

Historical Arguments re: Napoleon

"History is indeed an argument without end."

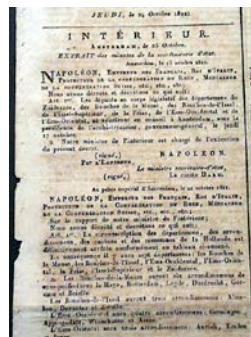
*It is doubtful whether there has ever been a more stimulating and yet contentious historical subject; each one of the thousands of learned works devoted to Napoleon Bonaparte has painted a different impression of the man. —David G. Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, introduction, p. xxv*

That historians should give their own country a break, I grant you; but not so as to state things contrary to fact. For there are plenty of mistakes made by writers out of ignorance, and which any man finds it difficult to avoid. But if we knowingly write what is false, whether for the sake of our country or friends or just to be pleasant, what difference is there between us and hack-writers? Readers should be very attentive to and critical of historians, and they in turn should be constantly on their guard. —Polybus, second century BC historian

by Kevin Zucker

When I set out to research the 1814 campaign for *NAB*, I realized that this project would take more than a trip or two to the library. I camped at the NYPL for weeks assembling the OrBat. I had just published *Napoleon's Last Battles* the year before, for which the resources available easily to hand were sufficient, considering the breadth of coverage in print. The Order of Battle was well known. *NAB* was a different story, but there was F.L. Petre, who anticipates the questions that a game designer would ask.

This effort called for total immersion. I even veered off to the newspaper archives of the NYPL (all online now), to read the Paris newspapers from 1814.



I discovered there were two “camps,” basically pro-Napoleon and anti-Bonapart-ist. This bifurcating tendency exists in all groups. When a group forms, it will quickly split into an “A” group and a “B”

group. This does NOT necessarily mean that all the writers on Napoleon must side with one or the other. It is a human tendency to do so, but according to the rules of our art, we must keep a level head, and after we have assembled our research—then we use our own judgement as well as corroboration from as many sources as we can find. I was trained to assume that all accounts are true and honest, until shown otherwise. I accept the accounts of pro- and anti- authors equally. I even found much in David Hamilton Williams useful. But if you have a bias as you go through your research, dismissing what could be critical information by deriding its source, *ad hominem*.

Like Samuel Eliot Morrison, I'll grant you that the historian will at all times sing the praises of his own side, but if he states something contrary to fact, he betrays the trust he undertook as a historian. I am neither a hagiographer nor a snagiographer (I just made that up). I am not of the pro-Napoleon party nor am I anti-Bonapartist. I'm not here for that ride. I just want to study the campaign. We all know that Bulletins lie, and Napoleon consistently doubled the stats in his favor. So it is more than fair to divide all his claims in half. He cheated at cards, he cheated at history, and he cheated at war.

Since David Hamilton Williams, there has grown up a contrarian approach to historical fact. The contra-historian gives

himself permission to cherry-pick the evidence. That is probably going to be an argumentative and inflexible individual. They have their position staked out on their hilltop and they defend it against all comers. What is missing is any pretense of balance. Their riposte is that human beings are inherently biased, so those who show their bias are indeed the more open.

But to circle back to Professor Geyl's quote (top), History is and should be an argument. Not an argument for increased bias, not cherry-picking. It means being willing to throw your hypothesis out the window. The ego can get in the way of understanding.

These days people discuss internet "fact-checkers," but knowledge isn't like that. The Theory of Flight is still just a theory and it works pretty good most of the time. Most "knowledge" is not "facts" but more a soup of information, some of it critical, some irrelevant, and some false. In our field, I am willing to accept, as a hard and fast Fact, that an individual, Napoleon Bonaparte, did live between 1769 and 1821. I am willing to grant you that the Battle of Waterloo did occur in 1815, and the Emperor lost. I have visited the battlefield...

But whether the Emperor was a good or a bad man, I have sworn my oath to neither side.

Napoleon had both good and evil sides. Chandler covers this when he quotes Clarendon, "A great, bad man." He is human- he incorporates both the best and worst of humanity. He is a mythological figure. People project their own feelings and opinions about the man. I have come away from my researches being impressed by the modern tone of his correspondence. It is crisp, clear and definite. His instructions themselves are bold, where an Austrian general opposite him would be striving to avoid losses. The great inclination to limit losses is one thing that reflects in lower leader ratings. They are operating so as "not to lose." For the first part of the 1814 campaign, Austria would have settled for a

peace with Napoleon. From Schwarzenberg's position, your monarch is telling you "we have only one army, don't lose it." At the same time, the diplomats say privately, they might even settle for peace with Napoleon-behind the 1792 borders. Which of course Napoleon refuses. Napoleon was not a good diplomat, he was tactless. That was a major flaw that did him no good in negotiations.

Napoleon, Inspiring Leader? Yes.

What about Napoleon the Generalissimo? He was a great general. He had several bad campaigns, and he was badly served by Napoleon the diplomat.

Napoleon the Law Giver? Check

Napoleon Wise Ruler? Not overall. The Empire was a calamity, but once the Revolution started, this was a coming storm. He understood the art of ruling.

Napoleon, Economist? He did work to increase the French economy, but his economy was based on land wealth (Silver) instead of Gold.

Napoleon, Savior of France? At first, this was appreciated, but as the wars wore on...

Napoleon, Egotist brought a curse on France.

Napoleon, Humanist, was aware of how he failed his people. See his speech to the senate above.

Napoleon, Romantic? Indeed! See his letters back home to Josephine from Italy. Stanley Kubric's Napoleon scenario focuses on the love affairs.

For more, see David Chandler's Intro, "Napoleon—the Man and the General: Qualities and Defects" in "Campaigns of Napoleon."

My Personal Story

Napoleon chose me, as much as I chose him. OSG is very convenient for the Emperor's image; at the same time OSG has a ready-built audience. Each gamer has a different fascination drawing him onto our subject.

Without John R. Elting's Napoleonic Atlas, I don't think NAB or any of these other games would have seen delight of play.

Vincent Esposito's oversize maps are meticulously rendered, with the different stages of the campaign on the same terrain background, like a flip-book.

I ran afoul of Col. Elting in the pre-pub review of my book, *"Habit of Victory."* This book was supposed to come out from Greenhill back in the '90's. Then I got a list of almost 200 points that Elting didn't agree with. It all came down to the outcome of the Battle of Eylau—who won? The battle is usually rendered as a French squeaker, by virtue of the fact that the French held the battlefield (and that alone). The losses were practically equal (there was no pursuit). The Ruskies got away to fight another day (Heilsberg-Friedland June campaign).

Elting, unfortunately, insisted that Eylau was a true French Victory, and down-played the destruction of the VII Corps (which was disbanded after the battle), to remove the supports from the counter-argument.

I cited Marbot's assertion that the officers of the 14th Line at Eylau suffered 36 out of 39 casualties. Elting challenged this eye-witness account on the basis of Marbot's supposed unreliability. This bad rap came from Chandler, who doesn't say Marbot is a liar, merely that "Marbot's tale certainly lost nothing in the telling;" or he could have also said, "I don't believe him." That is, one very fine historian at his writing desk versus an eye-witness account from the battlefield.

I continue the story in Special Study Nr. 2...

The 14th Line at Eylau

The memoirs of Lieutenant Marbot ... provide the mud, howling winds, numbing cold, and pounding drums of 1807 from one man's point of view. In a blizzard of snow and metal on the 8th of February, 1807, Marbot rode with an order to the 14th Regiment of the Line, on a hillock outside of Eylau. At the climax of the campaign—the apogee of the French storm across Europe—Marbot was wounded and watched as the 14th was destroyed in front of his eyes.

David Chandler, in the authoritative *Campaigns of Napoleon*, concludes that "a proportion of the regiment managed to escape—perhaps as many as half—and Marbot's vivid story has certainly lost nothing in the telling." For a typical regiment, losses of 50% in one day were more than sufficient to render it "destroyed," at least temporarily, until stragglers could be collected and officers replaced. Bourdeau, in *les campagnes modernes*, says that the 14th Line was "destroyed."

Marbot states that thirty-six officers of the 14th Line were buried in a mass grave near the hillock. Martinien's *Officiers Tues et Blesses*, based on official records, confirms the officer casualty figure for the 14th Line at Eylau as 39 officers wounded or killed. That is a loss of over 90% officer casualties for a regiment of two battalions.

Overall the whole VII Corps, of which the 14th Line was a part, suffered 57% lost at Eylau. The Corps was so badly damaged that it had to be disbanded, with its remnants distributed to other formations. This was the first time such a thing occurred in the Grande Armée. When they were ordered transferred on 4 March 1807 to the other Corps, the 14th Line had only 4 companies, the 44th Line six, and the other regiments 8 or 10 companies.

Andolenko, in *Aigles de Napoléon contre Drapeaux du Tsar*, reports the actual loss of the 14th Line's two battalions—not 50% as Chandler conjectures, but as much as 73%. Andolenko does not doubt Marbot's account of his mission to the 14th Line, merely his "very fantastic" explanation of what happened to the regiment's eagle after his loss of consciousness.

Those are the facts. It is up to the individual reader to determine for himself whether Eylau was a French victory or a defeat.

Serious students of history do not need to be spoon-fed and told what to think.