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European Warfare
1453–1815

Edited by

JEREMY BLACK
Professor of History, University of Exeter

9. Revolutionary and Napoleonic Warfare

JEREMY BLACK

PRE-REVOLUTIONARY BACKGROUND

As Peter Wilson indicates in his chapter, it would be mistaken to see the armies of Revolutionary France as impacting on a static military system. Such an approach is attractive to some commentators, for it permits a ready counterpointing of Revolutionary novelty and *ancien régime* conservatism, a contrast that can be held to account for the military success of the Revolutionary forces; but the reality was far more complex. It is necessary to understand the dynamic character of *ancien régime* military theory and practice, in order to appreciate better the degree to which the warfare of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods represented a continuation of earlier trends. To note the already strong currents of change in European armies, alongside an emphasis on the impact of the French Revolution, both in the scale of forces and in the political and social context of warfare, helps explain the numerous successes of Revolutionary France's opponents.

The sources of this current of change were varied. In part, it was an aspect of the continual process of testing and adaptation that had long characterised European warfare. However, in this case, three particular points are worthy of note, first, widespread demographic and economic expansion in Europe from the 1740s, second, the emphasis on the value of reform and the application of reason to problems that characterised the Enlightenment thought of the age, and, third, the impact of the protracted warfare of 1740–62. The first produced the resources for military expansion: large numbers of young men and the metallurgical industries capable of providing munitions for the sustained conflict of 1787–1815. The situation thus prefigured the demographic and economic background to the First World War.

The emphasis on the value of reform encouraged a questioning of established precepts and practices and an interest in new ideas. This can be seen in criticism of linear tactics, as in Campbell Dalrymple's *A Military Essay* (1761), Jacques Antoine Hippolyte de Guibert's *Essai Général de Tactique* (Paris, 1772) and two works by an Austrian veteran, Jakob von Cognazo, *Freymüthiger Beytrag zur Geschichte des österreichischen Militärdienstes* (Frankfurt/Leipzig, 1780) and *Geständisse eines oesterreichischen Veterans politisch-militärischer Hinsicht* (Breslau, 1788–91). Aside from reform explicitly as change, there was also considerable backing for reform understood as improvement, especially in administrative practices. This helped ensure that governments were better able to exploit their domestic resources and thus to wage war.

The warfare of 1740–62 was a period of testing, not least in the desperate battle of survival facing, first, Austria and, then, Prussia. It led to a determination to replace what had been found inadequate, and a drive to ensure that armies (and societies) were in a better state for future conflicts. Thus in 1763 the Portuguese army was reorganised along Prussian lines, so as to be better able to confront a future Spanish invasion, by Count Wilhelm von Schaumburg-Lippe-Bückeburg. The outbreak of new wars was seen as likely. Rulers were not planning for the French Revolutionary War, nor for large-scale conflict in Western Europe. Italy, the Rhineland and the Low Countries had been largely peaceful since 1748, and there had been no major war in any of these regions. The extension of the French frontier by the acquisition of Lorraine in 1766 had been peaceful, the working-out of a dynastic gain, and, although the acquisition of Corsica in 1768 had led to resistance on the island, there had been no wider reverberations: France had purchased Corsica from Genoa.

Instead, war was feared in Central and Eastern Europe. It was assumed that there would be another conflict between Austria and Russia, to follow the War of the Bavarian Succession in 1778–79. The fate of the Ottoman Empire also appeared to threaten peace, although the Russian occupation of the Crimea in 1783 was achieved without the wider struggle that was feared. However, in 1787 a period of major warfare did begin. A Turkish attack on Russia broadened out to include conflict between Austria and Turkey (1788–90) and Sweden and Russia (1788–

90), as well as a very short struggle between Denmark and Sweden in 1788. Although these conflicts did not expand to encompass the planned-for war between the Prussian alliance system and both Austria and Russia in 1790–91, they did lead to renewed Russian intervention in Poland in 1792, to the Second Partition of that country in 1793, to rebellion in 1794 and to the Third Partition in 1795.

Thus, Europe was scarcely waiting militarily for the French Revolution. This was especially true in France where humiliation by the armies of Prussia and Britain, at Rossbach (1757) and Minden (1759) respectively, had led to much experimentation in theory and practice, and a willingness to challenge and change the operation, organisation, equipment and ethos of the army. In what was to be a particularly influential work, his *Essai Général de Tactique*, Guibert stressed flexibility, movement and enveloping manoeuvres, advocated living off the land in order to increase the speed of operations, criticised reliance on fortifications and urged the value of a patriotic citizen army. His subsequent criticism of Frederick the Great's tactics was given greater impact because it was published in German as well as French: *Bemerkungen über die Kriegsverfassung der preussischen Armee. Neue, verbesserte und vermehrte Auflage* (Cologne, 1780).

Guibert was not the sole source of new ideas. In 1763 Bigot de Morogues criticised the prescritive approach and geometrical teachings of Hoste's *Art des Armées Navales* (1697), and claimed that they had misled French naval officers during the Seven Years War. On land, the concept of a division, a standing unit in peace and war, composed of elements of all arms and, therefore, able to operate independently, developed in France under the Duc de Broglie. Such a unit was designed to be effective, both as a detached force and as part of a co-ordinated army operating in accordance with a strategic plan. The divisional plan evolved from 1759, and in 1787–88 army administration was arranged along divisional lines.

There was also interest, both within France and elsewhere, in different fighting methods, a development of earlier ideas by writers such as Saxe. His *Mes Rêveries*, posthumously published in 1757, had criticised reliance on firepower alone, and instead, advocated a combination of individually aimed fire and shock attacks with bayonets. Saxe was important, because he encouraged fresh thoughts about tactics and strategy. He was not alone. In contrast to the customary emphasis on firepower and linear tactics, two other French writers, Folard and Mesnil-Durand, stressed the shock and weight of forces attacking in columns. Manoeuvres in 1778 designed to test the rival systems failed to settle the controversy.

In practice, linear tactics was a general concept, including a substantial variety of precepts among which line formations were only one. Therefore, formations in columns were not in themselves in opposition to linear tactics as a whole, as long as their deployment was not intended to break up the closely knit network of tactical rules and customs, and mechanistic creeds, that informed the ideas behind linear tactics. In particular, war against the Turks and overseas warfare allowed and even required more frequent deviations from the conventions of linear tactics than warfare in Western and Central Europe, as traditionalists, such as George Washington's adviser Steuben, admitted.

Allowing for this flexibility, the changes of drill enforced by the French *Règlement* of 1791 were still important. In concert with Guibert's ideas, the new French tactical manual and its vigorous implementation by the armies of Revolutionary France organised by Lazare Carnot, made a major impact on tactics.

It was not only tactical thought that was active and developing in pre-Revolutionary France. The army was also given better weaponry, in what was, increasingly, a more important arm of battle, the artillery. Jean de Gribeauval (1715–89), who had served during the Seven Years War with the Austrian army, then the best in Europe, regularised the French artillery from 1769, being appointed Inspector General of Artillery in 1776. He used standardised specifications: 4-, 6-, 8- and 12-pounder cannon and 6-inch howitzers, in 8-gun batteries. Standardisation aided the flow of force on the battlefield: the projection of fire in a rapid, regular, even predictable, fashion. This was further helped by the introduction of prepackaged rounds. The artillery of the French artillery was also increased by stronger, larger wheels, shorter barrels, lighter-weight cannon, more secure mobile gun carriages, and better casting methods. Horses were harnessed in pairs, instead of in tandem. Accuracy was improved by better sights, the issue of gunnery tables and the introduction of inclination markers.

The theory of war advanced to take note of these changes. In his *De l'Usage de l'Artillerie nouvelle dans la guerre de campagne* (Paris, 1778), the Chevalier Jean du Teil argued that the artillery should begin battles and be massed for effect, in short that they should play a more active operational role, dictating the timetable and topography of the battlefield.

However, the absence of French forces from the European battlefield in 1763–91 ensured both that these ideas were not tested under fire and that the potential impact of the developments on French military effectiveness was not realised.

REVOLUTIONARY WARFARE

Thanks to Gribeauval's reforms, Revolutionary France had the best artillery in Europe. In several other respects, the army of Revolutionary France, especially in terms of capability and effectiveness, though not social practice, was a product of pre-Revolutionary changes. Napoleon, who had been taught to use Gribeauval's guns, admired Guibert's work. The regular army was disrupted in 1790–92 through desertion and emigration by disenchanted and fearful officers, but it still played a major role in the successes of 1792 against Austria and Prussia, not least because the regulars were better trained than new levies.

Yet the political context of warfare was very different, especially in providing both a frenetic energy to the conduct of war and far larger armies. In August 1793 the Revolutionary government issued the *levée en masse*; the latest in a series of experiments to raise manpower and improve the status of the troops that had already led to the encouragement of volunteers and the dismissal of foreign mercenary regiments. Now, the entire population could be obliged to serve in the war and all single men between 18 and 25 were to register for military service. The distinction between the professional army and the militia had in effect been ended. Such powers of conscription were not new in Europe, and, particularly due to draft avoidance and desertion, it anyway proved difficult to raise the numbers that had been anticipated.

However, the armies raised were both larger than those deployed by France hitherto that century, and enabled her to operate effectively on several fronts at once, to sustain casualties and to outnumber opponents. In 1793–94 alone, nearly 7000 new cannons and howitzers were cast by the French. A large powder factory was founded at Grenelle, capable of producing 30 000 lb of gunpowder daily.

The greater size of the forces at France's disposal was a factor, but by no means the sole one, in the greater pace of French advances. Mass had to be complemented by system and ideology: the new logistics brought about by the partial abandonment of the magazine system helped the aggressive style of war – both in strategy and in tactics – of Revolutionary armies able to rely on numbers and enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is an intangible factor. It has been argued that the French soldiers were better motivated and, hence, more successful and better able to use the new methods. This is difficult to prove and it has recently been argued that 'The armies of the First Republic were neither as politically motivated nor as militarily innovative and successful as the Jacobins (then and later) claimed was the case.'[1] Revolutionary zeal had greatly declined by 1797. Nevertheless, initially at least, Revolutionary enthusiasm does seem to have been an important element in French capability. It was probably necessary for the greater morale needed for effective shock action, for crossing the killing ground produced by opposing fire. Patriotic determination was also important to counter the effects of the limited training of the early Revolutionary armies.

Enthusiasm was important for more than tactics. The outbreak of war increased the paranoia of French public culture and allowed the Revolutionaries to associate themselves with France. They were also able to demonise their opponents. Waging war by the brutalisation of subjects and the despoliation of foreigners produced resources. The exploitative nature of French rule led to a crucial increase in resources that complemented France's domestic mobilisation, but the exploitation helped to limit the popularity of the Revolution outside France. This encouraged rebellion.

There had been rapid advances earlier in the century, for example in late 1733 by the Russians into Poland and the French into northern Italy. However, the pace of war, or in scientific terms, the volume of force, speeded up in the 1790s. If, by 1748, the French under Saxe had overrun the Austrian Netherlands, that had taken several years campaigning. In 1792, although the initial French attempts to invade the Austrian Netherlands failed, an invasion in November met with overwhelming success, and they fell in a month.

The Austrians regained the Austrian Netherlands after their victory at Neerwinden the following year (18 March 1793); but, by the end of 1794, the French had again conquered it. They had also driven the Spaniards out of Roussillon and made gains in Catalonia. Having triumphed in the Austrian Netherlands, the French went on to overrun the United Provinces: in January 1795 Amsterdam was captured.

The superiority in French numbers was important both in battles, such as Valmy (20 September 1792, essentially an artillery duel), Jemappes (6 November 1792) and Wattignies (15–16 October 1793), and in offensives, such as that against the Spaniards in Roussillon. Tactics were also important. The characteristic battlefield manoeuvre of French Revolutionary forces, and the best way to use the mass of new and inexperienced soldiers, most of whom went into the infantry, was the advance in independent attack columns. This was best for an army that put an emphasis on the attack. Column advances were more flexible than traditional linear formations and rigid drill. Indeed, in 1787, Earl Cornwallis, one of the most experienced British generals, had echoed Guibert in criticising the regulations for field exercises drawn up by Sir William Fawcett, the British Adjutant-General:

> [Its] impossible for battalions dressing to their own centres to march together in line. For it often happens, and indeed almost always in action, that the centres cannot see each other. But if they did the least deviation of any leader of a centre from the direction of the march would either enlarge the intervals or throw the battalions upon one another.

In contrast, at Jemappes the French were able to advance in columns and get back into line at close range, defeating the less numerous Austrians. The French combination of mobile artillery, skirmishers, assault columns and lines was potent, a successful and disconcerting ad hoc combination of tactical elements matched to the technology of the times and the character of the new republican soldier. The integration of close-order and open-order infantry, so that every battalion could deploy its own skirmishers, proved especially effective.

The politics of revolution ensured that systems of command differed from those of the *ancien régime*. There was a more 'democratic' command structure, at least at battalion level. The social gap between non-commissioned officers and their superiors was less than hitherto. At the strategic level, the greater number and dispersal of units meant that command and co-ordination skills became more important, and the French benefited from young energetic and determined commanders. Careers were open to talent, commanders including Jean-Baptiste Jourdan, a former private, Lazare Hoche, a former corporal, and Napoleon Bonaparte, initially a junior artillery officer from the recent acquisition of Corsica. Those who found themselves denounced for failure, or who were suspected of treachery, risked the death penalty. Eight days after the outbreak of war, one French army murdered its unsuccessful commander, Théobald Dillon. Other generals followed. Houchard was even executed for achieving only moderate success at Dunkirk in 1793. Punishment, politicisation and the policy of the Committee of Public Safety ensured that the generals were willing to accept heavy losses among their troops.

Initial confusion was followed by a measure of organisation, as the government struggled to equip, train, feed and control the new armies. This owed much to Lazare Carnot, head of the military section of the Committee of Public Safety. The process of forming the new armies and using them with success was instrumental in the transition from a royal army to the nation in arms. The way was open for the ruthless boldness that Napoleon was to show in Italy in 1796–97.[2]

Yet the French did not push all before them. The Austrians proved tough opponents, especially in Germany in 1796 under Archduke Charles, and the Russians were often to show impressive staying-power and fighting quality, both in the 1790s and subsequently. The disciplined fire of the Austrian lines initially checked the French at Jemappes and Hondschoote (8 September 1793), and helped to defeat them at Neerwinden. Further afield, Napoleon's victories over the Mamelukes in Egypt in 1798 are a less than complete account of French effectiveness. It is as pertinent to note the failure of French forces to recapture newly-independent Haiti in 1802–03: 40000 French troops, including Napoleon's brother-in-law, Charles Leclerc, died, the vast majority as a result of yellow fever.

The French were driven out of Haiti by Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who proclaimed himself Emperor Jacques I. This lesser-known imperial counterpart of Napoleon indicated that in Haiti, as elsewhere, the successful use of force was crucial to power. That was certainly demonstrated by Napoleon. The conduct of the war had created an atmosphere of expediency in which it became easier for Napoleon to mount his coup.

Napoleon, the new commander of the French Army of Italy, developed in 1796 the characteristics of his generalship: self-confidence, swift decision-making, rapid mobility, the concentration of strength, and, where possible, the exploitation of interior lines. Victory by French columns over outnumbered defenders at Mondovi (27 April 1796) knocked the leading independent Italian ruler, the King of Sardinia, out of the war. At Lodi (10 May), Bassano (8 September), Arcole (15–17 November) and Rivoli (14 January 1797), Napoleon's tactical genius and ability to manoeuvre on the battlefield brought victory over the Austrians, and associated Napoleon with military success. His siting of the artillery was particularly important. The Treaty of Campo Formio (1797) brought peace, with France dominant in Lombardy and Austria ceding the Austrian Netherlands. The First Coalition of powers against Revolutionary/Napoleonic France had been brought low.[3]

However, neither under Revolutionary governments nor under Napoleon was France able to learn restraint. Repeatedly, victory was followed by a peace settlement that was only temporary. In 1798 a Second Coalition was formed. With Poland partitioned out of existence and Russia at peace with Turkey, the Russians were able to intervene effectively in Western Europe. The Austrians under Archduke Charles defeated a smaller French force at Stockach (25 March 1799), while a Russian army under Suvorov advanced into northern Italy, the first time that the Russians had operated there. Suvorov's victories, particularly Trebbia (17–19 June) and Novi (15 August 1799), were brutal battles, in which repeated attacks finally found weaknesses in the French position.

Like Napoleon, Suvorov was a believer in the strategic and tactical offensive and had little time for sieges. He used methods successfully employed against the Turks in the wars of 1768–74 and 1787–92. Suvorov was willing to accept a high rate of casualties and to mount costly frontal attacks on fortified positions, such as the castle of Novi or the northern approaches to the St Gotthard Pass. He relied on bayonet attacks, not defensive firepower. Suvorov's generalship contrasted with that of his more cautious Austrian allies, who were more concerned with regaining northern Italian positions by sieges, and showed that an emphasis on aggression, attack and risk was not restricted to the French. Russian tactics emphasised the use of the bayonet and troops were trained to fight in columns as well as extended order formations, although in practice they did not do the latter that much. Divisions were employed as tactical units from 1806.

NAPOLEONIC GENERALSHIP

The loss of northern Italy helped to undermine France's Directory government and to make easier Napoleon's seizure of power in the 'Brumaire' coup of 9–10 November 1799. As First Consul, and from 1804 Emperor, Napoleon was in a position not only to act as an innovative general, but also to control the French military system and to direct the war effort. He enjoyed greater power over the army than any ruler since Louis XIV. Furthermore, in many respects, Napoleon was more powerful than Louis. His choice of commanders was not constrained by the social conventions and aristocratic alignments that affected Louis, and both armies and individual military units were under more direct governmental control than had been the case with the Bourbon dynasty. Furthermore, Napoleon was directly in command of the leading French force throughout the wars of his reign. Although he had to manage many campaigns from a distance, they were always those of subsidiary forces.

Under Napoleon, French resources were devoted to the military with a consistency that the Revolutionary governments had lacked. The conscription system, which had become less effective in the mid-1790s, was strengthened. Napoleon raised 1.3 million conscripts in 1800–11 and one million in 1812–13 alone.[4] In August 1813 he had a reserve of 18 million musket cartridges.

Napoleon also developed the corps, a unit at a level above that of the division that could include all the arms and also be large enough to operate effectively: both corps and divisions were given effective staff structures. Thus, the corps added to the flexibility of the earlier divisional system the strength necessary both for the punishing battles of the period – where opposing forces would not collapse rapidly as a result of well-planned battlefield moves, and for Napoleon's campaigns of strategically applied force. Corps allowed the French to pack a heavier punch and operated effectively, both as individual units, for example at the battle of Auerstädt (1806) and in much of the Peninsular War, and in concert.

Greater numbers and operational flexibility ensured that skilled staff work was important to Napoleon. It was necessary to deploy rapidly and effectively the massive resources he controlled, in particular to be able to move many large corps by different routes, yet enable them still to support each other. In 1805 Napoleon speedily moved 194 000 men and about 300 cannon from northern France, where they were preparing to invade Britain, eastwards, in order to attack the Austrians in south-west Germany. The logistical basis of the campaign in 1805 was inadequate and the French were forced to live off the countryside, but they were able to move rapidly in order to surround the Austrians in Ulm. More generally, better roads and better map-making facilitated the swifter movement of troops. Napoleon's Chief of Staff, Louis-Alexandre Berthier, was a crucial figure in a French command structure that was better than those of her opponents. Henri Clarke, Minister of War from 1807, was an effective and energetic administrator, responsible for the drafting of troops, the organisation of new units and the management of the armies of occupation. However, Napoleon's centralised direction of campaigns became a problem from 1809 when he limited the autonomy of his commanders in the distant Peninsular War, and it even proved difficult to control effectively the large armies of his later years that were under his direct command. Several of his commanders, including Davout, Masséna, Ney and Soult, were talented, but Napoleonic intervention lessened their capability for effective independent command.

The French organisational and command structures were vital to Napoleon's characteristic rapidity of strategic and tactical movement, and his troops also travelled more lightly than those of Frederick II. Napoleon employed this mobility to strategic effect. He concentrated on a single front, seeking in each war to identify the crucial opposing force and to destroy it rapidly. For temperamental reasons, and because he sought glory, and rapid and decisive results, Napoleon sought battle. Although he fought for much of his reign, his individual wars with Continental opponents were over fairly rapidly. Warfare might be a long-term process for Napoleon, but war became an event. Thus, for example, wars with Austria in 1805 and 1809 ended the same year, while the war with Prussia that began in 1806 ended in 1807. Such rapid results were the product of a concentration of military resources on a single front, a contrast with the situation in the 1790s.

On campaign, Napoleon took a central position in order to divide more numerous opposing forces and then defeat them separately. A strategy of envelopment was used against weaker forces: they were pinned down by an attack mounted by a section of the French army, while most of the army enveloped them, cutting their lines of supply.

Napoleon was a strong believer in the value of artillery, organised into strong batteries, particularly of 12-pounders. At Wagram, he covered the reorganisation of his attack with a battery of 102 guns. Napoleon also massed his cavalry for use at the vital moment, as with Murat's charge through the Russian centre at Eylau (1807). He initially successfully employed *l'ordre mixte* of the 1790s for the infantry: a mixture of lines and columns with many sharpshooters to precede the attack. The use of these formations were enhanced by effective tactical plans and detailed staff planning. However, French tactics degenerated later on, and it can be argued that Napoleon devoted insufficient attention to tactical details. He was limited by the continual need to adapt tactics to his large numbers of inexperienced troops.[5]

On the whole, Napoleon has been applauded as a great operational genius, especially as a manoeuvrer and strategist. On the whole, he was an able planner and knew when and how to strike, although he usually left tactics to the discretion of his field officers. His campaigns and battles are, for example, still important in the West Point course on military history. Recently, however, there has been more criticism of his generalship, although it has been questioned by many scholars. Owen Connelly presented Napoleon as an improviser who did not care if he initially blundered, since he had confidence that he could devise a strategic or tactical plan in the field, based on the enemy's movements and/or errors, and win. *Improviste* is what he called himself at St Helena. Impressed by Napoleon's ability to improvise, Connelly claimed that:

> Napoleon began almost every campaign with a strategic blunder. . . . He began many battles with a tactical error . . . he did careful planning, paying particular attention to movement and maximizing his numbers. But that done, he simply charged towards his enemy's presumed location . . . his awesome energy; his ability to scramble, to make his men follow him, to hit again and again; and his inability to accept defeat . . . he always charged ahead and rewrote his plans as he went, although in mid-career he acquired superior numbers which covered his blunders and ensured his victories.

Napoleon manipulated the historical record to disguise his failings and seize credit from others. He had official accounts of the Battle of Marengo (14 June 1800) rewritten in order to conceal his mistakes and to present the battle as going according to plan.[6] Furthermore, it has been argued that, having changed European warfare himself, Napoleon failed to understand and respond to further developments:

> Napoleon's mistakes prior to 1809 did not have catastrophic consequences because his opponents made more mistakes and their armies were less effective in war. But Napoleon's usual mistakes were magnified as his opposition improved. Convinced that his personality and genius could overcome all obstacles, Napoleon was blinded to the changing realities of warfare.[7]

The last point is a valuable reminder that, as with Gustav Adolf, Marlborough and Frederick the Great, as well as less famous commanders, it is necessary to avoid a static account of their generalship and, instead, to consider them in terms of a dynamic situation, specifically shifting relative capability and effectiveness. This was as much a case of 'political' as of more narrowly 'military' factors, but, even in terms of the latter, the variety of opponents and the pace of change were such that it was necessary to be continuously flexible and adaptable.

Napoleon's generalship should not be simplified into a trajectory of success to failure, however attractive that might be in terms of the parallel idea of a ruler brought down by hubris. Indeed, in both 1813 and 1814 he displayed impressive generalship against superior odds. Throughout, Napoleon was dominated by the desire to engage and win. By launching campaigns and forcing battles whose likely shape was unclear, Napoleon placed great reliance on the subsequent effectiveness of his armies. This rewarded the fighting quality of individual units, the initiative and skill of subordinates, and the ability to retain reserves until the crucial moment. Napoleon confronted grave problems, not least the number and fighting quality of his opponents and the difficulty of establishing their positions, let alone intentions, the primitive communications of the period, and the need to raise the operational effectiveness of his conscripts. He deserves credit for developing an effective military machine, even as he undermined it by the strains of near-continuous warfare, and eventually overwhelmed it in 1813–14 by failing to avoid or end a multi-front struggle. Able to adapt rapidly to changing circumstances and fresh intelligence, Napoleon had a remarkable ability to impose his will upon war. He won close to fifty major battles in his career, including the largest, most convoluted engagements hitherto seen in the gunpowder age. Most martial reputations rest only on a victory or two. Indubitably, Napoleon, like so many other great commanders, committed errors of judgement, but they were relatively few. His successes owed something to weight of numbers, but Napoleon should be given credit for the skill with which he achieved (usually local) superiority, generally by manoeuvre over vast distances. Leadership and morale were also important. Napoleon, for all his faults, was a superlative military leader who commanded the respect and affection of troops and officers.

NAPOLEON'S CAMPAIGNS, 1800–1807

Napoleon's opening campaign as First Consul was an invasion of northern Italy, boldly begun with a crossing of the Great St Bernard Pass so that he arrived in the Austrian rear. At Marengo, however, he found the Austrians a formidable rival, and his enforced retreat for much of the battle was only reversed because of the arrival of reinforcements and the successful counter-attack they mounted. A quarter of the French force became casualties. A further French victory, at Hohenlinden (3 December 1800), by an army that was flexible in defence commanded by Jean Moreau, led the Austrians to conclude peace at Lunéville.

Napoleon next attacked the Austrians in 1805, in the War of the Third Coalition. The Austrians were preparing for an attack from the west through the Black Forest, but they were outmanoeuvred by the rapid advance of the French from the middle Rhine to the Danube in their rear. From the outset, Napoleon hoped and planned to get behind the Austrians. The overly cautious Austrian response left an army bottled up in Ulm. It surrendered on 20 October, and Napoleon then overran southern Germany and Austria. Success in Germany was helped by the situation in northern Italy, where a French force of only 50 000 under Masséna contained the 90 000-strong Austrian army under Archduke Charles.

Napoleon's advance brought him closer to the advancing Russians, deliberately so as he wanted to inflict a heavy defeat on them, and on 2 December 1805 Tsar Alexander I and a 85 000-strong Austro-Russian army attacked the 75 000-strong French at Austerlitz. A strong assault on Napoleon's right was held and, in a surprise attack, the French turned the weak flank of this Russian attack in order to win. The French were better able than their Russian counterparts to use numerical superiority at the point of contact they had sought.[8] Aside from Napoleon's superior generalship, the French command system proved better able to integrate the different arms effectively. Austria left the war. The following year poorly commanded and outmanoeuvred Prussian forces were defeated at Jena and Auerstädt (14 October), although French fighting quality played a major role at Auerstädt. At Jena, massed artillery and substantial numbers of skirmishers inflicted heavy losses on the Prussian lines. Victory over the Russians at Friedland (14 June 1807) brought peace with Prussia and Russia.

The conflicts of this period indicated the superiority of the French corps and divisional structure over the less coherent and well-coordinated opposing forces. French staff work, at army and corps level, was superior to that of both Austria and Russia, and this helped to vitiate the numbers France's opponents put into the field. The quality of French staff work enabled Napoleon to translate his wide-ranging strategic vision into practice, to force what might have been a segmented war into essentially a struggle in one major theatre of operations where he could use the *Grande Armée* effectively. The French had benefited from the years of peace on the Continent from 1801 in order to train their infantry, increase their artillery and cavalry, and produce better balanced corps. The earlier years of war had provided experienced troops and an officer corps sifted by merit.

NAPOLEONIC CAMPAIGNS, 1808–1812

Napoleon encountered many serious problems before his unsuccessful invasion of Russia in 1812. At Eylau (8 February 1807), the Russians proved a tough foe, inflicting heavy casualties with their artillery and fighting off successive attacks before withdrawing during the night. The following year, Napoleon's attempt to seize Spain led to a popular uprising. A surrounded French corps surrendered at Bailén (21 July 1808) and an advancing French army was stopped by the firepower of a British force under Sir Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington, at Vimeiro (21 August 1808). Napoleon, however, intervened, defeating poorly trained and commanded, and outnumbered Spanish forces, and entering Madrid on 4 December.

The following year, war resumed with Austria, and Napoleon found her a tougher opponent than in 1805, although the Austrians were handicapped by poorly conceived war aims, inadequate and divided central leadership and a foolish strategy.

At Aspern-Essling (21–22 May 1809), his bold attack on a superior Austrian force was repelled and he had to abandon the battlefield in the face of a serious Austrian advance and better Austrian generalship.

At Wagram on 5–6 July, however, Napoleon proved the better general and the French corps commanders were superior to their Austrian counterparts. Napoleon's counter-attack drove the Austrians from the field, but it was no Austerlitz: the Austrians were not routed. Thanks in part to the heavy artillery power of both sides, there were no tactical breakthroughs. The Austrian corps structure was effective, and the French victory was essentially due to leadership and to their overall superiority in troops and material in what was a battle of attrition. Unlike in 1805, the Austrians had no Russian support, while Frederick William III of Prussia refused promised support.

In 1812 Napoleon's hegemonic policies and unwillingness to accept other points of view led him to war with Russia. As with his earlier attacks on Austria, Prussia and Spain, and his planned invasion of Britain in 1805, he resolved to strike at the centre of his opponent's power, thus gaining the initiative and transferring much of the logistical burden of the war to his enemy. Napoleon invaded on 24–25 June with half a million men, most of whom were allied, principally German, Polish and Italian troops. The Russians, however, fell back, denying Napoleon a decisive battle. Russian scorched earth and guerrilla activity hit supplies, and the French lost men through hunger, disease and fatigue. Finally, at Borodino on 7 September, the Russians sought to stop the advance on Moscow. In a battle of attrition that involved 233 000 men and 1227 cannon, the Russians resisted successive attacks and were driven back without breaking. Russian casualties were heavier, but Napoleon lost a quarter of his army. He repeatedly pressed Clarke to forward troops from all available sources within the empire. Napoleon followed up Borodino by entering an undefended Moscow, but the city was set ablaze, probably by the Russians. Alexander refused to negotiate, and, in the face of a deteriorating supply situation and encroaching Russian forces, Napoleon retreated. The retreat turned into a nightmare as heavy snowfalls, supply breakdowns and Russian attacks, especially as the French crossed the Berezina River on 26–27 November, combined to cause heavy casualties.[9]

This disaster was far more serious than the checks at Eylau and Aspern-Essling; or the British victories in the Peninsular War in Portugal and Spain at Talavera (27–28 July 1809) and Salamanca (22 July 1812), for the French were winning the Peninsular War until 1812. Napoleon was fatally weakened, not least because there would never thereafter be anywhere near such an opportunity to defeat the Russians. The failure on 23 October 1812 of the attempted coup in Paris by ex-General Claude-François Malet was scant consolation.

NAPOLEONIC CAMPAIGNS 1813–1815

The idea of Napoleonic invincibility was shattered by defeat in Russia, although the defeat was in large part attributed to General Winter. In early 1813 Napoleon's diplomatic position collapsed as the French retreated before the Russian advance. In March 1813 Prussia declared war on France. Napoleon rebuilt his army to a force of over 400 000 plus his artillery, but the new recruits were more like the fresh troops of 1792 than the veterans of his earlier campaigns, and, unlike in 1792, France's opponents were not outnumbered. In addition, Napoleon was unable to create a new cavalry to match the troops lost in Russia. His victories over the Prussians and Russians at Lützen (2 May) and Bautzen (20–21 May) were achieved over outnumbered forces, and neither was decisive; they might have well have brought victory had Napoleon pressed on, but he could not, in part for lack of cavalry. Bautzen led both sides to agree to an armistice.

Napoleon rejected peace terms that summer, Austria and Sweden joined his opponents and the French became heavily outnumbered. In the autumn of 1813 Napoleon confronted his opponents again. Austrian, Prussian, Russian and Swedish forces exceeded 600 000, while Napoleon's total field army was only 370 000. The allies adopted the Trachenburg Plan: battle with Napoleon was to be avoided while independent forces under his subordinates were to be attacked. The plan reflected the Allies' respect for Napoleon's generalship. The Prussians defeated detached French forces at Grossbeeren (23 August), on the Katzbach river (26 August) and at Dennewitz (6 September); and the Austrians won at Kulm (30 August). Napoleon's failure to train his marshals to operate as independent commanders, and their lack of supporting staffs, cost the French dear. The marshals could not concentrate their armies at the decisive point in order to achieve victory, and they were unable to operate in order to fulfil strategic objectives. The scale of war was too great for Napoleon to control everything, and he also suffered due to the raw nature of many of his troops.

Only at Dresden, when Frederick Willian III insisted on fighting on 27 August, was Napoleon victorious, thanks to strong attacks by his flanks. Nevertheless, this was not the triumph of envelopment that the French required were they to win. By failing to concentrate his forces during the campaign, Napoleon had allowed their attenuation, and this had preserved neither the territory under French control nor the strategic advantage.

Instead, it was Napoleon who was outmanoeuvred, his line of retreat threatened by the converging Allied forces. At the Battle of the Nations at Leipzig (16–19 October) Napoleon was heavily outnumbered: by 195 000 to 365 000 by the time both sides were fully engaged. Unable to defeat his opponents, whom he, nevertheless, held off, Napoleon decided to retreat, but the premature destruction of the Elster bridge trapped four corps, leading to French losses of 68 000 in the battle.

Artillery played an important role in the battles of 1813, as more generally in Napoleonic warfare. Thus, before attacking the Saxons, then backing Napoleon, at Grossbeeren, Bernadotte bombarded his opponents with 62 cannon he had massed together.

After Leipzig, Napoleon's position in Germany collapsed as former allies deserted and the French fell back. Too many troops, however, were left in fortresses in Germany and Spain, a sign of Napoleon's refusal to face facts. In France, Napoleon was affected by falling tax revenues, widespread draft avoidance, a serious shortage of arms and equipment and a marked decline in the morale and efficiency of officials. The economy was in a parlous state, hit by British blockade and by the loss of continental markets.

In the early months of 1814, Napoleon took the initiative and, with some success, attacked the Austro-Prussian forces that invaded eastern France, manoeuvring with skill in order to destroy the most exposed units. Numbers, however, told. In place of the 80 000 opposing troops he had anticipated, there were about 200 000, and his own army was 70 000 strong, not the 120 000 men he had anticipated.[10] Both Napoleon and his subordinates were defeated. Finally, the Austrians and Prussians marched on Paris, ignoring Napoleon's position on their flank. After its defenders were driven back in the suburbs, Paris surrendered. A provisional French government deposed Napoleon and, with his marshals unwilling to fight on, Napoleon abdicated on 6 April 1814. Four days later the British army under the Duke of Wellington, that had earlier driven back the French in Spain, crushing them at Vitoria (21 June 1813), defeated Marshal Soult at Toulouse.

Napoleon was exiled to Elba, but he returned to France in March 1815 and seized power from the weak Louis XVIII. Rather than wait for the opponents to invade in overwhelming force, Napoleon attacked their nearest concentration, invading the Low Countries on 15 June. Three days later a 68 000-strong Anglo-Dutch–German army under Wellington on a ridge at Mont-Saint-Jean was attacked by Napoleon's 72 000-strong force. In the battle of Waterloo, defensive firepower beat off successive French frontal attacks. Flank attacks or yet more frontal assaults might have succeeded, but the arrival of the Prussian forces on the French right spelled the end.

A NOVEL FORM OF WAR?

If the context of judgement is late nineteenth-century warfare then it is possible to stress continuity rather than change, to argue that there was a use of yet greater resources of people, *matériel* and funds to pursue familiar military courses. Much that Napoleonic warfare is noted for had been anticipated in earlier conflicts: large armies, a strategy of movement, a preference for battles over sieges, a greater emphasis on artillery, light infantry. In this context, Napoleon was more of a consolidator than an innovator.

However, if the political and social context is to be seen as crucial, then the period was more of a departure than would appear if attention was concentrated on weaponry and naval conflict. Large conscript armies, organised into corps, were a new development in Western Europe. Possibly the greatest tactical difference was that of scale and the resulting organisational, operational and logistical problems. The military effectiveness, in the widest sense, of European states, increased, as formidable resources were devoted to warfare, and the practice of the mobilisation of a large proportion of national manpower and warfare both became more insistent. This greater effectiveness posed a serious problem for popular uprisings, such as those in and south of Rome in 1798. Such uprisings were not new, but they were more important in the period, in part because the French destroyed or took over existing power structures, and because they accelerated processes of reform that the population already found inimical.

CONCLUSIONS

The nature of war at the close of the period was different to that at the outset in part due to an increase in scale. Again, this is a matter of perspective. Whilst coming close to Gettysburg in 1863, Waterloo was closer to the battle of Pavia of 1525 than is was to the battle of Kursk of 1943. Furthermore, a notion of change in military arrangements and methods was already well established from the fifteenth century, so that the interest in novelty that was an important characteristic of thought in Enlightenment, Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods did not impact in military affairs on a static, rigid or conservative society.

However, although change was already well established from the fifteenth century, the warfare of the period did not yet witness the co-ordination of large-scale operations that was to characterise land and sea warfare in the Napoleonic period. The potential effectiveness of the military system was demonstrated by Napoleon's ability to force Austria, Prussia and Russia to terms in 1805–07, and by the simultaneous large-scale French operations against Austria and Spain in 1808–09. The role of land and sea power was demonstrated in 1798–1815 by the British. They suppressed rebellion in Ireland, made extensive gains in India, fought a war with the USA and resisted France and her allies, eventually playing a major role in Napoleon's overthrow.[11]

In Britain, France, and more generally in Europe, war reflected the ability of governments to tap economic activity and demographic potential. By 1813 the Prussians had 100000 regulars and a 120000-strong milita, the *Landwehr*. War increasingly became a matter of the intersection of capitalism and government, but an intersection that was mediated by political processes and social practices that reflected the dynamic co-operation of rulers and political elites. The Napoleonic enterprise was defeated not by an unreconstructed *ancien régime*, but by states that had absorbed many of France's developments. Across much of Europe, the modernisation of political structures and administrative practices was influenced by French occupation or models, or by the need to devise new political and administrative strategies to counter the French. The changes introduced in the Prussian army and society after defeat by Napoleon in 1806 are an important example, although there was also considerable continuity with the Enlightenment reforms of the pre-Revolutionary period.

It is, however, important not to exaggerate the effectiveness of military administration in this period. Despite manufacturing large quantities of munitions, including 110000 muskets in 1812, Russia was short of arms and ammunition and musket calibres were not standardised. Yet, in part, this was due to the pressures created by the mass recruitment of the period. The year 1812 was an exceptional one for Russia, but in it 420000 regulars were recruited, as was a 200000-strong militia.

War involves far more than resources and governmental structures, but both were important to the other factors that tend to absorb more attention. They were also important in Napoleon's failure. It was far from inevitable, but he was gravely weakened both by the ability of Britain to use the resources of worldwide trade in order to finance opposition to France, and by the precarious nature of the new imperial system and the limited support it enjoyed across much of the continent that he could otherwise dominate militarily. Napoleon's failure to bring lasting peace was in part a testimony to his unwillingness to compromise, but was also the product of a widespread reluctance to accept his perspective that reflected the strength of political identities across much of Europe. This might be presented as cyclical by asking how far Charles V and Hitler faced similar situations, but, in each case, the answer must refer to a specific moment in military and political history.

Napoleon benefited from the operational and organisational advantages that the French enjoyed over their opponents from the outbreak of war in 1792, and from the commitment of the Revolutionary political system to war. These relative advantages were, however, eroded in the 1800s, such that in 1807–09 the French encountered formidable opposition from Russian, Spanish, British and Austrian forces. As so frequently in European military history, a capability gap within Europe had been closed and, in combination with political factors, the consequence was the end of a drive for hegemonic power.

Notes and References

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