**How Good Was Napoleon?**

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*Serving general and military historian Jonathon Riley uses his personal knowledge of command to assess Napoleon’s qualities as a strategist, operational commander and battlefield tactician.*

Surrender of Madrid (Gros), 1808. Napoleon enters Spain's capital during the Peninsular WarBy 1805, the year that Napoleon became sole head of state and supreme warlord of France, the notion of strategy was recognizably modern. Joly de Maizeroy had written in Théories de la Guerre (1777): ‘Strategy ... combines time, places, means, various interests and considers all ... [Tactics] reduces easily to firm rules, because it is entirely geometrical like fortification.’ Achieving strategic objectives through means as diverse as diplomacy, economic power, information warfare and military power is not too far from this line of thought. The sort of strategy practised by Napoleon, his allies and some of his opponents, should be distinguished from that of his implacable enemy, Britain. Its worldwide empire, economic base, and naval reach, all meant that it was able to conduct strategy through other means than military power. Revolutionary and imperial France was not in this position – it had to use military force not in addition to the other instruments of national power, but in order to access them. Military power for Napoleon must be seen therefore as diplomacy, not merely, as in the Clausewitzian sense, an addition to it.

Napoleon’s strategy aimed not just at establishing a stable limit to his empire in Europe through peace with Britain, but at global domination. The latent hostility of the European anciens régimes,Britain especially, forced him to keep expanding until no opponents were left. In 1811 he re marked that ‘in five years, I shall be master of the world: there only remains Russia, but I shall crush her.’ For Napoleon, greater and greater success was the means to achieving a favourable and lasting settlement; one that saw Napoleon and his empire in control of the international system. Here lay the seeds of his destruction, and three examples of such over-reach demonstrate the flaws in the system: the Continental System, the occupation of Spain, and the invasion of Russia.

This last was the biggest single factor in his downfall. Napoleon needed a speedy conclusion to force the Russians back into the Continental System before the odds began to tell against him in the field. The campaign had a massive impact on French military potential: the empire lost 570,000 men, 200,000 horses and 1,050 guns  – while the guns could be replaced, the men and horses could not. More important, the defeat shattered the myth of Napoleonic invincibility and rekindled the coalition against him. In the final years of his reign, Napoleon won battlefield victories, but afterRussia, he was irrevocably on the road to St Helena. There is no better example of the great truth that, if strategy is flawed then, no matter how brilliant the tactical manoeuvres, no matter how inspired the operational art, failure will be inevitable.

Napoleon would certainly have understood the modern notion of the operational level of command. Military theory at the time spoke only of strategy and tactics, but the campaign was a well-understood idea, as was the concept of operational manoeuvre, usually referred to as Grand Tactics. Modern notions of operational art focus on the idea of critical vulnerabilities within a centre of gravity, pitting strength against weakness. Napoleon understood this, although when he possessed overwhelming strength, as he often did, he chose attrition over manoeuvre.

For Napoleon, the centre of gravity at the operational level was almost invariably the enemy’s army, and the decisive act in achieving his strategic objectives was its destruction in battle by the fastest means available. By this means he would break the enemy’s will to resist so that all else – the conquest of territory in particular – would follow. ‘I see only one thing,’ Napoleon declared in 1797, ‘namely the enemy’s main body. I try to crush it, confident that secondary matters will then settle themselves.’

Much of the success of Napoleonic campaigning was founded on logistics. Although the emphasis in logistics has changed since Napoleon’s day, as has the technology, the problem has not altered. Sustaining his army remains a key factor for any general in planning and executing a campaign and may, as with Napoleon in Russia, be decisive. It is a driving factor in the size of forces that can take and keep the field. Napoleon’s armies were the largest that the western world had yet seen, and his method of supplying it had to be innovative – hence his insistence on spreading out and foraging to supplement his depots.

It is ironic that, having succeeded in so many campaigns on the basis of just enough, just in time, he failed in Russia after the most extensive preparations undertaken in the history of warfare up to that point. He knew that living off the country would be impossible, and he knew the consequences of staying in one place for any length of time, but even his preparations were insufficient for the demand, distance and duration of the campaign. In modern campaigns, static operations in theatres like the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan have brought their own problems in over-stretching military logistic units and military forces that rely on contractors to provide many functions. This situation is almost the reverse of Napoleonic times. Once the line of communication has been established, the use of contracts allied to food technology and other commodity storage have made it far simpler to maintain a static force than a mobile one. Given the conditions of his time, therefore, the fact that Napoleon overran most of Europe, and did not starve his armies in the process, is nothing short of a miracle.

For Napoleon, there was an inescapable connection between the campaign and the battle: the campaign was constructed to achieve his strategic objectives – that of bringing the enemy to a battle that would be the decisive act of any war. While distinctions may be drawn between strategy, operational art and tactics, strategy and operational art are by no means suspended when battle is joined. Manoeuvring throughout the theatre of operations, and in the realm of diplomacy, continues before, after, and during a battle. This is implicit in Karl von Clausewitz’s celebrated but often misquoted (and still more often misunderstood) remark that ‘war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means.’

The close connection between strategic objectives, operational manoeuvre and battle was underlined by Napoleon’s own position as head of state, head of government, and commander-in-chief: in such an unrivalled position, he could ensure the unbroken maintenance of the aim from the beginning to the end of a war. The same intelligence prepared the general strategic conditions and objectives, set the operational scenery, and joined the engagement. Today, the position of a commander at the strategic or operational levels is different. He may indeed assist in preparing the general conditions for engaging an enemy, he may exert influence on the course of battles by assigning resources, priorities, boundaries, rules of engagement and so on, but the execution of a battle will be entrusted to a subordinate combined arms commander.

Napoleon expected to be in a position to observe and control any battle personally from one or two key positions. Like a modern commander, he needed to separate himself and his tactical headquarters from the impedimenta of the much larger main headquarters. This gave him the flexibility to exercise command at wherever the decisive point of a battle might be – but for limited periods. Meanwhile the main headquarters kept control of the army. Napoleon could thus find out what was going on, communicate his intentions to his subordinates, and maintain contact with the staff so that problems could be solved.

Close cooperation on the battlefield was relatively simple at that period, not only between corps but between the various arms and services of the entire army. Napoleon, crucially, never allowed control of any battle to slip from his hand. On the few occasions he did so the outcome was a bad one for the French, as Marengo (1800) almost proved, and Aspern-Essling (1809) and Waterloo(1815) certainly did. It is often said that Napoleon did not interest himself in tactics: this does not stand close examination. Whilst he only rarely issued detailed guidance on corps level tactical employment, Napoleon devised and issued the battle plans, and directed the combined attacks of infantry, cavalry reserves, and massed batteries of guns. What a modern corps or divisional commander carries out on the battlefield today within his own sphere of command, therefore, Napoleon himself performed on the entire field of battle.

If Napoleon was brilliant at the operational level, there was little glitter and less subtlety on the battlefield. True, he produced a run of successes in his early years, leading up to the triumph of Jena-Auerstadt (1806). Thereafter, for every victory, there was a disaster or near-disaster. He won at Friedland (1807), but only after the bitter winter battle of Eylau; Wagram recovered the near-disaster of Aspern-Essling at huge cost; and there was little to celebrate at Borodino (1812). His flash of genius was apparent at Lützen (May 2nd, 1813), but Bautzen (May 20th–21st) was a draw, and the success of Dresden (August 26th–27th) was followed by the defeats of Kulm, the Katzbach and, finally and decisively, Leipzig (October 16th–19th). After the escape from Elba, Nap oleon’s success against the Prussians at Ligny (June 16th, 1815) was an illusion, shattered the same day by Quatre Bras and by Waterloo two days later.

One common aspect of Napoleonic battles was the blood-letting. Because of his insistence on rapid marching to gain time, the myth grew up that ‘the Emperor uses our legs instead of our bayonets’. Nothing in the history of his campaigns shows this to be true. In battle after battle, the French conscripts would hold on in desperate combat, waiting for support from the rest of the army. Then, when the greatest possible mass had been assembled, the day would be settled – in victory or in a draw – by the crude application of force: massed artillery fire to blast holes in the enemy, and columns of infantry and cavalry pouring in. There is no subtlety here.

A key judgement for any general is to understand what his army is capable of doing, and what is beyond its abilities. In the early years, Napoleon’s Grande Armée was the most capable battlefield force in the world; Napoleon could demand feats of endurance, sacrifice and complexity beyond those of his opponents. But the quality of its later performances declined as casualties took their toll on the troops and on his marshals. After the Russian campaign, Napoleon rarely tried to unite dispersed corps on the battlefield in the presence of the enemy during offensive operations because he could no longer rely on a high-quality holding action to buy time for the assembly of his main army. As performance declined, so the cost of fighting rose still higher. Bautzen cost Napoleon more than 20,000 casualties. Despite Dresden, the French army lost 150,000 men between June and September 1813. Leipzig cost him 70,000 men, including seventeen general officers. These figures equal the very worst days on the Western Front, yet the First World War generals are often vilified while Napoleon’s reputation shines.

In the century after 1815 Napoleon’s legend was dominant: every general wanted to be him, to crush his enemy’s army, march into his capital, and attain the decisive victory. What did not dawn on his admirers, or on those responsible for teaching the military class of the future, was the simple fact that, in the end, Napoleon lost.

Of course, Napoleon himself, writing his memoir, on St Helena, did all he could to disguise this. It was the military theorist Basil Liddell Hart who reminded the world of the uncomfortable truth that ‘it is as well to remember that St Helena became his destination’. To get Nap oleon there took more than twenty years of ruinous war – against mixed opposition: Napo leon did not have to be faultless, he just had to be better than his opponents. Given this, and the edge that superior French organization and a unified command brought, it is not surprising that his legend grew as it did.

So large did it loom, in fact, the evolution of the nature of modern warfare over the next century became obscured. European armies after Napoleon were almost invariably large organizations raised through conscription, and the full impact of the industrial revolution – not felt until after 1815 – equipped them with weapons closer to those of today’s battlefield than to Leipzig or Waterloo. Of course, military technologies do not advance in complete capability leaps, and there is, in warfare, a relationship between the introduction of new technologies, and the employment and deployment of troops. This relationship is not constant, and without careful and frequent revision, trouble follows. By the American Civil War (1861–65), armies were equipped with powerful, rifled muskets and heavy artillery, and could be moved by rail, but the tactics were still those ofWaterloo. The results, for generals seeking the Napoleonic decisive battle, were the casualty rates of battles like Antietam, Fredericksburg and Gettysburg, and the acceleration of trench warfare. The same process continued through the Franco-Prussian war, the opening stages of the South African War, and the early years of the First World War.

Today, armies still operate within what is described as a Napoleonic staff model and a corps structure when, once again, the employment–technology relationship is shifting. The IT revolution should mean that general staffs are organized in a way that cuts across traditional divisions in order to provide superior (not necessarily faster) information, and thus produce superior decisions. Generals in the West today are most likely to be opposed, not by states, but by non-state groupings whose command structures, as far as they can be said to have any, operate in the virtual realm. Bringing an army corps into action may succeed in the taking of ground, but as the Coalition has found in Iraq, the action is unlikely to be decisive. But the focus on des troying an enemy force remains.

This is, however, the wrong lesson to draw from Napoleon’s legacy in the context of modern warfare. Napoleon was successful on many battlefields; and he may have been a master of campaigning. However, in strategic terms, he was a failure principally because he never succeeded in transforming a defeated enemy into a willing ally. He won wars, but he never won the peace.

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