

Military History

Jonathon Riley

NAPOLEON AS A GENERAL

Command from the battlefield
to grand strategy

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As the very model of a modern lieutenant-general, Jonathon Riley understands the qualities necessary to succeed as a professional soldier, and he shares his knowledge here in a superb study of Napoleon's qualities as a commander. *Napoleon as a General* is not another biography, but a detailed treatise on the many and varied demands made on top commanders throughout history. But General Riley very clearly relates this approach to a critical assessment of Napoleon's career. It is not, in fact, the first book to attempt this; General Sir James Marshall-Cornwall wrote a similar work in 1967. But this is clearly superior; the analysis is far stronger and in terms of clarity, Riley's writing is the equal of that great soldier-scholar, Field Marshal Earl Wavell, of whose essay on *Generals and Generalship* this book 'is reminiscent.

One thing that set Napoleon apart was how he organized everything around himself in a way that would be impossible today. Unlike in a modern army, his staff had no devolved responsibilities, and he admitted "no plan acceptable in which I am not personally at the centre". He also understood that "more battles are decided by loss of hope, than loss of blood", and, like a modern commander, he was principally dealing with coalitions, fighting almost continually both in and against multinational armies. This observation helps to make the book relevant, although Napoleon's coalitions were coercive - more Warsaw Pact than NATO, or even the US coalition in Iraq.

In analysing Napoleon's generalship, Riley pays homage in turn to theorists from Frederick the Great through Jomini to Field Marshal Sir Nigel Bagnall. The book's only weakness is that a reader unfamiliar with Napoleon's campaigns may struggle to follow events in the case studies; But the book finishes with an excellent and well-balanced conclusion. Having noted early on that war is a political act, Jonathon Riley nails his subject: Napoleon, he says, "won wars, but he never won the peace".

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