

History essays - napoleons italian campaign



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Discuss the military and political significance of Napoleon's Italian campaign.

Napoleon's Italian campaign of 1796-97 was a crucial factor in his rise as both an influential military and political figure. The successes of the campaign established Napoleon's reputation as a military genius and can be seen as a catalyst towards his eventual establishment of political power through the Coup of Brumaire in 1799. The campaign, and the plaudits lavished upon Napoleon for his leadership has also been used as evidence towards the 'great man theory' of history which suggest the actions and decisions of one individual can have great effects upon history. Certainly, the Italian campaign gave the some of earliest evidence of a personality that would have a military and political significance for years to come. As Britt writes " anyone who knows just a little about morale will never cease to marvel at the magnetic power of the personality that lifted armies out of misfortune and despair, from the early days in Italy to the last desperate hours at Waterloo" (Britt A, The Wars of Napoleon 2003). The campaign also saw the development of military tactics and the use of technology that would serve Napoleon well in later campaigns.

The military significance of the Italian campaign cannot be understated. As McGlynn writes: " Napoleon's Italian campaign of 1796 has always provoked military historians to superlatives." (p135 McGlynn F, Napoleon 1997). The evidence points to a massively successful campaign – by October 1797 the Directory in France recorded that Napoleon's army in Italy had taken 150,000 prisoners, 170 enemy standards, 540 canon and howitzers, five pontoon trains, twelve frigates, eighteen galleys in addition to numerous

masterpieces from the likes of Michelangelo and Raphael. The army had fought 67 actions and triumphed in 18 pitched battles (p135 McGlynn 1997). However, when Napoleon had initially taken over command of the Italian army from the ageing General Scherer in April 1796, the situation posed a major challenge. The forces available were substantially less than those of the opposing Austrian forces; Napoleon had no significant cavalry and only 40 pieces of artillery readily available against 200 Austrian pieces (p2 Joaquin Jacques).

Napoleon's ability to inspire his men was an important element of victory in the campaign and with a view to a political future, gave an indication of his understanding of man's psychology. His initial leadership showed a determination to make his presence felt – he organised reliable supplies of provisions, reinforced active divisions with troops from coastal divisions and had the army prepared for immediate offensives. Napoleon paid great attention to administration and logistics. He issued threatening letters to civilian contractors who had stolen supplies, the leaders of a battalion that had mutinied were placed under arrest and attention was paid to equipment and rations. Britt notes that the smallest details did not avoid Napoleon's eye, quoting his orders that “ fresh meat will be issued five times per ten days; battalions which have drawn salt meat today will have fresh meat tomorrow and those who have had fresh meat will have salt...” (p7 Britt 2003). He understood most importantly of all that men “ liked to be rewarded in their pockets while being appealed to in their hearts and minds” (p140 McGlynn 1997) and from the Italian campaign onwards would sometimes turn a blind eye to looting by his men and sought to secure

elaborate titles and rewards for his officers. Napoleon paid great attention to detail – he would be everywhere amongst his troops, ordering, encouraging, scolding or praising, remaining close to battle and displaying a human touch with men of all ranks that he commanded. He had an unerring ability to remember the names of low ranking staff he had met previously. His famous words during the campaign to motivate his men serve as an example of his philosophy:

“ Soldiers, you are illy-clothed, poorly fed; the government owes you much, it has given you nothing...I will lead you to the richest plains in the world. Rich provinces and great cities will be in your power; you will there find honour, glory and riches.” (p127 Asprey R, *The Rise and Fall of Napoleon Bonaparte* vol 1, 2000).

The Italian campaign saw Napoleon develop his tactical skills for warfare, something that would have both a military and political significance for years to come. His victories during the campaign came at lightning speed as he managed to establish a tactical tempo that allowed him to disperse his divisions as and when necessary, yet concentrate them when necessary – a revolutionary military tactic of force and manoeuvre. Through this, his troops were time and time again able to surprise inferior numbers of enemy troops, engage at the decisive point either fighting them in favourable numerical circumstances or sending them into retreat. His manoeuvre at Montenotte was a classic example of this in which he was able to take a central position between two sets of opposing forces.

Napoleon's other preferred tactic was to avoid costly frontal attacks in favour of enveloping attacks on the flanks of the enemy. To do this he reorganised the army into a corps system, with each of the corps having its own cavalry and artillery arm, capable of acting independently for over 48 hours and taking on much larger enemy forces. Upon contact with the enemy, Napoleon would order the corps nearest to the enemy to pin him down, usually provoking a retaliatory assault – with timing and coordination, the rest of Napoleon's army could attack from the rear and the flanks. The tactics were based on Napoleon's mathematical knowledge – he would watch patiently for events to unfold, stating “ there is a moment in engagements when the least manoeuvre is decisive and gives victory; it is the one drop of water which makes the vessel run over” (p142 McGlynn 1997).

New technologies played some part in the Italian campaign and would play a part in future campaigns. Napoleon had little faith in the muskets used by his infantry or in the generally poor marksmanship of his men using them. He laid greater emphasis on the smaller-calibre, lighter weapons used by snipers, sharpshooters, skirmishers and non-commissioned officers.

Napoleon would attempt to plan battles to maximise the advantages of technological advances in artillery and minimise the disadvantages of infantry and muskets. In contrast however, Napoleon remained disinterested in some other technological advances – he paid little attention to the development of military observation balloons or inventions such as Fulton's submarine and steamboat that promised huge changes to military tactics.

The Italian campaign saw Napoleon develop certain military principles that he would go onto maintain in all of his future campaigns. Firstly that the

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army's lines of communication must always be kept open, secondly that the army must always have a clear primary objective with no distraction – this objective should always be the enemy army, not its capital or town. Another principle was always to attack and never go on the defensive and to always remember the importance of artillery so as to go into battle with four big guns for every thousand men. Most importantly of all, Napoleon stressed the importance of concentration of force, of speed and of the factor of time alongside his cardinal principle – the commitment to outflanking the enemy. Such principles prompted a huge turnaround in the fortunes of the French army following the Italian campaign. As Asprey concludes “ this was by careful calculation more than by chance, the result of superb leadership that transformed a disparate bunch of demoralised officers and men into a hard-charging army.” (p134 Asprey 2000).

There are arguments that luck played a part in Napoleon's Italian campaign. Certainly, for all his work in transforming his army he did not have to build a military machine from scratch, he inherited one with potential albeit it in some disarray. The military significance here lies in the fact that getting the basics of provisions and organisation right was the basis for Napoleon's future successes. The capabilities of opposition generals were limited, with the likes of Wurmser, Alvinzi and Beauieu being older men with less of a passion to win than Napoleon.

Another issue of both military and political significance is the expropriation of money and goods from Italian soil during the campaign, both from Napoleon himself in order to pay for the war and from his troops enjoying the spoils of war. His attitude towards the pillaging and plundering undertaken by his

men could be ambiguous. His public pronouncements could sometimes refer to riches that lay ahead in conquered lands, yet from early in the Italian campaign when his troops were on a murderous rampage of rape, plunder and pillage, Napoleon told the Directory that such actions “ make one ashamed of being a man” (p137 Asprey 2000). He attempted to distinguish between wanton pillage and enjoying the spoils of war. Severe punishments were put in place for some forms of pillage, yet a soldier turning in a captured workhorse would be financially rewarded and detached units that captured mules or horses would also receive payment upon delivery. Arbitrary contributions were also levied on towns or villages touched by the war. Shortage of funds from the Directory was partly responsible for this and Napoleon was under orders from the Directory to make the war pay for itself and that any surplus obtained should be forwarded to Paris. Nonetheless, there was some blatant exploitation by Napoleon at times. He would turn a blind eye to the embezzlement of some of his generals in return for a cut and would openly insist on indemnities in the form of precious art or sculpture from conquered peoples. To some extent, the financial exploitation has some significance in relation to political turmoil ahead. Napoleon was under instruction to send back all works of art expropriated back to Paris for the Directory and the cause of the revolution. The fact that only one fifth of surplus art and money (p147 McGlynn 1997) found its way back to the Directory shows Napoleon’s independence from his political superiors at the time.

The Italian campaign and its immediate aftermath gave Napoleon an opportunity to hone his political skills. As well as committing the Directory to

territorial gains in Italy and a subsequent extension of the original war aims to achieve France's natural frontiers, Napoleon also utilise his political and diplomatic skills to reform the structure of Italian politics, dismantling the Austrian administration across the Italian states and establishing a 'Cisalpine Republic', based on the 1795 French constitution yet with members of the executive directory and legislative councils nominated by Napoleon himself. Here, Napoleon had to steer a middle course between conservative landowners and Italian democrats and, despite his former membership of a Jacobin club, to repress local Jacobin groups. It was a test of his political skills but as Wright concludes " nevertheless, he was under no illusion of this Realpolitik, aware that his rule evoked little loyalty from the majority of 'liberated' Italians, who would be only too glad to see the back of pillaging French troops" (p12 Wright DG, Napoleon and Europe 1984).

The political significance of the Italian campaign became more obvious as Napoleon was able to extend his influence into French domestic politics. He had virtually a free hand in the reorganisation of Italy and with the Directory in crisis by 1797, Napoleon was able to pursue his political ambitions. In 1797 he sent General Augereau to Paris to defend three ex-Jacobin Directors and instigate the coup d'état of Fructidor. During the campaign in Italy Napoleon had also used his generals to relay news of his triumphs around Paris and was able to return to Paris as a conquering hero. By this time Napoleon's legend had grown so that " the name of Bonaparte had become as frightening to the Directors as it was to the Austrian generals" (p13 Wright 1984) and he had little difficulty in having his plans for an expedition to Egypt sanctioned.

On his return in 1799, the republic was in crisis and Napoleon was approached by Jacobin generals to take part in a plot that would install him as a dictator of a left wing regime. Again, Napoleon was able to show his political cunning, manipulating those around him until he could secure the powerful position of First Consul. From this position, power rested securely in his hands with largely meaningless democratic principles being put in place in the constitution. From now on, Napoleon could appoint and dismiss ministers at will.

Napoleon's successes in inspiring his army in the Italian campaign have seen him used as an example to support the 'great man theory' of history. Certainly, Napoleon's energy and military brilliance was able to inspire his men to notable achievements and his military successes and political acumen played a major part in events across Europe at the turn of the century. Britt summarises Napoleon's attributes as a great leader as such: "He was a man of action. Impatience drove him to unbelievable exertions. He could spend all day riding from one division command to another and still have energy to spare for the dictation of orders, memoranda, notes or letters. He could fall asleep at will, and on waking, instantly put his active, searching mind to work, absorbing information, weighing alternatives, and framing orders for transmission to each and every part of the army. No member of his command was for one day left untouched by the energy generated by that high voltage temperament. Bonaparte did not simply lead the army; he energised it." (p9 Britt 2003). In reality however, to state that the personality of Napoleon single-handedly shaped major historical events is an oversimplification. Tolstoy notably used his novel War and Peace to

discredit the great man theory against the backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars and correctly so. Whilst Napoleon was an influential figure, other technological, economic and political factors in the period had a significant effect of the course of events. Even within the context of the Italian campaign, the efforts of Napoleon's generals were important in the eventual victory. Another factor that would oppose the great man theory in relation to Napoleon is that fact that during the Italian campaign he had the advantage of a "relatively homogenous army infused with the spirit of revolution" (p138 McGlynn), whilst the Austrian army was a combination of Austrian, Serb, Croat and Hungarian troops. Military service was seen by revolutionary citizens as a positive service for the nation and the Revolution itself provided Napoleon's army with fresh pools of motivated manpower and talent with positive ideals, images and theologies.

The Italian campaign was crucial to Napoleon's career both militarily and politically and its significance is wide reaching. Had Napoleon's campaign failed, his status as military genius may never have been confirmed or at least denied until later years. Certainly without the success of the campaign it is highly unlikely that he would have been able to make such an impact in politics and this in turn would have impacted on his ability to wage further military campaigns. Such was the strength of Napoleon's character and self-belief, it is likely that he would have recovered from a less successful Italian campaign but this is conjecture. What is indisputable is that throughout the campaign he established himself as a truly great military leader. He was able to inspire his men to fight their way to improbable victory after improbable victory; he was able to develop and utilise successfully military tactics that

would impact on military thinking for decades to come and he was able to restore a fading French military to the glory that the Revolution expected. Had the campaign never happened, Napoleon more than likely would have found another campaign to command, another outlet to display his military and leadership skills. Events in Europe may have taken a different course but Napoleon would nonetheless have come to the fore, whether on the battleground or within the political arena. Most probably he would still have made his mark on both. The Italian campaign was a window of opportunity for Napoleon to mark his mark. He had little difficulty in succeeding when such opportunity arose.