



Failure In Independent Tactical Command: Napoleon's Marshals In 1813

Major John M. Keefe

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This monograph offers a new perspective on an old subject. That is why did Napoleon's marshals, so successful in corps command, fail when given an independent army command? It examines in detail the defeats of Marshal Nicolas Charles Oudinot at Gross Beeren, Marshal Etienne MacDonald at Katzbach, and Marshal Michel Ney at Dennewitz.

Many authors have speculated why these marshals failed in independent tactical command. They have offered such reasons as lack of talent, lack of guidance from Napoleon or the failure to understand the nature of Napoleonic warfare. While these reasons are valid, they are contributing factors rather than the primary reason for the failure of Napoleon's marshals.

A thorough analysis of Napoleon's Correspondences for the period 10 August through 8 September 1813 reveals that Napoleon did provide adequate guidance to his subordinate commanders. A detailed study of the actions of all three marshals in both movement to and conduct during battle reveals that they in fact understood the nature of Napoleonic warfare. Certainly lack of talent was not the problem as each had been very successful in combat for twenty-two years. The primary reason that these marshals failed was their inability to command and control their forces. Lack of adequate staffs and an inability to make the intellectual leap from corps to army command proved to be their downfall.

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