



Radetzky: Imperial Victor and Military Genius

Alan Sked

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History remembers Wellington's defeat of Napoleon, but has forgotten the role of Field Marshal Radetzky in the battles which led to Napoleon's abdication and first exile in 1814. As Chief of Staff to the Allied Coalition of 1813-1814, Field Marshal Count Joseph Radetzky von Radetz determined the shape of the most decisive campaigns of the Napoleonic wars by inventing the strategy that in a matter of months defeated Napoleon. Neither Russia nor Prussia had been able to overcome the Corsican in battle and the forces that these powers controlled between them in 1813 were in no position to challenge him in Europe. It took the brilliant diplomacy of Metternich and the military genius of Radetzky to ensure victory over the Emperor. In short, the Austrian contribution decisively tipped the balance against Napoleon - a fact which has always been overlooked by historians.

Later in Radetzky's career, in 1848 and again in 1849, it was he who defeated a much superior army not merely to maintain the political and geographical integrity of the Habsburg Monarchy but thereby almost certainly preventing a whole continent from dissolving once again into war and revolution as it had in 1792-1815.

Yet, despite his impressive military record, Radetzky was not simply a commander. He was also an important military thinker, who examined all the key issues of his day - not merely strategy and tactics but also fortifications, the role of a general staff, the role of horses in warfare, the need for technical corps amongst many other issues. He was also progressive politically: he believed in moving with the times, in constitutionalism and in popular defence and was active in military strategy until his retirement, at the age of 90, in 1857.

Radetzky's achievements on the battlefield were of the greatest possible significance in European history, yet today, Radetzky is almost forgotten - remembered only in the music of the Radetzky March, dedicated to him by Johann Strauss the elder. In this, the first biography of Radetzky in English, Alan Sked paints a vivid picture of an exceptional, yet neglected, military commander in a book which will be fascinating reading for enthusiasts of military and modern European history.

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