«Making the world safe for gentlemen again» Waterloo and the reassertion of Britishness

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1.

The battle of Waterloo, fiercely fought on 18 June 1815, on a small rural ridge 20 km south of Brussels, between a British led allied force and a restored French Napoleonic army, is reckoned to date as one of the most important moments in European history and has thus become perhaps 'the most written about military campaign ever'[1]. As the recent bicentennial of that final clash opposing Wellington and Napoleon reminded us, Waterloo produced numerous eyewitness or literary accounts, and endless academic books, lent its name to streets, monuments and to the largest railway station in the world, and even inspired popular culture, in the form of ABBA's 1974 wining song in the Eurovision contest (although actually containing an inaccurate historical reference)[2]. The very word 'Waterloo' has gained a metaphorical sense, evoking, as Peter Snow wrote, 'that moment in life when each of us faces an ultimate challenge'[3].

Set in the context of a wider analysis of the revolutionary and Napoleonic age in the early 19th century, Waterloo can be look on to discuss either the changing face of war strategies, the downfall of the Napoleonic empire, or, stemming also from the outcome of the Vienna Congress, to understand 1815 as a decisive turning point – the end of an era and the beginning of a new British ruled Europe which, though touched up by nationalist struggles and imperialistic appetites looming in the late 19th century, would last for the next one hundred years, collapsing only during World War I.

The aim of this text is to gather these three angles and to highlight how much the allied victory and the date were yet another epic page in the longer process of the development of what is commonly known as 'Britishness', that is, the cultural, political, geographical and economic vision with which Great Britain and the British people sees and deals with Europe and the world. Notwithstanding some historical glorification – and Waterloo did enhance national pride for the Victorian age – Britishness is not so much a claim of 'superiority' but

[1] Harvey, 2007: 874.
[2] Black, 2010: XII and 179; Snow, 2014: 15.
[3] Snow, 2014: 15.

rather of an 'exceptionalism' towards the continent, that roots back to the *Magna Carta*, the Glorious Revolution and the *Bill of Rights*, and gave Britain a special place amidst all those opposing the French Revolution and the Napoleonic rule.

2.

To understand the resonance of Waterloo in British memory, though superseded, as it was, by the heroic record of anti-Nazi resistance in World War II, the battle of 1815 must stand as the climaxing point of what Jeremy Black terms as the 'Second One Hundred Years War', and as the gateway to an era of international peace and material development in which Britishness inspired the world and civilization to be 'more liberal politically and economically than it would otherwise have been'[4], distancing those times from the more violent 20th century.

From 1689 onwards, until 1815, all through the War of Spanish Succession, the Seven-Years War, the American Revolution, the dispute over the Low Countries and Egypt (in the 1790s), and over maritime dominion or continental seaports and markets, in the Iberian Peninsula, the Mediterranean or the Northern Sea (against Napoleon), London and Paris fought an almost continuous conflict, as decisive for the future of both as the medieval (first) One Hundred Years War. According to authors such as Alfred Leslie Rowse or Sir Winston Churchill, the 18th century thus unfolded on a contrast between the British Whig-led liberal system of parliamentary government, sheltered in its insularity, with its freedom of commerce, speech and person, and the continental French-driven tendencies towards absolutism, centralisation and the growing subjection of individuals to the state[5]. As history has it, the clash opposing England and France signalled the divorce between two seemingly irreconcilable political cultures – the old constitutional and liberty-based one and the first modern 'totalitarian' one[6], interpreted and maximized in the three successive waves of Bourbonic Versailles, revolutionary Jacobinism, and Napoleonic imperialism. Tackling the first gave John Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough, his legendary status; dealing with the second consumed the life and health of William Pitt (the Younger); while the third forged Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, and his renowned aura of Europe's 'saviour' at the birth of contemporary times.

What inspired these three figures was the staunch defence of the British peculiar mixture of 'constitutional continuity', limited and balanced political powers and social flexibility[7],

[4] Black, 2010: XI, and 2015: 4.
[5] Rowse, 1943: 61-62; Churchill, 1957: VII-VIII.
[6] Harvey, 2007: XII.
[7] Rowse, 1943: 57-61.

against the undermining of the international rule of law by an emerging and expanding power. In a speech in Westminster, in 1800, William Pitt defined the French revolutionary novelty as nothing but 'an insatiable love of aggrandisement, [and] an implacable spirit of destruction directed against all the civil and religious institutions of every country'; that was how 'the genius of the French Revolution marched, the terror and dismay of the world', threatening 'the natives of Great Britain, enjoying the perfection of practical freedom, and justly attached to their constitution, from the joint result of habit, of reason, and of experience'[8]. And as Wellington would add, what was at stake, from Robespierre to Napoleon, was, simply put, 'the public law of Europe'[9].

Of the seven European coalitions mounted against France, Great Britain was involved in all but the fourth of them, in 1806-07. The staggering victories of Napoleon in Austerlitz, Auerstädt, Iena, Eylau and Friedland, destroying Austrian, Prussian and Russian resistance, and opening up the partition of Europe with Tsar Alexander, signed in Tilsit in July 1807, left the Emperor with no other enemy but Great Britain. Unable to force London's surrender through military power, Bonaparte determined the Continental Blockade to strangle British economy. But the Peninsula being the open back door to that 'fortress Europe', the English government invested heavily in Portugal and Spain, from 1808 onwards, to countervail Napoleon's imperial aspirations. As Winston Churchill wrote, until the opening of the Russian campaign in 1812, 'only Britannia remained, unreconciled, unconquered, implacable. There she lay in her Island, mistress of the seas and oceans, ruled by her proud stubborn aristocracy, facing this immense combination alone, sullen, fierce and almost unperturbed'[10]. But there was a menace to be defeated. The 'Blue Water strategy', that is, England focussing on its colonial and imperial security, was deeply linked to a 'Continental strategy', that is, a foreign policy focussed on guaranteeing stability and balance of power in Europe, inasmuch as the former depended on the latter[11]. So, even mastering the seas, war on land had to be won – all more so because Napoleon coveted the Atlantic, through the Peninsula, and the Orient, through Egypt. The Russian campaign decimated the *Grande Armée*, and the allied victory in the battle of Leipzig, in October 1813, led to Bonaparte's abdication and exile in the island of Elba, in 1814. That would not be the end of the story. In February 1815, Napoleon – "*le Louis XIV de l'État démocratique*" as defined by François Furet[12] – evaded Elba and landed in France, where he quickly rallied support to regain power and might.

[8] MacArthur, 1996: 193-195.
[9] James, 2002: 242.
[10] Churchill, 1957: 254.
[11] Davies, 2014: 368.
[12] Furet, 1992: 66.

By then, over five million Europeans had died in the bloodiest quarter of a century unexampled before[13]. From Lisbon to Moscow, from the Baltic to Sicily, no country, political regime or social group had been left untouched by the French ideological and military whirlwind. The 'return of the bogeyman'[14], dubbed the 'great disturber of the peace of the world'[15] by the leaders in Vienna, was simply inadmissible, since the ousting of Louis XVIII reset in France a renegade power and nothing shy of a rogue state. Napoleon's 'Hundred Days' actually had the rallying effect of soothing tensions that had hitherto dragged the diplomatic negotiations in the Congress assembled in Austria. The remembrance of a continent in the hands of a single militarist power, like a 'European Union' run by a single voice – a French-centred one, contending with the Napoleonic myth of a libertarian United States of Europe –, pushed Britain to a last battle, destined, in the words of the ruling diplomacy, to 'crush the ogre once and for all'[16]. In Vienna, Tsar Alexander told Wellington, his hand on the Duke's shoulder: 'It is for you to save the world again'[17].

3.

What history records as the 'Waterloo campaign' was actually a set of four battles fought in three days: Quatre Bras, a military draw between Anglo-Dutch and French, and Ligny, a victory of Napoleon and Grouchy over Blücher, both on 16 June, followed by Wavre-Plancenoit, the Prussian successful revenge, and the central stage of Waterloo, both on the 18 June 1815. Waterloo was a skilfully chosen ground, where the bulk of the stationed army could be sheltered in the reverse slope of small hills, concealing size and disposition while overlooking the lower field where the French infantry and cavalry would have to march through[18]. Military wise, as Jeremy Black puts it, 'Napoleon had to win, and win dramatically, while Wellington only needed to avoid serious defeat'[19].

His Peninsular veterans sent to wage an ill-fated war against the USA, or back home, to deal with Luddite revolts or to secure Ireland, the Duke had a 'rookie' mix army of Anglo, Dutch, Hanoverian, Brunswick and Belgian soldiers – some 69.000 men facing the 75.000 under the command of Ney, d'Erlon, Grouchy and the Bonaparte brothers (Napoleon and

[13] Summerville, 2007: 402.
[14] Harvey, 2007: 868.
[15] Summerville, 2007: 287.
[16] Harvey, 2007: 871.
[17] Longford, 2005: 55.
[18] Harvey, 2007: 885.
[19] Black, 2014: 36.

Jerôme)[20]. The battle of Waterloo lasted for some ten hours and went through five phases, French columns against allied lines[21]. Wellington's right-centre forces were on the verge of collapsing when the Emperor led his Imperial Guard up front, but an all-out resistance by the 'red coats', combined with the offensive, on Napoleon's right flank, of the Prussian corps, sealed the French fate, its soldiers fleeing on the motto '*la garde recule*; *sauve qui peut'*. Lacy Evans, one of Wellington's ADC, would later describe the day as 'the struggle of enthusiasm and despair, on the one hand, and of courage and duty, on the other'[22]. Indeed, amidst many fait divers in the heat of the battle, with Napoleon in his eye range, the Duke cheered his 'lads' with what Elisabeth Longford calls the echo of Shakespeare's *Henry V*: 'we must not be beaten – what will they say in England?'[23] In the end, out of the total of 145.000 men fighting, Waterloo left some 48.000 dead or wounded on the battlefield[24]. Wondering through that 'frightful scene of carnage' the day-after, Lieutenant John Kincaid would recall that 'it seemed as if the world had tumbled to pieces, and three-quarts of everything had been destroyed in the wreck'[25].

Wellington won a defensive, yet decisive, victory in the strategic shape of those previously achieved in Iberia (especially Vimeiro, Buçaco or Fuentes d'Oñoro), one that reinforced Europe in its post-Napoleonic peace-seeking path, while reasserting the very Britishness the Duke personally incarnated. With his calm demeanour, steadiness, fortitude and deep seated commitment to service and honour, the heir of Marlborough, Horatio Nelson and John Moore sharply contrasted with the raw boldness, dashing impetuosity, men wasting prodigality and electrifying leadership underscoring Napoleon's style. On such a duel, reading about Waterloo is almost like watching an old American wild-West movie, anticipating that last tense sunset scene when 'the two most formidable commanders in Europe were to meet'[26].

4.

For Great Britain, the 1815 campaign was the pinnacle of an years-long anti Napoleonic resistance, which constituted, in Robert Harvey's analysis, 'a thrice-just war', since 'Britain had to take arms against the disruption of British commerce, against the slaughter wrought

[20] James, 2002: 246 and 256; Black, 2014: 49.
[21] Snow, 2014: 19, and Howarth, 2007.
[22] James, 2002: 257.
[23] Longford, 2005: 80.
[24] James, 2002: 262.
[25] Esdaile, 2008: 558.
[26] Harvey, 2007: 873.

throughout the continent and against the threat to British interests around the world'[27]. As such, Waterloo represented, adds Jeremy Black, 'the culmination' of an anti-revolutionary and anti-French opposition, whereby Great Britain 'saved country and civilization'[28]. And as far as the present day European Union is concerned, perhaps the greatest lesson to be drawn from that far gone battle is the spirit and practice of coalition it marked between the Island and its continental allies, a unity of common goals putting aside national differences, and determined to do what had to be done, thus showing how 1815 can even serve us against Euro scepticism and Euro dissent.

The outcome of Waterloo was a more plural and balanced continent, where a directory of powers shared rule over land and Britain's thalassocracy ruled overseas. In the words of Sir Winston Churchill, overlooking the 19th century in his famous *History of the English Speaking Peoples*, 'the battle of Waterloo, a far sighted Treaty of Peace and the Industrial Revolution in England established Britain for nearly a century at or around the summit of the civilised world'[29].

In Vienna and after, Lord Castlereagh, the British Foreign Affairs Secretary, 'won the peace' as much as 'Wellington had won the war'[30]. Taming Prussia's vengeful desires and securing for France its due place in the European concert was the major task at hand. Instead of being court-marshalled or simply executed on sight (as both Blücher and Gneisenau wished), Napoleon, upon surrendering to the British in mid July 1815, was sent to perpetual exile in the tiny island of Saint-Helena, in the South Atlantic, where he died in May 1821. The peace signed in November 1815 reduced France to her former borders of 1789 and established a sum of 700 million francs in financial compensations to be paid; but Louis XVIII was restored to the throne in Paris and the country was not dismembered or collectively humiliated. Such a hard line would probably have ignited revolution again, and as Wellington rightfully said, 'revolutionary France is more likely to distress the world than France, however strong her frontier, under regular government'[31]. The post-Waterloo European settlement, then, for all the accusations of being too conservative, stands as an exemplary case-study of what to do to rebuild a continent, in a careful equilibrium far more stable than any precarious *status quo*, and in a sharp contrast with that to happen in 1919. In other words, the new Vienna map was the harbinger for a pragmatic, realistic and painstakingly obtained peace, all around the moral and unwritten rule that 'one power could not directly threaten, undermine or humiliate another'[32].

[27] Harvey, 2007: 926.
[28] Black, 2015: 3-4.
[29] Churchill, 1957: VIII.
[30] Davies, 2014: 362.
[31] Davies, 2014: 358.
[32] Davies, 2014: 367.

Britain fought in 1815, as years before, just like it did later on in 1914 or in 1940, rising to the occasion when the whole continent seemed on the brink of falling under a single enemy. It is tempting to see in Napoleonic France a milder pre-figuration of the menace that one-man-ruled Nazi Germany would be later, all more so since Britain was the tenacious unconquered land and Russia the nemesis for both Bonaparte and Hitler, just as it is tempting to consider Castlereagh as the Woodrow Wilson of his time, and to remember Wellington as the Winston Churchill of the revolutionary wars. Both the 19th century Duke and the 20th century Prime-Minister faced, each one in his time and while defending national interests, the greatest challenges put to Britain since the Norman invasion, in the 12th century, or the Spanish Armada, in the 16th century. But they were also the banner-bearers of civilization at large, heralding a centuries-old cult of liberty and acting 'against the unreason of tyranny'[33]. To recur to Linda Colley's famous *dictum*, in both cases the winners of Napoleon and Hitler were very simply 'mak[ing] the world safe for gentlemen again'[34]. 'Gentlemenship', the popular proverb 'live and let live', or the academic formula 'liberty from' of Sir Isaiah Berlin, all are encompassed in the very essence of Britishness. The reassertion of that central feature of Britain's history and character, and the way it shined over the Western-dominated world of the 19th century, was all the good that came out of the otherwise evil and bloody battle of Waterloo, two hundred years ago.

History serves to remember the past as much as it can be an inspirational way to think about the present, with the general settings, foreseeable possibilities and unavoidable pitfalls that bound the overall dignity of human condition. Sitting in Paris, a few weeks after Waterloo, Wellington confided to a dear friend, Lady Frances Shelley, feelings that constitute one of the most heart-felt and morally committed judgements on war – any war – ever made by a top military leader. His' are the suitable words to close this text: 'I hope to God I have fought my last battle. It is a bad thing to be always fighting. While in the thick of it, I am too occupied to feel anything; but it is wretched just after. It is quite impossible to think of glory. I am wretched even at the moment of victory, and I always say that next to a battle lost, the greatest misery is a battle gained'[35].

[33] Black, 2010: 217.
[34] Colley, 1992: 191.
[35] Holmes, 2003: 254.

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