

Napoleon: A Dealer of Hope

Mark Billings

Napoleon is arguably the first modern leader in that he spoke *directly* to his people. Using the press and the media with great mastery, he initiated a revolution in the techniques of communication, manipulation and power. Napoleon understood quite well the art and science of psychology and how to get others to do what he wanted them to do. In short, he was a genius at self-promotion, a quite effective propagandist. No great (or infamous) leader since Napoleon has neglected these techniques at human manipulation. As with many of his military tactics and strategies, Napoleon was not necessarily the inventor of these techniques; rather, he was the first one to apply them in a systematic fashion. From early on in his career, Napoleon set in place a deliberate and sophisticated communications apparatus aimed to boost the morale of the French army and general populace and, as a corollary, his own reputation.

As this paper outlines, Napoleon employed effectively a variety of media, from inspirational speeches to the troops to the famous Bulletins of the Grande Armée posted in cities across France. In addition, great works of art commissioned during this period formed an integral part of Napoleon's communications and image campaign.

The underlying theme of Napoleon's communications campaign was a message of hope and optimism for the

French people and army. Napoleon was the one who would preserve the gains of the Revolution. His personal leadership was portrayed as central to the success of the French Republic and Empire. After all, as Napoleon once said himself, "A leader is merely a dealer of hope."

Napoleon's communications campaign and the effectiveness thereof must be understood in its historical context. At the beginning of the Consulate in 1800, France had approximately 29 million people. Although today we think of France as a unified state with a common language, in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Eras, France was a linguistic patchwork. Over 6 million inhabitants – more than 20% of the population of France – spoke no French at all. These were the findings of the Abbé Grégoire, who was mandated by the National Convention in 1793 to investigate this matter. Another 6 million people, he reported, were not able to carry on a conversation in the French language. There were an estimated 1 million Breton speakers and 1 million German speakers in France. To top it all, each region of France had its own *patois*, or dialect. For millions of French citizens at that time, the Revolution and Napoleonic Wars were being conducted in an entirely foreign language.¹

¹ Martyn Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), p. 56; and Abbé Grégoire, *Rapport sur la nécessité et les moyens d'anéantir les patois et*

Napoleon was a master at motivating and inspiring the French army, which was his power base and the vehicle that propelled him to the acme of power in France. In March 1796, Napoleon took up his command of the Army of Italy. The situation he inherited was quite bleak. Many French soldiers in this army were neither properly clothed nor properly armed. The morale of the troops was, needless to say, low, as the Army of Italy had not been paid by the government in several months. Everyone, including Napoleon's political masters in Paris, expected the young general to fail. It must have been quite a shock for the troops to see a 26-year-old general, standing five feet six inches tall, whose most decisive military victory to that point had been the massacre of a few hundred French civilians. This did not seem to be the painted picture of a source of enthusiasm for the officers and the troops.

Napoleon, however, had the ability to make himself obeyed with one glance of his cold, penetrating eyes. He was also a commander who knew how to speak to his men. On the eve of the First Italian Campaign, Napoleon launched the following challenge to his troops:

“Soldiers! You are naked and ill-fed. No glory shines upon you. The government owes you a great deal, but it can give you nothing. Your patience and courage do you

honor and give you neither worldly goods nor glory. I shall lead you into the most fertile plains on Earth. There, you shall find great cities and rich provinces. There, you shall find honor, glory, riches. Soldiers of the Army of Italy! Could courage and constancy possibly fail you?”

Napoleon and his rag-tag army quickly won four successive battles at Montenotte, Millesimo, Dego and Mondovi against the Austrians and Piedmontese. His enemies were just as astonished as his own troops.

The importance of this particular Napoleonic kick-off speech cannot be underestimated. Up to that point, the government in Paris and previous military commanders had encouraged the troops to fight for the ideals of the Revolution, to preserve them in France and to export them abroad. Although Napoleon's Republican credentials were impeccable, he appealed not to their patriotism and idealism at that time, but rather to their more primary and immediate needs. An analysis of this short yet effective speech demonstrates the following:

Napoleon described the current state of affairs: “*Soldiers! You are naked and ill-fed. No glory shines upon you.*” He took personal responsibility for changing the current state of affairs: “*I shall lead you into the most fertile plains on Earth.*” In addressing a destitute army, Napoleon appealed to their need and desire for material possessions: “*There, you shall*

find great cities and rich provinces. There, you shall find honor, glory, riches." (That is, you shall be paid, eat well and share the spoils of victory.) Napoleon showed them specifically what would be in it for them if they fought under his command. This speech was concise and precise and communicated confidence, conviction and enthusiasm. It was what the troops needed to hear; it reinvigorated the Army of Italy on a wave of increased morale. The fact that Napoleon delivered on his promises engendered a deep sense of loyalty from his soldiers.

Napoleon was always someone who recognized the importance of morale in war when he opined, "In war, the moral is to the physical as three is to one." An excellent example of a congratulatory speech designed to increase morale is his proclamation to the army after the victory at Austerlitz on December 2, 1805:

"Soldiers, I am pleased with you. During this day at Austerlitz, you demonstrated everything that I was expecting from your fearlessness. You decorated your eagles with an immortal glory. My people will welcome you with joy and it will suffice to say: 'I was at the Battle of Austerlitz', and they will answer you: 'There goes a brave man!'"

From a psychological point of view, this address had a powerful impact on the Grande Armée. It was certainly known that Napoleon set very high standards

for his troops, as well as himself. In saying these few words, the French Army knew that they had achieved perfection in the eyes of their Emperor. Napoleon satisfied their basic human needs for achievement, belonging, recognition and self-esteem. He made every soldier feel that he was integral to their common assault against the enemies of France.



Julius Caesar

It may come as a surprise to some that Napoleon, a Corsican whose mother tongue was Italian, would end up as one of the great military orators of France. It is commonly accepted that Napoleon never quite mastered the intricacies of the French

language. As indicated previously, France was a linguistic hodgepodge and not all soldiers could speak French perfectly. In this sense, Napoleon was seen not as an aloof noble but simply as one of the boys: he spoke his followers' language.

In addition, as a cadet, Napoleon was a bookworm and an adept student of history, one of his favorite subjects. He certainly studied the great military

leaders of history, including Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great. There is little doubt that he read and studied the inspirational leadership style of Alexander. This arguably explains in some part the tone, substance and style of the motivational speeches he would deliver to his own army. The parallels to Alexander's pre-battle speeches are obvious. The following is a sample of Alexander's rousing speech to the troops before the Battle of Issus:

"You have already faced and surmounted many dangers, and you ought to take courage from them. Again we prepare for another battle. This time our struggle will be between a victorious army and a foe, which has already been beaten. And don't forget that Alexander is commanding you into battle, while they are being led by Darius."² Despite being outnumbered by at least 4-to-1, the army of Alexander routed the Persians at Issus.

The Bulletins

The Bulletins were the official version of military encounters from the French perspective. They appeared in the official newspaper, *Le Moniteur*, and were posted in town halls across France by local prefects. The clergy was also involved in disseminating news from the pulpit to a population that was largely illiterate (at least 50% of the

² Partha Bose, *Alexander the Great's Art of Strategy* (New York: Gotham Books, 2003), p. 139.

population) and not necessarily French-speaking.

The originality of Napoleon's approach with the Bulletins was that he spoke directly and personally to his subjects. This allowed him to control the message that was communicated to the masses, upon whose continued support he relied.

During the First Italian Campaign of 1796, Napoleon swept to victory, entered the Lombard capital of Milan and went about setting up an Italian republic. During this time, General Bonaparte became the first French general to have his *own* newspapers. On



July 20, 1797, Napoleon established *Le Courier de l'armée d'Italie*, which was published every two days. Napoleon hired Marc-Antoine Jullien as its editor. Jullien was in the Police Ministry under Saint-Just and was an adept journalist with *L'Orateur plébéien*. One excerpt demonstrates the warrior image of Napoleon: "Bonaparte strikes like lightning and hits like thunder. He is everywhere and he sees everything."³

On August 10, 1797, Napoleon founded *La France vue de l'armée d'Italie*; this was

³ Natalie Petiteau, "Arrivisme et propagande: Comment on devient Bonaparte," *L'Histoire* 237 (Novembre 1999): 52.

published every five days. Once again, Napoleon hired a professional journalist to convey convincingly his message to the French populace. Regnaud de Saint-Jean-d'Angély had worked with the *Journal de Paris* and *L'Ami des patriotes*. Finally, in the winter of 1798, the *Journal de Bonaparte et des hommes vertueux* appeared, the title of which was propaganda in and of itself.

To no surprise, these newspapers were intended to boost the fame and accomplishments of the young Corsican general. Napoleon distinguished himself from the other victorious generals of his time through his crafty use of propaganda to exalt his victories and to increase his goodwill among the people of France. In the First Italian Campaign of 1796-1797, Napoleon realized the potency of a system for the "political exploitation of victory", as Napoleonic historian Jean Tulard coined it.⁴ Victories in Italy, coupled with this effective communication strategy, resulted in Napoleon becoming general *à la mode* back in France.

Napoleon was certainly not the first military leader to communicate in this manner. Julius Caesar routinely sent such reports back to Rome while he was on campaign in Gaul; these updates were posted in the Forum, where they were read to the local population. These Commentaries, which portrayed Caesar and his legions in a positive and optimistic light, let ordinary Romans know what was going on and how great

⁴ Thierry Lentz, *Napoléon: « Mon ambition était grande »* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p. 20.

Caesar was. The goal of these Commentaries was to increase the popularity of Caesar in his rise to power. Just as Alexander carried with him a copy of Homer's *Iliad*, Napoleon had on hand a copy of Caesar's Commentaries while on campaign.

The Bulletins of Napoleon were never designed to give a 100% accurate account of his military encounters. While based largely on fact, they included a sprinkling of lies, half-truths, misrepresentations and distortions. A case in point concerns the Bulletin from the Battle of Marengo of June 14, 1800, which cost the French side some 6,000 men and the Austrians about 9,000.⁵ Although the victory was not the greatest military achievement of the new First Consul, Napoleon's victory Bulletin cast a much different image. The French victory was portrayed in the most brilliant terms, with the leadership and personal intervention of Napoleon as key to the victory. The romantic imagery leaping out from the pages set the hearts and imaginations of young French men on fire, thereby providing a very effective tool in enlisting more troops for the campaigns to come. The Bulletin following the Battle of Marengo read, in part:

"The grenadiers of the Guard were placed in a granite redoubt in the midst of this immense plain; nothing could breach it. The battle appeared to be lost. The

⁵ J. Christopher Herold, *The Age of Napoléon* (New York: American Heritage Publishing, 1963), p. 135.

enemy was allowed to advance within musket range of the village of San Giuliano, where General Desaix's division was drawn up in the line of battle. The presence of the First Consul revived the morale of the troops. 'My children,' he addressed them, 'remember it is my custom to camp on the field of battle.' To cries of 'Long live the Republic! Long live the First Consul!' Desaix attacked the center at the double."⁶

In fact, the Battle of Marengo was never lost for the French. Similarly, Desaix's division had just arrived at the battlefield, barely having enough time to draw up a line. Although the French victory has been attributed to the timely arrival of Desaix (who was also killed in this battle), the Bulletin openly argues that it was Bonaparte and his morale-boosting leadership that saved the day for the Republic.

From 1799 onwards, Napoleon as First Consul was able to control the media so as to disseminate the messages that he wanted. He used the Bulletins and other propaganda apparatuses of the state and the media to ensure his place as First Consul and consequently as Emperor.

The Bulletins often deliberately included false information so as to mislead the enemies of France, who

⁶ Ibid., p. 136.

were also avid readers of these documents. Losses to the enemy were exaggerated, while minimal damage was usually done to the French. In Leipzig, at the Battle of the Nations (October 16 to 19, 1813), the Bulletins announced that Napoleon had organized a strategic withdrawal due to a shortage of cannonballs.⁷ The French defeat at Vittoria in Spain in 1813 was not even publicized in the Bulletins.

Sometimes, the truth was not obliterated but rather *massaged*. On October 21, 1805, at the Battle of Trafalgar, the French navy suffered its most shattering



The Battle of Austerlitz

defeat. The news of this naval disaster was delayed to coincide with that most glorious of Napoleonic victories, the Battle of Austerlitz, which occurred on December 2 of that year. Needless to say, the defeat of Emperor Francis of Austria and Tsar Alexander of Russia overshadowed the drowning of a few ships off the coast of Spain.

⁷ Robert B. Holtman, *Napoleonic Propaganda* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), p. 46.

It was only with the famous 29th Bulletin of December 3, 1812 that bad news was finally incorporated into these accounts. The disaster that was the 1812 Russian Campaign could in no way be massaged in any favorable way, and no attempt was made to do so.

“In a few days, more than 30,000 horses perished; our cavalry were on foot; our artillery and our baggage were without conveyance. It was necessary to abandon and destroy a good part of our cannon, ammunition and provisions.”⁸

The following French simile summed it up best: *mentir comme un bulletin* (to lie like a bulletin).

Art as Propaganda

Napoleon once suggested, “Poetry, painting and sculpture must lie, but they must lie with grandeur, charm and splendor.”⁹ Although he was a member of the National Academy, Napoleon was neither an artist nor an intellectual. He did understand, however, the practical utility of intelligence and the fact that art could be useful as propaganda.

In Napoleonic France, art took on an important dimension in promoting the

⁸ J. David Markham, *Imperial Glory* (London: Greenhill Books, 2003), p. 311.

⁹ Warren Roberts, *Jacques-Louis David, Revolutionary Artist* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p. 209.

image of Napoleon as savior of France. France was blessed during this era with an array of artistic talent, including two of the better known Imperial painters: Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) and Antoine-Jean Gros (1771-1835).

The major works produced by David, Gros and others during this period portrayed Napoleon as superhuman and larger than life, which is what he wanted everyone to believe. The following analyzes some of the more famous works produced by these two great Imperial painters.

The Fearless Leader

Gros, David’s star pupil, first met Napoleon in Milan in 1796 during the First Italian Campaign. Gros had been given the mission of determining which Italian art treasures were suitable for confiscation and patriation to Paris. Gros immediately became struck with the magnetism of Napoleon and the leadership abilities of the 27-year-old general. In *Napoleon at the Bridge of Arcola*, Gros captured the spirit of the young hero, grasping a standard in one hand, a sword in the other. This portrait was considered an innovation by Gros’ contemporaries because of the feeling of movement conveyed by Napoleon’s body and face.

Gros is said to have achieved an amazing likeness of General Bonaparte in this painting. A calm and resolute Napoleon is advancing towards an unseen enemy. Oblivious to his own safety, Napoleon does not look at his enemy; rather, he is looking back at his

own men, who are purportedly following him. The suggestion that Napoleon took the bridge and defeated the enemy is implicit.

As Dwyer argues, Napoleon was probably unscathed from this encounter because the enemy Croatian battalions (belonging to the Austrian army) on the other side of the river perhaps thought that an officer was approaching them for talks.¹⁰ When they noticed that was not the case, the firing recommenced and Napoleon withdrew. In the confusion, the French soldiers advanced, pushing Napoleon into a ditch of water, where he nearly drowned.

Previous heroic portraits subsumed the individual in the whole; this was quite the opposite in Gros' piece where the focus is entirely on Napoleon. With *Napoleon at the Bridge of Arcola*, Gros transformed Napoleon's heroism into a propaganda cornerstone and began the manufacture of his public identity. With this stunning portrait, Gros enabled people not just to identify Bonaparte but, more importantly, to identify *with* him.

Napoleon Does the Impossible

Shortly after his elevation to the post of First Consul, France was again at war with Austria and her allies. Thus began the Second Italian Campaign in May 1800. Much to the surprise of everyone, Napoleon decided to lead his troops over the difficult route of the Great St.

Bernard Pass. This enabled the French troops to get to Italy more quickly and added the element of surprise. Napoleon's Austrian enemies never believed that he and his army would be able to cross the Alps; this is the exact reason why he did it. The French forces, with Napoleon leading the way, began their trek across the Great St. Bernard Pass on May 15, 1800, completing it just five days later.

The enormity of this task cannot be underscored. Napoleon crossed this pass in May 1800 with 40,000 soldiers, as well as hundreds of pieces of artillery and supply trains; the road of the Great St. Bernard Pass was only completed in 1905. Thanks to David, here is how Napoleon has been immortalized during this bold and daring adventure. In *Bonaparte Crossing the Great St. Bernard Pass*, David shows First Consul Bonaparte astride a magnificent white stallion with two hoofs in the air in a monumental pose. Draped with a flowing red cape and his right hand in the air, Napoleon is signaling to the viewer "Forward march" over the Alps to victory, glory and immortality. It is as if Napoleon is saying that all that was needed for a successful completion of the task was him merely to order it. David presents the First Consul as an agent of speed, energy and daring and links his feats to those of Hannibal and Charlemagne, whose names are inscribed below that of Bonaparte. In this painting, the focus is clearly on Napoleon, while the troops are merely miniscule distractions.

¹⁰ Philip Dwyer, *Napoleon: The Path to Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 2.

In reality, Napoleon did not cross the Alps atop such a fiery steed. Never a good horseman, he crossed the Alps in a much less glorious way, atop a lowly – yet effective – mule. If one were looking for historical accuracy, the following depiction by Delaroche, completed some 29 years after the death of Napoleon, would fit the bill.

The Christ-Like Commander

During the Syrian Campaign of 1799, a number of French soldiers contracted the plague. A general fear of this illness was spreading among the troops faster than the disease itself. In order to avoid a heightened panic, Napoleon met 50 incurable plague patients in Jaffa. Napoleon himself carried out of the hospital the corpse of a plague victim in order to boost morale and impress his troops. He believed that only those afraid of the plague would get it. By this point, he was becoming confident in his own personal destiny and wanted to show his comrades his extraordinary powers.



Bonaparte visiting the Plague Victims at Jaffa – By Gros

Gros' *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague Victims at Jaffa* was another important work in Napoleonic mythos. Ordered by Napoleon, this painting shows a fearless and Christ-like Napoleon touching the

sores and open wounds of these soldiers and prisoners, whose wounds would seemingly be healed by his charismatic touch.

It has been alleged that before the French left Jaffa on their retreat back to Egypt, Napoleon ordered the sick to be poisoned with fatal doses of opium before they were abandoned to die.

The Acme of Power

December 2, 1804 is one of the most memorable dates in the Napoleonic calendar, as this celebrates the crowning of Napoleon as Emperor of the French, with Pope Pius VII in attendance. Napoleon wanted an association with the pomp and majesty of Imperial Rome, and this is exactly what David produced for him.

Before Napoleon, art served a simple and political need. "Nothing is beautiful," Napoleon once told the Council of State, "unless it is large. Vastness and immensity can make you forget a great many defeats."¹¹

The Coronation of Napoleon

was begun in 1805 and was not completed until 1808. With Napoleon's blessing, David decided to focus on the

¹¹ Roberts, p. 137.

coronation of the Empress Josephine, rather than that of the Emperor himself. The Pope was depicted as merely a bemused onlooker at Notre-Dame. The portrait was hardly accurate, as Napoleon's mother, Madame Mère, did not even attend her son's coronation.

The painting itself was gigantic in size, measuring 610 centimeters by 931 centimeters. If, as Napoleon suggested, there is a correlation between the enormity of a work of art and its beauty, then David's masterpiece must have one of the most attractive of all. Upon seeing the final product, the Emperor told David, "You have understood my thoughts. You have made me a French knight."¹²

The great works of art commissioned in the Napoleonic Era were important in helping Napoleon construct his own legend. Such were the skills of Napoleon that his accounts were – and generally are today – unquestioned.

Napoleon was the first ruler to elevate propaganda into a weapon of war. The objective of this campaign was to increase the morale of the French army and general citizenry, upon whose continued support Napoleon relied.

Napoleon set in place a sophisticated, effective and multi-faceted communications campaign that portrayed him as superhuman, as invincible. All of the efforts put into this strategy were concentrated on Napoleon himself, who conveyed a strong

message of strength and hope to his target audience. In all respects, Napoleon's propaganda machine was theatrically brilliant and immensely successful. He was the earliest example of a superstar: an amalgam of Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Hannibal, Charlemagne and Jesus Christ.

¹² Lyons, p. 193.