1 Napoleon I: The Unifier

Napoleon I was exceptionally lucky in his date, place of birth, and talents.

When he was born, on 15 August 1769, Corsica had only recently become French. It was ceded to France by Genoa on 15 May 1768. Napoleon’s father, Carlo-Maria de Buonaparte, began by joining the nationalist leader Paoli in his opposition to French sovereignty and struggle for independence. After Paoli’s defeat, in May 1769, and more especially after the French King had recognised Carlo-Maria in 1779 as having been of noble stock for over two hundred years, he changed his mind. His status now enabled him to obtain a scholarship for his second son, Napoleone, to go to the Collège d’Autun, in Burgundy, in March 1779.

Initially, the future Emperor was not happy. What little French he knew was made difficult to understand by a strong Italian accent, and he was nicknamed ‘la paille-au-nez’ from the way he pronounced his name. But in October 1779 he transferred to the Ecole militaire de Brienne, in Champagne, and was commissioned six years later, on 28 October 1785, as second lieutenant in the regiment La Fère, in the royal artillery corps. The ancien régime had established, under the leadership of Gribeauval, an excellent artillery. Because one needed a certain amount of mathematical or technical knowledge, this corps was also one in which it was easier for young men of talent to obtain promotion than in the cavalry or infantry. There, future officers had to prove four quarters of genuinely French nobility. Napoleon’s later insistence on ‘la carrière ouverte aux talents’ was well in keeping with the spirit of 1789. But it was also the result of his own early experience. As a young man, he had been very poor, and only the lucky chance of the first French revolution breaking out when it did enabled him to escape from what would almost certainly have been his fate in pre-Revolutionary France: that of a capable and conscientious officer who rose by slow degrees to the rank of major.

There are innumerable anecdotes to illustrate Napoleon’s talents. He was an excellent mathematician, capable of finding rapid solutions to the complex problems of ‘combining in space and time the operations of different formations’. He needed little sleep, and...
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could take what he did need at a moment’s notice. He had immense powers of concentration and would compare his mind to a desk with wholly separate drawers. When he needed to think about something, he simply opened the relevant drawer, and found all his ideas in order. When he closed it, the matter disappeared completely from his mind until it needed to be reconsidered. He could easily work 16 hours a day, and would frequently get up in the middle of the night to solve an administrative or a legal problem. Distance was no obstacle. The organisation of the Comédie Française is still based upon a decree issued in Moscow on 15 October 1812.

Meat remained for a long time something of a luxury in poorer Mediterranean countries such as Corsica, and childhood eating habits die hard. Napoleon preferred eggs and cheese, and in the early part of his career rarely spent more than 12 minutes at dinner. Unlike de Gaulle, who was also a fast eater, he nevertheless did not insist on the plates being cleared away as soon as he had finished. He would rise from table, and leave the Empress to entertain his guests. He had an excellent memory, a capacity for decision fostered by the possession of considerable power, and an enviable ability to inspire loyalty. He kept the same personal valet, Constant Wainj, from 1801 to 1814, and the same chief of staff, Berthier, from 1796 to 1814. From a military point of view, he was a genius, especially in his ability to appreciate the strategic possibilities of a landscape and to be so far ahead with his preparations that he would attack the enemy before they had even realised that he was there. He also had the great good fortune of inheriting not only the excellent artillery of the ancien régime but also a plentiful supply of men provided by the revolutionary policy of the levée en masse, and its subsequent transformation into a systematic recruitment policy by Jourdan. From a purely military point of view, he was very much the son of the Revolution in that it gave him enough soldiers for him to put into practice his favourite strategy of carrying out a powerful attack on what he judged his enemy’s weakest point. He won battles, he often said, by using his soldiers’ legs; and it is significant that he did better in the mountainous country of Northern Italy, where surprise was relatively easy, than in the open plains of Eastern Europe or Russia, where it was not. The first of the French Caesars was nevertheless able to base his power very firmly on his ability to handle an up-to-date sword. He also had as much an eye for the political main chance as for the lie of the land on the battlefield.

This chance was not slow in coming. The authors of the Déclaration