

Absolute Emperor: Napoleonic Wargames Rules

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Review by Paul Le Long

‘Not another set of Napoleonic rules!’ Well, actually no ... these are a bit different because they are at a much higher level – each unit is a division and you can play the whole battle of Waterloo with just 44 units on the table. Which means even the largest battles can be played in their entirety with relatively few figures and on an average-sized table. And with simple rules.

The caveat here is that the book was only published a week or two ago, so I’ve read it, played the training scenarios, watched some play-throughs on YouTube but I haven’t yet played a full game of Waterloo or Eylau.

The rules are scale agnostic and there are measurements given for 10-54mm. The author himself uses 28mm figures – you just need regular base widths. He represents a division with 4 bases; you could do it with any number but 4 allows you to represent the division’s current formation (of which there are four: Line, Attack Column, March Column and Deployed, which is used when garrisoning a town). There is no casualty removal, each infantry division simply has 8 hit points (which you mark with a D8) and its capability degrades as it takes hits until it is destroyed when it takes a total of 8.

A division is rated either Conscript, Seasoned or Veteran. To shoot you roll a number of D6 according to what formation you’re in (line is 4d6, column 2d6, there are some modifiers for things like shooting into a town) and you want 4+ if you’re Seasoned, 5+ if Conscript, 3+ if Veteran. It’s really simple.

Cavalry follow the same rules and their formations are essentially the same but they are there for hand-to-hand combat and are very aggressive. Artillery represents a lot of guns, not just a few 6-pounders, and can be grouped into grand batteries. Horse artillery is not included, except as an advanced optional rule; we are concentrating here on massed ranks of battle cavalry and large batteries of heavy guns. Skirmishers too are not present – instead an infantry division has a zone of control into which it is assumed skirmishers, horse artillery, small artillery batteries, detached companies and so on are firing and fighting.

It is quite abstract, but you would expect that at this level. There are some very definite design decisions which you may agree with or not (though to be honest the rules are so simple you could easily tweak). For example, attack columns are a manoeuvre formation here, they are rubbish at shooting and melee. You move in column and you fight in line.

The turn sequence is interesting in that it is simultaneous – Side A does all their command then Side B does their command, then Side A does all its movement, followed

by Side B, then it's shooting. And then they charge – after shooting, which is unusual – and then there is melee. Things can happen to a unit during the sequence so you might be intending to do a charge but your division gets hit in the shooting phase and halts in disorder, preventing it from charging in that later phase. It's quite clever while still being very simple.

Elan is the real heart of the system though. You will probably have several Corps Commanders on the board in an average game and they all have an Elan rating which reflects partly how good they are and partly how much they enjoy the trust and confidence of the CinC. The side with the lowest combined elan moves first in the turn so that the other side gets to see what they are doing and react to it – this is actually quite an advantage. Elan can also be spent on things like re-rolling dice and rallying divisions. But once a corps commander has spent all his elan his corps disintegrates. He loses elan by having divisions destroyed and by spending points on things like re-rolls. Typically, he will have 2-5 elan and there is a nice list of historical commanders with suggested elan for each of them. And this is interesting – what makes the French better than the Spanish is not generally the quality of their troops but the quality of their commanders, who have more elan so they can do more things to influence the battle and their corps have more staying power.

Oddly though the CinC has no elan and doesn't have a function in the game other than to stay within a certain distance of his corps to keep them in command range. So you don't get a Napoleon effect, which is disappointing. I suppose the fact that his (& Wellington's) corps commanders have higher elan reflects his overall influence on the battle but it feels too abstract to me.

I've gone into a bit of depth here because I do really like these rules – I've been looking for years for a set of rules that will allow me to fight proper Napoleonic battles in full but without needing a 20' table and 10,000 figures. And this is that set I think, partly because the rules are good, simple and hackable. But there are some problems. The book is poorly edited and so very simple rules can be hard to grasp and a lot of the flavour that the author has built in is hard to see and so at first glance it looks vanilla – which it isn't. One of the most crucial things is that Conscripts need 5+ and Seasoned troops need 4+ to do a range of things like shooting, combat and morale – it's basically the single most used rule in the whole book. But this information is buried in a block of text nowhere near where it needs to be – I searched for ages for it.

Also we have some scenarios – Eylau, Wagram, Waterloo – which look good. And we have training scenarios with just a few units on each side, to get you used to the rules. That's a good idea but the training scenarios are called the Battle of Bumville, which is a joke that falls flat and doesn't improve with age. Also while they teach you the basics of shooting and moving, they miss the heart of the game which is command of multiple corps. So my advice is to try the training scenarios in order to get used to the rules but don't let them put you off because they fail to showcase the interesting parts of the game.

I would recommend watching these playthroughs on YouTube to give you an idea: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkT-OoH5_LY – here they play the first and second training scenarios – only watch the first (about 45 minutes) because they mess up game two. Then watch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56P5lhGlZZs> – here they play the second training scenario with the author himself. His input is very interesting and transforms the game in such a way that you can see the design detail behind the apparently vanilla rules. These videos expose the weaknesses of the book but I think, especially in the second one, highlight the depth of the game.

Overall, I recommend these rules. I think they could provide a surprisingly (given their simplicity) realistic game with several corps on the table but without the requirement for thousands of figures, an enormous table and super-complex mechanisms. If you want to play Leipzig on your dining table in a couple of hours in a way that feels historically accurate then I think this set might be for you. Just remember that a lot of the detail has been abstracted away and that we are playing a fairly impressionistic game rather than a hyper-detailed one. And yes there are issues with the editing and presentation of the book which is a shame because it makes the rules look more complicated than they are while still missing the subtleties of the system so that it looks like an uninteresting but confusing game when in fact it is the opposite of that.