THE WATERLOO CAMPAIGN

The Strategic Background

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The strategic dimension of the Waterloo campaign is the one that receives far too little attention. The operational dynamics and interactions of the campaign, and the tactics of the day itself, have been extensively, sometimes exhaustively, covered, but, as so often, the strategic dimension has been relatively neglected. This neglect reflects a number of factors. There is a tendency to believe that the strategic situation and issues are obvious, there are the serious limitations in the source base, there is the more general interest with the tactical dimension, and there is the widespread popular tendency to treat the operational level as if it was the strategic one.

The last links back to the first of the factors cited, namely the conviction that the broader parameters were set by the drive for victory, and that therefore 'strategy' should focus on the means adopted. That approach, however, fails to capture the key strategic element of the campaign, the strategic asymmetry between Napoleon and his opponents. This asymmetry will be the topic of this piece. It set the essential parameters of the campaign and also should provide the guide for judging the vexed issues of success and the respective role of the armies of Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington and Field Marshal Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher in this success. Put simply, and these points will be fleshed out, Napoleon had to win, and win dramatically, while Wellington only needed to avoid serious defeat. In doing so, he would thwart Napoleon and thus overcome his strategy. As a consequence, Wellington won a defensive victory in successfully resisting successive attacks.

This victory was then transformed into a very different victory as a result of Blücher's advance and success against the French right. The second victory, however, was not 'necessary' in strategic terms as the advance of Austrian and Russian forces placed Napoleon in a very difficult position if he could not dissolve the Allied coalition. The strategic asymmetry rested on the legacy of the Napoleonic Wars hitherto. They had left a deep distrust of Napoleon, and this distrust took precedence over the tensions between the Allies. These tensions were as longstanding: Prussia's rise under Frederick the Great (r. 1740–86) had been achieved on the basis of Austrian failure, while Britain and Russia had come close to war on several occasions from the Ochakov Crisis of 1791.

More recently, tensions between Britain and Austria had been to the fore in 1813–14 as the latter continued to negotiate with Napoleon and the British feared a settlement that would leave France with a frontier on the Rhine and, notably, control of Belgium and its threatening naval facilities and harbour at Antwerp. In the winter of 1814–15, these serious differences received fresh direction and energy as a result of a dispute over the fate of Napoleon's former ally, Saxony. Russia supported Prussia's drive for crippling territorial gains, which Austria, backed by Britain and France, opposed.

These tensions suggested possibilities for the revisionism that Napoleon's return from exile in Elba represented. Ironically, this return overthrew a better-grounded revisionism that Louis XVIII and Talleyrand had sought to pursue at Vienna in 1814–15. Russia had sought co-operation with France against Britain, but Louis preferred an informal relationship with the British, which was designed to ensure that France played a role in the negotiations over the German and Italian questions. Talleyrand's co-operation with Austria and Britain over Saxony was designed to replace the alliance that had defeated Napoleon in 1814, the continuation of which would have left France with only a limited role, by a new diplomatic order in which France could have greater influence in Europe, as well as specific benefits on her frontiers. Count Blacas, the personal representative of Louis XVIII, advocated a league against Russia that initially would unite Britain, and her protégé the United Netherlands, with the Bourbon powers, and then be widened to include Austria and Prussia. Good relations were sought with the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II. A politics of interest was

linked to a sense that France was rightfully the arbiter of Europe and an accompanying suspicion of aggrandisement by others. Louis and Talleyrand disliked Russian predominance in Eastern Europe and tried to limit Austrian power and influence in Italy. In addition, Louis sought to recreate a Bourbon Family Compact with Spain and to restore the Bourbons to Naples.

Combining policy and strategy, this was diplomacy for a re-integration of France into the European diplomatic order, and such a re-integration was eventually to be achieved. Napoleon's return from Elba overthrew Louis XVIII's strategy and delayed this re-integration. The return also reset the international order as it had been in the spring of 1814, and thus set the context for the military strategies that were to be pursued during the 'Hundred Days'.

Napoleon had found his control of the principality of Elba, a small island, a frustrating lesson in impotence and one that mocked his greatly inflated sense of his own destiny, and he was only too happy to launch an attempt to regain France. On the evening of 26 February 1815, Napoleon took advantage of the absence of his British escort, Colonel Sir Neil Campbell, who was on a visit to Florence, to leave with a small flotilla and about 1,100 troops.

Louis XVIII, an out of touch and unpopular king, was unable to compromise to the will of the French people and as such found himself easily overthrown. (Anne S. K. Brown)

The departure of Louis XVIII in March 1815 at the start of Napoleon's Hundred Days. (Anne S. K. Brown)

Evading two frigates patrolling on the orders of Louis XVIII, as well as a British brigantine, Napoleon arrived near Antibes on the French Provençal coast on 1 March. The garrison was not welcoming, but soon surrendered in the face of Napoleon's force.

Napoleon offered both policy and strategy of his own for France's re-integration into the European diplomatic order. They were to be proven redundant by events, but their practicality also requires consideration. Advancing from south to north against no resistance, Napoleon was welcomed at the Tuileries Palace in Paris on the evening of 20 March. The unpopularity and lack of grip of Louis XVIII were important factors as was the uncertain response of the French military, but so also was Napoleon's drive, his ability to grasp the initiative, and his rapid advance.

This equation of relative advantage could not be repeated when Napoleon advanced into Belgium in June 1815. In a marked reversal of the situation the French encountered in Spain in 1808, Napoleon was to find the suppression of popular opposition easier in France in 1815 than engaging regular forces. Opposition in southern and western France was overcome in April and June 1815 respectively. The Army of the West which crushed the rising in the Vendée at the Battle of Rocheservière included part of the Young Guard of the Imperial Guard, which would otherwise have been at Waterloo.

Vive l'Empereur! Having travelled 300 miles north without opposition, Napoleon enters Paris in triumph on 20 March 1815. (Anne S. K. Brown)

Napoleon's return, a key instance of the use of force to overthrow a government, was unacceptable to the Allied powers. In his letters to the Allied sovereigns, Napoleon promised to observe existing treaties, in other words the Vienna agreement, and affirmed peace with the rest of Europe. Armand de Caulaincourt, Napoleon's last foreign minister, now returned to office, wrote to his British counterpart, Robert, Viscount Castlereagh, on 4 April, to inform him of the return of Napoleon and that Napoleon hoped for peace.

In theory, therefore, Napoleon offered re-integration on the basis of accepting the situation agreed by Louis XVIII. In theory, moreover, this should have proved possible. Napoleon had experience of bringing down successive coalitions organised against him and of fighting them into an acceptance of his position. The same had been the achievement of the domestically more radical French Revolutionaries. Despite the 'we will/should never negotiate' position of Edmund Burke and others, the powers of the First Coalition had all eventually negotiated with the Revolutionaries, some had signed treaties, and Spain had allied.

Royalists denounced the returned Napoleon as a Jacobin, and he courted support in France by populist measures, such as the abolition of feudal titles and the commissioning of public works, but these were not unacceptably radical on the model of those of 1792–94. Instead, the promises of constitutional and liberal government that were offered, which included freedom of the press and the maintenance of Louis XVIII's constitutional assemblies, would not have worried a British commentator. These steps and promises are emphasised in some recent French works, but not in those produced by non-French writers.

At the same time, Napoleon found little enthusiasm in France for a new struggle, and conscription was particularly unwelcome. Conscription had been abolished, and the Legislative Chamber was unwilling to recall the class of 1815. Napoleon responded by seeking to circumvent the situation and the Chamber, which he correctly identified as a source of élite opposition. To do so, Napoleon classified the class of 1815 as discharged soldiers who had to serve, and he was able to raise about 46,000 men, but none reached his army in the field.

However, Napoleon could call on veterans whose experience was essentially one of war and most of whom saw few opportunities under Louis XVIII. Many of the veterans served among the 200,000 troops in the Royal army. Moreover, repatriated prisoners, discharged veterans, soldiers recalled from half-pay, as well as sailors from the navy, all served to build up the army. The pool of French troops was not limited, as it had been in 1814, by the deployment of many in besieged garrisons.

The possibility apparently offered for those of a counter-factual disposition is therefore of a France akin to that under the July Monarchy (1830–48), a France with which Britain was able to co-operate and that was easily re-integrated into the European diplomatic order and, indeed, into that of the expanding Western world. Taking this argument further, it can be pointed out that the British ministries during the July Monarchy were Whig or Peelite Tory, and that a ministry of either type would have been able to work with Napoleon, whereas the more conservative Tories of the Liverpool and Wellington ministries found the reformed Bourbons more conducive.

There is also a military dimension to such counter-factualism. The latter tends to focus on the events of the day of Waterloo, or on the campaign as a whole. Yet, there is also a more profound counter-factualism in strategic terms. This looks at strategy in terms of prioritisation, and points out that in 1815 France did not benefit, as it had repeatedly, from the diversion of its opponents' attentions and energies, let alone from divisions between them. In 1770, during the Falkland Islands Crisis; in 1778–83, during the War of American Independence; and in 1790, during the Nootka Sound Crisis, France had been able to focus on Britain without the distraction of opposition from Austria, Prussia and/or Russia. The French Revolutionaries had benefited from the focus of the three last on the Polish question in 1793–95, while Napoleon had sought to profit from the rivalry between Turkey and Russia and from that between Britain and the United States.

1815 represented a strategically flawed moment in this scenario for France. Although Britain was engaged in war with Kandy and Nepal, these were small-scale and localized conflicts, and not as serious as earlier wars with Mysore and the Marathas. Moreover, the war with the United States had ended earlier in the year. Russia had no diversions.

Not only were these powers able to focus on Napoleon in 1815, but, in addition, he suffered from their earlier successes and, in particular, from their ability to overcome their geopolitical and strategic problems. Russia's victory over France in 1812–13 was simply the culmination of a triumphant overcoming of the *barrière de l'est* also seen in successes at the expense of Sweden (1808–09) and Turkey (1806–12), with victories resulting in treaties in which Russia's position was accepted.

A structural or systemic account of British empire building can make war, naval power, imperial expansion and maritime hegemony appear not only as obviously linked, but also as inevitably leading to a synergy of success. This approach is misleading and, in particular, underrates the multiple difficulties posed to Britain's domestic and international situations. Even if the synergy

Armand de Caulaincourt, Napoleon's foreign minister, saw a rise in fortunes upon Napoleon's return. (Topfoto)

This split view shows how quickly the French officials, previously loyal to Louis, switched allegiance to Bonaparte. (Anne S. K. Brown)

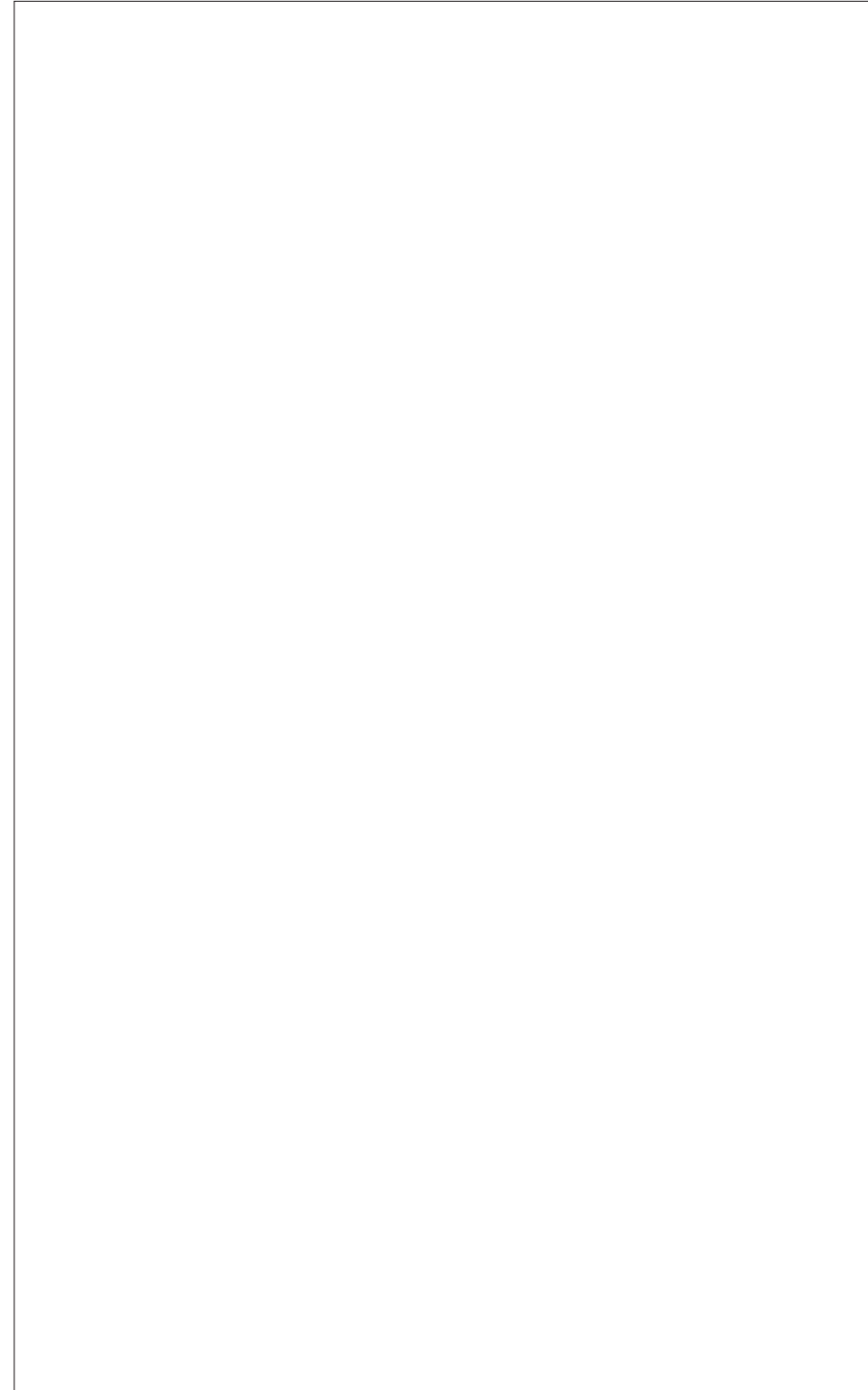## THE PROPOSED ALLIED INVASION OF FRANCE

Viscount Castlereagh, Caulaincourt's British counterpart and good friend of the Duke of Wellington. (Topfoto)

appeared clear-cut overseas after the major victory over the French and Spanish fleets at Trafalgar in 1805, there was still the danger that defeat on the European Continent or simply the collapse of Britain's alliance system would lead to a return of colonial gains in order to obtain peace, as had occurred in 1748 and 1802. The possibility that Austria might settle with Napoleon as late as early 1814 had made this a continuing danger. Trade and empire had to be fought for, by Britain, both on their own and as part of an often complex and difficult foreign policy. The latter was to the fore in 1815 but a united Allied approach against Napoleon made this issue less threatening for Britain.

For Britain by 1815, the geopolitical challenge by the combination of French, Spanish and Dutch naval power had been overcome, as had the economic threats of exclusion both from French-dominated Europe and from the United States. Moreover, the American attempt to conquer Canada had been driven back. Napoleon had seen the War of 1812 as a threat to Britain. In late January 1815, a British visitor who saw him on Elba recorded his host as saying that: 'peace with America should have been made sooner, as it would have given us [Britain] greater influence in the Congress'.

In 1815, there was no French attempt at *revanche* at sea comparable to that mounted by Napoleon in Belgium. Like those of 1814, 1870, 1914 and 1940, the conflict of that year was to be decided at sea; although sea-power was to prove of much greater relevance in all of these wars bar the Franco-Prussian of 1870–71. At the same time, in 1815 British naval power posed a major danger for Napoleon as it permitted British action in support of Royalists within France and also supported a blockade that ensured that France would not be able to trade with neutral powers or maintain links with its colonies. The former meant that the Anglo-American peace at Ghent would not be able to provide a basis for a *rapprochement* between the United States and France that could help Napoleon. The United States would only be able to trade with Britain.

Thus, Britain had emerged triumphant in the Atlantic world, as Russia had in Eastern Europe. These successes reflected a range of factors, not least the superiority of *Ancien Régime* military systems over the French Revolutionary/Napoleonic model that attracts so much attention in a misleading teleological account of the development of modern war.

The War of 1812 against the United States of America had provided some naval respite to the French as many ships of the Royal Navy were diverted to the east coast of America from the Atlantic and Mediterranean fleets. This print depicts the attack of Fort Oswego, on Lake Ontario, 6 May 1814. (Anne S. K. Brown)

The geopolitical context made it difficult for Napoleon unless he could avoid war by negotiations or, once begun, end it by dividing his opponents, as he had repeatedly done hitherto. However, Napoleon's return united the powers, which had been divided over the future of Saxony. On 13 March 1815, the powers assembled at Vienna declared Napoleon's invasion an illegal act and offered help to Louis XVIII. The presence of Alexander I of Russia and Frederick William III of Prussia in Vienna eased tensions among the Allies and speeded deliberations. Across Europe, Napoleon's envoys were promptly sent back by the Coalition powers. On 21 March, 'Boney's Return from Elba, or the Devil among the Tailors', a caricature by George Cruikshank, appeared in London. It captured the change that Napoleon's return appeared to usher in, but also the response. Looking far younger than in he really was, Napoleon, sword in hand, pushes Louis XVIII of France onto the floor and throws the gathering of European potentates into confusion. Yet, there are also signs of resistance. John Bull promises help to Louis and to sew up Napoleon, Blücher challenges the latter with a large pair of tailors' scissors, and an unperturbed Tsar Alexander I declares 'I'll take a few Cossack *measures* to him'.

On 25 March, the powers at Vienna renewed their alliance in order to overthrow Napoleon. Austria, Britain, Prussia and Russia each promised to provide forces of 150,000 men, with Britain being permitted to provide some of its contribution with money to be used to subsidise the forces of allies or to hire troops from rulers lacking the necessary funds. An agreement was reached over Saxony in May.

Napoleon had no real alternative to war. Indeed, at the same time that he had approached the Allies, his rhetoric within France towards the other powers was hostile and bellicose. Caulaincourt was also ordered to create a new league with the lesser powers, including Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, and the minor German and Italian states. This proposal was a testimony to his lack of realism, as well as to the flawed basis for the revisionism he represented and sought to foster. So also was his confidence that the people elsewhere who had known his rule would reject war against France whatever their rulers thought. This diplomacy to peoples led Napoleon to order the publication of appeals to foreigners who had served in his forces to rejoin them.

Ordered back from being a delegate at Vienna to take command of the British forces in Belgium, Wellington sought a repetition of the campaign of 1814: one in which overwhelming pressure was brought to bear on Napoleon. He argued that the Coalition should begin operations 'when we shall have 450,000 men', including Prussians and Russians, and he was confident that Napoleon could bring no more than 150,000 troops to strike at any one point.

The Battle of New Orleans on 8 January 1815 was the final major battle of the War of 1812 and a victory for Major General Andrew Jackson against the British force under the command of Wellington's brother-in-law, Edward Pakenham. (Anne S. K. Brown)

CONVERT TO MONO

Napoleon, therefore, had to prevent the impact of this capability gap by disrupting the operations of the Coalition forces, using location and interior lines to even the odds and win successive victories. Moreover, such success would disrupt the Coalition, provide supplies form conquered territory, and secure support within France. In short, Napoleon was offering a reprise of the policy and strategy he had followed since 1799. Moreover, he appeared to have a chance for quick success given the proximity of vulnerable Allied forces in Belgium. Their exposed character provided an opportunity for sequential success, both military and diplomatic. The combined strength of the Allied forces in Belgium was considerably greater than that of the French, but they were not well prepared for operations. Moreover, Napoleon aimed to drive apart Wellington's and Blücher's armies by attacking along the axis of the division between their spheres of responsibility; then he planned to defeat them separately.

Napoleon's key force was the Army of the North, comprising 123,000 troops and 358 cannon, as other units had to be deployed to protect France's other frontiers and to resist possible rebellion. In combination, these other units were a considerable force of about 105,000 men, and more troops possibly could have been taken from them to the Army of the North, but other frontiers could not be left completely bare, while only so many troops could have been redeployed. Numbers were not the only difficulty in fielding the Army of the North, as there was also a serious problem in providing the necessary equipment. This problem reflected the degree to which the army had been neglected under Louis XVIII, with a particular failure to maintain the necessary *materiel*. As a result, once back in Paris, Napoleon had to devote a major effort to secure sufficient weaponry and horses.

Napoleon depicted in the finery of an emperor on 1 June 1815, just days before the Battle of Waterloo. (Anne S. K. Brown)

At the same time, war is a matter of relative risk, advantages and capabilities. The poor state of Wellington's Army was a reflection of the rapidity with which Britain and the Netherlands had rushed to take a peace dividend. The British Army had been cut with large-scale discharges, while other units had been sent to North America in 1814 in order to take the offensive in the War of 1812, or were deployed to deal with disaffection in Britain, notably from the Luddites, who violently opposed new industrial technology, or to garrison Ireland. Wellington's British units initially were essentially based on those that had operated in the Low Countries in 1814, operations that had not proved especially successful. The army as a whole was a very mixed one, in background, experience and competence. There were concerns about the experience and trustworthiness of the Belgian and Dutch units.

Napoleon on horseback, resplendent in gold. Napoleon used over 150 horses during his military life. At Waterloo he rode an Arab Grey named Marengo. (Anne S. K. Brown)

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Boney's Return from Elba – or the Devil among the Sailors, a caricature by Cruikshank. It captured the change that Napoleon's return appeared to usher in, but also the response. (Rijksmuseum)

Wellington made an urgent attempt to mould his army by reorganising it, notably by adopting a method he had employed in the Peninsular War that entailed mixing formations in order to put the impressive alongside the less impressive down to divisional level. This method was seen as a way to stiffen the less impressive units and thus to improve the defensive strength of the entire army. Wellington's system was opposed by William I of the Netherlands, who wanted the Belgian and Dutch forces concentrated in one corps, but, benefiting from his own notable reputation and from the crisis environment, Wellington got his way. This decision was to be very important to the strength of his army at Waterloo. With time, Wellington was also more successful in obtaining the staff officers he wanted.

The strategy for both sides was therefore clear. In the event, it was an element that does not tend to receive attention that was one of the most significant in the strategic mix, namely the consequences of French defeat in the field. The counter-factuals tend to focus on French victory, but the defeat could have taken a different course. More particularly, Napoleon not only coped far worse militarily with failure than Louis XIV or Louis V had done, but also faced very different political consequences. This point underlines the importance of a grounding of rulership in legitimacy as well as success. The fall of his regime in 1814 both established a

pattern and also left a legacy of weakness that played a role in 1815. Napoleon had fallen in 1814 when he conducted an active defence of France against invading Allied forces. Although he fought a number of successful defensive battles, France was demoralised and the state was collapsing. A combination of heavy taxes, unwelcome demands for conscripts shooting up, the heavy casualties of 1813, and a sense of failure destroyed Napoleonic rule even while the fighting went on. Ready to pile up the bodies, Napoleon refused to face reality; but the Senate deposed him on 2 April 1814, and his remaining generals then insisted on his abdicating.

This context was also to determine the outcome of Waterloo, and thus set the strategic parameters. France in 1815 fell the same way Prussia had in 1806: there was no lengthy struggle. The situation would have been different had Napoleon won; for the Allies, most of whose armies were not yet engaged, would have kept on fighting. Napoleon's regime, however, was dependent on his main battle army and on his prestige. Resting on these fragile and now weakened foundations, it rapidly collapsed.

Despite his claims, Napoleon's lack of political legitimacy and support helped ensure that his opponents were able to make defeat in the field decisive. To revisit the famous military commentator Carl von Clausewitz, the varied nature of politics gave differing results to the events of war.

The Duke of Wellington. Ordered back from being a delegate at Vienna to take command of the British forces in Belgium, Wellington sought a repetition of the campaign of 1814. (Anne S. K. Brown)

The Tsar Alexander I of Russia with some of his staff officers in 1815. (Anne S. K. Brown)

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WATERLOO THE DECISIVE VICTORY

THE WATERLOO CAMPAIGN

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That it was Wellington who defeated Napoleon, by denying him, in a defensive battle, the success he needed, highlighted the contrast between France's failure and the contemporaneous success of Britain and Russia, a success that set the context for Waterloo. This success was given concrete form in 1815, when Napoleon surrendered to a British warship and Alexander I reviewed 150,000 Russian troops east of Paris, on the third anniversary of Borodino. Britain and Russia indeed dominated the geopolitics of the West during the subsequent decades.

The revolutionary ethos and purposes of the French Army in the 1790s had transformed the political context of military activity, freeing greater resources for warfare. The end result, however, of this warfare was to enhance British maritime and Russian land power. Both states were outside Europe, more able

Frederick William III of Prussia had steered a difficult course between France and her enemies following major military defeats in 1806. He was King of Prussia during the Congress of Vienna having turned against France in 1813. (Anne S. K. Brown)

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Plans of the Battles of Waterloo, Ligny and Quatre Bras. (National Army Museum)

to protect their home base than other European countries, yet also able to play a major role in European politics.

As a result, they saw off Napoleon, exploiting his inability to provide lasting stability in Western and Central Europe, and thus thwarted the last attempt before the age of nationalism to remodel Europe. In 1814–15, Europe was returned by Napoleon's victorious opponents to the multiple statehood that distinguished it from so many of the other heavily populated regions of the world. This was as much a consequence of Napoleon's political failure as of the absence of a lasting military capability gap in favour of France.