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Charles J. Esdaile, *Napoleon, France and Waterloo: The Eagle Rejected*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2016. xiv + 257 pp. Illustrations, notes, select bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN-10 1473870828.

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As the sun of 2017 sets and the new sun of 2018 dawns, we remember the bicentennial of one of history's brightest stars, Emperor Napoleon I of the French. We are now nearly three years past the bicentennial of his final and perhaps most famous defeat, suffered at the combined hands of British and Prussian warriors at the Battle of Waterloo (1815). It is hardly surprising that this bicentennial would coincide with the expected wave of new books on the great man and his downfall.^[1] Even the dust jacket of Charles J. Esdaile's *Napoleon, France and Waterloo: The Eagle Rejected* (2016) acknowledges that "at least ten narratives of the battle were published" alongside the battle's bicentennial. Yet, while over the past two centuries many, many books have dealt with the various military aspects of the battle, what has been missing from the historiography is an authoritative and reputable account by a top scholar of what was transpiring on the French home front amongst civilians. As French soldiers battled for their empire's survival in the face of difficult odds, what did the people back home think of their epic struggle on behalf of an emperor who had already been once before defeated and forced to abdicate his throne?

To answer this and other related questions, Charles J. Esdaile in his *Napoleon, France and Waterloo* masterfully fills in a critical missing piece of our understanding of French attitudes towards their emperor in 1814 and 1815 by going to the firsthand accounts of both civilians and soldiers residing in France before, during, and after that desperate period known as the Hundred Days during which the Battle of Waterloo was fought and an empire was lost. Yet, did the battle have to result in Napoleon's defeat? Could Napoleon and the French somehow have achieved a victory and thereby at least prolonged Napoleon's reign as Emperor of the French?

To that end, Esdaile also considers the possibility of a Napoleonic victory at Waterloo. This latter aspect of the book has of course been done before.^[2] Nevertheless, Esdaile's take is interesting and welcome given that it comes from such a top-notch and well-respected scholar.

Esdaile, who holds a chair at the University of Liverpool, has a literal list of dozens of "Personal Distinctions" on the University of Liverpool's website.^[3] He has authored numerous well-received books on Napoleonic history, especially on the Peninsular War fought in Spain and Portugal from 1807 to 1814. Esdaile even won an award for "Outstanding Academic Title" from the American Library Association for his *The Peninsular War: A New History* (2003). A few years later, his *Napoleon's Wars: An International History, 1803-1815* (2008) won the 2008 International Napoleonic Society Literary Award. Suffice it to say, he is unquestionably one of our current generation's leading professional historians of the Napoleonic period. Indeed, when my co-author and renowned Napoleonic scholar J. David Markham and I were considering what books to recommend in our "Suggested Reading" section for our recently published brief biography *Simply Napoleon* (2017), we included Charles Esdaile's recent books on the

Peninsular War among our recommendations.[4] Had I read Esdaile's book on Waterloo before finishing *Simply Napoleon*, I would have been influenced by it and cited it as a source.

So, is Esdaile's latest effort consistent with his past triumphs of academic writing? The answer is...yes!

Esdaile's latest effort opens with a Preface that provides a good historiography that reveals how his book is different from those that came before it. While the Battle of Waterloo is of course one of history's most written about battles, he challenges whether or not the battle even "deserves to be commemorated" (p. x). He also indicates that he seeks to answer "just two or three salient questions, what was the state of relations between Napoleon and the citizens of France in the last years of the empire; to what extent was the emperor himself capable of captaining the sort of fight which he now faced; and, finally, what actually happened in France in 1814 and 1815?" (p. xi) To answer these questions, Esdaile presents "not an exercise in counter-factual history, but rather the scholarly examination of a series of concrete situations from which certain conclusions may be drawn as to the likelihood of what would have transpired had Napoleon triumphed at Waterloo. That the emperor could have beaten Wellington is not denied, but could he then have withstood the retribution of an entire continent? The answer is at the very least doubtful," because "by 1814 popular support for Napoleon was all but non-existent" (p. xi). In his first chapter, Esdaile considers not only what if Napoleon had won at Waterloo but rather what if he had also won decisively in the battles that preceded Waterloo. This chapter is one of the more intriguing and well-written counterfactuals I have read, even if the author says it is not a "counterfactual" per se. Indeed, on a personal note, I was pleasantly surprised at the rather unique approach this book takes. When I was first asked to review a book about Waterloo, I expected just another battle narrative.

In Chapter 2, we get into more great 'what if' scenarios such as the prospects of Napoleon going "into exile in the United States had Francis I only allowed Marie-Louise to travel to Paris and inaugurate a regency in the name of the infant King of Rome" (p. 33) or the Allies fighting each other over the issue of Poland (p. 34). Later Esdaile suggests that "there was but one chance of survival....Suppose, then, Napoleon had somehow...gained the far more crushing victory that was very briefly on offer at Quatre Bras the day before" (p. 37). As I read this chapter and Esdaile recounts how "such had been the hatred of the French in most of the *grand empire*" (p. 51), I started to wonder then why is he still celebrated today? Fortunately, he does provide an answer later in the book.

In Chapter 3, Esdaile continues to point out how even with a victory at Waterloo, Napoleon's position was grim. This chapter is thus rather depressing (although necessary) to read for pro-Napoleon readers.

In Chapter 4, Esdaile opens by once again clarifying how his book is original when he writes, "Given its physical separation from the rest of the Napoleonic Wars, there is a tendency for histories of the Waterloo campaign to treat it as an isolated, stand-alone episode with a context limited to nothing more than the experience of the restoration of the Bourbons" (p. 80). This chapter also continues to portray Napoleon in a negative light. Esdaile outright asserts that "in general, the emperor had not brought prosperity but rather ruin" (p. 88). Ouch! We further get an impression of the fickle nature of how quickly the populace could turn on Napoleon in a long quotation on page 109.

In Chapter 5, Esdaile includes a quotation that suggests without Great Britain's role, Napoleon could have won the Napoleonic Wars. He also begins an explanation for "the nostalgia for the Napoleonic age which has continued to grip France down to the present day" (p. 143). We later come across a 'what if' within a 'what if' when Esdaile quotes someone as speculating that if Napoleon "had either relinquished the Spanish war for a while, or not gone to Moscow, no human power would have been a match for him" (p. 147).

Early in Chapter 6, the book's concluding chapter, when addressing Napoleon's return to France in 1815, Esdaile asks a good question for college-level essays: "What had happened? In brief there are two explanations. For admirers of the emperor, people and army alike had no sooner heard that Napoleon had landed on the shores of France than they rushed to support him, followed with greater or lesser degrees of enthusiasm by at least some part of the elites, whereas, for those who are more skeptical, what took place is something far more mundane, namely a military coup in which popular participation was distinctly limited" (p. 152). I could easily imagine asking students to consider which of these two explanations is more persuasive.

As the chapter progresses, Esdaile shows how engrossed the pro-Napoleon narrative is in popular culture, even if it is not the narrative he believes to be historically accurate. Esdaile also touches upon the influence of the environment and natural occurrences on history when he brings up the Tambora volcanic eruption of 1815 that caused the "year without a summer" of 1816. At a Napoleonic history conference a few years back, an individual argued that this disaster would have frustrated Allied efforts in 1816 and so had Napoleon won at Waterloo and managed to keep his army intact into 1816, he could have won the war. Esdaile simply concludes that "the effects of this crisis would have affected all the combatants of 1815 more or less equally" (p. 163), but it would have been interesting for him to explore that possible scenario with another paragraph.

As this chapter nears its conclusion, Esdaile acknowledges "that popular support for Napoleon was far from non-existent" (p. 186), and yet it was still insufficient. Something Esdaile could and should have acknowledged in this chapter when discussing to what extent the battle of Waterloo's outcome mattered is that the Duke of Wellington would later become a Prime Minister in Britain. Would that have happened had he lost decisively in 1815? In the final pages of this chapter, Esdaile creatively incorporates his title into his text with "the eagle was rejected" (p. 189) and answers my earlier question about "how does one account for the fact that within a very few years France had embraced the Napoleonic legend?" (p. 189) We get a sense of the strangeness of nostalgia, how despite all the horrors and hardships of Napoleon's rule, people can look past that and focus on the positives, just as in my own country (the United States of America), people refer to past decades with fondness, never mind if those particular decades were less than ideal for, say, women or African Americans. In his final sentences, I disagree that today's European Union "has nothing whatsoever in common with the *grand empire*" at least in the sense that Napoleon's empire does at least represent an earlier attempt at unification. Moreover, it was a work in progress that complicates to what extent it was or was not a valid parallel with what we presently have. While it is debatable how Napoleon's empire would have looked had he won in 1812 or 1813 and while we may of course be skeptical of his claims for it, he did nevertheless later assert, "Europe thus divided into nationalities freely formed and free internally, peace between States would have become easier: the United States of Europe would become a possibility." "I wished to found a European system, a European Code of Laws, a European judiciary: there would be but one people in Europe." [5] It is not too much of a stretch to further imagine the *franc* being the universal coinage of Europe in the event of Napoleonic victory. Yes, something ruled by an Emperor is a far cry from what we do have today, but if nothing else, surely there are proponents of the European Union who have looked to Napoleon and others' examples for inspiration in unifying Europe. In that sense there is a relationship if not exactly a parallel. Finally, few could argue with Esdaile's final sentence "that Waterloo is a battle that will never cease having to be refought" (p. 190).

Following these six chapters, Esdaile has extensive endnotes that help readers dig deeper. In these, he draws upon a respectable mixture of primary and secondary sources in multiple languages. You get a real sense of his commendable and meticulous research when examining these notes. I encourage anyone who reads this book to not only read the chapters but to also read these as, among other things, they include many intriguing additional 'what if' considerations such as how J.C. Hobbhouse "penned eloquent pleas for Napoleon to be left in peace" and how "the French ruler should be afforded the benefit of the doubt as he not only had an army to rebuild but was also confronted by massive internal unrest,

and many of his apologists have therefore implied that Waterloo was a battle that need never have been fought” (p. 201). These notes to some extent make it seem too bad that the Allies did not listen to these calls for peace.[6]

Esdaile writes memorably with such creative wording as “it is not just the dead of the First World War who sleep in Flanders fields” (p. xiii). His first chapter reads like a novel at times. He even creatively flips actual history to fit his counterfactual narrative, such as the following exchange between Wellington and his second-in-command, Lord Uxbridge: “Wellington: ‘By God, sir, I have lost my leg’; Uxbridge, ‘By God, sir, so you have.’” (p. 15) In our real timeline, it was of course Uxbridge and not Wellington who suffered the loss of a leg at the battle. More poetic wording comes with “what Geoffrey Best called ‘The French and the rest’” (p. 53). It is also hard not to admire the wording of the following passage: “now those ‘masses of granite’ had become millstones that were relentlessly grinding the last shreds of his power to dust” (p. 188). In addition to the effective language, Esdaile also has a clear and coherent organization to his chapters with concluding paragraphs that effectively summarize the chapters.

Esdaile also makes appropriate use of primary source quotations throughout his text. These sometimes-lengthy quotations help the soldiers tell their stories in their own words. Some of these capture the horrors of war quite vividly:

One of their favorite occupations was to strip men and women naked and drive them with whips out into the snow-covered countryside. Another favorite pastime was to take the village mayor, priest or doctor, to grip his nose in pincers and drag him round and round the room, or again in a college the headmaster would be stripped naked and flogged in a courtyard before the assembled scholars ... At Nogent a cloth-merchant named Hubert was set upon by a dozen Prussians who pulled on his arms and legs till he was almost torn in pieces and a kindly bullet ended his sufferings, and at Provins a baby was thrown upon the fire to make its mother speak ... (p. 82).

In terms of secondary sources, Esdaile read and cites the work of leading historians of the Napoleonic period, such as Owen Connelly. There is also a clear influence of P. Geyl’s *Napoleon For and Against* (London, 1949) on Esdaile’s balanced account. Nevertheless, he also cites Alan Schom in a way suggesting Schom to be a fair and balanced historian, but that is not how he is universally regarded.[7]

With regards to visual sources, Esdaile has selected well-chosen images that adorn the cover and a section of full-color images inside that collectively offer a beautiful visual accompaniment to the book’s excellent text. Moreover, I like that these images are organized chronologically so that they convey a sort of visual progression of the events relayed in the main text.

This book is excellent and a must read for anyone interested in Napoleonic history but also for those generally interested in the counterfactual genre. This book would be appropriate in upper-level and graduate-level classes. For such courses, I recommend students first read Bernard Cornwell’s *Waterloo: The History of Four Days, Three Armies and Three Battles* (2014) and then Esdaile’s book for comparative purposes, i.e. to see two notable scholars’ distinct approaches to dealing with this battle from multiple perspectives. Overall, Esdaile does what he set out to do and is convincing in the case he makes. Indeed, I echo the positive sentiments of fellow reviewer Steve Brown who described this book as “the most revealing work on the French ‘home front’” and “highly recommended.”[8] I would add to such high praise that this book is a real page turner and essential reading for any student of Napoleonic history.

NOTES

[1] In addition to the many recent books about the battle, a profound amount of articles have appeared, especially online, in the past few years that continue to cover the battle as a major event in human history. See for example the battle's first-place ranking at Major Dan, "10 Famous Defeats," *History & Headlines*, <https://www.historyandheadlines.com/10-famous-defeats/> (accessed 30 December 2017).

[2] See, for example, Caleb Carr, "Napoleon Wins At Waterloo," *What If? The World's Foremost Military Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*, ed. Robert Cowley (New York: Berkley Books, 2000), 220-221. The following book alone contains no less than three rather dramatically different counterfactuals associated with the Waterloo campaign: ed. Johnathan North, *The Napoleon Options: Alternate Decisions of the Napoleonic Wars* (London: Greenhill Books, 2000). Esdaile does cite this book as one of his sources and discusses it at length in a paragraph in one of his notes. It is good that he addresses these specific counterfactuals that preceded his work.

[3] Prof Charles Esdaile, <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/history/staff/charles-esdaile/> (accessed on 23 December 2017).

[4] J. David Markham and Matthew Zarzeczny, *Simply Napoleon* (New York: Simply Charly, 2017).

[5] As quoted in Felix Markham, *Napoleon* (New York: Mentor, 1966), 257.

[6] For an opinion as to why we would have been better off if Napoleon had remained in power, see Andrew Roberts, "Why We'd Be Better Off if Napoleon Never Lost at Waterloo," *Smithsonian.com*, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/we-better-off-napoleon-never-lost-waterloo-180955298/> (accessed on 30 December 2017).

[7] For an extremely critical review of Schom's work on Napoleon, see John Clubbe, "Review Essay: Schom's Napoleon," *Napoleonic Scholarship: The Journal of the International Napoleonic Society*, http://www.napoleonicsociety.com/english/scholarship98/c_schom.html (accessed on 30 December 2017).

[8] Steve Brown, "Review of *Napoleon, France and Waterloo: The Eagle Rejected*," *The Napoleon Series*, <https://www.napoleon-series.org/reviews/general/EagleRejected.pdf> (accessed on 30 December 2017).

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