



## THE RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE IDEA OF WAR AND THE NAPOLEONIC WARS

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### INTRODUCTION

The period from 1769 to 1821 (1804-1815) is known as the period of Napoleon or era of Napoleon in the history of Europe. Napoleon Bonaparte was one of the famous rulers and statesmen of not only France but also of the world. He was the child of the revolution, little corporal, small green chilly, Lon of 100 battles and mythological hero of modern days. Napoleon ranks with Alexander, Julius Caesar, Hitler and Charlemagne as one of the greatest conquerors and rulers of Europe. According to Mignet “napoleon was gigantic being of modern times”. He was a man of enormous energy, self confidence, fearlessness and resourcefulness. Napoleon called himself the “Man of destiny”. He was a great conqueror, an efficient and able ruler, a successful and good administrator, a great orator and a writer. HAL FISHER says “Napoleon was the prince of journalists and father of war correspondents”. Napoleon had a very charming, fascinating and magnetic personality. He used to say “I am not a man like other man”. Napoleon was always thinking, planning and dreaming how he might become world famous. He was marvelous social gifted man, civilized man, cultured man and well disciplined man. He had a sweet tongue and could influence everybody. Nothing was impossible for him. He used to say “the word impossible is found in the dictionary of fools only”. Hence he made “careers opened to talent”. In the opinion of

Leon Bloy “Napoleon is the face of god in the darkness”. According to Grant and Temperley “Napoleon seemed a god to kill and make alive”/

Napoleon was a man of very simple and man of very higher and was also a man of great qualities. But he had defects also. According to Guerard, Wells, Tane, Guedella etc., “Napoleon was too much and over ambitious, selfish, proud, unjust, robber, devil, destroyer of the revolution, tyrant of Europe and disturber of the peace of Europe”. Napoleon was of the opinion that “there will be no peace in Europe until the whole European continent is under one sovereign”. He was hungry of fame, power and conquests. He used to say “there is one thing to do in this world and that is to keep acquiring more and more money and power”. Napoleon wanted to conquer the whole world like Alexander.

Napoleon Bonaparte was born on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1769 in Ajaccio, the capital city of Corsica. His father Charles Bonaparte was a poor lawyer. His mother Lititia Romalino was a brave and courageous woman. Napoleon is stated to have remarked “I was born when my country was dying”. Because Genova sold Corsica Island before the 15<sup>th</sup> months of the birth of Napoleon. Romalino said once “the son is already born in her to suppress the French arrogance”. From his early childhood, Napoleon was fond of hearing the stories of war and military generals. He was deeply interested in receiving military education and taking part in battles. To quote him “I must become a soldier and when I become a soldier I shall win every battle”. When young Napoleon was only 9 years old he got French scholarship to be educated in the military school of Brienne in Paris. He belonged to a poor family. His class fellows, who came of a rich family despised him and made fun of him. Napoleon was ill-treating his companions but he was firm like a rock. One of his masters said of him “the youngster is made of granite and there is a volcano inside him”. Napoleon had keen interest in military science, mathematics, history and geography. He had studied history deeply and he used to say “history is the torch of truth and the destroyer of prejudice”. Napoleon had studied the work and the ideas of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Plato, Plutarch, Turgot, biography of Frederick the great of Prussia and the constitutions of various countries of Europe.

Rousseau was his famous author. He had studied the expeditions of Alexander, Haniball, and Julius Caesar and was deeply influenced them.

Napoleon came from poor family. Hence his early life was very difficult. After the completion of his military education, he was appointed as a sub-lieutenant in the royal artillery of France in 1785. As a young lieutenant wrote his mother “I have no sources here, work is very hard my salary is very low, I sleep very little, I go to bed at 10 ‘O’ clock, I rise at 4 “O’ clock and I have only one meal a day at 3 ‘O’ clock”. Napoleon was 5 feet 6 inches in height. But had power of hypnotism. Napoleon attracted French people through his battles. He was given promotion from his officers for his skills. Two events brought Napoleon into limelight. He gave proof of his military genius by capturing the city of Toulon in 1793. As a result of his brilliant success he was promoted as a Brigadier General in 1794. In 1795 he put down the royalist insurrection of Vendemiaire in this way he protected the national convention from the attack of enemies. As a result Napoleon was appointed as the commander of the French army in Italy. According to Ketelbey “his genius was flashing before the mirror of France”. In the year 1796 Napoleon married Josephine a widow who was keep of director barrasincharge of defence. She was six years older than Napoleon and was mother of two children.

The first Italian Campaign was the stepping stone of Napoleon to fame. In the year 1796 Napoleon marched against Austrians in Italy. The soldiers of Napoleon ill-fed, ill clothed and naked, they lacked confidence. But Napoleon inspired his soldiers with new spirit. He crossed the alps with lightening speed and defeated the Austrian army and took possession of northern Italy. He then defeated the Sardinians in the battle of Mondovi and captured Nice and Savoy. After defeating the Sardinians Napoleon turned to the Austrians. In the teeth of murderous fire Napoleon crossed the Lodi bridge (350 feet long). He besieged the fort of Mantua and captured Milan. About their successive victories Napoleon’s soldiers used to say “it is our legs that win the battles”. Then Napoleon terribly defeated the Austrians in the battle of Arcola and Rivoli and captured Venice and Lombardy. Thenceforth his soldiers called Napoleon as “the little corporal”. C.D. Hazen summed up the first Italian

campaign in the following words “he came, he saw, he conquered”. When Napoleon reached Leoben Francis II the king of Austria surrendered and signed the treaty of Campo-formio on October 1797.

Through the specifically Napoleonic system, organized by civilian prefects and carried through the paramilitary gendarmerie – the first full-time police force in Europe devoted specifically to the countryside – as the war ground on, the territories behind the lines, ironically, underwent a general trend of, first, violent and widespread disorder driven primarily by resistance to conscription, followed by levels of law and order hitherto unknown, as the gendarmerie began to keep the peace, as well as enforce conscription. Indeed, just as the gendarmerie fed the war machine, so the war machine was necessary to feed the gendarmerie: its men had to be veteran NCOs of at least three campaigns, and the longevity of the wars meant there were usually enough men to fill its ranks, even if its other cardinal requirements – height and literacy – were often harder to meet. Thus, the levée was sustained and was, itself, sustaining, and the whole population of those parts of Europe under Napoleonic hegemony was drawn into the wars.

Military service was seen as an active agent in the improvement of society, as embodied in the gendarmerie itself: a force composed of veterans – of men shaped in and by the wars – not just the army (remember: a minimum of three campaigns) was to represent the state, defend the state, and protect civil society throughout the nation; as Napoleon put it, ‘it provides a service ... spread across the whole territory’.<sup>6</sup> Veterans were, it was hoped, going to be the best exemplars of the new order when they returned to their communities, for the army was to be the true school of the nation, be it republic or empire. It may be worth reflecting in a comparative context how different this was from the expectations of ancien régime states: in Russia, enlistment was for life, for it was dangerous for the ex-serf to return to the mir, bringing with him a different view of the world. The British liked their standing armies well away from them.

In France the ideal of military service as the ‘school of the republic’ lived on after 1814, in the form of the vaudeville character Jean Chauvin, whose name has entered the language in a very different way since. Chauvin was the darling of urban radical audiences in early nineteenth-century France, the idealized peasant, whose

formative experience had been as a Napoleonic soldier. A repository of 'low Enlightenment' wisdom, of le bon sens, of skeptical anticlericalism, republican virtue, and rough humour, Chauvin kept a certain light alive, usually among those who had been exempt from conscription at the time or were too young to have fought, it must be said. Chauvin was how Frenchmen were meant to come out of the wars.

The reality, of course, was very different. In France, Jean Chauvin confronted another stereotype, the demisolde, the ex-soldier who found it impossible to readjust to civilian life.<sup>9</sup> War hardens its combatants, if not invariably, then at least in great part, and it must also be remembered that the vast majority of men who served in the armies of the period were drawn from harsh rural lives, and so already imbued with a certain level of brutality. It could make them valuable – the French in Italy often contrasted what they perceived as the inherent virility of the vendetta-laden highlands with the degeneracy of the plains and cities.<sup>10</sup> However, there is ample evidence in the police files of those whom military service did nothing to civilize. Giancarlo Demilano had been an officer in French service and had come home; his family had several farms near Tortona, between Genoa and Turin, and it was on one of them that he was found dead by a very precise knife wound, pushed through his left eye into his brains. The culprit

was his father, himself a veteran. Demilano was an only child, but his father had remarried, had two sons by his second wife, and spent most of his first wife's dowry, the French code having abolished dowries and their attendant legal conditions. The day before the murder, the father was heard to say that he did not know why the cannon balls had killed so many others, but spared his son. This was not quite the classical stoicism the French had in mind when they invoked their memories of Livy in the cause of Italian regeneration. However, it does reveal the extent to which the mentality of combat could penetrate absolutely every level of society.

Whether it was the violently negative reaction of Vendean communities, the harsh truth of brutalizing already hardened peasant conscripts, or the enduring myth embodied by Jean Chauvin of the edifying effects of military service, even in a lost war (let it be noted) the impressions were almost indelible. In his recent book, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare As We Know It*, David Bell argues that the

Revolutionary–Napoleonic Wars saw the emergence of an entirely new military ethos, one that sought to break a soldier’s links to civilian life. ‘In this sense’, according to Bell, ‘the rise of conscript armies actually reinforced the distinction between military and civilian.’ This seems true, but not in the meditated sense Bell suggests, if one holds up the example of the demi-solde, for here is the soldier professionalized simply by years of service – an accident of history – unable to reintegrate into the normal life of his society.

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