



## HISTORY OF TACTICS, FROM GUIBERT TO OUR DAYS – Part 3/6

Napoleon made full use of time and space as supports for his manoeuvre.

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Histoire & stratégie

Battle of Austerlitz (today Slavkov u Brna, Czech Republic) known as the "Battle of the Three Emperors" (2 December 1805)

**Inheriting this system from the end of the 18th century, Napoleon applied all his "military genius" (scientific and classical training, sense of reality, etc.) to it to optimize it. He put a definitive end to the quarrel of orders by adopting, in accordance with Guibert's prescriptions, the thin order for deployment in combat, the line, and the deep order, the column, for the movements of his divisions, which were to be deployed in combat. he took care to group together within corps, permanent joint fractions of his army, capable of conducting any action autonomously for twenty-four hours, thanks to the establishment within each of them of a permanent staff 5.**

The battle is now conducted at corps level and divisions are specific, either infantry or cavalry, but always manoeuvre in close coordination.

Finally, he built up a mass of maneuvering at his orders, the Guard and the cavalry reserve, a corps essentially comprising the heavy cavalry and line divisions to which he assigned as rôle to "create the event" on the battlefield by destroying an already shaken enemy formation, never an intact enemy 6. As far as the battle between the armour and the cannonball was concerned, Napoleon was a fervent supporter of fire: he never launched an attack that had not been prepared by artillery. His reserve had organic artillery at its disposal, just like his infantry corps.

Except in the case of a cavalry melee as in Kranowitz on the western slope of Pratzen, all cavalry charges are systematically preceded by artillery preparation (in Eylau, for example, the charge known as the "eighty squadrons"). In the same spirit, at the end of the Empire, he endeavoured to equip his "big cavalry" (cuirassiers, carabiniers and grenadiers at horse of the Guard) with snap hooks, so that they could fix an enemy by fire before disorganizing him by a charge, as was the case at Eckmühl. The lesson will be lost by Ney at Waterloo.

Furthermore, Napoleon knew how to make full use of time and space as supports for his manoeuvres. His knowledge of the enemy, updating and monitoring of the situation helped him to determine the right time and place for his manoeuvre. The terrain, by searching for lines of operations, an outlet, and then a line of halt, was the active support for his manoeuvre: During the 1805 campaign, the outlet of the entire Grande Armée by columns of corps (the "torrents of the Emperor", which came by forced marches along prepared routes, the "torrents of the Emperor"), was the only way to reach the outlet of the Grande Armée. 7 from the Channel and North Sea coasts) south of the Black Forest, which had concealed its movements from Mack, was the decisive element in the Ulm manoeuvre.

At all times, his overflowing movement aims to bring the enemy by himself on the ground he has chosen; this is the case at Austerlitz of course, but also at Friedland, Wagram or La Moskova. In tactical terms, Napoleon always favoured manoeuvring on the enemy's rear. This is the main form of Napoleonic manoeuvre. The most successful ones were Arcole, Marengo, Ulm, Jena, Friedland and Montmirail.

Others did not have their full effect, such as in Lützen and Bautzen, where the arm was not able to be operated immediately afterwards. The decimated cavalry in Russia had neither been rebuilt nor reconstituted. Only once, it turned out to be a failure: at Saint Dizier, the balance of forces being too unfavorable. The purpose of this maneuver is to impose the decision on the opponent by placing him facing an unresolved dilemma: either surrender or acceptance of the battle in the worst conditions.

General Camon who studied the Napoleonic Wars before 1914 identifies five advantages to this type of maneuver:

- simplicity, because it gives all performers a single goal (as such, it is a premise of the modern major effect);
- economy of forces, by bringing the enemy to the chosen ground, it dispenses with heavy safety devices, while depriving the enemy of his advantages;
- freedom of action, the acquisition of intelligence is facilitated by maneuvering on the flanks and that of the enemy is made more difficult;
- the results are important in all cases and, at best, decisive;
- finally, it is accessible: practised since time immemorial, it is not the exclusive prerogative of the "god of war".

When the balance of power did not allow him to act in this way, Napoleon opted for manoeuvring in a central position. In this case, unlike the rear manoeuvre, Napoleon was in a state of obvious inferiority, so that he could only engage against one side of the opponent. His objective is then to successively defeat the opposing corps by creating local superiority over one of the enemy fractions. The key point will be to be, in one way or another, situated between the different enemy fractions, either by deliberately placing himself there by an offensive blow, or by exploiting a momentary division of the enemy forces (due to terrain, error, etc..) from a strategic standby position (in fact, an operative one).

To do this, in both cases, a double maneuver is necessary:

- on the tactical level, it is a question of seizing the central position and installing the reserve which will be within quick range of the most likely combat points. Then, Napoleon must first simultaneously cover himself facing the secondary direction and attack on the main direction, then fall back in an attack on the secondary direction ;
- logistically, the change of the operations center, and thus of the related line of operations, is a constituent element of the general maneuver. The protection of this line and especially its change will make the enemy manoeuvre fall into the void. The line of operations must always be covered by the deployment of the units themselves.

The most brilliant example of this maneuver in a central position is the French campaign in 1814: In a state of flagrant inferiority, Napoleon is opposed to the army of Bohemia (Austrian) advancing through the valley of the Seine and that of Silesia (Russian-Prussian) advancing through the valley of the Marne. By deploying between the Marne and the Seine, Napoleon, by successive blows, slowed down both of them and prevented them from joining up.

He repeated the same manoeuvre in Belgium the following year: having managed to dissociate the Dutch-British army from Wellington and the Prussian army from Blücher at Ligny and Quatre Bras, he is finally unable to maintain this dissociation, having unfortunately given Grouchy somewhat vague orders.

**This Napoleonic manoeuvre will give rise to a number of exegeses, the best known of which are, on the one hand, the work of Clausewitz, the foundation of German military thought which bases all its reasoning on the search for the battle of the Rhine, and on the other hand, the work of the French, the German and the British. Jomini, whose influence was to be major in the United States and who, at the tactical level, favoured offensive action by an attack in column on the centre and on one end of the enemy line as at Wagram. Both, however, have focused their thinking much more on the strategic level, which is outside the scope of this study, than on the tactical level, leading to divergent conclusions.**

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5 This is how Jomini will be Ney's chief of staff for a time.

6 In what way, the somewhat rapid amalgamation between the cavalry corps of the Empire and the armoured breakaway formations of the twentieth century is a historical counter-sense and, to some extent, a mistake.

7 They are recognized, planned and on each of them fodder reserves are set up. See the Letter of the Emperor to Daru.

8 General CAMON. The Napoleonic War, systems of operations, theories and techniques. Reissue Economica 2004. He was the leader of a French school benefiting from the new contribution of the Napoleonic archives and advocating an approach to Napoleon based not on the decisive battle, as analysed by Clausewitz, but on manoeuvre. In addition to the work cited, he also published La guerre napoléonienne. Précis des campagnes. Paris 1999. Historical bookshop Teisseidre. Reissue. Battle

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