

Recensie van het boek over de slag bij Waterloo geschreven door Jeremy Black. [2018]

BLACK J., *The battle of Waterloo*, Random House, 2010, 256p.

This is one of the worst 'history' books I have ever read, and at the age of 63 I've read quite a few. To call this work a piece of consummate and unmitigated tosh is to praise it unduly. It is as balanced as the leaning tower of Pisa and full of errors of commission and omission. Black would be a great writer for Marvel comics because his two-dimensional cartoon Napoleon could not possibly exist in real life. Black by name and nature, his whole objective is to castigate and decry Napoleon from the first page to the last. This is not 'history' as I recognize it. He dedicates this 'work' to Charles Esdaile which is fitting because Esdaile's 'Napoleon's Wars' is of the same tainted ilk. Both these writers start with the premise that everything that Napoleon did and stood for was bad and evil, while saint Wellington and the Archangels in the British Cabinet could only grace the British population and the world by their beneficent good graces. More utter rubbish. Black ends his diatribic screed with the following: "Waterloo is thus symbolic: of a key moment in history and of the struggle against the unreason of tyranny." (p.217) This would be little more than a sick joke if this man was not supposedly a 'Professor of history'.

Like many a poor historian he has to get in his Hitler slurs and comparisons: "Indeed, like Emperor Wilhelm II of Germany and Hitler, Napoleon was an aggressive imperialist within Europe." (p.204) Meanwhile of course, angelic British politicians were making daisy chains and writing poetry - THEY couldn't possible do any wrong... Well actually: In 1807 Canning sent Wellington (blessed be his name) and sundry other pacifists to attack neutral Copenhagen and sieze the Danish fleet. They murdered over 2,000 Danish civilians in the process - bombarding them with Congreve rockets in this jolly little jape - the first use of weapons of mass destruction in European history. Our illustrious Professor does not mention this. I wonder why? He castigates Napoleon for poor foreign policy, yet the result of this atrocity was that the Danes joined forces with Napoleon. What brilliant foreign policy that was! Canning then lied through his back teeth in Parliament about the whole affair.

The British Government also paid for innumerable assassination attempts against Napoleon's life - all in secret without any discussion in Parliament. British gold paid for the infamous 'infernal machine' which nearly killed Napoleon - then First Consul - on December 24th 1800. As Ben Weider states in his book 'The Wars Against Napoleon': "The barbaric attack in the Rue Saint-Nicaise... Twenty-Two dead and fifteen wounded were carried away... The material damage was considerable and several dozen houses were destroyed. The monstrosity of this terrorist act was unimaginable. The life of the First Consul hung by a thread." (p.25) The young girl left to look after the cart packed with explosives was blown to bits. Another woman had her breasts blown off and yet another was blinded - plus all the other victims. This hideous and merciless act was paid for by Pitt and his criminal cabal in the British Cabinet. No doubt Black would call this 'British fair play'. The British Government continued with these murder attempts even during the Peace of Amiens. This revolting hypocrisy is again not mentioned by Black. I wonder why?

To return to the Hitler slurs. Hitler gassed the Jews: Napoleon gave the Jews equal rights within his Empire and was the first person to suggest that they be given territory of their own in the Holy Land. Anyone of any religion could become an officer or general in Napoleon's Army because he believed in careers open to talent but in the British Army no Catholic could ever become a General - there was even a law against it. So where was the tyranny there?

Black's comic book scribblings do not even mention the infamous Press gangs. They seized members of the public who were forced to serve on British vessels. Many of them never saw their families again. Furthermore they were not allowed on land when their ship docked in case they had the temerity to 'desert'. The press gangs even took American citizens from ships on the high seas and that was one of the reasons America went to war against Britain in 1812 - more superb British foreign policy!

According to Black's Promised Land of Britain it would seem that everyone partook of milk and honey. Sadly that was not the case. The life for ordinary men and women was atrocious and they were treated like vermin by their own Government. During the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, innocent, peaceful protesters were hacked to death by their own militia. One British soldier who had fought at Waterloo lived just long enough to be killed by his own militia that day in Manchester! Castlereagh praised the local magistrates for this action - for murdering their own people. Black does not mention this. I wonder why? Unless this is wilful omission, his only excuse must be his sheer ignorance.

Black says: "Napoleonic power was a dead end," (p205). In fact, Napoleon ensured that the French peasantry were able to keep the lands they had gained during and after the Revolution; he made peace with the Catholic church - the religion of most French people - with his Concordat; he invited 200,000 emigres back to France (despite dozens of their fellow royalists still being intent on murdering him); he instituted his famous Code Napoleon; the Bank of France; he abolished the guillotine; he organized roads, bridges and water supplies; he decided to register house with odd numbers on one side of the street and even numbers on the other - the first to do this; he built orphanages and had state dowries for poor girls; he insisted that small denominations were made available so that the poor could get simple charity to pay for bread; he boosted ports and dockyards; and he was responsible for signing sixteen treaties and peace conventions between 1800 and 1803 alone. In Paris he was lauded as a peace-maker. As soon as he became Emperor - a title he chose after the failed Cadoudal Conspiracy of 1804 paid for by the Bank of London - he wrote to the British Government asking for peace in a very statesman-like letter. His peace feelers were rejected with utter contempt. The ultra arrogant British Government did not even deign to reply. Napoleon wrote to King George III again in early 1805 - months before Trafalgar requesting a peace deal. Again his letter was ignored. And in 1815 the first thing he did after his return to Paris from Elba was to write to all the powers asking to be left in peace to rule France. He was immensely more popular than the 230lb Louis XVIII who was twice forced upon the French public by those 'peaceful' allies. Napoleon was three times voted ruler by popular plebiscites /referenda. There was nothing like this show of democracy in the whole of contemporary Europe. Black tries to maintain that he had little popular support during the so-called Hundred Days - more utter drivel. And what right had the British and the Allies to 'force' France to accept a king she did not want?

Napoleon was attacked in most of the wars of the period. After the failed Peace of Amiens - it failed because the British would not evacuate Malta as they had promised to do - the British impounded all French vessels in British ports without even a declaration of war. The Austrians and Russians were paid by the British Cabinet to attack France in 1805. They were basically bankrupt countries and could not possibly have gone to war without lashings of British gold. Similarly, an arrogant Prussia attacked Napoleon in 1806 and was utterly crushed at Jena-Auerstadt. Napoleon then found out that his supposed 'ally' Spain was dallying with the Prussians behind his back. This is often forgotten as was the fact that both the Spanish King and his heir appealed to Napoleon for him to intercede in their family quarrel - long before he invaded Spain. Napoleon did invade Russia in 1812 but as Georges Lefebvre makes clear, the Tsar made preparations to attack Napoleon's ally the Grand Duchy of Warsaw in 1811. And everyone seems to forget that Russia tried to invade France via Switzerland under Suvarov as early as 1800 - a full decade and more before Napoleon returned the favour.

As the British writer and Peninsular War veteran Napier remarked in his account of that conflict - the war in Europe was until 1807 essentially a war to defend privilege. The European powers believed in divine right monarchy and their own god-given right to power and wealth as enshrined in their own aristocracies. They made war repeatedly against France to kill the Revolution stone dead and then later against Napoleon personally because a nascent democracy was growing via the careers open to talent and his use of plebiscites. Hence their illegal and merciless action in declaring war on Napoleon PERSONALLY after his peace feelers of early 1815. What rank arrogance and despicable natures they showed to the world. Then with the White Terror after Waterloo, Lord Liverpool the British Prime Minister encouraged Louis XVIII to murder hundreds of Napoleon's former supporters without trial or legal process. His evil Government encouraged the murderers of their own people at Peterloo so why should mere 'Frenchies' expect mercy...

To conclude: Black's whole thesis is riddled with errors, vituperation and bile and frankly his supposed 'history' does not even deserve a '1'.