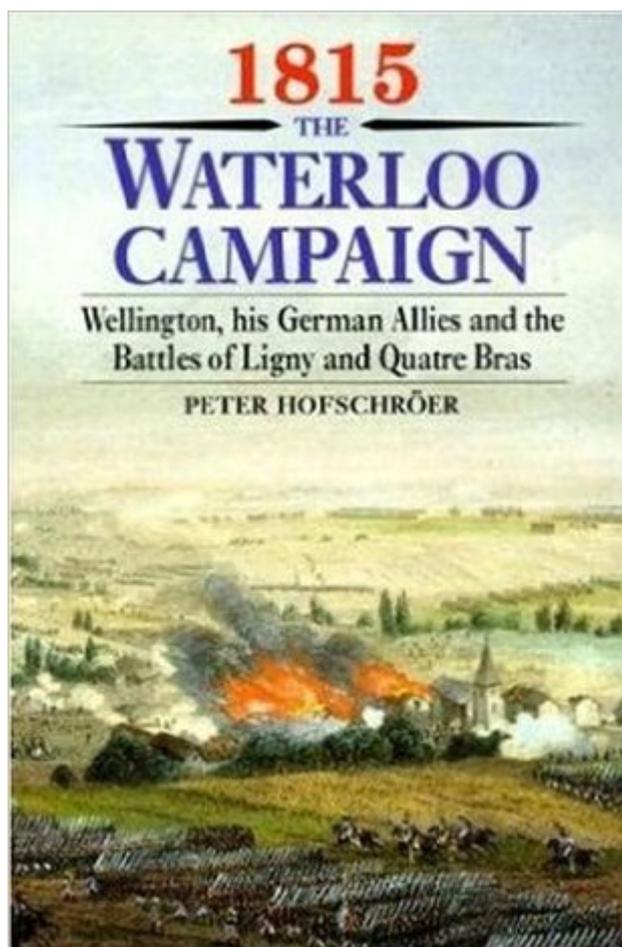


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1815 The Waterloo Campaign: Wellington, His German Allies And The Battles Of Ligny And Quatre Bras



Synopsis

Previously unpublished eyewitness accounts and battle reports German, British, and Dutch archive material published for the first time Controversial reassessment of the whole campaign Here is a unique reassessment of the Hundred Days and a powerful analysis of the epic confrontation at Waterloo. The first of two volumes, this study is a thoroughly researched examination of the opening moves of the campaign from a new perspective based on evidence never before presented to an English-speaking audience. Hofschrer arrives at far-reaching conclusions about the controversial theory that the Duke of Wellington deceived his Prussian allies and all subsequent historians of the campaign. By presenting events from the perspective of the Germans, the author undermines the traditional view of the campaign as one fought out by the French and the British and reveals the crucial role of troops from Prussia and the German states.

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Customer Reviews

My review is intended to refer to both parts of Peter Hofschrer's two-decker history of the events of June-July 1815. Indeed, it is a shame in way that they were published separately, for the events (and Hofschrer's narrative of them) are a seamless unit. Hofschrer has performed an inestimable service by making available, in magnificent detail and fluent English, the story of the Prussian side of the events of June-July 1815. That story has for far too long been glossed over, minimised, almost ignored in English-language histories. Hofschrer has removed for ever the (always slight) excuse given by lack of a good English narrative of the Prussians' deeds. Nothing can take away his achievement in doing that, no matter how flawed his books are (IMHO) by chauvinism,

misrepresentation and downright silliness. Hofschröer reveals the new Prussian army's enormous strength of organisation and morale, which enabled it to resume a decisive offensive within 36 hours of its defeat at Ligny, and the formidable tactical grasp of its commanders in the final crisis. Rather than simply falling into line with Wellington's tattered left flank, leaving the French the possibility of withdrawal, the Prussians detached the minimum forces needed to prevent a collapse there, and maintained their drive on the French right rear round Plancenoit. That ground once gained (at terrible cost, for Napoleon knew equally how vital it was) there was no escape for the French as a formed army; their dissolution in rout was the fruit of a brilliant tactical insight ruthlessly executed. But, above all, Hofschröer gives us, for the first time in English, the human voice of the Prussian combatants. We have long been accustomed to the voices of Harris and Kincaid, Marbot and Marcel; now we hear their German contemporaries. With all this wealth of scholarship at his command, Hofschröer had the opportunity to write the first genuinely balanced history of the Waterloo-Paris campaign, recognising the vital contributions of all the Allies. For an Allied victory (not German, not British) it certainly was. Wellington's decision to stand at Waterloo was based on his agreements with Blücher and Gneisenau for Prussian intervention, and the Prussian advance was predicated on Napoleon being pinned in front by the Anglo-Dutch forces. Neither Allied army could have won, and either or both might have been annihilated, without that basic trust and cooperation. Unfortunately, Hofschröer has sunk to the occasion. He seems to be of that mind-set which believes that balance consists of equal and opposing biases; this works fine for crankshafts, less well for history. In his efforts to redress the pro-British bias of Anglophone histories, he veers to an equal extreme of pro-Prussian bias. His industry and judgement in assembling and selecting data are magnificent; his interpretations are all too often openly, sometimes farcically, partisan. It will probably be another generation before someone achieves a genuine synthesis. It seems to me Hofschröer's problem (my categorisation, not his) stems basically from a view, widespread in Germany, of the events of 1813-15 as the spiritual birthplace of modern (i.e. Prussian-led) Germany and the precursor of national unification. This is the German equivalent of Manifest Destiny, and Germans of even mildly nationalist tendencies bristle at any perception that it is being downplayed or marginalised - as it certainly has been in Anglophone histories. This leads him not to follow through on his genuine insight that Prussia and Britain were pursuing quite different war aims in 1815. The Prussians were seeking revenge for defeat and occupation, and the opportunity to resume Frederick the Great's programme of expansion. The British, on the other hand, wanted to restore France as an orderly member of the European family of nations, powerful enough to act as a check to Austrian, Russian - or Prussian - expansionism if necessary. A similar contrast marked the

aims of Russia and the western allies regarding Germany in 1945. It also leads him to downplay the shameless behaviour of the Prussians towards their Saxon allies, 20,000 of whom were sent back from the theatre of war, almost on the eve of battle, after Prussian mistreatment drove them to mutiny. Presumably Saxons don't count as Germans in the context of 'German Victory'. The urge to magnify Prussia's glory years also leads Hofschoer into some very silly positions. He snipes persistently at the disbursement of 'British gold' which he seems to believe unfairly attracted Germans who would otherwise have fought for Prussia. One might point out that the British had retained the old-fashioned habit of paying for goods and services received, in contrast to the Prussians who had discovered the attractions of Napoleon's methods of extortion. More to the point, however, without the 'British gold' the non-Prussian German contingents in Belgium would have been another bankrupt farce like the German Corps on the Rhine (eloquently described by Hofschoer himself). Without them the Allied line on Mont St Jean would have been 30% shorter, and Napoleon would have broken through before the Prussians arrived. The silliest assertions of all, however, are those around the alleged 'race to Paris' which Hofschoer dwells on almost obsessively in the second volume. It takes a minimum of two to have a race and there is nothing in Hofschoer's account that indicates the British were competing. I for one decline to believe that the Prussian command, so perceptive in its operational planning, was foolish enough to engage in the sort of steeple-chase Hofschoer describes. A far more plausible interpretation is that the Prussians pressed forward in the hope of taking Paris on the fly, and being brought up short before the northern defences had to wait for the British, who had all the siege guns. Probably Wellington, who (Hofschoer concedes) had far better intelligence sources in Paris, knew all along that would happen, and saw no point in wearing out men and horses to no avail.

This book is a detailed investigation into the events leading up to the great confrontation at Waterloo; specifically the lesser known battles of Quatre Bras and Ligny. In this aspect, the book excels and gives a remarkably clear history of how it all came together. The other aspect of this book, which dominates the last few chapters, is Mr. Hofschoer's assertion that the Duke of Wellington deceived Prince Blucher and the Prussian Command about his intentions to assist the Prussians in the defense of Ligny. Mr. Hofschoer has received much flak for this attack on the beloved Duke, a hero in British history. As a new amateur scholar to this historical period, I think that my mind is a little less inclined to lean one way or another and this too despite my British heritage. Mr. Hofschoer lays out his evidence in convincing and painstaking detail using much German archival material that was not available or was ignored by Anglo-historians. While he makes

convincing arguments towards the Duke's deceptions, one can't help feel that the author has an axe to grind with the Anglo supporters. This is reasonable to a degree as it certainly balances the point of view from the Prussian side. At times however, I grew a little weary of his attacks. It is human nature to take sides and Hofschröer is as guilty as anyone. However, all that aside, the evidence he presents in his book is convincing enough to raise questions, if not of the Duke's guilt than certainly of his integrity. Though I am not convinced that the Duke of Wellington deliberately left his allies hanging in the wind, there is something rotten in the state of Belgium. Even to my amateur eyes it is plain that the Duke could not make good on his promises with the actions that he took. No one really knows what his motives were, but it is plain to see, when the evidence is examined through this book, that the Duke of Wellington was not playing with all his cards on the table. I enjoyed the book thoroughly. The evidence was laid out carefully and even the most jaded of readers has to ask themselves questions of the Duke of Wellington and his machinations. I wished the author had provided a bit more detail and insight from the French perspective as well as from others of the Allied cause. This book is not the bible of Quatre Bras/Ligny but in expounding the point of view of the Prussian Army it excels and at the very least raises many intriguing questions as to the Duke of Wellington's motives and intentions. Did he deliberately leave the Prussians to their fate, or did he cover up his strategic mistakes and follies? Read the book, it's a remarkable story.

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