The Horrible Peace: British Veterans and the End of the Napoleonic Wars

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Reviewed by Dr. John R. Satterfield

Most historians agree that the Napoleonic Wars ended with the Allied victory at Waterloo and Napoleon’s exile in 1815 to Saint Helena, followed by “Pax Britannica,” a century of peace dominated by the United Kingdom with no major-power conflicts and vast growth in both the territory and population of the British Empire. Many view Waterloo as a world-changing event that gave Britain and its growing empire unchallenged global power and influence with seeming invincibility, affluence, and social and cultural progress at home.

This volume, by Evan Wilson, associate professor at the U.S. Naval War College, argues that for thousands of British naval and military veterans of the Napoleonic Wars, the subsequent peace was turbulent and demoralizing. Wilson’s careful evaluations of government policy papers, records, memoirs, and correspondence of both officers and enlisted men in the Royal Navy and the British army shows that post-war demobilization was unprecedented in its scope with negative ramifications for many service members, regardless of rank and achievement. The title derives from an 1816 Times of London editorial quoting the Roman historian Tacitus while decrying the year as “a period rich in disasters, terrible with battles, torn by civil struggles, horrible in peace.”

Wilson divides his focus between the impact of peace on government institutions and on veterans themselves, the societal segment most directly affected by the war’s end. Britain had been in a near-constant fight with revolutionary France from 1793. For much of that time, the nation labored under the existential threat of invasion, necessitating vast expansion of the Royal Navy and the British army, frequently financed by loans with significant interest costs, that together consumed more than 80 percent of annual government expenses. After 1815, with the concomitant end of war with the United States, the government drastically cut military costs, but debts needed payment, so the combined obligations remained as high as in wartime. More than 20 years of conflict had exhausted the country, and it was unwilling to assume responsibility for expensive programs to ease the shift from war to peace more gradually. It is not surprising, therefore, that civil unrest, fueled by unemployed veterans and others no longer needed for war production, began in December 1816 with the Spa Fields riot, and culminated in the “Peterloo Massacre” in Manchester in 1819, when a cavalry charge killed eighteen and wounded hundreds of protesters.

Laissez-faire public policy was only partially responsible for the national economic slump. The government, under Prime Minister Lord Liverpool, also passed the Corn Laws, setting grain prices high to help prop up the incomes of landed gentry. Victory brought the Empire to its zenith, eliminating any European rivals, gradually adding ten million square miles of territory and four hundred million people to its already vast holdings, and gave Britain virtual hegemony over world trade. Also, entirely outside government control, the eruption of Mount Tambora on the island of Sumbawa, the largest volcanic eruption in human history occurring just a month after Waterloo, causing global crop failures in the “Year Without a Summer.”
Government passivity fueled nascent liberal public reforms that would drastically change the British political landscape in the later 19th century, expanding enfranchisement and civil rights. Throughout the decade following Waterloo, however, the situation for veterans at home was overwhelmingly bleak. The Empire’s expansion should have created demand for continued large naval and military forces, but the nation could not afford them.

Wilson also emphasizes the impact of government policies on the men who fought through an entire generation. Most memoirs focused on fighting, not demobilization. Still, the implications of leaving service were apparent, most generally in the growth of radical political movements and widespread demands from veterans for pensions and other post-service support. Soldiers could and did receive modest pensions, but these funds were never meant to be sole means of support. Many of those who suffered crippling wounds or psychological trauma, then not understood, fared miserably.

Sailors earned pay by voyages or commissions, but they could also receive shares of prize money from the capture of enemy vessels, although it was usually slow in coming. Mariners learned skills easily transferred into merchant and transport service, but even here, there were fewer opportunities than expected as the merchant marine cut costs. Many sailors served in foreign navies or merchant fleets. In any case, for thousands of veterans on land and at sea, destitution was common, and these people could rely only on local private charities.

Officers in both the army and the Royal Navy fared better, largely because many of them, especially in the Army, were from wealthy or elite families. Army officers purchased their commissions and counted on military achievements, or casualties among seniors, for promotions and titles. Senior officers won appointments to a variety of government posts or commands throughout the Empire. Still, a surprising number of officers suffered bankruptcy in the post-war era.

Naval officers were more egalitarian, passing required examinations for promotion to lieutenant’s rank. Further promotions were based more on merit, and after promotion to post captain, seniority took over with officers needing only to live long enough to become admirals. Still, these officers received only half pay when not on active service. Even Horatio Nelson spent five years “on the beach” before commanding HMS Agamemnon in 1793. After 1815, the government cut the Royal Navy’s fleet by more than half, leaving an enormous surplus of naval officers, reducing the percentage of those from lower classes and ensuring that many never went to sea again. Although Britain’s fleet was larger than any other, only a fraction of these vessels were seaworthy, leaving the service stretched far beyond its real capacity.

Wilson’s study demonstrates clearly that Britain and its military and naval establishments, instruments of the Empire’s s global dominance in the nineteenth century, paid a significant price for winning the Napoleonic wars, a tariff that contained the seeds of the Empire’s dissolution in the longer term. Pax Britannica was real, but it teetered on the brink for 99 years until 1914 when industrial warfare destroyed an entire British male generation, and the Royal Navy could play only a peripheral and diminishing role thereafter. As the Duke of
Wellington famously noted in a different but related context, “Believe me, nothing except a battle lost can be half so melancholy as a battle won.”

Dr. Satterfield teaches and writes about naval and military history, including the Age of Nelson.