Some of my most cherished books are my West Point atlases. These thick, spiral-bound works offer loads of maps to supplement the hundreds of war books that fill my shelves. My latest purchase is *Summaries of Selected Military Campaigns*, published in 1961. Unlike the other West Point atlases, this book has some text around each map describing movements and results. The majority of the book focuses on the major battles in between and including the Napoleonic Wars and the Korean War. West Point was not the only beneficiary of the 175-page book, as it acted as a textbook in a military history course at the United States Air Force Academy.
Here is a sample of one of the maps:

![Map of Battle of the Hydaspes](image)

**The Great Captains before Napoleon**

The most intriguing part is the small section at the beginning entitled “Great Captains before Napoleon.” It is only seven pages long, but it provides a clue as to which military commanders prior to Napoleon received attention from at least two schools of war more than 50 years ago.

Here is the list of those that made the cut.

- The authors believed Miltiades at **Marathon** (490 BC) and Epaminondas at **Leuctra** (371 BC) are two notable examples prior to Alexander the Great featuring maneuver. These battles went against the norm of armies generally facing “each other in line and fought until one or the other was defeated.”
- With the arrival of Alexander, the authors included the battles at **Issus** (333 BC), **Gaugamela** (331 BC), and **Hydaspes** (326 BC).
- Then with Hannibal, there are the battles at **Trebia** (218 BC), **Lake Trasimene** (217 BC), and **Cannae** (216 BC) where the Carthaginian crushed his opponents in each battle.
- Caesar received a nod for his victory over Pompey at **Pharsalus** (48 BC).
- The authors then skipped 1800 years of history to Frederick the Great’s battles at **Prague** (1757), **Rossbach** (1757), **Leuthen** (1757), and **Torgau** (1760).
The selections are typical. Everyone has heard of Caesar and Alexander. Hannibal and Frederick are less prominent in popular memory today, but many have at least heard of them. With the disappearance of Greek in Western schools, Miltiades and Epaminondas are probably the least recognizable for most people. Regardless, most books covering the period before Napoleon would include most if not all of these selections in compiling a list of important commanders and battles.

Who West Point Snubbed

The following exercise is a look at who West Point snubbed in this list. Given that the past 50 years has drastically changed the landscape on accessible information concerning ancient and medieval battles, I will limit any candidates to those mentioned in works by Hans Delbrück (1848-1929), Charles Oman (1860-1946), and B. H. Liddell-Hart (1895-1970), which had all seen publication by 1927. Meaning, these battles were easily accessible to historians in 1961.

Chief among the snubs in the ancient world would be Scipio’s victory over Hannibal at Zama (202 BC). It was an overwhelming victory, featuring maneuver, against the man with three battles in the West Point atlas. Delbrück believed Scipio deserved “to be placed, certainly not above, but nevertheless, with complete justification, beside Hannibal.” 2 B. H. Liddell-Hart went further to place Scipio above Napoleon in his analysis, stating that at Zama, “Scipio not only proved capable of countering each of Hannibal’s points, but turned the latter’s own weapon back upon himself to his mortal injury.” 3

What is most damning about the omissions in the West Point book is the complete lack of medieval battles and there are numerous worthy of examination. It is as though 1800 years’ worth of warfare never occurred. Easily accessible were the exploits of Byzantine commander Belisarius (c. 500-565) who led armies that helped extend the empire to its greatest size, winning battles in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. At the Dara (530), he used his combined-arms to withstand the assaults of a larger Persian force, eventually gaining, retaining, and exploiting the initiative. Charles Oman referred to him as a “great general,” providing extensive details of his battles. 4 More importantly, Oman was impressed with his ability to win these battles while always outnumbered. 5

Then there is Genghis Khan (r. 1206-1227), a man whose conquests overshadow all other conquerors in history. There was also his commander, Subotai (c. 1176-1248), who attack Europe and won victories over the Teutonic Knights, Germans, Russians, Poles, and Hungarians. Both commanders won battles that featured maneuver, surprise, and several other important tenants of military doctrine. B. H. Liddell-Hart believed that only Napoleon matched “the strategic ability of these two leaders.” 6

As we move closer on the timeline to today, the sources becomes more detailed and reliable, giving us commanders like Swedish King Adolphus Gustavus (r. 1611-1632) and the Duke of Marlborough (1650-1722). Yet, this has barely skimmed the surface of 1800 years of warfare not even hinted at in this atlas.

Who else would you include?

Bibliography

These are all easily-accessible modern editions of the books mentioned above.


Notes

5. Ibid., 30. [↩](#)
You May Also Like

Remembering John Keegan
August 10, 2012

Scott and Two Indians Walk Into Valley Forge . . .
January 9, 2012

War is war. Stop rebranding it.
August 28, 2013

2 thoughts on “West Point’s Great Captains before Napoleon and Who They Snubbed”

muhammad
September 4, 2012 at 8:35 AM

The Battle of Hattin! Saladin lured the christians into a trap, Then he surrounded them and killed them.

Scott Manning
September 4, 2012 at 8:40 AM
Muhammad, Hattin was a superb victory by Saladin. Sun Tzu believed “a victorious army wins its victories before seeking battle” (5.14). Saladin put his army in a position to win, which is an approach that someone like Liddell-Hart would appreciate.
Napoleon's capture of Belgium and the great port of Antwerp represented even more serious danger than the Irish invasion. The government built an alternative capital at Weedon in Northamptonshire, complete with army barracks and a pavilion for the royal family. It has been pointed out, however, that slave trade and the West Indian (ext.link) plantations provided less than 5% of the British national income during the years of the Industrial Revolution. Britain was a very populous country. The redcoats went against Washington and won at Bladensburg and North Point but suffered heavier losses to US forces made up largely of militia. The British at New Orleans had six excellent Peninsular regiments (4th, 7th, 43d, 44th, 85th, and 95th Rifles) and failed spectacularly against the Americans. The year before Napoleon's birth, France acquired Corsica from the city-state of Genoa, Italy. Napoleon later adopted a French spelling of his last name. ADVERTISEMENT. Napoleon worked to restore stability to post-revolutionary France. He centralized the government; instituted reforms in such areas as banking and education; supported science and the arts; and sought to improve relations between his regime and the pope (who represented France's main religion, Catholicism), which had suffered during the revolution. One of his most significant accomplishments was the Napoleonic Code, which streamlined the French legal system and continues to form the foundation of French civil law to this day. Napoléon Bonaparte (/nəˈpoʊliən bɔ̃napɔʁ/; French: [napɔleɔ̃ bɔ̃napɔʁ]; Italian: Napoleone Buonaparte, Italian pronunciation: [napoleˈone buonoˈparte]; 15 August 1769 – 5 May 1821) was a French statesman and military leader who rose to prominence during the French Revolution and led several successful campaigns during the French Revolutionary Wars. He was Emperor of the French as Napoleon I from 1804 until 1814 and again briefly in 1815 during the Hundred Days. Napoleon dominated European and