CHAPTER 8

THE PRUSSIAN ARMY AT WATERLOO

Charles Esdaile

PREVIOUS
The Prussians were heavily involved in the fighting at Plancenoit, where, as depicted here by Adolf Northern, they stormed the cemetery. (akg-images)

CONVERT TO MONO

GNMX1043_193 [LOW RES FOR PLACEMENT, HI RES TO COME]
Field Marshal Blücher, the Prussian general whose loyalty to Wellington ensured Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. (© English Heritage)

In all the many years that historians have been writing about the Battle of Waterloo, few issues have proved as contentious as that of the role played by the Prussian Army. In brief, at one end of the spectrum there are those who regard the battle as a largely British affair in which the Prussians played but a minor role, while at the other there are those who rather claim that the battle was in reality a Prussian victory.[1] For a good example of the former tendency – one which is, of course, to be found most commonly among British accounts of the battle – we might cite David Howarth, whose work *A Near Run Thing: The Day of Waterloo* (London, 1968) over 40 years on remains one of the most attractive and accessible introductions to the subject that has ever been published. Thus, Howarth bases his account of the fight on the personal experiences of 14 participants in the battle, but of these not one is Prussian, while the general picture that we have of the Prussian role in the battle is neither very full nor very complimentary. Throughout the book there are scarcely half a dozen references to the forces of Field Marshal Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher, and those that do exist paint a picture that is barely more positive than it is negative. Blücher, true, is given full credit for promising to send help to Wellington in the aftermath of the severe defeat of Ligny, and, in the course of the morning of 18 June, doing everything he could to hasten the march of his troops from Wavre to the fringes of the Waterloo battlefield, while his character is painted in terms that are reasonably friendly. On the other hand Howarth repeats the distinctly dubious story that, to paraphrase Wellington, not only did Blücher pick the fattest man in his army to ride to him with the news that Napoleon had crossed the border at the completely unexpected spot of Charleroi, but that said officer had taken 30 hours to travel 48 kilometres. And, once the Prussians finally get into the action, Howarth rather spoils the effect by alleging that Blücher misjudged the place at which he should make his major effort and implying that the troops closest to Wellington's left wing were dispatched in the wrong direction. Thus:

> Now, at the time when the help of the Prussians was needed most urgently, they were marching not towards the ridge, but away. The duke knew that Blücher was attacking Napoleon's flank down in the village of Plancenoit. But this was not even in sight from the middle of the ridge: the spire of the village church could be seen from the left-hand end of the line, but that was all. He did not know how heavy the attack was or how successful. At best it was only an indirect help which would occupy some of Napoleon's forces. What he needed was direct help, a few thousand men who were not yet battle weary, to stop the gaps in the line, or to join it on the left so that he could move some of his own men towards

> the centre. He had been sending aides all the afternoon along the ridge and beyond it to report on the Prussians' progress or to try to hurry them. Now he sent another, a colonel named Fremantle, to tell the nearest Prussian commander that the situation was desperate and to ask for help at once. Fremantle found the commander of the leading Prussian corps, General von Ziethen. Von Ziethen promised to come as soon as the whole of his corps was assembled, but he was reluctant to commit it bit by bit, which was a sound enough conventional decision. Freemantle, fretting with respectful impatience, said he could not go back to the Duke with an answer like that. But Von Zieten kept him waiting while he sent one of his own officers forward to reconnoitre. And that officer … saw the crowds of wounded, deserters and prisoners making for the forest, and came back to report that Wellington was in full retreat. Freemantle could not contradict him: by then, so far as he knew, it might have happened. And Von Zieten turned his troops and marched away to the south to support the rest of the Prussians at Plancenoit.[2]

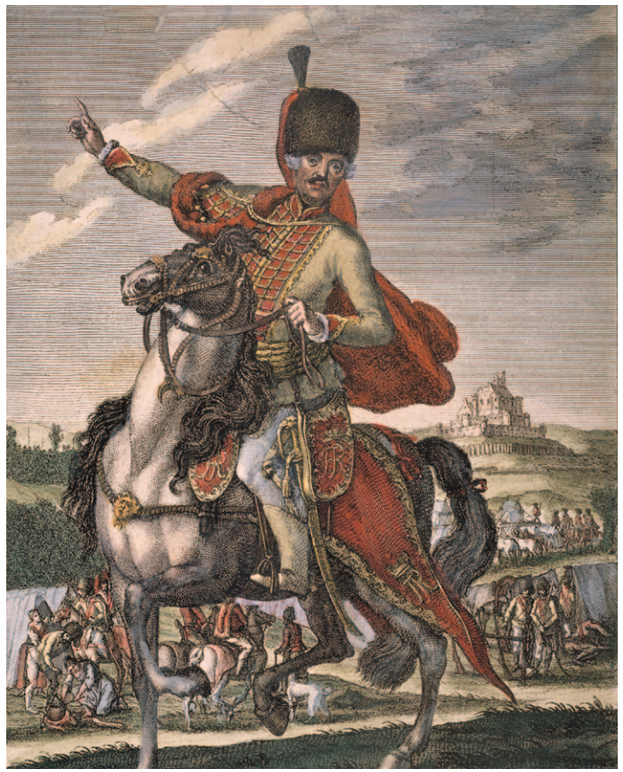
As can be seen from the quotation, as the Prussian general most closely involved in the decision not to give direct support to Wellington's left, Lieutenant General Hans von Ziethen is absolved from the charge of having acted out of wilfulness or anti-British feeling, but even so a few pages on the accusation is repeated that he was, to quote Howarth, 'marching away from the battle'. General Carl von Müffling – the same staff officer who had supposedly taken so long to reach Brussels from Charleroi on 15 June – is admittedly given the credit for galloping after Ziethen's Corps and bringing it back to the ridge, but we hear little of what the Prussians actually did there, while the desperate fight at Plancenoit is dealt with in no more than a line or two. Thus: 'The fight against the Prussians at Plancenoit was still undecided. The main road back to France … was threatened by their advance; already their cannon fire was falling not far short of it.'[3] How the Prussians got this far, Howarth does not say, but at all events it appears that the threat which they posed could not have been that great, for very soon we learn that 'two battalions of the Garde … attacked at Plancenoit and turned the Prussians out of the village, and so removed the immediate threat to the flank and rear of [Napoleon's] army'.[4] Nor, meanwhile, do things get better as Napoleon's Army collapses in rout. We hear of the Prussians pursuing the French, certainly, but the very fact that they were in a fit state to pursue the enemy is used as ammunition against them. To quote Howarth yet again:

> [Wellington's] army was exhausted. It had fought for nine hours. A few of the Prussians, at Plancenoit, had been in action for four hours, but Von Zieten's corps had not been in it for much longer than an hour, and more units were constantly arriving too late to take part at all.[5]

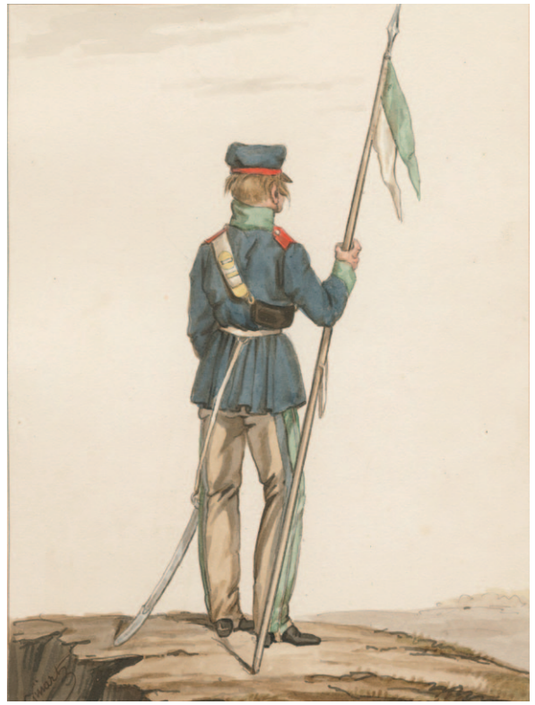
In the event, though, it transpires that the Prussians do not pursue very far – by the time that the fleeing French reached the village of Genappe some 4 miles from the main French position at the inn of La Belle Alliance, 'there were very few Prussians in pursuit; their infantry had halted, and perhaps 4,000 horsemen were pursuing 40,000 French'.[6] As a crowning image of the Prussian role in the battle, then, one is left not with a moment of glory, but rather with a moment of farce in the form of the famous incident in which the Royal Horse Artillery battery commanded by Captain Cavalié Mercer is shot to pieces by some stray Prussian gunners (complete with comic-book German officer: 'Ah! Mein Gott! Mein Gott! Vat is it you dos, sare! Dat is your friends de Proossiens, an you kills dem! Ah, mein Gott, mein Gott, vill you no stop, sare!').[7]

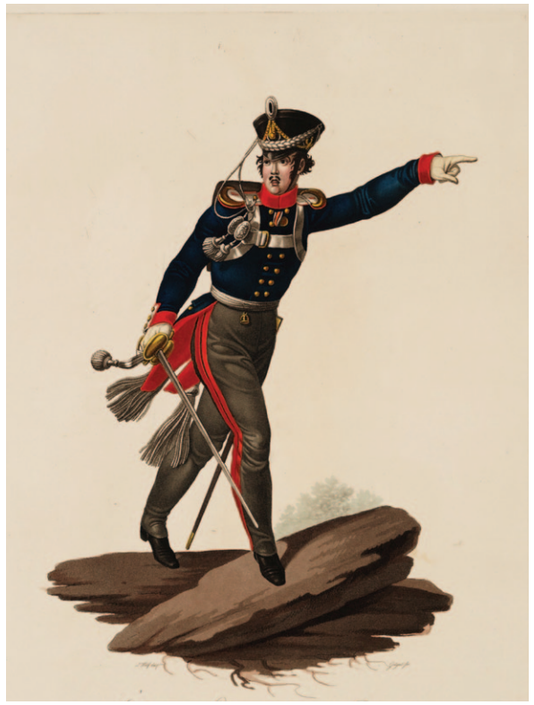
The line taken by Howarth is not an isolated one. On the contrary, indeed, it is one with a long history. In 1840, Edward Cotton, a veteran of the battle who had fought in the ranks of the 7th Hussars, published an account of the campaign entitled *A Voice from Waterloo* in which he took firm issue with what he perceived as a growing tendency to exaggerate the role of the Prussians. For example:

Lieutenant General von Ziethen, commander of the Prussian I Corps at Waterloo. (akg-images)



> It is doubtful whether Napoleon could have driven the British from the ground even if the Prussians had not arrived. The English troops had maintained their position for eight hours against the most experienced army and the ablest general ever France sent into the field: not a British regiment was broken, nor the Allied Army in a panic, nor, at any time, in serious danger of being penetrated. Further, even if the Prussians had not arrived, we are inclined to think that Napoleon could not, in the exhausted and dispirited condition of his troops, and the lateness of the hour, have driven the British from their ground. The junction of the Prussians was a part of Wellington's combinations for the battle. Their flank movement at Waterloo was similar to Desaix's from Novi to Marengo with this no small difference: that upon Bülow's troops joining, they found the Allied Army firm and unbroken and rather in advance of their position of the morning… We are not astonished that the French should employ this argument as a balm to their disappointment, but it comes with a peculiarly bad grace from the Prussians. Surely in thus taking the lion's share in this glorious victory, they do not think to cover their defeat at Ligny, or their unaccountable delay in arriving on the field of Waterloo… And, if true, as the Prussian official report represents, that Blücher had such a large force on the field to act, previous to, or during, Napoleon's last attack upon us, why did not Blücher … roll up the French Army as Pakenham's division did at Salamanca.[8]





RIGHT
A Landwehr cavalryman of the sort that took part in Bülow's attack at Waterloo. (Anne S. K. Brown)

LEFT
A typical Prussian infantry officer, c.1815. (Anne S. K. Brown)

There is, then, a deeply Anglo-centric view of Waterloo that in its most extreme form suggests that the Prussians played, at best, a secondary role in the Allied victory: in brief, Napoleon's Army was already beaten when Blücher finally turned up very late in the day; still worse, meanwhile, the new arrivals, who had already failed Wellington by coming to grips with the French far later than they had initially promised, did not exert themselves nearly as much as they should have. If we are to believe the staunchly pro-Prussian Peter Hofschröer, indeed, in the years after the war repeated attempts were made to crush all those who

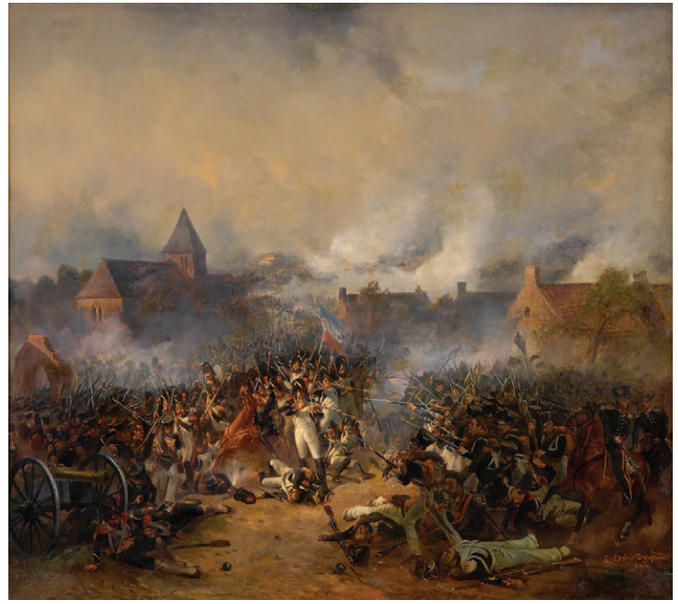
sought to challenge an establishment view that allowed the Prussians just so much of the glory but no more.[9] Yet even in the lifetime of the duke it was easy enough to find views that were more balanced. An obvious place to begin here is the highly influential history of Revolutionary and Napoleonic Europe published by Sir Archibald Alison in 1860. Thus, though clearly written with a great degree of national pride, this makes it very plain that, in his eyes at least, Cotton had gone too far:

> In considering the comparative shares which the British and Prussian armies had in the achievement of this glorious victory, an impartial judgement must award the best share to the British troops. When it is recollected that the British soldiers and King's German Legion in the field did not exceed 37,000 and that, including the Hanoverians, the whole troops on whom reliance can be placed were only 52,000, and that they were assailed, for above five hours, by continual attacks from 74,000 veteran French under Napoleon's direction before even Bülow's Prussians arrived in the field at four o'clock, it must be admitted that this day must ever be reckoned as the proudest of the many proud days of English glory. On the other hand, it is equally clear that the arrival of Bülow's corps at that hour, which compelled Napoleon to detach the two divisions of Lobau's corps, and, at last, eleven battalions of his Young and Old Guard, to maintain Plancenoit against them, went far to … bring nearer to an equality the military forces of the contending armies. Had they not appeared in force in the field, as they did at half-past seven at night, it is doubtful the French army would have been repulsed… The victory, at best, would have been dreadfully hard won, and probably little more than a sterile triumph like that of Talavera… It was unquestionably the arrival of the Prussians which rendered the success complete, and converted a bloody repulse into a total overthrow.[10]

To argue, then, that the British historiography of Waterloo was marked by excessive Anglo-centrism is a little unfair. Certainly, there were many factors pushing it in that direction, including, not least, the plethora of prints and paintings celebrating such episodes as the defence of Hougoumont, the charge of the Union Brigade and the repulse of the French cavalry, not to mention the constant desire to rehearse the triumphs of the Duke of Wellington, but the picture that emerges is far less uniform than is sometimes alleged. As a good example of the modern state of the historiography, we might cite David Chandler's *Waterloo: The Hundred Days* (Oxford, 1980), if only because its author was for many years the veritable doyen of Napoleonic campaign history. In this work the Prussians are described as entering the battle for the first time at about 4 p.m. – incidentally, a time rather earlier than that given in some other British accounts – and thereafter occupying more and

more of Napoleon's attention, and, with it, his troops. Indeed, the account that we have is both relatively detailed and inclined to give full credit to the Prussians:

> Now, however, Napoleon faced a real crisis. Domon's cavalry and Lobau's VI Corps were forming a new line at right angles to the main front … and the French attacked before Bülow could deploy all his 30,000 men, but soon expended their energy. Bülow gave a little before the French, but then shifted his line of attack towards the village of Plancenoit, threatening to turn Lobau's right flank. The French could only fall back, and by 5 p.m. the village was in danger as the Prussians swept towards it from three sides at once, for now Pirch's II Corps was coming into action to the south of Bülow… To stop the rot a division of the Young Guard was sent off … to recapture the lost parts of Plancenoit and ease the pressure on Lobau's tiring troops, thus enabling them to occupy a better position north-east of the village. The Young Guard managed to become masters of Plancenoit, but only briefly, for they were repulsed again by a new surge of Prussian attackers. There was nothing for it but to send in two battalions of the Old Guard… The Young Guard then regarrisoned the village, but the victors pressed a little too far beyond in pursuit of the discomforted Prussians and were tellingly forced to withdraw. Nevertheless, within an hour the situation on Napoleon's right flank had been stabilised.[11]



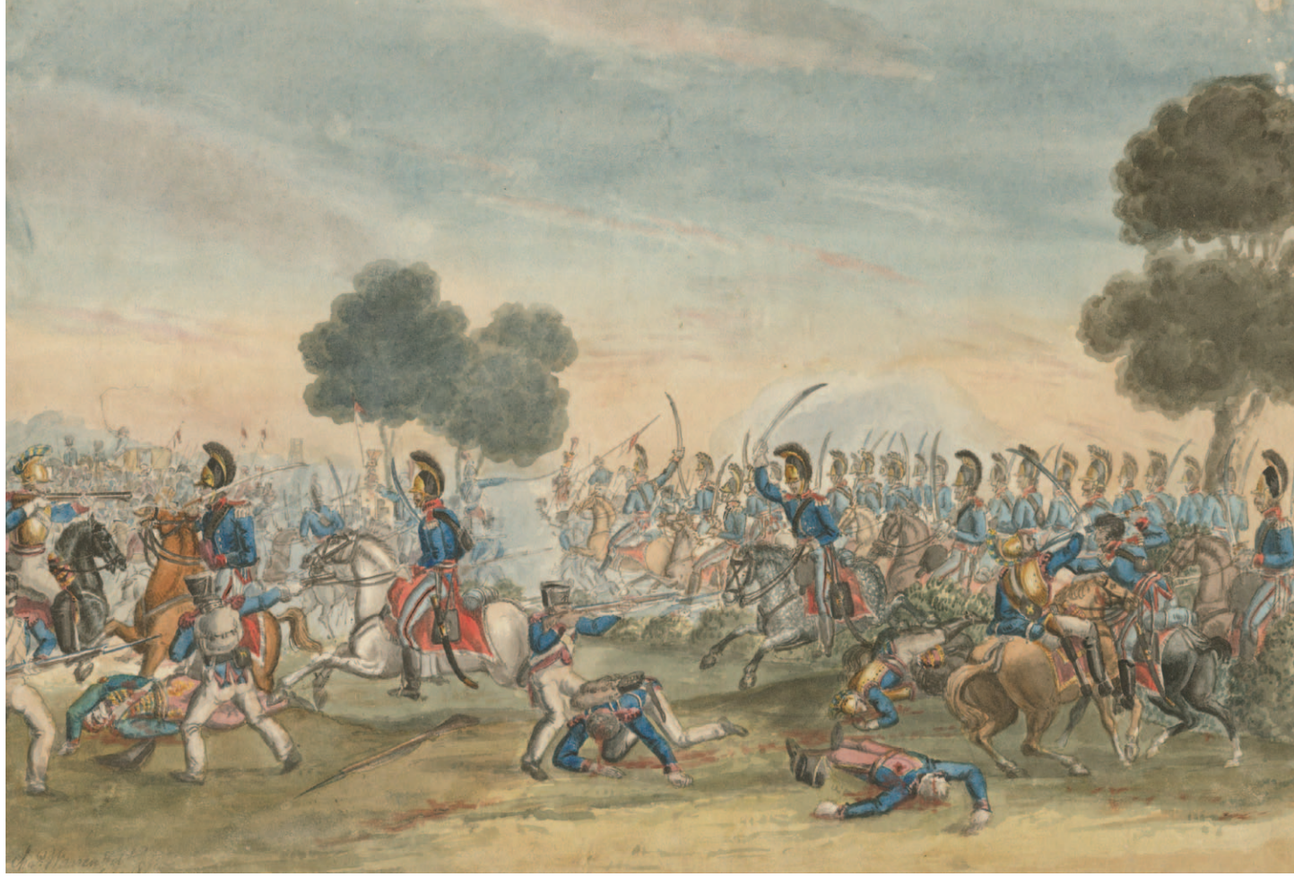
Ludwig Elsholtz's 1843 painting depicting the Battle of Plancenoit. (Public domain)

This passage is, perhaps, slightly more guarded than it appears at first sight – in the end, the Prussians are checked and Napoleon thereby afforded the opportunity to throw in the Guard in one last attempt to break Wellington's Army – whilst Chandler also later suggests that the pursuit was 'at first mainly a British affair'.[12] Yet the inclusion of a detailed account of the Prussian defence of Wavre against the attacks of Marshal Emmanuel de Grouchy takes the sting out of this issue, whilst Chandler ends on a note that is generous indeed. As he says, 'There can be little doubt that Waterloo would not have been won had not the Prussians arrived. This has sometimes been questioned by British historians, but the Prussian contribution was vital.'[13]

German historians, then, have little to complain about, whilst it might further be pointed out that it was a British initiative that produced *Waterloo: Battle of Three Armies* (London, 1979), this last being a unique attempt to tell the story of the battle through simultaneous exposition of the three competing national perspectives, and one which reaches a conclusion with which even the most die-hard Prussian cannot take issue. To quote the book's editor, Lord Chalfont:

> It is in the matter of the Prussian role in the battle that a little reassessment of historical viewpoints might legitimately be called for. Blücher's army … played a part in the Waterloo campaign, not least in the final battle, which has been consistently underestimated by British historians… It was not only that the Prussian attacks … forced Napoleon to detach precious reserves to safeguard his flanks… The advancing Prussian forces were a constant factor in the battle throughout the day – a persistent threat in the mind of Napoleon, who could not give his entire attention to Wellington, and a reassurance to Wellington who could concentrate on repelling the initial French attacks in the knowledge that, sooner or later, the arrival of Blücher would decisively change the balance of forces. Indeed, it is arguable that some of Napoleon's apparent errors of judgement were brought about by the knowledge that, if he could not crush Wellington before Blücher arrived, the day was lost.[14]

THE SITUATION AT PLANCENOIT AT 6 P. M., 18 JUNE 1815



Prussian cavalry pursuing Napoleon's broken forces towards Genappe in the wake of the French collapse.
(Anne S. K. Brown)

The point, then, is well made. Not all modern British writers are quite so generous: both Jeremy Black and Andrew Roberts have in recent years published studies that lean more towards Howarth than they do towards Chalfont.[15] Yet sweeping allegations to the effect that 'most British historians' have regarded 'the Duke of Wellington … as the sole or even the prime victor of Waterloo' are, at the very least, wildly exaggerated.[16] That said, it does have to be admitted that, for all the conscientious efforts of historians such as Chandler, the British reader interested in Waterloo is far more likely to be aware of the exploits of, say, the Royal Scots Greys or the Inniskillings than they are of the 2nd Silesian Hussars or the 1st Pomeranian Landwehr. In this bicentennial publication, then, it is fitting that some attempt should be made to

give a detailed account of the battle as it was experienced and fought by Blücher's forces. This story, of course, begins on the evening of 16 June in the wake of the Battle of Ligny. Dealt with elsewhere in the current volume, this action need not detain us here for very long, but it is worth considering the circumstances of the moment. The Prussian Army had not been routed, certainly, but its situation was nonetheless more than somewhat parlous. Many units had suffered terrible casualties; stragglers were scattered broadcast across the countryside; the troops were utterly exhausted; the army had all but been split in two by the last French attack; the whereabouts of the reserve ammunition was unknown; and, to cap it all, Blücher himself was missing and, for all his staff knew, dead. As for Wellington's forces, meanwhile, the one thing that was certain was that, notwithstanding a series of assurances on the part of their commander, they were not likely to arrive in the vicinity any time soon and could, in fact, be assumed to be retreating. In the circumstances, the Prussian chief of staff, Lieutenant General August Neithardt von Gneisenau, would have been well within his rights to order his surviving troops to pull back eastwards towards Liège and thereby fall back on their line of communications, a direction in which he was further pulled, first, by deep dislike of the English and, second, by the conviction that the Prussian Army should never have been sent to Belgium in the first place. Yet, in what was perhaps the most vital decision of the whole campaign, Gneisenau ordered his forces to retreat northwards in parallel with what was assumed to be the intent of the Duke of Wellington and head for the town of Wavre. Needless to say, Prussian historians and those who sympathise with them have insisted that Gneisenau acted out of recognition that, above all, he needed to keep in touch with Wellington. Well, perhaps. But there were also circumstantial forces in play in that many Prussian troops were already moving northwards while it was clear that a move on Liège would necessarily leave Friedrich Wilhelm Freiherr Count von Bülow's IV Corps, which, due to a combination of poorly written orders and the stubbornness of its commander, had failed to reach the area of Ligny on 16 June and was believed to be somewhere to the north, open to destruction. To claim, as Eberhard Kaulbach does, that 'the necessity of remaining in effective contact with [Wellington] must have been the decisive consideration for Gneisenau in making up his … mind' therefore seems a little foolhardy.[17]

Yet, in the end, even the fairest of caveats do not matter. Taken the decision was, whilst it was vigorously confirmed by a somewhat bruised and dishevelled Marshal Blücher, who was restored to his Headquarters a few hours later after the adventures on the battlefield that are retailed elsewhere, and the consequence was that by the evening of 17 June the whole of the Prussian Army was moving

into bivouacs in the area of Wavre. In the course of the day the disorder of the night before had been remedied, whilst the columns carrying the ammunition reserve had turned up safely in the course of the afternoon and allowed the resupply of the I, II and III Corps, but the extent of the damage inflicted at Ligny had become all too apparent. In all, casualties had amounted to a minimum of 20,000 men, of which at least 8,000 were deserters, while the French had taken 22 guns. In terms of manpower, then, the army had lost fully a quarter of its strength, while the gaps in some infantry brigades – the worst hit were those of Ziethen's I Corps – reached as many as 50 per cent. At the same time, the troops were very tired. However, according to Prussian sources at least, the combination of the absence of any French pursuit with the sterling efforts of Blücher, who had spent much of the day in the saddle encouraging his men, had restored the troops' morale, whilst communications had been restored with Wellington's Army, and a plan established for the morrow, it having been decided that Wavre would be held by a rearguard composed of roughly half the army while the rest of the troops moved to support the Anglo-Dutch. Here, then, are the orders that were issued to Bülow at midnight on 17 June:

> According to information just received from the Duke of Wellington, he has positioned himself as follows: his right wing extends to Braine l'Alleud; the centre is at Mont Saint Jean; [the] left wing at La Haye. The enemy is facing him and the Duke is expecting the attack and has asked us for our co-operation. Your Excellency will, therefore, with IV Corps under your command, move off … at daybreak, march through Wavre and move towards Chapelle Saint Lambert, where, if the enemy is not heavily engaged with Wellington, you will take up positions under

LEFT
The Prussian chief of staff, Lieutenant General August Neithardt von Gneisenau. (Anne S. K. Brown)

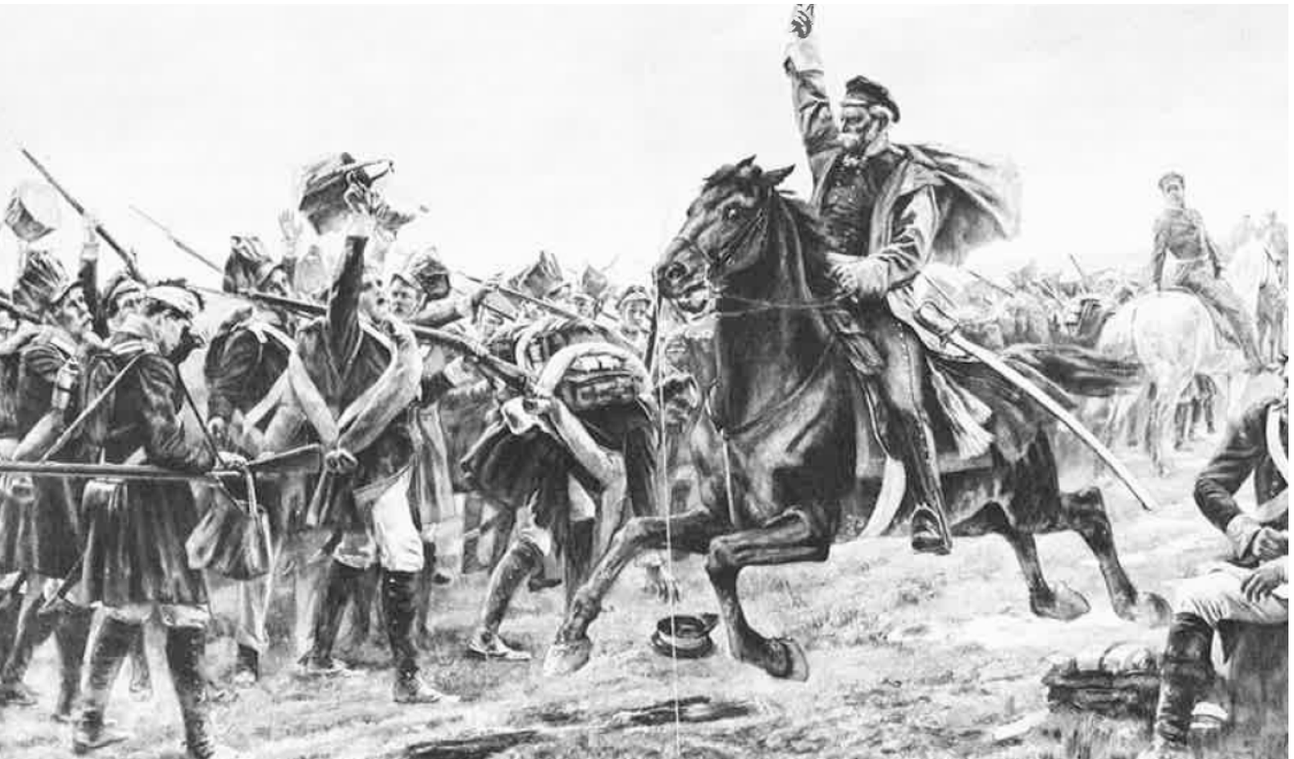
MIDDLE
Lieutenant General Johan von Thielmann, painted in the uniform of a Saxon Hussar officer. (akg-images)

RIGHT
Count von Bülow, Prussian IV Corps commander at Waterloo. (akg-images)

> cover. Otherwise you are to throw yourself at the right flank of the enemy with the utmost vigour. II Corps will follow immediately to the rear of Your Excellency to lend support. I and III Corps will likewise hold themselves in readiness to follow in support should the need arise.[18]

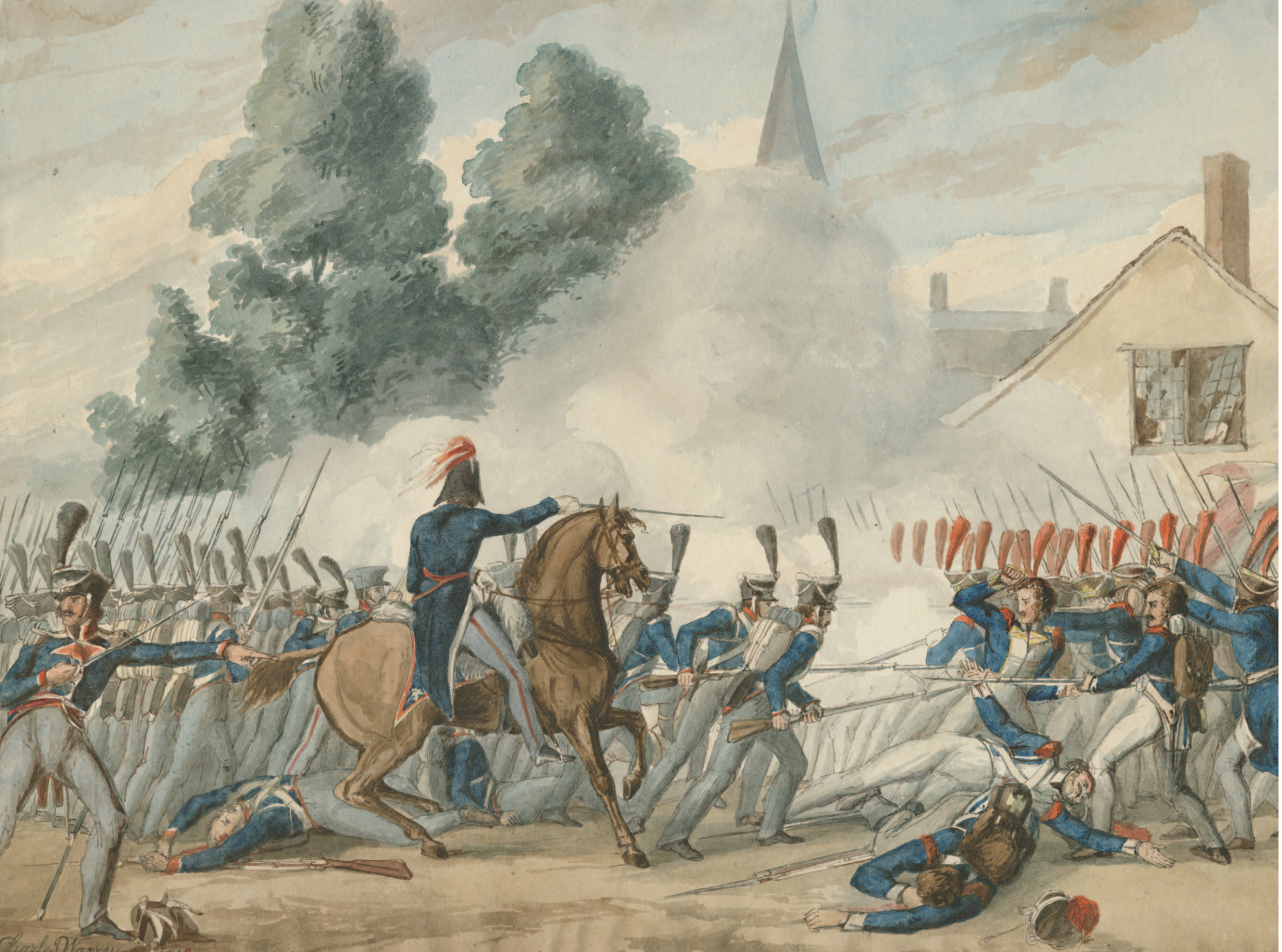
It will be noted that at this point the movement that actually took place on 18 June had not yet fully been decided on. However, this is not surprising. In brief, at this point Blücher and Gneisenau had no idea how many troops had been sent to follow them, and the latter – a man who was by nature much more cautious than his commander – was therefore able to prevail upon the field marshal to stay his hand for the time being. But, if Gneisenau had felt any repugnance about supporting Wellington, this was now long gone: at least in principle, the chief of staff was determined to fight. Whatever his motives, he was not able to prevail for very long. At about 9.30 a.m. on 18 June, Blücher sent a message to the chief Prussian liaison officer at Wellington's Headquarters, Baron von Müffling, in which, without saying so in quite so many words, he announced that he was marching on Napoleon's right flank with not just one or two corps, but the bulk of his forces. Quite clearly, he saw an opportunity for a pitched battle in which the tables would be firmly turned against Napoleon, and thereby remedy the blow that had been dealt to his reputation

Blücher encourages his army in their march to Wellington's relief. (Print after R. Eichstädt)

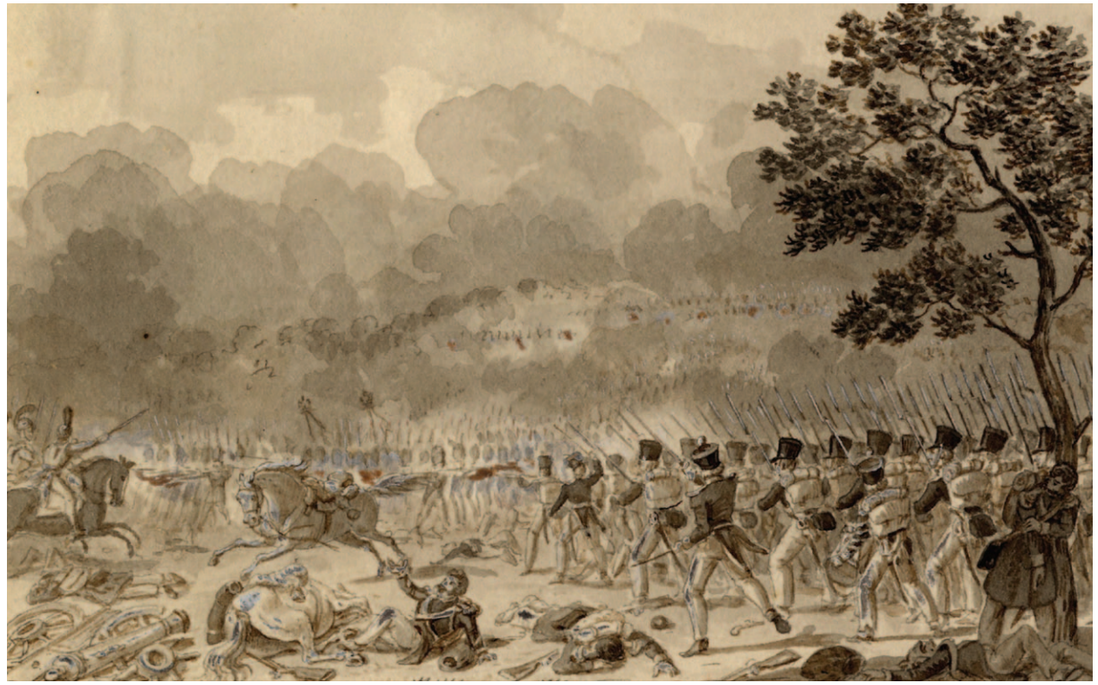


at Ligny. The professional, then, was mixed with the personal, whilst it is impossible not to speculate that the chance was rendered all the sweeter by the fact that accomplishing Blücher's aim would enable him to pull off the feat that had so completely evaded Wellington on 16 June. However, in the end none of this matters: whatever the reason Blücher elected on the course that he did, it was the right decision, and one that firmly tipped the scales against Napoleon.[19]

For at least some men in the Prussian Army, these doings at the level of Headquarters made little difference: ordered to move the night before, IV Corps was already on the road at daybreak (4 a.m.). Why this force was chosen for the task of heading the Prussian advance was clear enough in that it was the only one of Blücher's corps that was still intact after the fighting of 16 June. That said, its situation was extremely unfortunate in that it was also the Prussian corps that was furthest from the Waterloo battlefield; for, whereas their fellows had spent the night camped in and around Wavre, Bülow's men had rather passed it at the little village of Dion le Monte a mile or so east of the town. Still worse, to reach the road that they needed to take to reach Napoleon's right flank, they had to pass through the bivouac of II Corps, cross the Dyle at Wavre by means of just one narrow bridge, and then negotiate the narrow streets of the town, which was already clogged up by the wagons, carriages and general impedimenta consequent upon the town being Blücher's Headquarters. All this meant that the corps' initial movement was attended by considerable delay: thus, it took two hours just to get the advanced guard through Wavre, matters then being made still worse by the outbreak of a serious fire in the heart of the town (so catastrophic was the site of this fire in terms of the movement of the army that it might almost be thought that it was started deliberately, but there is no evidence that this was the case, the reality being that it was probably the fruit of mere carelessness on the part of the soldiers billeted in the mill in which the blaze started). At all events, the whole affair is a prime example of what the famous military commentator, Carl von Clausewitz – a man who was very much an eyewitness to the events in question – later called 'friction', whilst, whatever the cause of the fire, the end result was that the last troops of IV Corps did not even leave their encampment until 10 a.m. Nor was this an end to the problem. Once through the town Bülow's men had to negotiate a single-track country road leading through undulating terrain to the village of Chapelle Saint Lambert and from there descend a narrow sunken lane to the little River Lasne before scrambling up again to the wooded plateau that closed off the north-eastern fringes of the Waterloo battlefield. With the tracks deep in mud due to the heavy rain of the night before, the going could not but be very slow, and that despite the decision that was taken to send the corps'



Another view of the Battle of Ligny: the Prussians fought hard but were eventually driven from the field. (Anne S. K. Brown)



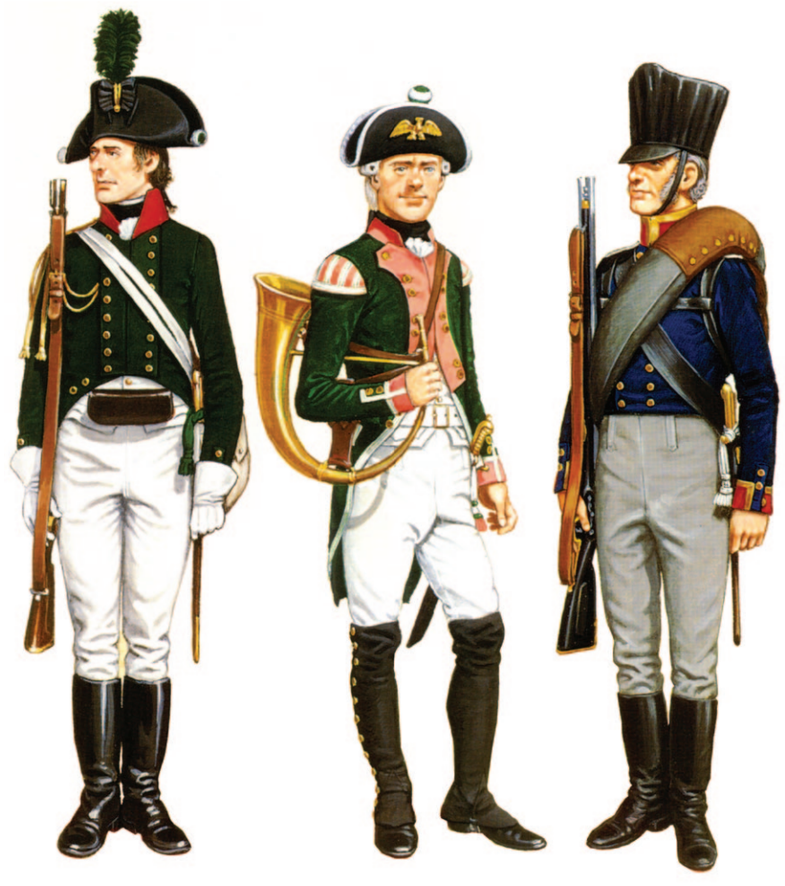
'Schlacht bei Waterloo am 18 Juni 1815'; a watercolour by Philip Heinrich Duncker showing the advance of Prussian infantry against French troops at Waterloo. Two eagles can be seen among the French, who are presumed to be foot chasseurs of the Imperial Guard. (Anne S. K. Brown)

OPPOSITE
A mounted Prussian general of the Waterloo period.
(Anne S. K. Brown)

baggage train off to the safety of Louvain rather than attempt to drag it along in the wake of the troops. Meanwhile, the troops were very tired and the distance considerable: having marched many kilometres over the previous two days, some of the soldiers had not lain down until midnight the night before, and then been roused at 4 a.m.; as for the distance, it was a good 24 kilometres to the outskirts of the battlefield at Frischermont alone, the final objective of Plancenoit being perhaps 5 kilometres further on beyond that.[20]

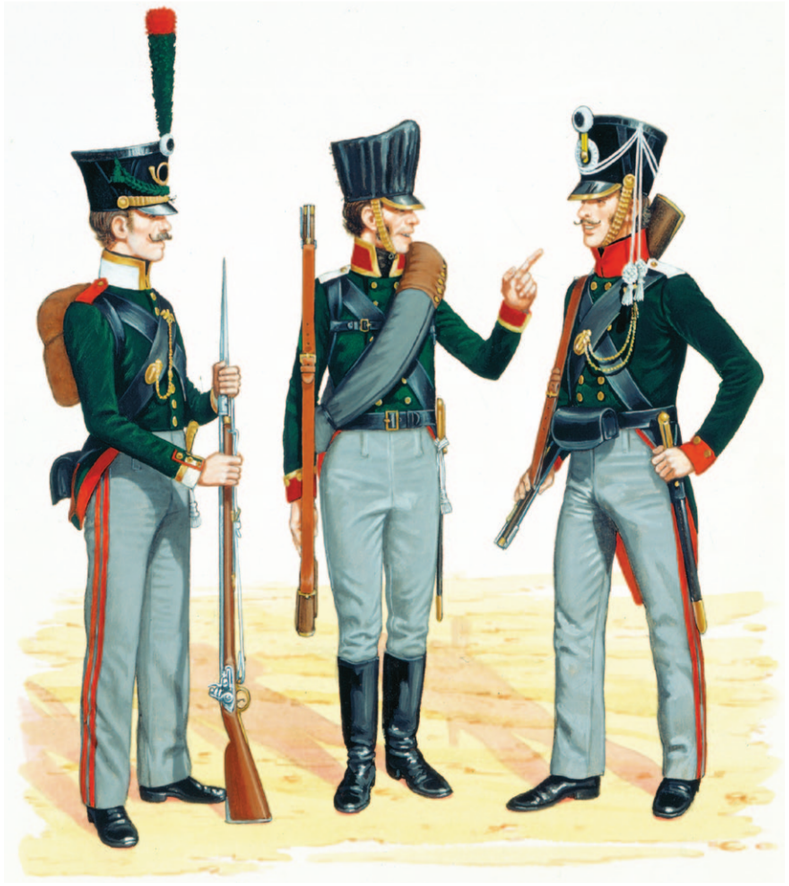
As even the firmly pro-Prussian Peter Hofschröer is forced to admit, all this put the Prussian advance seriously out of kilter, a march that might in ordinary circumstances have taken IV Corps six hours actually costing it nearer 11, whilst even then Bülow did not take his men straight into action but rather paused in the woods north-east of Frischermont to send out a reconnaissance. And it was not just Bülow who ended up wildly delayed: ordered to follow IV Corps, II Corps did not get moving until midday, while, bivouacked as it was at Bierges, a little village on the Dyle a mile south-west of Wavre, I Corps had to wait for a further two hours before it could move more than a few hundred yards, the basic problem being that it could not reach the equally bad road that would take it to the position on Wellington's left flank which it had been decided should be

its post in the battle to come. In the face of these difficulties, the Prussian commander was scarcely idle: he rode forth from his Headquarters at 11 a.m. and has been pictured as galloping up and down the lines of toiling troops shouting, 'Forward boys! Some, I hear, say it can not be done. But it must be done! I have promised my brother, Wellington! You would not make me a perjurer?'[21] To these exhortations, the troops seem to have responded with a will, but, in the end, mud is mud, and one may therefore be thankful that Napoleon delayed any movement on his own part until 11.30 a.m.: had he moved even an hour sooner, the day might very well have gone the other way. And, even as it was, Waterloo, as Wellington famously later said, was a 'near-run thing'. Not for nothing, then, was he at one point heard to murmur, 'Either night or the Prussians must come.'

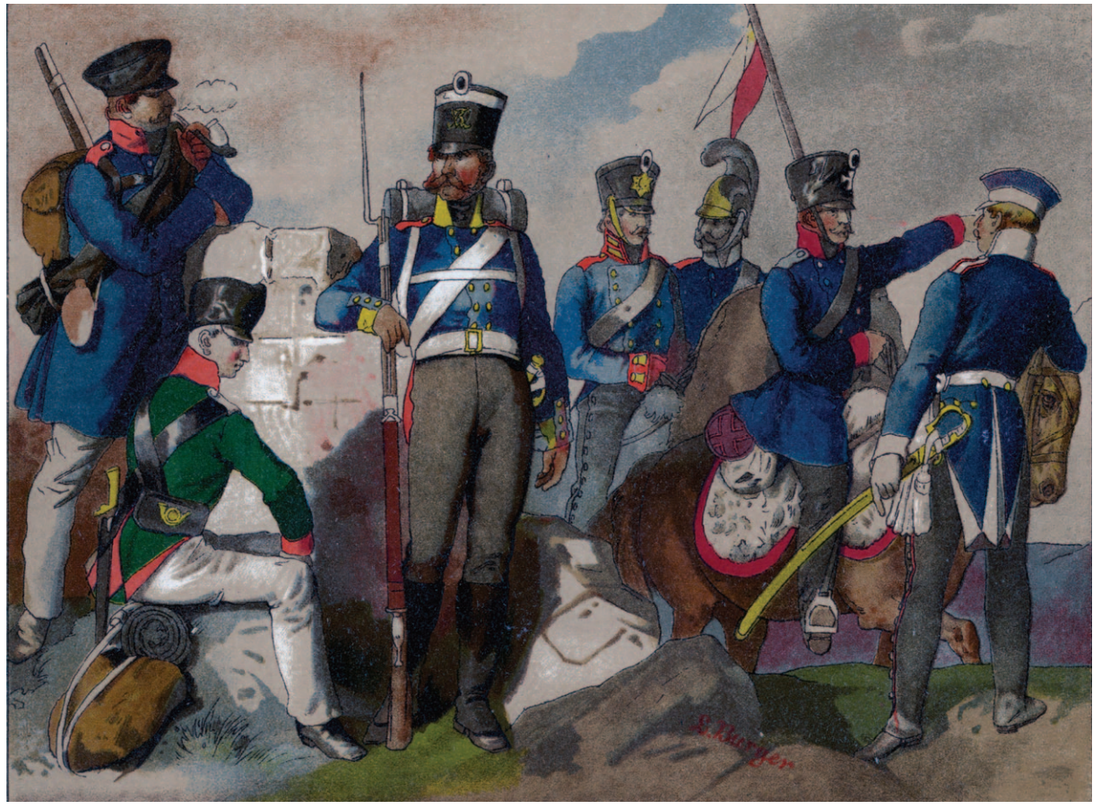


The changing face of Prussian troops throughout the Napoleonic period. (Left to right) A bugler c.1792, a private c.1806 and a fusilier infantry NCO, c.1814–15. (Adam Hook © Osprey Publishing)

At last, however, the Prussians did come. Had Bülow had his way, IV Corps would not have entered the battle until he had concentrated all his troops, something that would probably have taken till at least 5.30 p.m., and, though now fully aware of the pressure which Wellington's Army was having to withstand – the battlefield could, after all, now be glimpsed from his advanced positions – he even sent Blücher a note to this effect.[22] As the Prussian commander realised, however, such a delay might prove fatal, and Bülow therefore received a tart note to the effect that he should go in with what he had even if the force available to him was no more than a single brigade. At about 4.30 p.m. IV Corps finally went forward. In the lead was a screen of two fusilier battalions, whilst behind them came the first two of its four brigades – 15th Brigade, commanded by Major General Michael von Losthin, and 16th



Prussian light infantry of the Volunteer Jaeger companies. The figures on the left and right are dated 1815, while the one in the middle is 1813. (Bryan Fosten © Osprey Publishing)



Prussian soldiers of 1813. This artwork illustrates the uniforms of the period that would have been seen at Waterloo. (Topfoto)

Brigade, commanded by Johann von Hiller – each of the two formations being composed of one three-battalion regiment of line infantry and two three-battalion regiments of *Landwehr*, together with a single eight-gun battery of field artillery. In support, meanwhile, rode a few advanced units of cavalry, though most of Bülow's mounted troops were back in the woods. Linking up with some troops from the Duchy of Nassau who had been holding the hamlets of La Haye and Papelotte, the right wing of Bülow's troops ejected the French from neighbouring Frischermont to the accompaniment of a brief cavalry mêlée, and moved steadily forward in the face of a thickening line of French skirmishers. Beyond Frischermont, however, the Prussians ran into serious problems in that they found the rising ground south of the village held by a strong force of French troops. Initially, the only enemy troops in a position to reinforce the Frischermont sector had been a single brigade of light cavalry, but as early as 1.30 p.m. Napoleon, who was by now well aware that the Prussians

were coming, had responded to the danger by ordering General Georges Mouton's VI Corps to adopt a holding position south of the village.[23] According to some accounts, Mouton responded to the appearance of Bülow's men with a furious charge in an attempt to drive them back, but this seems unlikely: though many skirmishers certainly went forward, VI Corps seems rather to have stood entirely on the defensive. For a French perspective we might cite a French officer named Tromelin. Thus:

> The Prussian attack started towards 4.30 p.m. Our cavalry sabred the enemy squadrons. Then we formed in square by brigade and remained under fire of forty Prussian guns that caused us much damage… At 5.30 p.m., the enemy was reinforced by infantry and cavalry; the artillery fire became terrible. Maintaining a brave front, but suffering under the weight of shot, the four squares of the corps … retired slowly in the direction of Plancenoit where we finally established ourselves, already outflanked by Prussian cavalry. The debris of my three battalions occupied the gardens and orchards.[24]

Based on a painting by Georg Bleibtreu, this woodcut shows the Prussian advance under Blücher. (akg-images)

Broadly speaking, then, what happened appears to be this. Having started off bravely enough, Bülow's weary troops were brought to a halt by Mouton's men, and were unable to move forward again until the second echelon of XIV Corps came forward in its turn and thickened the line. Nor is this surprising: according to Kaulbach, both von Losthin and von Hiller were very concerned about their flanks and therefore kept up to one third of their infantry in reserve.[25] With Mouton's men now formed more or less on a north–south axis on a line stretching from the vicinity of Papelotte to Plancenoit – Bülow having apparently been ordered by Blücher constantly to edge to his left, the net effect had been to force back Mouton's right and therefore to cause the entire corps to pivot on its left flank – the latter village was now in the front line. Always a key Prussian objective, it now came under direct attack. At about 6 p.m., then, von Hiller launched a determined assault with two battalions of the 15th Line Regiment and two battalions of the 1st Silesian Landwehr. Pressing into the village from two sides, the Prussians overran most of the built-up area and captured three guns as well as several hundred prisoners, but in the centre of the village the church and its attendant graveyard formed a natural redoubt, while the elements of Mouton's Corps which held it refused to yield. To make matters worse, at the last minute reinforcements arrived in the shape of General

Prussian line infantry, 1811: an NCO, privates and an officer in parade dress. (Print after Theumen)

Guillaume Duhesme's Division of the Young Guard, and the Prussians were hurled back in disorder having suffered heavy losses. However, even as it was the situation was bad enough. Emplaced on the high ground beyond Plancenoit, the guns of IV Corps could now pound not just the high road but also the waiting French reserves. Waiting with the grenadiers of the Old Guard was Sergeant Hippolyte de Mauduit:

> For some time we did not have a single gun to reply to these uncomfortable neighbours… The emperor was immediately informed and a twelve-pounder battery of the Guard Reserve was … deployed a hundred paces above us… Its fire, well-directed, quickly reduced the effectiveness of the Prussian fire, which, nevertheless … caused us about fifty casualties. The shells … caused us the most damage. Three grenadiers of our company … were killed by one of them which exploded two paces from us… Each discharge thus knocked down several grenadiers, but our post was there, and neither the balls nor the shells would force us to abandon it.[26]

Grizzled veteran as he was, Mauduit goes on to claim that he and his fellows were unperturbed by this experience, but plenty of French troops displayed less

Foot Guards Regiment, 1812: an officer in undress, officer in full dress and NCO in parade dress. (Print after Theumen)

This reproduction of Carl Roechling's painting of the Battle of Gross Goerschen on 2 May 1813 shows that Prussian skirmishers and attack columns were used during this period, and is a good example of battlefield tactics in action.

nonchalance. They had been repeatedly told that Grouchy was on his way and yet were now confronted by fresh enemies. Not surprisingly, then, there were many troops who began openly to doubt the possibility of victory and even to start to slip away to the rear, while the growing sense of demoralisation was increased by the decision of the emperor's personal staff to start packing up his baggage so as to be ready to move in an instant. As one senior officer of the Guard put it, 'From then on, no one thought any longer of going to Brussels.'[27]

The Prussians, then, scarcely needed to take Plancenoit to have a dramatic effect on the fighting, and all the more so as it was about this time that the first representatives of I Corps began to emerge onto the ridge of Mont Saint Jean, thereby enabling a greatly relieved Wellington to start calling in troops from his left wing to plug the growing weakness in his centre, where La Haye Sainte had just fallen to the French.[28] Just because their guns could bombard the French reserves, however, the Prussians did not cease their efforts. On the contrary, Plancenoit now became the centre of a bitter battle in which at least two Prussian assaults were thrown back with heavy losses. Yet the weary IV Corps was now supported by the first troops to arrive from II Corps, and a further attack carried not just the same buildings that had been occupied before, but also the church, whilst the commander of the defending Young Guards, General Duhesme, was shot in the head and had to be carried from the field. In over-running the village, however, the attackers, who, it should be remembered, were mostly militia and had been on the march continuously for many days, had lost all order, and were therefore vulnerable to a counter-attack. Realising that all was lost unless he acted immediately, Napoleon ordered up the only reserves that he could spare in the form of the two battalions of the Old Guard, including one of chasseurs and the other of grenadiers. Instructed, by the emperor himself, not to fire a shot, but rather to press home their advance with the bayonet, the troops managed to get into the village and re-occupy the church, where they were joined by some survivors of the Young Guard, but the Prussians had only been driven back: very soon then, they were pressing around the village once more.[29]

With the situation at Plancenoit temporarily stabilised, Napoleon was free to throw his last reserves into battle at Mont Saint Jean in the form of four battalions of the Old Guard and six battalions of the Middle Guard. The fate of this attack

is well known and need not concern us here. More to the point, however, is the sequence of events which surrounded it. According to the traditional British view, the repulse of the Guard from the ridge between Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte triggered a general collapse of morale that soon had the entire French Army fleeing from the field, whereas the Prussian version of events is that, just as the Guard breasted the ridge, Ziethen ordered a general assault that broke the French line at Papelotte and La Haye, which had both fallen into the hands of the French a short time earlier, and precipitated the collapse for which the British have so often assumed responsibility. Here, for example, is the version of events later retailed by Gneisenau:

> It was half past seven, and the issue of the battle was still uncertain. The whole of the Fourth Corps and a part of the Second under [Major] General Pirch had successively come up. The French fought with a desperate fury, [but] some uncertainty was perceived in their movements and it was observed that some pieces of cannon were retreating. At this moment the first column of General von Zeithen arrived … near the village of Smohain on the enemy's right flank and

CONVERT TO MONO

Following the battle, Blücher is given the captured medals, hat and rapier of Napoleon in Genappe. (akg-images)

instantly charged. This movement decided the defeat of the enemy. His right wing was broken in three places; he abandoned his positions. The troops rushed forwards at the *pas de charge* and attacked him on all sides, while, at the same time, the whole English line advanced. Circumstances were entirely favourable to the attack formed by the Prussian army: the ground rose in an amphitheatre, so that their artillery could freely open fire from the summit of several heights which rose gradually above each other, and in the intervals of which the troops descended into the plain, formed into brigades in the most perfect order, while fresh corps continually unfolded themselves, issuing from the forest on the height behind. The enemy, however, still preserved means to retreat till the village of Plancenoit … was, after several bloody attacks, taken by storm.[30]

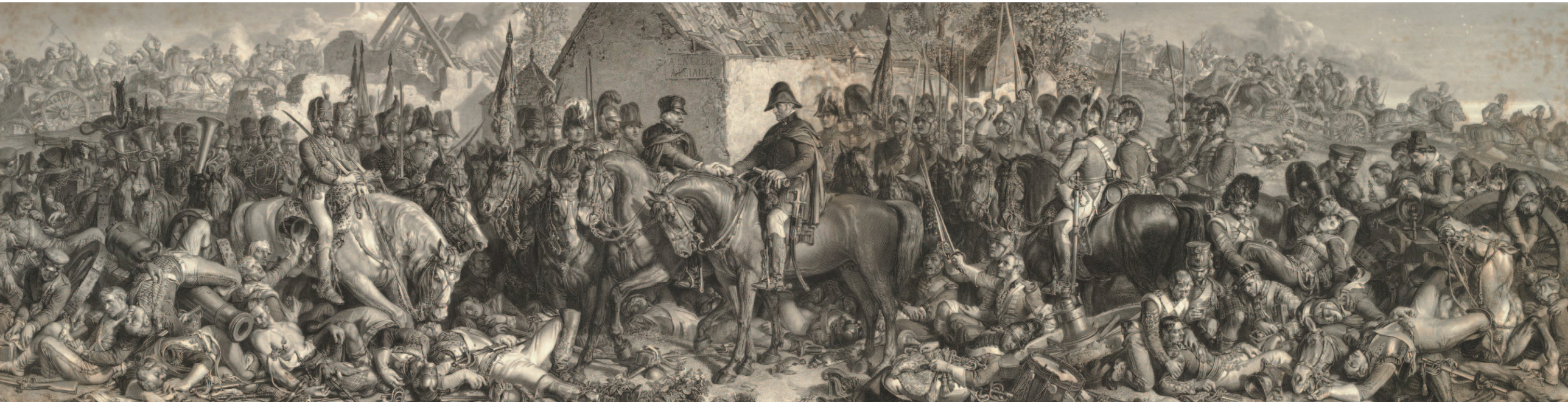
Well, perhaps. It is certainly true that Ziethen's troops launched a general advance about this time, and, further, that as the French Army collapsed, so the Prussians finally got into Plancenoit, which was by now ablaze from end to end.[31] Meanwhile, there are French accounts that are marked by a chronology that seems to coincide with that offered by Gneisenau. Here, for example, is Louis de Pontécoulant, an aristocratic officer serving in the Guard artillery:

the army, had been obliged to retire and was partly destroyed, augmented the disorder and the precipitation of the retreat.[32]

Yet Gneisenau is not wholly to be trusted. We know, for example, that he was decidedly hostile to the British, while in other places the account that he gives of the battle is, at the very least, grossly over-simplified. Here, for example, is his account of the entrance onto the battlefield of IV Corps: 'General Count Bülow … with two brigades and a corps of cavalry, advanced rapidly along the rear of the enemy's right wing.'[33] If this is taken to mean Bülow's circumvention of the Frischermont position, fair enough, but, especially if the reader knows the outline of the battle, the effect is to suggest that the troops proceeded all the way to Plancenoit, which is obviously very far from the truth. On top of this, meanwhile, it is simply not the case that Ziethen launched his attack at the very moment of entering the battlefield: rather, I Corps clearly spent some time getting into position and skirmishing with the French in the course of which time an unfortunate incident took place in which some green-uniformed soldiers from the Grand Duchy of Nassau were fired upon. As the chief of staff of the I Corps, Lieutenant Colonel Ludwig von Reiche, later wrote:

Our line … was suddenly broken. The Prussian cavalry hurled itself into this breach and soon flooded the battlefield, sabring isolated soldiers and making it impossible for us to rally. The news, spread by malevolence or fear, that the Guard, the rock of

As the Nassauers were dressed in the French style of that time, our men took them to be the enemy and fired at them. Their commander, Prince Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar, rushed up to General Zeiten to clarify the misunderstanding,



The climax of Waterloo – Blücher and Wellington meet at La Belle Alliance at the end of the battle. (Anne S. K. Brown)

> which he did in no uncertain terms. The general, not knowing the prince, made no excuses and calmly replied, 'My friend, it is not my fault that your men look like the French.'[34]

In all probability, then, what happened was a coincidence in that Ziethen happened to advance virtually at the very moment the Guard was defeated. Both sides, then, are in the right, just as both sides have a similar share in the defeat of Napoleon. At all events the two armies now moved forwards in the great converging movement that formed the climax of the day. Sometime in the next hour or so, the two commanders encountered one another and shook hands, to the accompaniment of Blücher's famous comment 'Quelle affaire!' Near them, meanwhile, were strewn many of the 7,000 Prussians who had fallen in the battle. Yet even about this much-painted tableau there is controversy. Most sources suggest that it took place outside the inn of La Belle Alliance at about eight o'clock, but, mindful perhaps that the name 'Belle Alliance' – the name, incidentally, that Blücher wanted to give the battle and, indeed, used in its respect in private conversation for the rest of his life – was suggestive of a debt to the Prussians that he did not especially relish, Wellington himself suggested that the meeting took place somewhat later near the village of Genappe, a detail that also conveyed a neat hint that Blücher had come upon the scene very late indeed.[35]

To conclude, then, where are we? First of all, as we have seen, it is impossible to say that Wellington did not receive the support that he was promised from his Prussian allies. Despite terrible logistical difficulties, the serious effects of the Battle of Ligny and the dislike that was entertained of the British by many of his subordinates, Blücher managed to get most of his troops to the field at a time when they could still have a significant impact on the course of the battle, and, what is more, to deploy them in a manner that was highly effective. Secondly, once they reached the field the Prussian forces fought extremely well despite coming up against opposition of the highest quality – setting aside the Imperial Guard, even Mouton's troops were for the most part hardened veterans – and themselves being in large part composed of second-class troops who arrived on the field in a piece-meal fashion after a long and difficult approach march. Thirdly, Blücher kept close control of his troops throughout, and, despite the occasional error – most notably, the order that almost pulled I Corps away from its designated position on Wellington's left flank – directed them extremely well and refused to be diverted from the defeat of the emperor that was the central aim; particularly notable here is the manner in which at about 6 p.m. he rejected a desperate plea for help from

Lieutenant General Johann von Thielmann, whose III Corps was defending Wavre in the face of increasingly desperate French assaults with the tart remark that he would not give him so much as a horse's tail.[36] And, finally, the Prussian intervention on the battlefield tied down many thousands of French troops and spread serious demoralisation amongst Napoleon's forces, even if it did not actually save Wellington from complete disaster. In short, whilst we will never know for certain what would have happened had the Prussians not arrived on the battle field when they did, to pretend that they did not play an important role in the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo is unwarranted. Whatever the battle is called, as generations of British historians have always recognised, it was indeed a *belle alliance*.