

PART THREE

**Naval Leadership and the
French Revolution, 1789–1850**

INTRODUCTION

Naval Leadership and the French Revolution

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On 14 July 1789, after months of economic distress and political tension, there was a popular rising in Paris to release prisoners in the Bastille, the fortress that overawed the eastern part of the city. There were few prisoners to be released, but it sparked a series of events that were to lead to seismic shifts in world history. The political, economic, cultural and military consequences of that rising are still very much with us today. By August 1792 the political shifts in France had brought about a republican government and later, in January 1793, the execution of the King, Louis XVI. The monarchical institutions of the army and navy which had been crumbling since 1790 were eventually shattered as revolutionary suspicion of the predominantly aristocratic officer corps led to the dismissal and mass migration of experienced officers. By the late summer of 1792 the simmering hostility of the other great monarchies of Europe turned into open war and by early 1793 France was faced by a coalition of Austria, Prussia, Spain, Great Britain and the United Provinces. Despite a victory at Valmy (September 1792), the position of France remained desperate.

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The great achievement of the revolutionary government was to fashion a new army and a new art of war out of the crisis. It achieved remarkable success, reorganising its armies and, critically, its officer corps, so that by the end of 1794, France appeared the most powerful military state in Europe.¹⁸⁷ The mobilisation of the nation, driven on by an ideology of a free citizenship in arms and the energy of revolutionary government against the old feudal monarchies, provided manpower and resources that expanded the army to four times its 1792 size. By mid-1796 internal revolt had been crushed and the First Coalition had effectively broken up.

Within France's armies, Napoleon Bonaparte was excelling at his trade and rising through the officer corps. His seizure of power by *coup d'état* to become First Consul in October 1799 and then the establishment of his empire at the end of 1804 fundamentally changed the political nature of the revolution and entrenched France as a dynamic military force. Although ultimately suffering complete defeat in 1814–5, the wars of the Napoleonic Empire caused massive change in thinking about warfare. From tactics, through operations, to the understanding of strategy, the conduct of warfare across Europe went through major changes. Military analysts at the time and later historians, seeking to systematise or codify these changes, have sometimes overstated the revolutionary nature of Napoleonic warfare, underestimating the developments that were occurring before 1789 and ignoring the continuities with those reforms, but there can be little doubt that the theory and practice of land warfare was dramatically altered by 1815.¹⁸⁸ Looking back, with experience and hindsight it appeared to some that there was a distinct difference between the strategies employed by states before and after the Revolution. The two basic strategies that have been employed throughout history, depending on the circumstances, were most simply summed up by the German historian Hans Delbrück (1848–1929). The first was a strategy of exhaustion, in which battle was only one of many means of wearing down the enemy's capability to fight. The second was a strategy of annihilation in which the destruction of the enemy's army, and thus battle, was the central objective. The lessons of the Napoleonic decisive battle that made it impossible for the enemy to resist long after defeat in the field were clear.¹⁸⁹ The former suited the conditions of the eighteenth century, while the latter suited the conditions of Revolution and after.

Some of these changes, particularly those associated with the mobilisation of populations in a national cause, did not survive the end of the Napoleonic threat to the traditional dynastic states. However, most of the organisational and technological shifts were more permanent and incorporated into the armies of Europe. One of the most interesting shifts was the change of focus from the reformers of the eighteenth century, who sought the underlying principles of war at a tactical level, to those who experienced the wars of 1792–1815 and saw the need to focus on the policy and strategic principles. The evolution was evident in the work of Antoine-Henri Jomini (1779–1869) and fully developed

in that of Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831). Jomini, who experienced the great Napoleonic campaigns first hand, located the operation of military genius in the destruction of the enemy's armed force by seizing the initiative, maintaining mobility and concentration. Clausewitz's works, which gained prominence in the second half of the nineteenth century, insisted that this war of annihilation had to fit within the policy framework of the state. With the decisive victories of Prussia over Austria and France in 1866 and 1870–1, and the evident contribution of a sophisticated General Staff, the higher direction of armies became the key element in military organisation in the last quarter of the century.¹⁹⁰

How did this change in military thinking and operations apply to naval warfare and officership? Of the great naval powers, France suffered the greatest organisational dislocation during the Revolution. While Napoleon made moves to rebuild his navy, employing the resources across his European empire, they could never be concentrated or sustained for a long period. After Trafalgar in 1805 the French imperial navy never recovered to offer more than spasmodic squadron operations.¹⁹¹ Other navies, the British Royal Navy excepted, suffered crushing defeats, economic starvation and domestic upheavals that seriously damaged their effectiveness. The most obvious difference between the experience of European armies and the navies was that while the forces of revolutionary ideology and drive successfully rebuilt the French army and created a weapon of immense force under Napoleon, nothing like this occurred in the naval sphere. The mass mobilisation of the population and ideology could never compensate for the loss of experienced officers and administrators. The ruthless drive for administrative improvement was effective under the Committee of Public Safety (1792–94) in the short run, but not enough to recreate effective, sustainable naval forces, especially against the Royal Navy, which was operating at a level of unparalleled effectiveness.¹⁹² Naval expertise could not be created out of revolutionary or imperial enthusiasm.

In many respects, the changes in the art of war on land identified during the revolutionary period had been taking place at sea for a while. The conditions of war that had favoured a strategy of exhaustion on land were largely to do with the relative parity of force in offence and defence that had emerged in Europe with the effective fortification of key areas towards the end of the seventeenth century. Fortifications made decisive field encounters difficult to exploit with the size of armies available. Throughout the eighteenth century the development of professional armies, with engineering and artillery expertise, was broadly balanced by the expansion of fortresses at key strategic points. The Revolution, which produced large popular armies, made the fortress less significant in both offence and defence and the strategy of annihilation became more important.¹⁹³

On the high seas there were no *points d'appui* like the fortress. However, from the mid-seventeenth century, the disciplined line of battle in combat acted like an impenetrable artillery line. Getting around it or breaking through it to

annihilate the enemy was an ambition or fear of naval officers from the late seventeenth century onwards. The problem was how to surround or break through in the face of a determined enemy. Really significant results were only achieved in chase actions, such as the two battles off Finisterre in May and October 1747 or at Quiberon Bay in 1759, or when the enemy was at anchor (Battle of Chesme, July 1770 and the Nile, August 1798). Of course, there were differences between officers in the enthusiasm with which they pursued the annihilation of the enemy and differences in the expectations of their political masters as well. In Britain, the expectation of destroying the enemy was so strong that even a moderately creditable performance was sometimes inadequate to protect the officer from censure, as William, Lord Hotham and Sir Robert Calder found out in 1795 and 1805 respectively.¹⁹⁴ On the other hand, for French and Spanish officers, who almost always faced a numerical and qualitatively superior enemy, the option of breaking the line seldom presented itself. Furthermore, for the most part they sailed under orders to achieve a particular operational objective, not to seek out and destroy their enemies. Thus, French and Spanish navies had to be more committed to a strategy of exhaustion. It did not prevent brave, resourceful and sophisticated operations on the part of their officers, but it did present them with a more challenging context and thus, different approaches to their duty and conduct.