

Who Won Waterloo?

Though the battle ended on 18 June 1815, arguments as to who, and what, decided it were just beginning.

Source A

Wellington, early on 19 June 1815, in his official despatch about the battle to the British government.

I shall not do justice to my feelings or to Marshal Blücher and the Prussian army, if I do not attribute the successful result of this arduous day, to the cordial and timely assistance I received from them. The operation of the Prussians upon the enemy's flank was a most decisive one.

Source B

Wellington to Lady Frances Shelley on 17 March 1817.

She had drawn attention to a recent French book which argued that the Prussian army, not Wellington's, had won Waterloo.

This led to the Duke's emphatic assertion that it was the British, and the British alone, that won the field. The Prussians joined the English in order that they might profit by their victory.

Source C

Napoleon, speaking to Dr Barry O'Meara, in exile on St Helena, 26 October 1816.

English soldiers, said the Emperor, are not equal in intelligence to the French, but they are brave. If the Prussians had not arrived, the English army would have been destroyed. They were defeated at midday. But accident, or more likely destiny, decided that Lord Wellington should gain it.

Source D

The French novelist, Victor Hugo, in Les Misérables, published in 1862.

What was most impressive in that battle was England – English steadfastness and resolution, English blood; and what was most superb in England was not her commander but her men. But what is wonderful in all battles on the scale of Waterloo is the part played in them by chance.

Source E

Henry Houssaye, a French historian, writing in 1903.

When the Prussians reached the battlefield, the British and French armies were exhausted. The arrival of these fresh troops was sufficient to decide the outcome. But by resisting French attacks, it was the English who up to that point had made the victory possible. The result is due to the Prussians but the glory remains with the English.

Source F

From D. G. Wright, a British historian, writing in 1984.

Napoleon nearly succeeded but lacked the energy and decisiveness he had once shown. Once the Prussians began to join Wellington in the early evening, the French were doomed. Even the Imperial Guard fled in confusion before the British cavalry. Wellington, whose line had come perilously close to breaking in several places, owed everything to Blücher keeping his word and honourably supporting his ally.

Source G

The Armies at Waterloo.

Napoleon had 71,947 men at Waterloo. Wellington had 67,661. His army consisted of 36% British, 10% King's German Legion, 10% Nassau, 8% Brunswick, 17% Hanoverian, 13% Dutch & 6% Belgian. By the end of 18 June over 40,000 Prussians had also arrived on the battlefield.

Learning Resource Questions

1. What does *Source A* tell you about what Wellington thought decided Waterloo? [2]
2. How, and why, has Wellington changed his mind in *Source B*? [4]
3. How far does *Source C* support either A or B? [4]
4. Why might *Source D* be unreliable? [3]
5. How useful are *Sources E & F* as evidence about the outcome of the battle? [4]
6. 'British soldiers were the most important reason why Wellington won the Battle of Waterloo.' Using all the sources, and any other knowledge, how far do you agree with this statement? [8]