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The Eagle's Rise:
Napoleon Bonaparte's First Campaign and the Birth of Napoleonic Warfare

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The study of the military science has always been viewed through the lens of the great captains, through those few who by their skill redefined warfare.¹ Scholars and generals alike have delved into the lives of these figures, searching near and far to coax out of their experience the secrets to the art of war. Napoleon himself advised his officers to “read and re-read the campaigns of Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, Gustavus Adolphus, Turenne, Prince Eugene, and of Frederick,”² a pantheon of elites to whose number subsequent generations have added the French Emperor.³ However, in surveys of the Napoleonic Wars, what is often neglected by scholars is Napoleon’s first campaign, the Italian Campaign (1796-1797).⁴ This disregard is incomprehensible. Both the scope of Napoleon’s achievement in Italy and the reality that it was there, in Lombardy, that Napoleonic warfare, the methodology of war whose elements, practice, and very name would serve to define the coming century of battle, was both born and proven to be wildly successful, demand that the Italian campaign be understood not only amongst Napoleon’s greatest but amongst history’s greatest demonstrations of the art of war.⁵ Thus this

¹ Herbert Sargent, *Napoleon Bonaparte's First Campaign* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Co., 1895), 15.

² Andrew Roberts, *Napoleon: A Life* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2015), 9.

³ John T. Kuehn, *Napoleonic Warfare: The Operational Art of the Great Campaigns* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015), xv.

⁴ Martin Boycott-Brown, *The Road to Rivoli: Napoleon's First Campaign* (Charleston: Cassell, 2001), 13.

⁵ Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Napoleon* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1977), 20.

paper aims, through an operational and tactical analysis of the campaign, and focusing on the case studies of the Battles of Montenotte and Castiglione, to demonstrate the historical significance of Napoleon's first campaign.

Before this analysis can commence, however, some background is needed with regards to the military terms referenced in the introduction, so as to create the context needed to approach the larger thesis. First, in the modern understanding, there are three levels to warfare: strategy, operations, and tactics.⁶ At the lowest end lies tactics, the level of combat. The highest level is strategy, the determination from on high of how military force can further political aims.⁷ Operations are the middle level, serving as the link between the grand aims of strategy and the minutiae of tactics. It is the level of the campaign.⁸ The practical purpose of this theoretical separation can be illustrated through an overview of Napoleonic Warfare.

Napoleonic Warfare, itself, refers to the comprehensive system of waging wars constructed by Napoleon. Regarding strategy, Napoleon's only objective was the rapid destruction of the enemy's army in battle.⁹ His was a philosophy of warfare which demanded that an army remain on the strategic offensive, a reality that in turn colored Napoleon's operational and tactical precepts.¹⁰ Each operation, each maneuver, and each battle was carefully designed to create the circumstance for a decisive engagement, a battle of annihilation. This was Napoleon's great innovation, the fusing of tactical battle with maneuver.¹¹ However, it is important to note that Napoleon's genius was practical, not theoretical. Indeed, he was the heir to decades of French military innovation, both theoretically through the concepts laid out by

⁶ Kuehn, XV.

⁷ J.P. Riley, *Napoleon as a General* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), 54-55.

⁸ Kuehn, 9

⁹ Riley, 24

¹⁰ David G. Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 141.; Rothenberg 35.

¹¹ Chandler, 154

celebrated theorists Bourcet and Guibert, whose thoughts embodied the fundamental notions on warfare that Napoleon was taught as a student, and practically, by the introduction of the division system post Seven Years' War.¹² A revolution in military deployment, divisions separated armies into subunits enhancing their flexibility and granting them far more maneuverability and speed whilst in campaign, an innovation ignored by the remainder of Europe.¹³

However, while he did not conceive these operational notions, he did perfect them.¹⁴ Operationally, while Napoleon was defined by the rapidity of his maneuvers and his ability to concentrate his forces to achieve local numerical superiority, his vision centered on the linkage of dispersion and rapid concentration of divisions.¹⁵ At the onset of a campaign, Napoleon would disperse his divisions in a deployment resembling a cordon to grant himself operational flexibility in his choice of target. Upon a selection, the dispersed divisions would rapidly reconcentrate upon a single carefully selected point, maneuvering with rapidity and precision to envelop and annihilate the chosen enemy force.¹⁶ To achieve this end, Napoleon employed three mutually reinforcing operational structures. First, *la manoeuvre sur les derrières* - An operational maneuver used against a single enemy army. In this case, Napoleon would deploy a small detachment to assault the enemy and pin it in place while maneuvering his main army to turn the flank of the enemy army and from there cut off its retreat. At this point, Napoleon would rapidly advance on the enemy rear forcing them to either surrender or give battle on Napoleon's terms.¹⁷ Second, the strategy of central position- An operational maneuver used when the French were faced by two or more enemy armies. Operating at a numerical disadvantage,

¹² Sir James Marshall-Cornwall, *Napoleon as Military Commander* (Princeton: Nostrand Company. 1967), 28-30.

¹³ Boycott-Brown, 47. Kuehn, 17.

¹⁴ Chandler, 136

¹⁵ Chandler, 151

¹⁶ Riley, 59

¹⁷ Chandler, 163-164

Napoleon would move to gain local numerical superiority by isolating each enemy force and defeating them in detail. To achieve this, Napoleon would locate the "hinge" connecting the enemy forces and immediately concentrate all available forces at this point.¹⁸ Upon seizing this "central position," the French would divide their army into two wings and a reserve. A target would then be selected, and the nearest wing would march to launch a pinning attack against this foe while the reserve maneuvered to outflank it. Simultaneously, the other wing would screen and pin the remaining enemy armies to both prevent an attack on the French rear and to ready the subsequent, identical, operation which would occur on that wing.¹⁹ Third, the strategy of penetration- The introduction to the other two maneuvers, it consisted of smashing through a defensive cordon to seize a center of operations.²⁰

These operational maneuvers were designed to construct a favorable environment for battle, for which, tactically, there was but one goal, annihilation. As such, all Napoleonic battles were centered on the offensive with the utmost importance placed on achieving an envelopment of the enemy.²¹ There were three principal types of Napoleonic battles: 1) the frontal assault, used when necessitated by the geographic environment, 2) the double battle, the strategy of central position writ small, and 3) the strategical battle, Napoleon's favorite.²² A tactical approach designed to secure an envelopment and destroy the enemy, the strategical battle began with a vanguard moving forward to pin the enemy line. This frontal assault would then draw in the enemy's reserve as ever more French soldiers would commit to the attack. Meanwhile, an enveloping force would gain the enemy's rear and launch an assault once their last reserve had

¹⁸ F. Loraine Petre, *Napoleon at War: Selected Writings of F. Loraine Petre*, ed. Albert A. Nofi (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1984), 35-37.

¹⁹ Petre, 37.

²⁰ Riley, 72

²¹ Rothenberg, 149.

²² Chandler, 184-186

been sent to the front line.²³ At which point, the enemy would be forced to extend, and thereby weaken, their formation to prevent encirclement. Ready for this moment, Napoleon would commit his “*Masse de décision*,” a special reserve, to the weakened sector, smashing the enemy line and achieving victory.²⁴ The combination of these strategic, operational, and tactical elements constitutes Napoleonic warfare.²⁵ What is striking is that Napoleon had conceived of these detailed frameworks from the onset of his career, as will be shown by his extensive use of these concepts in Italy, wherein he translated theory into practice and demonstrated its deadly effectiveness.²⁶

The birth of Napoleonic warfare is one portion of the significance of the Italian campaign; the other is the scale of the achievement itself. The Italian campaign was one theater of the War of the First Coalition, a war which began in 1792 when Austria, Prussia, and Britain, amongst others, invaded revolutionary France.²⁷ By 1796, the war had stalled with Austria and Britain remaining in opposition. To resolve the stalemate, the French Directory organized two distinct offensives, a primary effort in Germany and a diversionary campaign in Italy. To command the Army of Italy, the directory chose Napoleon Bonaparte, a 26-year-old General selected primarily for his political connections.²⁸ The army which he was to command was in a state of disrepair; it lacked food, ammunition, and weaponry, its units were mutinous, and it stood thoroughly outnumbered.²⁹ This was the strategic situation upon Napoleon’s arrival in Nice where the Army of Italy was camped in March of 1796. A year later, Napoleon, having

²³ Petre, 38-39.

²⁴ Petre, 40.

²⁵ Chandler, 137.; Kuehn 36-37.

²⁶ Riley, 151-152.; Chandler, 127-130.

²⁷ Dana Lombardy, "Napoleon's Stunning Debut," Warfare History Network, warfarehistorynetwork.com/daily/military-history/napoleons-stunning-debut-the-italian-campaign/

²⁸ Kuehn, 22.

²⁹ Napoleon Bonaparte, *Letters and Documents of Napoleon VOLUME ONE: The Rise to Power*, trans. and ed. John Eldred Howard (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961) 86.

defeated the six successive larger armies, constituting over 420,000 soldiers, sent to defeat him, stood just 100 miles outside of Vienna and was forcing Austria to sue for peace.³⁰ What accounts for this development? Besides his own genius, two principal external factors aided Napoleon in this endeavor – the capacity of Napoleon’s sub-commanders and the archaic means by which Austria waged its war. On the former, Napoleon was blessed with talented divisional commanders- generals such as Massena, Augereau, Serurier, and La Harpe, who stood amongst the best in France.³¹ On the latter, the opposing Austrian generals, a string of septuagenarians, proved themselves incapable of adapting to Napoleon's methods and repeatedly divided their forces only to see Napoleon repeatedly annihilate them.³² But while these factors influenced the outcome of the campaign, it was Napoleon's operational and tactical skill which decided it.

The first phase of the campaign was Napoleon’s offensive into Lombardy. Following his arrival on March 31, 1796, Napoleon, with only 37,600 available soldiers, constituting five divisions, was faced with two allied armies with a combined force of 52,000 Austrians and Piedmontese.³³ This force was divided into three, with 20,000 Piedmontese stationed in the west by the city of Ceva, and 20,000 Austrians under the command of Beaulieu camped to the utmost east. Linking these two forces were 11,500 Austrians deployed in a thin cordon from Deigo to Acqui under the command of Argentaui.³⁴ In this theater, it was the Austrians who seized the initiative with a surprise offensive on April 10.³⁵ While Piedmont remained on the defensive, Beaulieu’s eastern attack pushed the French out of the town of Voltri. However, Argentaui’s

³⁰ Napoleon, 175.; Sargent 168.

³¹ Kuehn, 22.; Napoleon, 144.

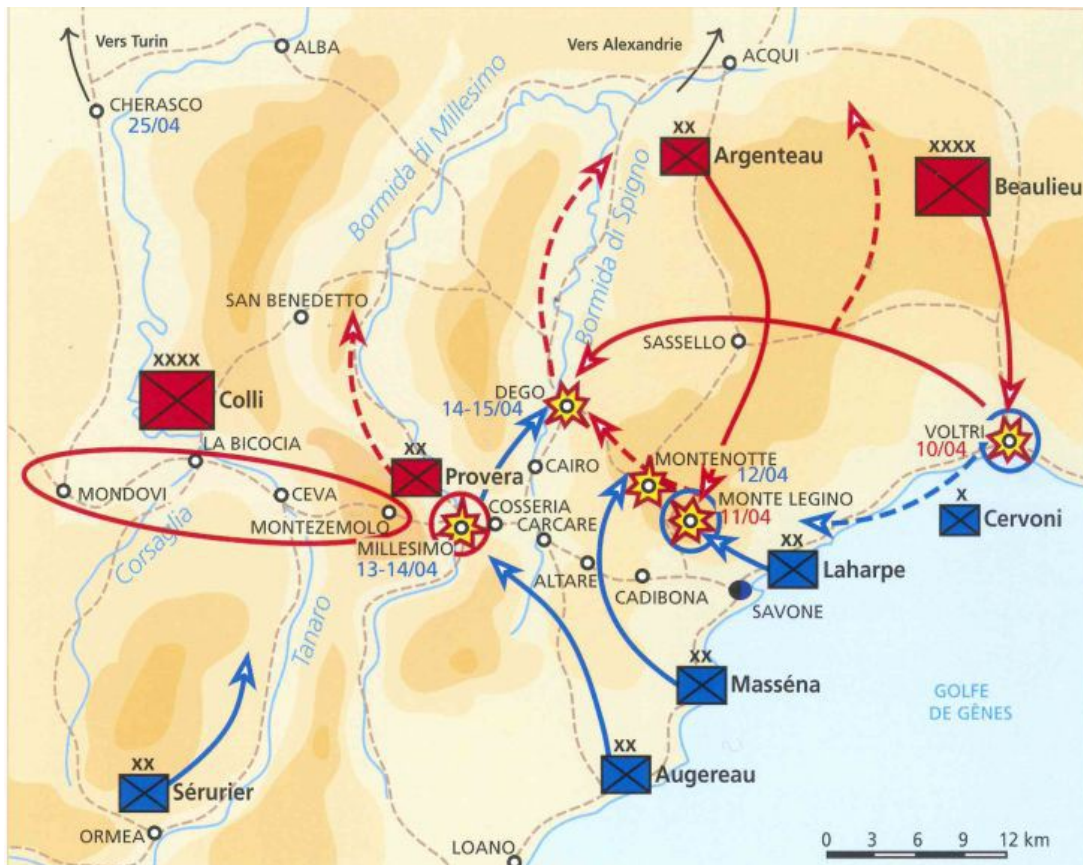
³² Sargent, 195.; Kuehn, 23.

³³ Lombardy, “Debut.”

³⁴ Henry Lachouque, *Napoleon's Battles: A History of His Campaigns*, trans. Roy Monkcom (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1967) 34-35.

³⁵ François René Jean Pommereul, *Campaign of General Buonaparte in Italy, during the Fourth and Fifth Years of the French Republic*, trans. by John Davis (New York: Thomas Greenleaf, 1798) 5.

central offensive was halted at Monte Legino, and he was forced to withdraw to Montenotte.³⁶ Though a mixed bag tactically, operationally this offensive proved fatal for Austria's prospects in this theater. By moving into Voltri, Beaulieu had placed a mountain between him and Argentau, completely isolating the latter whose force was the connecting hinge between the two allied wings.³⁷



Map. 1 The Conquest of Lombardy. Source: battlesandcampaigns.wordpress.com

Knowing now that Beaulieu could no longer reinforce Argentau, Napoleon implemented a lightning offensive in the mold of a strategy of penetration. On April 11, Napoleon ordered La

³⁶ Boycott-Brown, 185-86.

³⁷ Sargent, 35.

Harpe to engage the Austrians in a frontal assault, successfully pinning them while Massena maneuvered and turned their flank. In so doing, the French achieved local numerical superiority, 9000 men to 6000 for the Austrians, which allowed them to completely envelop the Austrian force.³⁸ In the ensuing Battle of Montenotte, Napoleon's first battle and victory, Argentau was broken, and the French were free to seize Carcare, the central linkage point between the two armies, an act which enabled the complete separation of both allied wings. From there came the implementation of the strategy of central position. Deploying Massena to the city of Dego to screen against a potential rear assault from Beaulieu, Napoleon, along with Augereau and Serurier, immediately moved west to attack the forces of Piedmont, achieving a local numerical superiority of 25,000 to 20,000.³⁹ Soon after, on April 21, following a series of maneuvers and encirclements, the Piedmontese were routed at the Battle of Mondovi, with the kingdom officially surrendering a week later. Napoleon had, in ten days, achieved what six years of French commanders had failed at doing, driving Piedmont out of the war.⁴⁰

In response, Beaulieu, with 21,000 remaining soldiers, turned east and retreated across the Po River, establishing a defensive cordon to halt the French from crossing.⁴¹ However, by this time, the Army of Italy's strength had risen to 39,600 men, granting Napoleon the overall numerical superiority and allowing him to implement *La manoeuvre sur les derrières*.⁴² Deploying Serurier as a pinning force to fix the Austrians at the crossing at Valenza, where they were entrenched, the main French army conducted a forced march to cross the Po downriver at Piacenza. Through this crossing, Napoleon successfully turned the Austrian defensive line,

³⁸ Napoleon, 95-97.

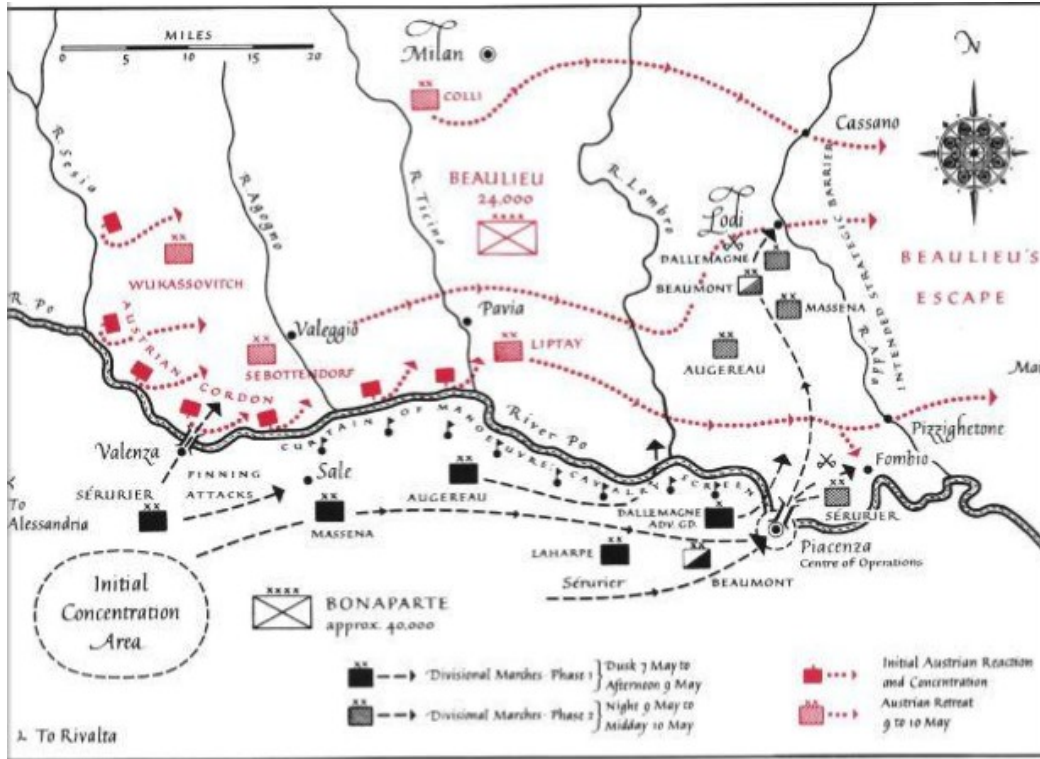
³⁹ Riley, 135

⁴⁰ Pommereul, 22.

⁴¹ Riley, 141

⁴² Chandler, 78-80

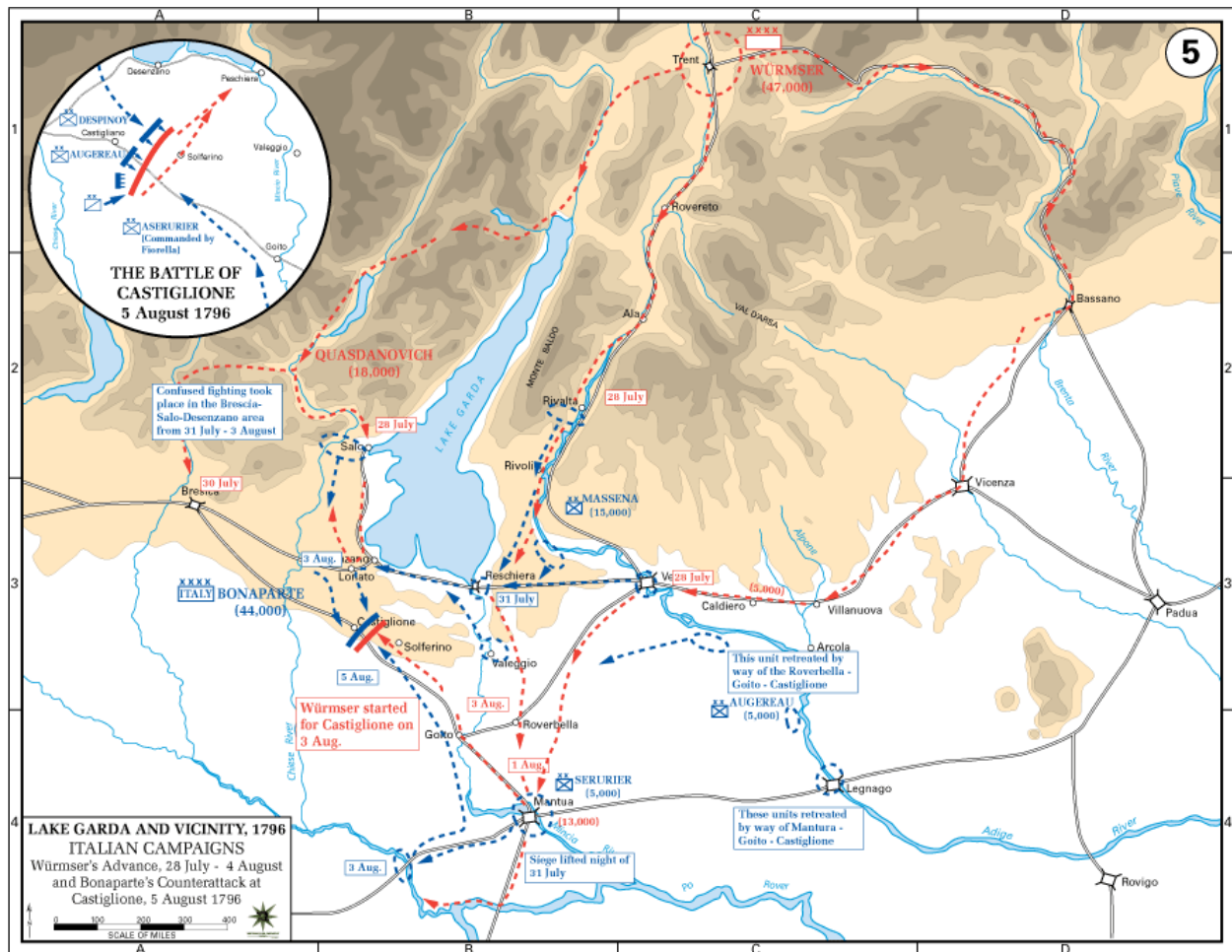
thereby gaining their rear, an advance which forced Beaulieu under the threat of obliteration to withdraw from Northern Italy back to Austria.⁴³ As a result, by May 10, 1796, Napoleon was the master of Lombardy, bar the fortress of Mantua which he immediately invested. The question was could he hold it?⁴⁴



Map 2. Napoleon breaches the Po defensive line. Source: battlesandcampaigns.wordpress.com

⁴³ Napoleon, 97-98.

⁴⁴ Pommereul, 80.



Map 3. The Castiglione Campaign. Source: battlesandcampaigns.wordpress.com

Indeed, from May 1796 to January 1797, the campaign revolved around the fortress of Mantua. Nearly impregnable, Mantua, and more importantly its 13,000 strong garrison, held up Napoleon’s advance into Austria.⁴⁵ As such, Napoleon invested the fortress, aiming to starve it out. Concurrently, the Austrians launched repeated offensives to relieve the siege. Napoleon stood on the operational defensive, a condition he would repeatedly reverse over three separate Austrian attacks.⁴⁶ This dynamic characterized the second phase of the Italian campaign, as

⁴⁵ Boycott-Brown, 329.

⁴⁶ Kuehn, 30

exemplified by an Austrian offensive in July 1796. In this relief attempt, 47,000 Austrians under the command of Wurmser, acting in conjunction with the 13,000 men in Mantua, moved to break the siege of the fortress. In his advance from Austria, Wurmser had divided his force into two columns which moved in parallel along the banks of Lake Garda, with 18,000 under Quasdanovich on the western bank and the remainder under Wurmser on the eastern bank.⁴⁷ To halt this advance, Napoleon had roughly 45,000 men; but, 10,000 of those, under Serurier, were committed to the siege of Mantua and therefore could not be used offensively. The Austrian offensive began on July 29th. In anticipation of this, Napoleon had dispersed his divisions in a defensive cordon around Mantua. The Austrians, however, pushed through, breaking the French line in three places.⁴⁸ At this stage, Napoleon adapted; understanding that it was critical that the Austrian armies not unite south of Lake Garda, he ordered Serurier to abandon the siege of Mantua and commanded all his divisions to concentrate at the central position of Castiglione.⁴⁹

This was the decisive point. If from here Wurmser had coordinated with Quasdanovich and directly attacked the French, they would have been enveloped; instead, he moved to relieve Mantua, wedded as he was to an obsolete understanding of the strategic importance of places rather than the Napoleonic focus on the importance of armies.⁵⁰ Thus having gained the central position between Wurmser and Quasdanovich Napoleon again turned to the strategy of central position.⁵¹ Deploying Augereau to screen against Wurmser's advance, which would follow his relief of Mantua, Napoleon moved three divisions to strike Quasdanovich, thereby achieving a local numerical superiority of 20,000 French to 15,000 Austrians. And, on August 3rd, while

⁴⁷ Boycott-Brown, 378-379.

⁴⁸ Napoleon, 136.

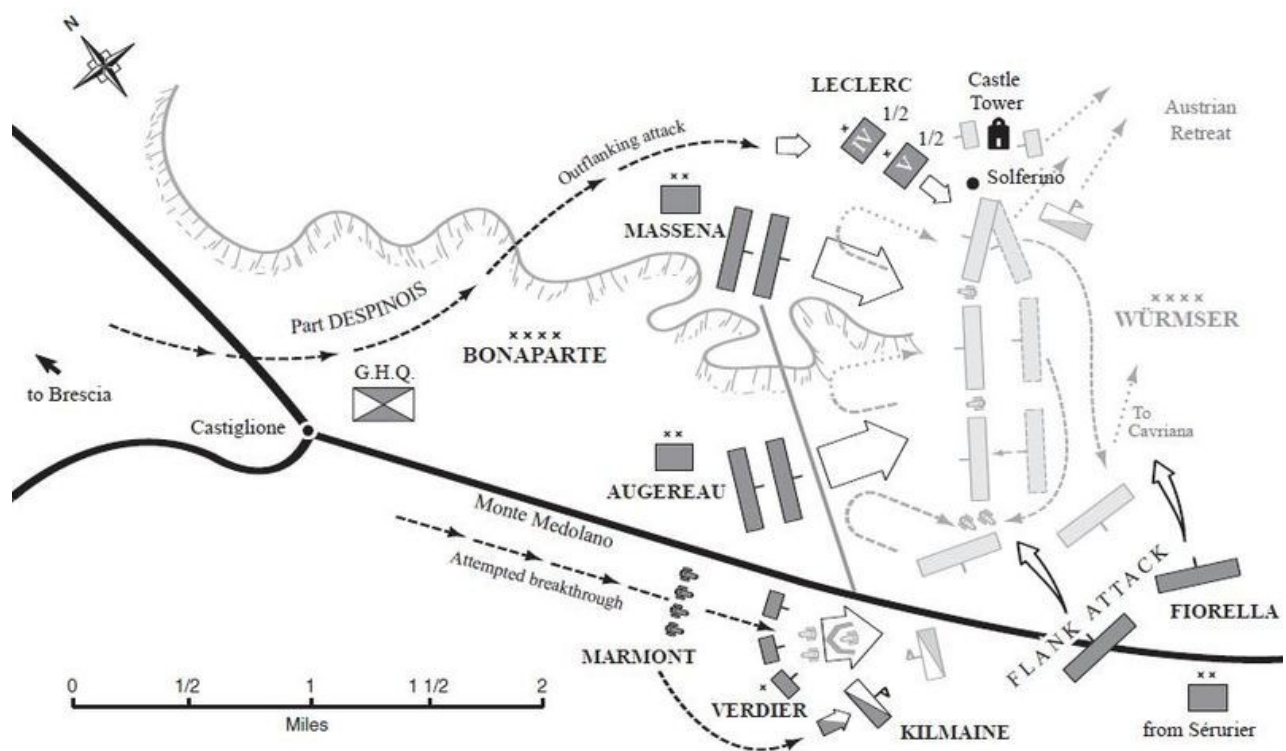
⁴⁹ Pommereul, 96-97.

⁵⁰ Sargent, 99.

⁵¹ Riley, 143.

Augereau held Wurmser's main force, Napoleon enveloped and smashed Quasdanovich at Lonato.⁵² One wing of Wurmser's divided forces was thus destroyed, freeing Napoleon to turn to Wurmser himself, rapidly moving towards the Austrian's remaining 25,000 men with a superior force of 30,000, again creating a battle under favorable circumstances.⁵³

Battle of Castiglione, 5 August 1796: Situation in Late Morning



Map 4. The Battle of Castiglione. Source: David G. Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (1973), 197.

This climactic battle would take place at Castiglione, where Augereau had stalled Wurmser's attempt to support Quasdanovich, and it would be the debut of Napoleon's strategical battle and his tactical masterpiece.⁵⁴ On August 4th, Napoleon began amassing the entirety of his

⁵² Pommereul, 102-103.; Napoleon, 139.

⁵³ Kuehn, 30

⁵⁴ Chandler, 193.

army for an attack on Wurmser, marching with Massena to reinforce Augereau and recalling Serurier.⁵⁵ From the onset, Napoleon intended for this to be a battle of annihilation, and as such, he applied his strategical battle structure. Massena and Augereau were to launch frontal pinning attacks on Wurmser's center-right and center-left, an assault on the Austrian line that, with the aid of a stream of reinforcements, would draw in the Austrian reserve. Then, at the moment when the last reserve was committed, Serurier's division, having maneuvered around the enemy flank, would materialize upon Wurmser's left rear, cutting off his retreat and creating an envelopment. To combat this, Wurmser would then extend his line, thus weakening it.⁵⁶ At this point, Napoleon would launch a general line attack while deploying a special reserve of three battalions to smash through Wurmser's line, breaking the enemy force. It was to be a textbook Napoleonic battle of annihilation.⁵⁷

However, events failed to go as intended. This began with Serurier launching his attack prematurely before the commitment of the final Austrian reserve. This allowed Wurmser to reorganize his line while maintaining its strength. Secondly, the pinning attack failed to hold the Austrian line fully in place, allowing them to withdraw from the engagement to avoid the envelopment. Finally, some of the French troops failed to commit to the general assault launched upon Serurier's attack.⁵⁸ The combination of those errors robbed the battle of any chance for comprehensive success. And while the "Masse de décision" succeeded in breaking the Austrian formation, and victory was still gained with Wurmser withdrawing to Austria, having lost 15,000 men, the battle itself did not result in annihilation.⁵⁹ However, the significance of Castiglione is

⁵⁵ Boycott-Brown, 380.

⁵⁶ Chandler, 195

⁵⁷ Riley, 144.

⁵⁸ Pommereul, 102-103.

⁵⁹ Chandler, 198.

not in what was achieved, but instead in its demonstration of the first use of Napoleon's principal battle plan. All of the elements of future victories, of Jena, of Austerlitz, were on full display.⁶⁰ The first relief attempt of Mantua had been defeated; Napoleon had managed to concentrate a superior force against each Austrian wing, and in just six days had captured or killed 20,000 Austrians while losing only 7,000 himself, and in so doing demonstrated the future of warfare.⁶¹

After Castiglione, the Austrians would launch three more assaults upon Mantua, each a repeat of their predecessors. A numerically superior Austrian army would divide itself and advance down the paths surrounding Lake Garda, they would then push back the French divisions, at which point Napoleon would concentrate his divisions, gain a central position, and defeat each Austrian detachment in detail. This was the case at Bassano, this was the case at Arcole, and this was the case at Rivoli.⁶² By skill in operations and tactics, Napoleon was repeatedly victorious in the face of overwhelming odds. By skill in operations he achieved local supremacy and by skill in tactics he won the ensuing battles. Each successive Austrian attack confirmed Napoleon's ability to maneuver, his ability to concentrate his forces to defeat armies far larger than his own, and his ability to wage what would be called Napoleonic warfare. After Rivoli, Mantua surrendered, and Napoleon pushed on to Austria. From here, Napoleon quickly overwhelmed the Archduke Charles and opened the path to Vienna, thereby ending the war.⁶³

For France, this was a momentous victory that not only marked the end of the long running War of the First Coalition but also reestablished its status as the martial superpower of Europe. By 1797, France stood, for perhaps the first time since the Revolution, ascendant with all of its enemies bar Britain being driven from the field, a reversal that was brought about not by

⁶⁰ Ibid. 201.

⁶¹ Chandler, 95.

⁶² Boycott-Brown, 522

⁶³ Sargent, 169.

the bulk of its armies, who stood defeated in the Rhine, but was instead created by a “Jacobin General.” Napoleon, together with his undersupplied "diversionary army," had in the course of single year strung together a string of conquests which not only drove the Austrians out of Italy, but also changed warfare forever. The Italian Campaign marked the start of a century of Napoleonic Warfare, and it was a turning point in the evolution of the operational and tactical approaches to warfare. It is where Napoleon began his rise, and for these reasons, if nothing else, the Italian Campaign deserves a place amongst history’s greatest martial achievements.

About the author

Berke Gursoy is a recent graduate of Cornell University with a triple major in Government, Economics, and History and a Minor in Near Eastern Studies.

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