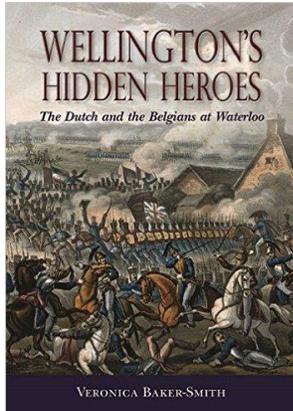


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Baker-Smith, Veronica. *Wellington's Hidden Heroes: the Dutch and the Belgians at Waterloo*. Oxford (UK): Casemate, 2015. 216 pages. ISBN# 978161200320. £17 / \$33.



Although there are thousands of books in English on the battle of Waterloo, only a handful look at the role of the Dutch-Belgians. Demetrius Boulger wrote *The Belgians at Waterloo* in 1901, but very little was written after that for almost 100 years. But the first 15 years of the 21st Century has been a boon for those interested in the topic. In 2001, Osprey Books published Patrice Courcelle's *Wellington's Belgian Allies 1815*, which provides an overview of their actions at Quatre Bras and Waterloo, but also looks at their uniforms. In 2008, André Dellevoet self-published [The Dutch-Belgian Cavalry at Waterloo – A Military History](#), while in 2012, Erwin Mjuilwijk self-published the first volume in his massive study of the Dutch Belgians [1815: From Mobilization to War](#).¹

Just published is *Wellington's Hidden Heroes*. The book has three recurring themes about the Dutch-Belgians in the Waterloo Campaign. The first examines the army itself. Eighteen months before Waterloo, the Dutch Kingdom did not exist and there was no army. *Wellington's Hidden Heroes* looks at the problems its leaders encountered building it in such a short time. These problems ranged from its soldiers speaking not only Dutch, but French and German; no standardization of weapons and equipment (some units used two or three different caliber of muskets); a lack of everything from accoutrements and uniforms to wagons to horses. One thing Ms. Baker-Smith emphasizes throughout the book though was the quality of its officer corps. Many had served in Napoleon's Army over the past ten years.

The book's second theme is that it was only due to the timely decision of the Dutch command to march towards Quatre Bras, when the French were stopped there on 16 June 1815. The Dutch arrived at the village and although out-numbered three to one by the French, they held the key crossroads for many hours until the Wellington was able to bring up British re-enforcements. The author strongly argues that it was their sacrifice that prevented the French from taking Brussels before Wellington could concentrate his army. A subset of this theme is that although compared to their critical stand at Quatre Bras, the Dutch role during Waterloo was also important. These include the defense of Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte, Baron Trip's cavalry charge, and General Chassé's Division help in the defeat of the Imperial Guard late in the day.

Scattered throughout the book is the third theme: why their contributions were ignored by Wellington immediately after the battle and by most English speaking historians for the next 100 years. The author proposes several theories for the cause of this. The first

¹ The first three volumes can be purchased from [Lulu](#). A fourth volume will be published in 2016.

is that because many of the Dutch officers served in the French Army, Wellington never fully trusted them and was concerned that they were still loyal to Napoleon. She also shows that many British accounts only told of how they saw Dutch units retreating or rumors the writers heard about their misconduct. Unfortunately for the Dutch reputation future historians over the next century accepted these reports as gospel without checking their validity. The author concludes that much of this attitude was part of the innate British nationalism and that "The 'myth' of Waterloo as a powerful symbol of Britain's place in Europe and the world, ensured that the British narrative was virtually unchallenged."²

Wellington's Hidden Heroes draws heavily on material from both the Dutch Royal Archives and the Dutch National Archives. Unlike many books on Waterloo that ignore Dutch sources, the author uses a combination of Dutch official reports, diaries (including that of the Prince of Orange), and memoirs of their soldiers to show how critical the Dutch-Belgian contingent was to the success of Allies in the campaign. The book is illustrated with 10 black and white images and 8 color plates, from the Rijksmuseum and the Royal Archives. Many of these I have never seen before.

Wellington's Hidden Heroes has a few flaws that will be immediately picked up by those with a good background in the Waterloo Campaign. For example Ms. Baker-Smith calls Major Georg Baring of the King's German Legion, who commanded the defense of La Haye Sainte, an English officer, while in reality he was Hanoverian. Later she states that William Napier wrote *History of the War in the Peninsula and the South of France from the Year 1807 to the Year 1814* in the late 19th Century, yet it was first published between 1828 and 1840. The errors are minor though and do little to distract from the story she tells.

Wellington's Hidden Heroes is a quick read and gives the reader a good overview of the Dutch-Belgian contributions during the Waterloo Campaign. Her analysis of why their role has been downplayed over the past 200 years provides much food for thought on how, as one 19th Century Dutch historian put it ". . . the English recorded history in their own way."³

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

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