

Napoleon Bonaparte as a General

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One of the most infamous figures in world history is France's Napoleon Bonaparte. As officer, general, and later emperor, he helped France to single-handedly take on the rest of Europe in war. Though he possessed numerous triumphs early on, towards the end of his career, his decline in victories becomes evident. Nonetheless, by reviewing his successes and failures as a general, Napoleon can confidently be regarded as a great commander, whose talent and sprinklings of luck assisted him on his rise to power.

Napoleon's Successes

Psychological Genius

As general, Napoleon achieved much success through his psychological and military genius. Concerning the former, Napoleon maintained a disciplined and talented army by rallying his troops with speeches. He would often appeal to soldiers' emotions by citing their bravery when overcoming hardships. In one speech, he proclaimed, "You have...made forced marches without shoes, camped without brandy and often without bread. Soldiers of liberty, only republican phalanxes could have endured what you have endured."¹ Through these emotional entreaties, Napoleon was able to push his men to their limits, knowing they would not break.

Napoleon also psychologically appealed to his soldiers in a way that allowed them to achieve astonishing endeavors. During 1805, his forces completed an enormous feat not attempted since the days of Hannibal. He and his men crossed the treacherous Alpine pass in just six days to surprise the Austrians.² This illustrated the endurance Napoleon instilled in his men mentally and physically. Finally, Napoleon emotionally rallied his men by example. He led the assault in numerous battles, including Toulon, Arcola, and Lutzen. In one instance at La Rothiere

1. "Napoleon's Proclamation to His Troops in Italy (March-April 1796)," *The History Guide*, 2004, accessed February 25, 2016, <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/nap1796.html>.

2. "Napoleon," *PBS*, 2012, accessed February 26, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-DYqs9itbY>.

in 1814, Napoleon “exposed himself recklessly to artillery fire in order to animate his wavering young troops.”³ His risks on the battlefield encouraged troop morale and ensured success.

Military Genius

In addition to his emotional appeals, Napoleon’s accomplishments as a general also relied on his military expertise. In his military career, Napoleon won around fifty battles by using strategies that allowed him to take advantage of enemy forces.⁴ For instance, he brought Europe closer to modern warfare by mobilizing the largest army Europe had seen up to that point. By the 1790s, France possessed an army of 1.5 million.⁵ Also, Napoleon’s military genius shone in the Italian campaigns. Upon his appointment to commander of the Army of Italy, he was able to turn the once neglected force into an Austrian-defeating machine that won numerous battles in just the first week of fighting.⁶ Further, the decisiveness of his battles illustrated Napoleon’s brilliancy on the battlefield, especially at his greatest victory at Austerlitz. Even with inferior numbers, Napoleon inflicted more than three times as many casualties on the allies at Austerlitz. His victory caused Austria to lose vital footholds in Germany and Italy as a result of the Peace of Pressburg after the battle.⁷ Overall, Napoleon’s successes significantly outweighed his defeats.

Napoleon’s Defeats

Failed Battles

Nonetheless, Napoleon’s defeats were not nonexistent. As a military commander, he did not always make the decisions that would have brought the best outcome in his battles. His first

3. G. Smith, A. Nuñez, and Z. Olszewski, “Napoleon Bonaparte,” *Napoleon, His Army and Enemies*, 2008, accessed February 26, 2016, http://napoleonistyka.atspace.com/Emperor_Napoleon.htm.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. G. Smith, A. Nuñez, and Z. Olszewski, “Napoleon’s Strategy and Tactics,” *Napoleon, His Army and Enemies*, 2006, accessed February 26, 2016, http://napoleonistyka.atspace.com/Napoleon_tactics.htm.

7. Felix Markham, *Napoleon* (New York: Signet Classics, 2010), 116.

major defeat in the Battle of Aspern-Essling especially demonstrates this idea. In 1809, Napoleon underestimated Austrian Archduke Charles' forces. This miscalculation led him to fight Charles' 100,000 men with his 36,000 men, resulting with a sound defeat.⁸ Napoleon did not possess much success in Spain either. He faced revolts and guerrilla warfare from Spaniards after replacing their monarch with his brother Joseph, whom he later replaced again with the original Spanish monarch. The general had made the mistake of assuming that Spain's middle class would gladly accept French reforms.⁹

Multiple Front War

Fighting a war on multiple fronts also contributed to these Spanish debacles and a later failure in Russia. Earlier, Napoleon had removed troops from Spain in order to focus on preparations for a Russian invasion.¹⁰ By spreading his forces too thin, he lost control over some of his power. As his most famous disaster, Napoleon failed immensely during his attempt to invade Russia in 1812. By the end of it, he had lost 600,000 men and never "regained his greatness."¹¹ Truly, most of his defeats during his military career occurred after the invasion of Russia, demonstrating that even an accomplished general is prone to mistakes.

Napoleon's Legacy

Promotion through Talent

Concerning how to regard Napoleon, his military career does afford him the title of a great commander, though he did receive some help along the way. He was one of the greatest generals because of his military genius. This idea is evidenced by how others took notice of him

8. Markham, *Napoleon*, 176.

9. *Ibid.*, 165.

10. G. Smith, A. Nuñez, and Z. Olszewski, "Napoleon Bonaparte."

11. G. Smith, A. Nuñez, and Z. Olszewski, "Napoleon's Invasion of Russia," *Napoleon, His Army and Enemies*, 2008, accessed February 26, 2016, http://napoleonistyka.atspace.com/Invasion_of_Russia_1812.htm.

for his talent, not necessarily his background or status. For instance, his earlier victory over the Piedmontese at Dego caused his commander to boast about Napoleon to the Committee of Public Safety. The commander asserted that, “it is to the ability of the General of artillery that I owe...our success.”¹² Therefore, Napoleon’s expertise in artillery caused him to gain initial recognition. Further, though many of Napoleon’s opponents took notice of his political connections, overall, his promotions were based on battlefield success. For example, Napoleon was met with contempt when appointed to command the Army of Italy. His close political ally, Paul Barras, became a Director in the French government, which naturally spread rumors of favoritism.¹³ In reality, his appointment was based purely on military accomplishments.

The greatest benefit to Napoleon’s military prominence is his legacy that continues on after his death. Significantly, military academies across the globe, including West Point, would teach their students French so that they could read his books on military tactics. His “campaigns formed the basis of military education throughout the western world.”¹⁴ Napoleon’s strategies, as mentioned, also helped thrust Europe into modern warfare. Though he did not necessarily focus on creating new additions for military reform, the way he understood, modified, and executed mass warfare made him a more modern and impressive tactician than others of his time.¹⁵ His achievements in the art of warfare certainly immortalize him as an exceptional commander.

Promotion through Connections

Although, in some instances, Napoleon can be considered “lucky” in the sense that he had many political connections that assisted him during his rise of command. These connections

12. Markham, *Napoleon*, 15.

13. *Ibid.*, 19.

14. G. Smith, A. Nuñez, and Z. Olszewski, “Napoleon’s Strategy and Tactics.”

15. *Ibid.*

though would simply provide Napoleon with an opportunity to prove his military excellence, rather than appoint an unqualified favorite to certain positions. Early in his career, he came to admire Augustin Robespierre whom, through patronage, appointed Napoleon as the operational planner of the Army of Italy. After this appointment, Napoleon assisted French forces in winning victories at Oneglia and Saorgio.¹⁶ While this promotion was through political patronage, it allowed him to demonstrate his military capabilities during these acquisitions of vital ports.

Another instance of Napoleon's political connections granting him career success was in 1795. During this time, the French government became suspicious of English ties to Corsica, resulting with them recalling all Corsican officers from the Army of Italy back to France, where the government could keep an eye on them.¹⁷ Napoleon viewed the recall as an insulting demotion. Through connections in the Committee of Public Safety though, Napoleon was transferred to the Topographical Bureau of the Committee instead of to France. The Committee was interested in Napoleon's plans for conquering Italy and Lombardy.¹⁸ Again, though his opportunity to remain in Italy was attributed to political connections, it allowed him to carry out his plans for Italy, which were successful. Also, though these contacts no doubt assisted Napoleon as he rose through the ranks, the main reason he was noticed by superiors in the first place, in many cases, was because of his military talents that later distinguished him as a great military commander.

Overall, Napoleon Bonaparte was an excellent and impressive militarist. He excelled through his military ranks, albeit with assistance at times, at a significant rate. Though receiving defeats and making mistakes occasionally, his career as military commander of the French forces

16. Markham, *Napoleon*, 14.

17. *Ibid.*, 15.

18. *Ibid.*

consisted of mostly decisive victories. These victories demonstrated the military genius that allowed Napoleon to receive recognition and success. Because of his achievements, his legacy lives on in the military doctrines of country's around the world. All of these instances testify to the fact that Napoleon became and remains one of the greatest commanders in history.

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