

The Causes of Napoleon Bonaparte's Loss at Waterloo 1815

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Abstract

There is much controversy surrounding the Battle of Waterloo, specifically how Napoleon came to be defeated. I argue that the main cause of Napoleon's loss was not solely due to any strategic or tactical failure on his part, but by outside elements that severely harmed his ability to wage war. The purpose of this paper is not to present a play by play account of the Waterloo Campaign or to claim that I myself am an expert in military affairs. Instead, this paper seeks to understand the causes of Napoleon's loss at Waterloo by analyzing the battle's key moments and applying my thesis of the influence external factors had on these said specific moments and how they affected Napoleon's army the most. I do not attempt to note every significant moment of the battle, but rather I use important events as examples to support my argument that outside elements had much to do with Napoleon's defeat (This is done also to avoid redundancy of stating the same supporting argument over again). Thus, this paper will primarily examine the battle from the French perspective. By doing so, I hope to paint a clearer picture regarding this historic battle.

Introduction

Lead balls and canister shots fly through the air, viciously ripping apart the French Imperial Guard infantry. With a raise of the hat, Wellington signals his entire army to advance. The Imperial Guard, the elite of the French Grande Armée, was trained to stand their ground no matter the cost. Then the unthinkable occurs: the Imperial Guard panics and retreats. Napoleon's heart sinks. His more than a decade long campaign to conquer Europe was now at a decisive end brought by his defeat at Waterloo, Belgium. The

combined efforts of Wellington's Anglo-Allied and Blücher's Prussian forces were just enough to break the ambitious Emperor's army. In examining such a legendary battle, one must ask, what actions and series of events led to such a historic outcome? How did a military titan such as Napoleon fall? I argue that the major causes for his defeat at the Battle of Waterloo were not solely due to his faults as a leader but largely from outside forces that considerably influenced the outcome.

The importance of strategy and tactics cannot be understated when studying the Battle of Waterloo. As military historian Jonathon Riley states, "Strategy is the science of war: it produces the overall plans and it assumes responsibility for the general course of military enterprises ... Tactics is the art of war: it teaches the way in which major military projects should be put into execution."³⁷⁶ In the case of Napoleon Bonaparte, he excelled in both fields. There is little wonder as to why the name "Napoleonic Wars" exists. Throughout the majority of the early nineteenth-century, Napoleon ruled the battlefield, using superior strategic and tactical planning over his enemies. The most notable of these examples include the Battle of Austerlitz 1805 in which Napoleon decimated Austrian and Russian forces at Pratzen Heights, by deception and flanking maneuvers.³⁷⁷ However, by 1815, Napoleon's military prowess alone would prove to be insufficient to win the final battle of his campaign. Despite his skillful use of both strategy and tactics, Napoleon would still lose the Battle of Waterloo, due in large part to elements outside of his control.

Perhaps even more significant than strategic and tactical planning is the wide variety of external factors that influence the setting of battles. A commander could have superior numbers in his forces, possess the latest technology, and formulate the best battle plan, yet this could all be made inconsequential by the dominating influence of outside forces. This became especially apparent at the

³⁷⁶ Jonathon P. Riley, *Napoleon as a General* (London ; New York : Hambledon Continuum, 2007), 22.

³⁷⁷ David Gates, *The Napoleonic Wars, 1803-1815* (London ; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 33.

Battle of Waterloo. Environmental factors often have a heavy hand to play in any combat scenario, as they dictate the physical obstacles for military forces. This includes the effects of weather and terrain on the mobility and cover of the combatants. Additionally, the competence and leadership skills of the commanding officers impact how and when military engagements take place. A general may have the perfect plan, but ultimately it is up to his officers to execute the plan. He cannot be in all places at once. Also, the overall status of the military force itself determines its capabilities in combat. For instance, lack of sleep or hunger will make soldiers less likely to carry out orders in a cohesive manner. Lastly, the tactics, strategies, and positions of enemy forces determine the exact approach a general must take to ensure victory. At times, an enemy's advantageous position or superior tactics can tip the balance in his favor.

When these factors are combined, the realities of warfare become clearer. Strategy and tactics must work under the circumstances of external forces. A shift in one outside element can have drastic results on the field of battle, forcing even the most well laid plans to adapt. However, questions still remain. Which key outside forces had the most impact at the Battle of Waterloo? Were Napoleon's tactics and strategies weak?

Historiographical Debate

Few events in world history are surrounded by the same level of debate and controversy as the factors that led to the Battle of Waterloo's outcome. Historians from all over the world offer different, often conflicting perspectives and theories. There exist three main schools of thought concerning Waterloo's conclusion. In the first view, historians claim that the French loss at Waterloo was a direct result of Napoleon's own leadership blunder and inferior methods of warfare. The second argument claims that Napoleon was defeated mainly due to the superior strategy and tactics of his enemies, the Prussians and Anglo-Allies. Lastly, the third perspective asserts the notion that Napoleon's loss at Waterloo resulted chiefly not

from his own faults, but from outside forces that heavily influenced his ability to fight. I argue that the third viewpoint is the most accurate in determining the factors that resulted in the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo.

For some historians, Napoleon's own incompetence in combat, namely errors in tactical and strategic ability, was what led to his downfall in the Battle of Waterloo. In *The Battle of Waterloo*, Jeremy Black states his belief that "the French did not display any learning curve in dealing with the British".³⁷⁸ He goes on to claim, "Napoleon's situational awareness was very poor. This weakness not only was due to poor intelligence but was a product of a more serious failure in his understanding, namely his inability to appreciate the strengths of both the British and the Prussians".³⁷⁹ Historian Owen Connelly agrees with this notion, overtly criticizing Napoleon as having skill in "scrambling, not in carrying out a preconceived plan".³⁸⁰ While these claims are argued well and provide much insight in Napoleon's tactical mindset, they are largely inaccurate in the context of Waterloo. When examining the events of the battle, it becomes clear that Napoleon's strategies and tactics were generally sound. Napoleon had proven himself quite the skillful commander in 1815, the most notable example being the early stages of the Waterloo Campaign in which he forced both Anglo-Allied and Prussian forces to retreat at Quatre Bras and Ligny. The majority of his military failures at Waterloo stemmed from his officers' inability to achieve his goals. If the major faults in Napoleon's methods did not bring about his loss, what did? A closer study of the Battle of Waterloo reveals that Napoleon performed to the best of his ability given the circumstances, but eventually lost due to the unforeseen contingencies that hindered his war fighting capabilities such as incompetent officers and environmental conditions.

Many historians argue that Napoleon was defeated almost entirely by the

³⁷⁸ Jeremy Black, *The Battle of Waterloo* (New York : Random House, 2010), 153.

³⁷⁹ Ibid, 154-155.

³⁸⁰ Owen Connelly, *Blundering to Glory : Napoleon's Military Campaigns* (Wilmington, Del. : Scholarly Resources, 1987), 222.

superb strategies and tactics of his enemies, either by the Anglo-Allied or Prussian forces. The majority of these assertions are heavily biased and take stances based upon strong nationalistic backgrounds. For instance, Peter Hofschröder is famous for his claim that Waterloo was a Prussian victory, not a British one. Had the Prussians not arrived at the critical time to provide reinforcements for the battered British, the Battle of Waterloo could have easily gone to Napoleon.³⁸¹ In contrast to this, Jeremy Black claims it as a primarily British victory, citing Wellington's higher troop quality and superior tactics. Specifically, Black notes in *The Battle of Waterloo* that the well-disciplined British infantry and the brilliantly executed defensive tactics of Wellington were what won the day, while downplaying the roles of the allied forces such as the Prussians and Dutch.³⁸² Perhaps David Chandler summarized this nationalistic debate perfectly,

In Great Britain, many a history book vastly exaggerates the British role in the campaign and battle; Belgians, Dutch and Hanoverians – who accounted for almost two-thirds of the Allied manpower – often go unmentioned, and the Prussian intervention is played down in importance. Germans, on the other hand, sometimes represent the whole campaign as having been borne on the backs of the Prussian army, Wellington being accused of failing to come to Blücher's aid at Ligny on the 16th³⁸³

Both sides can correctly argue that Napoleon's enemies during Waterloo, to a degree, had greater tactics, however to say that this alone led to his downfall is an inaccurate claim. As later elaborated in this essay, the circumstances at Waterloo

³⁸¹ Peter Hofschröder, *1815 The Waterloo Campaign: The German Victory* (London: Greenhill Books, 1999).

³⁸² Black, *The Battle of Waterloo*, 43-44, 153.

³⁸³ David Chandler, *Waterloo, The Hundred Days* (New York : Macmillan, 1981), 10.

favored the tactics and strategies of Napoleon's enemies while proving to be detrimental to his own.

In the third Waterloo argument, historians affirm that outside forces were the chief cause of Napoleon's loss, not in his faults as a commander or in the supposed, inherent superiority of tactics by the Coalition forces. S.G. Rosenbaum concludes that "Waterloo was not lost because of errors in military technique. It is, therefore, quite possible for a layman to examine the elements that entered into Napoleon's great disaster and to estimate their relative force."³⁸⁴ Watson supports this notion, stating that the physical disadvantages the French army suffered such as the lack of food and hilly terrain placed many difficulties on their ability to fight.³⁸⁵ Even the extreme critic of Napoleon's methods, Owen Connelly, cites that Napoleon lost due to being outnumbered, having his army staffed by incompetent officers, and that on perhaps that day, Wellington was the better general.³⁸⁶ Jac Weller further reinforces this argument, stating, "The Emperor in taking the offensive against superior forces well commanded needed not only a good plan, but nearly flawless execution at all levels ... The French plan was good, but the execution was far from perfect."³⁸⁷ Simply put, Napoleon's dramatic defeat at Waterloo cannot be attributed to his tactical and strategic errors alone. This view on the battle is perhaps the most accurate and appropriate explanation as it takes into account not only the capabilities of the participants at Waterloo but also how contingencies affect these capabilities.

In reality, no one factor is the sole cause of Napoleon's downfall at Waterloo. All of the above arguments hold some merit. In regards to the nationalistic arguments between the British and German perspectives, both are correct. Wellington's superb defensive tactics and use of terrain combined with the arrival of

³⁸⁴ S. G. Rosenbaum, *The Causes for the Loss of the Battle of Waterloo* (New York : Privately printed, 1923), 8.

³⁸⁵ Thomas E. Watson, *Waterloo* (New York : Neale Publishing Co., 1908), 15.

³⁸⁶ Owen Connelly, *Blundering to Glory : Napoleon's Military Campaigns* (Wilmington, Del. : Scholarly Resources, 1987), 222, 202.

³⁸⁷ Jac Weller, *Wellington at Waterloo* (London : Longmans, 1967), 200.

Blücher's reinforcements at a critical moment of the battle are what eventually defeated the French army. Had either one party faltered in their role, Napoleon may very well have been the victor that day. In terms of tactics and strategy, Napoleon did indeed have his faults. His errors in decision making and use of frontal attacks on the Allied forces would prove fatal for him. But to chiefly place blame on Napoleon's ability to formulate effective battle plans or to claim that the military skill of his enemies alone led to his downfall is just as flawed. Those that oppose these views are correct in recognizing the physical obstacles, the inferior numbers of troops, the circumstances that aided in the Coalition's tactical abilities, and the mistakes of commanding officers all affected how Napoleon's Grande Armée fought. Clearly, the primary factors that lead to Napoleon Bonaparte's decisive defeat at the Battle of Waterloo were not a major error in either his tactics or strategy, but rather the external forces that were beyond his control. The adverse environmental conditions, the weak state of his army, the incompetence of his officers, and the superior tactics of his enemies all forced Napoleon to wage war from a disadvantageous position and eventually led to his demise.

An Overview of the Battle of Waterloo

Prior to the events of Waterloo, Napoleon had been defeated in 1814, forced to renounce the thrones of France and Italy to the armies of the Coalition and sent to exile on the island of Elba. After a year, Napoleon would escape his prison in February 1815 with about a thousand of his loyal men. Upon reaching Paris, Napoleon quickly rallied his forces and retook power over France.³⁸⁸ The whole of Europe became alarmed as Napoleon now sought to reconquer the continent once more. Thus, the Coalition forces declared war, not on the nation of France, but on Napoleon himself. As events unfolded, the French Grande Armée would meet the Coalition's forces at Waterloo, Belgium on June 18th 1815, where the fate of Europe would be determined by one last Napoleonic battle.

³⁸⁸ Rosenbaum, *Loss of Waterloo*, 12.

The battle consisted of three armies clashing in one of history's most iconic military engagements. The belligerents consisted of the French army and the Coalition forces of the Anglo-Allies and Prussians. The French, led by the self-proclaimed Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, wielded a well-balanced military force. The Grande Armée consisted of three main corps (the Imperial Guard, I, II), each with their own battalions of infantry, cavalry, and artillery. These were supported by a reserve corps (VI) and two reserve heavy cavalry corps (III, IV). At the time of Waterloo, Napoleon's forces totaled approximately 107,500 men, this included infantry, cavalry, artillery, and support staff.³⁸⁹ However, nearly a third of Napoleon's entire army (30,000) was with his subordinate officer, Marshall Grouchy, at Wavre attempting to stop the Prussians from regrouping with the British. This left Napoleon 77,500 troops to deal with the British at Waterloo.³⁹⁰ The Anglo-Allied forces, under the British Commander Arthur Wellesley, (better known as the Duke of Wellington) numbered at 73,200, slightly less than Napoleon's numbers. Wellington's army consisted of a mixture of greenhorn and veteran soldiers, all of different nationalities including Dutch, German, Nassau, Brunswick, Hanoverian, and Belgian ethnicities.³⁹¹ The Prussian forces under Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher was comprised of three corps (I, II, IV) and numbered at a mere 49,000.³⁹² However, this combined with the Anglo-Allied forces easily put Napoleon's army at a numerical disadvantage, something he attempted to prevent from happening throughout the Waterloo Campaign.

On June 16th, 1815, Napoleon would engage in two major battles with the Anglo-Allied and Prussian forces that would largely influence the outcome of Waterloo. His forces were split into two, one half at Ligny under his own command and the other at Quatre Bras under the command of Marshall Ney. While Napoleon was able to hold off both Coalition armies, he did not achieve a decisive blow to

³⁸⁹ Mark Adkin, *The Waterloo Companion* (London : Aurum, 2001), 51.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 65.

either Wellington or Blücher. Instead, Ney managed to fight Wellington's army to a standstill at Quatre Bras while Napoleon defeated Blücher at Ligny, forcing the Prussians into a desperate retreat.³⁹³ This allowed for Wellington's forces to establish a strong defense at Waterloo and for Blücher's forces to fight another day.

The Battle of Waterloo would commence midday on June 18th 1815. Napoleon now faced Wellington's Anglo-Allied army at Waterloo itself, in an all out display of artillery, infantry, and cavalry combat. The remainder of the French forces under Marshall Grouchy was tasked to hunt down Blücher's Prussian forces at Wavre in order to prevent them from reinforcing Wellington's army. For much of the battle, Napoleon would employ a strategy of direct and aggressive attacks through the use of heavy artillery and frontal attacks. However, fate would be against him on this day. Marshall Ney would impulsively order an unsupported cavalry charge into the center of Wellington's infantry, causing many French casualties.³⁹⁴ This, coupled with Prince Jerome's (Napoleon's youngest brother) costly diversion attack at the British held farmhouse of Hougoumont, would deplete much of the French army's numbers.³⁹⁵ When Blücher's forces, not Grouchy's, arrived to the scene of Waterloo, Napoleon's forces were now at a numerical disadvantage. At this moment, Napoleon became desperate, lying to his men that Grouchy's troops had arrived in order to boost morale and ordering his elite Imperial Guard Corps to make a frontal attack in a last ditch effort to break Wellington's lines. Using the tall, hilly ridge to his advantage, Wellington ordered the majority of his forces to lie prone, effectively hiding them from the French. When the time came, Wellington waved his hat to signal his troops to stand up and surprise attack the Imperial Guard, forcing an unheard of retreat.³⁹⁶ The advancing Anglo-Allied forces, the attacks from the Prussian army to the French right flank, and the lack of support from Grouchy's men in combination compelled Napoleon to

³⁹³ Rosenbaum, *Loss of Waterloo*, 19.

³⁹⁴ Adkin, *The Waterloo Companion*, 360-361.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 336.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 391-392.

retreat. As a result, he would lose the Battle of Waterloo and his once powerful grip on Europe forever.

An Overview of Napoleon's Strategy and Tactics

For Napoleon Bonaparte, offense was everything. He always sought to crush his enemies in a constant barrage of attacks. This allowed him to seize the initiative, set the tempo in battle and force his opponents to fight on his terms. Jonathon Riley notes that "Napoleon's foremost strategic objective was to destroy the enemy's army in battle, and thus break his opponent's will to resist."³⁹⁷ In practice, this was often achieved by pinning an enemy force and using another body of his army to flank an exposed area, all through the use of a "massive combination of artillery fire, infantry attack, and cavalry exploitation."³⁹⁸ Such offensive movements were achieved by the rapid mobility of his troops, which forced his enemies to react to his actions.³⁹⁹ This display of constant attack is reflected further in Napoleon's tactics in the field.

The infantry is the essential backbone of any army. While the artillery and cavalry could attack objectives, only the infantry could take and hold objectives. Common infantry tactics used at Waterloo were the column, line, and square formations. The column placed the marching infantry units in long lines, greater in length than width. This provided the tactical value of increased mobility in attacking and increased flexibility in switching to other formations. When firing upon enemy forces, the infantry could easily change into a line formation, which presented the units in a wide arrangement with the troops being placed longer in width than length. This allowed for the maximum firepower of the muskets to be employed all at once. If presented by a cavalry attack, the infantry could just as easily switch into a square defensive formation.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁷ Riley, *Napoleon as a General*, 24.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁰⁰ Adkin, *The Waterloo Companion*, 194.

The cavalry in Napoleon's army consisted of both heavy and light variants. The heavy were made up of cuirassiers, lancers, dragoons, horse grenadiers, and carabineers. Armed with lances and sabres, they were tasked with breaking the lines of infantrymen through mass charges.⁴⁰¹ In the case of the light cavalry — hussars, light dragoons, and *chasseurs* — the objective was to scout, pursue, and secure the rear.⁴⁰² Cavalry units were also effective against retreating infantry.⁴⁰³

The artillery was Napoleon's pride and joy of the entire army. The main purpose was to soften up targets with a variety of devastating ammunition in order to allow infantry and cavalry to attack with greater ease. Artillery pieces in the French army consisted of 6-pounders, 12-pounders, 6-inch howitzers, and 5.5-inch howitzers, all of which drew from round shot, canister, and shell ammunition.⁴⁰⁴ Round shot, a large lead ball, was fired out of cannons primarily to destroy fortifications and personnel at longer ranges. The ball could ricochet off the ground, creating even more carnage.⁴⁰⁵ Canister shot was also fired from cannon and was used against close range infantry. Since this ammunition was made up of a tin can filled with musket balls, it functioned like a "shotgun", spreading out lead balls in order to inflict multiple casualties.⁴⁰⁶ Lastly, shell ammunition was fired by howitzers and targeted formations of troops as well as structures. It comprised of a hollowed out cast-iron shell, filled with black powder, and attached to a fuse. If fired correctly, the shell would explode.⁴⁰⁷

The correct use of these strategies and tactics were what often allowed Napoleon to win his battles throughout the Napoleonic Wars. At the Battle of Waterloo, however, this was simply not enough to win the day. Errors in both

⁴⁰¹ Riley, *Napoleon as a General*, 83.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁰³ Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Evolution of Weapons and Warfare* (Fairfax, Va. : Hero Books, 1984), 159.

⁴⁰⁴ Adkin, *The Waterloo Companion*, 296.

⁴⁰⁵ Kevin F Kiley, *Artillery of the Napoleonic Wars, 1792-1815* (London : Greenhill Books : Mechanicsburg, PA : Stackpole Books, 2004), 93.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

categories were made, but not solely by Napoleon's doing. As stated before, when campaign strategies and battlefield tactics are put under the stress of external factors, terrible mistakes inevitably occur.

The Lack of a Decisive Victory at Ligny and Quarte Bras

While the Battle of Waterloo itself took place in June 18th 1815, the events that occurred two days prior drastically influenced the result. Napoleon's army was drastically outnumbered by the combined might of the Anglo-Allied and Prussian forces. Knowing this, Napoleon realized he must attack first and with speed. The option of playing defense was suicide, as it would merely delay the inevitable. Thus, Napoleon employed his strategy of central position, which was a maneuver "designed to separate the various enemy forces and destroy them by producing local superiority in a series of strikes against scattered adversaries, rather than one crushing blow."⁴⁰⁸ He split his forces between Marshal Ney commanding the left wing to confront Wellington's Anglo-Allied forces at Quatre Bras and Marshal Grouchy to confront Blücher's Prussian forces at Ligny.⁴⁰⁹ Under Grouchy's command were the infantry corps of Vandamme and Gerard and cavalry corps of Pajol and Exelmans. Ney's command, meanwhile, contained the infantry corps of Reille and d'Erlon and the cavalry corps of Kellermann.⁴¹⁰

Ney was given a direct order from Napoleon to "unite the corps of Counts Reille and d'Erlon, and that of the Count of Valmy [Kellermann] ... with these forces you ought to be able to beat and destroy any force of the enemy which you may meet" and later order added that he was to take position at Quatre Bras.⁴¹¹ However, Ney did neither. Instead he did the exact opposite of what was expected of him by "ordering Reille's corps to proceed to Quatre Bras, three divisions of

⁴⁰⁸ Riley, *Napoleon as a General*, 61.

⁴⁰⁹ Rosenbaum, *Loss of Waterloo*, 21.

⁴¹⁰ Peter Hofschröer, *Waterloo, 1815 : Quatre Bras & Ligny* (Barnsley : Pen & Sword Military, 2005), 44.

⁴¹¹ John Codman Ropes, *The Campaign of Waterloo; a Military History* (New York : C. Scribner's sons, 1906), 182-183.

d'Erlon's corps to take position at Frasnes, and two divisions of Valmy's corps to do the same at Frasnes and Liberchies."⁴¹² Ney thought it to be inadvisable to place all of his forces in one area, but to have d'Erlon's infantry back at Frasnes as a reserve while Reille's infantry progressed to Quatre Bras.⁴¹³ This would have harmful consequences once the battle with Wellington's forces began. Initially, the battle tipped to Ney, but as time progressed, Wellington's forces grew in numbers from reinforcements. The roles became reversed, Ney's single infantry corps was now forced to fight a defensive battle — again, the exact opposite of what Napoleon intended. It was at this moment that Marshal Ney needed the support of d'Erlon's corps the most.

Meanwhile at Ligny, Napoleon and Grouchy were fairing much better with the Prussians. While doing battle with Blücher, Napoleon devised a plan. Realizing the futility of a partial victory over the Anglo-Allies or Prussians, Napoleon decided then that Ney should keep Wellington's forces at bay long enough for his own army to crush Blücher for good. However, he lacked the sufficient manpower to do so. Napoleon too, required the assistance of Marshal d'Erlon.⁴¹⁴

It is at this point that conflicting historical accounts regarding the communication mishap between Ney, Napoleon, and d'Erlon appear. Whichever version is correct, the same basic events occurred: both Ney and Napoleon requested d'Erlon's immediate assistance at varying times. Neither Napoleon nor Ney knew of each other's orders. Due to this, d'Erlon aimlessly meandered between Ligny and Quarte Bras without his forces firing a shot.⁴¹⁵ This error in communication would prevent d'Erlon from giving aid to either battle. Rosenbaum correctly concludes that, if the 20,000 men under [d'Erlon's] command had been thrown against Blücher's wavering line, it would be impossible for the Prussians to rally in time to join Wellington at Waterloo ... Napoleon could then have turned upon Wellington

⁴¹² Rosenbaum, *Loss of Waterloo*, 23.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

and completed his triumph. On the other hand, if d'Erlon had employed his corps against Wellington, Ney would have been able to score a decisive victory at Quatre Bras, which would have placed Blücher at Napoleon's mercy. Either way, Napoleon would have conquered and there would have been no battle at Waterloo.⁴¹⁶

The lack of a decisive victory at Ligny and Quatre Bras effectively eliminated Napoleon's best chance to win Waterloo. While his strategy and tactics were sound, it was the incompetence of his subordinate officer, Marshal Ney and the unfortunate communication error with Marshal d'Erlon that ruined the execution. The blame can squarely be fixed on Ney, for disobeying Napoleon's orders to unite his forces, which in turn weakened his hold at Quatre Bras and placed d'Erlon too far away for a direct line of communication to Napoleon. While the Prussians were defeated at Ligny, they were allowed to link up with Wellington's army in the final moments of Waterloo, eventually crushing Napoleon's forces.

Inability to Begin Attack on Wellington's Forces Earlier

It is the morning of June 18th 1815 in Waterloo, Belgium. On one side, Wellington's Anglo-Allied army stands at the ready and the other, Napoleon's Grande Armée sits idly by. Hours pass before the battle finally commences. Napoleon, originally intending to begin the assault on the Anglo-Allies early in the morning, initiates the attack at approximately 11:00 to 11:30 am.⁴¹⁷ Why was there such a delay in Napoleon's attack? Surely, he knew the consequences of allowing more time for the Prussians to regroup with the Allied army. This action also goes completely against Napoleon's doctrine of constantly being on the offensive. The answers lie not with Napoleon decision making, but in the factors that affected it.

The common misconception (that to this day is still taught to the general audience) for the delay in Napoleon's attack is that the weather and environmental conditions alone prevented him from doing so. The argument goes that the rain

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 34.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 81, 83-84.

from the night before the battle caused the ground to become thick with mud, severely decreasing the mobility of Napoleon's artillery and cavalry. Because his tactics relied heavily on fast moving and rapidly attacking units, Napoleon waited several hours until the mud dried in order to allow for this. Were it not for the rain, Napoleon could have used this precious time to begin the attack sooner and defeat Wellington before the Prussians arrived.⁴¹⁸

The more realistic answer is not as clear cut. The event of the rain itself is confirmed by nearly all accounts and its effects on the soldiers were real. Napoleon himself lists the unfavorable weather conditions as one of the several reasons why he lost Waterloo in a document written in St. Helena during his exile. In it, he claims, "If the weather had permitted the French army to maneuver on its terrain beginning at 4 am, the Anglo-Dutch army would have been cut up and scattered before 7 am; it would have lost everything."⁴¹⁹ However, the assertion that Napoleon waited a few hours for the ground to dry is questionable at best. This is an exaggeration because "if any worthwhile drying was to occur, several hours of summer sun were required, which, to all at Waterloo that morning, did not look likely."⁴²⁰ The probable cause for this postponed attack was also due to Napoleon's army arriving late.⁴²¹ The overall status of the troops was at an extreme low point, affecting not only the speed in which they marched to Waterloo but also their ability to fight. Jac Weller takes notice that,

Napoleon's armies were as bad as ever; in addition to three days of marching and fighting, the troops had to find most of their food. Finally, all weapons needed to be cleaned after the downpour of the afternoon and night before. An attack by a poorly concentrated, tired, hungry, and

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 81.

⁴¹⁹ Napoleon I, *The Mind of Napoleon. A Selection from his Written and Spoken Words*, trans. J. Christopher Herold (New York, London : Columbia University Press, 1961), 237.

⁴²⁰ Adkin, *The Waterloo Companion*, 414.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 413.

inadequately armed army would have been worse than a delay.⁴²²

Coupled with this, was Napoleon's overconfidence that Blücher was still slowly recovering from the loss at Ligny and that Marshal Grouchy was well on his way in rooting him out.⁴²³ This false sense of comfort gave Napoleon the notion that time was on his side and could afford to delay the attack.

As it is known today, the arrival of the Prussian army at Waterloo would spell the end of Napoleon. In order to avert this loss, Napoleon would have had to make every hour count in his assault on Wellington's army. His strategy of taking the offensive supports such an action, therefore making it viable plan. But at the morning of June 18th, this was simply not an option. External factors of the rain, muddy ground, and the unhealthy state of his troops prevented the attack from commencing on time.

Unsuccessful Attacks on Wellington's Successful Defense

Throughout the Battle of Waterloo, Wellington repelled a nearly endless onslaught of French army attacks, a testament to the genius of his defensive tactics. Napoleon's inability to break the Anglo-Allied lines as seen by the ineffective preliminary artillery barrage, costly infantry assaults, and disastrous cavalry charges contributed to his eventual failure at Waterloo. At first glance, one would judge this a major fault in Napoleon's tactical skill. Indeed, critics such as Owen Connelly would likely characterize Napoleon's methods of attack as "hurried and unsophisticated."⁴²⁴ However, upon closer examination, it is revealed that outside forces were at play. This simultaneously aided in Wellington's defense and harmed Napoleon's offense.

At the beginning of the battle, Napoleon deployed his "Grand Battery" to

⁴²² Weller, *Wellington at Waterloo*, 193-194.

⁴²³ Rosenbaum, *Loss of Waterloo*, 87.

⁴²⁴ Connelly, *Blundering to Glory*, 202.

bombard the Anglo-Allied positions, but to little effect. The purpose of this artillery barrage, as reflected by Napoleon's tactics, was to smash a hole in the enemy's center, create disarray, shake the enemy's morale, and to soften the enemy for subsequent troop attacks. However, despite nearly 30 minutes of uninterrupted artillery strikes, Napoleon has had little effect on the Anglo-Allied forces.⁴²⁵ Fortunately for Wellington, his forces were located on a hilly ridge. His troops were able to take cover behind the reverse slope position, significantly reducing Allied casualties. On top of this, the soft, soggy ground that formed from the rain easily absorbed the impact of ricocheting round shots and exploding shells.⁴²⁶ As depicted in the documentary series, *Battlefield Detectives*, even a shell detonated at point blank range of a target was unable to produce damage of any kind due to the soft ground.⁴²⁷

Throughout the battle, Napoleon sought to break the Allied forces by infantry attacks to the center led by d'Erlon. The ineffective artillery barrage from before did little to aid d'Erlon's advancing infantry.⁴²⁸ Napoleon's tactics always called for the infantry or cavalry to be supported by artillery. While this was the case, the lack of any real damage by the artillery only left the infantry open for attack. To this day, d'Erlon's choice of using column formation attacks against the Anglo-Allied line formation is heavily criticized. In regards to force on force contact, the critics are correct. The column's distinct disadvantage stemmed from the decreased firepower capability. Only the first two rows of the formation could fire upon an enemy, whereas in a line, all troops are able to fire at once. But what factors led to the use of the column? As stated previously, the column offered the French the value of flexibility and mobility. It "permitted the commander to move large numbers of men over the battlefield more rapidly and with better control than had been possible with more rigid lines. In particular, the column could operate more effectively than

⁴²⁵ Adkin, *The Waterloo Companion*, 296, 298.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁴²⁷ "Massacre at Waterloo." *Battlefield Detectives*. History Channel (USA: November 9, 2003).

⁴²⁸ Adkin, *The Waterloo Companion*, 347.

the line in hill terrain.”⁴²⁹ As columns marched, they could easily switch to a different formation to match the varying incoming threats. However, the real issue came not with the ability to switch formations, but the timing of the switch. Changing from a column to a line formation mid-march required perfect timing. If it occurred too soon, the formation would slow down prematurely, have increased difficulty overcoming physical obstacles, and become disorganized. If it happened too late, the battalion was more likely to be destroyed by enemy fire.⁴³⁰ Additionally, the Allied forces again wielded the power of the terrain. The French “had to charge uphill over miry ground. The English were stationary on the crest, excepting when they charged, and then they charged downhill.”⁴³¹ Napoleon’s infantry could not see past the ridge that hid many of Wellington’s forces until the very last minute.⁴³²

The infamous cavalry charge by led by Marshal Ney would prove to be one of the most catastrophic endeavors by the French. Some controversy is placed on whether Napoleon or Ney ordered the charge, but most sources indicate it was indeed Ney’s command.⁴³³ He believed at the time that wounded Allied soldiers being moved to the back were retreating. Knowing that cavalry were the most effective against a retreating force, Ney thought an opportunity presented itself.⁴³⁴ He ordered 9,000 horsemen to attack in mass. What resulted was nothing short of a tactical blunder. Ney’s cavalry units were met with Wellington’s infantry in square formations. This tactic consisted of soldiers forming into block patterns that were essentially walls of bayonets pointing from all sides.⁴³⁵ The cavalry was effectively useless, as not one square was broken. This was due in large part to the horse’s psychological fear, refusing to charge into a small human fortress.⁴³⁶ British Lieutenant Colonel James Stanhope documented his first hand account of the

⁴²⁹ Dupuy, *The Evolution of Weapons and Warfare*, 155.

⁴³⁰ Adkin, *The Waterloo Companion*, 193.

⁴³¹ Watson, *Waterloo*, 15.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴³³ Weller, *Wellington at Waterloo*, 198.

⁴³⁴ Adkin, *The Waterloo Companion*, 356.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 172-173.

⁴³⁶ Weller, *Wellington at Waterloo*, 110.

cavalry charge in a letter to the Duke of York, which stated, “When the French cavalry attacked us in squares (which they did with the most persevering gallantry, never retiring above 100 or 150 paces & charging again) our men behaved as if they were at a field day, firing by ranks & with the best possible aim ... not a man moved from his place”.⁴³⁷ Another failure on the cavalry’s part was the fact they did not turn the overrun artillery pieces of the Allies against them. At least twelve times the French were in possession of the guns, but neither used them nor sabotaged them.⁴³⁸

In the realm of tactics, Napoleon's efforts were simply not enough to make any form of significant impact against Wellington. Despite the constant attacks of Napoleon’s army, each was repelled from the main body of the Anglo-Allied forces. External elements such as the hilly terrain, soggy ground, incapable officers, and the superior defensive tactics of the enemy all drastically affected Napoleon’s own abilities to effectively engage in combat. By this end, Wellington was able to hold off Napoleon until the timely arrival of Blücher’s Prussian reinforcements.

Conclusion

Napoleon looks across the vast ocean in his Longwood House at St. Helena. He now possesses no army, no status, and no power, only himself and the sound of the ocean waves. No doubt he asks himself, “How did victory escape my grasp? Where did it all go wrong?” Napoleon would have the next six years of his life to ponder these questions. For the rest of the world, a lifetime of historical speculation and debate attempting to answer these exact questions will define a large part of Napoleon’s legacy.

The loss at Waterloo meant the end of Napoleon’s military and political career, owing much of this to a series of his own mistakes in both strategy and

⁴³⁷ Gareth Glover, *The Waterloo Archive Volume I: British Sources* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2010), 132.

⁴³⁸ David Howarth, *Waterloo; Day of Battle* (New York, Atheneum, 1968), 132.

tactics. However, the impact of the various external factors that greatly influenced his ability to wage a successful war cannot be overlooked. The army he led, a shadow of its former self, was not the same one he used to win Austerlitz. His subordinate officers, while experienced, were unable to achieve his strategic goals. The environmental conditions, both in terrain and weather, hindered his mobility and in turn his ability to control the pace of combat. Finally, the strategy and tactics of his enemies, at least on the day of June 18th 1815, proved to be superior to his own. Napoleon Bonaparte will always be remembered for his genius in military campaigns and battlefield coordination, but it is important to also remember that even the best men are subject to elements they cannot control.