

# The Napoleon Series

## An Interview with John Hussey: Part II

By [Robert Burnham](#)

**Question 5:** Please speculate. . . would the Anglo-Allied and Prussian Coalition have been as effective without Wellington and Blücher?

**John:** When reflecting on the relationship that existed between historic figures such as Blücher and Wellington we can draw upon elements in each man's past career, on the memories of those who knew them, and on their and their armies' archives, but we can only guess at that evanescent thing, the human touch. An historically important example would be Sarah, Marlborough's duchess. At a time when women were politically of no account, she held an absolute sway over her husband and their great friend Lord Treasurer Godolphin, a sway that lasted all their lives and led them to take actions at her insistence that they *both knew* were politically unwise and ultimately proved fatal. From their letters to her we can see that both men in their different degrees loved her, but she comes to us as doubtless a beauty but essentially an impossible unremittingly wrong-headed utter termagant. What her all-powerful magic was we cannot now discern.

From Blücher's life we know he was a fearless and impetuous leader, a good farmer, a loving father and husband, a patriot who became temporarily deranged by his country's humiliation, but with only rudimentary intellectual and political skills, which was why he was given first Scharnhorst and then Gneisenau to assist him. He was kindly and paternal towards his young and inexperienced troops and was in turn loved by them. Blücher was also blessed with a simplicity of character and a sense of humour that delighted most of those whom he met in society, and he seems to have hated only France and Napoleon. In my second volume I give a perfect instance of this simple sense, humour and insight; standing in Napoleon's palace of St Cloud in July 1815 he remarked: 'That man must have been a regular fool to have all this and go running after Moscow!'

From all this it is clear that he was a very different personality from Wellington, who was a neglectful husband, a man with a clear if narrow concept of politics and matters political, a man not loved by his army and indifferent to their views of him, a most sagacious commander with a total mastery of the 'higher branches' of military art. Of course he was not without kindness, as witness his devotion to his friend Richmond's brood of children and to his brother William's nieces; he was a patriot and deeply reverencing his country's monarchy and 18th Century constitution. Napoleon he seems to have regarded as a gambler and rogue, likening him to 'Jonathan Wild' – not a gentleman.

And yet, when Wellington and Blücher first met in the London celebrations of 1814 these two men of such different temperaments hit it off. At that time there was no thought of Boney ever emerging again to disturb the world's peace – European war was not on anyone's horizon and neither man can have dreamed of serving alongside the other in some future campaign. There must have been mutual curiosity, respect, liking of some sort, and that subtle recognition of encountering a fellow 'alpha male'. Thus at the height of the Saxon crisis six months later, when war between Prussia and Britain seemed imminent we find Blücher writing to the Duke hoping that the crisis will pass and they will not confront each other, as it would be such happiness to serve together. We have nothing at that period from Wellington that quite matches this, but whenever Blücher's name comes up in the 1815 *Despatches* and *Supplementary Despatches* and in the memoirs of men like Dörnberg, there is some quite pleasant remark about 'old Blücher' and what a 'splendid fellow' he is, and there is assistance for his young wife's requests from Germany.

This mutual liking and respect is visible all through the campaign until the negotiations over the capitulation of Paris and the personal fate of Napoleon. By the time Blücher reaches his army in mid-April the difficult negotiations on a joint strategy in Belgium have been thrashed out already, and when there is a threat of a French attack early in May the two chiefs quickly agree on mutual support at Tirlemont. Almost immediately the Saxon mutiny distracts the Prussians, and Wellington guarantees support and cooperation. There is a visit to Brussels and an inspection of Wellington's army at the month-end and both leaders are keen to launch an invasion of France [Muffling acts a valuable part in settling these terms], if only Schwarzenberg will make up his mind on a general multi-front plan. All this is good. Only the food-versus-payment dispute between the Dutch king and the Prussians really strains relations and in this the impulsive Blücher is led by a bitter Gneisenau who is dismissive of Wellington's mediation.

All this talk of invading France is killed dead by Napoleon snatching the initiative. Both chiefs know that in combination they are still too strong for him, and Blücher, without waiting to hear from Brussels decides instantly, by noon on 15 June to give battle at once. Hence the genesis of Ligny: the dream of a solely or mainly Prussian victory and a predominant place in postwar decisions. Wellington, though left in an information vacuum and indeed placed at risk by Prussian thoughtlessness, comes south to cooperate but is held at Quatre Bras. Having beaten Ney he plans to advance with Blücher the next day, only to find the Prussians have been beaten and have fallen back somewhere. He too must fall back, but he will give battle if the Prussians will send two corps, and this Gneisenau agrees to do. This certainly is a fine decision, taken when the injured Blücher is virtually unconscious, but it is based upon the Prussian need to avoid isolation and total destruction. The limits to this promise become clear overnight, when a recovered Blücher has to bear down Gneisenau's views and decide that he will bring not two corps but his whole army to support the Duke on the 18th. Both chiefs now know that it will be a battle in which both armies will fully participate.

But Blücher does not intend them to fight shoulder to shoulder. Part certainly will move towards Wellington's flank on the crest, but the main thrust will be independent of Wellington, at the French right rear in the valley towards Plancenoit. The Prussian orders are ill-thought out, the march much delayed thereby, and at times the subordinate commanders appear to take counsel of their fears. Orders are not Blücher's speciality, but nor are fears. He drives his forces on: 'You don't want me to break my word to Wellington' he shouts. Napoleon is more and more constrained by the Prussian attack and throws his final dice by launching the *Moyenne Garde* at Wellington, only to be smashed. Wellington's men push forward to 'La Belle Alliance' and there actually come under fire from Prussian guns firing from near Plancenoit. The French collapse continues and up comes Blücher and his staff to meet the Duke and rejoice in the Allied victory.

I have gone into all this detail because I want to show why I believe that nobody on the Prussian side had the same drive and courage as Blücher or would have acted as boldly as he did. It is a truism that only Wellington had the authority to direct the Anglo-Allied side. Sir Andrew Barnard of the 1/95th was once asked if he had had any fear of the outcome, and his reply said it all: "Oh no, except for the Duke. We had a notion that while he was there nothing could go wrong". And so I – somewhat lengthily – conclude that Blücher and Wellington were excellent and irreplaceable leaders in a great coalition campaign.

What happened at Paris is a sadder story. But then making a good peace is so very difficult.

**Question 6:** As a follow up to Question 5, if **Blücher** had been killed at Ligny, would whomever replaced him have marched to the aid of the British on 18 June?

**John:** We are dealing here with matters that are discussed in my second volume, so any reader of this interview will have to take much of this on trust. However, the question is a fascinating one, and for what it is worth here are my thoughts.

After Blücher fell during the final counter-attacks at Ligny, Gneisenau could do little to affect the outcome. A faulty disposition, some muddle, and Blücher's impetuous and premature deployment and wastage of his reserves took their toll. On the eastern flank the French advanced to the great west-east road that ran behind the Prussian position, linking Nivelles with Namur. This made a Prussian retreat eastward towards Namur virtually impossible. The men straggled north past Tilly and into the countryside. At this point the energetic and positively-minded QMG Grolman tried on his own initiative to reimpose some order and sent staff officers to shepherd the men northwards towards Wavre, possibly because it was the one name clearly marked on all maps.

The day of the 17<sup>th</sup> for Gneisenau was spent tackling four matters.

1. The search for news of the victorious French and about his own III and IV Corps. On both counts he received reassuring news by the afternoon so that by night all four corps of his army were fairly closely regrouped, he was receiving some fresh ammunition supplies and was not being closely pursued.

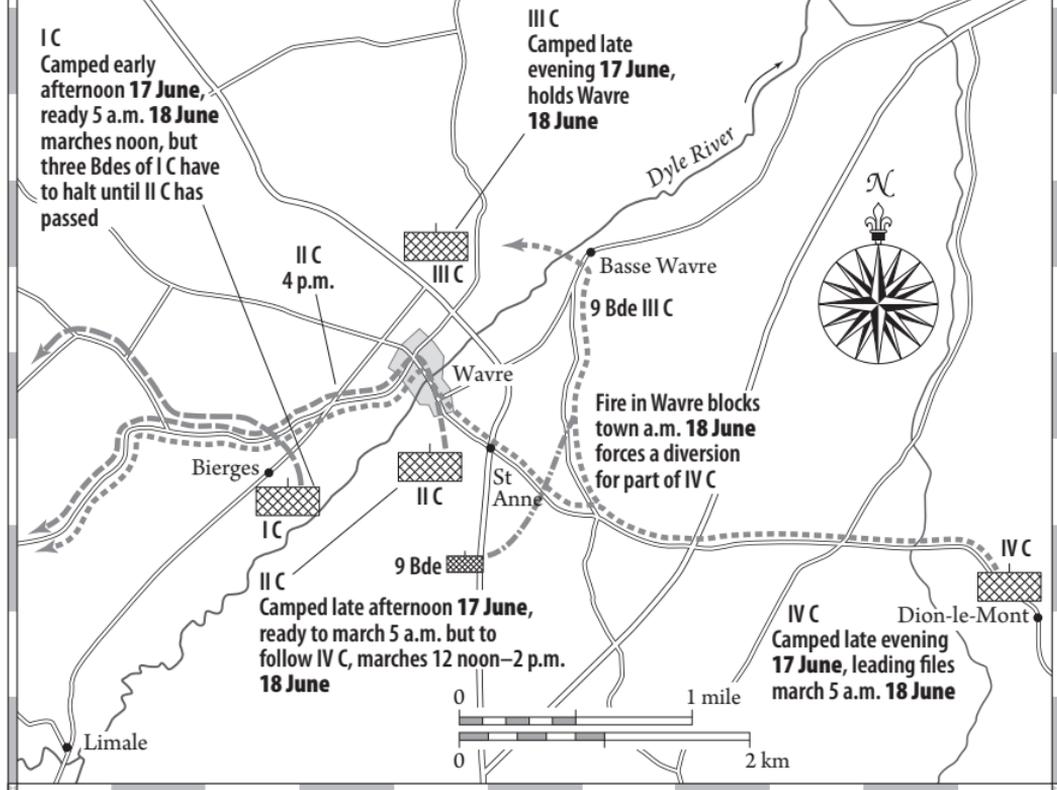
2. He knew that Wellington had won at Quatre Bras, had abandoned the proposal for a joint advance and had decided that he had now to fall back, but would fight at Mont St Jean if the Prussians would send 'two corps'. He agreed in mid-morning to send 'two corps'.

3. Gneisenau judged that if he retreated north-eastwards towards Maastricht and Germany he would be marching unaided, isolated, at risk of total destruction by superior forces if Napoleon turned all his strength against him. His best support lay in closing upon his ally and ensuring mutual support. It was that factor that governed his views as the day went on. To talk of his decision as though resembling a man safe on land holding out a hand to a drowning Wellington is to miss this fundamental point.

4. Despite excellent, accurate and reassuring reports from a Prussian scouting force to the south, which indicated that the French were mainly interested in Wellington, we know that during the evening both Gneisenau and Grolman felt that the regrouped army at Wavre could not be risked *en bloc* in going to Wellington's support, and so they intended that half should remain at Wavre [It was Blücher who finally overrode this and who insisted that the whole army would march to Mont St Jean – but in this present scenario he is "dead"]. So with Gneisenau as C-in-C only two corps will march west.[Grouchy, when he attacks on 18 June will thus find not merely a single III Corps - that had not yet started west as was intended - but two Prussian corps, and that might have led to his defeat that day instead of a partial success.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> the orders to the four corps that Blücher required to be issued by Gneisenau would have been issued to two only, and it is possible that the criss-crossing of march routes that caused so much delay and confusion might have been less. We cannot say which of the two corps Gneisenau would have selected [under Blücher we had the most distant but least battle-scarred IV as leader, followed by

## The Prussian March, 18 June 1815



### The Prussian March, 18 June 1815 (Map by Peter Wilkinson)

the Ligny-bloodied I and II, with the smallest (III) to march last. We know that they all were supposed to be readying themselves shortly after dawn but that in two cases they did not march until midday.] With a smaller marching force, might Gneisenau have got them marching earlier than historically was the case? That seems unlikely. For we know that when Blücher wrote his letter promising total support, Gneisenau insisted on a postscript that queried the accuracy of Müffling's inward reports and asked if the Duke really did intend to stand and fight. That PS implied a wish to exert a brake upon Blücher's impulse, but we are now in a situation where there is no Blücher and only the more cautious Gneisenau. As all through the morning there was no sound of gunfire from the west, so Gneisenau's doubts would have remained.

Hence I suggest that the size and speed of support proffered would have been less, that a planned morning start would not have been authorised until around noon, and that the progress of the march would have got nowhere near Lasne and the Bois de Paris by 3 pm [as it did], and that the leading officer, Bülow, whom Blücher had to push hard to open the attack on Lobau's *6e corps* east of Plancenoit, would have been much less far along the road and perhaps not close to the Bois de Paris until 6 pm or later.

Everyone must judge for himself, but I feel that Gneisenau's caution and even pessimism would have led to a much less whole-hearted intervention than the one driven forward implacably by Blücher.

But it might not have entailed total disaster for the Allies. Wellington might be beaten through lack of Prussian support, but he had inflicted grievous and irreplaceable casualties on the French army; if he had managed to keep his army together and taken cover in the forest behind him it would have been dangerous for the tired French to press into the woodland. And Napoleon would have been conscious that the Prussians were somewhere behind his back. The campaign was not necessarily lost. Who shall say?

**Question 7:** You mentioned the Saxon Mutiny that put stress on the Anglo-Allied and Prussian relationship. What other incidents or factors that were the main stress on it?

**John:** Yes, the Saxon mutiny did place a stress on the alliance in Belgium because it drastically weakened the Prussians at a time when it was thought that Napoleon was about to attack. Wellington thought it unfortunate but did not think any less of Blücher in overall terms; it was just an unfortunate incident. So the stress was what one might term 'objective', it did not harm the "Relationship" or unity. I do not think it created a stress between the two armies' high commands in the way that the provisioning imbroglio did,

where Gneisenau personally held Wellington to have acted in bad faith, and the stress in this case did damage unity and Gneisenau's attitude made it more 'subjective'. I am not sure that my explanation is particularly clear, but do you see the point I am trying to make?

So far as I can see the two main stresses on Anglo-Allied and Prussian relations in the three months before Waterloo arose first from the question of whether Wellington should adopt a maritime or western line of supply and communication, or rely upon a line that depended upon the Rhine, the natural line for Prussia; secondly from the complicated matter of how to feed the armies camped in Belgium and who was to pay for the supplies and how much. Both matters were extremely complex and convoluted, so that I shall simplify quite a lot, to try to put matters into a nutshell.

In 1814 Gneisenau had judged that in any defence of Belgium against the French the British would adopt a western line of supply and rely on bridgeheads such as Antwerp and Ostend for re-supply, while the Prussians would hold the Rhine. But in the situation of March-April 1815 he sought to persuade Wellington of the merits and even necessity of a purely eastern line. This Wellington refused to discuss and in its place emphasised other considerations. The eastern argument treated the retention of Brussels as merely optional, so that it could be abandoned in favour of a defensive line west of the Rhine, with all British supplies arriving via Emden or Bremen. This would have greatly added to the British supply burden as the German ports were four times further distant from the Thames than were Belgian ports, so that more vessels, more time, and more congestion would be the result. It was a logistical nightmare, as the campaigns of 1758 and 1794 had shown. The Duke argued that Brussels could, should and must be retained by both armies combining to cover it: but this would draw the Prussians further westwards from the Rhine. The Prussians were always worried that in defeat they might find themselves isolated and far from the Rhine while the British made for Antwerp and their ships. This fear stayed in Gneisenau's mind for the entire spring (he mentioned it on the morning of Ligny) and he may have thought the Duke's arguments sophistical, since Wellington seemed to brush aside these worries by speaking of their combined superiority outweighing the Napoleonic threat. It did not help that the Duke was militarily and socially superior to Gneisenau and had the ear of the allied sovereigns, so that the Duke's arguments prevailed.

There was another factor that could have been at work. Wellington was the supreme pragmatist. He disliked hypothetical discussions of future operations. He would wait on events, observe, and then decide. Gneisenau seemed to put greater emphasis on plans and prescriptive maxims: he spoke of armies marching widely separated, that the failure of one army need not affect the advance of the others, and so forth. Insofar as Wellington could be induced to speak in such terms he seems to have argued that close combination of armies was desirable. So the two men approached the forthcoming campaign for rather different viewpoints, and this may have led to irritation and friction.

As to the second theme, the provisioning of a quarter of a million men in Belgium while the invasion of France was being planned, the actual supply of food was naturally linked to the matter of payment, and thus some formula was needed. That each allied state should contribute according to a formula may have seemed no more than just, but in fact applying a formula proved very difficult and there was a strong suspicion that some states were cheating and not paying their proper share, so that the suppliers suffered. Gneisenau tended to take the view that the Netherlands were rich, made a small military contribution, and ought to accept that Prussia, a poor state, was providing a large contingent to protect Belgium, and so the Netherlands should supply the Prussians without payment. A bilateral agreement made in March 1815 by the Dutch and the Prussians had not mentioned 'price' and this further complicated matters. Wellington, on his arrival in April, sought to mediate but this only led Gneisenau to make some personal animadversions against the Duke. My chapter on this extremely complicated provisioning imbroglio, entitled 'A Measure of Give and Take', required repeated revision before I judged that it was reasonably comprehensible, and I suggest that anyone interested in this disagreeable argument should turn to it for a better understanding.

These, I think, were the main subjects that created strains between the two high commands.

Question 8: Napoleon does the unthinkable. He crushes the Prussians at Ligny. . . Blücher is dead and the Prussian Army destroyed. Two days later he inflicts such heavy casualties on the British, that Wellington abandons Brussels and retreats to Antwerp where the remnants of his army is evacuated to England. What will the Russians and the Austrians do? Will they decide the cause is lost and return home?

**John:** Wait a second. Is he supposed to win an overwhelming utterly crushing victory on 16 June against the three Prussian corps present [IV Corps being well distant and so surviving] and win it *without* Ney's assistance???. Napoleon, Soult, everyone was screaming at poor Michel, "The fate of France is in your hands", so his presence at Ligny was presumed essential for total victory, but if he was marching towards Brie from 1 pm onwards that surely would leave Wellington free to attack the French flank as Blücher and the Duke had discussed at Bussy windmill that noontide.

So before tackling your scenario we need to get that away.

But in taking your Question as it stands, personally I think Schwarzenberg would have kittens, wet his breeks and advised to sue for terms. Metternich and Francis I might have agreed to such a demarche; Frederick William III would have wept at the shame, but I have a gut feeling that Tsar Alexander would have maintained his determination to break Napoleon and that Frederick William III would have fallen in line behind him. This would place the Austrians before a real dilemma: which would be worse: a Europe dominated by Russia or by France. In 1813 they plumped for Russia being the lesser evil; would they again? They had to judge between

1. a rapid advance by 400,000 Russians crushing the remnants of the Armée du Nord [it must have suffered considerable casualties by now] and bringing an early peace and the ending of the burden of war budgets,

2. a prolonged struggle between France and Russia which would certainly further devastate central Europe [but not Russian lands] and still end with a non-Germanic power dominating Mitteleuropa. In this I think Alexander's determination would be the decisive factor on whether the allies would sue for peace. I think that he saw the advantage to Russia in crushing Napoleon once for all. The result would have been timid and unwilling support by Prussia and Austria, a march to Paris, and a settlement in 1815 or 1816 which left Russia as dominant as in 1945. The only real opposition to such an outcome in historical fact was the enormous prestige that Waterloo gave Castlereagh in 1815, much more than in 1814, and so Russian ambition was contained.

To be continued.

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