

The Napoleon Series

An Interview with John Hussey: Part III

[By Robert Burnham](#)

Question 9: Napoleon faced a large number of political challenges both domestic and international when he returned from exile in 1815. What was his biggest domestic challenge?

John: Endowed with high self-regard, a capacity for ridicule of the stupid and banal, a dash, a taste for fine gestures and brave deeds, France had marched to the Napoleonic drum fairly uncomplainingly until after Tilsit in 1807, and felt pleased with the way it [or rather its Emperor] could give the law of almost all Europe. The later years, the failure of the Continental System, the economic hardship, above all the vast losses in manpower, led the French to other views.

Peace in 1814 was initially welcomed, the Bourbons were accepted passively, the loathed conscription was ended. But the First Restoration demanded skills of its leaders that would have taxed better men than Louis XVIII had at his side. There were foolish measures introduced by the 'ultras' and by the Church, and the army was poorly handled. Opinion turned. But it did not turn all in one direction. I would guess that perhaps the royalists made nearly a quarter [somewhat more in the south and west], republicans another quarter, various moderates [Orleanists, bourgeois centrists who sought a mixed constitution, etc] about a quarter, the balance being Bonapartists - and Jacobins.

There was plenty of discontent in Louis XVIII's France by February 1815; enough to encourage Napoleon to try again. But on the road to Grenoble he was warned repeatedly that conscription must not return. At Lyons this man who detested the mob and insubordination was welcomed, but found Jacobin mobs calling for the old measures of 1793, and bourgeois asking for a constitution more liberal than that of 1804. Everywhere he was accepted passively and the Bourbon regime collapsed internally. Louis had to flee Paris and was escorted over the frontier into Belgium, protected by Marshal Mortier who only then accepted Napoleon.

But as Napoleon remarked to one of his former ministers on his first night in the Tuileries: 'Mon cher, the time for compliments has passed; they have let me come just as they let the others go'. The army was delirious with pleasure, the ministers round Napoleon were deeply worried, the country simply watched and waited. The regime from 1799 to 1814 had so centralised everything in the person of its amazing ruler that all turned upon a single man, the system could not work at speed without his constant impulsion. According

to the French historian Houssaye the prefects in the country were unhelpful, and the mayors of the towns were worse. The domestic administration creaked under the Emperor's hand as it had never done before; by mid-summer many of the Restoration officials had still not been replaced by men more favourable to the regime. Only a few short days before the opening of the campaign did Napoleon openly re-institute conscription.

All attempts to tell the courts of Europe that the Empire meant peace were unsuccessful, and when the news of these failures was published in April and the country was warned of the likelihood of war the price of French government stocks plunged and never recovered until the news of the defeat at Waterloo brought hopes of peace. Fouché for one had expected a war, with some initial successes and then a fatal defeat, after which Napoleon's wings could be clipped according to the prevailing situation.

A more liberal constitution was formulated within a month and promptly issued without debate. A plebiscite, habitual Napoleonic method for registering support for the regime, produced a very disappointing turn-out, a mark of indifference or disillusion. Elections to the Lower Chamber led to a massive increase in moderates with Bonapartists in a clear minority.

Napoleon perhaps for the first time had to waste days and weeks in placating, explaining, and encouraging, instead of simply ordering. In these circumstances what he achieved was amazing. Public works were initiated to give urban workers some employment. Muskets, munitions and equipment were produced in surprising quantities, though no sufficient for the needs of general war. The treasury was soon desperately short of money, and that affected industrial production; by mid-summer even the army's pay was falling badly in arrears and the prospect for its pay by autumn was grim. Horses and harness were in short supply and in June Napoleon had to order that horses should be denied the cavalry in order that the artillery could be equipped.

Perhaps most worrying was the condition in the higher ranks of the army. Wellington told Creevey in May 1815 that he expected the French soldiery to fight as well as ever, but although the Allies might take a marshal or two they were 'not worth a damn'. Soult the turncoat was widely distrusted, Ney [he and Soult had quarrelled much in the past] was past his best, Davout and Suchet were placed by Napoleon in positions that were possibly of only secondary importance when they might have served better with the *Armée du Nord*. Yet Napoleon may have been right to suspect that without a man of Davout's calibre effectively commanding the city of Paris, that turbulent city could have rioted or revolted, or its politicians plotted a *coup* as soon as the Emperor was away from it. D'Erlon and Exelmans had been savagely handled by Soult when he was a Bourbon minister, and Vandamme detested Soult. And now Soult was chief of staff of the last army of France. Clausel one of the best generals in the Peninsula was left watching the

Pyrenees in 1815; Reille who also kept his reputation in the Peninsula, worked well when reporting directly to Napoleon on 15 June 1815, and then went slack as soon as placed under Ney. The high command in the French army stands in stark contrast to the record of Nelson's 'band of brothers' and the outcome was not wholly unpredictable.

So the domestic scene was a constant worry to Napoleon, and to none of the domestic problems was there a solution, even if there were some victories in the north. It was a daunting prospect.

Question 10: Would Napoleon have been better off if he took Davout instead of Soult as his chief-of-staff?

John: Soult really was inadequate as a chief-of-staff, but his staff was on short commons and limited budget, and I think they were all scared of asking Napoleon what he really meant when they could not quite grasp his meaning; and also his staccato style of dictating orders and then changing his mind and rapping out new orders all created confusion. But also Soult had so many enemies in the army or people whom he had persecuted under the Bourbons: Ney, d'Erlon, Vandamme, Davout was better all-round, and stood up to Napoleon much better much of the time, so I would have expected him to make a better chief-of-staff, and he was a man whom everyone respected. Or he might have commanded a wing instead of Ney or Grouchy.

But I have a feeling that when people enthuse about the qualities of the 26 marshals and all the leading French generals as men exceptionally gifted, the record does not really bear this out. Were these men - chosen from a nation of say 12 million French men - any better per head of population than the other Powers? How many really proved of the front rank *once Napoleon's hand* was removed from them? Massena and Davout, and Suchet, and possibly the paladin Lannes [Saragossa, but not brilliant at Tudela], but so many marshals seem just at the upper end of 'bon general ordinaire'.

Question 11: Napoleon supposedly said "If Berthier had been there, I would not have met this misfortune." Do you think he would have made a difference?

John: Berthier certainly suited Napoleon much better and seems to have run a better 'shop' [though in 1815 Napoleon was forced to keep the staff shorter of necessities like money and horses than in the glory days]. But two officers under Soult in 1815 said that that Soult managed matters with much less efficiency and was much slower than Berthier. On the other hand, Berthier was very much a chief clerk [in 1809 when briefly acting Commander-in-Chief he was useless and Napoleon had much to put right on reaching the army], and although he might have organised the concentration of the army in mid-June more efficiently than Soult, the real failures, the indecisions, the delays [morning 17 June], the food shortages, the marauding all stem from Napoleon or his method of war.

Question 12: Was there any indication that Napoleon was aware of the problems in the Imperial Headquarters? If so, did he take any steps to correct the problems?

John: Napoleon said no more than that the budget for the army staff could not be on the old scales, and he reduced the Intelligence budget drastically. He went on driving the war ministry all through June with demands for guns, harness, and all manner of things; he introduced a major reorganization of his cavalry early in June, that caused dislocation and much mayhem. He drew up outline plans in the first week of the month which he expected should be executed by the staff so that the campaign should begin at dawn on 14 June, but then on 8 June he sent away his army chief-of-staff on a special mission along the frontier at the very time when he should have kept him close by his side. Another general could have been sent on the mission, surely? As it was the staff was headless for several days at a most critical time, and it was rejoined by Soult only around 10 June. As I say in my book I cannot imagine Foch acting in this way with Weygand in 1918 or Eisenhower sending away Bedell Smith a week before D-Day. But that is what Napoleon did.

Question 13: So you are Napoleon was responsible for many of the problems?

John: Yes. For example, the choice of a semi-independent wing commander was a major one to make. After March 1815 Ney was virtually unused and felt neglected. Did Napoleon view him as useless or unbalanced or a fool? In that case he should never have been selected for such a command. But if Napoleon did think him useful, why did he leave it till 11 June, before sending a message to Davout, saying that if Ney wished to take part he should come to the front by 13 June. In fact Ney managed to scramble to the front only during the afternoon of the first day's operations, and was given neither staff nor any proper explanation of what Napoleon required of him that day. Nor were the subordinate commanders told that Ney was henceforth their superior. They learned this only belatedly. It was only the next morning that Napoleon sent any proper instructions [though with some wrong information about which units were really at Ney's disposition]. Grouchy was similarly told of his command of the other wing only during the first day. It was all so ad hoc, casual, and yet the whole operation depended on speed, clear organizational arrangements, precise orders and instant reaction. Ney and Grouchy deserved better.

This is not to excuse the many mistakes that both marshals made on 16, 17 and 18 June, but they must have been concerned in their minds that they were not receiving the good clear leadership that they required of their commander.

Question 14: Considering the financial and time constraints that Napoleon had was there anything he could have done to solve these problems?

John: Napoleon seems to have been a dynamo, sparking for hours at a time with orders, new orders, changed orders, all of which one may think is the prelude to disorder. For

instance d'Erlon received orders to leave a part of his corps at the upstream bridges on the Sambre while the rest marched forward to downstream bridges; fresh orders told him to follow Reille over the downstream bridge, and he asked what he was to do with the forces left upstream by Napoleon's own order. He repeatedly asked for fresh instructions on this post, but received no fresh order until dusk, and so only belatedly knew he could bring his tail forward. But then he was upbraided by Napoleon for not having got tail up to the lower bridge that day.

The other factor that caused concern was the periods when Napoleon seemed to lose interest and dawdled to no real purpose. After Ligny it was vital that Ney and Grouchy should be driven forward incessantly and given the most immediate and clear instructions overnight 16/17 June and not during the morning of 17 June, which Napoleon wasted in touring the battlefield and discoursing about Parisian politics. The allies were granted time to slip away and fight another day.

Question 15: Back to the problems before the campaign started. . . Would delaying the start of the campaign have helped?

John: The general idea in Allied planning was for an invasion of France and that concentric attacks would tie French forces on all fronts. The Belgian front was the one where Allied readiness was greatest and this front could be the one where action could first begin, while the forces from central and eastern Europe, having assembled on the Rhine, would march as soon as [or almost as soon as] those in Belgium. More forces would attack from NW Italy, while the Spaniards would demonstrate at both ends of the Pyrenees. All sea coasts of France would be blockaded by the British. In theory the Allies could have something like a 3:1 superiority, a crushing one especially when led by generals who were not frightened of the Napoleonic aura. In theory all the Allies would keep the initiative, would march to Paris, break the Usurper, and that as early as possible.

Two small factors came into play, one negative, the other positive. Murat's premature eruption in Italy diverted the Austrians for a while, but this was all over by the beginning of May, and the Austrians could return to their worries about fighting Bonaparte [for whom Schwarzenberg had a debilitating fear] and what the Russians might be planning in eastern Europe. And shortly after Murat's collapse the royalists in the Vendée rose in revolt and obliged Napoleon to divert 17,000 good troops to suppress them. So for the Allies the prospects by late May looked quite promising, if only - - -

But an indecisive Supreme commander in Germany, Schwarzenberg, was saddled with three autocrat sovereigns or their powerful ministers, and nobody could agree on priorities or plans. Schwarzenberg's plans were pretty hopeless and full of maxims and generalities, and each plan created dissension between his masters. Wellington and Blücher were increasingly desperate for some firm overall plan to be issued, setting priorities and dates. It never came. Blücher threatened to march in early June regardless

of the deliberations at Supreme HQ in Germany, and Wellington was worried at the slippage and the time being granted to Napoleon to prepare for action, albeit defensive action. On 13 June the latest Schwarzenberg plan [10 June] was received in Belgium, and a positive reply was sent back at once. The invasion could at last begin on/around 1 July.

Both Blücher and Wellington had been keen to begin as soon as possible, and left to themselves the invasion might have begun in late May or early June. That is clear. They thought that numbers must tell. They thought that the presence of other allied armies on the eastern frontiers must force Napoleon into dispersion or to a defensive line deep inside France along the Somme, Aisle and Marne. Blücher thought the Allied delay did not help Napoleon; Wellington was less sure. Both men, and Gneisenau as well, discounted offensive action by Napoleon in mid-June.

From around 9 June allied outposts were receiving warnings of movements in northern France, but these did not convince Blücher or Wellington. On 14 June they sent Schwarzenberg their agreement to his invasion plan. They did not know that this 14 June was the intended day for Napoleon's attack [postponed to 15 June because of chaotic French staff work]. They did not know that on 14 June a conference was being held by Schwarzenberg to again debate and perhaps alter the agreed 10 June proposals.

And so, because of the lamentable disputes in Germany Napoleon was able to snatch the initiative and attack.

On the French side Napoleon had faced an inner conflict: either an early French offensive before he could raise all the needed men and stock sufficient munitions but before funds ran out; or a waiting game through the summer, seeking time for massing men and munitions and relying on French patriotism when France should be invaded, and then deploying his best tactical skills as in 1814 to harry and beat the invaders [the option that Wellington thought was Napoleon's wisest course] until discouragement and dissension should split the alliance. But in the second case, where was the money to come from? - it was running out by June.

So Napoleon faced an option of difficulties. it was Schwarzenberg who gave him the privilege of deciding for himself on the course to follow. Napoleon snatched the initiative. And thus the decisive battles were fought in Belgium and not deep inside France.

To be continued.

Placed on the Napoleon Series: April 2017