

# The Geopolitical Transformation of the Italian Peninsula under Napoleon (1800-10)

## Alexander Grab

On 9-10 November 1799, a month after returning from Egypt, Napoleon rose to power in France in the famous coup of Brumaire, toppling the unpopular Directory and the two-chamber Legislature that had governed France since 1795. The new Constitution of Year VIII proclaimed the Consulate, with Napoleon as the powerful First Consul, heading the executive branch.<sup>1</sup> The new legislature was weak and divided and did not pose much of a challenge to Napoleon. Neither did the other two consuls who merely served in a consulting role. Napoleon consolidated his power in France and within two years, on 2 August 1802, became Consul for Life. On 18 May 1804 Napoleon was proclaimed Emperor of France and on 2 December crowned himself as the Emperor at Notre Dame with Pope Pius VII present.

Upon his rise to power, Napoleon needed to defeat the Second Coalition in order to secure his

---

1. For a recent comprehensive study of the Consulate period see, Thierry Lentz, *Le Grand Consulat 1799-1804* (Paris, 1999).

grip on power and retain the support of the French people. As in 1796, France faced Austria, its principal continental enemy, in Germany and northern Italy. Not surprisingly, Napoleon chose to confront the Habsburg army on the more familiar northern Italian terrain. He also had to save André Masséna's army, which was besieged by the Austrians in Genoa, the only Italian city to remain under French control following the defeats of 1799. On 15 May 1800, about six

months after seizing power, Napoleon launched his second Italian campaign, crossing the Alps into northern Italy through the Saint Bernard pass with an army 30,000 strong. Napoleon himself crossed on a sturdy mule, not the blazing white stallion portrayed in Jacques-Louis David's glorifying painting. The French occupied Turin a week later, and on 2 June Napoleon entered Milan, which the Austrians had

barely evacuated. Masséna capitulated to the Austrians in Genoa, two days later. This Austrian success, however, was short lived.

On 14 June, Napoleon defeated the Austrian

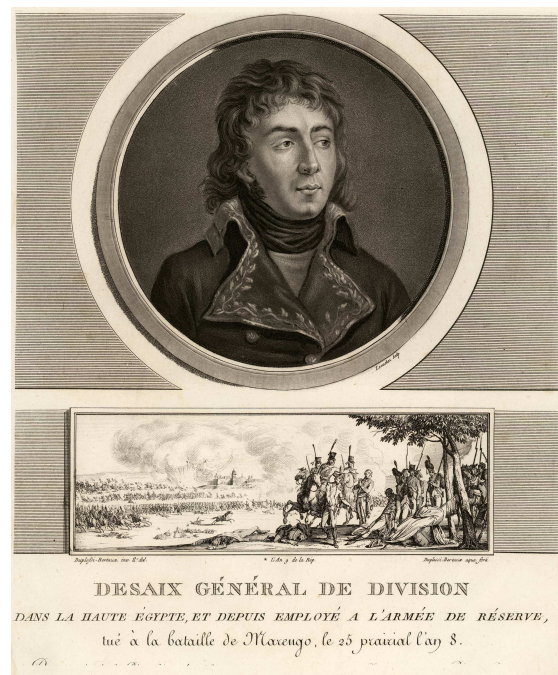


commander Michael Melas at the battle of Marengo, near Alessandria, thanks to the last-minute arrival of General Louis Desaix at the battlefield<sup>2</sup>. The next day, Melas asked for an armistice. As in 1796-97, military success in northern Italy was highly significant for Napoleon's future. It played a key role in assuring his hold on power in France and enabled him to expel the Austrians and restore French domination over most of northern Italy. Still, France had to wait until General Jean-Victor Moreau defeated Archduke John at Hohenlinden in southern Germany (3 December) to end the Second Coalition.

The victory over the Austrians inaugurated the second phase of the *epoca francese* in the Italian peninsula, which lasted for the next fourteen years (1800-1814). Dominating the peninsula was essential for the success of Napoleon's imperial policies, hence his incessant efforts to expand his rule there. Controlling northern Italy, which led to the alpine passes, gave France a strategic advantage over its bitter rival, the Austrian empire. Napoleon had demonstrated that when he invaded Tyrol through those passes in 1797, forcing Vienna to request a truce. The two countries continued to wage battles in northern Italy throughout the entire Napoleonic period. Moreover, controlling the long Italian coastline and the important ports

2 . David Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon : The Mind and Method of History's Greatest Soldier* (New York, 1966); Owen Connely, *Blundering to Glory : Napoleon's Military Campaigns* (Wilmington, Delaware, 1984) 66,70.

of Genoa, Livorno, Naples, Ancona, and Venice was crucial in challenging the powerful British navy in the Mediterranean and the Adriatic Seas and in establishing the Continental Blockade, Napoleon's most significant foreign policy after 1806. In fact, Napoleon began barring British commerce from Italy even earlier. Italy also was instrumental in any possible renewed attempt by Napoleon to gain a foothold in the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East. Exploiting the human and economic resources of Italy was another major way Napoleon used the peninsula to enhance his imperial power. Napoleon stationed thousands of French troops throughout the peninsula at the expense of local governments and drafted



tens of thousands of Italian soldiers to his *Grande Armée*. Italian troops fought under the Napoleonic banner in Spain, Germany, and Russia. The rich plains of Lombardy and

Piedmont constituted the basis for flourishing agriculture and an important source of fiscal contribution. Northern Italy was a major producer of rice, grain, and raw silk which Napoleon required to be exported to France to feed Lyon's silk industry, while Italian markets constituted an important outlet for French exports.<sup>3</sup> Napoleon forced his Italian satellite states to favor French imports over merchandise from other countries. The Emperor also used the peninsula by endowing his favorite military officers, public servants, and relatives with numerous land grants - dotations - there. Finally, Napoleon had a personal interest in Italy which was closer and more familiar to him than any other country, except for France; his ancestors originated from the peninsula, and it was the first country where he launched his reputation as a brilliant military commander. In sum, the Italian peninsula was highly valuable for Napoleon strategically, politically, economically, and personally.

During the first decade of the nineteenth century Napoleon incessantly and aggressively intervened in the peninsula, launching numerous geopolitical and governmental changes designed to consolidate French rule.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, no other

---

3. Alain Pillepich, *Milan capitale napoléonienne 1800-1814* (Paris, 2001), 587-600.

4. On the changes in the Italian peninsula after 1800 see, Giorgio Candeloro, *Storia dell'Italia moderna I Le origini del Risorgimento* (Milano, 1975); Francesco Lemmi, *Storia politica d'Italia L'età napoleonica* (Milan, 1938); Andre Fugier, *Napoléon et l'Italie* (Paris, 1947); Jacques Driault, *Napoléon en Italie (1800-1812)*, (Paris, 1906); Jacques Godechot, *Altalie@ Dictionnaire*

country in the Napoleonic Empire underwent so many transformations and experienced so much effort on the part of Napoleon to incorporate it into his empire as the Italian peninsula. The French ruler gradually expanded his domination there by reshaping its map, changing borders, deposing old rulers and crowning new ones, annexing territories into the French empire, and creating new satellite states. The emperor punished and toppled enemies while endowing relatives and supporters with land and authority. The Napoleonic authorities introduced many reform programs, laws, and institutions modeled on the French system into every corner of the peninsula in their efforts to Afrenchify@ it. Militarily, the peninsula became a secondary front after 1800, as the main battle fronts moved to central, northern, and eastern Europe as well as Iberia. Still, the French army was busy clashing with the Austrians in several battles in northern Italy in 1805 and 1809 and in 1806 Napoleonic troops conquered southern Italy.

The geopolitical changes that Napoleon initiated in Italy can be divided into three distinct periods: 1800-1802; 1805-1806; 1808-1809. With each phase, Napoleon increased his imperial domination over the peninsula.

**1800-1802** - The victory at Marengo wiped out the territorial settlement established in

---

*Napoléon* (Paris, 1989), 942-945; Stuart Woolf, *A History of Italy 1700-1860 The Social Constraints of Political Change* (London, 1979), 188-226; Gregory Desmond, *Napoleon's Italy* (Madison, London, 2001).

northern Italy in 1799, enabling the French to reoccupy Piedmont, Liguria, Lombardy, and Emilia. Soon the First Consul began reorganizing those regions, reconstituting the Cisalpine and the Ligurian republics. The former, which was renamed the Second Cisalpine Republic, consisted of the First Cisalpine Republic, the Novarese that had belonged to Piedmont, and a small part of Austrian Veneto.<sup>5</sup> On 9 February 1801, Austria recognized the new reality in the Treaty of Lunéville, which it signed with France and which essentially confirmed the Treaty of Campo Formio. On 27 March 1802, Napoleon concluded with Britain the Peace of Amiens, which proved to be a brief truce, however, lasting for only fourteen months. Neither treaty deterred Napoleon from expanding and strengthening his rule in the peninsula. In January 1802 the First Consul convened an assembly of north Italian notables in the city of Lyons which changed the Second Cisalpine into the Italian Republic, approved a new constitution modeled on France, and chose Napoleon as its powerful president. The Ligurian republic came under tighter control of Napoleon who approved its new constitution (June 1802) and selected its executive. A provisional republican regime was set up in Turin under

---

5. Zaghi, *L'Italia di Napoleone dalla cisalpina al regno* (Turin, 1986), 249.



*Napoleon by Ledru*

French protection in 1801, but on 11 September 1802, Napoleon annexed Piedmont to France, dividing it into six new departments: Doire, Marengo, Po, Sesia, Stura, and Tanaro.<sup>6</sup> This act disappointed leaders of the Italian republic who had hoped that Piedmont would be joined to their new state. The annexation of Piedmont was the most significant move in terms of consolidating France's position in Italy during this phase. Aside from its economic wealth, possession of Piedmont gave Napoleon

control over the western alpine passes (e.g. Saint Bernard) and access to the Lombard plain. Then, in August 1802, Napoleon annexed the island of Elba to France and in October extended the French rule to Parma following the death of its Bourbon duke, Ferdinand. He sent to Parma the French official Moreau de Saint-Méry who established there French laws and institutions. Earlier, in 1801 Napoleon also introduced a constitution, modeled on the French one,

into the small republic of Lucca, which had been ruled by local patricians before the Revolution and was now occupied by French troops. As for Tuscany, its fate was decided in the Franco-Spanish treaty of Aranjuez (March 1801) which handed it over to Louis the son of

---

6. Michael Broers, *Napoleonic Imperialism and the Savoyard Monarchy 1773-1821 State Building and Piedmont* (Lewiston, NY, 1997), 168.



the Duke of Parma and son-in-law of the Spanish monarch Charles IV, in exchange for the Spanish cession of Louisiana to France. Tuscany was renamed the Kingdom of Etruria. In May 1803, Louis died and his wife Maria-Louisa, the daughter of Charles IV, succeeded him.<sup>7</sup> Although the Kingdom of Etruria remained officially independent, Napoleon had the power to abrogate it at will. In sum, by the end of 1802 the French dominated directly Piedmont and Parma and indirectly the Republics of Italy and Liguria, and the Kingdom of Etruria. Those conditions would facilitate Napoleonic interventions in the Papal State and the Kingdom of Naples in later years.<sup>8</sup>

During the same years Napoleon also increased his power and influence in Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands.<sup>9</sup> Yet the increase of French power in Italy contributed more than any other Napoleonic continental expansion to the deterioration of relations with England and the rekindling of war.<sup>10</sup> Those policies would encourage England not to evacuate Malta, thus violating the Treaty of Amiens, and the hostilities between the two countries resumed in May 1803.

#### **1805-1806 - During the years 1805-6 Napoleon**

---

7. Michael Broers, *The Napoleonic Empire in Italy, 1796-1814 Cultural Imperialism in a European Context?* (London, 2005), 77-80.

8. Candeloro, *Storia dell'Italia*, 291.

9. Alexander Grab, *Napoleon and the Transformation of Europe* (London, 2003) 65-66, 88-89, 117-19.

10. Paul Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics 1763-1848* (Oxford, 1994), 239.

brought his imperial rule in Italy to new height. Much of the motivation in extending French rule during those years stemmed from the wish to bar British commerce from Italy and defy Albion in the Mediterranean. On 19 March 1805, following his coronation as emperor, he transformed the Italian Republic into the Kingdom of Italy with him as its hereditary king. In May, Napoleon crowned himself in the cathedral of Milan. This step, which increased his authority over the north Italian state substantially, was a clear violation of Lunéville. It contributed to the decision of Austria, which wished to restore its hegemony in Italy, to join the Third Coalition with England and Russia later that year. In June 1805, Napoleon incorporated Liguria and its important port of Genoa into France, creating the departments of Gênes, Montenotte, and Apennin. In the same month, Napoleon appointed his sister Elisa and her husband Felix Bacciocchi as the rulers of the principality of Lucca and Piombino. In September 1805, the War of the Third Coalition broke out. Shortly after the French victory at Ulm (20 October), Masséna and Archduke Charles fought an indecisive battle at Caldiero, east of Verona (30 October) after which Charles withdrew from Italy, rushing to help the Austrian army in Germany.<sup>11</sup> On 2 December Napoleon beat the Austrian and Russian armies at Austerlitz, forcing Austria to withdraw from the Third Coalition and sign the treaty of Pressburg (26 December 1805). Vienna ceded the Veneto and the old Venetian possessions of Istria, and Dalmatia,

---

11. Frederick Schneid, *Napoleon's Italian Campaigns 1805-1815* (Westport, Connecticut, 2002), 27- 43.

which Napoleon added to the Kingdom of Italy, thereby strengthening his control over the Adriatic Sea.

A day later, Napoleon announced from Schönbrunn Palace near Vienna that the Bourbon dynasty of Naples had ceased to reign.<sup>12</sup> Ferdinand IV had joined the Third Coalition, thereby violating a treaty of neutrality he had signed with France. This provided Napoleon a pretext to invade the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, topple the Bourbons, and gain control over southern Italy which was crucial for the soon to be declared Continental Blockade. In February 1806, Marshal Masséna, with an army of 40,000 men, invaded southern Italy and, after defeating the Bourbon army, occupied Naples. For the second time in less than eight years, Ferdinand and his wife Maria Carolina fled to Sicily where they enjoyed British protection. On 30 March Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon's older brother, was crowned king of the Kingdom of Naples. Joseph faced a fierce two-year brigand-led revolt in Calabria, and while he succeeded in suppressing the revolt, some resistance and disorder lingered throughout the period of the French rule.<sup>13</sup> The new Neapolitan king launched important economic, administrative, fiscal, and legal reforms, most significantly the abolition of feudalism (August 1806). Joseph ruled over Naples for a little over two years. In July 1808 Napoleon appointed him as the king of Spain,

---

12. John Davis, *Naples and Napoleon Southern Italy and the European Revolutions 1780-1860* (Oxford, 2006), 130.

13. *Ibid.*, 134-35, 209-231.

replacing him with his brother in law Joachim Murat, the husband of his sister Caroline and grand-duke of Berg. Murat would rule over Naples until 1815.

**1807-1809** - The need to seal the Italian coasts in order to impose the Blockade more



efficiently stimulated the emperor to establish full control in regions that lay between the Lombard plain and southern Italy. Using as a pretext that Maria-Louisa, the ruler of the Kingdom of Etruria, was unreliable since she was more attached to Spain than to France, Napoleon ordered her to leave Florence and abolished the Kingdom of Etruria (December 1807). In March 1808 the emperor annexed Tuscany to France, dividing it into the departments of Arno, Méditerranée, and Ombrone. This move aimed at preventing the smuggling of English goods through the important Tuscan port of Livorno. In May 1808, Napoleon also integrated Parma into

France, forming the department of Taro. The Papacy was the last Italian state to come under Napoleon's rule. Its territory was reduced to the regions of Latium and Umbria after Napoleonic troops seized the Marche, including the port of Ancona, (November 1807) in order to strengthen French control over the Adriatic littoral. Relations between Napoleon and Pius VII had deteriorated since the latter had declined to annul the marriage of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome Bonaparte to his American wife Elizabeth Patterson,<sup>14</sup> and later refused to recognize Joseph as king of Naples. The Pope protested the occupation of the Marche but to no avail. Most importantly, however, Pius rejected the Napoleonic demands to collaborate in enforcing the Continental Blockade and close his ports to English goods. In February 1808, the emperor ordered General Sextius Miollis to occupy Rome and the rest of the state. In May 1808, Napoleon annexed the Marche to the Kingdom of Italy. On 10 June 1809, the emperor added the rump Papal state to France, creating the departments of Tiber and Trasimène and declaring Rome as the second city of the empire. Pius VII quickly excommunicated the emperor, who retaliated by arresting the Pope (6 July, 1809) and exiling him to Savona on the Italian Riviera. In February 1813 the Pope was moved to the palace of Fontainebleau near Paris, where he stayed until Napoleon released him in early 1814.

As in the war of 1805, during the Franco-

---

14. E.E.Y. Hales, *Napoleon and the Pope* (London, 1962), 86-7.

Austrian war of 1809, northern Italy served as a secondary front to the two other fronts of Central Europe and Poland.<sup>15</sup> An Austrian army under Archduke John invaded the Kingdom of Italy, forcing Eugène de Beauharnais, Napoleon's vice-roy in the Kingdom of Italy, to evacuate the eastern



territories of the Veneto. On 16 April, John defeated Eugène at the battle of Sacile, east of the Adige River. Three weeks later, on 8 May, Eugène inflicted a crushing blow on the Austrians at the battle of Piave, forcing John to retreat into Hungary. In late 1809, following the Franco-Austrian war Napoleon removed the regions of Dalmatia and Istria from the Kingdom of Italy and added them to

---

15. Robert Epstein, *Napoleon's Last Victory and the Emergence of Modern War* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1994), 74-96.

the newly created Illyrian Provinces. In 1810, Napoleon added South Tyrol, which had belonged to Bavaria, to the Kingdom of Italy, creating the department of Alto-Adige.

And so, by 1810 Napoleon completed the reshaping of the peninsula's map. Ultimately, the emperor reduced the fifteen Italian Old Regime states into three parts totally dependent on France: 1. The northern Italian republic, which Napoleon transformed into the Kingdom of Italy in 1805; 2. The southern Kingdom of Naples; 3. The regions Napoleon annexed to France (*départements réunis*), including Piedmont, Liguria, Tuscany, Parma, and a part of the former Papal State with the city of Rome. The small principality of Lucca-Piombino existed as a separate entity under French administration. Only the islands of Sardinia and Sicily, where the Savoyard king Charles Emmanuel IV and the Neapolitan monarch Ferdinand IV found refuge, respectively, remained outside the French orbit, thanks to British power in the Mediterranean Sea.