



Innovator or Imitator: Napoleon's Operational Concepts and the Legacies of Bourcet and Guibert

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In 1805, a new style of operational warfare burst upon the fields of Europe as Napoleon Bonaparte's Grand Army swept from the Rhine to the Danube surrounding the Austrian army at Ulm and initiating a revolution in military affairs (RMA) whose effects are still felt today. The question remains whether this new style of warfare was merely a natural outgrowth of the work of 18th century military thinkers, whose theories were imitated by a dynamic leader, or did Napoleon bring something new to warfare, a true innovation in the conduct of operational warfare? This is the central question that this book will attempt to answer. David Chandler maintains that "Napoleon contributed little new." As we struggle today with the implications of a possible RMA, it is important that we fully understand the forces that caused former RMA's to occur. For the historian, it is also important that we get our interpretations of past events as correct as possible. Was this a RMA that would have happened with any energetic leader who strictly followed the teachings of Bourcet and Guibert, as a sort of TTP put together by theorists, or did Napoleon take their theories, and meld them with his own ideas to create a new form of warfare and initiate a RMA? Does a true RMA require more than just theories and doctrine, does it require an inquiring mind on the part of the practitioner as well? These questions give relevance to the research question of this book. The writings of Bourcet and Guibert, and their influence on Napoleon's conduct of operational warfare, and the development and utilization of the corps d'armee system, have not received a thorough examination since Chandler published *The Campaigns of Napoleon* in 1966. This book will perform that task by analyzing Bourcet's *Principes de la Guerre de Montagnes*, and Guibert's *General Essay on Tactics*, and then examining the linkage from these writings to Napoleon's approach to campaigns and battles. A full examination of the writings of these two 18th century military theorists will provide a synthesis of the salient features of their thinking that affected Napoleon's operational methods. Using this synthesis as a basis for evaluation, I will attempt to show the linkages between their ideas and Napoleon's operational systems and methods. An examination of Napoleon's operational employment of his system in the 1805 Ulm campaign will provide the opportunity to evaluate the linkage between the early theorists and Napoleon in action. This book concludes that Napoleon did not imitate the two thinkers, and that the RMA initiated by him was more than just an implementation of techniques proposed by theorists. The RMA in 1805 required an imaginative practitioner who could grasp the salient features of theory and put them to use in new ways. To initiate the RMA innovation by the war fighter was required, not mere imitation.

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