

Introduction to Napoleon and Europe

Carl von Clausewitz offered several definitions of war in his masterful treatise. War is a duel. It is the use of force to compel the enemy to do one's bidding. It is like a wrestling match in which the position of each side depends on the position of the other. It is a trinity composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity; reason; and chance. It is an extension of politics by other means. Considering the brilliance of Clausewitz's work, the ambiguity and diversity of his definition is remarkable—and appropriate. For war is the most complex human undertaking, involving all the activities of peaceful human society and the ever-present danger of death and destruction as well.

The Napoleonic Wars shaped much of Clausewitz's thought. They were the library he mined most frequently for historical examples to illustrate his theories of strategy, tactics, and the art of command. To Clausewitz, the Napoleonic Wars revealed not simply the genius of Napoleon but also the complexity of war and the interrelationships between war and politics.

Yet the Napoleonic Wars have largely gone into history in a more simplistic fashion. Military historians, following Clausewitz's contemporary, Baron Antoine Henri de Jomini, focus primarily on the military operations. They attempt to explain Napoleon's early victories and ultimate defeat primarily in terms of the numerous battlefields of the day. Social, political, diplomatic, and economic historians, on the other hand, normally make only the most basic references to the military events of the time.

But Clausewitz had the keener insight. The study of war cannot be divorced from the study of politics, diplomacy, society, and economics. All are interrelated in the minds of the decisionmakers, and all interact in the physical world as well. Any attempt to study one aspect of human activity in isolation from the others will ensure a partial and distorted understanding of that area. It is not enough simply to say that war is an extension of politics. Understanding war also requires understanding the politics of which it is an extension. Clausewitz even took this principle so far as to recommend that senior generals be allowed to sit

in on policy discussions, not so that they could influence the discussion but so that it could influence their decisions.¹

Clausewitz's insight was nothing revolutionary in the Napoleonic age. The distinction between politics and war did not seem so clear in a time when many political leaders took the field with their armies on the day of battle. Many generals were high nobles with powerful voices in the domestic affairs of their states, and it would have seemed foolish to imagine that they would put political matters aside when going to war. The real separation of war and politics was a product of a later age. It came with the rise of a sense of military professionalism driven by the growth of general staffs that attempted to exclude the influence of amateurs in military decisions. The struggle between Otto von Bismarck and Helmuth von Moltke the Elder was the apotheosis of this tendency in the nineteenth century, and the effects of that duel are felt around the world to this day.

To read a civil–military dichotomy back into the pre-Moltkean world is inappropriate, whether it is done explicitly or by default, when war and politics are considered in isolation from each other. It strips the Napoleonic experience of some of its most profound lessons about how war actually works—lessons that the Bismarck–Moltke struggle and its aftermath have largely obscured.

What is the relationship among domestic politics, international relations, and war? What role do individuals and their personalities play in driving the course of events? How do states come together in coalitions? What makes those alliances strong or weak? What makes them succeed or fail? How important are the “great men” of history compared to their numberless subjects, fellow citizens, and subordinates? How can there be so little correlation between military victory and political success? These questions, so important in the world today, belong at the heart of the study of the Napoleonic Wars, which offer many valuable insights into them.

In his efforts to learn from the great wars of his epoch Clausewitz had another advantage—he was not French and did not idolize Napoleon. Although he called the emperor “the god of war,” he did not study the wars to discern the keys to Napoleon's genius that he and others might imitate them. He cited Napoleon's mistakes and the mistakes of his enemies as often as Napoleon's brilliance; and if he distilled from Napoleonic practice certain key concepts, he did not thereby imagine that Napoleon always executed those concepts in the best possible way.

This detachment from the greatest hero of the age was critical in allowing Clausewitz to evaluate the events of the wars more objectively and establish his own valuable insights based on that evaluation. No figure in history has distorted his own era as much as Napoleon did. No other great wars of the modern world bear the name of the leader of a single belligerent. Despite his small

physical stature, the image of Napoleon bestrides the first fifteen years of the nineteenth century like a colossus, compelling all who would look at that epoch to chart their course by reference to him.

This hero worship is not an accidental development. Napoleon deliberately sowed it and nurtured it throughout his life. Napoleon was even more successful as a propagandist than as a general. On the battlefield, he lost almost as many fights as he won. In the pages of history, however, he lost only one: Waterloo. Exiled to St. Helena after that battle, Napoleon was hardly able to influence how contemporaries perceived the story of that fight. Had he been permitted to do so, there can be little doubt that it would now be celebrated in France as yet another great military victory followed by an inexplicable political disaster. Even the catastrophe of 1812 is commonly and erroneously presented as a campaign Napoleon lost without ever losing a battle.

For Napoleon brilliantly divorced his military victories from their political contexts in public, even as he carefully wove the two together in his own thoughts and actions. To the people of France and Europe Napoleon portrayed his wars as an endless search for the glory France rightly deserved. This theme of glory, which he used to replace the French revolutionary calls to liberty, equality, and brotherhood, seemed to make war a good in its own right. His military successes justified themselves; his setbacks demanded vengeance to efface the slur on France's honor and his own. According to his propaganda, the wars of his era were started by hostile, suspicious, and jealous enemies or by weak-willed and perfidious allies, seduced into fighting him by those implacable foes.

Napoleon invoked the rhetorical traditions of the French Revolution, which he terminated and partly reversed when he seized power, to explain the hostility of the rest of the continent. He perpetuated the myth of "reactionary" Europe, unwilling to accept the "new order" in France and fearful that he would destroy the tyrannical hold Europe's feudal lords still held over their subjects. Napoleon's propaganda was so skillful (and his opponents' so inept) that echoes of this myth are still heard today. Many think that Europe's fearful, resentful monarchs attacked Napoleon in efforts to destroy the French Revolution, which they detested, and restore the Bourbon monarchy, which had long been their cherished dream. Only Napoleon's brilliance on the battlefield—and their own military incompetence bred from their hidebound conservatism—kept this nightmare from descending on France for fifteen years. So the popular version goes.

Napoleon's success in perpetrating these myths is neither surprising nor unusual. From earliest times, historians and their readers have often identified too closely with their subjects. Thucydides' excessive veneration of the flawed Pericles was the first such distortion in histories, and countless others followed. Napoleon was at once so attractive and repellant, so successful and such a failure, that his ambiguity is endlessly intriguing.

It is a mistake, however, to succumb to Napoleon's charms without giving his adversaries their fair chance at seduction, even if they do not initially elicit our sympathy. The grim visage of Austria's Emperor Francis reflects the disillusionment of a man who has presided over the collapse of the position his empire held in the world for more than a decade. King Frederick William III of Prussia is less off-putting in physiognomy but more so in personality, steeped in a Pietist tradition that kept him continually focused on his own failings. King George III of Britain, half mad, attracts few admirers, particularly in this era, and his even more unstable son, the future Prince Regent and then George IV, is almost repulsive. Only Tsar Alexander I of Russia is both attractive and engaging, but his youth, inexperience, and callowness at times strike jarring notes even so.

A closer examination reveals a more engaging picture. Each monarch reigned at the time of greatest crisis in his realm. All, apart from George III, were educated in the traditions of the Enlightenment and had a deeper sense of obligation to their subjects than almost any of their predecessors had. They contemplated the suffering that followed the internal and external wars, coups d'état, and cataclysms of the 1790s with real pain, and they found nothing to celebrate in the prospect of war with Napoleon. There have been few coalitions of states initially less willing to fight than the Third and Fourth Coalitions that attacked Napoleon in 1805 and 1806.

To look through the eyes of Europe's monarchs at the beginning of the nineteenth century is to see a world of fear, danger, responsibility, and limited opportunities. We are familiar with Napoleon's struggle to gain power and his struggle to remake Europe to his liking. For too long, however, his towering figure has obscured his adversaries' desperate and tormented struggle to fulfill their obligations to their subjects, preserve their states and their power, and seek to implement the high ideals inculcated into them as young men. The tragedy of their failure to do so is no less engaging than Napoleon's fall—and considerably more important for the subsequent history of Europe and the world as it actually developed.

Napoleon's shadow has also covered the opponents who fought him on the battlefield. We are more than familiar with Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington. But for too many, Mikhail Kutuzov remains the ponderous, dim-witted, slow-moving, elemental representation of the Russian peasant evoked so movingly and inaccurately by Leo Tolstoy. The hapless Austrian Field Marshal Lieutenant Karl von Mack has passed into history as a stupid blunderer whose character, background, and personality merit no attention. That he was virtually the only senior general in any army of the time who was born a commoner and rose from the enlisted ranks to effective overall command of an army escapes notice. The effects of his background on his personality and performance in the critical days of 1805 are, therefore, also largely unknown.

Austrian historians have long lionized Archduke Charles, Francis's younger brother, as the only authentic military genius of the Habsburg army of the day, attempting to set him up as an anti-Napoleon who would have brought victory to Austria much sooner if only he had been heeded. These efforts to counter one great man with another have generated distortions of their own, however, concealing the blemishes of this manic-depressive, epileptic archduke behind the still greater flaws of his contemporaries.

The colorless depiction that most of Napoleon's adversaries receive in the histories of this period creates a curious problem: if they were all so weak and incompetent, how is it that Napoleon ultimately lost? The customary answer is a throwback to the tragic heroes of the ancients. Napoleon's hubris and arrogance, qualities essential to his early success, ultimately got the better of him and led him to a series of mistakes that caused his downfall. Some are unwilling to go even that far, attributing his failure to the ailments that affected him at the battles of Borodino and Waterloo or even to "General Winter": Russia's wretched climate.

The focus on the great man imposes its highest price at this point. If Napoleon lost his wars because of physical infirmity or intractable climes, then the modern student of war or politics has little to learn. One would like to find more meaning in the campaign of 1812 than the advice that invading Russia is unwise or that the physical condition of leaders is important.

But Napoleon did not lose his wars by himself or with the help of the weather alone; his adversaries won them. The allies developed new methods of organizing and using their armies, largely in response to Napoleon's exploits. His continental foes aped what they saw as key aspects of Napoleon's military system in order to defeat him. Massive reform programs in Prussia and Russia were supposed to make their armies more French while the Austrians incorporated Frenchness in a lesser degree and more gradually. Perhaps the allies defeated Napoleon by becoming Napoleon.

This simple explanation is also inadequate, however. The allied armies of 1813–1815 were not that different from those of 1805–1807. They were marginally restructured and reorganized, but the advantages of those "new" organizations were far fewer than is generally supposed. For the armies of 1805–1807 were not badly organized to begin with. Myth has it that in 1805 the allies fought Napoleon with eighteenth-century armies that were far behind the Grande Armée in virtually every important technique and characteristic. They relied, it is said, on closed-rank formations where the French relied on skirmishers. They marched in shapeless masses where the French marched in independent corps. They relied on cumbersome supply systems while the French lived off the land. They were thus slower, less flexible, and less effective on the battlefield than the "modernized" French troops.

None of these myths has serious grounding in reality. Beginning in 1805, Napoleon's enemies organized their armies into all-arms corps. Except for the

Prussians, they used skirmishers as extensively as the French did—because the French army of Napoleon’s day used skirmishers far less than the armies of the French Revolution had. And in 1805, as we shall see, the Austrian army that met Napoleon in southern Germany did so without magazines and with plans to live off the land—as the French did. Napoleon made every effort in that campaign to establish a sophisticated supply system, and his army ended up living off the land only because he failed to do so. Once again, structural explanations of improvements in the allied armies will not suffice.

The real story of the coalitions that fought Napoleon lies not in their increasing military prowess but in their growing skills as members of a coalition. It was a political improvement. Ultimately the translation of that political growth into military power at the higher levels of war led to allied successes in 1813, 1814, and 1815. British troops at the battle of Waterloo fought no better than they had fought for years before in Spain. And the same General Blücher who led the Prussian troops onto that bloody field at just the right moment had made some of the disastrous decisions leading to Prussia’s 1806 defeat at Auerstedt. How the Prussians fought at Waterloo mattered less than the fact that they were present at all—a fact that resulted from a decade of painful lessons about how allies should and should not behave in the face of danger.

The greatest value in studying the Napoleonic Wars today lies in the objective evaluation of the major players, the interactions among key figures within states, and the interactions of states and armies. Clausewitz identified the complexity of war and its inextricable interrelationship with politics, but he was a warrior and military theorist who had no time to explore the politics in any detail. The goal of this and subsequent volumes is to present an integrated diplomatic, military, and political history of the Napoleonic period worthy of Clausewitz’s insight. The reader must judge its success.