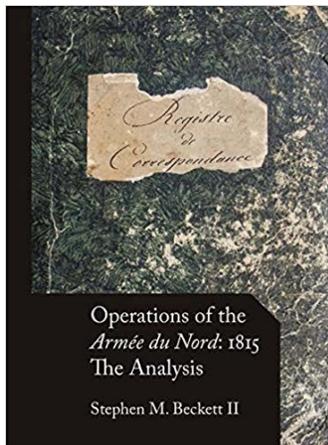


Napoleon Series Reviews

Beckett, Stephen M. *Operations of the Armée du Nord: 1815*. 5 vols. Canton, GA: Marpleflower House, 2018 - 2019. 2612 pages. ISBN: 9780986375705. \$500¹

Noted French historian, Colonel Eugène Stoffel, who died in 1907, wrote

“The first duty of one who wishes to faithfully write the history of a modern-day war is to obtain the orders, dispatches and reports that were sent and received throughout its duration. The documents in their entirety form what one may call the framework for the history of that war, a cornerstone upon which the author must build his work. Previous historians of the 1815 campaign seem not to have been concerned with this necessity and have for this reason produced accounts incomplete accounts filled with falsehoods, the most serious of which was to accuse Napoleon of intentions he had never had. While it is nearly impossible to gather every last order, dispatch and report relating to the war of 1815, one may, through diligent research, acquire as great a number as possible. Heretofore, we have merely been aware of the few orders published Marshal Grouchy based on his correspondence book and that of Marshal General Soult. However, the Army of the North, the commanders of the infantry and cavalry corps, major generals/division generals, brigadier generals and colonel each had their own book of correspondence. I have been in communication with the descendants of most of these combatants of Waterloo and, through their gracious good will I have at last succeeded in assembling many hundreds of orders, dispatches, and reports pertaining to the French army.”²



Unfortunately, Colonel Stoffel’s collection was broken up after his death and sold at auction.

Those who research the British Army at Waterloo are luckier. Although most are not down to the tactical level, Wellington’s *Dispatches* and *Supplementary Dispatches* have over 1300 pages of documents that pertain to the Waterloo Campaign. Additionally there is the *Correspondence of Sir Henry Clinton in the Waterloo Campaign*³ which came out in 2015 and has hundreds of letters, reports, orders, and even evaluations of the British battalions that fought in the Waterloo Campaign.

¹ The price varies wildly depending on whom you buy the books from. I have only found separate volumes for sale, with individual copies ranging from \$38 to \$100.

² Volume I; pages 1-1 and 1-2

³ Clinton, Henry. *The Correspondence of Sir Henry Clinton in the Waterloo Campaign*. 2 vols. edited by Gareth Glover. Godmanchester: Ken Trotman, 2015.

Stephen Beckett, the compiler and editor of *Operations of the Armée du Nord*, recognized the glaring gaps in the French correspondence and decided to see what he could find. He began his search in 2015 and spent a considerable amount of time corresponding with many people and searching archives. *Operations of the Armée du Nord* is his results. The five volumes contain over 2500 documents, many of which have never been published before.

Some of the new material that was found include:

- General Henri-Gatien Bertrand's *Minutes de la correspondance de Bertrand pendant les Cent-Jours*. General Bertrand was the Maréchal du Palais for Napoleon on campaign.
- Marshal Davout' Registry of *Correspondance expédiée du 20 mars au 8 juillet 1815*.
- *Marshal Soult's Registre de Correspondance & Rapports à L'Empereur*. Marshal Soult was Napoleon's Chief-of-Staff during the Waterloo Campaign.
- Marshal Soult's *Mouvement des Troupes*, which overlaps Marshal Grouchy's *Registre du Major-Général* and covers 13 – 18 June.
- General D'Erlon's *Registry of Correspondence*. General D'Erlon commanded the 1st Corps in the Waterloo Campaign. This registry covers the correspondence for units in his corps. Its 600+ documents cover the period from 1 April to 13 June.
- The 1st Corps' Campaign Diary which runs from 12 – 18 June.
- *Reille's Registry of Correspondence*. General Reille commanded the 2nd Corps.

A registry is a listing of the correspondence sent or received by a headquarters. Other nationalities may call them Orders Books. Some registries are just a listing of the documents, however others includes a copy of the documents or drafts of the document. Mr. Beckett has done a superb job finding many of the original documents listed in the registries or copies of them in other registries! The registries are also interesting because one can track how busy and stressed the headquarters staff became the closer to the start of the invasion they came.

“There is no doubt that in moments of stress, things got messier, abbreviated, or even skipped. On June 12 with Soult received the orders, they were way behind. He was supposed to be in Laon, so he got the orders from a half-day to a full day later than intended. The first part of the day the registry is neat and orderly, and every entry has a draft that was found in archives. But then bam, concentrations orders arrive and chaos - many things are not drafted or registered – yet we know they were sent because we see responses.”⁴

The material is covered in five volumes:

Volume I: The Registries. The first volume looks at those documents that cover the origins of the Armée du Nord and its formation. It looks at Napoleon's reasons for forming it and

⁴ Email from Stephen Beckett dated 25 June 2019.

his concept of operations, where the troops were to come from, and how they were to get to their cantonments along the Belgian border. Its 507 pages contains hundreds of documents from the above registries that have never been published before, plus relevant ones from: *Correspondance de Napoléon*;⁵ *Correspondance Générale publiée par la Fondation Napoléon*;⁶ *Correspondance du Maréchal Davout*;⁷ plus his unpublished material found in the French Archives.

Volume II: The Organization May 9 – June 4. Chronicles the organization and movements of the army from the time Marshal Soult command through the early days of June. These messages cover in detail every aspect of forming an army, from individual unit strengths, problems with deserters, including logistics, such as hospitals, and the availability of bakers. One of my favorites is a letter by Lieutenant General Ruty, the Army's Chief of Artillery, discussing reserve infantry ammunition in the Artillery Park. In a nutshell, this book shows how Napoleon to build the army from scratch.

Volume III: the Concentration June 5 – June 11. At 661 pages, this is the largest of the five volumes. The previous volume had a listing at the beginning of each section that was in effect a "registry" for that section. It listed each message, who sent it, the recipient, and a short summary of the message. It was generally organized by week. Volume III, has the same kind of registry, but it is organized by day, which means there are about 600 messages in the book or approximately 100 per day. Most of them pertain to the final preparations of the army was making to invade Belgium. In addition to reports on arrival of units into the area or in some cases the anticipated arrival or non-arrival as was the case of the 3rd Cavalry Division, there is information about the National Guard, the Gendarmes, intel reports, skirmishes with British, the quality of bread, spies, and even about the arrival of the new Eagles that were given to the regiments in Paris on 1 June! As it gets closer to the start of the operations, there are more messages about operational security, such as intercepting foreign correspondence and suspicious individuals.

Volume IV: the Invasion June 12 – June 17. This volume has about 450 documents spread over 6 days. They include copies of movement orders, logistical arrangements made based on those orders, route descriptions, problems with finding men to man the artillery train, intelligence reports, orders to move into Belgium, situation reports from the commanders of the lead troops, report of Beaumont's defection to the enemy, complaints about the discipline of the Imperial Guard, orders and reports for the battles of Quatre Bras and Ligny, and numerous reports dealing with the aftermath of the two battles, including casualty reports, treating the wounded, ammunition resupply, and the pursuit of the enemy.

Volume V: The Analysis. This is an interesting volume that "presents an analysis of several aspects of the Armée du Nord's operations that raises doubts about the established interpretation of the events in question. New hypotheses are raised directly

⁵ Published in 1869.

⁶ Published in 2018.

⁷ Published in 1885.

from the overwhelming evidence amassed in the companion references.”⁸ Mr. Beckett looks at whether there was a conspiracy within the army to undermine Napoleon. He looks at the key personnel who might have been involved, analyzes in great detail how the army’s communications were sent, which surprisingly at first was via the national postal system, then a dedicated military postal system, and then by couriers. His examination provides data on how fast a message could be sent and the factors affecting its speed. He then looked day-by-day on how these systems impacted the army.

Volume V also contains several valuable appendices.

- A Master Chronology of all the documents done in chronological order. This is a compilation of all the “registers” for each section in every volume.
- Marshal Soult’s justification of his actions.
- General Bourmont’s defection in his own words.
- An appeal to all Frenchmen to rehabilitate Bourmont’s reputation
- A master index to the first four volumes.

A sample of the type of documents that are in the books is this report by the Intendent General to Marshal Soult on the state of the services in the army.

Paris Le 17 Mai 1815
Monsieur Le Maréchal

Mon rapport d’hier qui entretenoit Votre Excellence de la situation de tous les Services, à l’armée du Nord, comprenoit par conséquent les 1er et 6e corps d’armée. Les ordonnateurs en chef de ces Corps d’armée viennent de m’adresser leur rapport particulier et comme ils contiennent à peu près les mêmes observations que celui de l’ordonnateur en chef Volland, j’entrerai dans peu de détails à cet égard.

1er Corps d’armée
Ambulances

Le Corps d’armée a reçu à Lille le matériel de cinq ambulances pour 4 Divisions d’infanterie et une réserve au quartier général ; les trois divisions de Cavalerie n’en ont point. Ces ambulances n’avoient point de moyen de transport. D’après les dispositions ordonnées hier à l’ordonnateur Volland, les Equipages militaires qui servoient au transport des vivres vont être rendues à leur destination.

Campement.

Les corps sont pourvus des effets de campement et il en reste à Lille pour les corps qui arriveroient à l’armée.

⁸ Vol. 5, page 6

Transports

Il n'y a pas un seul caisson de vivres à la suite. Le service se fait donc par requisition. Il seroit très essentiel d'envoyer au 1 Corps un bataillon des Equipages.

6e Corps d'armée Service courant

Ce Service se fait régulièrement, les troupes reçoivent les vivres de campagne. Elles ont en ce moment les trois jours de pain voulu par les ordres de l'Empereur.
II-59 May 9–17

Ambulances - transports

Ce Corps a ses ambulances pour l'infanterie et le quartier général. La Cavalerie n'en a point. Ces ambulances sont attelées./.

Daignez agréer Monsieur Le Marechal, l'hommage de mon respect
L'Intendant Général Daure⁹

The author has done a superb job of organizing the 2500 letters and reports. The “register” for each section of the volume, plus the master “register” of all documents in the book that is in Volume V, provides a short overview of each document. This gives the researcher an idea of what is in each of them. My only complaint, and it is relatively minor, is that there is no page number assigned to each document in the “register”. This meant once I found a document in the “register” I had to thumb through the pages to find it. Hopefully in future editions the author will add the page numbers to the “registers”.

Mr. Beckett closes with

“The discoveries of new registries and original correspondence is absolute proof that we don't know what happened and that the history of French operations has been manufactured – it is a patchwork of guesses dominated by few facts and many preferences. The pursuit which should unite all historians interested in the period is acquiring access to the many primary source materials that still exist.”

Mr. Beckett has two goals for this book. The first is “to gather all the important correspondence for the operations of the Armée du Nord”.¹⁰ The second goal was that

⁹ Vol. 3, pages II – 58 and II - 59

¹⁰ Vol. 5; page xiii

now that this correspondence has been rediscovered and scholars began to use it to further “our understanding of events, private collectors will be willing to contribute their holdings to this effort”.¹¹ Without a doubt he has published an unbelievable number of documents about the French Army of 1815, which have long been lost to most scholars.

This book is one of the most valuable books on Waterloo that has come out in many years. Future scholars are now able to see how well, or poorly, French command and control functioned during the critical days leading up to the start of and during the first several days of Napoleon’s final campaign. The value of these books is incalculable! This will be the go-to source for scholars for decades to come. Highly recommended.

On a side note, Mr. Beckett has produced a video called [Waterloo The Truth behind Napoleon's Final Defeat](#). In it he examines the material in the above books and shows a possible conspiracy to undermine Napoleon at the highest levels. It is interesting.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: June 2019. Updated September 2019.

¹¹ Ibid