissolution of the corps was preceded by his resignation. He himself later sought to give this impression, albeit in terms, that left the chronological course unclear. ... It seems likely, that the Marshal in exasperation at the dissolution of his corps refused to receive a new command and then by the emperor with or against his will was dismissed."¹⁷

Recent Napoleon biographies, such as that of Frank McLynn (1997), still maintain that Charles John was an incompetent and all round jealous windbag, used all opportunities to hurt his benefactor & ended up betraying him. There is a December 2006 internet debate in this spirit at <napoleon-series.org>. Most of the Charles John-criticism can be traced to General Jean Marbot's posthumous memoirs, published in 1892: The deification of Napoleon prevented him from being his own worst enemy – instead it required a Judas, who

¹³ Barton 1921: ss. 129-150.

¹⁴ Höjer 1939b: s. 329.

¹⁵ Höjer 1939b: s. 352-353.

¹⁶ Barton 1921: ss. 210-231.

¹⁷ Höjer 1939b: s. 411.

thus became Bernadotte. The military of the time had a more balanced view of Napoleon's qualities as commander. In one of his lectures for the Charles John Association Israel Hwasser summarized the views of generals Moreau, Pichégro, Dumouriez, Massena & Wellington:

He is certainly superior as to practical tactics. His almost instantaneous grasp of the battlefield, what to do and how to expedite it, is unsurpassed. But he dares too much; Once he fails, he is lost. He has not shown himself capable of planning a battle, so that somebody else can execute it. By contrast, he has shown a skill to hastily equip large armies, which has surprised the world, but to plan a large campaigns, involving obstacles such as climate, seasons and other local circumstances, as well as adapting his methods to peoples' mentality, laws, customs, passions and prejudices is beyond him. The generals opinions may be summarized in the words of Moreau from his exile in America: "His strategy is always the same: A bold march to surprise the enemy & then bet everything on a single battle. If it works, it does." Capefique L'Europe pendant le Consulat et l'Empire de Napoleon. Vol. IX p. 79).¹⁸

Expressed in modern terms: There was no strategy & Napoleon's shoddy staff work made coordinated action impossible. Bernadotte had to wait for a dispatch & hope that the map still matched reality, which it often did not. Since Napoleons entire tactics was based on attack, he neglected retreat & defence. I was a one man circus.

¹⁸ Hwasser 1855: s. 50.