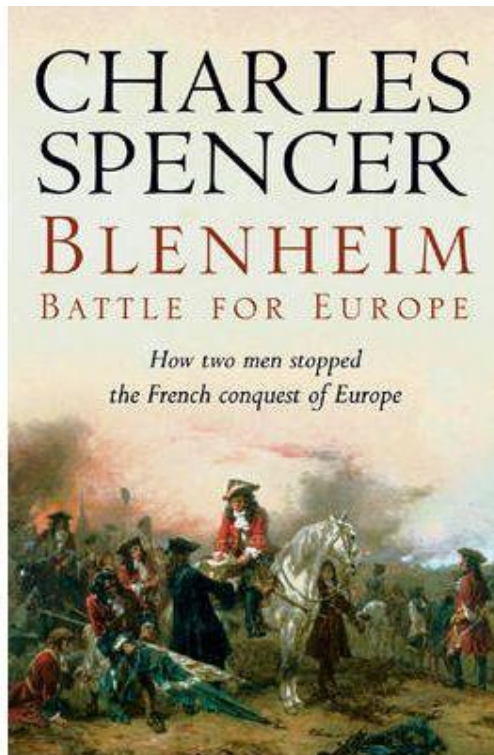


Blenheim: Battle for Europe
By Charles Spencer
Phoenix Books, 2016 edition, 375 pages, £8.99

Review by Rob Morgan

This is a broader book than the title would suggest, but unless you are an enthusiast for the Age of Enlightenment, Part One, while only 75 pages, can be passed by with little lost. The book is about the greatest battle fought and won by Britain's greatest military commander. Marlborough, compared to Wellington, has been neglected, but in this volume his finest achievement is recorded and examined in detail.



The Battle of Blenheim, 1704, is one I've never encountered on the table top, though I do recall a series of articles on Marlborough's many sieges in *Battle* magazine long ago. This book deals with the decisive attempt to stop Louis XIV, the French Sun King, and his Spanish and Bavarian underlings from destroying Austria and controlling Europe. Marlborough with his exceptional deputy Prince Eugen, found himself commanding a range of forces, British, Dutch, German, and Danish, and fighting against the contrasting ideas of his and other allied governments in order to bring Louis to battle and destroy his armies. The

Battle of Blenheim, fought on the Danube northwest of Munich, was just one of four large encounters. The others, Ramillies, Oudenarde and Malplaquet, finally settled the matter, but this was the killer blow.

The book grazes over a number of sieges and encounters which took place on the borders between France and Holland, sadly without any great depth. This is a period of warfare which has so much to offer the solo wargamer, with map and smaller forces engaged in the sieges and the march and counter-march. An intriguing point is that Marlborough had to deal with commanding a Dutch army which went into the field accompanied by two Field Deputies who could contravene or overrule his orders and prevent battle! A hard one to add to a set of rules!

The main part of Spencer's work deals with Marlborough and Eugen's massive achievement: marching a number of armies, and combining them, as they moved from the Dutch fortresses toward the Danube in order to save Austria from French conquest. A huge undertaking, and a well written account of it. If, as a wargamer, you ever want to learn *how* to conduct a long-range attack with deception and preparation, this is the one to study. Marlborough gives it to us on a plate! His attack is the obverse of Xenophon's "Anabasis," that's the way to conduct a retreat. The thoroughness of later British (actually both named here were Irishmen!), like Wellington and Montgomery, owed much to the competence of Marlborough.

The march involved few encounters beyond the odd skirmish, until the Danube was reached, and the 30 Years War fortress of the Schellenberg was stormed. This, along with the other sieges and stormings, would make a decent solo game. A dozen general officers died or were wounded in the taking of a hard fortress known to Gustavus Adolphus.

The battle at Blenheim, which followed soon after, was something of a surprise to the French. Marlborough and Eugen would surely withdraw, avoiding a fight a superior (*sic*) army in well-fortified positions. Wrong.

The French had their elite infantry and cavalry on the field, accompanied by their Bavarian allies, and with an astonishing series of command decisions, saw their finest foot battalions used to defend fortified villages, while raw recruits faced Marlborough's battalions in the open, and were swept away. As a battle, the mindset of the French commanders in tying themselves to a row of forts, leads to this being a good solo wargame if fought from the Allied side.

Twenty-seven French battalions surrendered in Blenheim village alone, having entombed themselves, along with 12 squadrons of dragoons! The French household cavalry ("Europe's finest" (*sic*)) were smashed early on, and after that the battle went all the other way. Hard fighting, but after a massive cavalry engagement in mid-afternoon, the French and Bavarians visibly began to fail. The British and Germans attacked with the blade, the French preferred the pistol and carbine -- a big mistake. Tallard, the French commander, had little left to throw in. Half a dozen smaller engagements, sometimes with ruse and bluff on the side of Eugen, led to a complete surrender. The French army was finished.

The battle, a splendid, rattling read in these pages, would be hard to re-create on the tabletop, since so much of the victory was due to the skills of individual commanders and the sheer stupidity of the enemy leaders. It's big too, and maybe only 1/300th would do it? However, the long-range march and the gathering for the attack has a great deal of potential, as the book clearly shows. Napoleon, incidentally, was a great enthusiast of Marlborough's tactical and logistical skills, and put many of them into practice.

Only one point needs to be mentioned. The book, well-written and sound of content, is appallingly badly mapped. What it needs is a decent map of the border fortresses and battlefields of the Low Countries, and a significantly more detailed map of Marlborough and Eugen's route to the battle. The diagram of the battle itself is unclear and I think should have been replaced with three maps, the field at the outset, the field at mid-afternoon, and at the final debacle. The French leader Tallard, incidentally watched the destruction of his master's pretty armies from Marlborough's coach as a prisoner. Eugen's cavalry had captured him long before the end.

Excellent reading for the wargamer, if you skip the political bits.

Further solo wargame thoughts?

Having reviewed the book, I was considering the battle, from the point of view of a solo wargamer, naturally! My first stop was Winston Churchill's account of the campaign and battle. Useful in that it contains a dozen good maps dealing with the encounter from start to finish. You'll find it in his life of Marlborough, but it was published in a shortened form many years ago, almost a booklet of about a hundred pages. Winston's voice still rings out from the page. Very helpful. Read him.

I thought about figures, and naturally that era of the quite elegant uniforms and splendid colours and pennons has long been a favourite of the collector, but to wargame a battle of such scale rules out many of the most attractive manufacturers, unless you want to end up as out-of-pocket as the Sun King did. I won't go through a score of ranges, but will simply pick on Irregular Miniatures. In 6mm, 10mm, 15mm and 20mm scales, they hit the button and at prices you can afford. If 15mm is your scale, then Magister Militum make an ideal period coach to keep your captured French generals in. Years ago, I'd have recommended Peter Laing's figures. He began his ranges with just such battles in mind. Sad, they've gone.

There is a part of the Battle of Blenheim which is made for a solo gamer to play out. With the Bavarians in flight, the French centre broken asunder, then only Blenheim village stood untaken. Clerambaut, the French general commanding that strongpoint on the river, disappeared at some time in the afternoon; it's assumed he went into the Danube and didn't come out again! He had, however, crammed a mass of elite troops -- including the three battalions of the Royal Regiment, three of the crack Navarre, two of the Santerre and of Artois -- 27 foot battalions in all and a dozen squadrons of dragoons (all that were in the field that day) into a space in which they could not move or even adequately fight. France's best infantry.

With the bulk of the Generals gone from the field, command towards evening fell upon the Camp Marshall, the Comte de Blansac. Eventually, though his elite troops had barely broken into a sweat all day, nor suffered great loss, he parleyed and the fortified village surrendered, and to a much smaller force under General Cutts and the Earl of Orkney. Some of the leading French regiments wanted a fight to the death. But it's not that which can provide the game! The unbroken French units could, with adequate command, have broken out of Blenheim. The captured Count of Merode-Westerloo (lovely names, aren't they?) was of the opinion that organising about 40 battalions, well disciplined and highly trained, and with little encumbrance, into a square and marching them along the high road to Hochstadt would have been easily achieved had it been attempted.

Just so!

They even had such a commander, the Marquis Denonville, a royal favourite, and several lesser ranking commanders with similar capability, all holed up in the village. But he opted to surrender. The chance was lost. If the French had come out with *elan* and style, the hard pressed and much reduced cordon force of British infantry, Rowe's, Ingoldsby's and Howe's regiments lost 2/3rds of their officers in containing the garrison of Blenheim, as well as its brigadier, would have suffered. What closed around the fortified village was merely a bare holding force, no more. The bulk of the British and German cavalry, by now as worn out as their infantry, were in pursuit of the Elector of Bavaria and Marshal Marsin, far beyond the

field. Could they have dealt with a substantial fresh, elite force, intent on escape and capable of sustaining battle for a matter of a dozen miles or so to reach Hochstadt?

It was a chance not taken. Yet potentially a solid solo game, if you play the French. For Orkney, in command at the perimeter, summoning squadrons of tired cavalry, far from fresh infantry units, and of course, moving ordnance to fight a square would be a piecemeal operation at best. Marlborough's last field order was for Orkney to seal up Blenheim using whatever battalions he had to hand. He would deal with the village and its garrison in the morning, but of course he didn't have to.

There, Gentlemen, is your solo wargame.