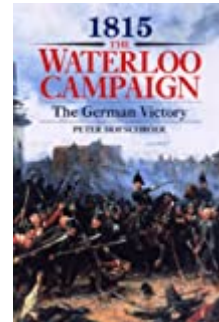


Peter Hofschroeer. *1815: The Waterloo Campaign: The German Victory.* London: Greenhill Books/Lionel Leventhal, 2004. 384 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85367-368-9.



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Challenging the Status Quo

Napoleon Bonaparte is one of history's most popular figures. It comes as no surprise, then, that the clash which led directly to his final fall from power has drawn much ink from historians' pens over the years. In fact, Waterloo ranks among the most heavily-studied battles in military history. Nonetheless, Peter Hofschroeer's *1815: The Waterloo Campaign: The German Victory* proves that much remains to be said concerning the battle near the inn of La Belle Alliance, and challenges the standard interpretation on several important points.

First and foremost, the author presents the battle as a German victory. In this sequel to his previous work, *1815: The Waterloo Campaign: Wellington, his German Allies and the Battle of Ligny and Quatre Bras* (1998), Hofshroeer attempts to remedy what he perceives as a long-standing misconception regarding the 1815 campaign in general and the battle of Waterloo in particular—chiefly, that the battle was an English victory, with limited Prussian assistance. Hofshroeer argues that the campaign was in reality a Prussian victory. Repeatedly he stresses the significance of the presence of Prussian-German troops both at key points in the campaign and on the field of

Waterloo itself. For instance, the standard interpretation of the battle has the Prussians coming to the field late in the day and providing the final weight of numbers to simultaneously shore up the Anglo-Dutch troops under the Wellington and aid in breaking the French resistance. Hofshroeer, however, argues that the Prussians under Bluecher were present in the French rear much earlier in the day than is normally thought, specifically at the village of Plancenoit. The arrival of these troops, and the hot fighting that resulted from their presence, drained key reserves from the French army, which, in turn, could not be utilized to break the Anglo-Dutch center. Likewise, the respite caused by this new threat to Bonaparte's rear gave Wellington the opportunity to shore up the crumbling areas of his line.

Another instance where Hofschroeer's approach differs from the usual English-language accounts of the 1815 campaign is his analysis of the campaign following the French defeat of June 18, 1815. He meticulously details both the Prussian-led march on Paris and the capture of the frontier fortresses of eastern France. The significance of these movements was that they forced the complete

defeat of the French, thus ensuring that Napoleon could not attempt another coup after his second abdication. The loss of the fortresses in particular deprived those remaining loyal to Bonaparte both of bases from which to support potential uprisings and sources of supplies. Hofschroeer describes the materials the Allies secured at each of the posts they captured with a stunning level of precision.

Hofschroeer is nothing if not detailed, specifying the particular regiments that took part in various engagements. While this attention to dispositions may become tedious to some, it establishes the depth of his knowledge of the campaign and aids in developing an understanding of how various clashes developed. When explaining how engagements played out, the author often lets primaries speak for themselves. So thoroughly researched is *1815* that Hofschroeer is able to use several sources to act as correctives to one another. Only on rare occasions does he assert that a particular eyewitness account is in error. When he does argue that a source is profoundly flawed (and this is very rare), Hofschroeer articulates sound reasons for the mistakes, such as the author of the account being separated from events he described, or that he was simply attempting to cover up an error on his part in reports to senior officers. Likewise, in the few instances where he finds a source seriously in error, Hofschroeer bases his contention on the inconsistency of that source with the overwhelming majority of other pertinent materials.

The attention to detail, however, goes far beyond the minutia of deployments and comparisons of different source material. The author places himself clearly in the tradition established by John Keegan's classic, *Face of Battle* (1976), by taking into account numerous external factors, such as the simple physical condition of the troops when they entered combat. Had they eaten prior to battle? Had they slept? These factors can have an obvious effect, positive or negative, on the fighting capacity of the troops. Hofschroeer presents this information and draws logical inferences from it in order to build his interpretation. This close attention to detail helps Hofschroeer develop an incredibly strong case for the Prussians playing a much more significant role in the 1815

campaign against the forces of Napoleon Bonaparte than previously accorded them.

In addition to providing a campaign history that is well above the standard, Hofschroeer adds a discussion of the relations between Britain and Prussia that strained their alliance throughout the campaign. His purpose here is to expose the flaws in the standard English-language interpretation of the battle. In developing this portion of his analysis, Hofschroeer points out what he perceives as Wellington's success at covering up some of his mistakes at the outset of the campaign. The duke's report to Earl Bathurst, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, served as the foundation for the British history of the battle. The author's close scrutiny of this and Wellington's subsequent writings on the battle reveals portions that cannot be reconciled with documented events. Despite the irregularities contained in his accounts, Wellington is usually taken at face value. Furthermore, Hofschroeer points out that a history of the 1815 campaign by the eminent Prussian military scholar, Carl von Clausewitz, who served in the Prussian Army at the time as well, has remained neglected by most Napoleonic students who do not read German.

Finally, Peter Hofschroeer's work presents a much-needed corrective to the standard English-language historiography on the battle of Waterloo. Napoleonic scholars, whether they support or reject the more German-centered interpretation of the campaign he offers, will certainly find much in the pages of the work that is worthy of consideration. His research is of the very highest caliber. Those interested in historical gaming will find much that is useful in constructing scenarios contained within these pages as well. *1815: The Waterloo Campaign* should find a wide audience among military historians in general and Napoleonic experts in particular.

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