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at Depe 16 Octobr. Sir Robert Cary ⁴⁵

The Ice Incident at the Battle of Austerlitz.

THERE is perhaps no incident in the history of modern warfare in which the evidence of bulletins and memoirs has been so long accepted as conclusive, only to meet with denial from those who have investigated the local evidence, as the alleged engulfing of some thousands of Russians in the lakes, or large ponds, of Satschan and Mönitz. In the *Spectator* for 15 March I maintained that all the ordinary French sources on which the historian relies agree as to the reality of the catastrophe to some thousands of Russians on their left wing; and another writer pointed out that the tsar Alexander is reported in the recently published memoirs of Count Chambonas to have asserted at Vienna in 1814 that 20,000 Russians did actually so perish. When the tsar himself confirmed the evidence supplied by Napoleon's bulletin, and by a dozen or more of French memoirs, including the dramatic and pictorial touches added by Ségur and Marbot, and the far simpler and more convincing narrative of Lejeune, it appeared unreasonable to refuse credence to the story. Wishing, however, to learn whether the local evidence was consistent with it, I wrote to Professor August Fournier, of Vienna, and he has been good enough to furnish me with the following facts, which seem to prove the incident to be enormously exaggerated.

(1) The facts as described by the official papers and the written testimony of the local *Oberamtmann*, Franz Brutmann, and of the *Pfarrer* of the neighbouring village of Telnitz, prove that the ice on those ponds on 2 Dec. 1805 was comparatively thin, so that the fugitives, when driven back in that direction, would naturally skirt the lower part of the Satschan pond and make for the dam which separates it from the Mönitz lake. It is allowed by Ségur that 2,000 did escape through this gap; but the local evidence shows that his story of the icy mirror becoming suddenly black

⁴¹ Omitted in the list printed by Nichols.

⁴² Called 'Mathew' in Nichols's list.

⁴³ 'Dawtrej' in Nichols's list.

⁴⁴ Afterwards first earl of Danby.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Memoirs of Robert Cary, Earl of Monmouth*, p. 40; *Unton Corresp.* p. 98.

with thousands of fugitives who were thereupon engulfed is at least a gross exaggeration.

(2) On Napoleon's own order to the overseer (*Fischmeister*) the lakes were drained within a very few days; and all that was found was 28 or 30 cannon, 150 corpses of horses, but only two (some say three) human corpses. These were all found in marshy corners of the Satschan lake, over which they had evidently tried to rush, and the fact that all the men but two had escaped seems to show that the infantry either skirted the lake or got safely across, and that the two (or three) men who perished were drivers, or gunners, who were entangled with the harness or were hit by the cannon shot which the French poured upon this spot, and which were afterwards found there.

(3) In the Mönitz pond not a single cannon or wagon, or corpse, whether of man or horse, was found.

(4) The two ponds have long been drained and are now arable land; but no bones or weapons have ever been found there, though these are often turned up on the other parts of the battlefield.

This evidence, then, seems decisively to reduce the catastrophe to very small proportions. The question only remains how it comes about that the French narratives of the battle, with few exceptions (and those on the part of generals who were on a different part of the long line of battle), insist on the ice catastrophe as grandiose and horrible beyond description. The answer would seem to be that when Napoleon had set the fashion in his bulletin containing the sensational account of the cries of the drowning, French generals thought it incumbent on them to fill in the details in an equally picturesque manner. And so the two men, the hundred and fifty horses, and thirty cannon ultimately developed into Marbot's 'thousands of Russians, with their horses, guns, and wagons, slowly settling down into the depths.' But how came the tsar to add his quota to the tale of victims? Here again it is clear that what Napoleon wrote, in the first instance, apparently in order to provide a welcome sensation for the Parisians in that gloomy winter marked by a financial crisis and general discontent, proved to be an equally serviceable version for the tsar. It enabled him to explain the precipitate flight of his army and his abandonment of the Austrians by a reference to natural causes. Indeed the 'lakes of Telnitz' played the same part in the ordinary Russian account of the campaign of 1805 as the 'flames of Moscow' and the 'snows of an exceptionally early winter' played in the Napoleonic version of the campaign of 1812.

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