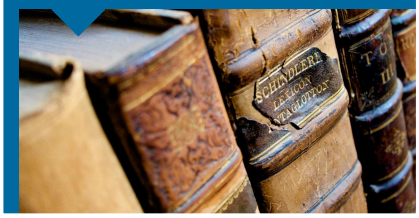
REMEMBERING WATERLOO AND THE NAPOLEONIC WARS



WATERLOO - IN - HISTORIOGRAPHY

How have historians remembered Waterloo until now? The interest in Waterloo has changed over time, and it may be worth, here, briefly summarise how and why it did so.

As per many historical events, this battle has changed status when national narrative and national interest required to[2].

The very first accounts of the battle came from the actors themselves: Napoleon himself published his first account of the battle in the *Moniteur* (17, 18 and 21 June 1815); he dictated a second one while on his journey to St. Helena, which accused Marshall Ney and Grouchy of fatal mistakes that led to the defeat. From the British side, Wellington's party responded to critics as early as thirteen years after Waterloo (Sir Napier's account of the Peninsular Wars dates from 1828).

The first post-Waterloo years were thus characterised by pamphlets and contrasting accounts. In the 1830s and 1840s historians and military experts who did not participate to the battle started publishing new accounts; among them, Dutch and Prussian texts are particularly notable: the Dutch account, written by a former aide-de-camp of Frederick of the Netherlands (whose division was in Waterloo but did not see action) focuses on the positioning and on the events concerning Dutch troops - thus concentrating on building a national memory of the battle. The Prussian accounts, among which one written by von Clausewitz and published in 1835[3], are all more technical and focused on the way the battle developed. In Britain, discussion revolved around Wellington's performance, and the role Prussian troops had, rather than on the battle itself; Britain was at the apex of its world power, and victory at Waterloo was a non contentious subject: British troops, alone, had won the battle, as consensus went.

Portrait of Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington – 1814

The second half of the XIX[th] century and its nationalism affected the way the battle of Waterloo was studied, especially in the Continent, where French historians felt the need of reassessing the defeat (a glorious defeat[4]) and their Prusso-German colleagues worked for a definitive recognition of the essential role of Prussian troops on the field. The rising of tensions towards the end of the century and the change in the traditional diplomatic assets applied pressure upon the classic perspectives on Waterloo. In 1915, the British government downplayed celebrations of the centenary: in the middle of an equally devastating war, the old enemy was now London's best ally[5].

However, the XX[th] century marked also a new change in the way information was collected: authors started feeding from multiple archives - while until then the usual research concerned one archive and foreign, published sources at times.

The First World War, which superseded the Napoleonic Wars as the new Great War, prompted new reflections among French historians, who started wondering about the reasons of Napoleon's defeat.

Until the Second World War, historians had focused on the high commands' perspectives on the battle, with very few mentions to the soldiers - let alone to the civilians, or the social repercussions of the Battle and the campaign in general. In the aftermath of the war, finally, new perspectives started being taken into account and ego-documents from common soldiers became the core of some new works[6] - coming especially from English-speaking historians. Waterloo studies followed in the new trends in history writing, and turned to a less classic, more 'democratic' kind of presentation. Bruno Colson calls it 'Cultural History', and adds:

"Historians are now concerned by the cultural repercussions of the event itself and its memorialising.[7]"

"OUR ALLY IS TODAY OUR SWORN ENEMY!"

A cartoon depicting King George V sweeping away his German titles in 1917. During the First World War the Royal House changed its name from 'Saxe-Coburg and Gotha' to the more British 'Windsor'.

A Good Riddance – L. Raven Hill 1917

PUBLIC REMEMBRANCE - AND - WATERLOO

The scale of the battle of Waterloo was huge - even in modern terms: its almost 50.000 deaths within a single day are comparable to the first day of the Somme-Battle of July 1916.[8] The death toll exacted by the Napoleonic Wars equals that of the First World War - in relative terms of population.[9] Since Europe was in 1815 in good part ravaged by more than twenty years of basically uninterrupted state of war, people started memorialising the major events quite early - the battle of Waterloo included.

Some main reasons can be put forward to explain how structured public remembrance could be enforced as early as during the XIXth century: the European-wide character of the Napoleonic Wars and battles (including Waterloo) put different national perspectives in simultaneous competition for the same events. Combined with the rising nationalism (due also to the war itself), and thus to the construction of national narratives which took place during those years, made it a convenient subject for national remembrance.

Furthermore, the enforcement of national education programmes enabled people to have basic education and to be fed with national narratives and perspectives of events of the past: basic education created a community with a sense of what the nation was and of what it stood for, thus creating the bases for common public remembrance[10]. Historical narratives thus tended to support the construction of the national State; they tended to avoid complexity, and often were undisputed within their communities.

Today, instead, organisers of educational and cultural initiatives to remember past wars have the opposite, but equally difficult task of navigating the complex and sometimes blurred lines of commemoration, legitimisation and glorification.[11] Even when there is no willingness to justify wars or the devastating losses they caused, there are significant political and cultural pressures to draw meaning from past conflicts and to avoid suggesting that so many deaths might have been in vain or without just purpose.

Cross-border activities can help understand that *what is remembered, how it is remembered* and *why it is remembered* can vary from one society to another and from one generation to another. The development and implementation of comparative online teaching modules will help transporting national (re-) interpretations of key moments from a country's - or a region's - past into a broader European and global perspective. A focus on best-practices exchanges, cross-border dialogue and European-wide support network will enable educators to be better equipped and thus to own the capability to make students aware of the risks of glorification or victimisation of a tragic past seen exclusively through a national prism.

From top to bottom:
1. Soldiers during a reenactment of the battle of Waterloo
2. French cuirassier during a re-enactment of the battle of Waterloo
3. Reenactors in the uniform of the 33rd Regiment of Foot (Wellington's Redcoats)

THE ROLE OF
– PERSPECTIVES –

Do national perspectives play a role in Waterloo studies? The literature (both academic and novelistic) on Waterloo still features a predominance of national points of view, language skills of researchers are determining to a large extent still the results, and therefore the perspectives of historical research. Finally, national perspectives still predominantly determine the point of views and consequently national bias are still very present in the way Waterloo features in the national narratives. A European perspective on Waterloo and the Napoleonic wars in general might positively reflect in history teaching in primary and secondary schools. Nonetheless, the marginality of the subject in many European curricula pushes teachers to teach Waterloo the traditional way, thus missing a rich subject which could instead be very useful as a key to spread light on life in 1815. In this framework, this publication might be useful in supporting educators as a quick reference book and a collection of ready-to-use ideas, while also making the case for the relevance of teaching Waterloo today.

TODAY'S
– RELEVANCE –

The European and Global Dimension

The European dimension of the alliance against Napoleon in 1815, and particularly the armed forces in the Battle creates a subject of European importance. A large majority of the soldiers on the battlefield spoke German, many of them in the British army.[12] Part of the British regular army was the German Legion, a legacy of the fact that the king was of Hanoverian descent. However, many more spoke German. Brendan Simms, a well known Cambridge historian, wrote on *The New Statesman* in 2014 that *"Waterloo was a 'European' rather than a 'British' or 'German' victory"*. Waterloo offers a picture of the high degree of European 'cooperation' existing at the time – a very relevant information, nowadays.

Waterloo's precedent and subsequent years can also be brought into the classroom through the battle. After all, Waterloo marked the beginning of the process of destruction ofdecaying empires such as the Spanish and the Ottoman, and the definitive establishment of new great Powers, such the British, Russian, later the American[13], and the European empowerment of Prussia. One can even consider it as a first beginning of a unification process of Germany.

The Napoleonic wars and Waterloo can thus be taught from the viewpoint of a European and even global dimension. In particular, the bicentenary of the Battle should be an opportunity to reflect on dynamics of conflict and cooperation in Europe throughout the 19th and the 20th century[14]. This way, learning about the war will contribute to reinforce peace and the values attached to it in the minds of young people, helping them understand the world they live in and become responsible and citizens.

Ordinary People

The Napoleonic Wars were known at the time as the 'Great War' - a proof of the wide public's awareness of the impact this period had had on Europe. Notwithstanding this, remembrance concerned mainly the major characters who fought the wars (Napoleon, Nelson, Wellington, Blucher...), while almost no memorial or public remembrance took into consideration the commoners (be they soldiers or civilians). For instance, the victims of the battle of Waterloo did not receive any celebratory burying of some sort, nor were their deaths commemorated in any meaningful manner[15].

Personal testimonies reveal a complex picture of responses ranging from patriotism to comradeship to self-preservation. Soldiers kept diaries, wrote letters or, if they survived, simply remembered what they had seen and done, thus uncovering their idealism, nationalism, pragmatism, reluctance to go to battle, sarcasm, and any other shade of human behaviour, so much so that students can promptly feel a connection to them.

Soldiers' experiences and motivations defy simplistic classifications and rarely fit political narratives. Here lies their added value: at a time when the legitimacy and relevance of the nation are being challenged by globalisation, mass migration, identity politics and many other forces, it may be tempting for governments to seek to use wars to construct a national identity rooted in a particular vision of the past. Yet even if soldiers' sacrifices could be moulded into a simply-defined defence of the nation and its values against an external enemy, this is likely to prove divisive and even counter-productive. Attempts to create a single national memory by excluding alternative perspectives are detrimental to efforts to make war commemorations inclusive and meaningful to a broad spectrum of society. Injection of multiple perspectives, besides those of great men, into history teaching is thus a fundamental tool in order to keep history unbiased and independent. Multiple perspectives add complexity to the narration of history; showing students that there is no one, correct view, but many, competing and coexisting ones, leads to the understanding of complexity in the past - and in the present.

Focusing on the way commoners have 'not been remembered' so far is indeed an interesting perspective to take into account when discussing about Waterloo. In recent years there has been a tendency to focus more on this perspective. In Spring 2015 a team of international archaeological experts was due to start new research on Waterloo's battlefield, and especially in the environment of Hougoumont Farm, to try to locate the common burial places created right after the battle[16].

Commemoration of the dead has, in short, changed much over the years - a very interesting subject of discussion with students and learners. But it is commemoration of civilians at large that ought to find its way into history teaching. Learning about the everyday life of civilians and common soldiers is significant as a way to understand the perspectives of those who lived during the Napoleonic Wars, while being also a means to make comparisons with today's societies.

Women

Gender studies are an important subject that history teaching should be tackling, as it opens up discussion on the role of women in society, today and in the past. It is relevant, and it is fair: for in 1815 women were playing an increasingly important role in society, thanks to the effects of the French Revolution but also because of the rise of the bourgeoisie in Europe. Students could be confronted to characters such as the women who died at Waterloo. So far ignored by the classic rendition of the Battle, many women had followed their husbands or had participated to the battle as nurses[17].

Furthermore, common women experienced a steady evolution of their role after (and in part due to) the Revolution; these are themes that can be explored using Waterloo as a starting point.

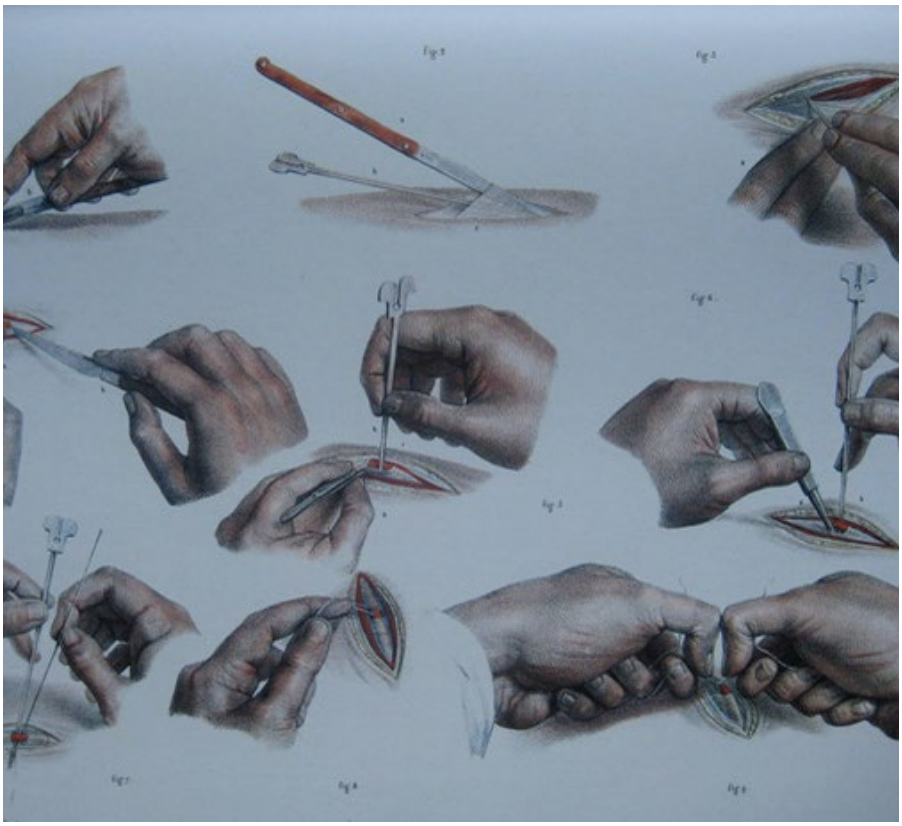
The Duchess of Richmond's Ball– Robert Hillingford 1870s (CC via Wikimedia)

Medicine

Another kind of history, not one of politics but of science, can be extracted by the study of Waterloo. History of medicine is closely related to military history as it is from that field that surgeons and doctors received the strongest inputs to develop new medical tools and innovative methods of intervention.

The Napoleonic Wars also proved a formidable incentive to develop the study of epidemiology, leading to a better control of diseases such as smallpox and scurvy, and increased the studies about correct nutrition (especially in harsh environments).

Addressing this field when talking about Waterloo can indeed foster reflection upon the toll wars exact upon civilians and soldiers, but also upon the ways technology may develop under the strain of hard times.



This picture was used by Professor Michael Crumplin during the February Seminar in Braine L'Alleud (Workshop: "Some Gain through Pain – advances in Military Medicine 1792 – 1815).

In conclusion, the distinctive features of the Napoleonic Wars - and of Waterloo as a highly symbolic event, make it a relevant subject to teach today: because of its own historical importance, but also because it provides tools for teachers to engage in effective talks on remembrance with students. This way, historical memory can be effectively translated from a token of respect to victims into lessons for the future, and from a highly public and institutionalised issue into a critical and reflective subject. This enables history to fulfil its potential as a resource for the present and the future. In order to achieve this results, educators need to provide students with the tools to develop their own, solid historical thinking skills.