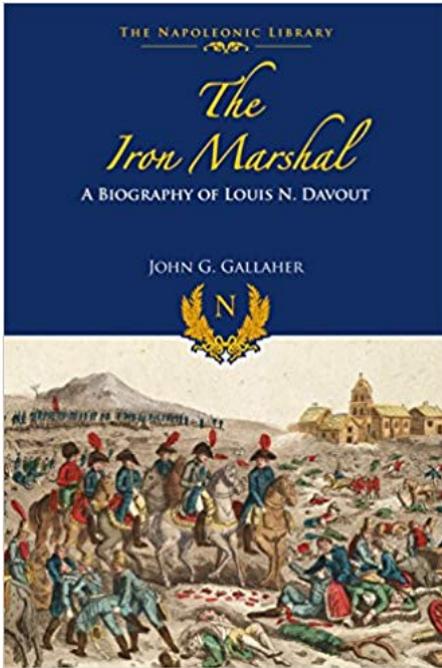


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Gallagher, John G. *The Iron Marshal: A Biography of Louis N. Davout*. Havertown (UK): Frontline, 2018. 432 pages. ISBN# 9781526738325. Hardcover \$39.95/£19.99



This is a new edition of the classic work first published in 1976. In a new preface written in 2000 the author explains that he has not rewritten it since nothing published in the interval has made this necessary, this may well be the case, but (to get minor criticism out of the way at the beginning) it is a pity the new work was not subjected to more rigorous proof reading: apart from minor typos there are peculiarities such as referring to General Bourriene, three different spellings of Beurnonville in one chapter and the mystifying condition affecting Napoleon at Borodino, 'uroedemo'. Whether these were present in the first edition I do not know: if they were, they should have been pointed out and corrected sometime in the intervening 25 years.

This is a full-scale biography beginning with Louis Nicolas Davout's aristocratic ancestry and ending with his funeral; each episode of his life is covered in detail and supported by references. A considerable amount of political and general historical narrative is supplied to provide the

background to Davout's career, which is considerate to any reader previously unfamiliar with Napoleonic history. Inevitably the central portion of his life is an account of Napoleon's campaigns since he played such a significant part in them but they are viewed from a slightly different angle to the standard Napoleon-centred narratives, which adds an extra dimension: not surprisingly, this is most noticeable in the Jena-Auerstädt chapter. The campaigns are clearly described and are illustrated by some very elegant line-drawn maps: probably some of the battle details can be disputed, that is usually the case. Davout's conduct of the siege of Hamburg is handled fairly: his harshness is justified by his obligation to carry out his orders, a defence accepted in those days, but the author explicitly states (p288) "Indeed, had Davout been tried by a war crimes court in Germany in 1814, he would surely have been found guilty of war crimes against the people of Hamburg." I do find though, that in this instance and also in the other controversial area of 1815, Davout's own version of events is accepted without as much critical examination as I would have liked: there is no reason why Davout should be assumed to be any more reliable than any other memoir writer, especially in areas where he had some explaining to do.

The author has made extensive use of Davout's private correspondence, especially that with his wife, which gives a more kindly picture to contrast with his implacable reputation: more extensive quotes from the private letters would have assisted the reader in this. Curiously, although it is admitted throughout the book that Davout was unpopular and lacking in social graces there is never an example given to illustrate this point; we are only given an account of him publicly abusing General Puthod, but then gracefully apologising when he realised he had been unjust. If some of the examples of Davout's behaviour given in Paul Britten Austin's '1812' trilogy were included it would undeniably leave the reader with a much less sympathetic attitude towards him.

The book is well researched and footnoted and the author is scrupulously fair towards the other characters, even to Bernadotte (though I will point out that the latter was not dismissed from his command on the field at Wagram - Marbot's story - he was still receiving orders up till July 8th). In my opinion there is slightly too much use of Bourrienne, Laure Junot, Thiebault and Marbot, but not in any matters of substance; the careful reader can check the footnotes for the source of each comment.

In spite of some criticisms the conclusion still has to be that this remains a classic work and a valuable addition to any Napoleonic library.

Reviewed by [Susan Howard](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: December 2018