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The Strategies of the Napoleonic Wars

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'Strategy' was not a term that was widely used during the Napoleonic Wars. Napoleon seldom employed it during his long years of campaigning, and when he did, on Saint Helena, he used it in a very particular sense, 'referring to the manoeuvres of armies outside an engagement but leading to it'.[1] He attached great weight to the planning of manoeuvres that could outflank the enemy, gain an advantage in terrain or cut off his adversary from vital supply lines. He insisted that every army commander focus on the country's overall war aims and on the part they should play to achieve them. 'It is essential', he noted, 'when one has fourteen armies, that each wages a kind of war relative to the overall plan for the war, and to the strength and circumstances – whether topographical or political – of the opposing state.'[2] It is important, in other words, to think strategically at all times.

When others spoke of his 'military genius', it was less to describe any global strategy than to praise his control of battlefield operations and his ability to make incisive tactical decisions. Future generations were impressed by his command of detail, by the hours he devoted to studying the lie of the land and assessing the strength and likely deployment of enemy forces, as he and Berthier did, with stunning results, on the eve of the Battle of Ulm in 1805.[3] If the courses on military history offered to officer cadets at Saint-Cyr in the Third Republic gave considerable prominence to Napoleon's campaigns, they contained far less on wider strategic goals than on more immediate tactical

1 B. Colson, *Napoleon on War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 122.
2 N. Bonaparte, 'Note on the Political and Military Position of our Armies in Piedmont and Spain, June 1794', quoted in J. Luvaas (ed.), *Napoleon on the Art of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 80.
3 The casket which Napoleon and Berthier used to plot the movements of the Austrian Army is illustrated in the exhibition catalogue edited by É. Robbe and F. Lagrange, *Napoléon Stratège* (Paris: Liénart/Musée de l'Armée, 2018), 116.

Map 1.1 Europe in 1812. Redrawn with permission from 'L'Europe en 1812', map drafted by Aurélie Boissière (Fondation Napoléon, 2019), www.napoleon.org/histoire-des-2-empires/cartes/carte-de-leurope-en-1812/.

decisions that were key to victory.[4] Yet fighting a decisive battle that forced the enemy to accept an imposed peace settlement – as he did with Prussia after

4 Archives de la Guerre, Vincennes, X016, *École Spéciale Militaire de Saint-Cyr, programmes des cours*, 1905–1914.

Jena – was for Napoleon a strategy in itself. Even in 1814, when he was offered a diplomatic settlement by the other powers, he insisted on fighting on, gambling on total victory to drive his enemies to the negotiating table.

Where we today might use the term 'strategy', Napoleon preferred to talk of 'grand tactics', *la grande tactique*, though this does not mean he lacked strategic sense. During the *ancien régime* French military reformers had repeatedly raised strategic issues when they discussed how France might win future wars.[5] Each successive defeat from the War of the Austrian Succession to that of American Independence had produced a plethora of reform proposals, while the operational innovations of Frederick the Great in Prussia, not least his resort to conscription to swell his ranks, had encouraged fundamental strategic rethinking.[6] Their reform proposals produced a 'military Enlightenment' that unleashed new ideas of 'heroism, citizenship, and martial agency' and applied principles of mathematics, science and engineering to the study of war.[7] From the writings of Guibert, Gribeauval and de Saxe there emerged concepts of strategy that helped shape the Revolutionary and Napoleonic campaigns and mould Napoleon's own strategic ideas.[8]

Grand strategy, as we understand it today, requires the mobilisation of all the state's resources in pursuit of its objectives in war. Michael Howard notes how, in the first half of the twentieth century, it 'consisted basically in the mobilisation and development of national resources of wealth, manpower and industrial capacity, together with the enlistment of those of allied and, when feasible, of neutral powers, for the purpose of achieving the goals of national policy in wartime'.[9] Napoleon needed to do more than win battles. He had to gear the economy to support the war effort, impose and collect taxes in France and the territories he conquered, maintain supply lines, raise loans and forge alliances. And he had to create in France and across his empire a culture that valued military ideals such as courage and sacrifice, rewarded them with civic dignities such as the Légion d'Honneur, and celebrated military triumphs in parades and civic architecture.[10] These things

5 J. Black, *Military Strategy. A Global History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 23.
6 C. Telp, *The Evolution of Operational Art, 1740–1813* (Abingdon: Frank Cass, 2005), 5–34.
7 C. Pichichero, *The Military Enlightenment. War and Culture in the French Empire from Louis XIV to Napoleon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 15–18.
8 H. A. Guizar, *The École Royale Militaire. Noble Education, Institutional Innovation, and Royal Charity, 1750–1788* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), esp. 79–120.
9 M. Howard, *Grand Strategy* (London: HMSO, 1972), vol. 4, quoted in H. Strachan, 'Michael Howard and the dimensions of military history', *War in History*, 27 (2020), 541.
10 M. J. Hughes, *Forging Napoleon's Grande Armée: Motivation, Military Culture and Masculinity in the French Army, 1800–1808* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 1–15.

he unquestionably achieved. The question for us must be whether he distanced himself sufficiently from operational matters to develop a clear strategic purpose.

Sources

If Napoleon did not write a treatise on grand strategy, or indeed any theoretical work on the nature of war, he left abundant evidence in his speeches, letters and exhortations to his men of his strategic objectives. In part, of course, his purpose was to inspire others, or, in his days as a revolutionary general, to get himself noticed in Paris. The *Bulletins de la Grande Armée* must certainly be read through a propagandist lens, along with the reports which he had sent from the army in Italy praising his speed of manoeuvre and his use of surprise tactics to outwit the enemy. Throughout every campaign, he wrote letter after letter to his military commanders, outlining campaign tactics, talking of general strategic goals or seeking to ensure that his soldiers and horses were adequately supplied. The publication over the past two decades by the Fondation Napoléon of his *Correspondance générale* has been a major landmark in Napoleonic scholarship, which has opened a window on both his often fastidious management of detail and his wider strategic concerns.[11] Because many of the letters were written while he was on campaign, there is an immediacy about them that is lacking in the thoughts he dictated to Las Cases on Saint Helena, or that he shared with his companions on the island, Generals Bertrand, Montholon and Gourgaud. These were recorded by Las Cases in the *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*, published in 1823,[12] and would form the basis of his own *Mémoires*, which are especially rich on the Italian and Egyptian campaigns.[13]

Napoleon's strategic reputation continued to expand in the decades following his death, with the most prominent military theorists of the day, notably the Frenchman Antoine-Henri Jomini and the Prussian Carl von Clausewitz, among his greatest admirers. Jomini first made his name with analyses of Napoleon's campaigns, and only later developed his more theoretical work, his *Précis de l'art de la guerre*, published in 1838. Here his debt to Napoleon is clear, as he praised the emperor's careful preparations for battle,

11 N. Bonaparte, *Correspondance générale, publiée par la Fondation Napoléon*, 15 vols. (Paris: Fayard, 2004–2018).
12 Comte de Las Cases, *Le Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*, M. Dunan (ed.), 2 vols. (Paris: Flammarion, 1951).
13 T. Lentz, *Mémoires de Napoléon*, 3 vols. (Paris: Tallandier, 2010–2011).

his reading of the enemy's strengths and weaknesses, and his appreciation of the value of topography and mapwork. Clausewitz might write generically about war and about the nature of warfare, but he also drew extensively on his own experiences as an officer in the Napoleonic Wars, who, though his outlook was Prussian, was nonetheless dazzled by Napoleon's mastery of the battle and emphasis on moral values in warfare. He had, indeed, two heroes, Frederick the Great and Napoleon, and his analysis in his master-work, *Vom Kriege*, which did much to define strategic thinking throughout the nineteenth century, helped to ensure that Napoleon's aura of genius lived on in the succeeding generation. Modern specialists including Hew Strachan, Peter Paret and Bruno Colson have shown how important Clausewitz's influence has been in gilding Napoleon's military legend.[14]

Actors

Though the Empire was a highly centralised and authoritarian regime, that should not imply that Napoleon was indifferent to the views of others. He might consider himself above politics – his parliamentary institutions were notoriously weak and persistently undermined – yet he depended on them to give his regime a veneer of legitimacy and could not afford to ignore them entirely. Rules governed the membership of the Senate and the Tribunate, and his control was never absolute. In 1807, fearful of opposition, he increased the minimum age for membership of the Legislative Body from thirty to forty; and of the 1100 members who sat between 1800 and 1814, 203 were rewarded with titles and honours.[15] Even when he was absent on campaign, he would return regularly to Paris to push through legislation or demand further funding. Among Legislative Body members were men on whose skills and judgement he came to depend, who became ministers or entered his inner circle of advisers – men such as Talleyrand, the former Bishop of Autun, who was Napoleon's chief diplomat during the years when French military victories brought one European state after another under French hegemony; Joseph Fouché, the former terrorist who served as his minister of police and was responsible for much of the repression of the imperial years; or Armand de Caulaincourt, who after a successful diplomatic posting to St Petersburg was appointed as Napoleon's aide-de-camp and would become his foreign minister during the Hundred Days. No one exercised more influence on the

14 See, for instance, B. Colson, *Clausewitz* (Paris: Perrin, 2016).
15 I. Collins, *Napoleon and his Parliaments, 1800–1815* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), 143.

emperor than Jean-Jacques-Régis de Cambacérès, who was responsible for drawing up the Napoleonic Code and served as Archchancellor of the Empire from 1804 to 1815. Such men did not only hold high office in the Empire, they also exercised considerable influence over Napoleonic policy making. Cambacérès, indeed, was entrusted with managing much of France's internal policy during the emperor's long absences on campaign.[16]

On military matters, Napoleon's key advisers included his most senior marshals, foremost among them his chief-of-staff, Louis-Alexandre Berthier, Prince of Wagram.[17] And as Napoleon's project became increasingly dynastic, the influence of his family over policy matters increased. His brothers all played some part in his rise to power or in the governance of the Empire as it expanded across the continent. His elder brother, Joseph, who was often a calming influence on the more irascible Napoleon, he appointed in turn to be King of Naples, then King of Spain; Louis would be given the Kingdom of Holland; Jérome the Kingdom of Westphalia; while Murat, Napoleon's son-in-law, took over the throne of Naples after Joseph moved to Madrid. Only Lucien of the Bonaparte brothers did not wear a crown: though he had been a key ally at Brumaire and became minister of the interior after the coup, he was too loyal to his republican roots to win Napoleon's trust. Indeed, in Napoleon's eyes, all his brothers were found wanting, Louis for showing too much sympathy with the Dutch people, Joseph for his failure to impose his rule on Spain, Jérome for his inclination to offer amnesty and forgiveness to opponents.[18] Yet they had all played an important part in empire building, alongside those members of the European elites, in the Netherlands, along the Rhine, in northern Italy and across central Germany, who had provided the administrative and judicial leadership needed to rule Napoleon's satellite republics and kingdoms.

Adversaries

Napoleon's policy across the European continent was unrelentingly expansionist, creating adversaries wherever his armies threatened. Even though he came with promises of efficient governance and a law code available to all, local people could not be expected to welcome reforms imposed by a foreign invader. Nor could their rulers, who routinely turned to diplomatic alliances

16 L. Chatel de Brancion, *Cambacérès : Maître d'œuvre de Napoléon* (Paris: Perrin, 2001).
17 F. Favier, *Berthier: L'ombre de Napoléon* (Paris: Perrin, 2015).
18 W. H. C. Smith, *The Bonapartes: The History of a Dynasty* (London: Hambledon and London, 2005).

and military coalitions to orchestrate their resistance. In all, France faced seven coalitions of European powers during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, six of them after 1799.

Each country had its own reasons for joining one or more coalitions against Napoleon. Austria had to fight on multiple fronts if it was to prevent Russia from taking control of Poland, while the deeply conservative Austrian monarchy fought to repress revolutionary and democratic impulses that might undermine international stability. The Habsburgs suffered a number of humiliations at Napoleon's hands, not least the abolition of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806. To rebut French advances they were dependent on alliance diplomacy, which had an important place in their strategic planning.[19] Prussia, too, relied heavily on diplomatic treaties, though here the instincts of Frederick William III were generally to avoid conflict and seek safety in neutrality. Napoleon's ruthlessness, however, made that difficult to sustain: he first established the Confederation of the Rhine, then shattered Prussian resistance at Jena-Auerstedt, before driving home his advantage at Tilsit, depriving the Hohenzollerns of almost half of their territory. Tilsit ended all hope of Prussian diplomatic autonomy. The Prussian government increasingly appealed to German nationalism, with patriots leading a call to exact vengeance and expel the French from German soil. 'Our chief idea', wrote Baron von Stein, 'was to rouse a moral, religious, patriotic spirit in the nation, to inspire it anew with courage, self-confidence, a readiness to make any sacrifice for independence from foreigners and national honour.'[20] But it is easy to exaggerate the importance of German nationalism; the Hohenzollerns were more concerned with maintaining monarchical power and dynastic authority.

Spain and Portugal had altogether different priorities. Portugal, of course, was historically a close ally of Britain.[21] The Portuguese monarchy had done much to anger Napoleon: defaulting on debt after the War of the Oranges in 1801, allowing British warships to dock to take on victuals and supplies, and refusing to enforce the Continental System as the Portuguese economy was heavily reliant on British markets, especially for its wines. Spain had begun the war as an ally of France, but relations soured once Napoleon tried to force Spaniards to observe the continental blockade, leading to Spanish fears that

19 C. Ingrao, *The Habsburg Monarchy, 1618–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 234–41.

20 K. Hagemann, *Revisiting Prussia's Wars against Napoleon: History, Culture and Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 47.

21 For a detailed analysis see M. Robson, *Britain, Portugal and South America in the Napoleonic Wars: Alliances and Diplomacy in Economic Maritime Conflict* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

France intended to send an army to invade Spain and dethrone the Bourbons. Because of his often contradictory statements, we cannot be sure when Napoleon finally decided to remove the Spanish king and replace him with his brother, Joseph. But Napoleon's intransigence had turned Spain from an ally into the most determined of enemies, and from 1807 to 1814 French troops were condemned to fight a campaign in the Peninsula that they could not win, against the regular Spanish Army, Wellington's forces and their Portuguese allies, and irregulars in the form of *guerrilleros* in Spain and *ordenanças* in Portugal.[22] Before the launch of the Russian Campaign in 1812, indeed, the Peninsula must be counted Napoleon's greatest strategic disaster.

Not all foreign rulers viewed the approach of the Grande Armée with dismay. For some German princes, Napoleon offered an opportunity to pursue their traditional ambitions or to be rewarded with their own kingdoms. In the case of the short-lived Kingdom of Westphalia (1807–1813), Napoleon simply summoned a number of German dignitaries to Paris and presented them with the draft constitution he had prepared.[23] For others, it was a chance to avenge earlier humiliations. For Poles, in particular, the French emperor was a beacon of hope, offering the possibility that they might regain the autonomy that they had lost with partition in 1795; Polish nationalists could not but be encouraged by Napoleon's project for a Grand Duchy of Warsaw.[24] But their response, and their apparent willingness to serve in Napoleon's armies across Europe and beyond – Poles would make an exceptional sacrifice in the failed bid to retake Saint-Domingue in 1802 – had more to do with their desire for liberation from Austrian, Prussian and Russian rule. So in Scandinavia, each country had its own ambitions and war aims. Finns would turn to Russia in a bid to free themselves from the Swedish crown; Norway–Denmark tried to adhere to a policy of neutrality that would allow their commercial shipping to continue trading; Sweden, after also staying neutral in the war until 1805, found itself drawn by Britain and Russia into a coalition against France.[25] In part this was a response to the threat from the Royal Navy, which had been demonstrated in the bombardment of Copenhagen in 1801. But what really attracted Gustav IV was the

22 C. Esdaile, *The Peninsular War. A New History* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), 1–37.
23 S. A. Mustafa, *Napoleon's Paper Kingdom: The Life and Death of Westphalia, 1807–1813* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 30.
24 J. Czubaty, *The Duchy of Warsaw, 1807–1815. A Napoleonic Outpost in Central Europe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), passim.
25 For a detailed analysis of strategy in Norway–Denmark see R. Glentøj and M. N. Ottosen, *Experiences of War and Nationality in Denmark and Norway, 1807–1815* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), passim.

more traditional goal of conquering Norway and creating a large and powerful Nordic state that could defend itself in the Baltic. The prospect of gaining Norwegian territory was sufficiently tantalising to compensate for the loss of Finland to Russia in the Finnish War of 1808–1809.[26]

The powers which emerged as the clearest winners in the peace that followed, Russia and Britain, also had clear objectives. Alexander I was concerned to consolidate an empire in eastern Europe that had been patiently constructed over the centuries in wars with other imperial powers, notably Sweden and Turkey, and to acquire previously unconquered lands to the east, such as Novgorod and Kazan. Russia had annexed land to the west in three partitions of Poland between 1772 and 1795, and to the south, where she had sought access to the Black Sea, annexing Crimea in 1783 and Georgia in 1801. Consolidating this expansion remained a consistent Russian aim throughout the war, largely at the expense of Poland and the Turkish Empire. Until Tilsit an accommodation with Napoleon seemed possible, since, to gain Russian support in a putative campaign against India, Napoleon was prepared to make concessions in the east. But Alexander's demands proved too high: if Turkey were defeated, Alexander demanded the right to annex Constantinople and the three European provinces of Bessarabia, Moldova and Walachia, and insisted that the Straits be placed under Russian control.[27] He also made clear that he wished to maintain Russian control of Poland, whereas Napoleon saw the Duchy of Warsaw as an essential French sphere of influence. At Tilsit he tried to push Alexander eastwards, leaving German Central Europe under French control. But the Tsar would not be manipulated in this way; rather than concede, he prepared himself for war, maintaining his own strategy while Napoleon pursued increasingly unrealistic dreams. In 1809 he took Finland from Sweden, in 1812 Bessarabia from Turkey. By 1814 Russia had achieved its principal war aims.

Britain had different priorities. In Europe, it sought to remove Napoleon's forces from the Low Countries and to prevent him from opening up a deep-water port on the Scheldt from where he could mount an invasion. To this end the British government paid subsidies to other countries to persuade them to join coalitions against France and in 1808 opened up a new front against Napoleon in the Peninsula, a move that ensured Britain's role in the peace process that followed. These were not insignificant achievements,

26 M. Hårdstedt, 'Decline and consolidation: Sweden, the Napoleonic Wars and geopolitical restructuring in northern Europe', in U. Planert (ed.), *Napoleon's Europe. European Politics in Global Perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 213–26.

27 M.-P. Rey, *Alexander I, The Tsar who Defeated Napoleon* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012), 192.

demanding strategic decisions on the use of troops and supply.[28] But it was naval power that was crucial, both to the country's defence against possible invasion and to the blockade of the European coastline which provided supply lines to the army in Portugal. Outside Europe, too, it was critical to the defence of Britain's colonies, especially those in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, which remained vulnerable as long as other navies – whether of France, Spain or the Netherlands – commanded the sea lanes from Europe. French and Spanish losses in the Americas helped to strengthen Britain's colonial position, as did some strategic acquisitions elsewhere – Malta in the Mediterranean, Mauritius and Ceylon in the Indian Ocean, and the Cape of Good Hope on the southern tip of Africa.

Causes of the Wars

There can be little doubt that the principal cause of the Wars lay in Napoleon's imperial ambitions and his desire to create a modern empire to rival those of antiquity. He had no interest in maintaining the peace, or in supporting the existing balance of power on the continent, and with few exceptions he was the aggressor, the ruler intent on disrupting the existing order. The conquered lands became resources to be used, a reservoir of soldiers for future military campaigns, a source of horses, fodder, food for his armies and of taxes for his treasury, and a market for French industrial production. His adversaries sought to prevent further expansion and to defend what they saw as their own vital interests; this was the case, for instance, in the Low Countries, which Britain saw as vital to its national security since it was from there, with its deep-water ports, that Napoleon might launch a successful invasion of the south coast of England. Outside Europe, France, like Britain, sought to defend its colonial possessions against its rivals, and the Wars in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean should be seen as simple extensions of a century-long rivalry between the Great Powers.

Ideology played a diminishing role among the causes of European warfare in the Napoleonic years, after the claims and counterclaims of leaders during the revolutionary era, when the purpose and legitimate use of war had been widely debated. The National Assembly rejected the conventional rationale of monarchies for making war, be they the annexation of disputed territories, the acquisition of overseas colonies, the seizure of vital resources or the fulfilment

28 C. D. Hall, *British Strategy in the Napoleonic War, 1803–1815* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 74–101.

of dynastic ambitions, arguing that France should only make war to defend the nation's frontiers from attack or to prevent the revolution from being overthrown by its enemies. It would not, it declared, 'deploy its forces against the liberty of any people'.[29] But when the revolutionaries went on to declare a republic and execute their king and queen, they unleashed an ideological war against monarchical Europe, in which the very existence of the state was at stake – what David Bell has suggested amounted to 'total war', affecting all classes of society and requiring the mobilisation of huge material and cultural resources.[30] The possibility of compromise receded as states organised themselves to resist revolution, recruiting mass armies, accepting high casualties and showing a new openness to operational innovation. Many turned to conscription to fill their ranks; even Britain, which had resisted all calls for conscription during this period, raised over 225,000 men for the Peninsular War by a mixture of voluntary enlistment, recruitment into the militia and militia ballots.[31]

However, the ideological language used was often deceptive. The wars that engulfed Europe between 1792 and 1815 were not just wars between a disruptive, revolutionary force and the crowned heads of Europe; indeed, while France's enemies might describe them as 'the French Wars', most of Europe's Great Powers were implicated, forming seven coalitions of differing strengths, while France was aided by its own allies and the states it occupied in the Rhineland and across German central Europe.[32] Napoleon may, in Lawrence Freedman's words, have 'embodied a new way of fighting wars: a combination of individual genius and mass organisation, and objectives far more ambitious than those of his predecessors'.[33] But in other ways the wars had changed little from the wars of the eighteenth century, and when Napoleon was finally defeated, it was at the hands of *ancien régime* armies that had adjusted to the requirements of the age. They were as much cabinet wars as peoples' wars (a concept that was largely the product of nineteenth-century nationalist propaganda), and ideology was quickly forgotten both by Napoleon and by those fighting against him.[34] War had reverted to more traditional aims.

29 *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860. Recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des Chambres Françaises, série 1, 1787 à 1799*, Jérôme Mavidal and Émile Laurent (eds) (Paris: 1862–), vol. 15, 662, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k495339.texteImage.

30 D. A. Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), passim.

31 K. Linch, *Britain and Wellington's Army. Recruitment, Society and Tradition, 1807–15* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 57.

32 For a concise discussion of the seven coalitions that formed against the French, see C. Esdaile, *The French Wars, 1792–1815* (London: Routledge, 2001).

33 L. Freedman, *Strategy. A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 70–1.

34 B. Simms, *The Struggle for Mastery in Germany* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 102–3.

Objectives

Napoleon's objectives on the European continent seemed relatively consistent, at least until his treaty with Alexander at Tilsit. At first, he sought to provide France with defensible frontiers, the Rhine to the east, the Alps to the south-east, the Pyrenees in the south-west. This should not be equated with political reaction; it had been revolutionary policy, too, and had its roots in Enlightenment republicanism.[35] And, like the revolutionaries, he soon turned to empire building, to extending the territories he controlled into central Europe and northern Italy. But not everything was exploitative: there was a positive side to the Empire, too, through which he sought to win public support in the very countries he was exploiting. He brought justice and administration on the French model to the lands he conquered, offering the people the benefits of good governance, access to justice and better education. Wherever possible – essentially in what Michael Broers encapsulates in the 'inner empire', where resistance to French rule was limited and there was more of a shared political culture – he called on the authority of local elites to entrench his rule. Where this proved impossible, he did not hesitate to impose French administrators, or to remove recalcitrant rulers and replace them with his own brothers.[36] But offering good governance and winning over local people was also a weapon of war. The lands he conquered or annexed became important sources of wealth, tax revenue, requisitions and conscripts. In later years, however, Napoleon lost sight of this objective and sought to punish other European rulers who defied him or refused to do his bidding, notably when he took the foolhardy decision to invade Russia in 1812. His purpose here was purely punitive: he had no intention of adding Russian territory to his empire. But the responsibility for the campaign was surely his, since, when he imposed the Continental System on Russia as part of the peace terms at Tilsit, Alexander understood that another war was inevitable. As the Russian general Levin Bennigsen noted, 'if Napoleon was allowed to strangle Russia's foreign trade, then the economy would no longer be able to sustain Russia's armed forces or the European culture of its elites'.[37]

Napoleon also, almost obsessionally, dreamed of mounting an invasion of Britain, the country he saw as his and France's most persistent enemy. During

35 J. R. Hayworth, *Revolutionary France's War of Conquest in the Rhineland. Conquering the Natural Frontier, 1792–97* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), xiii.

36 M. Broers, 'A Turner thesis for Europe? The frontier in Napoleonic Europe', *Napoleonica. La Revue*, 2 (2009), 157–69.

37 D. Lieven, *Russia against Napoleon: The Battle for Europe, 1807–1814* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 64; A. M. Martin, *Constructing Imperial Moscow, 1762–1855* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 182.

the truce that followed the Peace of Amiens in 1801, he amassed a huge army along the Channel coast, training and drilling them at the Camp de Boulogne and seemingly posing a direct threat to the south of England. In the event, when hostilities resumed, the Grande Armée marched eastwards into Germany and central Europe, but Napoleon had made his intention clear, and he would not be dissuaded from it. Indeed, Nicola Todorov suggests that even after the destruction of his navy at Trafalgar the idea of invading England remained uppermost in his mind, giving coherence to the decisions he took up to and including his fateful attack on Russia. In the Baltic and along the North Sea coast he sought to establish the major ports and naval bases that would be needed if he were to embark for England. In Spain, he extended the war in order to tie down British forces and strip Britain of the troops needed for its defence. And all the while he systematically exploited Europe's forests for high-quality timber and recruited seamen to strengthen his navy, all with the goal of invading England. Even the continental blockade was tweaked to help advance the invasion: by opening up commercial shipping by a system of licences in 1810, he encouraged the recruitment of seamen among whom he could find recruits for his navy. From every perspective, observes Todorov, 'the great affair of his reign was the invasion of England'.[38]

In the colonial sphere, it is more difficult to follow a consistent line of policy. Napoleon's desire for colonies was, from the start, reflected in their value to the mother-country as an economic resource; he had little interest in free trade and stood by a traditional mercantilist view of their worth. At the heart of this vision was his desire to regain and exploit France's richest Caribbean colony, Saint-Domingue, whose plantation economy had been destroyed by war and slave insurgency, and which by the late 1790s lay at the mercy of British and Spanish forces. In the rebel leader, Toussaint-Louverture, he faced a formidable opponent, a man with the political and military gifts to wrest control of the island. In the meantime, Louisiana, which Napoleon saw primarily as a granary to supply the island with provisions, cattle and wood, had been ceded to Spain in 1795, and though he regained it in 1800, he was soon forced to send an army of 3,000 men to occupy New Orleans and the Mississippi delta, and a much bigger force, led by his brother-in-law Charles Leclerc, to reconquer Saint-Domingue for France. By 1802, however, this strategy lay in ruins, as Leclerc's army was

38 N. Todorov, *La Grande Armée à la conquête de l'Angleterre* (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2016), 226–9.

destroyed by a combination of Toussaint's tactics and yellow fever, and as the United States pressed to expand into French territory on the mainland. Napoleon quickly changed tack, seemingly abandoning all interest in the region and authorising the sale of Louisiana to the Americans. Louisiana had become dispensable. And when it did, the last vestige of a consistent strategy for the Americas was abandoned.

Like French governments across the eighteenth century, Napoleon still dreamed of ruling over a global empire, though he found opportunities for colonisation limited. In both Central and South America his ambitions were blocked by the maritime empires of Spain and Portugal, and in the Levant and the Indian Ocean by the Royal Navy. His 1799 campaign in Egypt was in large measure inspired by his desire to undermine the British Empire in India. Again in 1803, an expedition from Mauritius was sent to India to reoccupy Pondicherry, only to be held at bay by British forces. And in 1805 Napoleon sent a military mission to Teheran to forge a military alliance with Persia, which resulted in the Treaty of Finkenstein in 1807. But again his strategy was flawed, since, as Jeremy Black explains, his vision for the region was quite different from Persia's: 'The Persians wanted help in driving the Russians out of Georgia, while Napoleon wished to see Persia exclude British influence and hoped that it could be a base against British India.'[39] After Tilsit, the strategic importance of the region to the French declined and Napoleon's interest dramatically lessened.

Available Means

France needed a strong army to fend off attacks on the Continent, and had to invest heavily in the navy to challenge Britain in the colonial sphere. It was a difficult balance to maintain, and a very costly one for a country without Britain's fiscal strength or the strong banking traditions of Holland. Years of war had strained royal finances long before 1789; the costs of the American War, indeed, had caused the virtual bankruptcy of the monarchy. The Napoleonic Wars, too, would place huge strains on the treasury, requiring both massive loans from banks and huge indemnities from the countries Napoleon invaded. The strength of Britain's public finances and its higher tax base were major contributors to its success.

39 J. Black, *From Louis XIV to Napoleon. The Fate of a Great Power* (London: UCL Press, 1999), 214.

As an artillery officer, Napoleon placed greater store by the army than the navy, and though for long periods he invested in both, a mass army was his principal weapon in war. The Revolution had dramatically reformed recruitment, and by 1799 France was exacting annual conscriptions which continued throughout the Napoleonic years. And as his empire expanded, the annexed territories were in turn expected to provide recruits, as well as horses and logistical support, for the army. Relations between government and governed were often tense, as the fiscal and manpower demands of the state seemed ever-more oppressive and increasing numbers of their sons were exposed to military service, while the army and gendarmerie were deployed to impose order on rural villages and recalcitrant peasant communities. Conscription was especially resented. By 1813 public support for the war was visibly dwindling, as levy after levy drained the country of its young men and Napoleon turned to boys who had barely reached adolescence in a desperate bid to fill his ranks. Across the country, the annual conscription pitted more and more young men against the authorities: if some still marched obediently to their units, others opted to lie low in woods or in shepherds' huts, provided with food and protection by their families, village mayors and local farmers. Napoleon not only lost his former allies. He risked losing his home front too.[40]

The navy which he inherited had been weakened by the flight in the first years of the Revolution of nearly half of its officer corps, who were much more deeply royalist than their army counterparts; by chronic underinvestment in the years that followed; and by the loss of seven ships of the line when Toulon surrendered to the British and Spanish fleets in 1793. Yet, if he was to pursue his goals beyond Europe – controlling the Atlantic sea lanes, for instance, recapturing Saint-Domingue or cutting off Britain's supply routes to India – Napoleon required a navy capable of defeating the British in a battle at sea. And while he could take some comfort from the mutinies in the 1790s at Spithead and the Nore, these did not permanently undermine British naval morale. Britain maintained a vital superiority in both the quality of its ships and the number of seamen it could muster, and France was unable to achieve numerical parity.[41] Nelson inflicted a serious defeat on the French at the Nile in 1798 which led to the loss of thirteen ships and effectively destroyed Napoleon's strategy in the Levant and Egypt, while the destruction of France's Atlantic fleet in 1805 at Trafalgar guaranteed British naval superiority for the remainder

40 A. Forrest, *Conscripts and Deserters. The Army and French Society during the Revolution and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 236–7.

41 J. Meyer, 'The Second Hundred Years' War, 1689–1815', in D. Johnson, F. Bédarida and F. Crouzet (eds), *Britain and France: Ten Centuries* (Folkestone: Dawson, 1980), 139–63.

of the war. When he invaded Spain in 1808, Napoleon lost the support of the Spanish Navy, another blow to any hopes he still entertained of maintaining an effective blockade of the coastline and protecting the Atlantic sea lanes.

Process of Prioritisation

Napoleon's first concern was the security and stability of his European empire. This was not only a military question: governing the Empire, providing its component parts with administration and justice, using the countries he conquered as granaries and as sources of much-needed troops and supplies, and preventing any outbreaks of revolt or rebellion were all interlocking parts of his imperial policy, and they were prioritised over colonial and extra-European objectives. They were also critical to providing for and servicing his armies for future conquests. The fact that his armies lived off the land allowed him to travel without encumbering baggage trains – a policy that had begun under the Revolution, which had persistently instructed its agents to '*nourrir la guerre par la guerre, faire vivre l'armée sur le pays*' ['feed war with war, and make the army live off the land'].[42] The people of central Europe might with justification feel that not only were they subjected to the rule of a foreign invader, they were also treated as milch-cows for an ever more gluttonous military machine.

Prioritising the army meant raising unprecedented sums in tax and requisitions, and directing agricultural and industrial output to the needs of the military. Napoleon understood the full importance of military logistics and reliable sources of supply. He also appreciated the value of a clear command structure. The planning of military operations passed to the army high command, whose role and composition he had reformed while on campaign with the Italian Army. The army was now answerable to his newly appointed chief of staff, Louis-Alexandre Berthier, whose *Mémoire sur l'organisation du service d'état-major* he had read and assimilated.[43] Military administration was organised around three governing principles: all officers were answerable to the high command, which was responsible for taking initiatives and ordering manoeuvres; they were committed to carrying out policy quickly and efficiently without being distracted by other priorities; and each army was

42 J. Godechot, 'Les variations de la politique française à l'égard des pays occupés, 1792–1815', in Centre d'histoire économique et sociale (Bruxelles), *Occupants, occupés, 1792–1815: Colloque de Bruxelles, 1968* (Brussels: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1969), 22–5.

43 G. P. Cox, *The Halt in the Mud. French Strategic Planning from Waterloo to Sedan* (London: Routledge, 2019), 12.

assigned four adjutants-general, each responsible for a discrete part of the service. The high command divided its activities between three main areas: troop movements; materiel and logistics; and planning and intelligence. As the war progressed, it was given further responsibilities, for the management of prisoners of war and military justice, fodder supplies, field hospitals and reconnaissance. Napoleon's insistence on careful staff work and attention to detail became legendary and would be reflected in all his campaigns.

The sublimation of economic policy to his wider war aims was never clearer than when Napoleon tried to impose his continental blockade on the whole of occupied Europe, with little concern for the economic damage it wreaked. At one level, this policy was unashamedly mercantilist, aiming to protect French markets while threatening to destroy British maritime trade with northern Europe and the Baltic. At another, it was an act of war, a strategic move which would, he hoped, compensate for French naval weakness by attacking Britain's financial stability, turn British public opinion against the war, and deny Britain the financial capacity to wage it.[44] Napoleon knew that he could hurt Britain by focusing on its trade: between 1802 and 1804 the resumption of war had reduced the value of Britain's trade with France from around £2 million to a mere £20,000. If his policy failed, it was because it underestimated Britain's commercial and fiscal strength, and undermined the prosperity of much of the rest of Europe.

Execution of Strategy

Napoleon spent much of the war in the field, and his reputation as a strategist focuses heavily on his leadership on the battlefield. He took care to assess the enemy's strengths and to pick off his adversaries one by one to prevent them from combining against him. He consistently favoured offence over defence, organising his armies for aggressive campaigns and launching surprise attacks to encircle enemy units and cut them off from the main body of their army – his famous *manoeuvre de derrière* which forced the enemy to turn and face him when they were least prepared. A good example of this was at Ulm in 1805, where after an exhausting march from the Channel ports, he encircled Mack's army before attacking it from behind and taking control of the centre of the battlefield.[45] Speed of movement was paramount, whether in lines or in

44 K. B. Aaslestad and J. Joor (eds), *Revisiting Napoleon's Continental System. Local, Regional and European Experiences* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 5.

45 J. Garnier, 'À la recherche d'une typologie des batailles napoléoniennes', in Robbe and Lagrange (eds), *Napoléon stratège*, 86–9.

columns. On Saint Helena he would claim that he altered his tactics in accordance with the strengths of the enemy. 'A general never knows if he must attack in lines or columns', he explained. 'If he attacks in lines, he is weak against a cavalry attack that takes him in the flank. Faced with the Russians, for example, who employ their cavalry marvellously, that is very dangerous.' But overall he preferred to attack in columns. 'In war', he wrote, 'you have to be utterly simple. The attacking column suffices; it is formed promptly and by simple procedure.'[46] Napoleon understood the need to deploy each arm in battle, and by bringing them together into a corps system, he sought to gain the greatest manoeuvrability. He used field guns that were one-third lighter than his opponents', to allow him to concentrate artillery fire in battle; and he understood the use that should be made of cavalry in giving increased mobility, always keeping some in reserve for the later stages of a battle. 'Without cavalry', he reflected after Jena, 'battles are inconclusive.'[47] And throughout his career he insisted that he would be content with nothing less than a conclusive victory.

The Empire, as we know, ended in failure, twice – in 1814 after the *Campagne de France* (French Campaign) and again in 1815 following the misguided adventure that was the Hundred Days. By then Napoleon had lost any sense of strategic purpose; everything was geared to salvaging what remained of his empire. Indeed, after Wagram in 1809 the era of empire building was effectively over. The invasion of Russia in 1812 – surely his greatest strategic blunder – was a rash and ill-advised act of vengeance undertaken at huge cost and against the advice of his ministers, a vainglorious moment of folly that ignored the inevitable diplomatic fallout. There had been no thought of incorporating Russia into his empire; rather, this was an act of pure opportunism whose one aim was to punish Russia and compel Alexander to adhere to the terms of the Treaty of Berlin. Napoleon's retreat from Moscow was followed by the collapse of his fragile alliance system, the desertion of a majority of his allies and the construction of a sixth coalition for the 1813 campaign. Again Napoleon had shown that he was intent on total victory, and that negotiation and compromise had little place in his strategic world. Yet diplomacy is an essential part of strategy; for Napoleon to ignore it was to limit his strategic options at a time when every European power was nurturing its own ambitions and pursuing its own goals. Almost all were intent on curbing French expansion, if only to impose some form of stability on the international system.

46 Colson, *Napoleon on War*, 315. 47 Colson, *Napoleon on War*, 215.

In the short term Napoleon's strategy brought rapid results that shocked and impressed in equal measure. He fought over sixty battles, winning the vast majority of them. But his strategy for European dominance was flawed, his success worn away by years of attrition. And, crucially, he did not win the peace. 1815 brought a seismic change in the international order that left Britain and Russia enjoying unprecedented power on the world stage and opened the way to the rise of Prussia in German central Europe. In Paul Schroeder's view, the international system that would go on to shape diplomacy until the First World War was composed of 'two world powers, more invulnerable than ever; three major Continental powers, distinctly weaker and more vulnerable; and a host of smaller intermediary bodies'.[48] It placed new emphasis on co-operation for the maintenance of peace, as the Great Powers embarked on what Beatrice de Graaf has termed 'a unique experiment', 'the implementation of a collective security system', united against what they saw as the necessary disruption brought about by revolutionary change.[49] The alliance systems that had done so much to ensure the downfall of the Empire would live on through the return to a multipolar Europe and the creation of a consensual management system for international politics that would help to keep the peace in Europe until the Crimean War in the 1850s.

Conclusion

To his admirers, Napoleon remains the complete strategist, blessed with a vision that combined immediate military operations and wider foreign policy goals.[50] But others have questioned this, asking whether he really had an overall strategy at all. Or was he simply, in Owen Connelly's words, 'blundering to glory'?[51] Charles Esdaile suggests that too many military historians of the period have been content to advance from campaign to campaign, emphasising the tactical brilliance of his operational manoeuvres, with little discussion of what these manoeuvres were supposed to achieve. They say little about Napoleon's vision of international relations, and assume 'that his goal was the construction of a pan-European coalition directed from

48 P. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 516.
49 B. de Graaf, *Fighting Terror after Napoleon. How Europe Became Secure after 1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 9.
50 J.-P. Bois, 'Napoléon, chef d'État, chef de guerre, chef d'armée', in Robbe and Lagrange (eds), *Napoléon stratège*, 20–5.
51 O. Connelly, *Blundering to Glory: Napoleon's Military Campaigns* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1987).

Paris that could force Britain into submission by means of the exclusion of her trade from the entire length of Europe's coastline'.[52] It is too easy, he implies, to allow Napoleon to control his own narrative, often retrospectively, and to assume that behind each campaign and each incisive battle lay a coherent strategy that may or may not have existed.

52 C. Esdaile, 'Deconstructing the French wars: Napoleon as anti-strategist', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 31 (2008), 516.