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The Prevailing Corsican

On Napoleon

NO series of connected and consecutive military events has been so closely analyzed by military students as those marking the first Italian campaign of Napoleon Bonaparte. All expounders of the military art who have had the good fortune to live since its principles were so wonderfully illustrated by that campaign have delighted to use its incidents in exposition. Every student has early learned that he could not afford to neglect it. Even to the "general reader," unacquainted with the mysteries of strategy and tactics, who in the darkness of his ignorance cherishes the error that war is fortuitous fighting loosely directed to results by physical courage and the will of God, the history of these brilliant operations can hardly fail, when lucidly related, to prove interesting and charming beyond the power of fiction. As related by the mere "historian," with his port-fire and blood-fumes to emotionalize the situation, it is doubtless as dull reading as the literature of the heart generally. What, in brief, was this remarkable campaign?

In the month of March, 1796, Bonaparte, a boy of twenty-six, untried in independent command, was entrusted with an army of some forty thousand badly clad and inadequately supplied men, with which to invade Italy. He was opposed by Beaulieu, with a well equipped force, Austrians and Sardinians, of fifty thousand. The Alps and Apennines were between. Bonaparte began active operations on the eleventh day of less four days, with forces averaging forty-six thousand opposed to forces averaging sixty-one thousand he had in fifteen pitched battles routed one Sardinian army and the six Austrian armies successively sent to drive him out of Italy, only to be driven out themselves. His losses during the campaign in killed, wounded and prisoners were about equal to the numbers of his army at the outset. The losses that he inflicted upon the enemy were no fewer than one hundred and twenty thousand men and vast quantities of material.

How were these astonishing feats of arms performed? Not by the superior courage of his soldiers, for the Austrians then, as they are now, were a brave and warlike people. Not by the "will of God," whose agency is to the military eye nowhere discernible, and whose political predilections are still unknown. Nor were these admirable results due to "luck," the "favours of fortune," the "magic" of genius. They were brought about by the very commonplace method of knowing his business thoroughly and applying the knowledge. There is nothing miraculous in that. It is an open secret which Napoleon himself has explained:

"In war nothing is accomplished but by calculation. During a campaign, whatever is not profoundly considered in all its details is without result. Every enterprise should be systematically conducted; chance alone cannot bring success."

I should be sorry to be understood as affirming the possibility of such military success as Napoleon's to the mere student of military art, devoid of Napoleon's genius. On the other hand, Napoleon's genius would have been futile without his mastery of the art. Military art is no exception to art in general; for eminent achievement is required great natural aptitude, plus a comprehensive and minute knowledge of the business in hand. Given these two requisites in the commander, and the army is multiplied by two. For many generations, doubtless, the French will boast of Montenotte, Marengo, Austerlitz, Jena, and Wagram; but every intelligent soldier's view is that on all these historic fields there was but one victor. To quote his words again:

“It was not the Roman army that conquered Gaul, but Caesar; it was not the Carthaginian army which, at the gates of Rome, made the Eternal City tremble, but Hannibal; it was not the Macedonian army that marched as far as the Indus, but Alexander; it was not the Prussian army that defended Prussia for seven years against the three most powerful states of Europe, but Frederick.”

The contrary view—the theory of the insignificance of the individual—so persistently urged a generation ago by Mill, and so eagerly accepted by the young philosophers of his period, derives no support from military history. Tolstoi, it is true, is in full, if somewhat belated, advocacy of it, and professes to find confirmation in the events that he relates in his military novels. And it must be confessed that, as he relates them, they indubitably do seem to justify his view that leaders do not truly lead. With the splendid irresponsibility of the fictionist, he shows that the French people having incurred, somehow, a blind, reasonless impulse to go gadding about Europe, caught up Napoleon, as a stream bursting out of its banks might catch up a sheep or a log, and pushed him along before them. A careful study of the progress through Italy will, I think, show that at least he did something toward reducing the friction incident to the movement.

Anyone really believing in unimportance of the individual must be prepared to affirm that a chance bullet finding a lodgment in the brain of the commander of the Army of Italy at Montenotte would have made but little difference in the conduct of the campaign and the later history of Europe; and any one prepared to affirm this may justly boast himself impregnable to argument, through induration of the understanding. The history of the military operations that we have been considering has never been better told than in a book entitled *Napoleon Bonaparte's First Campaign*—it should be remembered that he was then simply General Bonaparte. The author of the book is Lieutenant Herbert H. Sargent, of the Army. Nothing could well exceed the clarity with which the author has told his story; and nothing that I have seen in military literature is more admirable than his professional but untechnical comments on its successive stages. Everything is made so clear that the benighted civilian of the anti-West Point sort, the fearfully and wonderfully bepistoled swashbuckler of the frontier, the gilded whiskey-soldier of the National Guard and even the self-taught strategist of the press can comprehend it all without a special revelation from Heaven. Those conscious of a desire, however vague and formless, to acquire such a knowledge of military science and art as will give them a keener interest in “war news” that is not “bluggy” than they ever had in that which reeks with gore and “multiplies the slain” will find in Lieutenant Sargent a guide, philosopher and friend for whom they cannot be sufficiently thankful to the God that bestowed him.