

EUROPE'S GREATEST MILITARY STRATEGIST

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"Men of genius are meteors destined to be consumed in illuminating their century", wrote Napoleon as a young man in 1790. Napoleon Bonaparte was the outstanding soldier of modern history. He shares fame in history with the likes of Alexander the Great, Hannibal and Genghis Khan. His dominance in Europe lasted for over a decade, while his rule over France lasted almost two decades. His actual military career spanned but twenty^{Two} action packed and dynamic years of European history. The results of his career are still felt throughout Europe a century and a half later. Napoleon, although a remarkable soldier and outstanding statesman was foremost a born leader of men. To understand Napoleon's control of the French people, one must understand his personal charisma and power over the masses. Not unlike Adolf Hitler in the Second World War, Napoleon Bonaparte at the pinnacle of his reign, had total dominance over every aspect of French government. These leadership qualities made his troops follow him where they would follow no other. Leadership made his marshals accept orders which they would have questioned from a lesser man and the French people fought as they never fought before--and would never fight again.

A complete autobiography of this Corsican born world leader could encompass volumes of historical data. This paper will not attempt to cover the many faceted sides of Napoleon, but will only cover those aspects of his life that deal with his art of war. His birth, rise to fame, domination of Europe and eventual exile to the island of Saint Helena are well documented elsewhere. What tactics, strategy and decisions made him so different from the

leaders of his time?

Napoleon physically did not resemble one's idea of the perfect leader. Of small stature, inclined to stoutness from early middle age, he was a sitting target for hostile caricatures of his time. Napoleon had a personal magnetism that was amplified by his large, greyish-blue, deep-seated eyes which had an almost hypnotic effect. In manner, he was charming, considerate, crude, or even vulgar and always outspoken. His power was such that he could enthral almost any man or woman he would encounter. General Vandamme once stated, "So it is that I, who feared neither God nor Devil, am ready to tremble like a child when I approach him."

This hypnotic affect that he had on people extended their loyalty to his person alone. As was often the case, his absence on the battlefield or at the seat of government caused great confusion. This hands on approach was both his strength and his undoing. Napoleon had personal contact with the troops under him down to the lowest rank and file. Many of his methods although purely theatrical were very effective. He encouraged the men to present in person ^{THEIR} ~~their~~ claims to promotion or decoration and ^{USED} ~~his~~ his uncanny talent for remembering faces and records of old soldiers to spread more of his charisma among the men. His personal contact endeared his troops to him and they would and did follow him everywhere. This trait set him apart from most of his stuffy aristocratic contemporaries.

Napoleon had an incredible range and sheer power of intellect that is uncommon. Octave Aubry, the historian, wrote that

Napoleon possessed "the greatest personality of all time, superior to other men of action by virtue of the range and clarity of his intelligence, his speed of decision, his unswerving determination, and his acute sense of reality, allied to the imagination on which great minds thrive."

The Emperor's fertile mind~~was~~ rarely at a loss for valuable ideas that would help him solve the problem at hand. He had the ability to rapidly study every facet of a subject without losing the central theme. His powers of concentration were dauntless and his grasp of detail phenomenal; yet he could switch from one subject to another without clouding his acute thought processes. Napoleon once wrote about himself, "Different subjects and different affairs are arranged in my head as in a cupboard. When I wish to interrupt one train of thought, I shut that drawer and open another. Do I wish to sleep? I simply close all the drawers, and there I am--asleep." He was able to keep four secretaries fully occupied on four separate topics; strolling about the room dictating one sentence to one then another, never losing his train of thought on any topic. He could assimilate information at one glance and retain it with his near-photographic memory. This capability enabled him to command an entire field of combat and remember troop placements and other assets without consulting anyone but himself.

Behind all of the aforementioned traits was Napoleon's phenomenal capacity for hard and unremitting work. "Work is

my element," he once wrote. "I was born and made for work, I have recognized the limits of my eye-sight and of my legs, but never the limits of my working power." A twenty-four hour day was not unusual for the Emperor and while on campaign he would average four to five hours sleep a night. He would retire at eight or nine P.M. to his camp bed and then rise at midnight to write and dictate memos until five A.M. He would then sleep for another hour before he was ready for the day's activities at six o'clock.

He would work while he ate, bathed, and even while he attended the opera. Meals were usually haphazard affairs with luncheons sometimes taken on horseback or in the field with his troops. Dinner was often prepared many times by the cooks before the Emperor would finally sit down and eat. Nevertheless, he expected the food to be ready the moment he was ready to eat.

Napoleon's relations with his officers were often strained because he believed the way to get maximum efficiency from them was to keep them in a constant state of nervous anxiety. He played his subordinates off against one another, but had few favorites. He expected instant obedience and accepted nothing less. Napoleon was subject to instant rages where he would pummel his officers and servants with his riding crop. On one occasion he seized Berthier, his Chief-of-Staff, by the throat and hammered his head against a stone wall until his rage subsided. There were many who thought he suffered from hystero-epilepsy, the so-called "conqueror's syndrome."

Napoleon spent most of his career accumulating the ~~MEANS~~ ^{MEANS} of power rather than employing that power. He probably wielded more power ~~than~~ ^{THAN} any man in pre-twentieth century history, but did not fall prey to its monstrous temptations until late in his reign. He was no monster but he could be utterly ruthless.

The Emperor states that he was a realist but he also states he is a fatalist. He once said, "All that is to happen is written down. Our hour is marked and we cannot prolong it a minute longer than fate has proclaimed." This fatalism led him to believe in his divine destiny which clouded his sense of realism in the end. He thought he was destined to rule Europe and when forces drove him to his final defeat at Waterloo ~~he~~ he was unable to accept his defeat.

Napoleon stated the three basic requirements for successful generalship are; concentration of force, activity, and a firm resolve to perish gloriously. He stated, "They are the three principles of the military art that have disposed luck in my favor in all my operations. Death is nothing, but to live defeated is to die everyday." Surprise in both the strategic and tactical level of warfare can be stated as his fourth requirement for he used this in almost every campaign.

Clearly, Napoleon Bonaparte used his extraordinary qualities to develop and implement his battle strategies.

Napoleon used his extraordinary mental capabilities to plan for his military endeavors sometimes months in advance. He would picture every detail of his battle strategy and could foresee most of ~~the~~ ^{THE} problems that might occur. He would allow for

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chance by mathematically figuring [^] on the battle field was in fact
a preconcieved plan that he thought out sometimes months in ad-
vance.

Napoleon knew his fighting men as well as any man in history. He understood the strengths and weaknesses of the French soldier. He played his troops like a maestro leads an orchestra. He would reward them when they performed well and punished them severely when they failed. He fought his battles using the strengths of the French army and tried to avoid their weaknesses.

It has been mentioned that the Emperor believed in centralisation of supreme authority. "In war men are nothing; one man is everything"; or again, "better one bad general than two good ones" he was quoted as saying. Practically every decision was made by Napoleon when conducting a war or running a nation. He let this power of central command dictate his fall into incipient megalomania. At the end of his reign, he often treated friends and foes with equal distain.

This megalomania encouraged him in adopting illogical and extreme vendettas. The struggle with Britain took on all the irrational overtones of a Mafia feud. Near the end, he blamed subordinates for his failures. This self-proclaimed realist could not accept the fact that his army, his nation, and himself were worn down from decades of war. Moral and physical bankruptcy warped his grand strategic judgement on a number of critical occasions.

Napoleon's reputation as a military theorist and grand innovator was largely undeserved. He was neither original nor revolutionary. Napoleon was only too pleased to have his contemporaries believe him to be a unique military phenomenon. His main means to this end was steadfastly not to explain his methods in any great detail, or even in outline, thus fostering an illusion of sublime and unique abilities incapable of comprehension by ordinary mortals. He was however^A a quick learner and never forgot a mistake he made. He actually instituted various strategies and ~~maneuvers~~^{MANEUVERS} he had learned in the past. He was actually a master of timing and pre-planning, always able to anticipate what his enemies might do next. The Duke of Wellington figured this out in the early years when he fought against Napoleon in Spain. This obviously was the reason Wellington became Napoleon's chief adversary and his eventual executioner at Waterloo. Napoleon fostered his mystic^y never instituting a staff of college or higher training institution for his more senior officers. He saw little sense in imparting his innermost military secrets to men who might come to be his rivals.

The Emperor's methods were based upon the psychological domination of his opponents by keeping them acutely apprehensive, bewildered, and off-b^alance. In many of his early campaigns before 1812, the foe was half beaten before the first shot was fired. Napoleon deliberately exploited his charisma,

building up the myth of invincibility.

To achieve the moral predominance, Napoleon invariably sought to gain, and retain the initiative. Napoleon didn't believe in a defensive strategy. He once wrote, "the best form of defence is attack." He used speed, deception, and surprise to mount blitzkrieg attacks of great energy." I may lose ground, but I shall never lose a minute," he once proclaimed. His ~~lengthy~~ ^{LENGTHY} preplanning made this form of war possible for he always knew his next step. Napoleon's constant pressure on his enemies enabled him to gain quick and decisive victories.

Napoleon's operations from first to last, were directed towards short, decisive campaigns. The quick destruction of the enemy's army was his basic formula for success. In his search for this victory he made his most original contribution to the art and science of war, by fusing marching, fighting, and pursuing into one continuous process of war. There was no pause in a Neopoleonic campaign. Most of his contemporaries marched in formation and fought in a second formation after a great deal of time ^{WAS} spent reforming. As head of state, Napoleon alone decided policy or "grand strategy", selected objectives, decreed alliances, and adopted or rejected plans. The Emperor was able to control supply of munitions, conscript soldiers, and demand more funding for war. He fostered the idea of a total nation at war. In summary, Napoleon had a firm finger on every pulse of the French war machine and though the system would ultimately develop grave weaknesses, this high degree of central-

ised authority was one major secret of his shattering successes. 9

At the level of strategy, the movement of forces to obtain a favorable battle situation, Napoleon employed three methods, either singly, or in combination. As before, they were not unique as concepts, but only in the way they were applied.

First, and the least important, was the strategy of penetration. This tactic was used when a border or major natural barrier had to be passed. Napoleon would deploy his forces in small groups along the border. When he found a weak spot, he would rush his main force thru the corridor and immediately be behind his enemy.

The second strategy often employed was that of the "Central Position" which was commonly used when the French were faced by a superior opponent or series of opponents. He would divide his forces into four parts. The Advance guard, whose job it was to scout the enemy and establish a central position. The right and left wings would engage the enemy's forces which were usually superior in size. The reserve, or fourth unit, would reinforce the left or right wing, whichever seemed to be winning their battle. Often times, the weak wing would disengage and join the reserve unit to bring a speedy decision to the battle. The entire force could then turn and face the second foe after routing the first.

Neither of the strategic methods outlines so far however, was as important as the third, the maneuver of envelopment. This action normally required a superior French force. He would engage the enemy in a frontal action with a small force; then with cavalry cover he would attempt to flank the enemy and actually get behind his opponent's force. He would then cut off

supply lines, administrative services, and lines of communications. Then, causing much fear and confusion, he would attack his enemy from the enemy's rear position. He would reinforce the flanks of his army and literally envelope his enemy. This action caused panic and usually led to a rout. Napoleon's blow was shrewdly intended to strike at the Achilles heel of such armies, their supply and administrative systems.

One final innovation Napoleon instituted was a "corps d'armee." In the simplest terms, it was a miniature army, containing elements of infantry, cavalry, and artillery, besides medical and supply services, together with a staff. In this way, Napoleon's ~~small~~^{small} armies were self-contained and could fight long engagements without depending on anyone for relief. Most of the armies in his day had long supply and communication lines which were easily disrupted. These other armies could only sustain brief actions and depended greatly on reserves which were often slow in coming.

All in all, the French army became a formidable weapon for Napoleon's limitless ambitions, as indeed, did the French nation he ruled. Napoleon is not to be judged solely as a commander, or as a national leader, or as a man. He was one of the few men in history whose lives have to be seen as a part of history itself, shaping and shaped by the evolution of nations, societies and ideas.