

**Franck Favier, Le maréchal Ney, Paris (Perrin) 2023,  
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Few if any lives encapsulate the Napoleonic episode so well as that of Marshal Michel Ney, known to history as the »bravest of the Brave«. Franck Favier's biography is therefore more than an account of a human life, interesting though this is in itself. It is also the story of the rise and fall of an empire.

Grounded in the mass of memoir literature thrown up by the period, as well as archival collections including those of the family Ney located in Paris, this book will be of interest to the military historian. Ney's career as a professional soldier coincided almost precisely with the chronological span of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Army. His trajectory justified the adage about the ordinary foot soldier possessing a marshal's baton in his knapsack: the principle that merit would justify preferment.

Like most other Napoleonic marshals, Ney rose through the ranks. He did so north of the Alps, away from Napoleon whom, surprisingly, he met for the first time only in 1801. The north-eastern theatre suited Ney's background, as a bilingual French-German speaker from Saarlouis. This town was French at the time of his birth in 1769, but later became Prussian and is now German. Ney was a product of the borderlands, and the cultural capital he acquired there helped at various junctures in his career, including in Switzerland in 1802 and 1803 when he »mediated« between various factions and prevented bloodshed, and in 1805 in the Tyrol, which he helped dissuade from rising up in support of Austria.

Less positively for Ney, the Rhenish orientation of his early career meant association not with Napoleon whose star rose in Italy, but with his rivals, including Hoche, Kléber, Bernadotte and Moreau. This might have blocked Ney's further progress after Napoleon seized power (in 1799). These early associations were especially embarrassing, if not dangerous, at the time of the Cadoudal Plot of 1803–1804, a conspiracy that sought to overthrow Napoleon's regime. However, salvation for Ney's career came with the matrimonial politicking of Josephine Beauharnais. She, together with the famous educationalist Henriette Campan, facilitated Ney's marriage to the latter's niece, Aglaé Auguié. Favier's whole account of how this transpired, and of the factionalism and networking within the higher levels of the French establishment, is an especially illuminating part of this book.

Thanks to the marriage, Ney was linked to the inner circle, though he was out of his depth. As for his military career, Favier's assessment is somewhat mixed. No one doubted Ney's bravery on the field of battle. But he also possessed less appealing character



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traits, and these generally got worse over time: a tendency towards pedantry, an authoritarian impatience with subordinates, and a habit of blaming others for his mistakes. His relations with other marshals, including Soult, Murat and Masséna, were often dire. Against the background of these ongoing issues, Favier charts the ups-and-downs of Ney's military career: his great contribution to the entrapment of Mack at Ulm in 1805; his absence from Austerlitz, which greatly upset him; his poor showing in 1806 against Prussia, when a desperation to prove himself led to errors; and his triumph at Friedland (1807) against the Russians, where he earned his sobriquet, »bravest of the Brave«.

Friedland marked the apogee of the Napoleonic empire. Its new territories provided Napoleon spoils that he lavished on his commanders, Ney included. However, the dynamics of the empire pushed it forward, with the consequence that neither Ney nor anyone else had time to savour their new fortunes. Ney was soon off to Spain, where he spent two-and-a-half years characterised by failure and recriminations. Favier elaborates on the interesting falling out that occurred between Ney and the famous military writer, Antoine-Henri Jomini, who served on his staff. Jomini took to mocking Ney behind his back and had brought his professional inadequacies to Napoleon's attention. The Russian campaign of 1812, in contrast, brought a reputational rebound: Ney's handling of the retreat proved his finest hour. The following two years, in contrast, brought more failure than success: the 1813 campaign, when Ney was entrusted with multiple corps which he mishandled, proved his incapacity to hold the very highest command; and in 1814, his reputation suffered from the machinations surrounding Napoleon's abdication and the restoration of the Bourbons. That said, Favier does provide some mitigation for Ney's failings by pointing to Napoleon's own inability to encourage initiative amongst his subordinates.

The roller-coaster that was Ney's career now started its final circuit. Bourbon slights, especially those directed at his wife, resulted in disillusionment with Louis XVIII's regime. It was shared by many. Napoleon hoped to capitalise upon this sentiment when he escaped from exile in Elba in 1815 and landed in France. Famously, Ney promised to bring back the Emperor in an »iron cage« but then promptly went over to him. Ney's performance during the Waterloo campaign was hardly brilliant, but as Favier reminds us, nor was Napoleon's. Favier's book draws to a close with a gripping account of how the re-restored Bourbon regime dealt with Ney. The French army itself was let off having to do the dirty work of trying one of its own. Instead, the marshal's fate was entrusted to the Chamber of Peers, a body dominated by the so-called Ultras, composed of the most reactionary and vindictive elements. And this proved to be Ney's salvation, if not in the sense of his life, then of his reputation. Condemned to death and executed, he quickly became part of the larger Napoleonic legend.

Beyond capturing the breathless excitement of the age through the life of one of its more famous participants, Favier's study



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also is illuminating of various facets of the Napoleonic regime. On the military side, one is struck especially by the limitations of the marshalate. Fatally, it did not represent more than the sum of its parts. As to the civilian side of the regime, Favier's study reminds us of the importance even within a supposedly modern bureaucratic state of personalities and networks. In conclusion, this is an excellent book, worthy of the magnificence of its subject.



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