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Michael V. Leggiere, *Blucher: Scourge of Napoleon*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014. 568 pp. \$34.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN-10: 0806144092.

Review by William R. Nester, St. John's University

Marshal Gebhard Leberecht von Blucher (1742-1819) was among the Napoleonic era's more colorful and important generals. He was renowned for leading from the front and suffering numerous wounds from saber slices, gunshots, and horse tumbles. It was his Russian allies who nicknamed him "Marshal Forwards" for his aggressiveness. His bravery, bonhomie, energy, and advanced age when he fought against Napoleon made him at once a soldier's soldier and father figure to his troops and officers alike. Yet, he was also a devoted and loving husband to his wife Katharina, thirty-one years younger than her husband, and a loving father to his five sons and one daughter. He was notorious for his eccentricities. At times, stress caused him to believe that his head had turned to stone, and he begged servants to shatter it with a hammer. During the Waterloo campaign he complained of being pregnant with an elephant.

Blucher was born in Rostock, Mecklenburg. His father was a cavalry captain in Hesse Kassel's army and died in a duel. Looking back at his younger years, Blucher confessed that "I cared for nothing except having fun; and instead of studying, I gambled, drank, caroused with the ladies, hunted, and pulled hilarious pranks on my friends. That is why I know nothing" (p. 4). Like his father and five older brothers, he became a soldier as a teenager, in his case, fifteen. He first fought as a Swedish hussar against Prussia during the Seven Years' War. After being captured he turned coat and became a Prussian hussar. Unfortunately, his impetuosity (he once ordered the mock execution of a priest who offended him) irritated Frederick the Great, who passed him over for promotion and finally cashiered him. After a fourteen-year hiatus as a civilian, he rejoined the Prussian army and achieved fame leading a hussar regiment during the 1793, 1794, and 1795 campaigns against France's revolutionary armies on the Rhine. He was rewarded with a series of promotions leading to lieutenant general by 1801. During the 1806 campaign, he fought courageously but, like most of the rest of the Prussian army, eventually succumbed to Napoleon's blitzkrieg. King Frederick William III yielded to Napoleon's pressure not just to dismiss but also temporarily to exile Blucher. For the next seven years Blucher longed to avenge the conjoined humiliations of his adopted homeland and himself, insisting repeatedly that "the inferno will soon erupt" (p. 162). After Prussia finally rebelled against Napoleon and his empire, Blucher played a decisive role during the 1813 (when he became a marshal), 1814, and 1815 campaigns.

Despite Blucher's historic importance, the only English biography of his entire life was Roger Parkinson's *Hussar General* (1975). The most prominent German biographies include those by Friedrich Wigger (1887), Wolfgang von Unger (1908), and Walter Gortitz (1940).<sup>[1]</sup> Campaign studies in English include those of Ernest Henderson and Andrew Uffindell.<sup>[2]</sup> The German General Staff published five volumes of Blucher's correspondence.<sup>[3]</sup> This scanty bibliography presented a golden opportunity for a scholar fluent in German, French, Russian, and English to write a biography using the latest sources and methods.

Michael Leggiere has seized that opportunity. His *Blucher: Scourge of Napoleon* is an excellent account of Blucher's military career, with much of the book exploring his role in the 1813, 1814, and 1815 campaigns. Leggiere gives a balanced, in-depth analysis of Blucher as a commander. He notes that Blucher's mere presence on a battlefield was, like that of Napoleon, a force multiplier by exciting the confidence and energy of his troops. Although best known for his dogged pit bull aggressiveness, he did not hesitate to retreat before overwhelming or encircling enemy forces. Yet, Blucher's charisma and courage only briefly obscured severe failings as a general. Critics condemned "his command style as negligent, inefficient, imprudent, and at times careless" (p. xii). He not only had trouble planning more than a strategic step or two ahead but paid little heed to ensuring that his men got a steady supply of provisions and munitions during fast-paced campaigns. Fortunately for Blucher and the allied cause, the brilliant general August von Gneisenau served as the marshal's chief of staff. Gneisenau had the gifts of strategy, tactics, and logistics lacking in his boss. Their combined strengths formed a formidable military partnership that decisively contributed to Napoleon's ultimate defeats by pulverizing Etienne MacDonald's corps in 1813, holding fast at Laon in 1814, and joining Wellington at Waterloo in 1815.

During the 1813 campaign, Blucher followed the allied strategy of avoiding battle with Napoleon and awaiting a chance to attack his detached corps. To his men, he explained the strategy: "The enemy wants to force us into a decisive battle, but to maintain our advantage we must avoid it. Therefore we will go back in a manner that causes him to lose time so the combined Russian, Austrian, and Prussian armies gain time to break out...and cross the Elbe in his rear, while the crown prince of Sweden advances...and also attacks him in the rear" (p. 269). Blucher saw his mission as "voluntarily retreating to lead [the enemy] to his doom" (p. 269). The strategy worked. Blucher's defeat of MacDonald at once forced Napoleon to abandon his plan to join MacDonald for a drive on Berlin. Instead, Napoleon shifted his center of operations from Dresden to Bautzen to counter an advance by Blucher. This in turn encouraged Austrian General Karl Schwarzenberg to march on Dresden. Napoleon returned to Dresden and defeated Schwarzenberg in a two-day battle. When Blucher and other allied forces converged on Napoleon, he withdrew westward before deciding to risk battle at Leipzig. Blucher's army formed the allied right flank and played a crucial role in eventually crushing Napoleon during three days of fighting, forcing him to retreat to France with the remnants of his shattered army.

Blucher's doggedness again was decisive in the 1814 campaign. Napoleon repeatedly trounced him, with the most humiliating defeats inflicted during the Six Day Battles when Blucher suffered 18,000 casualties to 3,400 French losses. Blucher withdrew to the heights of Laon, massed troops, and repulsed Napoleon's attack. He wrote his wife that "Napoleon has attacked me three times in three days...but he has achieved no purpose and today he is on the retreat to Paris. I will follow him tomorrow and unite our army; a main battle before Paris will decide everything" (p. 330). Blucher's unwillingness to accept defeat encouraged Schwarzenberg to advance toward Napoleon's rear. Napoleon quick-marched his army to attack Schwarzenberg at Acris-sur-Aube but was forced to retreat after a two-day battle. The enemy armies then literally turned their backs on each other as Napoleon marched toward the allied rear, and Blucher and Schwarzenberg advanced on Paris, capturing the city on March 31. Napoleon withdrew to Fontainebleau where, on April 4, faced with the loss of his capital, defection or surrender of several of his key generals, and outnumbered now by three to one, he finally signed an armistice whereby he abdicated and agreed to go into exile.

During the four-day Waterloo campaign, Blucher once again refused to accept defeat. He suffered devastating losses at Ligny, largely because he disregarded Wellington's advice to shelter his troops behind ridgelines and instead left his men exposed to a massed French artillery bombardment. Yet, he retreated not east toward his supply center at Liège but north in parallel with Wellington's army, which withdrew to Waterloo after defeating Marshal Michel Ney at Quatre Bras. He sent a message to Wellington pledging: "Ill as I am, I will put myself at the head of my troops and fall on the right wing of the enemy as soon as Napoleon begins the battle. Should the day pass without a French attack, I propose that we both attack him tomorrow" (pp. 408-409). He fulfilled his promise. He marched his

weary troops to the sound of the guns on June 18, and hurled them against Napoleon's right flank. Had Blucher's army not reached Waterloo, Napoleon could have forced Wellington to retreat to Brussels and possibly beyond.

There are just a few minor quibbles with Leggiere's book. He devotes a mere paragraph to the four years of Blucher's life from Waterloo to his death. The legacy section of his concluding chapter could have been stronger. Instead of talking about games, prizes, and warships named after Blucher, he might have succinctly summed up Blucher's most critical accomplishments, perhaps ending his book with a section expanding these conclusions that appeared several pages earlier: "The lesson of 1813 and 1814 taught Blucher not to wait on others to create the conditions for a decisive battle. Likewise, he learned not to depend on complicated plans to establish these conditions. Thus, in 1815, with the two Allied armies close together and cooperating with a general of Wellington's caliber, Blucher had no choice based on his experience but to stand at Ligny and march to Waterloo" (p. 446).

Overall, Michael Leggiere's military biography of Blucher is a wonderful contribution to the literature on the Napoleonic era. Readers will enjoy the array of thought-provoking insights embedded in a finely researched, argued, and written book.

#### NOTES

[1] Roger Parkinson, *Hussar General: The life of Blucher, Man of Waterloo* (London, Wordsworth, 1973); Friedrich Wigger, *Felmarshall Furst Blucher von Wahlstatt* (Schwerin: Stiller, 1878), Wolfgang von Unger, *Blucher*, 2 vols. (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1907-08); Walter Gorlitz, *Furst Blucher von Wahlstatt* (Rostock: C. Hinstorff, 1940).

[2] Ernest Henderson, *Blucher and the Uprisings of Prussia against Napoleon, 1806-1815* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1911); Andrew Uffindell, *Waterloo Commanders: Napoleon, Wellington, and Blucher* (Barnsley, U.K.: Pen & Sword Military, 2007).

[3] Friedrich Karl Ferdinand von Muffling, ed., *Zur Kriegsgeschichte der Jahre 1813 und 1814* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1827).

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