A Soldier Is Not a Soldier Without Training

Napoleonic Warfare

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7 December 2011

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By the time Napoleon's second *Grande Armee* fell at Waterloo, estimated French casualties totaled more than 2,500,000 from over ten years of near-continuous fighting.
Napoleon commanded some of the largest armies ever assembled on the modern battlefield, ultimately changing the face of warfare through a heavy reliance on mass, speed and superior firepower. This new style of warfare demanded much from his men, sometimes pushing them beyond the limits of their training. Hasty training, which could be as short as a week for the average infantryman and two months for an officer, subtly contributed to the decline of Napoleon's *Grande Armee*. Poor training affected everything from organization to tactics. Ultimately, an increase in mass could not make up for a steady decrease in the quality of training, especially since immense casualties drained much of the army's wealth of experience. The poor quality of training slowly diminished Napoleon's army from within, something not even experience nor bravery could overcome.

Hasty and incomplete training was not always rampant in Napoleon's army, but it would eventually mirror similar experiences of the revolutionary army he inherited. As with Napoleon's first *Grande Armee* of 1805, training for the Volunteers of 1791 was initially very good. When the volunteers entered service, they received a full year of training in line and column tactics, were highly motivated and fighting off the patriotic fervor instilled in them by the revolution.³ That same year saw the publication of a drill book, referred to as the Manual of 1791, aimed at improving infantry tactics in the ability to move between line and column formations, also known as *l' ordre mixte*.⁴ Unfortunately, heavy casualties began to mount shortly after the revolution began, requiring an increase in overall troop strength. As a result, the Manual of 1791 was often disregarded in favor of loose skirmishing tactics, which resulted in additional casualties.⁵ By November of 1792 the French army lost 160,000 out of 450,000 men

to desertion, disease and battle.⁶ These massive losses required a desperate call to arms by the French government.

Massive casualties forced the government to issue a new decree of *levee en masse* on 23 August 1793.⁷ Its design was to requisition all available men for fighting, but not yet via a formal conscription. This decree succeeded in its purpose, raising an army of 700,000 men by 1794.⁸ After only four years the army required additional manpower. The Jourdan Law in 1798 introduced a formal method of conscription combined with those volunteer enlistments; this was something quite foreign to the volunteers and distasteful to others, but altogether necessary.⁹ The goal was to replace the army's dwindling numbers, in part due to lack of volunteers. Further depletion of the human resource required the first formal and massive conscription in 1799 under the Jourdan Law, which raised the army's numbers to approximately 230,000 men.¹⁰ Despite this new law, the army of 1799 was still relatively small compared to those of previous years. The French army needed a break to reorganize, recuperate and resupply. Unfortunately, peace was still three years away.

When Napoleon signed the Treaty of Amiens on 25 March 1802, the French and its army were ready for peace. ¹¹ It was nearly a decade since the well-trained Volunteers of 1791 entered the army, and by 1802 the army was ragged and weary. ¹² According to the general inspection of 1801, desertion was rampant, morale low, NCOs were slack and the officer quality was not very good. ¹³ To facilitate training and improve overall quality, Napoleon created the Ministry of the Administration of War in 1802. ¹⁴ The new ministry's primary mission was to tackle admin duties such as rations, hospitals, clothing, etc. ¹⁵ This addition allowed the Ministry of War to focus on the sizeable undertaking of troop organization, officer procurement and training. ¹⁶ All

of these delicate issues became especially important as the size of Napoleon's army increased over the next few years.

By 1804-1805 and on the brink of his first major campaigns since Amiens, Napoleon was able to increase the size of his combined army to over 350,000 men.¹⁷ This arose in part through multiple conscriptions, which averaged approximately 73,000 men per year over the duration of his campaigns.¹⁸ The other part came about through the inclusion of foreign troops. For the most part, the *Grande Armee* of 1805 was predominantly French, much like the early revolutionary army.¹⁹ However, large numbers of foreign troops began to pour into the ranks as Napoleon continued to annex additional territory under his authority.²⁰ When Napoleon inherited the revolutionary army, it included Swiss, Polish, Hanoverian and Irish legions.²¹ Only two foreign regiments existed in Napoleon's army of 1805 prior to his first campaigns.²² By 1811, French divisions were largely heterogeneous, relying on foreign troops to augment French forces.²³ As the French empire grew the composition of foreign soldiers within the *Grande Armee* rose rapidly.²⁴ This would cause significant issues later in his campaigns.

Napoleon's mounting requirement for more soldiers arose shortly after his first campaigns began in 1805, just as it happened at the beginning of the French Revolution.

Whereas the revolutionary army averaged between 320,000-800,000 men from 1792-1804, the Napoleonic forces averaged over 1,000,000 men from 1804-1814.²⁵ This large increase occurred primarily due to large conscriptions, sometimes a year or two ahead of time. The conscription of 1806 totaled 106,000 men, with 60,000 used for reserves.²⁶ In 1807 he called ahead on 80,000 men from the class of 1808, with another 80,000 in 1808 from the class of 1809.²⁷ 1809 called on 60,000 more conscripts, with an additional reach back to the classes of 1806-1808 for even more conscripts, which totaled 75,550 men.²⁸ These levies continued, with 1811 calling on

167,000 (90,000 reserve) and 1812 demanding an amazing 245,000 additional conscripts for the Russian campaign.²⁹ In all, Napoleon levied 2,646,957 men between 1800-1815; approximately 1,350,000 were called to active duty.³⁰ The large increase in available soldiers over this time warranted significant changes in the *Grande Armee's* organization, training and eventually tactics.

The relative peace in Europe from 1803-1805 provided an opportunity to reorganize and rebuild the French army for certain future campaigns.³¹ In order to compensate for the sizeable increase of his army Napoleon established the corps, averaging between 20,000-30,000 men, as the standard fighting unit and placed the division subordinate to the corps. ³² However, this number was quite flexible. In 1805 Marshal Nicolas J. de Dieu Soult commanded the IV corps with 41,000 men while Marshal Charles Pierre Francois Augereau commanded the VII corps with 14,000 men.³³ The typical corps averaged about 24,000 men, which was the size of Marshal Michel Ney's VI corps.³⁴ Approaching the end of Napoleon's rule in 1813, some corps were three times as large as they were in the initial campaigns, such as Marshal Louis Nicolas Dayout's corps of 69,500 men.³⁵ When Napoleon started his campaigns as First Consul in 1805, a total of seven corps were at his disposal, each commanded by a marshal, or the equivalent of a present-day army lieutenant general.³⁶ Each corps contained approximately 720 company and field grade officers to organize and train its troops.³⁷ In total, Napoleon's seven corps averaged approximately 5,000 officers during his campaigns. However, these officer totals thinned out as the size of the corps grew, which only added to Napoleon's mounting organizational troubles.

Thinning of the officer force also occurred through other means. Officer casualties continued to mount as Napoleon's campaigns persisted. According to the French army's military historian, Martineau, officer casualties totaled 50,000 during Napoleon's campaigns of 1805-

1815.³⁸ Of these casualties, 15,000 were killed and 35,000 wounded.³⁹ The alarming statistic is that Napoleon's army averaged approximately 5,000 officer casualties per year during his campaigns, enough to deplete his entire officer corps for the whole *Grande Armee* every year! Staff officers and the corps of engineers were not exempt, with 3,024 and 501 casualties respectively.⁴⁰ Though Napoleon could not possibly foresee the huge amounts of officer casualties within the next decade, he did predict a requirement to properly train and educate as many officers as possible to support his growing army.

In anticipation of a growing need for officers and their subsequent training, Napoleon founded the military school at Fontainbleau in 1803. The goal of this school was to instill strict discipline through drill and to speed up the supply of trained officers. Officers were supposed to complete the curriculum in two years' time, but were lucky to get one year of training. By 1811 the top 10% in math were pulled for duty regardless of readiness and despite the school's overall inability to provide trained officers for the war effort. Napoleon expected that a newly minted graduate should know everything that an experienced sergeant should, which included how to train recruits in marksmanship. This was a tall order for officers that received limited training at the school. It placed emphasis on a rapid ability to learn under pressure, most times in battle, rather than being able to fall back on what knowledge they gleaned from their minimalist military education. For example, some Fontainbleau graduates went into the cavalry, gaining their education "under saber strokes." Unfortunately, this was not the only military school with severe training issues.

In 1803 Napoleon also founded the *Ecole speciale militaire* because of this increased demand for trained officers.⁴⁷ The goal was to produce 100 graduates per year.⁴⁸ However, the war effort demanded more. To compensate, the curriculum often shortened from 12 months to

2-3 months of training.⁴⁹ From its founding in 1803 to Napoleon's defeat in 1815, the school produced approximately 4,000 officers for Napoleon's army.⁵⁰ This equates to roughly 333 officers produced per year, which is over a 300% increase in production above the school's original mission. At the same time the school of Saint-Cyr produced 2,932 officers from its founding to 1810.⁵¹ By 1814 only 15% of the entire officer corps came from military schools, which reflected limited military educational backgrounds at the highest levels.⁵²

Lack of a formal military education continued through to the highest ranks of the French Army. As with his other officers, less than 15% of Napoleon's marshals attended a formal military school.⁵³ An additional sampling of twenty-one non-marshal generals shows that the same percentage continues, with approximately 15% attending some sort of formal military school.⁵⁴ Well over 50% of Napoleon's marshals attained promotion through the ranks after enlisting in the French army; the sample of his best generals approached 70%. 55 Other marshals and generals attained either direct commissions or were appointed to some sort of staff job after volunteering. ⁵⁶ Interestingly, a lack of formal military education and experience did not prevent rapid promotion, with some marshals and generals attaining promotion to general of a brigade, the equivalent of a modern-day brigadier general (O-7), within only two years of service!⁵⁷ This was true even in 1804, with the majority of Napoleon's generals achieving this rapid promotion between 1791-1800.⁵⁸ The average period from entering the army to general of a brigade was approximately 13 years for both marshals and generals. An officer in today's military would only reach the rank of major (O-4) in this same timeframe, which is three full ranks below that of these Napoleonic generals.

The result of a lack of training at the highest levels was generals and marshals that did not meet their fullest potential. Napoleon's style of command was very centralized, which did

not provide much flexibility in decision making to his officers. This would eventually cause a breakdown in command and control that was possibly at the root of his failures in 1813 and 1815. Lack of a formal military education combined with rapid promotion put great strains on the marshals. Some marshals were unable to execute independently as a result of their informal training, such as Marshals Jean Baptiste Bessieres, Guillaume-Marie Brune, Joachim Murat, and Nicolas Charles Ouidinot. For example, Marshal Ouidinot did not have a knack for handling foreign troops nor did he master combined arms, a staple of Napoleonic tactics. Other marshals, such as Ney, displayed admirable soldierly qualities of bravery but sometimes suffered when it came to tactical execution. Ney often got Napoleon into trouble, such as his sojourn into Russian-occupied territory that accidentally kicked off hostilities during the Eylau campaign in Poland.

Because of an incomplete officer education, some less formal schools on the art of war evolved from within the military camps, especially for company and field grade officers. Valiant attempts were made to educate themselves by devouring books and discussing the finer points of the art of war in between battles. This approach highlighted the determination and dedication of the officers to learn, but also exposed the fact that there was a deficiency in their foundations of military and tactical knowledge. Engineers and gunners suffered a similar fate as their infantry counterparts with respect to training. The emphasis on their proper training was disregarded at the highest levels, with Napoleon commenting, "There is no need that these men know all about ballistics and construction; all that is necessary is that they can serve in the field and in the trenches."

In addition to the influx of untrained officers was the issue of training new conscripts.

Nearly all of these conscripts were untrained, with orders that they were to receive plenty of

target practice in areas where the enemy could not see them, especially on the heavily conscripted Spanish front. ⁶⁵ If they did get target practice it could sometimes be with as little as ten blank, not live ball, cartridges per man. Eight cartridges were used in single rank fire and the other two for platoon firing. ⁶⁶ In fact, Marshals Victor and Augereau protested in 1812 that their troops required a minimum of fifty cartridges per man for proper instruction. ⁶⁷ However, continuity in this training also suffered. For example, when Napoleon's forces garrisoned for winter in 1805-1806 across Germany, training dropped off nearly entirely in order to secure the territory that the army just seized. ⁶⁸

Napoleon adopted the concept of the *amalgame* from the revolution to further the training of conscripts. The *amalgame* relied on conscripts picking up whatever knowledge they could from veterans once assigned to their respective units.⁶⁹ As the war continued, the ratio of conscripts to veterans began to increase.⁷⁰ By 1809 the army actually began to form entire divisions out of raw recruits; a division contained at least 3,000 men.⁷¹ With the total number of conscripts steadily increasing, great pressures fell on veterans to keep the army functioning. Responsibilities for the veterans were many, to include training the new conscripts for battle. Formal training was sometimes as short as one week for the average infantryman.⁷² In fact, Napoleon actually stated "Conscripts need not spend more than eight days in training camp."⁷³ Instead of spending valuable time training the soldier in depot, basic soldierly skills developed during the march, which could last 50-60 days.⁷⁴ The infantry soldiers were fairly well-trained by the end of this time, but the mindset of training men on the march would prove to be unsustainable not only for infantry, but also for cavalry.

The ability to ride a horse, maintain formation and execute cavalry tactics required more training than the standard infantry soldier. ⁷⁵ A flood of inexperienced conscripts made its way

to cavalry as the campaigns continued. This made it all the more difficult for command, which was arguably more demanding than that of infantry. ⁷⁶ In addition, care of horses required experienced men, something that was harder to come by as the campaigns continued. Fitting the horses with shoes after miles of riding, properly fitting saddles and harnesses, watering, feeding and even maintenance of proper load weights was essential. The However, by 1812 Marshal Davout found approximately 90% of all new cavalry conscripts had never touched a horse!⁷⁸ The general performance of some units' horsemanship was "wobbly" at best, identifying the need for more experience. By 1813 the French cavalry was heavy on inexperienced officers and men, but overall severely short-handed.⁷⁹ The situation remained unchanged a year later, with raw cavalrymen mounted on whatever horses they could muster. 80 These cavalrymen did not know how to pace their horses in battle, sometimes wearing them out early in a long-distance gallop, which also added to the problem of keeping some semblance of a formation intact. 81 In fact, some of the men were with their units less than fifteen days and incapable of holding the reigns and sabre simultaneously, requiring two hands to turn the horse. 82 Even Archduke Charles dismissed the French cavalry as "poorly mounted and poorly equipped; its men were awkward horsemen."83

By 1813 approximately 75% of the army had little to no training.⁸⁴ This was despite Napoleon's best efforts to overhaul the *Grande Armee* of 1812, considered the "most organized force Napoleon ever commanded, with the most thoroughly prepared supply system." The army that he organized to march on Russia approached 500,000 men; on the Spanish front there were 175,000 French troops. Depots had nearly as many as the Spanish front, with garrisons containing even more personnel. With all of these men and limited training, Napoleon and his

officers unwillingly had to sacrifice complex tactics for some that could utilize these poorly trained troops.

The levies continued to increase and the amount of training decreased, affecting even the most basic tactics of column and line. For example, these partially trained troops operated more effectively in column than in line, which drove formations used in battle. More advanced tactics and formations could not be used since the soldiers were not properly trained. Effective firepower also decreased, primarily because the conscript soldiers did not even have the training to utilize the weapons they were issued. Some had never seen a rifle before and learned to shoot after they were already heading toward the battlefield! In fact, soldiers were hitting approximately 6-15% of what they aimed at, possibly due to careless loading. Napoleon possibly increased the ratio of artillery guns to men in order to compensate. For example, the ratio was 3.87:1,000 at Wagram and increased to 4.5:1,000 in 1812. This ratio decreased as the campaigns neared Waterloo, with the ratio at 3.5:1,000, perhaps due to a limited amount of horses following the Russian campaign. This obviously affected the tactic of massed and organized firepower, decreasing overall effectiveness and creating vulnerabilities that Napoleon failed to either recognize or correct.

Napoleon's tactics evolved to compensate for decreased weapons effects over time, gradually developing into heavier formations such as regimental column, toward 1813.⁹³ This formation was easier for his officers to manage, possibly because it also prevented a majority of the soldiers from seeing what went on in the battle. However, the formations of new recruits sometimes broke once heavy fighting ensued. This was an issue for veterans of the Spanish front, where sloppy tactics and random skirmishes gave troops a false sense of security, which was promptly crushed once heavy fighting began.⁹⁴ Though these men fought bravely, some of

them most definitely lost their lives based on limited training. Putting a weapon in the hand of someone who has never touched one and then sending them to fight in battle only a few days later is not a recipe for success, even if you happen to have thousands upon thousands of these individuals at your literal disposal.

Training affects all facets of any military organization. A soldier is not a soldier without training. Without training, a soldier is essentially a civilian with a uniform. Training provides the means to execute a coordinated effort, often under extreme pressure. In today's military, training provides the means to integrate forces and leadership in an extremely complex system and on an increasingly complex battlefield. The modern soldier fights with some of the most highly-advanced weapons ever seen in warfare, integrating these systems into a modern combined arms of air, land, sea, space and cyber capabilities. It is only through effective training that the modern warfighter can succeed in this combined effort.

Training has recently contributed to the success (and failure) of the US military on two simultaneous fronts in Iraq and Afghanistan, which is very similar to Napoleon's situation during his campaigns from 1805-1815. The successes of proper training are obvious, yet often overlooked. Unfortunately, the insidious nature of improper training becomes almost unnoticeable until it is too late. Only after several years of fighting have some of the Air Force's flying units realized this cold and hard fact. For example, aviators continue to get combat experience in specific mission sets, such as close air support (CAS). However, other mission sets take a significant hit because of the focus on today's fight, such as air interdiction of maritime targets (AIMT). There is a proficiency in one area to the significant detriment of several others.

While the training of a soldier in Napoleon's army may not compare to the complexities of a modern-day soldier's training, it was still vitally important. A lack of proper training affected everyone from the average infantry soldier all the way to the highest marshal. It made its way through the ranks and touched every facet of Napoleon's campaigns. Unfortunately, it did not get the attention that it most definitely deserved. In possible recognition of this fact, Napoleon changed the name of his *Grande Armee* to the Army of the Main and Army of the Rhine around 1813. However, by 1813 it was arguably too late. Poor training infiltrated everything from organization to tactics, forcing Napoleon to alter the very things he obviously had an advantage in for the majority of his campaigns.



¹ Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Art Of Warfare In the Age Of Napoleon*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 236. This number is open to speculation, with sources claiming that only 150,000 men died in actual combat and the remaining died in hospitals from disease or wounds received on the battlefield. Numbers from Lefebvre also claim that losses were more likely around 680,000 from 1800-1815. He claims there were a low percentage of battlefield killed in action (KIA): 2% at Austerlitz and 8.5% at Waterloo, with the remainder deaths occurring from disease or in hospitals. ² Ibid., 132-135.

³ Ibid., 114.

⁴ Ibid, 22-23.

⁵ Ibid, 23 & 67.

⁶ John R. Elting, Swords Around a Throne: Napoleon's Grande Armee (New York: De Capo Press), 34.

⁷ Rothenberg., 100.

⁸ Ibid., 101.

⁹ Ibid., 101.

¹⁰ Rothenberg., 101, 127.

Todd Fisher, The Napoleonic Wars: the Rise of the Emperor 1805-1807 (Chicago: Osprey Rairchild Research Information Center Publishing, Limited), 9.

¹² Rothenberg 114.

¹³ Ibid., 127.

<sup>1010., 127.

14</sup> Elting, Swords Around a Throne, 56.

¹⁵ Ibid., 56.

¹⁶ Ibid., 56.

Rothenberg., 128.

Owen Connelly, Blundering To Glory, Napoleon's Military Campaigns (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc.), 74.

¹⁹ Elting, Swords Around a Throne, 58.

²⁰ Georges Lefebvre, *Napoleon: From 18 Brumaire to Tilsit 1799-1807* (New York: Columbia University Press), 222.

²¹ Lefebvre, 222.
²² Lefebvre, 222 & Rothenberg, 103.

²³ Elting, Swords Around a Throne. 58.

²⁴ Ibid., 356.

²⁵ Ibid., 55.

²⁶ Ibid., 325.

²⁷ Ibid., 326.

²⁸ Ibid., 326. ²⁹ Ibid., 327.

³⁰ Ibid, 329.

³¹ Connelly, *Blundering to Glory*, 71.

³² Ibid., 73.

³³ Rothernberg, 128.

³⁴ Ibid., 128.

³⁵ Elting. Swords Around a Throne . 59.

³⁶ Ibid., 128 & 676.

³⁷ Rothenberg, 103. Each regiment contained approximately 90 officers. Two regiments made up a brigade. Two brigades made up a division. Finally, two divisions made up a corps. Using simple math: 90x2x2x2 = 720. Again, this is approximate and applies primarily to company and field grade officers. Generals and their staff are not included in this total.

³⁸ Ibid., 133.

³⁹ Ibid., 133. I could not find approximately how many of the 35,000 wounded officers returned to service. It would be logical that some would return if they were not severely injured, but that data was not available based on the research conducted.

⁴⁰ Rothenberg, 133-134.

⁴¹ Elting, Swords Around a Throne, 170.

⁴² Ibid., 170.

⁴³ Ibid., 171.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 171.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 171.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 170.

⁴⁷ Rothenberg., 132.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 132.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 132.

Ibid., 132.

50 Ibid., 132.

51 Jean-Paul Bertaud, *Napoleon's Officers* (JSTOR: http://www.jstor.org/stable/650999), 102.

⁵² Bertaud., 103.

⁵³ John R. Elting, Biographical Sketches, A Military History and Atlas of the Napoleonic Wars, (New York: Praeger). Of the twenty-four marshals, only three attended a military academy (Davout, Grouchy & Marmont). Two others (Kellermann & MacDonald) became gentleman cadets, but it did not mention completion of a formal military school.

⁵⁴ Ibid., Generals that did attend military schools were Drouot, Lauriston & Nansouty. Those that did attend military schools included Caulainco, Desaix, Eble, Eugene, Exelmans, D'Hautpoul, Junot, Kellermann (son of Marshal Kellermann), Kilmaine, Lasalle, Latour-Maubourg, Montbrun, Moreau, Mouton, Revnier, Savary, Vandamm & Wrede. However, Caulainco and D'Hautpoul were cadets.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 14 out of 24 marshals enlisted in the French army, progressing through the ranks that way..

⁵⁶ Ibid., Lannes, Mortier, Perignon, St.-Cyr, Serurier & Suchet were among the marshals that received either direct commission or appointment to staff.

⁵⁷ Ibid., Brune and Desaix were appointed to general within only two years, with St.-Cyr being the fastest promoted at only one year!

⁵⁸ Elting, Swords Around a Throne, 164.

⁵⁹ Elting, *Biographical Sketches*.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² John R. Elting, Eylau-Friedland Campaigns Maps (Map 71).

⁶³ Bertaud, 112.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 133.

⁶⁵ Elting., 326.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 483.
<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 483.
<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 60.
<sup>69</sup> Lefebvre, Napoleon: From 18 Brumaire to Tilsit 1799-1807, 218.
<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 219.
<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 221.
<sup>72</sup> Rothenberg, 135.

<sup>73</sup> Lefebvre, Napoleon: From 18 Brumaire to Tilsit 1799-1807, 218.
74 Rothenberg., 135.
75 Elting, Swords Around a Throne, 237.
<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 227.
<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 227.
<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 64.
<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 245.
<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 245.
81 Ibid., 541.
<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 245.
83 Ibid., 247.
84 Rothenberg., 136.
<sup>85</sup> Elting, 63-64.
<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 64.
<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 64.
<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 536.
<sup>89</sup> Rothenberg, 65.
<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 65.
<sup>91</sup> Elting., 59.
<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 59.
<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 537.
<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 537.
95 Lefebvre, Napoleon: From 18 Brumaire to Tilsit 1799-1807, 50.
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