

**C. J. Esdaile, *Napoleon, France and Waterloo: The Eagle Rejected* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2016), pp. xiv + 257. ISBN: 1473870828. £25.**

Reviewed by Zack White

History is full of debates and unanswered questions. The inability to fully determine the ‘truth’ about key historical questions is part of what makes the subject so fascinating. Historians have never solved, and perhaps never will solve, questions such as: ‘To what extent does Field Marshal Douglas Haig deserve the nickname “The Butcher of the Somme”?’; ‘Was Charles II truly a “Merry Monarch” or a shrewd manipulator of people and politics?’ and ‘Was Hitler’s Final Solution designed from the outset, or did it develop as a result of the circumstances that Nazi Germany found itself in?’.

The Napoleonic Wars are no different. More than 200 years after the final defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte, there is fierce debate over the relative importance that should be placed on key events or individuals from the conflict. Given the healthy level of discussion that exists amongst scholars of the period, it is surprising that the one figure who has so far been the focus of little debate is the man who gave his name to the conflict: Napoleon himself. It is this, and an inclination to deify the dictator, which Professor Charles Esdaile laments in the opening pages of his greatly anticipated new publication. In a clear statement of intent, Esdaile challenges the existing consensus that Napoleon deserves to be remembered as a hero of the French Revolution, and a man of peace who had war forced upon him in 1815 by the belligerence of Britain and her allies.

In his study, he examines in great detail the situation in France during 1814 – 1815, arguing that Napoleon’s position in France was untenable. In terms of long term military impact, the result at Waterloo was largely irrelevant, as it would have been impossible for Napoleon to defeat all of his enemies. To do so, Esdaile suggests, would have placed too much strain on a France which had already been bled dry of men and resources. Napoleon had returned to a nation that was exhausted by war, and was unable and unwilling to give any more. If Napoleon had not been defeated at Waterloo, he would ultimately have been defeated elsewhere. Furthermore, far from being a triumphal return based on near universal support from the French population, Napoleon mainly owed his return to the disgruntled veterans of the French army who saw an opportunity to regain both employment and lost glory.

Those who disagree with the theories that underpin this work might initially suggest that the book is simply offering a revisionist view for the sake of it, yet such an accusation does not stand up to scrutiny. Esdaile is well established as one of the world’s foremost experts on the Napoleonic era. He has a steadfast reputation for effectively challenging popular misconceptions of the period, and *Napoleon, France and Waterloo* is clearly written with the same, laudable intention.

Furthermore, the quality of the work speaks for itself, as this book is a masterclass in how to construct a carefully argued, yet exciting historical narrative. The reader is taken on a journey through the period, whilst Esdaile interweaves extracts from contemporary sources with historical analysis. At no point are theories which clash with Esdaile’s views dismissed

out of hand. On the contrary, every avenue is carefully explored, and the flaws in each argument are meticulously explained as Esdaile convincingly expresses his interpretation.

Perhaps the greatest strength of this work, is that Esdaile allows the sources to speak for themselves, telling this gripping story through the eyes of those who experienced it. His account of the climax of the Battle of Waterloo is a brilliant example of this. Esdaile is so effective at demonstrating the confusion and fragility of the Anglo-Dutch army at the point of the last French attack, made by the Imperial Guard, that the reader is left wondering how on earth Wellington's troops were able to hold out. Whilst numerous accounts of Waterloo have been published to coincide with the battle's bicentenary, few are as effective as Esdaile's in immersing the reader in the turmoil and gun smoke.

However, this book is by no means just another re-hash of the well-known story of Waterloo. It is important to emphasise that Esdaile has broken new ground by carrying out a detailed investigation into the situation in France in 1814-1815. Most work on this topic focuses on the over-arching narrative of Napoleon's fall, first abdication, exile to Elba, and return. However, for the first time, Esdaile explores in great depth the thoughts and feelings of the French people as these events unfolded. In the process, he persuasively argues that the popular response to Napoleon's return from exile was often rather lukewarm, and that his claims to wish to create a parliamentary regime convinced few. Here, again, the idea that this work is revisionist for its own sake is disproven. There are clear parallels between the arguments put forward here, and wider points made by Esdaile in previous works about a comparative lack of enthusiasm amongst the French population when Napoleon returned from Elba.

The style of writing is clear and free flowing, and the book is illustrated with well-chosen images and a helpful map on the Battle of Waterloo. The reader should be warned to pay careful attention to the footnotes. Again, this is especially well demonstrated in the account of Waterloo, where Esdaile, in order to convincingly highlight how easily Waterloo could have been transformed into a French victory, tweaks reality slightly whilst dabbling in counter-factual history. However, the footnotes are very clear in explaining the tweaks that he has made. In fact, the footnotes are, in themselves, another great strength of this work, as they are comprehensive and provide useful additional details. Almost as much can be learned about the topic from the footnotes as can be learnt from the main text. This is another example of how this book is in many ways a blueprint for how to write 'proper' analytical history.

It is difficult to know how scholars of the Napoleonic Era will receive this work. Esdaile certainly takes no prisoners when it comes to denouncing the claims of those who feel that Napoleon could have won the campaign of 1815, or that he had peaceful intentions. At times his criticism of pro-Bonaparte historians, especially David Hamilton-Williams, borders on being scathing. Some may feel that this work goes too far in its efforts to dismantle the deeply embedded 'Bonaparte myth', although arguably this is necessary in order to generate a rigorous debate on the matter.

In the opening pages of this book, Esdaile himself describes his contribution as forlorn, yet this is one area where he is undoubtedly mistaken. This engaging and cleverly written book will excite novices and experts alike, and there can be little doubt that this work is essential reading for anyone who studies the period. It is often said that, in history, today's

consensus is tomorrow's controversy. Thanks to this bold study, the era of consensus on Napoleon is over. 200 years on, Napoleon's supporters and opponents are about to do battle once again, albeit this time with a pen, rather than a sword. Only time will tell whether Napoleon will lose the peace in the same way that he lost the war.