NAPOLEON'S ITALIAN CAMPAIGNS

1805–1815

FREDERICK C. SCHNEID

Foreword by
Gunther E. Rothenberg

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Westport, Connecticut
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For my parents,
June and Norman,
and for
Stacy, Craig, and Sarah

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD

Italy and especially its northern region had been contested between Austria and France for centuries. Control of the rich plains of Lombardy and Venetia and of the high plains leading to the alpine passes assumed special importance in the offensive and defensive strategy of both sides during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Of course, the valley of the Danube remained the principal line of operations for a thrust toward Vienna, but in 1796–1797 then-General Bonaparte had made Italy the primary front. After evicting the Austrian armies from the Italian plain he penetrated through the passes into Carinthia and Styria and compelled the Austrians to come to terms. Although the Marengo campaign of 1800 was Bonaparte's last personal command in Italy, and this time it required a victory at Hohenlinden in the Danube valley to defeat Austria, control of Italy remained a significant factor in strategic considerations.

When in 1805 Austria, provoked by Napoleon's creation of the Kingdom of Italy with his stepson, Eugène de Beauharnais, appointed viceroy, went to war, the Habsburgs' best general, Archduke Charles, actually considered Italy the decisive theater. The main Austrian army was deployed there and supported by Russian, British, and Neapolitan forces. It was to break into Lombardy and defeat French forces there. After that, this army was to swing northwest into Switzerland and combine in Germany with the Austrian army, which, expecting prompt Russian assistance, as well as support from Prussia, would advance rapidly into western Bavaria. In the event, of course, Germany became the decisive theater when Napoleon, acting with lightning speed, eliminated the Austrian army in Germany, captured Vienna, and drove the slowly moving Russians and the Austrian remnants into Moravia. Information about these defeats forced

Charles, who had moved rather sluggishly, to abandon his great scheme and hastily retire from Italy into Carinthia, hoping to join with the allied forces in the north. Although fighting with numerically inferior forces, the *Armée d'Italie* under its commander, Marshal Masséna, managed to achieve more than its primary objective. It not only contained the largest portion of the Austrian field armies but forced it to withdraw from Italy.

The 1805 campaign, in which French units fought together with troops from the new Kingdom of Italy, constituting the *Armée d'Italie*, set the pattern for the future. Whereas from now on Italy clearly became a secondary theater of operations, neither side could afford to neglect it. Under French control not only did Italy remain a base for invasion of Austria, but the Treaty of Pressburg ending the War of 1805 ceded the old Venetian possessions in Istria and Dalmatia to France and extended Napoleon's influence into the northern Balkans. In addition the French hold on Italy and Switzerland together with the control of the western alpine passes was further secured when the Tyrol was ceded to Bavaria, Napoleon's new German ally. Finally, in 1806, French troops conquered the Neapolitan mainland and from there posed a potential threat to British naval control of the Mediterranean. For its part, Austria neither could reconcile itself to the loss of its Italian possessions and of Tyrol nor afford to leave its southern flank open. Therefore, in each of the subsequent wars substantial forces would be deployed in the Italian theater of operations. On the French side this was the *Armée d'Italie*, always composed both of French units, many of them actually raised in annexed areas of the Italian peninsula, and units levied for the growing army of the Kingdom of Italy ruled by Eugène de Beauharnais. Ultimately success or failure in the main theater, southern Germany and the Danube valley, would decisively influence operations here.

Whereas in 1805 Marshal Masséna commanded the *Armée d'Italie*, in 1809 and later Eugène, guided by detailed instructions and advice from the emperor, personally led this army. He did surprisingly well in 1809, when after an initial setback he drove the Austrians out of Italy, their retreat accelerated by news of defeats in Bavaria. Keeping up the pressure, Eugène followed them as far as Hungary, defeated them in the battle of Raab, then marched his army to participate at Wagram. In 1813–1814, despite the debacle in Russia, which had nearly destroyed his army, Eugène raised new troops and capably defended his kingdom, remaining loyal to the emperor even when the mercurial king of Naples, Joachim Murat, defected. In the end, Napoleon's defeats in Germany and France ended Eugène's vice-regal career.

The final act of the Italian campaigns occurred during the Hundred Days in 1815. Murat, whose defection had saved his throne the previous year, changed sides again and without coordinating his effort with Napoleon attacked the Austrian forces in central and northern Italy in March. After initial success, Murat was defeated by the end of May. In June Napoleon with the bulk of available troops in his *Armée du Nord* invaded Belgium, leaving the defense of his southeastern border in the hands of Marshal Suchet. Although he had but

a handful of troops, Suchet initially managed to advance into Savoy. But he could neither hold his small conquest nor defend the alpine passes into France against a large Austrian army. In any case, Waterloo doomed Suchet's efforts and on 11 July 1815 the Napoleonic Wars came to an end.

Most accounts of the wars and campaigns of 1805 to 1815 pay little attention to the valiant and effective role played by the *Armée d'Italie*. This volume rectifies this omission. It provides a narrative of campaigns and battles against both Austria and Bourbon Naples, together with an excursus on the much-disputed encounter at Maida. There also are orders of battle for 1805–1806, 1809, 1813–1814, 1815. Altogether, here for the first time in English is an account of Napoleon's *Armée d'Italie* and its battles.

Gunther E. Rothenberg

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wrote this book many years ago believing that a history of the Napoleonic Wars in Italy was long overdue. Unfortunately the manuscript sat for some time. Yet, the research and writing of it led me to produce a second book, *Soldiers of Napoleon's Kingdom of Italy: Army, State and Society, 1800–1815*. Ironically, it was the latter work that was published years before this current manuscript made it to press. In many ways this campaign history raised questions about the nature of Napoleon's empire, and his satellite armies, encouraging me to write the other.

I have tried to produce an analytical narrative that not only recounts the armies, generals, strategies, tactics, and battles in this theater of war, but expands beyond it to include motivations and rationales of the respective participants. Perhaps the most significant element was to attempt to present a clearer picture of the Austrians, Neapolitans, and British generals and their armies: how they conducted their campaigns against the Franco-Italian forces of imperial France.

There were a number of people who were of invaluable assistance in creating and publishing this manuscript. Professor Gunther E. Rothenberg's friendship, guidance, and advice were particularly important. Professors Richard B. Mc-Caslin and George L. Simpson also provided significant comments on the final draft. Peter Kracht, publisher at Greenwood/Praeger, finally gave this book life. Lastly, my wife, Stacy, and my children, Craig and Sarah, whose love and support make it all the more enjoyable to share good things.

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PROLOGUE: ITALY, WARS, AND GEOGRAPHY

The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars raged in Italy for 23 years. During the course of the wars no fewer than eight campaigns were waged in the Italian peninsula. The most famous of the Revolutionary campaigns were those of 1796–1797 and 1800. In both, General, and later First Consul, Napoleon Bonaparte conducted brilliant operations, establishing French dominance in the region and making a name for himself. His victories set the stage for future wars in Italy.

Not the primary theater of war for France or Austria, Italy was secondary to the great military efforts of both states. Yet Italy was vastly important and in 1796–1797 was the place where the war of the First Coalition was decided. During the Napoleonic Wars, three major campaigns were conducted between the French and Austrians in Italy. The strengths of their armies were substantial when compared to those stationed in Italy a decade earlier. The average strength of the French armies in Italy between 1805 and 1815 was roughly 50,000 to 80,000 in the field, whereas the Austrians mustered some 70,000 to 90,000 men. There was clearly no parity between these armies and those in the primary theater. The *Grande Armée* averaged 180,000 men in 1805 and 1809 and the Austrian *Hauptarmee* numbered in excess of 120,000 and 180,000 during those same years. Nonetheless the numbers of troops involved in the wars in Italy during this period reflect Napoleon's will to hold the region and Austria's resolve to retake it.

The importance of Italy rested in its strategic location and economic value. Northern Italy bordered the heartland of the Austrian Empire. The provinces of Styria, Carinthia, and the Tyrol were the crown lands of the Habsburg mon-

archy. The historical and economic significance of these provinces to the ruling Austrian house cannot be underestimated. Austria had also had a long tradition of major possessions in Italy, and the loss of these hurt. Northern Italy, therefore, had been a theater of war between the two nations for centuries, beginning in 1494 with the French invasion of the peninsula. Since that time every major war between France and Austria resulted in extensive campaigning in northern Italy.

From the Austrian strategic perspective there were two traditional invasion routes into Austria. The first ran from Strasbourg into Bavaria and down the Danube valley to Vienna. It was this path that Napoleon took both in 1805 and in 1809. The second invasion route was over the Carnatic or Swiss Alps through the north Italian plain and into Carinthia, Styria, Hungary, and finally on to Vienna. By 1805 French control of northern Italy, and the establishment of Napoleon's Kingdom of Italy, shortened the distance between French armies and Vienna along the southern route. Similarly, Napoleon's alliance with Bavaria guaranteed friendly passage of French armies through southern Germany and into the Danube valley.

The comparative distances of invasion routes provide ample illustration of Austria's strategic concerns. Prior to French conquest of northern Italy in 1796 the distance from southern France to Vienna was roughly 500 miles, whereas it was only 400 miles from Strasbourg to Vienna. In 1805, French control of northern Italy reduced the invasion route to 300 miles, while the distance through Germany was unchanged. In 1809 the expansion of the French satellite kingdom in Italy shortened the route further, to only 200 miles. After Napoleon's acquisition of Illyria in 1809, French armies were merely 150 miles from Vienna. This meant by 1805 Napoleon's army in Italy, marching at an average pace of 20 miles a day, was only two weeks from the Austrian capital. After 1809 they were only ten days' march. For these reasons the Austrians placed considerable emphasis on the reconquest of northern Italy and the removal of French military presence from the peninsula.

Strategic considerations did not only affect Austria, for the British also considered French control of northern and central Italy a threat to their position in the Mediterranean. Since Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798, the British feared French attempts to sever British communications with India and threaten their Mediterranean trade. The alliance between France and Spain further increased the threat in the Mediterranean as well as the Atlantic. The consequences of this were increased British aid to Austria and an ever-vigilant naval presence in the Mediterranean. Perhaps the greatest threat to the English in the Mediterranean was the possibility of the French seizure of Venetia and the Venetian fleet. Although small, it could enable the French to challenge British control of the Adriatic Sea.

For Napoleon, Italy served as a staging area for his armies. He was well aware of the strategic importance of the peninsula and had every intention of expanding French control over it. He learned this lesson in 1797 when he invaded

Austrian from Italy, forcing the Habsburgs to capitulate. The signing of the Treaty of Campo Formio was a clear illustration of the strategic significance of Italy. In 1805 he held northern Italy; in 1806 he occupied the Papal States and conquered the Kingdom of Naples. By 1809 Napoleon reorganized the Italian states into satellite kingdoms and controlled the Papal States. Italy was utilized by the Emperor to force the Austrians and British to focus a portion of their military resources against the threat from Italy. More than defensive, Napoleon proposed in 1805, 1809, and 1813 to use Italy as a secondary theater with the hope that perhaps his lieutenants could achieve great victories as he had years earlier. He could also use its manpower and money for this purpose.

Italy was, to an extent, underscored by its geography. The Italian peninsula is approximately 600 miles long and 100 miles wide; however, all but two campaigns in Italy were concentrated in the north. Although the Apennine mountain range divides the Italian boot, northern Italy is essentially flat. Surrounded by the Tyrol, Swiss, Carnatic, and Julian Alps to the north, east, and west, Italy was locked in by its geography; the isolation of the north Italian plain also limited the ability of French armies to invade the Hungarian plain if the mountains of Illyria and the Tyrol were well defended. In fact, it was not until 1810 that the French controlled the Illyrian passes; Bavaria received the Tyrol in 1806.

The north Italian plain is where Napoleon in 1796 and 1800 met Wurmser and Melas. The plain extends from Alessandria, in Piedmont, east for 200 miles, beyond Venice to the Isonzo River. The landscape is scored by dozens of rivers that run south from the Alps and eventually into the Adriatic. As such, the rivers of northern Italy are excellent for defensive purposes. Only the river Pô runs parallel to the mountains of the north, and many of the smaller rivers flow into it. The Pô spills out into the Adriatic and effectively bisects the plain. Of these rivers approximately half are major obstacles to movement. The Isonzo, Piave, Brenta, Adige, Mincio, and Pô Rivers have very strong currents during the fall, winter, and spring and can only be forded with difficulty except by bridge, pontoon, or boat. Medium rivers, the Tagliamento, Livenza, and Bacchiglione, can be forded in several places except in the spring. Located in the eastern region of the plain, these rivers afforded the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy a series of natural defensive barriers. These river lines played a crucial part in the campaigns of 1809 and 1813, as they did in all later campaigns, including those of 1859, 1866, and the First World War.

Whereas the rivers of the north Italian plain provided security against invading armies, the mountains surrounding Italy reduced the number of invasion routes into the country. From Austria there were only three major roads. Two roads ran from Villach and Trieste across the Isonzo into Italy; the third ran through the Tyrol down the Adige valley to Verona. There existed a fourth road that followed the course of the Piave River from the Tyrol; however, it did not continue across the mountains and required an army to advance from Linz over the Tyrol into the Piave valley. The roads were protected by several

fortresses. Palma Nova was a formidable fortress that guarded the route from Trieste to the north Italian plain. The road descending from Villach, which followed the course of the Tagliamento, was protected by the smaller fortress of Osopo. From the Tyrol along the Adige valley, however, the road was not blocked by a fortress until it reached Verona. The city stood in the center of the north Italian plain and was an important strategic asset to the defending army of northern Italy. Finally, guarding the approaches from Switzerland and western Tyrol was the fort of Rocco d'Anfo, located approximately 25 miles north of Brescia. In the central plain stood several powerful fortresses, which formed a considerable barrier to those attempting to traverse northern Italy. Verona, Legnago, Peschiera, and Mantua formed the Quadrilateral fortress net. Movement between the Mincio River and the Adige, as well as from the Tyrol to the Venice-Cremona road, was under the guns of these fortifications. All east-west roads ran across the Quadrilateral, and to move around it meant a march through the Alps or south across the Pô.

The geography and strategic location made Italy an excellent base of operations for the French army and its allies. The threat to the heart of Austria was very real. For this reason Austria allocated almost a third of their army to Italy in 1805 and 1809, and one-fourth in 1813.

PART I
THE CONQUEST OF THE ITALIAN PENINSULA, 1805–1806

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CHAPTER 1
THE ARMIES AND THEIR GENERALS

THE FRENCH ARMY

The French army of 1805 was the best ever fielded by Napoleon. In general, half of the soldiers were veterans of the Revolutionary Wars and the other half were called to arms under the Consulate and Empire between 1801 and 1805. Soon after Napoleon's victories of 1800, and during the general European peace, 1802–1804, he set about reorganizing and reforming the French army administratively and tactically. These reforms are well known and need not be discussed here. Napoleon's foremost project were the preparations for the invasion of England. Perfidious Albion had constantly been on his mind. ''A nation of shop-keepers," he called the English contemptuously. To carry out his invasion plans successfully Napoleon assembled the majority of the French army along the Channel coast and dubbed it the *Armée du Angleterre*. He did not, however, leave French interests elsewhere unprotected, and allocated troops to the various regions of France and its satellite, the Kingdom of Italy.

The French army in the Italian peninsula numbered in excess of 68,000 men. The regiments were almost entirely composed of veterans, and many of the regiments had served in Italy since the great days of 1796, and most certainly since 1800. Reinforced and designated VIII Corps, it boasted six infantry divisions, one dragoon division, one cuirassier division, and two divisions of light cavalry. Reconstituted the *Armée d'Italie* and commanded by Marshal Andre Masséna, VIII Corps was united with regiments of the army of the Kingdom of Italy, roughly 8,000 infantry and cavalry, and the Polish Legion. These forces were spread throughout northern Italy from Piedmont to the Adige River. In

the Papal States a Franco-Italian corps guarded the Neapolitan border. One Italian and one French division, no more than 18,000 men, were allocated for this task.[1]

Napoleon had certainly provided well for the security of Italy. The *Armée d'Italie* had a paper strength of more than 94,000 men: a considerable force to defend Italy from Austrian invasion. The reality of the situation, however, was less than impressive. Deducting garrison troops, depot battalions, and those in the hospitals, the entire army, including the corps in central Italy, could only muster a field strength of roughly 60,000. Their responsibility included the protection of the Adige River, which was the eastern border of the Italian kingdom; the observation of the Kingdom of Naples, a potential enemy; and the defense of the northwestern coast of Italy between Genoa and Leghorn, a traditional landing place for British raids from the Mediterranean.

Due to its great task, the *Armée d'Italie* was divided essentially into three groups, all semiindependent but under the control of the commander of the army. The largest group constituted the main army, 48,000 strong; the second group was the corps of observation in the Papal States, 10,000 in number; the third, which retained the balance of the regular troops, 2,000 in all, was responsible for internal security of the Italian kingdom and Piedmontese departments of France. This last section was reinforced by French and Italian national guard units and various militias from Parma.

Although the divisions in Italy were numerous enough to be organized into corps, there was no official corps organization. Masséna did not have the authority to establish formal corps and appoint corps commanders; only Napoleon could. General Gouvion St.-Cyr commanded the *corps d'observation* on the Neapolitan border. It was an autonomous entity created by Napoleon in 1803. The *Armée d'Italie* then operated by divisions under its army commander, as in 1796.

The quality of the French troops was excellent. Whereas in northern France the *Armée du Angleterre* received daily drilling at the Boulogne camp, the regiments in Italy did not participate in large unit maneuvers. Nevertheless they were more than capable of performing formation changes under fire and could march as rapidly as those troops with the main army. Both the *ligne* (line) and *légère* (light) regiments were able to operate in skirmish order and excelled in combat in rough terrain. They were perfectly suited for campaigning in Italy, especially if required to fight in the mountainous region of the southern Tyrol. The French regiments maintained three combat battalions and one depot battalion. Several infantry regiments were organized with four combat battalions and a fifth depot battalion by 1805. All battalions maintained eight to nine companies per battalion, two of these companies the elite *voltigeur* and grenadier. The paper strength of the battalion was 1,066 men; however, combat battalions rarely exceeded a strength of 800 soldiers on campaign.[2] In Italy the battalions were understrength, fluctuating between 400 and 600 men, because most recruits were sent to the *Armée du Angleterre*. To the regular French reg-

iments several independent battalions were added. One battalion of Swiss and the Corsican Legion were attached to the army.[3] By the end of the campaign, the *Armée d'Italie* was reinforced by a regiment of Neapolitan Dragoons, and Hanoverian Chasseurs, volunteer units formed under French auspices.

During the early years of the empire it was common for elite companies to be stripped from their parent battalions to form elite battalions. In Italy an entire division was composed of ten elite battalions, grenadiers and carabiniers from the *ligne* and *légère* regiments. The French cavalry had also undergone dramatic changes since the days of the revolution. The lack of well trained cavalry had critically reduced the effect of the French armies. Even during the Marengo campaign in 1800, Napoleon suffered from his cavalry's inability to provide reconnaissance for the army. Shortly thereafter an overhaul of the cavalry branch was conducted, resulting in better organization and performance. By 1805 the French cavalry was still unequal to Austrian light and Prussian heavy cavalry, but the French military system more than made up for any shortcomings in experience and capability. The best cavalry regiments in Italy were the cuirassiers. Napoleon's allocation of these regiments to Italy in 1805 illustrated his concern that Italy remain in French hands. The dragoons and chasseurs provided reconnaissance, although still inadequate, and screening for the army in addition to their combat roles. Cavalry regiments consisted of four squadrons with individual paper strengths of 700 to 800 per regiment. In Italy, the cavalry averaged 400 men per regiment.

The allied troops of the *Armée d'Italie*, notably the Italian regiments and the Polish Legion, were of variable worth. The Polish Legion was originally formed in 1797 in France, from Polish expatriots wishing to liberate their country, which had been divided up by Austria, Prussia, and Russia. Sent to Italy shortly thereafter the legion fought there in 1799 and 1800. By 1805 it was renamed the *1^e Legion Polonaise* and attached to the army of the Kingdom of Italy. The legion was transferred to Neapolitan service when the French conquered that kingdom in 1806.

The Italian army was created from the Italian revolutionary and republican legions. In 1802 the regular Italian army was established and conscription instituted. The Italian army was based on the French model. Its soldiers by 1805 were led by Italian revolutionary veterans within the officer and noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps. The majority of the rank and file, however, were conscripts. Although trained and drilled, they had little, if any, combat experience. The campaign of 1805 served as their baptism of fire and first national war against the hated *Tedesche* (Austrians), who had occupied Italy for centuries.[4]

The best regiments of the Italian army were the two dragoon regiments, Dragoons *de la Reine*, and the Dragoons Napoleon. The army also maintained a Royal Guard, who were perhaps the best trained and most dedicated soldiers in the army. Two of the three battalions of guard were attached to Napoleon's Imperial Guard at Boulogne; only the battalion of Guard Velites remained in

Italy. In all, the Italian army numbered some 20,000 infantry, cavalry, and artillerists. One-third of the army, however, was with the *Armée du Angleterre* in the autumn of 1805, leaving the rest in Italy. The Italian infantry regiments were organized into two combat battalions and a third depot battalion. Whereas French regiments tended to be understrength, the Italian battalions were generally stronger, with 700 to 800 men per battalion in the field. The Italian cavalry as well mustered 600 men per regiment. The relative small size of the Italian army compared to that of the French made it easier to keep the regiments almost at full strength.

In the national guard units, both French and Italian, quality and ability to perform under battlefield conditions were relatively nil. Their purpose was to maintain internal order, and for this they had proved quite worthy in the past. Luckily, these units were not required to participate actively in the campaign but remained in the cities of northern Italy. The Parmesan militia as well was of dubious value, more a liability than an asset. Although organized and assembled during the campaign, they were not used.

Despite French occupation, the Papal States maintained a small army. Consisting of professional soldiers, the Papal Army was generally employed in maintaining the loyalty of the various provinces under papal rule. When the French armies occupied central Italy in 1797 the Papal Marches were annexed by the Cisalpine Republic, later the Kingdom of Italy. As such many of the Papal soldiers joined the Italian army, others the French army. The remainder guarded Rome and the Pope, and as such were of little consequence.

The French and their allies in northern Italy maintained a respectable size force, with its core solidly formed around crack French troops. The Italian army provided a valuable auxiliary corps, freeing the French divisions for purely campaigning endeavors. The national guard and militias secured the lines of communications for the army, allowing combat troops to be dedicated to the progress of the campaign. In all, the soldiers of the *Armée d'Italie* were more than capable of confronting the Austrian.

THE AUSTRIAN ARMY

The Austrian army was the foremost opponent of the French since the first shots were fired in 1792. Although consistently matched and beaten on the battlefields of Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Italy, the Austrian army was an ever present force in the wars against France. In 1805 the Austrian army again formed the core of the Third Coalition's forces. Yet it was sent to war while in the middle of extensive military reforms. The army's defeats between 1792 and 1800 clearly illustrated that the Frederickian military system, on which the army was based, was inadequate to meet the French armies in the field. Archduke Charles, brother of the Austrian emperor, Francis I, was given the responsibility of reforming the military system, administratively and