

British Coalition Success in the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon



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Introduction

“There has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefited.”

– Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, II-7

The protracted nature of the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon enabled the final coalition to succeed when all its predecessors had failed. The opportunities afforded by a lengthy 24-year conflict enabled the sixth iteration of allied partnership to take full advantage of the chinks in Napoleon’s armor. Operational mistakes, uneven war efforts, and disparate strategic ends plagued previous alliances, allowing Napoleon to lead an empire stretching across the European continent and beyond. Alternatively, the final coalition was marked by a confluence of three key factors: the allied nations’ adoption of modern operational doctrine; the overextension of the French Empire; and British physical, psychological, and financial victories that bonded the allies in unity of purpose.

The First Five Failures

Despite glimmers of hope and iterative improvements, the first five coalitions were unsuccessful in beating back the French Empire because of poor choices, faulty leadership, and unfortunate circumstances. Previous coalitions were troubled by mistakes stemming from an inability to adopt new operational war strategies like the ones being used by Napoleon. The allies’ error can be seen in their failure to concentrate mass about a single objective, as when they split their forces during the 1799 Switzerland campaign,¹ or in Austria’s inability to

¹ Russell F. Weigley, *The Age of Battles: The Quest for Decisive Warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 358.

correctly identify the enemy's center of gravity, and instead sought to “capture critical positions”² in Genoa which were not aligned to desired strategic ends.

The allies also fought with varying levels of effort compared to that of France. The Requisition Law of 1793 paved the way for France’s total war by mobilizing every citizen to contribute to the war effort, allowing the French to field massive armies and conduct the quintessential war of annihilation.³ Early coalitions split their attention, forces, and resources on other objectives. The divergence in aims can be seen in Russia’s, Austria’s, and Prussia’s preoccupation with Polish partition⁴ or Britain’s hesitancy to commit large ground forces.

Lastly, the first five coalitions demonstrated that the allies had disparate strategic ends; the earliest campaigns saw Austria and Prussia fighting to re-install the French monarchy, while Britain sought to defend its Dutch commercial interests,⁵ and later allyships saw disagreement concerning Napoleon’s fate. The allies were also fighting to preserve their land and power at the expense of the greater coalition, as evidenced by the disparate nature of the Treaty of Tilsit. Russia was quick to settle to secure large portions of its empire, leaving Prussia’s fate to a “humiliation” caused by France’s establishment of the Kingdom of Westphalia and Grand Duchy of Warsaw.⁶ These rifts hindered the coalitions’ abilities to coalesce around a singular unity of purpose and hence were a significant roadblock to any sweeping success.

Modern Operational Doctrine

Leading right up to and during the final coalition, the allies utilized lessons learned from previous campaigns to enable the adoption of modern operational doctrine. The nations began to

² Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 371

³ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 290

⁴ Steve Ross, “Caging the Eagle: Napoleonic War Coalitions,” in *Naval Coalition Warfare: From the Napoleonic War to Operation Iraqi Freedom*, eds. Bruce A. Elleman and S.C.M. Paine (London: Routledge, 2008), 28.

⁵ David French, *The British Way in Warfare, 1688-2000* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 88.

⁶ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 408

use Napoleon's military genius against him, taking on tactics he championed and reverting him to actions that had previously been deemed ineffective. Further, the allies capitalized on increasingly asymmetric strategies that the French could not counter.

The final coalition generals had been continually beaten by France's innovative use of battlefield operational strategy, such as Napoleon's ability divide and conquer opposing forces at Jena-Auerstadt or destroy the Austrian army before they could join the Russians at Ulm.⁷ However, this situation changed for the better once the allies began utilizing the emperor's warfare concepts for themselves. Framing the coalitions' later actions through the lens of Clausewitz enables an illustrative analysis of how the coalition was able to finally conform to new methods of war in the early 19th century. The allies began to identify that attacking the center of gravity, "the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends...the central feature of the enemy's power...the point on which your efforts must converge,"⁸ was a vital measure to take, and correctly surmised that Napoleon's center of gravity was his main army and not a geographic position. The coalition also realized that a critical step in defeating the French army was inhibiting their vulnerable lines of communication, and after the battle at Dresden, began attacking Napoleon's flanks and rear⁹ to wear down his supply lines. The concentration of mass at a decisive point¹⁰ was illustrated at Leipzig when the allies combined their forces and employed 365,000 soldiers to blunt Napoleon's main effort into Germany directly,¹¹ thereby turning the emperor towards France and rallying additional support for the sixth coalition. Lastly, keeping the pressure on the enemy through momentum¹² was

⁷ Michael Pavković, "The Wars of Napoléon" (lecture, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI, March 17, 2022).

⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 595-596.

⁹ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 478

¹⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, 197.

¹¹ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 480

¹² Clausewitz, *On War*, 625.

demonstrated by Blucher and Gneisenau in their relentless pursuit of Napoleon towards Erfurt.¹³ The final coalition's operational success was marked by several instances of the aforementioned concepts, paving the way to ultimate battlefield victory.

The drive to update operational doctrine resulted from the allies' tiresome string of defeats, which in turn led them to focus on improving their strategy and military professionalization. This new approach can be seen through Austria's conversion of its army to the "Napoleonic model,"¹⁴ or Prussia's effort to "educate its officers more rigorously in the military art than any state had ever done before... select the most promising graduates... and pool their capacities in a collective brain."¹⁵ Their collective enlightenment is evidenced by the brilliance of the Trachtenberg Plan, which called for the allies to avoid meeting Napoleon head-on¹⁶ until they had the overwhelming forces to do so. This strategy limited Napoleon's strengths by depriving him of his so-desired decisive battle while attacking his vulnerabilities, namely his subordinate commanders.

Also, leading up to the final coalition, the allies began utilizing several asymmetric capabilities against the French, for which the empire had limited means to counter. These uneven patterns included the use of Russian Cossacks and partisans as Napoleon was being run out of Russia;¹⁷ their hit-and-run mentality deprived the French the opportunity to replenish their supplies as they made their way westward, further exasperating Napoleon's communication line issues. The unrelenting and sporadic nature of the partisans also undoubtedly created psychological hardships throughout Napoleon's ranks, wearing them down as they were driven

¹³ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 483

¹⁴ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 419

¹⁵ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 459

¹⁶ Ross, "Caging the Eagle," 31

¹⁷ William C. Fuller, *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600-1914* (New York: The Free Press, 1992) 192.

towards the allies of the final coalition. Similarly, the increasing effectiveness of Spanish guerrillas as the British campaigns eventually made their way towards France successfully kept the French forces off-kilter. If the French army came together, they would be targeted on the perimeters by the guerillas, and if they could not mass, they could not beat the British regulars.¹⁸ Additionally, the unfriendly Spanish countryside prevented the French from re-supplying in a timely fashion, eventually leading to their losing the war of attrition in the west. During the Peninsular War, this type of victory, one of attrition, was a "canary in the coal mine" of deeper issues within the French Empire, ones which saw the nation unable to keep up with its insatiable appetite for conflict.

Overzealous and Overextended

Napoleon's overzealousness as the years of conflict waged on led to an overextension of the French Empire that proved to draw too many enemies, require too many resources and weaken too much nationalistic support. As appropriately stated by Sun Tzu, "We have not yet seen a clever operation that was prolonged...for there has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefited."¹⁹ This almost constant state of war weakened the French state and, in combination with the emperor's growing need to tighten control over his realm, directly opened an opportunity for the final coalition to solidify and eventually seize victory.

The Continental System's attempt to block Britain from trading with mainland Europe failed to damage the British economy. Britain's sea power dominance allowed it to increase its annual trade with portions of Europe under the system, quadrupling exports and doubling imports from 1806-1810,²⁰ while simultaneously causing economic strife with Napoleon's allies

¹⁸ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 485

¹⁹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 73.

²⁰ James Davey, *In Nelson's Wake: The Navy and the Napoleonic Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 241.

and protectorates. The more the emperor tried to bring the states in line with his system through the dispersion of customs officials and public destruction of British goods,²¹ the more the Europeans sought alternatives for trade. Britain's ability to circumvent Napoleon's embargo was so successful that the British began issuing licenses to ensure their goods' safe passage to the continent.²² Nowhere was the festering acrimony towards the emperor's policies more apparent than in Russia, as the loss of a significant trading partner in Britain badly damaged their economy, eventually leading the Tsar to go from turning a blind eye to British trade to flat out accepting it in the open.²³ This affront to Napoleon was the pretext for his infamous Russian campaign of 1812, which would prove disastrous for the French army.

France's decision to open a new Russian front, in addition to the Spanish theater, would stretch the resources of the nation past its breaking point. Napoleon's march to the east would require lines of communication never experienced by the French, which forced them to revert to the more traditional depot system, inhibiting the army's characteristic ability to move exceptionally quickly towards the enemy.²⁴ On a strategic scale, the French homefront was pushed to its limits to provide both people and rations for two separate, massive forces; the aforementioned problems being placed upon French forces by Spanish guerrillas only exacerbated this logistical disaster. Without adequate supplies, France's western front fell to the Duke of Wellington, giving the British an open the door to the French countryside. As the war in the east raged on and French losses began to mount, Napoleon needed to backfill for his significant casualties, having only 80,000 soldiers available after the 1813 campaign.²⁵

²¹ Davey, *In Nelson's Wake*, 249.

²² Davey, *In Nelson's Wake*, 240.

²³ Fuller, *Strategy and Power*, 184.

²⁴ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 442

²⁵ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 501

Compounding this issue was the fact that the Grand Armée's ranks at the beginning of the Russia campaign were over half-filled by non-French soldiers;²⁶ and with his previous allies now turned against him, Napoleon needed to seek a new class of soldiers from France. However, although the emperor hoped for 936,000 to be levied in 1814, he was only to receive 150,000.²⁷ This inability to produce replacements for his casualties directly fed into the final coalition's war of attrition over the French.

Lastly, the prolonged years of conflict and overstretching of the nation's resources led to a breaking of the French people's support for the continued war effort. This can be seen in the final days of the push towards Paris, when Napoleon attempted to call up local partisan forces, only to be rebuffed;²⁸ the people had lost the will to even defend themselves from the coming onslaught of the final coalition. This is also indicated in the lack of proper preparations for the final defenses of Paris and, most glaringly, in the abdication of Napoleon's marshals to the coalition forces.²⁹ The protracted nature of the Napoleonic Wars had transformed the conflict from one of annihilation of the enemy's armies to one of attrition of the enemy's state. When coupled with a war on two fronts, Napoleon's constant push for more expansive yet tighter control of the empire opened the door to victory for the allies. The final coalition took full advantage of France's fractured national capacity and unity by relentlessly pushing forward.

Britain's Wealth Breeds Unity of Purpose

Britain utilized the prolonged nature of the conflict with France to increase its economic position through its long-term sea power dominance, which enabled it to provide the financial and moral "glue" to bring the final coalition together. Specifically, Britain's sea power directly

²⁶ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 443

²⁷ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 501

²⁸ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 502

²⁹ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 511

led to its victory in the Peninsular War, a significant physical and mental win that drove the allies closer together. Combined with Britain's capacity to fund the ultimate push to remove Napoleon, this major success solidified the coalition's unity of purpose, which is key to a strategic victory, as accurately revealed by Sun Tzu: "he whose ranks are united in purpose will be victorious."³⁰

Britain's sea power dominance allowed the nation to continue its drive to expel the French from the Iberian Peninsula. The British were able to sustain the fight over several years by consistently replenishing troops and supplies across its sea lines of communication while preventing their adversary from doing the same and forcing the French to live off the land unsuccessfully.³¹ Britain's support of the Portuguese and Spanish was critical in finally beating back the French forces and clearing the way for an eventual footing from which the British could garner support to form a broader coalition.³² Britain's unilateral ability to secure the global commons not just led to a material battlefield victory, but also enabled a psychological win that would further drive the allies together.

The British success in the Peninsular War yielded an important moral victory for those who opposed the empire's reign. The years preceding Britain's ability to bring significant land forces to the continental fight assuredly raised doubts with the other nations about how much the British were genuinely committed to peace and balance of power in Europe. Seeing the British dedication of its troops and having "skin in the game" instead of just paying for others' blood with their treasure,³³ certainly would bring the allies closer together. Additionally, Britain's triumphs in the west, in conjunction with Russia's in the east, proved that the French were not invincible, that even the great military genius of Napoleon could be beaten. This realization was

³⁰ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 83.

³¹ French, *The British Way*, 118.

³² French, *The British Way*, 118.

³³ Pavković, "The Wars of Napoléon"

vital in bringing Britain, Russia, Prussia, and Austria together to achieve unity of purpose; only together with a shared understanding of what it takes to beat France, and with an eventual common goal of deposing Napoleon, could the final coalition be ultimately successful.

Britain's economic wealth also enabled it to fund the final coalition significantly. Although the British had contributed funds and supplies to various coalitions throughout the conflict, their support of £26 million between 1813-1815 alone accounted for over 50% of what they had provided overall since 1802.³⁴ This ultimate financial contribution was solidified during the Treaty of Chaumont, where Britain agreed to provide “£5 million in subsidies to keep the allies united” and required each nation “to maintain an army of 150,000 men in the field, to remain at war until Napoleon surrendered.”³⁵ The financial incentives offered by the Treaty of Chaumont certainly opened the door for cementing the final coalition’s agreed upon end state; however, it was the proposed 20-year peace that truly bonded the allies together. Doing so would set the allies on the path to what Liddell Hart called the true objective in war, “to attain a better peace-even if only from your own point of view,”³⁶ and finally bring a single unity of purpose to the coalition. That purpose was to end the 24 years of conflict that had plagued Europe and bring about an international relations arena that enhanced each state’s national interests. The only way to accomplish this was by removing Napoleon from the European political equation and not the French people.

Napoleon, a Shadow of His Former Self?

Some would argue that the final coalition was successful not because of any actions on their part but purely on the failure of Napoleon himself. Napoleon, the military genius, “the God

³⁴ Michael Duffy, “British Policy in the War against Revolutionary France,” in *Britain and Revolutionary France: Conflict, Subversion and Propaganda*, ed. Colin James (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1983), 19.

³⁵ French, *The British Way*, 116.

³⁶ Sir B. H Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Meridian, 1991), 353.

of War," as described by Clausewitz, was no longer the man he was, as this theory would posit. His declining mental state, combined with a refusal to impart any of his exceptional battle knowledge to his subordinate commanders, made the final coalition successful. Napoleon did indeed begin to show character traits that were previously unseen leading up to and during the height of his reign. The emperor displayed indecision and self-doubt at the battle of Leipzig³⁷ and periods of lethargy and malaise, as during the battle at Borodino, which was "the first in a series of battles during which the state of Napoleon's health detracted from his performance."³⁸ It is also accurate to state that a major weakness of Napoleon in the later years of the empire was his inability to mentor and train his subordinate commanders appropriately, as he "hoarded his military insights."³⁹ The performance of Napoleon's generals when not directly guided by him was indeed lacking, as when Oudinot in Berlin was unable utilize the requisite speed and mass⁴⁰ characterized by the emperor in his battle strategies.

However, this theory fails to recognize the tremendous impact of strategic forces bearing down upon the emperor, regardless of his role in it. Napoleon's wavering moments were fleeting, and it would be a mistake to assume that imparting his genius to his generals would have made any measurable difference in the outcome of the conflict. Napoleon continued to pull victory from the jaws of defeat on several occasions. Even while outnumbered or out-positioned, the emperor could still rise to the occasion, utilize his coup d'oeil, and beat back the coming onslaught of the final coalition. This is evident in his victories in the winter of 1814 at Champaubert, Montmirail, and Vauchamps, which "stirred memories of the young General

³⁷ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 479

³⁸ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 449

³⁹ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 511

⁴⁰ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 470

Bonaparte.”⁴¹ Additionally, a better-prepared cadre of Napoleonic marshals may have been more successful against the allied generals on a battle-by-battle basis, but as theorized by Sun Tzu, "for to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill[;] to subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”⁴² The aforementioned strategic effects enabled by the protraction of the conflict were too heavy a current to make any discernable headway in, no matter how many tactical victories the marshals were able to achieve. Additionally, the coalition generals knew all of Napoleon’s tactical tricks by that time; the allies were bringing mass and concentration to a divided French army via the Trachtenberg Plan, France was too overextended to support its forces, and the coalition’s solidarity, although marked by brief cracks, was indeed binding them into a unity of purpose. Napoleon, however much a military genius or leader he was or was not between 1813-1815, would not be the decisive factor in the fate of Europe; time had caught up with him.

Conclusion

The protracted nature of the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon created significant opportunities that the final coalition greatly benefitted from. The 24 years of conflict gave the advantage to the allies through their ability to bolster operational strategies, push France’s military state to the breaking point, and bond together the great powers of Europe into a single unity of purpose. The final coalition’s true success was not in the defeat of Napoleon and his empire, but in preventing Europe from erupting into continent-level conflict for another one-hundred years.

⁴¹ Weigley, *The Age of Battles*, 505

⁴² Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 77.