

## **War and Peace in the Age of Napoleon Conference – 5-7 September 2024**

### **Command decisions in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing**

#### **Abstract**

For most of the major European campaigns of the Napoleonic Wars, armies were commanded by senior generals who exercised almost total military control of their country's armies in the region of operations, subject only to a broad policy direction from their governments. Few commanders encouraged much initiative from their sub-commanders at the strategic level. As Rory Muir puts it, 'The responsibility for the success or failure of an army in battle rested entirely on the shoulders of the general commanding it.'<sup>1</sup>

However, on the periphery of Europe, command was often devolved to more junior officers who operated far from senior officers or government direction. This paper will look at command decisions in the Adriatic theatre of operations. Paris to Ragusa (Dubrovnik) is a journey of almost 2,000km along roads that were often little more than dirt tracks. From Moscow, the same destination is nearly 3,000km. The Adriatic is 2,200km from London and almost 900km from the theatre commander based in Sicily. Messages took weeks to deliver and were frequently outdated when and if they arrived.

Using primary source memoirs and contemporary communications, I will show how junior officers would make military and even diplomatic decisions in a complex and fast-moving political environment. They negotiated with semi-autonomous local warlords, allies and enemies whose loyalties were not always transparent. These were borderlands far from the seat of power and created challenges for the states trying to control them.

This aspect of the Napoleonic Wars is rarely studied - far removed from the rigid hierarchies of the main European battlefields.

#### **Introduction**

For most of the main theatres during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, command of armies was exercised by senior generals, subject to the broad instructions of and sometimes detailed direction of their respective governments. Even Wellington, not known for delegating command, showed his irritation at the degree of direction from London. In one Peninsular report, he said, 'Unfortunately, the sum of one shilling and ninepence remains unaccounted for in one infantry battalion's petty cash, and there has been a hideous confusion as the number of jars of raspberry jam issued to one cavalry regiment during a sandstorm in western Spain. This reprehensible carelessness may be related to the pressure of circumstance since we are war with France, a fact which may come as a bit of a surprise to you gentlemen in Whitehall.'<sup>2</sup>

Putting the colonial conflicts aside, parts of Europe remained far from government interference. The commanders involved often knew very little about the countries and the peoples they fought with or against - not even the equivalent of the 1940 Panzer commander with his Baedeker guidebook. The Adriatic and the Balkans involved most of the main protagonists, but messages took weeks to reach the commander on the spot. This meant commanders had much more freedom of operation than their colleagues elsewhere, and they often exercised that freedom. This was true for all the nations involved except for Austria. Paris to Ragusa (Dubrovnik) is a journey of almost 2,000km along roads that were often little more than dirt tracks. From Moscow, the same destination is nearly 3,000km. The Adriatic is 2,200km from London and almost 900km (including a sea journey) from the theatre commander based in Sicily.



In this paper, I will examine how commanders from the belligerents used this freedom along the eastern Adriatic coast and its Balkan hinterland<sup>3</sup>. For the purposes of this paper, the region covers Istria (in modern Croatia) in the north and Albania and Greece in the south. The coastline is mainly a narrow belt of land, with 79 islands, dominated by the Dinaric Alps, which helped create a hinterland utterly different from the more urbanised and prosperous coast. The coastal cities were not large during this period. They included Trieste in the north, Rijeka, Zadar, Split, Ragusa (Dubrovnik), Cattaro (Kotor) and Ioannina (in modern Greece) in the south. However, the Adriatic conflict did not operate in isolation. The Ottomans had broader concerns in the Balkans, not least perennial war with the Russians and internal disputes. The British campaign was directed mainly from Sicily, meaning that events in Naples and later Spain often dominated their plans. For the French, Russians and Austrians, the central European campaigns were decisive, but they all fought over and occupied parts of the Adriatic. The Austrian and Ottoman empires faced each other on the coast and inland in a border area that, by this period, became known as Krajina.

War came to the Adriatic when Napoleon Bonaparte captured Venice on 12 May 1797 during the War of the First Coalition. While Austria gained Venice under the Treaty of Campo Formio (12 October 1797), the Ionian Islands off the Greek coast were ceded to France. The subsequent campaigns resulted in the territories shifting control amongst the great powers of the day, with the French establishing the Illyrian

Provinces. In addition to France and Austria, the Ottoman Empire held Bosnia and, on paper, Montenegro, Albania and Greece. However, in practice, the Montenegrins acted independently, as did Ali Pasha, who controlled much of Albania and northwest Greece. The Russians captured the Ionian Islands in 1799, although they surrendered them in 1807. They also engaged in one of many wars against the Ottomans. The British dominated the Adriatic Sea from bases in the Ionian Islands and the island of Lissa (Vis) in 1812. The Napoleonic Wars ended in the Adriatic in 1814 when the French abandoned the Ionian Islands.

## **Austria**

The Austrian territories in the region were not far from the Hofkriegsrat (Imperial War Council) based in Vienna. However, at its furthest, Vienna to Cattaro (Kotor) was over 1,000 miles, along abysmal roads or pirate-infested sea routes, largely unchallenged by the modest Austrian Navy. Between the Austrians and the Ottomans was the Military Border (*Militargrenze*), under the direct control of the Emperor. Initially populated by refugees from Serbia and Bosnia, they were granted plots of land in return for military service. The soldier (Grenzer) was not a serf and lived in a self-administering community based on *zadrugas* (household communities)<sup>4</sup>. The Austrian and Hungarian ruling classes often challenged the different systems, privileges and limited autonomy, but although the Emperor and Archduke Charles instituted reforms, they resisted demands to disband the institution. The troops were an effective and cheap frontier militia and increasingly a critical component of the Habsburg armed forces.

The Grenzer engaged in relatively constant border warfare with the Ottomans in Bosnia, with little reference to Vienna. Individual Grenzer also crossed the border to support the Serbian uprisings despite Vienna's refusal to provide aid. Austria was concerned that a Serbian revolt could become a broader Balkan revolt. The Austrians re-established their control of the Adriatic with British assistance in 1813. The Austrian commander, General Miliutinovich, had to exercise political and military judgements in dealing with the efforts of Ragusan rebels to re-establish their republic and the Montenegrins who were occupying the Bay of Cattaro.

## **Ottoman Empire**

On the other side of the Austrian border in Croatia was the Ottoman province (*vilayet* or *eyalet*) of Bosnia. The governor was appointed by the Sultan and had the title of Beglerbeg, holding the highest rank of pasha called a 'three-tailed pasha' and was usually based in Travnik, 1300km from Constantinople. The border areas in Bosnia included military *kapitanates* and increasingly hereditary military chiefs whose duties were to guard the frontier and the lines of communication. Along with the main towns, they had a degree of autonomy and used it to engage in warfare across the border. Military salaries were never high, and raiding offered an opportunity to gain wealth through booty. Bosnian governors were changed regularly and reasonably obedient to directions from the Sultan, although many in Bosnia complained that Constantinople officials neglected this frontier<sup>5</sup>. There were many connections between different parts of the empire, with officials moving around frontier areas during their careers.

While each of the Ottoman regions on the border operated differently, they all reflected the disintegration of central rule from Constantinople and the challenges faced by Sultan Selim III in reforming the empire. The partial breakdown of Ottoman central authority led to the development of semi-independent rulers (*ayans*). By the late 18th century, there were ten *ayans* in the Balkans, the strongest of which were Pasvanoglu Osman Pasha, based in Vidin and Tependenli Ali Pasha, based in Ioannina (854km from Constantinople). Ali played an important role in the Adriatic conflicts, often dealing directly with the European powers. The Ottoman central government (Sublime Porte) tolerated this independence because they relied heavily on the *ayans* for their armies, making it difficult to reassert control after the conflicts.



Ali Pasha only cooperated with the Sublime Porte when it suited him. When war broke out between the Ottomans and the French in September 1798, Ali Pasha offered to join them in return for the island of Lefkas (Lefkada) and 10,000 French troops. He even bestowed a wife (probably his illegitimate daughter) on a French officer. When the French refused, he took control of the Ottoman war effort on the mainland, capturing Butrint and Vonitsa and defeating the French at the Battle of Preveza on 23 October 1798. He was stopped at Parga by the locals, who understandably preferred Russian rule. The arrival of a joint Russian/Ottoman fleet thwarted further advances to the Ionian islands. Ali then focused on expanding his territories within the Ottoman Empire, controlling much of Albania and Greece. With the

outbreak of war between the Ottomans and Russians in 1806, Ali reopened diplomatic relations with the French, now his neighbours in Dalmatia. He gained several French advisors, including an artillery expert, General Guillaume de Vaudoncourt.

After the Treaty of Tilsit turned the Ionian islands over to the French, Ali turned to the British for help. There are several effusive letters from Ali to the British in the National Archives. In one, after much flattery and regret over past misunderstandings, he asks for 'a squadron of four or five large ships which would be very useful for the necessary protection of the coast.'<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, the British declined to provide such a squadron. Still, the British liaison officer at Ali's court, Major Leake, provided artillery and ammunition for use against the French and 600 Congreve rockets. Most of these were used against his internal enemies. While the Porte made some efforts to contain Ali, they needed his troops. He promised to send 30,000 troops with his sons to fight the Russians on the Danube in 1811.

Foreign visitors were fascinated and horrified by Ali Pasha. Byron famously visited and wrote about him in his epic poem *Childe Harold*. The French consul Pouqueville wrote, 'His guard is composed of assassins; his pages are depraved children of victims of his ferocity; his emissaries, blackguardly Vlachs, ready to commit any crime, and his confidential agents poisoners who glory in their wickedness.'<sup>7</sup> Noel Malcolm argues that while the Napoleonic Wars destabilised the region, Ali played a clever game seeking to benefit from the changes. Malcolm concludes, 'His own power had been great while it had lasted, however; and it is testimony to his extraordinary skill that he sustained it, in one of the most internationally contested areas of the Ottoman Empire, through all the twists and turns of a major European war.'<sup>8</sup>

## Russia

Russian officers operating in the Adriatic faced particular command challenges. Besides the sheer distances involved, Russia was frequently at war with the Ottoman Empire, which closed the Straits to messengers and their Black Sea Fleet. The alternative was a challenging sail to the Baltic, which could have its own military issues.

The first Russian commander to face these challenges in the Napoleonic Wars was Admiral Fyodor Ushakov, who, in September 1798, brought six ships-of-the-line and ten frigates and corvettes into the Mediterranean from the Black Sea. He succeeded in capturing the Ionian islands with Ottoman help. Relations with Admiral Nelson were, to put it mildly, poor. Both the Russians and Ottomans suspected

Nelson wanted the great fortress at Corfu for the British, 'They have always wanted to take Corfu for themselves and wished to send us away under various pretexts, or by splitting us up reduce us to incapacity.'<sup>9</sup> Equally, Nelson suspected the Russians wanted Malta and refused Russian assistance to take it. The Hospitallers, when forced to leave the island by Napoleon, had proclaimed Paul I as the new Grand Master.

Ushakov was left to organise the islands politically, maintain good relations with the Ottomans and British, and maintain a rotting fleet with an ill-equipped harbour. He had to use Russian and Turkish marines to garrison the islands while he awaited Russian troops, some of which were then diverted to Suvorov's army in Italy. Ushakov used his fleet to support operations in Italy, which created further tensions with the British and the Austrians. When Tsar Paul broke off all diplomatic relations with the Austrians, Ushakov sailed for Sevastopol on 17 July 1800.

In 1804, a Russian squadron of three frigates brought Russian troops to strengthen the garrison of the Ionian islands, primarily made up of local militia. Several detachments were sent throughout 1804, increasing the Russian force in the islands to over 13,000 soldiers. A substantial naval squadron was dispatched from the Baltic on 24 October under Aleksey Samuilovich Greig (Scottish descent). The Russians agreed to a defensive treaty with the Ottomans in September 1805, which allowed Russian ships to pass through the Straits into the Mediterranean.



In 1805, Vice-Admiral Dmitriy Nikolayevich Senyavin was appointed to command naval and land forces in the Mediterranean. He joined Greig with five more ships of the line. The Montenegrins were sympathetic to Russia and encouraged Senyavin to occupy Cattaro and the eight forts in the Bay when the Austrians were supposed to hand it over to the French in 1806. Senyavin recognised the strategic merits of Cattaro and got there well before the French. He used his initiative to intervene, arguing that the Treaty of Pressburg did not apply to Russia. He later explained to the Tsar that Cattaro had 400 merchant ships, 5,000 seamen, and 12,000 citizens under arms, which was probably an exaggeration<sup>10</sup>.

He then attempted to occupy the Republic of Ragusa (Dubrovnik). However, The Republic was a firmly Catholic enclave in an Orthodox and Muslim hinterland and had generally poor relations with Russia. The French General Lauriston demanded that his troops be allowed to rest and be supplied, but when they entered the city on 27 May, they seized control. The Republic was subsequently abolished and incorporated into the Kingdom of Italy (1808). The Russians blockaded the port, and Russian marines seized the town of Ragusa-Vecchia, south of the city. On 17 June, the Russians defeated Lauriston at the Battle of Bergatto Heights, but the French relief column under Molitor reached Ragusa on 5 July, and the Russians withdrew. They subsequently fought off an attempt by Marshall Marmont to capture the Bay of Cattaro. Senyavin received contradictory instructions from Tsar Alexander, which reflected the state of Russian-Austrian negotiations. Senyavin believed that he had a better grasp of the local situation, which is another example of how local commanders in the Adriatic had much more scope for independent action.

Senyavin joined with a failed British attempt to bombard Constantinople, as the Russians were blocked due to the outbreak of war with the Ottomans. The Treaty of Tilsit resulted in Russia abandoning much

of its Adriatic possessions. Senyavin's fleet was already suffering from a lack of funds and supplies, and he was now stranded in the Mediterranean without a base. He could not go back through the Straits, so he sent the troops home via Trieste and Austria, scuttled or sold some ships, and sailed the rest back towards the Baltic. The British blockaded him in Lisbon, and only two ships made it home in 1813. It was a tragic end for one of Russia's finest fleets that had operated successfully in the Adriatic.

## France

Napoleon Bonaparte's Italian campaign concluded with the Treaty of Campo Formio (17 October 1797). It brought the French to the Adriatic shores of Italy by creating the Cisalpine Republic, the Roman Republic and the Parthenopean Republic, giving the French naval bases, including the Papal port of Ancona and the Ionian islands off Greece. Napoleon regarded Corfu highly. Writing to his brother Joseph, then King of Naples, he said, 'You must regard it as more valuable than Sicily. Mark my words: in the current situation in Europe the worst misfortune that can happen to me is to lose Corfu.'<sup>11</sup> While the French fleet was strong enough to make short visits to Corfu, the French governors were still isolated and had to deal with the local powers, including Ali Pasha, without the stream of directions Napoleon was want to issue to other commanders. For example, the second governor, General Louis Chabot, agreed to ferry Ali's Albanian troops, led by the colourfully named Yusuf Arab the Blood Drinker, for a surprise attack on the prosperous town of Nivitza. Some six thousand civilians were said to have been slaughtered, some roasted alive and impaled, and the rest sent to serve on Ali's farms<sup>12</sup>.

The Treaty of Pressburg (26 December 1805) ended the War of the Third Coalition for the Austrians, who handed Venetia, Dalmatia, Istria and the Bay of Cattaro to France. This brought Napoleonic France to the borders of the Ottoman Empire. The new provinces were initially absorbed into the Kingdom of Italy, which had been created on 17 March 1805 with Napoleon crowned King in May, represented by the Viceroy Eugène de Beauharnais. Not that Napoleon believed in delegating much to his stepson, saying, 'Your system of government is simple: the emperor wills it to be thus.'

In 1802, the Ottomans signed the Treaty of Paris, restoring French-Ottoman relations to their positive state before Napoleon invaded Egypt. In July 1806, Horace Sébastiani was sent as the new French

ambassador to the Porte with explicit instructions to build a French-Ottoman-Persian alliance against Russia, including the closure of the Bosphorus to Russian ships. He brought a military mission that included artillery Colonel Foy, the engineer Major Haxo, and 300 gunners. They strengthened the Ottoman gun batteries, helping to repulse a British attack on Constantinople in February 1807 by Admiral Duckworth. Sébastiani was another French commander who had to take military and diplomatic decisions without regular reference to Napoleon.



The Treaty of Schonbrunn (12 October 1809) resulted in further loss of Austrian territory in the Adriatic, including Trieste, Carniola, Istria and most of the Croatian lands. Napoleon reorganised these territories into the Illyrian Provinces and appointed Auguste de Marmont, Duke of Ragusa, as the first governor, although he was already the military governor of Dalmatia. Traces of Marmont's rule still survive in public works and memory. He introduced

the rule of law prison reform, abolished torture and flogging, and created schools and colleges. Most South Slav historians agree he ruled well, and streets were named after him until WW2, despite having to finance the cost of the French administration and fund war reparations. The Illyrian province's appointment was challenging, given the geography and the different religions and nationalities. His staff included interpreters speaking seven languages. Marmont learned Croatian and sponsored a dictionary. He also built effective diplomatic relations with the Bosnians and Ottomans.

Marmont strongly supported the Grenzer system, although Napoleon was less convinced. After several reviews, Napoleon eventually gave in, and the Grenzers were formally incorporated as light troops in French service. French became the official language of command, and two hundred Grenzer boys were sent to France for a military education. Marmont used these troops to undertake punitive raids into Ottoman territory. Against the Aga of Bihac in Bosnia in 1809 and in 1810 against the main Turkish raiding base at Izačić, using four Grenzer and two French battalions supported by artillery.

As the Royal Navy took control of the Adriatic, French commanders were often isolated from Paris and operated mainly on their own initiative. They increasingly relied on locally recruited troops, which required considerable personal leadership skills, particularly when the war turned against the French after the Russian campaign of 1812.

## **Britain**

Britain had been engaged in the Mediterranean since the outbreak of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. However, the resumption of war with France in 1803 and the subsequent War of the Third Coalition, when Austria and Russia declared war on France, brought a greater focus on the Adriatic. British ships helped the Russians maintain control over the Ionian Islands, and war in Italy brought Russian troops from Corfu to assist the Allied campaign effort. The British Government considered attacks on the new French bases in the Adriatic but was persuaded to focus on defending Sicily. As we have seen, not without tensions with their Russian allies.

The British largely left the 1806 Dalmatian campaign to the Russians, other than some gunboat diplomacy with Admiral Duckworth's attempt on Constantinople. Limited attempts were made to intercept French reinforcements to Corfu when they regained control of the Ionian Islands. Still, Collingwood, commanding in the Mediterranean, was reluctant to stretch his resources when invited to support a rebellion in 1808. British intelligence indicated a French garrison of around 6,000, too strong for Collingwood's meagre resources, including the need to garrison the forts<sup>13</sup>. Instead, a small Royal Navy squadron was established in the Adriatic, commanded by Captain Campbell in the frigate HMS *Unité*. His task was observing French activity in Venice, liaising with the Austrians in Trieste, and interdicting French naval traffic. His arrival was welcomed by Britain's local agents, who had despaired of the Russian fleet's inability to prevent French troops from moving from Italy to Dalmatia. He succeeded in closing the ports of Trieste, Fiume and Ragusa and seized timber destined for the Venice shipyards. While frigate captains were used to operating on their own initiative, this command involved sensitive commercial and diplomatic decisions.

The Adriatic was the ideal theatre of operations for ambitious naval officers prepared to use their initiative, far from the direction of senior commanders. Instructions from the Admiralty in London could take between six and eight weeks. Royal Navy small ship captains captured ships at sea and landed on the coast to attack supply convoys, signal towers and gun batteries. HMS *Porcupine* (24) captured or destroyed over forty enemy vessels in two months off the Bay of Cattaro and raided Ragusa harbour, destroying artillery and military stores. The most famous frigate captain to serve in the Adriatic was Captain William Hoste of the *Amphion* (32), who arrived in February 1808 and returned in early 1809 with the *Redwing* (18). In a letter to his father, he said, 'I am still in hopes I shall make some cash'<sup>14</sup>. In



the first quarter of 1808, Hoste alone took 38 merchant ships and burnt another six, claiming £6,000 (worth £516,000 today) prize money. In the wake of the Royal Navy came smugglers and privateers, who added to the problems facing the French garrisons.

The Royal Navy's main problem was the lack of a base, as Malta was 925km away. In 1809, the army provided 1800 troops, built around the 35th Foot, to capture Zante as a naval base. Corfu remained too strong to take with the modest forces available. 'French engineering during the last three years has rendered the fortress of Corfu impregnable to every power in Europe but Great Britain owing to her naval superiority'<sup>15</sup>. Useful though Zante was, to threaten French interests in Venice required a base further up the Adriatic. The Royal Navy settled on Lissa (Vis), which has an excellent natural harbour at Port Santa Giorgia (Vis town today) and a smaller one at Comisa (Komiža). Royal Navy ships had

informally used the island. Still, it had no fortifications or garrison, leaving it open to a raid in October 1810 by a French squadron from Ancona commanded by Captain Bernard Dubourdieu. Hoste developed the island as a base, even establishing a cricket club on some rare flat ground. At the Battle of Lissa (13 March 1811), Hoste's squadron of four frigates defeated Dubourdieu's six frigates, securing British naval dominance of the Adriatic. Lissa was then properly fortified, including Fort George and three large towers, Bentinck, Wellington and Robertson, which can be seen to this day. This naval dominance was achieved by a Royal Navy captain operating mainly on his own initiative.

Only in 1812, when the French completed ships of the line in the Venice lagoon, an Admiral (Freemantle) was sent to the Adriatic with three ships of the line. Even then, captains like Hoste operated semi-independently. On his own initiative, he supported rebellions in the Bay of Cattaro, capturing Castello Nuovo (Herzog-Novti) at the head of the Bay and then Cattaro itself. The defending Fort San Giovanni (Sveti Jovan) was perched on cliffs 600 feet above sea level. Hoste landed an 18-pounder cannon and had them dragged up the mountain above the fort, forcing a surrender. As Hoste described his role in a letter home, 'How you would laugh, were you to see me here. I am general, admiral, governor, engineer and complete jack of all trades'<sup>16</sup>. This included sensitive negotiations with the Austrians, who wanted to reclaim the Bay, while the Montenegrins wanted it for themselves, arguing that they had done the fighting. Hoste later intervened in the siege of Ragusa, allowing the Austrians to march in ahead of the rebels, ending all hope of the Republic being re-established.

This level of initiative was not limited to naval captains. The Ragusan insurgents had been blockading the city with assistance from a handful of British troops and gunboats from the Lagosta and Lesina garrisons<sup>17</sup>. The Lagosta garrison was commanded by the 19-year-old Lieutenant John Hildebrand (35th Foot), who had earlier liaised with the insurgents by removing his uniform and donning local garb. He nearly got captured by the French, who could have shot him, while reconnoitring the fortifications. On his own initiative, he transported some of his troops and guns to assist them. His decision to work closely, if not lead this determined bunch, was undoubtedly at odds with his orders to command on Lagosta, as was his decision to stay with the Ragusans in their headquarters under the fortress's guns.

As referenced above, another soldier required to use his own initiative was Captain (later Major) Leake, who was sent as a military advisor to Ali Pasha. Operating independently, he had to make diplomatic and even commercial judgements. The British interest in Ali was not solely as a military buffer against the French. They viewed the Albanian port of Durazzo (Durrës) as a convenient place to export corn, wool,



timber and tobacco and import British goods such as sugar, cloth and coffee. Leake's papers contain a detailed report on the suitability of Albanian timber for use by the Royal Navy<sup>18</sup>.

## Command Decisions

Modern management theory teaches that delegation improves efficiency and ensures better decision-making and effective time management. Such concepts were not commonplace during the Napoleonic period, and senior commanders did not have the communication systems that enabled the necessary support and supervision to make delegation work. Contemporary military theory does reflect modern communications, which allow joint operations, with the addition of the air dimension, in a way that would be unrecognisable to Napoleonic commanders. Mission-directed tactics (German *Auftragstaktik*) recognise the benefits of delegating more responsibility and leaving more room for initiative to subordinate commanders. Order-directed tactics (*Befehlstaktik*) increase control at higher levels of command, an approach that is easier to deliver with modern communications. These are either/or options, and their use depends on the operational and strategic context. Contemporary theorists such as Martin van Creveld argue that armies that gave the subordinate commanders considerable latitude proved more successful. He referenced Napoleon's marshals, Ludendorff's stormtroopers, and Israeli divisional commanders during the Six-Day War in 1967<sup>19</sup>. This view is now reflected in the practices of the British and even the traditionally more theoretical US Army. The former captain of the USS Benfold even espouses the grassroots leadership concept, arguing that you 'shift your organising principle from obedience to performance'<sup>20</sup>. However, it is not hard to imagine what Wellington or Napoleon would have made of the doctrine of dissent!<sup>21</sup>

The military theorists of the period had little to say on this issue or much advice for the detached commander. Jomini highlighted two methods – old-school detailed daily directions and detached orders such as those given by Napoleon to his marshals<sup>22</sup>. However, even Napoleon was reluctant to say too much in his orders to maintain an air of mystery and the risk of more specific orders falling into the hands of the enemy. Napoleon could also change his orders quickly, an option not available in theatres like the Adriatic. Jomini highlighted the risks involved in what he called 'great detachments' but offered little advice on how such detachments should be organised and directed. If anything, he advised against them, favouring concentration of force, although when ventured, officers 'should be selected who are bold and full of stratagems'<sup>23</sup>. Clausewitz was equally unenthusiastic about detachments, focusing on the importance 'always to be very strong, first generally, then at the decisive point', although his focus was on operations rather than strategic detachments. In his lectures on 'small war', he references the Balkans, making clear that they can serve tactical, strategic and political ends<sup>24</sup>. Actions in the Adriatic certainly fell within his definition, even when they didn't involve the insurrections he also referenced. Classical authors such as Wu-tzu also focused on the concentration of force but had little to say about command far from the home territory. Of course, these theories must be put in the context of the period they were written, as John Keegan puts it, 'products of their time and place'<sup>25</sup>.

The great commanders of the period offer little help in this search for advice on detached command far from home shores. Napoleon was focused on fighting the great battle, while Wellington claimed he was avoiding such a great battle. Wellington would have recognised the challenges Hoste, Freemantle, Marmont, and Senyavin faced in the Adriatic. In 1810, he wrote to his brother William, 'I am left to myself, to my own exertions, to my own execution, the mode of execution, even the superintendence of that mode'<sup>26</sup>. Wellington denigrated many of his subordinates and delegated very little, but we should remember that there was no staff college to train officers in the range of skills needed to command in faraway places<sup>27</sup>. The Royal Navy did provide at least extensive practical experience of detached command, but there were few equivalents in the army. Wellington did benefit from outstanding mapping officers and decent intelligence, although he still relied on the evidence of his own eyes. Few such support mechanisms were available to officers outside the Peninsular.

The modern British Army doctrine of command sets out three tenets, 'Together, this requires a style of leadership which promotes decentralised command, freedom and speed of action, and initiative.' Mission Command elements include, 'Subordinates decide for themselves how best to achieve their superior's intent'<sup>28</sup>. This would be unrecognisable to an officer in the British Army during the Napoleonic Wars. However, for the reasons set out above, expeditionary forces had considerable discretion. Forces dispatched were placed under the command of a general officer formally appointed by the monarch. The general would be given a 'letter of service' with broad instructions. Even after the advent of the telegraph in Crimea, Lord Raglan was told, 'Much must necessarily be left to the exercise of your own judgement and decision on the spot'<sup>29</sup>. Governments recognised the reality of slow communications. A good example is Sir Edward Pakenham fighting the Battle of New Orleans in 1815 after peace had been signed. Expeditionary commanders could convene courts-martial and make temporary promotions, although they had little say in appointments other than their personal staff.

## Conclusion

One of Napoleon's military maxims was 'Nothing is so important in war as an undivided command'<sup>30</sup>. However, as David Chandler comments, this broke down when he tried to micro-manage the Peninsular War from Moscow. Wellington complained about interference from London but also noted that he was largely left to himself. This was the reality of command in an era of limited communications, and you were commanding forces many miles from senior officers.

Much has been written by historians and military theorists about command decisions. However, these focus on command of an army, typically by senior generals in their own right. The Adriatic points to a different command experience. One which often involved more junior officers making military, economic and political decisions that would be way above their pay grade in their home countries. They exercised these judgements in an environment that would have been challenging for the most experienced officers. The Adriatic was a region of shifting alliances, multiple languages, as well as religious and cultural beliefs that most officers would never have encountered before. There was no handbook to fall back on or telephone for advice. With the possible exception of naval officers, their training and doctrine did not equip them for these responsibilities.

In these circumstances, we can only admire the bravery and skill of the soldiers and sailors who muddled their way through the events outlined in this paper. They made command decisions in a faraway country between people of whom they knew nothing.

Dave Watson  
September 2024

## Biography

Dave Watson lives in Ayrshire, Scotland. After a trade union and government affairs career, he semi-retired in 2018 to work as a policy consultant and later as Director of the Reid Foundation, a Scottish think tank. This also allowed him to develop his lifetime passion for military history, which had previously been limited to journal articles and editing the website *Balkan Military History* for 24 years.

His military history books include '*Chasing the Soft Underbelly: Turkey and the Second World War*' (Helion 2023), '*The Frontier Sea, The Napoleonic Wars in the Adriatic*' (BMH 2023) and '*Ripped Apart: Volume 1, The Cyprus Conflict 1963-64*' (Helion 2023) and *HMS Ambuscade: From 1746 to the Present Day* (CNT

2024). The latter reflects his involvement in a charity bringing the last ship of that name, a Falklands War veteran, back to the River Clyde. His remaining 2024/25 projects include two more volumes on the Cyprus conflict, a chapter in *British Amphibious Warfare* based on the 2023 *Helion* conference and a wargamers guide to the Cyprus conflict 1974.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon*, (Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> *Anecdotes of Wellington*, (Wellington Society of Madrid), <https://wellsoc.org/society-member-pages/anecdotes-of-wellington/>

<sup>3</sup> The use of 'Balkan' to describe the region is arguably less accurate than 'south-east Europe' used by some academics. It isn't popular, particularly in modern Croatia, but it remains the most recognisable description of the region.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the military border see, G.Rothenberg, *The Military Border in Croatia, 1740-1881*, (Chicago, 1966).

<sup>5</sup> They complained in verse. Mustafa Firaki, quoted in, E.Hajdarasic, *Frontier Anxieties*, (Austrian History Yearbook , Volume 51 , May 2020), p.25.

<sup>6</sup> TNA, *Ali Pasha to Consul*, (FO 78:61, 28 January 1808 (old style).

<sup>7</sup> W.Plomer, W, *The Diamond of Jannina*, (Jonathan Cape, 1970), p.136.

<sup>8</sup> N.Malcolm, *Rebels, Believers, Survivors: Studies in the History of the Albanians*, (Oxford, 2020), p.244.

<sup>9</sup> P.Fregosi, *Dreams of Empire*, (Hutchinson, 1989), p.141.

<sup>10</sup> Saul, N, *Russia and the Mediterranean 1797-1807*, (University of Chicago, 1970), p.148.

<sup>11</sup> J.Potts, *The Ionian Islands and Epirus*, (Signal Books, 2010), p.42.

<sup>12</sup> Q & A.Russell, *Ali Pasha, Lion of Ioannina*, (Pen & Sword, 2017), p.70.

<sup>13</sup> TNA: *Constantinople (based at Malta) Embassy reports*, (FO 78:61,1808).

<sup>14</sup> T.Pocock, *Remember Nelson*, (Lume Books, Kindle edition, 2020), p.159.

<sup>15</sup> TNA:, *Constantinople Embassy, 26 December, 1809*. (FO 195:5).

<sup>16</sup> Anon, *Service Afloat or The Naval Career of Sir William Hoste*, (W.H.Allen, 1887), p.284.

<sup>17</sup> G.Glover, *Fighting Napoleon*, (Frontline, 2016), Chapters 11-14.

<sup>18</sup> J.Baggally, *Ali Pasha and Great Britain*, (Blackwell, 1938), p.43.

<sup>19</sup> J.Angstrom & J.Widen, *Contemporary Military Theory*, (Routledge, 2015), p.65.

<sup>20</sup> P. LaBarre, *Military Leadership: The Agenda – Grassroots Leadership*, (Westview, 1999), Chapter 20.

<sup>21</sup> M.Cantrell, *Military Leadership: The Doctrine of Dissent*, (Westview, 1999), Chapter 10.

<sup>22</sup> H.Jomini, *The Art of War*, (Greenhill, 1992), p.259.

<sup>23</sup> H.Jomini, *The Art of War*, (Greenhill, 1992), p.224.

<sup>24</sup> C. Daase & J.Davis, *Clausewitz on Small War*, (Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> J.Keegan, *The Mask of Command*, (The Folio Society, 2019), p.4.

<sup>26</sup> J.Keegan, *The Mask of Command*, (The Folio Society, 2019), p.143.

<sup>27</sup> The traditional view of Wellington's dictatorial command style has been challenged in modern work. See, G.Jaycock, *Wellington's Command*, (Pen & Sword, 2019).

<sup>28</sup> *Army Land operations: Army Doctrine Publication AC 71940*, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a82e143e5274a2e87dc3705/Army\\_Field\\_Manual\\_AFM\\_A5\\_Master\\_AD\\_P\\_Interactive\\_Gov\\_Web.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a82e143e5274a2e87dc3705/Army_Field_Manual_AFM_A5_Master_AD_P_Interactive_Gov_Web.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> R.Holmes, *Redcoat*, (Harper Collins, 2002), p.331.

<sup>30</sup> D.Chandler, *The Military Maxims of Napoleon*, (Greenhill, 1987), p.213.