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Michael V. Leggiere, *Blücher: Scourge of Napoleon*. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2014. Pp. xxxi, 536. ISBN 978-0-8061-4409-2.

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Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher was one of the most colorful personalities of the Napoleonic Wars. Unlike many important figures of the period, he did not have a long career in military or political affairs after the Napoleonic era (he was already seventy-two years old at Waterloo). Hence his actions during the wars were unbesmirched by subsequent events and decisions; this was not so for many other prominent commanders or heads of state. Blücher became a Prussian hero and then a pan-German hero, celebrated in folklore, song, poetry, and novels. He was commemorated officially by the state with statues, monuments, and eponymously named streets, ships, railroads, and plazas. Blücher collectibles decorated the homes of thousands of middle-class Germans well into the twentieth century. And, though few serious biographies have appeared in recent decades, German scholarship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries covered his career in considerable detail.

It is therefore surprising that there is little substantive English-language work about Blücher. Indeed, this new biography by Michael Leggiere (Univ. of North Texas) represents the first such book in four decades (excluding translations of older German monographs). Leggiere has spent many years researching and writing about campaigns Blücher was directly involved in, particularly during the period German historians call the “War of Liberation” (1813–14).

One of the challenges facing any biographer of Blücher is the vast accumulation of legends and hagiographic accounts that piled up around his character throughout the nineteenth century—Blücher the Mad, with his bouts of dementia and often comical outbursts; Blücher the cursing, tobacco-spitting, semi-literate soldier’s general; Blücher the super-patriot, unflinching in his hatred of Napoleon (and all things French, as nationalist writers would later have it); Blücher the brave, stubborn, gritty face of vengeance and redemption for Prussia and all Germany; and Blücher the Liberator.

Leggiere cuts through the immense corpus of popular history by concentrating on his subject’s own words, a challenge in itself, since Blücher’s capacity as a writer was notoriously irregular, to put it charitably. Leggiere explores the conventional wisdom regarding Blücher’s allegedly spotty education, concluding that the Marshal was more erudite than he is given credit for; he was simply relaxed and sometimes careless in his words when among friends.

The correspondence of the primary actors comprises the overwhelming majority of the sources in the monograph. Leggiere often lets Blücher’s words fill most of a paragraph. As a counterpoint, he quotes from the letters or recollections of dozens of contemporaries, who sometimes qualify or flatly contradict Blücher’s accounts. For example, he summarizes Blücher’s ambitions for promotion and command of the new Army of Silesia, then registers the skepticism of many of his contemporaries, in effect allowing his primary sources to evaluate Blücher’s flaws and strengths, without intruding his own judgments. Such deft use of source material provides an instructive example for undergraduate history students.

Leggiere’s method of letting participants speak for themselves demythologizes earlier, often uncritical, descriptions of Blücher and opens the way to a more objective assessment of his character. Thus, recounting the retreat from Lützen (239–41), he shows Blücher grudgingly accepting the reality of defeat but (with no hint of disingenuousness) spinning it as a heroic achievement to lift the spirits of the soldiers. The description of the Prussians hanging on by their fingernails in the final hours at Ligny (397–400) vividly conveys the desperation of the fighting and the resolve of the commander. In other words, Leggiere shows that Blücher the myth was based upon Blücher the man. “Old Forwards” was one of those rare historical figures

who made little effort to craft his own story or image, yet had it faithfully rendered by enough eyewitnesses that we must take it seriously.

Central themes of the mythic Blücher are his reliance on excellent subordinates and his symbiotic relationships with younger men like Gerhard von Scharnhorst and August Neidhardt von Gneisenau. Again, Leggiere deploys the correspondence of the actors themselves to demystify and deromanticize such relationships. Gneisenau, in particular, appears as an indispensable asset to the Prussian army and to Blücher personally. More than once, Leggiere writes of them as a single subject—"Blücher and Gneisenau"—with regard to their decisions and grasp of situations.

The arc of Blücher's long career is dominated by its final three years (1813–15) and the victory over Napoleon. But, though Leggiere devotes the last two-thirds of his text to this period, he does give close attention to Blücher's earlier career, particularly the years of enforced peace and collaboration with France (1807–12). Significantly, this was the time of Blücher's life-threatening illnesses and infamous "madness" as well as his dabbling in the work of Prussian reform movements and secret societies. Leggiere tells at some length the sad story of Blücher's son Franz, who was far more active in these causes than his father and whose career was cut short by deteriorating physical and mental health.

In his concluding five-page section, "Legacy," Leggiere just touches on Blücher's place as a symbol in subsequent German memory, popular history, folklore, and highbrow culture. I would have enjoyed a lengthier exegesis or historiographical essay on the subject. The author limits himself here to examples of official commemoration, primarily in military terms, such as the naming of ships.

Michael Leggiere's *Blücher* is a remarkably thorough and balanced treatment of an enigmatic and important man. Striking the proper balance between scholarly military history, analysis of campaigns and actions, and traditional biography, it will appeal to both advanced students and general readers.<sup>1</sup>

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1. The University of Oklahoma Press is to be commended for not recycling too familiar maps from a few standard sources; instead the book is equipped with a crisp and usefully clear map program created by Alex Mendoza. One quibble: campaign maps are gathered in a preface, while battle maps appear as appropriate within chapters. In fairness, however, positioning campaign maps referenced in several chapters is always problematic.