

Haakon Goflebakke Foss

# The concept of "Total War" and its Impact on French Military and Warfare in the period 1792-1815

How France through the use of mobilization affected their way of waging war in Europe

Bachelor's thesis in History  
Supervisor: David Brégaint  
May 2024



Haakon Goflebakke Foss

# **The concept of “Total War” and its Impact on French Military and Warfare in the period 1792-1815**

How France through the use of mobilization affected  
their way of waging war in Europe

Bachelor's thesis in History  
Supervisor: David Brégaint  
May 2024

Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
Faculty of Humanities  
Department of Historical and Classical Studies



## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	1
1.1. Topic and research question .....	2
1.2. Prior research on the topic .....	3
<b>2. Method and Literature</b> .....	4
2.1. Method .....	4
2.2. Literature review .....	5
<b>Main body</b> .....	7
<b>3. The Concept of "total war"</b> .....	7
3.1. Origins and present day .....	7
3.2. Military Tactics and Theory: Clausewitz and Jomini .....	9
<b>4. Napoleonic Warfare – Infantry, Artillery and Cavalry</b> .....	11
4.1. Napoleonic Warfare .....	11
4.2. Infantry .....	13
4.3. Artillery .....	15
4.4. Cavalry .....	17
<b>5. French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815)</b> .....	19
5.1. French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802) .....	19
5.1.1. <i>Lévee en mass</i> - French mobilization of the masses .....	20
5.2. Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) .....	23
5.2.1 <i>La Grande Armée</i> .....	24
<b>5 Summary</b> .....	27
<b>6 Literature list</b> .....	29

## **1. Introduction**

"Total War", as the term used in the modern age, is a fitting description of the characteristic's warfare portrayed during the late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. These intertwined conflicts, often categorized under "*The Napoleonic Wars*", were marked by a vast mobilization of both military and civilian resources. Entire nations and societies were drawn into a series of conflicts on a scale previously unseen in European- and world history. Armies reaching hundreds of thousands of men in size now needed new tactics and strategies to wage wars. As more men were needed to directly fight in the new conflicts, the many dead and the new scale of destruction reached a new level.

### **1.1 Topic and research question**

The French revolution brought with it massive changes to not only French society, but was also the start of what would develop into the French Revolutionary Wars. They were fought by France against many of the European powers, who feared the extremist nature and ideals of the revolution. Europe had for a long time been ruled by kings and emperors, backed by the aristocracy, which now were threatened by the emergence of a republic in one of the biggest nations of the time. Inspired by the American Revolutionary War just a few years prior, who had shown that a republic was not only possible to achieve, but also maintain. The French Revolutionary Wars was different than the conflict fought out in North America, not only in term of brutality, but also in the everlasting effects following it. Not only would they force their enemies back against all odds, but they would also push on into enemy territory following their victories in France. It is also in this conflict, that a Corsican artillery captain would make his way up the ranks, eventually commanding entire armies after showing great promises. His name was Napoleon Bonaparte.

The Napoleonic Wars erupted as a direct result of the French Revolutionary Wars, as it completely overhauled society and the French armed forces. Napoleon, rising up through the ranks in the army in credit to the opportunities provided by the revolution, would eventually become the emperor of France and with it he would wage war for many years to come. Beating opponent after opponent, with lightning speed tactics, his reputation as a master of the continent would quickly take root. He would fight on many battlefields throughout his military career. From the land of sand and pharaohs in Egypt, to the snowy forests of Russia, he would lead his armies in combat. Eventually, losing everything he had fought to conquer. Yet, his legacy would last long after his death.

How did France, before and under Napoleon's military and civilian leadership, embrace and implement the mobilization principle of “Total War” through the conscription of civilians into military service?

By analysing this key aspect, I aim to answer how France's military efforts were impacted by their mobilization of civilians into the military throughout the wars. Understanding the evolution of this concept and its relation to France during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, requires delving into the dynamics of warfare, tactics and the geopolitical landscape of the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

## **1.2 Prior research on the topic**

Napoleon, as well as the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars are heavily researched topics. Well known authors like David Chandler, Andrew Roberts and Adam Zamoyski are among many who have written extensively on either the man himself or the wars. There was therefore no shortage of literature to pick from. Covering all aspects of either his life, military- or political career.

The concept of “total war” is also a heavily researched topic, mostly of covering it in relation to the First and Second World Wars. I also came over some literature covering the general concept applied on nations, such as Germany, France, and the United States. Though these were large analyses covering a broad period or fixated on a specific period. I found much research, including what would be my chosen literature, by searching up keywords such as “mobilization, Napoleonic Wars, conscription, French Revolutionary Wars, Napoleon” to name a few, on websites such as JSTOR, ORIA, and Google Books.

There was also an extensive array of research covering the aspects connected to warfare in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Many of these covered the broader aspects of warfare during the relevant period, whilst others went more in depth on individual countries and the development of their armed forces. Some covered a broad period of development for their armies, whilst others focused on a specific aspect of the military at the time. An example of this is David B. Bell, who is the author of one of my chosen literatures, “*The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe And the Birth of Warfare As We Know It*” (2007). I found a journal article through JSTOR written by him, named “WHEN THE LEVEE BREAKS: *Dissenting from the Draft*” (2008), which was a part of a Journal called “World Affairs”. I found it to be an interesting read, although I ultimately did not use it in my thesis.

## **2. Method and literature**

In this section I will explain my chosen method for this thesis as well as why. This includes how I shaped this thesis. Followed by an analysis of my chosen literature, with its strengths and weaknesses. This will also encompass my own opinion on said literature.

### **2.1 Method**

To answer my research question, I have chosen to make use of secondary sources in the form of books. I have made use of several books covering everything from Napoleon, through Warfare in the Napoleonic Wars as well as the concept of “total war” and its relation to the Napoleonic Wars. To be able to understand how the mobilization aspect of “total war” worked in practice during this period, I started by searching for secondary sources that would fit my research question. I quickly found David Bells book, my first source, which ultimately made me decide to write my thesis on this topic. Due to my fascination of- and interest in military history, I already had a good amount of knowledge of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars prior to finding my other sources, which has been a strong advantage when working on this thesis combined with my interest in the topic. My pre-existing knowledge has been largely attained through the use of several different media, as well as books. Some examples of these mediums are:

The grand strategy game “Napoleon: Total War” (2010), a video game where the player is given control of a nation state set in the Napoleonic Wars. The player is given control over all aspects of said nation state, including but not limited to economy, politics, diplomatic relations, as well as control over the army and navy. When initiating battles, they are fought out on large battlefields with potentially tens of thousands of unplayable characters formed up in regiments and batteries. These units are then controlled by the player and enemy AI (artificial intelligence) and behave in manor as real as a video game can portray them. With the games focus on visual and historical accuracy, I largely credited it for me gaining an interest in this period at a young age.

Another example worth mentioning is a YouTube channel called “Epic History Tv”. A channel with 2.3 million subscribers as of May 2023. They produce a wide range of historical informative videos based on real life events and wars such as The First Crusade, but also have a lot of videos on both Napoleon and his campaigns, which goes into immense detail. I credit



this channel for not only maintain my interest in this period into my late teens, but also for making me learn something new every time they release a new video.

I quickly knew that I needed to find more sources on the topic as I could not solely rely on one book, my own knowledge, and some YouTube videos to create a proper thesis. By searching on websites such as JSTOR and ORIA, combined with visiting several different websites containing reviews on books covering Napoleon and the period, I found 4 more secondary sources which proved to be of great value. After finding, reading reviews and exploring the sources myself I was satisfied with my findings and got to work. After spending a lot of time reading and interpreting my chosen sources, I created a plan where I split the main body into three parts, covering the basics behind the concept of “total war” combined with military theory first, followed up by explaining how Napoleonic warfare and the different combat arms worked in practice. Lastly, I could start discussing my research question by analysing how France and subsequently Napoleon made use of mobilization, as well as accounting for the problems they faced and how they remedied them. I finished my thesis off with a summary, including what I deemed was the most important factors I had discovered.

## **2.2 Literature review**

As previously mentioned, I have used 5 secondary sources for working on my thesis. I will now present the used literature, as well as coming with my own opinion on it.

- The first piece of literature I found and chose to use was "The First Total War: *Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It*" (2007), written by David A. Bell. He is an historian whose area of specialization is French history. By analysing many aspects of not only the French revolution, but also the wars following it, his book is about how our modern notions of the concept of “total war” can be traced back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries warfare and socio-political situation. I found it somewhat confusing at first, as he at times does contradict himself. However, his take on how the aspects of “total war” was first born during this period was both interesting and helpful in writing this thesis.  
He has written many books on both Napoleon himself, as well as works exploring different aspects found in the French Revolution such as social factors and nationalism.

- The second piece of literature I used was “The Campaigns of Napoleon” (1966) by David Chandler. He is a military historian who has written extensively on Napoleon, his battles, and his marshals. His book was crucial to gain an understanding of the not only how the Napoleon and the aspect of mobilization went hand in hand, but also gain an overall picture of France and its military development after Napoleons rise to power.
- The third piece of literature I used was “Napoleonic Warfare: *The Operational Art of the Great Campaigns*” (2015) by John T. Kuehn. He is a Professor of Military History, and his book proved vital to not only getting a sense of the operational art of warfare at the time, but also how it affected modern day military thinking. His information regarding the military theorists I write about was also very helpful. He also included chronological dates to important events at the beginning of each chapter in his book, which further helped me provide exact dates for events throughout the thesis. He also acknowledges David Chandler for his work on both Napoleon and his campaigns.
- The fourth piece of literature used was “Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon” by Rory Muir. He is a researcher at University of Adelaide, and his work was of vital importance to gain a greater understanding of how the various combat arms behaved and was organized throughout the Napoleonic Wars. I found his book to be important for my section on infantry, artillery, and cavalry.
- The last piece of literature used was “The People in Arms: *Military Myth and National Mobilization since the French Revolution*” (2003). It is a book comprised of different chapters covering mobilization throughout history, with the first and second chapter being relevant to me and my study. Each chapter is written by different authors, and the book is edited by Daniel Moran and Arthur Waldron. I found this book to be extremely helpful when delving deeper into the mobilization aspects of the French Revolution and the early stages of the Revolutionary Wars.

A last important note to make regarding almost all of my sources used, except the work by Rory Muir, is that they all cover some of the mobilization aspects of either The French Revolutionary Wars, The Napoleonic Wars and both. Even though I used specific works at times to back up my claims, they all were of importance to gain an overall understanding of mobilizing French citizens for service in the wars.

## **Main body**

### **3. The Concept of "Total War"**

«*Wollt ihr den totalen Krieg?*»

- Joseph Goebbels, 1943.

This is the infamous question that the propaganda minister of the Third Reich would ask in a speech to his fellow party members in 1943.<sup>1</sup> He asks the crowd whether they are ready for- and to commit to a *total war*. It is a phrase that not only sums up the fanatical nature of the Nazis, but also to what extent modern warfare had developed into. It was not only seen in World War 2, as the conflict twenty years earlier also encompassed many of the traits related to the concept of “total war”. To understand the mobilization of civilians during the Napoleonic Wars we must explore what the concept of “total war” truly means.

#### **3.1. Origins and present day**

The concept of “total war” entails the mobilization of the civilian populace for mandatory service in the military during times of war, but also the use of all economic resources and industrial capacity for military purposes.<sup>2</sup> At its core, “total war” represents a radical shift from the limited and constrained methods and sizes of earlier conflicts, whereas it now seeks the entire effort of both military and civilian lives to achieve total victory. It was not a new concept in terms of its practical aspects in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the city states of ancient Greece could to some extent, be compared to the “modern” concept, as in the 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>th</sup> century warfare.<sup>3</sup> The city states of old used to form its own “citizen” armies, not out of professional soldiers but rather the inhabitants of the different city states. In times of war, these city states would funnel all their resources and available manpower towards their war efforts.<sup>4</sup> However, the conflicts on Greek soil in ancient times cannot be directly compared to the operational art of warfare used by the huge nation states of Napoleons reign, as they had as a vast array of resources as well as millions of inhabitants.

Though Nazi Germany were among the first to coin the famous wording of “total war”, the United States of America is in my opinion important in the discussion of how the practical aspect of the concept works in the later stages of the modern age. During World War 2, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Bell, 2007, p. 516

<sup>2</sup> Bell, 2007, p. 32-33

<sup>3</sup> Bell, 2007, p. 193-194

<sup>4</sup> Bell, 2007, p. 26

US went from a non-intervention policy to total war footing after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Not only were millions of Americans put in uniform and sent to fight in the different theatres of war, but millions were also put to work in factories producing everything from plane parts to weapons and rations. Especially women played a huge role in this aspect, as millions of women went into factories and helped the US produce much of its essential equipment and weapons. At its peak, the production efficiency found among factories in the US were unmatched, maybe challenged to some extent by the Soviet Union. After the war, the US decided it would step up on the world stage as a beacon of democracy, ready to intervene in conflicts when needed. As a result, the US needed to maintain the biggest and most versatile army in the world, backed up by a massive economy which in the matter of days and weeks were, in theory, able to completely turn from a civilian- to a military economy.

David Bell, author of “The First Total War” tries to explain exactly what the concept entails. He even goes so far as to claim that a full total war, can never be accomplished, in other words, a full mobilization of all resources and manpower in a country towards the war effort is impossible. Instead, he tries to explain it in a cultural and political context in which any and all restraints previously found in warfare, disappears. War had become an existential threat to a state’s existence, instead of a small conflict with limited loss of life.<sup>5</sup>

His claims are further reinforced by the number of lives lost through the Napoleonic Wars, which reached a new all-time high never seen before. Bell goes on to state that close to one million French soldiers would lose their lives in the span of the conflicts, which is a bigger proportion of lives than France lost during World War 1. Furthermore, up to five million people in total would die as a result of the Napoleonic Wars. As a last argument to his claims, he mentions guerrilla fighting occurred in many countries, which left everlasting scars on not only the land but also the population for decades to come.<sup>6</sup>

In my own opinion, this is a biproduct of a total war, where all means necessary is used to harass, slow down or halt an enemy’s advance and war effort on your own soil. The Peninsular War, fought in Spain after Frances invasion in 1808 all the way through the fall of France, truly showed not only the French but the rest of the world that guerrilla and partisan fighters, if supported and determined enough, could do serious harm to an invading force.

---

<sup>5</sup> Bell, 2007, p. 22-27

<sup>6</sup> Bell, 2007, p. 23-24

The type of warfare found in the throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century can be viewed as much less “brutal” in contrast to earlier and eventually later warfare. Bell explains that even though war, in the eyes of people at the time, were seen as a natural part of life, the scale of which Wars were waged could be coined as “limited”.<sup>7</sup> Smaller armies and smaller engagements, combined with mutual respect between the aristocracy of the armies and states, meant that warfare was looked upon as a completely fair and lawful way to settle your differences. Even though the horrors of war could still be found, especially in the Seven Years’ War a few decades earlier, the scale of destruction and suffering that would come about in the Napoleonic Wars were largely missing in the period after the wars following the Reformation. France would, towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, find themselves in war with some of the great powerhouses of Europe at the time. Not only were they at war with huge nation states such as the Austria and Prussia, but also in a semi-civil war.<sup>8</sup> Pro-royalist revolts rose up throughout France, further threatening the new young republic. To combat their new existential threats, France would make use of a big aspect of “total war”, that is to say the mobilization of the populace for wartime service. This aspect would be recurring through the Napoleonic Wars, as more and more men were needed to fight in the many campaigns to come. To understand how and why mobilization took place, we must delve deeper into the military tactics and theory of the Napoleonic Wars.

### **3.2 Operational level of war and military theory: Clausewitz and Jomini**

Two military thinkers are mentioned repeatedly in the different sources used for this thesis, one had a direct effect on military theory during the Napoleonic Wars, the other became prominent after the release of his works following his death. One would directly influence Napoleons way of waging war, whilst the other would develop his military thinking based on Napoleons strategies and tactics, which then again was somewhat based on the first. An important clarification, which sums up the French army’s goals, ways of waging and committing to war both prior to and after Napoleons rise to power, is called the *Operational art*.

We are familiar with the term’s *tactics* and *strategies*, which is a part of the levels of war. By adding the *operational level*, we can divide them into three levels in this simplified version of the art of warfare:

---

<sup>7</sup> Bell, 2007, p.19-20

<sup>8</sup> Kuehn, 2015, p. 33

- The tactical aspects are based on how to win a battle or engagement, thereby supporting the operational plans.
- The operational aspects, also known as the *operational art*, involve the planning and execution of campaigns and missions, often involving the manoeuvres and logistical aspects. Ultimately it is the aspect which aims to fulfil the strategic aims.
- The strategic aspect is aimed at how to win the overall war or conflict, and is often but not always, what military high command focuses on.

These three aspects together make up the levels of war, the armed forces' way of planning and execution of wars.<sup>9</sup>

Baron Antoine Jomini is the first of two important military theorists at the time, credited for “inventing” the operational principles which were later utilized by Napoleon and his marshals. The operational principles in question is based on four different components, relatively new at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. John T. Kuehns, author of “Napoleonic Warfare”, describes it as: «... embodied in the concepts of maneuver, mass, offensive, and objective.»<sup>10</sup>

Through a study of Fredrick the Great's campaigns, Jomini were able to produce his “principles of war”, based on the four previously mentioned aspects.

He is largely credited for his implementation of manoeuvring (essentially speed, both on and off the battlefield) and logistical planning in the operational art of war.<sup>11</sup>

Carl von Clausewitz, a Prussian officer alive at the same time would after his death when his works was released, became an inspiration to future military theorist. His analysis of war combined with his inspiration from Napoleons campaigns and Jomini's work on operational art of warfare, created a series of books which in great detailed outlined the operational level of war, as well as other important aspects. To some extent, both Jomini and Clausewitz's theories go hand in hand, but where their differences is most noticeable, is Clausewitz's focus on strategic aims, that is to say how to plan for, fight out and win a war.

Both theorists would go on to inspire the Soviets version of the operational art, however Clausewitz remain relevant to this day, something Kuehns emphases through comparing

---

<sup>9</sup> Kuehn, 2015, p. 16-19

<sup>10</sup> Kuehn, 2015, p. 17

<sup>11</sup> Kuehn, 2015, p. 21-22

Clausewitz's take on strategic definition with the US army manuals definition of the same aspect.<sup>12</sup>

#### **4. Napoleonic Warfare – Infantry, Cavalry and Artillery**

To further understand why and how mobilization of the masses affected the French army during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, we have to delve deeper into how armies of the age operated. For this, I will use Rory Muir's "Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon" (1996), as his work is detailed when it comes to not only how armies operated on the battlefields, but also how the individual components of the armed forces involved Napoleonic Wars worked in practice. This section will be split into three parts, covering the three main arms found in an army of the Napoleonic era. Before exploring the different combat arms, I will give a brief explanation as to some of the most important aspects of Napoleonic Warfare.

##### **4.1 Napoleonic Warfare**

As previously stated, armies and battles were of a much larger size during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars than before. Yet it was preferred that armies did not exceed around 60.000 men strong, even though many battles of the period were fought with over 100.000 or more on one side. There are several factors which plays a role as to why, such as command and control, logistical demands, and the environment.

Campaigns usually happened during the dry seasons, whilst seeing combat and skirmishes reaching a peak in the late spring – summer – and early autumn. The reasoning for this being large armies either relied long supply lines to friendly territories or forging the land when in hostile territory, something which became more complicated during wintertime and wet seasons.<sup>13</sup> Yet, battles and campaigns did take place during winter though this was not the norm.

Another key reason as to why dry and nice weather was the best option, was the length of which military technology were at during the time. Most weapons relied on gunpowder to be able to send their projectiles flying towards the enemy, mainly used in muskets, cannons and flintlock pistols. Gunpowder does not work well when exposed to water or harsh environments, rendering the weapons almost useless.

---

<sup>12</sup> Kuehn, 2015, p. 18-24

<sup>13</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 13-14

Muir states that with armies reaching the hundreds of thousands came the problem of not only flexibility on and off the battlefield, but also keeping the armies coordinated.<sup>14</sup> Napoleon is credited for solving the problem of flexibility by dividing his forces often into *corps* and *divisions*, all though these practices developed during the French Revolutionary Wars. Corps were usually multiple divisions combined, also consisting of supporting elements. Consisting of everywhere from 5000 to 10.000 men,<sup>15</sup> a division was seen as a small army also consisting of supporting units, able to move along other roads than the main body and fight independently for a limited time, yet still being reliant on reinforcements. Other divisions would come to the rescue when another division sent word of them being in combat. By making it easier to manoeuvre one could also outflank or threaten the enemies' line of supplies and retreat, thereby winning a battle without fighting it.<sup>16</sup> Outflanking your enemy could in some instances come as such a shock that it instigated an orderly retreat to a safer position, or in the best-case scenario, forcing the enemy into a rout. It is also important to point out that the number of men a division or corps was made up of, could deviate as many factors played a role as to if the unit was at reduced or full strength. Casualties taken in battle needed to be replenished, as well as ammunition, lost and broken weaponry, and so on.

The last point to mention is how important the grounds of battle were. If one could eliminate the enemy's possibility to outflank you, the battle would be resolved through a pitched battle instead of outmanoeuvring your enemy. However, most of the battles during this period took place on large open fields, sometimes with hills, villages, and forests. The army choosing the battlefield often had the advantage, as they could easier scout and plan out their course of actions prior to when the engagement started.<sup>17</sup> How one chose to fight their battle fell under their overall strategic aims, as sometimes it was not about winning to advance, but winning to buy time for a retreat or for a friendly force to outflank the enemy. Muir also explains that the outflanking aspect of combat became more and more prominent as the years passed, with more generals becoming cautious and thereby reducing its effectiveness towards the last years of the wars.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 12

<sup>15</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 69

<sup>16</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 14

<sup>17</sup> Muir, 2000, p.15-16

<sup>18</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 14-15



He further on explains that an army of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries consisted of three combat arms; the *infantry*, *cavalry*, and *artillery*. These three arms combined was the most common units to find on a Napoleonic battlefield, and they remained largely the same over the 20-year span of conflicts. I will now break down the three different combat arms and explain their role during the Napoleonic Wars.

## 4.2 Infantry

The Infantry was viewed as the backbone of the army, not only because they made up the biggest part of a military force, which was anywhere from 60 to 90 percent, but because they also were versatile when it came to their practical uses. Muir states that they could be used in almost any terrain, both for offensive and defensive operations.<sup>19</sup> It is also this part of the army that most conscripted men were integrated into, as they also suffered the most casualties in battles. When it comes to how the infantry was organised at lower levels, companies, battalions, and regiments were the most common. Consisting of anywhere from a few hundred men to over a thousand, the battalion, created by combining several companies, was the main way the soldiers were organised.<sup>20</sup> The battalions could be formed together to create regiments, which again could together form a division. Multiple divisions would form a corps, the biggest organized grouping within an army. As previously mentioned, the divisions often were viewed as small armies, with supporting battalions of artillery, cavalry, medical- and logistical staff.

The French also kept what Muir calls “depot battalions”, who’s primary role was to prepare and integrated new recruits and conscripts into the existing battalions. These came about during the French Revolutionary Wars. Just like in earlier history, the other more “prestigious” positions in an army such as cavalry, and artillery to some extent, were reserved for either career soldiers or men of a higher social background.

The musket was the main weapon used by the infantry, and it is well known for being wildly inaccurate at anywhere from medium to long range. However, even at short range, at an individual target, the musket did not prove itself as effective. Therefore, the way armies fought in this period was shaped by their weaponry. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, men had fought in line formations, consisting of long lines, either two or three men deep, with the rest spread out shoulder to shoulder in length. By concentrating the men and thereby their muskets in such a

---

<sup>19</sup> Muir, 2000, p.15, 68-69

<sup>20</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 69-71

manor in one direction, they could send a literal wall of lead towards the enemy. Even though some bullets missed their targets, some would hit their mark. This had been and remained the most common way of engaging your enemies throughout the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.

Muir later explains although the infantry was drilled in volley firing, that is to say all the soldiers fired at the same time, the confusion in the heat of battle could have; “quickly degenerated into individual fire-at-will”,<sup>21</sup> thereby reducing the overall effectiveness of the battalion or regiment when engaged. It is safe to assume that the drilling and training of the soldiers were essential to prevent them from losing cohesion, breaking or even routing after receiving the first volley by an enemy. Muir goes on to state, that even though muskets were responsible for many casualties in a battle or engagement, it still was not the deciding factor.<sup>22</sup> He instead credits tactical advantages such fear of being outmanoeuvred, reinforcement rate and morale as potential deciding factors. Another way to view this is the better the troops and morale, the harder, more brutal and bloody the price of victory would be.

Another brutal aspect often associated with the warfare of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century is the bayonet. Often viewed as the deciding factor of a charge, or in some cases the last resort when out of ammunition or when in a desperate situation. What was a bayonet exactly? Muir explains: “... all infantries were armed with a bayonet - usually about fifteen inches long — which fitted around the muzzle of their gun, and hindered, but did not prevent, loading and firing”.<sup>23</sup> When attached, the bayonet would make the musket into a deadly spear or pike, effective when used against cavalry or when charging a demoralised enemy. When a close quarter battle first initiated, men would use everything at their disposal to fight it out including the hard “butt”, that is to say the back part of the musket. This is because the use of bayonets was not always either possible or practical at times. An interesting fact David Chandler covers in his book on the campaigns of Napoleon, is that the future emperor himself was stabbed in the thigh by a bayonet at the battle of Toulon.<sup>24</sup> This, in my opinion, further solidifies the dangers attributed to the bayonet as a desperate men did all they could to survive. It is still important to state that most “bayonet charges”, that is to say an advance at walking speed or quick march pace with bayonets pointed towards the enemy, was more of a

---

<sup>21</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 77,

<sup>22</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 84

<sup>23</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 86, 88

<sup>24</sup> Chandler, 1966, p. 123

scare action similar to a tactical manoeuvre. Muir mentions that hand-to-hand combat was of the rarer type of combat experienced, since a bayonet charge was more about demoralising and/or breaking the enemy line before reaching it.<sup>25</sup> The initiative would therefore be held by the unit initiating the charge. Fiercer hand-to-hand combat would often take place when battles were fought over villages, in more challenging terrain or when two seasoned units faced each other.

I have yet to mention *light infantry*, a type of infantry moving and behaving differently than the common rank and file units. Often used as scouting element, its most prominent capabilities were that of harassing the enemy. Fighting in a looser formation, with the tactical ability to crouch, lie down or use the terrain such as trees and rocks for cover. They often fired loosely at will, trying to pick off soldiers or skirmish with the enemies light infantry. Muir credits the light infantry for its successes for the French early in the Revolutionary Wars, where they combined seasoned soldiers in large numbers, able to effectively harass the slower and bigger armies of the Austrians and Prussians.<sup>26</sup> They were also sometimes equipped with different forms of muskets, especially the British introduced an early form of rifles, more accurate and able to deliver deadly shots at a far longer range. Napoleon himself was also interested in these skirmishers, seeing their value and potential deadly capabilities when deployed in great numbers.<sup>27</sup>

### **4.3 Artillery**

Artillery played a crucial role during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. A simple way to describe them could be like a musket except it was much larger and sent a much bigger projectile down range with an even more furious power. It was not something a poor man conscripted from the streets were sent to, but rather it required some intuition and understanding of math. Muir explains it like this; “Its officers were often bourgeois in origin or the sons of artillery officers, for the service required a level of technical and mathematical knowledge which made it unappealing for many young gentlemen.”<sup>28</sup> With this being said, it still required a large pool of men to operate a few cannons. With thousands of men working tirelessly on placing, reloading, operating and cleaning around a hundred cannons. Napoleon

---

<sup>25</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 88

<sup>26</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 51

<sup>27</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 53

<sup>28</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 29

himself (Captain of the Artillery), chose to go into a career within the artillery, which suited him nicely regarding his mathematical prominence Chandler explains.<sup>29</sup> Unlike the cavalry or officer corps, a position in the artillery could not be bought or influenced by social status, as the way to operate them demanded an understanding of its mathematical factors, practical, and tactical uses.

There were different kinds of artillery used during the wars, ranging from light horse-drawn cannons to heavier weapons designed to be used in siege warfare. Most commonly they were grouped into *batteries*, consisting of 6-8 guns.<sup>30</sup> There was also an artillery piece called a *howitzer*, famously known for firing explosive projectiles, which either detonated some meters above the infantry, or on direct contact with the ground. Artillery was usually a slow-moving weapon, not easy to reposition unless drawn by horses. They were mainly used as a defensive tactic, however Napoleon and other commanders would later reinforce and use its offensive properties, such as covering fire, effectiveness against defensive positions or its demoralising effect. Muir makes a point when it comes to the weight of the shot and size of the artillery piece, where the larger guns were naturally more feared on the battlefield.

The cannons also had different projectiles, tailored for its tactical uses. The most common type of projectile was the *round-shot*, similar to the musket ball used by the infantry except larger. How large depended on the calibre of the cannon, creatively being named for example, 6-pounder, 8-pounder and so on based on the projectile's weight.<sup>31</sup> There were multiple ways to use the round-shot, mainly shooting on target, but a big contribution to the cannons' effectiveness was that round, if the conditions on the battlefield were right, could skid along the ground doing more damage. Another dangerous projectile was the *canister shot*, which consisted of multiple small or medium sized round balls in a canister, which would spread out over a certain area when fired. It is comparable to a modern age shotgun when it comes to its damage potential and area of effect. Lethal at close range towards big infantry formations or cavalry charges, but practically useless at long range. Based on how many, and the sizes of the round balls in the canisters, the range varied with it.<sup>32</sup> The larger balls which had a longer range, were called *grapeshot*, terrifying not only because of its damage potential, but the

---

<sup>29</sup> Chandler, 1966, p. 80, 88-89.

<sup>30</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 29-30

<sup>31</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 30-31

<sup>32</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 31

sounds of multiple cannon balls landing around you and flying overhead could demoralize even the most seasoned soldiers. Even though these last-mentioned projectiles were scary, Muir points out that the French and British mainly used the round shot, which made up around 70-80 percent of their overall ammunition.

#### 4.4 Cavalry

Cavalry, or the use of horses for military purposes, is something humanity has utilized for centuries, if not millennia. They were indispensable during the Napoleonic Wars, not only for use in combat, but also for carrying supplies, scouting, and delivering messages. News only travelled as fast as the man on the horse could, they were therefore of great importance to all commanders. Especially Napoleon relied on news from his corps- and divisional commanders to greater be able to coordinate his forces and strike where needed. The cavalry was still the great shock-troop of the Napoleonic Wars, comparable to the early form of tanks introduced by the British in World War 1. Just as tanks later would become more advanced and categorized into weight class, the same principles went for the cavalry.

You had light, medium and heavy cavalry, each suited for special tactical situations, yet used however, whenever needed.<sup>33</sup> Light cavalry could be made up of the famous *hussars*, and were generally lightly armoured (if armoured at all), equipped with sabres and causing devastating damage when riding down fleeing infantry. They were also well suited for scouting and patrolling because of their rapidness.

Medium cavalry could consist of either dragoons or at times lancers. Dragoons were armed with cavalry muskets or carabines, shorter versions of the musket.<sup>34</sup> They could engage from horseback, but their preferred method was to dismount to engage, then mounting again to reposition themselves, follow up an attack or retreat. Lancers were not as common as in the medieval period, but they were present on battlefields across the Napoleonic Wars. The Russian Cossacks is well known for their harassment of the *Grande Armée* both during the French invasion and retreat from Russia.

The last type was the heavy cavalry, often heavily armoured and used as shock troops, either to break an enemy line or save the day. A good example of this is the famous cavalry attack at the Battle of Eylau in 1807, where French cavalry commander Joachim Murat, is said to have

---

<sup>33</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 106-108

<sup>34</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 109

saved the day with an all-out massive attack with his cavalry reserves. Chandler writes the following about the charge: «Apart from his jealously conserved Guard, the only men still available were the 10,700 troopers of Murat's cavalry reserve. These were now ordered (at about 11:30 A.M.) to take position in the shattered French center and charge the looming Russian columns.»<sup>35</sup>

He later calls it one of the greatest cavalry charges in history. Rightfully so, as not only the sheer size of the attack was impressive and well-coordinated, but the tactical ramifications following it led to Napoleon snatching victory from the jaws of defeat at Eylau.

Even though the cavalry at first glance can seem as invulnerable as tanks, they still relied heavily on fear, as in scaring either the enemy infantry, artillery, or cavalry. Muir explains that the cavalries' greatest weapon was the fear they induced in the lines they threatened to attack.<sup>36</sup> Not only because a massive cavalry charge was hard to prevent, but also because it at times might come as a surprise, seriously demoralising an enemy force. Another result of a cavalry attack could be that the infantry might fire to early as a result of them becoming nervous wrecks after spotting enemy cavalry close by. The real threat of outflanking manoeuvres was very effective when done by cavalry, as it could seem they almost came out of nowhere. Even though they in many instances were very effective against infantry,<sup>37</sup> a well organised infantry battalion or regiment could hold stand against a cavalry charge. One famous counter to this would be the square formation, where a unit of infantrymen formed four straight lines in a square formation, either two or three men in depth. They would have their bayonets pointed outwards on all sides, effectively eliminating the horse's ability to run in between soldiers, as a horse will never charge head on into a wall of bayonets. However, this would make the infantry not able to move as they were in a fixed formation, not suited for infantry vs infantry engagements, and certainly not against artillery.

The last point which is important when analysing the use of cavalry on the battlefield is how expensive they were. Thousands of horses were killed in combat across Europe following the wars. Some died in combat whilst others succumbed to harsh environments such as the Russian winter, which did not spare animals nor humans. Even though France really utilized the cavalry to follow up their successful attacks under Napoleon, it became increasingly

---

<sup>35</sup> Chandler, 1966, p. 1005

<sup>36</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 130, 134-135

<sup>37</sup> Muir, 2000, p. 57

harder to replenish their lost cavalry reserves as the wars went on. Muir makes a point that even with most of Europe under his control and influence, Napoleon still struggled to find enough horses fit for either service in combat or in the baggage train as he fought more and more battles.<sup>38</sup> He also claims that an average horse's time of service lasted around 2 to 3 years.

## **5. French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815)**

Now that we have explored how battles were fought and by who, we can start investigating how France mobilized its citizens for those said battles, as well as their overall effect on France's ability to wage war. Facing enemies on all fronts, at times simultaneously, France needed many men to fight. It was through the birth of the republic, and the wars following it, that the need for a national conscription emerged. Why, and how was it so? I will aim to answer these questions through an analysis of the French Revolutionary Wars.

### **5.1 The French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802)**

On July 14, 1792, a French mob stormed the Bastille and with set in motion a series of events which ultimately would evolve into the French Revolutionary Wars.<sup>39</sup> It is named as such because the wars from 1792 to 1802 happened as a result of, and in the wake of the French revolution. The Bastille was a military bastion situated in Paris and served both as a prison and armoury for its stationed troops. It was viewed as a part of Bourbon France's, Bourbon being the line of kings which ruled France up to this point, suppressive rule. France's society was split into what we call *estates*, simply explained it was the different "ranks" of society, where the aristocracy comprised the first estate followed by the clergy in second, and the people in the third estate. With the economy at its worst in a long time, as well as the majority of the third estate starving, the Bastille was stormed by a mob of people who did not find King Louis XVI's actions near good enough to relieve them of their suffering. Rumours were also circulating about the king massing troops outside of Paris to crush the young revolution and shut down the newly proclaimed the *National Assembly* formed by the people.<sup>40</sup> Later, after the king's unsuccessful escape attempt in 1791, he was proclaimed an enemy of the revolution and arrested. He was ultimately executed by the guillotine, an apparatus designed to behead its victims, along many other "enemies" of the revolution.

---

<sup>38</sup> Muir, 2000, p.124

<sup>39</sup> Kuehn, 2015, p. 33

<sup>40</sup> Bell, 2007, p. 153-155

The aristocracy of the big and influential nation states in Europe did not like the scenes playing out in France, as it potentially could threaten their way of life as well. In April 1792, the situation reached the breaking point as France declared war on both Austria and Prussia. At first, the coalition forces pushed into France, before French forces experienced some military victories and further on pressed their attack by crossing the borders into the Rhineland, as well as the Benelux region and Italy. By August 1793 France found herself at war with most of its neighbours, from Spain to Naples, up to Austria and over to Great Britain.<sup>41</sup> As if this war was not chaotic enough, pro-royalist revolts fired up in France, occupying some cities and ports like Toulon. Keuhn explains that the French army, following the revolution at the start of the war, faced serious difficulties.<sup>42</sup> Desertion, especially the officer corps in the infantry and cavalry, was widespread, and the army faced an almost impossible task when it came to defend the republic. To remedy this, the first mobilization act of the republic was the creation of the *National Guard*, similar to a militia force. The cohesion of the newly created units were not the best, as it was comprised of volunteers and former soldiers of the old regime. This would not be enough to fight most of the major powers in Europe, which would eventually lead to the famous *levée en masse* in 1793.

### **5.1.1 *Léeve en mass* - French mobilization of the masses in defence of *La patrie***

It all began in March 1793, when facing the direst situation yet, the new French government started its first true mobilization of the French populace. Yet this was not enough to stop the juggernaut of a force which threatened *La patrie* (translated into the fatherland), and so in August of 1793, 600,000 men were called up to military service through the *Léeve en mass*.<sup>43</sup> It is a term which today is associated with a nation's desperate attempt at massing any and all means necessary to defend themselves against invasion.

This was uncharted territory for not only the society of the French republic, but also its politicians and military high command. The new government's philosophy was that all citizens of the new republic could be called up to defend their nation's sovereignty, in other words as all my sources claim, it was forced out of necessity for their own survival. This meant, following their earlier formation of the National Guard as well, that the French now

---

<sup>41</sup> Keuhn, 2015, p. 33-34

<sup>42</sup> Kehun, 2105, p. 43-46

<sup>43</sup> Forrest, 2003, p. 8-9 & Keuhn, 2015, p. 46-49.



would have an army of almost one million men, armed and eager to defend their homeland. Alan Forrest, author of the first chapter of “The People in Arms” (2003), explains that the previous boundaries in the armed forces of the old regime now dissipated. Anyone, no matter their background or previous history, could not only join the army but also advance up the ranks due to it not being restricted to earlier social factors anymore.

With all of this in mind, why did people actually accept the call and risk their life for this new experimental republic? Well, the easy answer is what the republic offered the masses compared to the old regime. Now people had the right to somewhat dictate their nations policy, but also the possibility for an individual anywhere to make a name for themselves. This had not yet been possible under the Bourbon regime, where the social classes with wealth and influence largely held all the control and possibilities of advancing their own social status. By empowering the common man and giving him a sense of inclusion and ability to shape his own future, a man would be willing to fight all the nations of Europe in defence of that right.<sup>44</sup> It was truly a revolutionary move by the new government, as it gave them the ability to not only fight head to head against the other European armies, but also having enough reserves to keep control in many areas of interests. They did not just send one million men in World War 1 style attack towards the coalition forces, but rather created many smaller armies, in other words they took use of what Kuehn calls *distributed deployment*.<sup>45</sup> Spreading out and positioning smaller armies where needed, as well as being able to move along different roads. This factor, combined with their use of the early form of the operational level of war I mentioned earlier, gave the French republic a significant advantage over their enemy’s forces.

This all sounds inspirational and beautiful at first glance but is overshadowed by some major problems. Firstly, although the French revolutionary army experienced some major tactical and strategical victories in the defence of France, followed by their offensive accomplishments, the war eventually formed into a stalemate.<sup>46</sup> From 1792 to 1794, they would push their adversaries out of mainland France into modern day Germany, as well as in Italy and the Benelux region. Their greatest problem was to follow up on their success, which proved to be a great challenge for the French army commanders. Problems such as bad

---

<sup>44</sup> Forrest, 2003, p. 8-10

<sup>45</sup> Kuehn, 2015, p. 49-50

<sup>46</sup> Kuehn, 2105, p. 50

cohesion, logistical challenges and now being in enemy territory contrary to their initial battles. Forrest explains that even though one in six men would be called into the army throughout the duration of the wars, it was mainly the poor who did not have much of a say in the matter and naturally did not behave as the most disciplined force before- and when facing battle.<sup>47</sup> This problem would have largely been remedied by 1796, as Keuhn explains that most divisional commanders had found a greater understanding of how to operate, deploy and ease up logistical bottlenecks and setbacks.<sup>48</sup> They learned to fight as a proper units, relying on each other for help and making use of multiple roads to more efficiently fight and stand their ground when facing enemy opposition. Much like how Napoleon would conduct his campaigns, based on the points I made earlier in my section on *Napoleonic Warfare*.

Secondly, as I previously mentioned the new French army had a serious shortage of officers to lead the conscripts on a tactical level. The conscripts came from all over France, which actually had a broad range of dialects and norms that made it difficult for individuals to communicate and get along at first.<sup>49</sup> Placing all these newly mobilized conscripts into battalions and throwing them at the enemy would not be the best way to use this new fighting force. These problems were remedied by the introduction of the *demi-brigades*, brigades consisting of newly mobilized- or volunteer battalions of conscripts, merged together with an older royalist battalion in hopes of them ultimately becoming an integrated and effective brigade. They also attempted to standardize the army in several ways, such as forcing the soldiers to speak in French, further supporting the new republics aim of indoctrination and creating a feeling of love for the nation, not only their provinces and hometowns. Kehun points out that the creation of demi-brigades did not fix the shortages of officers at first due to the massive new sizes of the armies.<sup>50</sup> Instead he explains that the formation of the brigades, combined with the new army policies meant that over time more and more officers could quickly rise through the ranks after they had shown some promise. An direct example of this is Napoleon himself, who Kehun states rose from the rank of Captain to General in the matter of a few years. This would not have been possible under the old regime, as Napoleon came from a “higher” yet middle class family, as well as being from Corsica which just before his birth became a part of France.

---

<sup>47</sup> Forrest, 2003, p. 9-10

<sup>48</sup> Kuehn, 2015, p. 48

<sup>49</sup> Forrest, 2003, p. 25

<sup>50</sup> Kuehn, 2015, p. 47-49

The last point to make about how the French military failed to capitalize on their earlier success is the lack of effective cavalry. This is the same problem Napoleon faced later on in his later campaigns as I mentioned earlier, except he had a crucial shortage of horses to maintain his large cavalry forces. The French revolutionary armies were often able to effectively fight against the Prussian and Austrian armies, especially when it came to infantry vs infantry, but the same could not be said for cavalry vs cavalry engagements. Keuhn states that the Prussian and Austrian cavalry would win the fights that broke out when French cavalry tried to run down fleeing coalition infantry.<sup>51</sup> The biggest factor as to why the French cavalry was bested by the coalitions cavalry was simply that most experienced officers and cavalymen from the old regime had either fled, been exiled, or executed following the chaotic scenes played out during the revolution. The French cavalry would not improve and develop further on until after Napoleons influence on the army, together with capable commanders such as the mentioned hero of Elayu, Joachim Murat.

To summarize my points, the *Lévee en mass* truly revolutionised the way Frances war effort developed. In the face of many problems and setbacks, the French revolutionary army always managed to get back on their feet. Yes, they were unable to really capitalize on their success in enemy territory, but they ultimately saved the French republic from the immediate danger following invasion. Through shaping their war into a war of survival, they managed to not only unite men from all over France to fight together for *La patrie*, but also were able to gain footholds in their neighbouring nations. Through the formation of the demi-brigades, and divisions, they managed to fight in a new way with an unprecedented determination of will and sacrifice. As Kuehn puts it, the French army would no longer collapse or capitulate when facing a tactical defeat, instead funnelling more divisions and brigades towards the problem to hold their ground.<sup>52</sup> This is ultimately the result of a national conscription of the French people in the start of the war, led by in some cases politicians, yet made way for development and further testing of principles to strengthen their revolutionary army. The French army was on its way to becoming a dominant force on the European stage, which a certain Corsican artillery captain would later capitalize on.

## 5.2 The Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815)

---

<sup>51</sup> Kuehn, 2015, p. 49

<sup>52</sup> Kuehn, 2015, p. 50-51

The Napoleonic Wars can be categorized as a series of conflicts and engagements which ravaged across Europe (and other parts of the world) through the years 1803 to 1815. The conflicts were not fought out in a 12 year stretch but rather progressively between peace treaties and among different parties at different stages. The main unifying factor, which also lies behind its name *Napoleonic*, is that Napoleon was involved in all of them, since his proclamation by the Senate (the coronation would take place later) as the Emperor of the French on May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1804.<sup>53</sup> He had promised the French people peace after fighting since the beginning of 1792, with some small breaks in between up until 1802. This also includes a failed expedition to Egypt, where he fought the Ottoman Empire backed by Great Britain. Through a political façade he came back as a hero, not a failed army commander as his adversaries in France had hoped for. All though he did not wish at first to become a dictator, at least he himself expressed so, he later was coerced by some political allies into joining them as one of three consuls, later clearing them out of his way and taking the fitting name of *First Consul*, effectively becoming a dictator as well as paving the way to later becoming emperor.

In this section of my thesis, I will be exploring how Napoleon would make use of the mobilization aspects of “total war” through the further development of the French army following the Revolutionary Wars *lève en mass*. This would develop into the famous *Grande Armée*, an army created by Napoleon which would help cement his military achievements into the minds of people not only in his time, but also in the coming generations.

### 5.2.1 *La Grande Armée*

Napoleon's brainchild was the formation and development of *La Grande Armée*, a standing army capable of fighting anywhere. After gaining complete power over both France and her armed forces, Napoleon got to work improving her military capabilities through several means. The *Grande Armée* was largely composed of the earlier divisions and corps which had fought in the various campaigns of the French Revolutionary Wars, as well as newly formed units. Chandler explains its origins as such: «The basis of the new army was, of course, the old revolutionary forces that he received ready-fashioned from Carnot, but between 1800 and 1804 a great many improvements and adaptations were incorporated to make the most of France's military potential.»<sup>54</sup> Napoleon wanted to create a modern army, not only consisting of several corps, but also supporting units such as engineers and logistical

---

<sup>53</sup> Chandler, 1966, p. 559-560.

<sup>54</sup> Chandler, 1966, p. 645

elements. He abolished the system from the earlier French Revolutionary Wars, which was multiple armies spread out across the fronts, instead centralising it all into one army, under his direct command. Of course, he had other units stationed where needed, but the formation of a main army would help him keep control over it. Kuehn credits this army, under his direct leadership, for his successful campaigns from 1805-1809.<sup>55</sup> Still, he understood the importance of corps- and divisional commanders' ability to operate independently. As such, the army would be massed at the starting points of campaigns or before engagements, followed by a dispersion of forces until first contact with the enemy.<sup>56</sup>

Chandler comes up with a rough estimation as to how big the Grande Armée was supposed to be after its inception, reaching around 200.000 men at full combat strength.<sup>57</sup> However, the army would eventually grow up to around 350.000 soldiers by the year 1805, and later over 600.000, where around 500.000 of them were in the army, whilst the rest was stationed in garrisons or in the supportive parts of the army.<sup>58</sup> This further reinforces David Bell's opinion of how armies and warfare had such drastically grown in comparison with earlier conflicts, and with it came further carnage and a many more casualties. When I covered the mobilization of the French people during the start of the French Revolutionary Wars, the amount of people conscripted into the army at the start of the war, matches the amount of people now serving in Napoleons Grande Armée. All these people serving in Napoleons army was a direct result to some extent of volunteers and soldiers from the previous years of fighting, but mostly new conscripts. Chandler frames it like this:

«... the Imperial legislation of later years followed a repetitive pattern: all men between the ages of 18 and 40 were expected to register; those between 18 and 25 (subsequently 30) were liable for call-up in annual classes. After 1805, when the Emperor secured the right to fix the proportion of each class called to the colors annually,† the practice of anticipating the annual output of potential recruits became increasingly employed».<sup>59</sup>

In other words, the practical aspects of conscription into the French army after Napoleons rise to emperor was much more organized and enforced, than during the French Revolutionary Wars. He could, to some extent, expect a steady stream of fresh conscripts on a yearly basis.

---

<sup>55</sup> Kuehn, 2015, p. 170

<sup>56</sup> Chandler, 1966, p. 645-646

<sup>57</sup> Chandler, 1966, p. 645-648

<sup>58</sup> Chandler, 1966, p. 647

<sup>59</sup> Chandler, 1966, p. 647

This was a big changeup from the earlier mobilization system employed in the start of the French Revolutionary Wars, which can be described as poorly organized and executed in comparison.

A small, interesting fact regarding being called up to service in Napoleons army, was that if one was rich enough, you could “buy” your way out of service.<sup>60</sup> How was that possible if the revolution meant to remove these economic and social differences previously experienced? By paying another citizen to go in your stead. This was an accepted way of “ditching” your call to arms for a long time, however it would by 1813 be deemed illegal as a real shortage of manpower occurred after many years of fighting.

Another point to make out regarding differences between the early armies of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, was that Napoleon had amassed a large and effective officer corps again, which up until 1812 provided his armies with superb command and control on both lower and higher levels.<sup>61</sup> It is also estimated that up to half of the officers who served after 1805 had in previous years carried a musket, meaning they had risen up through the ranks from common conscripts or volunteer, to becoming seasoned officers through experience and showing promising signs of leadership.

The last point I would like to make regarding the Grande Armée and conscription of men would be how Napoleon made use of foreign soldiers to fill up the ranks of his army later on in the wars.<sup>62</sup> As he conquered and occupied more of Europe following the various wars, he would in return for offering protection and assurances of their independence, demand French troops to keep bases on their territories, as well as a contribution of troops to campaigns when needed. An example of this could be the Austrians and Prussians, whom France had fought against and defeated multiple times throughout the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. During the invasion of Russia in 1812, a contingent of foreign troops, including Austrians, Prussians, Poles, Italians and many more partook in the invasion force.<sup>63</sup> It is still important to note that the various foreign units had different views on their commitment. For instance, the newly created Polish state would fight this war with more resilience, as their nation depended on Napoleons victory. The Austrians and Prussians on the other hand, fought merely because they had too, honouring their treaties with Napoleon or facing invasion of their own lands.

---

<sup>60</sup> Chandler, 1966, p. 648

<sup>61</sup> Chandler, 1966, p. 649-650

<sup>62</sup> Chandler, 1966, p. 648

<sup>63</sup> Chandler, 1966, p.648-649, 1364-1365 & Kuehn, 2015, p. 275-276

Naturally, the effectiveness of these units is debatable, as some would fight just as hard as the French troops, others focused more of their own survival rather than risking their lives for a foreign emperor.

Napoleons system of mobilizing men and integrating them into *La Grande Armée* would deteriorate and eventually collapse towards the end of the Napoleonic Wars. After his failed invasion of Russia, came a defensive war which went all the way back to France. His last major attempt at turning the tide came at the battle of Leipzig in 1813, also known as the Battle of the Nations due to how many nations were involved in the battle.<sup>64</sup> Napoleon saw some initial tactical victories, however the strategical advantage laid with the coalition forces, who finally had enough men and material themselves to soundly beat Napoleons forces in battle. Napoleons Grande Armée had been reconstituted before the battle, however most of his veteran troops laid dead in Russia or were not in great enough numbers to make a difference. To make up for these lost troops, he called up what he could of young and old conscripts, some even as young as 15,<sup>65</sup> as well as stripping his navy of their marines to form regiments on land, and gun crews to man his cannons in the field.<sup>66</sup>

However, he could not replenish his cavalry, which was seriously understrength compared to earlier campaigns. This underlying problem meant that he never could capitalize on destroying broken infantry formations, something he never could achieve again to the same extent even in his defence of France. Ultimately, Napoleon was pushed all the way back to France and even though he achieved some tactical victories there due to his smaller versatile army, combined with being on home soil, the coalition forces would eventually come out as victorious. Although Napoleon maybe could have relied on some old veterans and young fanatical conscripts to keep fighting on, the majority of the French population was tired of war having seen and experienced its cost since 1792. The famous *lévee en masse* could not save *la patrié* this time, and neither could the once proud men of *La Grande Armée*, which was all gone. Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of the French, signed his unconditional abdication on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1814.<sup>67</sup> He would return once more to challenge the major powers in Europe in 1815, where he later would be soundly defeated at the famous Battle of Waterloo.

---

<sup>64</sup> Chandler, 1966, p. 1640

<sup>65</sup> Chandler, 1966, p. 648

<sup>66</sup> Kuehn, 2015, p. 318

<sup>67</sup> Chandler, 1966, p. 1794

## 6. Summary

The French revolution would change not only the face of Europe in the period 1789 to 1815 but would also reshape warfare for the next centuries to come. The French revolution, and consequently the wars following it, could not have been fought had not the new young republic managed to mobilize its masses in defence of their homeland. By breaking down the barriers of the old regime, any citizen had in him the potential to become someone of high stature in the new French army. The nature of warfare developed from small scale confrontations between the aristocracy to all out “total war” between the nation states of Europe. With reorganization of armies, as well as their sizes growing massively in numbers, one defeat would no longer mean capitulation, as other men would step into the ranks of the fallen. Thanks to the minds of men like Clausewitz and Jomini, the art of waging war would become far more advanced than ever before, as their “discovery” of the operational level of war is still relevant to this day. Although the combat arms of the age, namely infantry, cavalry and artillery fought in a similar manner as in earlier wars, the massive size of armies would completely change the way one could potentially use them.

Napoleon Bonaparte, emperor of the French, would have his legacy cemented in history through his excellent use of France’s military forces. In much credit to the governments of the French revolution, he inherited both a system of conscription, as well as an organized army which he himself perfected as much as he could. Through waging war, he would become master of Europe, leading both Frenchmen and fellow Europeans in war himself. Humbled only by his massive effort in attempting to tame the Russian beast in 1812. Even though he was on his backfoot, he managed to mobilize conscripts for service in his former glorious army, though his brilliant moves and famous campaigns was by then behind him. He would be responsible, not for all, but for many of the millions of lives lost in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. The warfare experienced truly share many of the same qualities found in the concept of “total war”, ranging from mobilization of the masses to guerrilla actions disrupting an enemies attempt at subjugating its conquered lands. The legacy of *l’éve en mass*, together with its principles, would come to shape modern interpretations of a sovereign state, able to call on its citizens in a time of war to stand up to an invader and fight for their independence.



### **Literature list**

Bell, D. B. (2007). *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Chandler, D. (1966). *The Campaigns of Napoleon*. (Vol. 1). Scribner.

Forrest, A. (2003). *La patrie en danger: The French Revolution and the First Levée en masse*. D. Moran & A. Waldron (Ed.), *The People in Arms: Military Myth and National Mobilization since the French Revolution*. (p. 8-32). Cambridge University Press.

Kuehn, J. T. (2015). *Napoleonic Warfare: The Operational Art of the Great Campaigns*. Praeger.

Muir, R. (2000). *Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon*. Yale University Press



 **NTNU**

Norwegian University of  
Science and Technology