Jakob Walter: Loyal soldier or common man?

Loyalty is born out of a strong feeling of allegiance and undeniable support to an idea, cause, person, fight or anything in the world. People will go through many obstacles and negative experiences in pursuit of loyalty. While a soldier might not be loyal to the cause he is fighting for, he or she is committed to the idea of the single unit and the faithfulness to the leader. This idea dates back to the beginning community and has been one of the greatest influences of all time on civilization. In the early nineteenth century, soldiers in conquered territories were forced to conscript and join Napoleon’s army. Even though he felt no real connection to Napoleon, held little knowledge of the intentions of the work he was doing and watched his fellow comrades die of dehydration and hunger, Jakob Walter remained a loyal soldier to the Napoleonic forces even in the face of inevitable defeat because of his duty to being a soldier and his commitment to family, religion and the desire to make it home.

Prior to Napoleon’s rule, France had been involved in revolution since 1789 and civil unrest dating back even further. With the rise of Napoleon in the early nineteenth century, a lot of turmoil existed further outside of France and onto the entire European continent. During Napoleon’s conquests throughout the early part of the century, he conscripted many soldiers into his giant army. Napoleon believed his large force and military intelligence would lead to total domination over Europe. As he explained, the regions he conquered became subjects with their armies becoming available to the French
emperor. With the formation of the Confederation of the Rhine, a common soldier from Wurttemberg, Jakob Walter, was conscripted to join Napoleon’s army. Throughout the early nineteenth century, Walter served several times around Europe in the name of Napoleon. In 1812, he was brought back into the Grande Armee for the impending invasion of Russia.

Jakob Walter proved his place as a common man who had no real interest in the “cause of the French Empire and was subjected to mostly terrible conditions from the time he entered Russia until he returned home. During his journey from Stuttgart to Moscow, Walter marched thousands of kilometers trekking across Europe. From his account of the events, the readers gets the sense that Walter felt no cultural or emotional connection to Napoleon. Walter states, “Bonaparte fired upon the high points held by the Russians…and sent his cavalry across the water” (Walter, 41). This is one of many instances throughout Walter’s piece where he calls Napoleon by his last name, Bonaparte, not his title. Walter also refers to the attacking soldiers as “his” cavalry, showing disconnect between all the different groups of soldiers banded together fighting for a single cause and issues of hierarchy within the Grand Armee. On top of the division within the forces Walter encounters, he was also subjected to harsh conditions from the moment they entered Russia. Walter and his fellow soldiers “now believed that, once in Russia, we need do nothing but forage – which, however, proved to be an illusion” (Walter, 41). Later on, after reaching Moscow only to be brutally defeated, he bore witness to fellow soldiers die of thirst and starvation. Walter said, “much of the humanity of man had already vanished because of hunger” (Walter, 66). Walter was forced to retreat because Napoleon refused to sign a peace treaty and fought until the bitter end and
almost to total defeat. Jakob Walter experienced a journey that was unimaginable to embark on, yet essential in the name of empire building and French Napoleonic domination. He was faced with fighting for a country he had no connection to and had to deal with many personal obstacles as well as those around him.

Although he experienced years of conscription to an army he had little association with, fighting for a cause he did not seem attached to or even knowledgeable of, Jakob Walter remained a loyal soldier to Napoleon through his defiance of starvation and his push through conflict. Throughout the march back from Moscow after the defeat, Walter mentioned reports the soldiers received of impending combat or food and clothing delivery that never seemed to come to fruition. After many days he finally received bread for the second time since leaving Moscow and he said, “I thanked God anew with tears. Now we were all happy by the fire, and with renewed spirits we resumed our journey toward whatever fate had in store for us” (Walter, 73). It is reasonable to believe that warmth and bread might bring some element of happiness and nourishment after the tough journey, but Walter’s attitude is full of rejuvenation and energy. He continued in the front of the forces during the retreat in an obvious commitment to returning home but also as a faithful member of the army. He remained loyal to Napoleon by not going off on his own in search of safety, but rather with the army united even in defeat.

Jakob Walter was not necessary devoted to the French cause and did not really connect with the French people or soldiers, but he wanted to get home at the end of the retreat to see his family and friends. Along the way, he found that “only mutual support still procured true friendship (Walter, 75). After years into the journey, the distinction between soldiers did not mean anything because there were so few left and so little to
hang on to and keep sane. Even the division between officers and regulars soldiers
disappeared with uniforms being destroyed and complete disorganization of units and
commanders. By the end, the soldiers were loyal to Napoleon through commitment to
each other in assuring safe passages home.

Jakob Walter may not have been loyal to the cause of Napoleon, but Walter was
certainly loyal to Napoleon as a military leader and soldier under his influence. Though
Walter experienced great hardships on his journey, his commitment to being with his
family and his faith in religion led him to follow the French emperor with loyalty. It is
interesting to note that Walter wrote the account of his journey many years after the
actual events occurred. With this knowledge, it is possible that many details could have
been left out and the true sentiments of Walter during his time as a foot soldier in the
Napoleonic Grand Armee might not have been fully captured. Either way, based on
history and his account, during the long journey to and from Russia, Jakob Walter
showed his loyalty to being a soldier and continuing his allegiance in the name of
survival.
Works Cited
