NAPOLEON'S CROSSING THE ALPS STRATEGY



In this section, I will examine one of my favorite Napoleon strategies: the crossing of the Alps. I believe it's an ideal strategy to address all the mentioned categories.

Context: The War of the Second Coalition is about to begin, and Napoleon, who has just returned from his campaign in Egypt, needs to design a strategy to start the conflict with an advantage. The situation is as follows:

- An imposing army of 120,000 soldiers is in Germany.
- Another formidable army of 100,000 soldiers is in Italy, near southern France.

Both aim to attack France.



In response, Napoleon sends two armies: one under the command of Moreau towards the army in Germany and the other under Masséna towards southern France, in northern Italy. However, this is not the final strategy, as it is still in the process of preparation.

The Strategy:

The essence and goal of Napoleon's strategy is to find a way to surprise the enemy. It doesn't matter if Germany is more relevant or any other factor; he aims to impact the adversary. Thus, he will come up with the brilliant idea of using Hannibal's strategy of crossing the Alps to surprise his opponents.

Although the main strategy will be to cross the Alps, Napoleon's divergent thinking will lead to a significant change in this strategy.

The Problem with the Strategy:

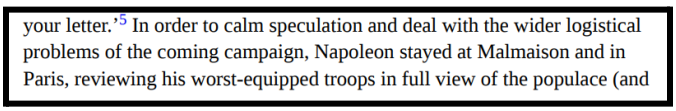
Despite the goal of surprising the enemy with the Alpine crossing, the strategy had a major drawback due to logistical losses, as seen in Hannibal's crossing. Although by the 18th century the crossing would be more accessible with new routes and technologies, the strategy had lost its effectiveness, as more people were familiar with the routes and strategies to counteract them, making it predictable. At that time, the Alps only served as an escape route, as demonstrated by Suvorov.

However, Napoleon thought differently. He believed that the strategy could still be effective but needed innovation to be applied discreetly and effectively, without alerting his adversaries.

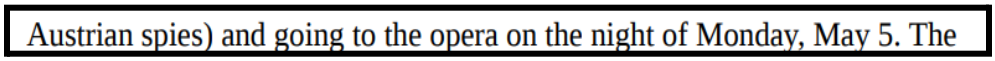
Shielding the Strategy:

Before Napoleon decided to cross the Alps, he used a three-layer deception tactic to keep his true intentions hidden and reinforce his strategy within that context.

First Layer: Napoleon organized meetings and issued orders from key locations. For instance, he stayed in Malmaison and Paris, inspecting his less-prepared troops in public view.


your letter.'[5] In order to calm speculation and deal with the wider logistical problems of the coming campaign, Napoleon stayed at Malmaison and in Paris, reviewing his worst-equipped troops in full view of the populace (and

Second Layer: He publicly announced that he would attend an opera on May 5th.


Austrian spies) and going to the opera on the night of Monday, May 5. The

Third Layer: He congratulated Moreau on his campaign in Germany.

> on April 25 to Napoleon's effusive and almost deferential private congratulations. To those unversed in the realities of power-politics, it might even have seemed that Napoleon was the Grand Elector and Moreau his consul for war.

While these actions might seem trivial, they were actually clever maneuvers designed to confuse the enemy.

Explanation of the 3 Tactical Layers:

1. Let's start with the first layer. **Napoleon stayed in Malmaison and Paris.**

Explanation: Napoleon did this intentionally to calm speculation about his movements and mislead his enemies.

2. The second layer involves **announcing publicly that he would attend an opera on May 5th.**

Explanation: By doing this, Napoleon aimed to project an image of carefree distraction, reinforcing the idea that he was not thinking about war or planning any strategy at that moment.

3. The third layer is a bit more complex: **Congratulating Moreau on his campaign in Germany.**

Explanation: Napoleon praised Moreau with great enthusiasm and respect. Despite being the supreme leader with a dominant position, his praise showed admiration and a cooperative relationship. To the public, it seemed as if Napoleon was fulfilling a more ceremonial or supervisory role (like a Grand Elector), while Moreau appeared to be the main person in charge of military operations (like a war consul).

In this way, Napoleon seemed more focused on supporting and supervising Moreau rather than directing the entire military strategy, further confusing his enemies and making them believe they should concentrate on Moreau rather than on him.

Perception Manipulation:

Now that we've broken down the three layers, Napoleon's intentions become quite clear. He aimed to:

- Appear carefree (reinforcing this by attending an opera).
- Give the impression that he had only a ceremonial role in the war.
- Suggest that the real battle would be fought in Germany, not southern France, by praising Moreau.

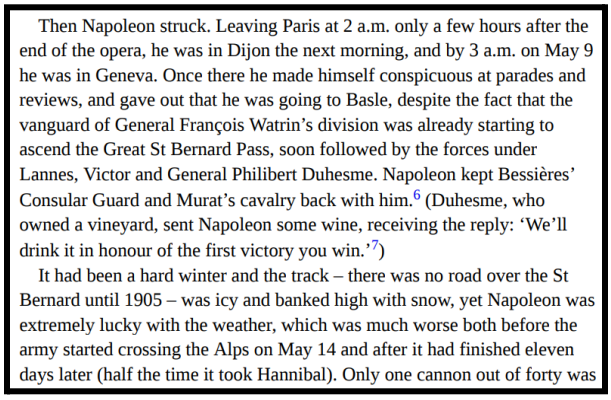
But how did Napoleon manage to send this misinformation to his enemies? It's simple: Napoleon knew that the chances of Austrian spies being present were high, and that all this information would be passed on to his enemies (and he was right). He took advantage of this to manipulate his adversaries' perceptions.

Just like a magician who distracts the audience with one hand while performing the trick with the other, Austrian spies misinterpreted Napoleon's intentions. This allowed him to indirectly deceive his enemies and divert their attention.

Executing the Strategy:

After setting up these three layers of deception, Napoleon moved to execute his strategy.

- **Step 1:** At first, he sent his army to cross the Alps while he supposedly stayed in Paris "inspecting" troops.
- **Step 2:** Then, he attended the opera as promised, strengthening his deception.
- **Step 3:** Once the opera ended, Napoleon immediately set off to join his troops, within just two hours.
- **Step 4:** On his way, he stopped in Geneva and performed another small deception. Here, he appeared at parades and inspections, creating the illusion that he was heading toward Basel, distracting anyone from thinking he was really going toward the Alps.
- **Step 5:** Everything worked perfectly; no one realized that while Napoleon appeared to be in Geneva, he and his army were already crossing the Alps via the St. Bernard Pass.



Then Napoleon struck. Leaving Paris at 2 a.m. only a few hours after the end of the opera, he was in Dijon the next morning, and by 3 a.m. on May 9 he was in Geneva. Once there he made himself conspicuous at parades and reviews, and gave out that he was going to Basle, despite the fact that the vanguard of General François Watrin's division was already starting to ascend the Great St Bernard Pass, soon followed by the forces under Lannes, Victor and General Philibert Duhesme. Napoleon kept Bessières' Consular Guard and Murat's cavalry back with him.[6] (Duhesme, who owned a vineyard, sent Napoleon some wine, receiving the reply: 'We'll drink it in honour of the first victory you win.'[7])

It had been a hard winter and the track – there was no road over the St Bernard until 1905 – was icy and banked high with snow, yet Napoleon was extremely lucky with the weather, which was much worse both before the army started crossing the Alps on May 14 and after it had finished eleven days later (half the time it took Hannibal). Only one cannon out of forty was

Outcome:

Thanks to these layers of deception, Napoleon stealthily moved an army across the Alps, catching everyone by surprise. The enemy forces in Italy were completely baffled. This strategy was so effective that, as history shows, Napoleon won the War of the Second Coalition. While this strategy alone didn't guarantee his victory, it certainly gave him a powerful and decisive start, much like a chess player who opens with an unexpected move that throws their opponent off balance.

Strategy Analysis:

Castling Strategy:

- Makes a seemingly impossible, predictable, and already challenging strategy work in the 19th century.
- Shields the strategy with three tactical deceptions.
- Conceals the strategy and makes it impossible for others to discover it by indirectly manipulating spies.

Strategy Complexity:

- Features three layers of deception plus an additional improvised layer.
- Causes Austrian spies to make incorrect deductions simply by being in specific locations and making two specific announcements (congratulating Moreau and attending an opera).
- The layers of deception make it impossible to determine Napoleon's true intentions.

Strategy Building:

- Creates three layers of deception to control an otherwise impossible and predictable strategy.
- The strategy is not prolonged; it maintains its complexity at a level that doesn't appear unnecessarily complicated.

Strategy Logistics:

- Deceives spies through interpretations just by being in certain locations and making specific announcements.

Strategy Flexibility:

- Is able to Incorporate a fourth tactical deception while in Geneva, redirecting everyone's attention towards Basel.