

The Napoleon Series Reviews

Smith, Digby. *The French & Prussian Armies at War 1805-1806* Nottingham (UK): Partizan Press, 2017. 208 pages [with 16 full-color maps and plates]. ISBN: 9781858187303. £29.50.

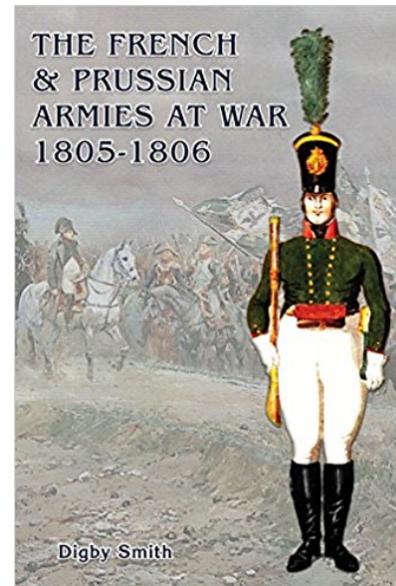
Digby Smith is a veteran author of dozens of books about the Napoleonic Wars as well as other eras. I believe this is the first book of his published by Partizan Press. Many reading this review are familiar with Mr. Smith's comments on the Napoleon Series and elsewhere about the Jena Campaign. I agree with him that so many previous views of the Prussia's defeat have been rather facile, if not simply wrong, missing a great deal of history. Regardless of what has been written, the Prussian Army that fought at Jena and Auerstedt had very little in common with the Frederickian army of the Seven Year's War. His short Introduction states:

“The section of this volume dealing with the Prussian state and army is based largely on German language sources not previously seen in English. These sources contain some very surprising information, which give a whole new colour to the interpretation of the causes for Napoleon's dramatic victory at Jena and Marshal Davout's at Auerstedt on October 14, 1806.”

Writing a review of a good or bad book is relatively easy, requiring fewer pages compared to a book with significant amounts of both qualities. *The French and Prussian Armies at War 1805-1806* is of the latter category, and for that reason, frustrating to review succinctly. It requires more description, of both the positive and negative features. The positive first.

The book has thirteen chapters with two appendices covering the orders of battle for the armies at Jena and Auerstedt.

The first chapter [5½ pages.], “The Year of Prussia's Indecision”, deals with the events of 1805 including the Ulm campaign, ending with Prussian envoy Haugwitz's meeting in Vienna with Napoleon on December 15th, agreeing to become an ally of France.



Chapter two [25 pages] covers the Prussian army, detailing everything from the Prussian General Staff and army administration, to the company economy system through to unit organizations and the Kanton system. This chapter is filled with valuable information, much of it not seen before in one volume.

The third chapter [14 pages] deals with the French army, command and staff, conscription methods as well as the changing army organization since 1800. This is a solid chapter with a lot of interesting details such as Davout's orders for the march in 1805 and on recruitment for the new voltigeur companies.

Chapter Four [8 page] deals with "Tactics." This is a very basic primer on general tactical practices during the Napoleonic Wars. At the beginning of the chapter the reader is referred to George Nafziger's *Imperial Bayonets* for a "comprehensive study."

Chapter Five [8 pages] describes "Napoleon's Attempted Invasion of England in 1805." This chapter was filled with fascinating information including some great anecdotes about the French efforts to mount a sea-borne invasion of England including a harbor engagement with British frigates.

Chapter Six [36 pages] is entitled "The Year of 1806," subtitled "The Campaign of 1806" covering January to July 1806. That is the first four pages. The next section, subtitled "The Campaign of 1806" relates the armies' moves from August through to October 14th. The chapter contains a great deal of excellent information, the kind of information that the author was pointing to in the introduction. The interplay between the various Prussian commanders and attendant personalities is an 'eye-opener.' Their decisions, lack of decisions and willingness to ignore orders, or just let inertia take over is amazing.

Chapter seven is less than 2 pages long, entitled "The Day of Battles." It deals with the terrain only around the Jena battlefield and then some night movements before that battle. I am glad to see among other things, the actual distances between towns and woods, which played such an important part in Prussian deployments and tactical decisions. Also, for the first time I have seen, Clausewitz is being quoted about the nature of the Jena battlefield: "In all of history, there is scarcely a more advantageous site for the defense of an army to be found."

Chapter Eight [24 pages] covers the battle of Jena. The author notes in the beginning pages that the account of the battle is based mainly the report to the court of inquiry May 1808 by Major von der Marwitz, ADC to Hohenlohe. Also included is eleven pages of the full report by von Richel in 1808 to the Royal Immediat-Commission investigating the causes of the 1806 catastrophe.

Chapter Nine [14 pages] describes the Battle of Auerstedt which is stated to be based on Jany's detailed account of the battle. No volume or pages are given as reference. It reads well and points up the main events of the battle.

Chapter Ten [12 pages] is entitled "Diary of the I and II Reserve Corps of the Grand Army," subtitled "Or the Same of the Second Action from 8. To 21. October 1806." This is a strange heading and very confusing because it only refers to Kalckreuth's account, not Blücher's, also provided in this chapter. The Prussian Order of Battle listed in the book does not contain a I and II Reserve Corps for the Prussians at Auerstadt. Kalckreuth commands the only "Reserve Corps" listed in the OOBs. I imagine that should have been 'Divisions', not 'Corps' or some explanation for the title translations should have been added. In calling the Prussian main army the Grand Army, not referred to as such in the book text, makes one think of the French Army. It is an fascinating set of accounts, the contrast between Kalckreuth's and Blücher's accounts is telling.

Chapter Eleven [7 pages] is describes the retreats from the battles and the capitulation of Prentzlau on October 28th, 1806 where Murat tricks Hohenlohe into surrendering. The details of the discussion between Hohenlohe and Murat are given by Massenbach. It is a fascinating read. Marwitz's eyewitness conclusions about the condition of the Prussian forces and Murat's ruse are insightful as well.

Chapter Twelve: [3 pages] is titled "The Subsequent Capitulations." which lists without commentary all those fortresses and Prussian forces that surrendered quickly after Hohenlohe.

Chapter Thirteen: [3 pages] The Aftermath. The last page is entitled "Conclusions." Here Hohenlohe, Kalckreuth and other Prussians are faulted for seeing potentially fatal errors and failing to address them. The book's conclusion; the Prussian command decisions were the major reason for the Prussian catastrophe, shouldn't be all that surprising, though it will be for any number of readers of other accounts of the battle which fault 'Frederickian tactics.' Like most French and German contemporaries, Napoleon came to the same conclusion after his post-Jena visit to the King of Prussia:

"At Jena, his [Prussian] army performed the finest and most spectacular maneuvers, but I soon put a stop to this tomfoolery and taught them that to fight and to execute dazzling maneuvers and wear splendid uniforms were very different matters. If the French army had been commanded by a tailor, the king of Prussia would certainly have gained the day."

It would have been interesting to know the Prussian military's conclusions about their failures after hearing all the testimony to the board of inquiry, particularly when a portion of the reports are quoted in the book

And now the less than good. I will give a few examples illustrating pervasive issues. It is not clear whether this book was written to be revelatory history for the Napoleonic enthusiast or simply an overview of the armies for the general reader. Unfortunately, it doesn't quite meet the needs of either audience.

The first problem is the book suffers from poor editing, making it appear to be rushed into publication. There are many typos, from duplicate words, dropped articles to poor organization and formatting. For instance, "The Prussians invaded Holland in 1797" [It was 1787]. The table of contents lists an index before the Bibliography. There is no index. Instead, after the Bibliography is a five-page Glossary with no page references. Officers as important to the text as von der Marwitz are not listed but Marengo and the city of Mainz are. The orders of battle have no consistency in information or formatting, an obstacle to making any comparison between the two armies, suggested by the book cover as the main purpose for their inclusion.

There are two pages of bibliography, totaling 24 books. Some of the works referenced in the text, like Jany's and Hopfner's, are not listed while others never referenced are included. Some chapters have inserted footnotes and complete source references while others don't. So, which German works not seen in English until now provided the surprises? Are they in the bibliography? Why not tell the reader which German books harbored such 'eye-opening' information? If they were Jany and Hopfner's works, why weren't they in the Bibliography? Also, why are such simple overviews of the 1806 campaign as Chandler's 1996 Osprey Campaign series book and Günther Steiger's very similar 88 page "*Die Schlacht bei Jena und Auerstedt 1806*" from 1981 [the 1995 re-edition has 124 pages] listed, but works such as Paret's, Shanahan's or White's English language studies of the Prussian army during this period are not referenced at all?

There are inexplicable errors, omissions and unsupported comments throughout the book that give a reader pause. I am assuming, again, mostly from poor editing. For example, in Chapter Three, the company and squadron organization for Prussian Fusiliers grenadiers, Feldjäger, and cavalry are given, but not for the Line infantry or the fact that the Prussian line battalions went from four to five companies just before 1806.

Chapter Four on "Tactics" is filled with omissions, errors and odd formatting. There is a heading in letters larger than the other headings "Cavalry Weapons," the contents consisting of two sentences. The first sentence of the section on Cavalry Tactics reads, "The characteristics of cavalry are mobility, fire power and protection." This brought me up short, to say the least. Yet, in reading the section, nowhere is it explained how cavalry provides fire power and protection. Instead, squadron formations and cavalry charges are discussed. The French cavalry corps commanded by Murat during the Jena campaign is said "to have been so successful, that a heavy cavalry reserve remained a feature of French

tactics and was eventually copied by other armies. . .” Why it was so successful is not mentioned in this chapter or the one describing the Battle of Jena where the cavalry corps fought.

Skirmish tactics are dismissed with two sentences of two paragraphs under the heading “Squares”, ending with “Whilst skirmishers had their place on the battlefield and were definitely the future—in principle—they were in no way the decisive factor in either battle.” What that place on the battlefield consisted of is not described.

In Chapter Six, it is stated that Prince von Hohenlohe-Igelfingen had been in the Prussian military service for four years, but still retained his in-born regional mistrust of all Prussians. Mr. Smith knows Hohenlohe entered Prussian service in 1768 and had been in their service ever since—38 years. He wrote a biography of the soldier for the Napoleon Series. Blücher felt Hohenlohe was one of the finest officers in Prussian service. The reasons for believing Hohenlohe ‘still’ mistrusted Prussians after 38 years or why he was now such a bad soldier are not addressed.

In the description of the Jena battlefield, the village of Lützerode is said to lie *on* Dornberg hill northwest of Closewitz, though the maps in the book do not show this. Both villages are at the same elevation. The description of the battle of Jena contains a number of unrecognizable events, even though it is stated to be taken from Major Marwitz’s account of the battle. The IR von Hohenlohe and Grenadier battalion Hahn are said to be “directly in front of Vierzehnheiligen” which was simply not the case. Significant actions have been left out too. About noon, Lannes mounted a spoiling attack with the 100th and 103rd Line Regiments on the Prussian’s left flank to delay their attack on Vierzehnheiligen. Lannes dramatically called it “The crisis of the day.” Of the three times Hohenlohe determined to attack the village, only the third attempt is mentioned, where Massenbach and Grawert talk Hohenlohe into waiting for Rüchel.

And then there are so many pertinent issues only mentioned, not explained or simply missing. In the chapter on the Prussian army missing was the role played by the *Immediat-Militär Organisations-kommission* from 1795 to 1806.

King Frederick William II created the *Ober-kriegs-kollegium* in 1787 specifically to direct the army. This is well-described in the chapter. However, under the new King, Frederick William III, the "Senior War College" was reduced to nothing more than his executive secretary. In 1795, within months of Prussia's exit from their 1792-1795 participation in the Revolutionary war, the new king created the *Immediat-Militär Organisations-kommission* with a mandate to “investigate and ameliorate the defects that had appeared” during the war. The Commission was also to direct the expansion of the army necessitated by the newly acquired Polish territories and the loss of foreign recruiting areas in Germany and Holland which meant revising the Kanton system.

Chaired by Field Marshal von Möllendorf, this commission became, in effect, the administrative head of the army for the next ten years. [Blanning, T.C.W. *The French Revolutionary Wars 1787-1802* pp. 100-101 and Shanahan, William O. *Prussian Military Reforms, 1786 to 1813*. p.73-75]

In the chapter on the Boulogne Camps in 1804-05, there is almost nothing about the tactical training the army participated in 2/3 of each week, which had far more impact on the performance of the Grand Army in 1805-06 than training for a sea-invasion. What is stated is so brief, two one-sentence paragraphs stuck in between the text on boat building and training for sea-borne invasion, I can quote them here:

“It was here that Napoleon’s corps system, with its permanent divisions and brigades was tried, tested and perfected.” And several paragraphs later: *“Napoleon held numerous reviews of his army, as it trained in the new ‘corps structure,’ which was to prove itself so well in the next few campaigns.”*

Why there were eight pages detailing the boat-building and French training efforts preparing to cross the channel is not explained. It would have been far more pertinent to know how the training in the new corps structure was done over the year in the camps *and* how it subsequently influenced the French Army’s actual performance in 1805 and 1806.

Important statements are made and information provided without explanation. With the accounts by Kalckreuth and Blücher, another 11 pages of reports, there is little analysis or explanation offered by the author other than to assert such brief statements as *“General von Blücher’s report is loaded with tactical lessons which should have been common knowledge to every Prussian commander present.”* I would have loved to know what some of those lessons were. Not being Prussian commanders, I am sure the readers would have liked some hints too. And it is pointed out that Kalckreuth saw any number of tactical errors and possible responses, but did nothing. Again, this is stated, but it is not pointed out *where* these events occur in the many pages of the report.

Note: On the cover and in the plates in the middle of the book are two pictures of 1806 Prussian soldiers...in shakos. The pictures were provided by Stephen Summerfield and he assures me that the Prussian army in 1806 was transitioning from bicornes to shakos along the lines of the ones the Fusiliers were already wearing.

Conclusions:

The book’s topic, the French and Prussian Armies in 1805-1806, and the stated goals, providing a German language exposé of Prussian command failures, could easily have taken up the entire 208 pages without the information dumps of

battle reports which should have been appendices. Detours into invasion boatbuilding, large extracts from reports or simplistic discussions of tactics seem to be an afterthought or filler.

Because I have a real interest in the campaign and Prussian army, this study will find a place on my book shelf. However, its value has been compromised for both the Napoleonic enthusiast and the general public wanting to know more about the two armies. It is a missed opportunity to create something far more significant and illuminating.

Reviewed by [Bill Haggart](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: June 2017