

The Fox 151

Chapter 151: Return to Paris

In the parliamentary session, Barras proposed several key points. First, to hold new elections ensuring a majority for the Thermidorians. This idea received unanimous support. Second, to have military representation in the parliament, considering the presence of the Red Army outside. Again, this was widely accepted. Third, to form the Directory with esteemed members who had demonstrated their loyalty to the republic in the vote to execute the king. This proposal was also met with approval.

Barras suggested including General Carnot in the Directory, representing the military, which garnered no opposition. Furthermore, due to a lack of technical expertise among parliament members, there was a need for individuals well-versed in military technology. This idea found support as well. Lastly, given the poor performance of the police during the recent uprising, Barras argued for a reorganization of the Parisian police system and recommended Fouch for the task.

Notably, Fouch's appointment as head of the police department faced resistance, as it was a crucial department with significant political influence. Many believed they could compete for this powerful position, while others feared the growing imbalance of power under Barras's faction.

In this matter, Barras encountered resistance for the first time. To overcome it, he resorted to revealing that the families or subordinates of several vocal opponents had leaked state secrets to the royalists, providing concrete evidence. In contrast to the Reign of Terror in 1793, Barras did not suggest executing these opponents immediately. He attributed their actions to the cleverness of the royalists and believed they had been deceived. However, Barras argued that the opponents lacked the cunning to deal with the royalists effectively. Therefore, he recommended Fouch for the position of Minister of Police, emphasizing the importance of this role.

Meeting with some initial discontent, the parliament ultimately understood and approved Barras's proposal. No one wanted to risk their own secrets coming to light, as almost no one in the National Convention had clean hands. In the days when Robespierre ruled, many would have faced the guillotine.

While the discussions in the parliament heated up over these positions, Joseph arrived with a few bodyguards wearing holstered revolvers. Accompanied by Fanny and her family, they arrived at the Fanny family's residence.

Several days earlier, as the situation in Paris grew perilous, Fouch had arranged for Joseph to personally escort Fanny's family out of the city for their safety. Now that the situation had calmed down, they could return.

During the carriage ride, Baroness Maniere expressed her concerns, wondering if thieves had ransacked their home. Fanny reassured her, saying, "Don't worry, Mother. If thieves did break in, we should be glad because there's nothing valuable in our home. It's possible that while searching for something to steal, a thief might accidentally drop their wallet in our house."

"Don't jest," even the Baroness chuckled, "We're not that destitute. At the very least, we can afford your dowry, dear Fanny."

Fanny blushed and cast a shy glance at Joseph, then fell silent.

Fortunately, they arrived at their doorstep, and the servants began unloading their belongings. Joseph, accompanied by Baron Lavasie and his family, proceeded to the garden to sit and chat.

"Baron, in the coming days, Paris should finally stabilize. At the very least, the worst of the turmoil is behind us," Joseph remarked.

"Does that mean we can expect peaceful days ahead?" the Baroness inquired hopefully, "And it would be even better if Armand were to return."

Joseph, with a composed demeanor, replied, "Indeed. Things are bound to improve. But, it will take time to prepare for the move. Paris is the heart of France, offering the best schools and research resources. Naturally, my research institute will return there. However, this is a significant endeavor and not a quick task. Currently, I'm scouting locations near Paris with my friends to find a suitable place for the new institute. Additionally, your brother, Master Lavasie, is starting to miss Paris. After all, Toulon is quite small in comparison."

They continued chatting casually, and Joseph eventually took his leave. The Baron, citing his poor leg condition, opted not to accompany Joseph outside, instructing his daughter Fanny to see him off.

Fanny bid Joseph farewell, and it took her quite some time to return. As she strolled through the front yard, humming a tune, preparing to go to her room, she heard her father calling her from the small sitting room, "Fanny, come here for a moment."

Fanny walked into the sitting room to find her elderly father sitting in a sunlit corner by the window.

"Dad, what's going on?" she asked.

"Ah, Fanny, come and sit next to me," the Baron said.

Fanny walked over and took a seat in a chair near his rocking chair.

"He proposed to you, didn't he?" her father suddenly asked.

Fanny blushed. "Uh..." she hesitated.

"What's this? Is that scoundrel not being honest? Well, he's friends with that obnoxious little rascal. Fanny, no, this won't do. If he dares to come again, I'll..." her father began.

"Dad..." Fanny scolded, "He did bring it up, but he's too annoying. He doesn't even consider whether I'd say yes. He just talks about what we'll do after we get married. I told him I haven't decided if I want to marry him!"

"Oh, my!" her father exclaimed, "This is not right, Fanny! You have to know that young men like Joseph are not easy to find. He has a bright future and will become one of the most important figures in all of France. For your happiness, you should hold on to him tightly. Otherwise, who knows when some shameless, deceitful harlot might come and snatch him away?"

"Dad, you're making it sound like I won't find a husband otherwise!"

"How could my daughter not find a husband? Paris has more men than fish in the Atlantic. But, Fanny, you must realize how important it is to marry the right person. It's like fishing, catching a marlin is not the same as catching a sardine. Also, you really need to hold on. You see, although the sea is full of fish, if the bait stays in the water too long..."

As Fanny and her father shared this heart-to-heart talk, Joseph arrived at his residence by carriage only to find Lucien missing.

"Mr. Bonaparte, Lucien went out; it seems he was invited to a feast. He left a note for you." Sophie, the housekeeper, handed Joseph a piece of paper.

"Oh," Joseph replied, taking the note.

The note mentioned that Lucien had gone to La Basque, instructing Joseph not to wait for him.

"Damn, this scoundrel went to enjoy a feast on his own!" Joseph said. Nonetheless, he wasn't too keen on appearing at such social gatherings, so having his brother represent him wasn't a bad idea.

Since Lucien was absent, Joseph asked Sophie to prepare dinner for him. After the meal, he retired to his study to contemplate the various plans for relocating his research institute to Paris.

"Should we establish it directly within Paris? It would be more convenient in many ways, but the city is too crowded and limited in space for certain experiments. Orleans Duke's estate? It's not too far from Paris, and it has ample space. However, it's a bit distant from the Red Army's garrison. There's also this location, slightly further from Paris, but closer to the Red Army, offering more diverse terrain. Maybe this one; we might need to widen the roads, which would require additional expenses..."

While pondering these options, he heard the sound of keys turning in the lock from outside. Joseph left his considerations behind, exited his study, and discovered Lucien entering, smelling strongly of brandy.

"Going to these kinds of gatherings and actually drinking this much, are you brave or just foolish?" Joseph frowned, contemplating how to provide better guidance for his younger brother.

"I didn't drink that much, I swear," Lucien responded, trying to sound sober, "Do you want to smell? The alcohol is all on my clothes. Going to dine with those old schemers, I couldn't risk getting intoxicated for real."

"Really?" Joseph approached and, indeed, detected most of the alcohol on Lucien's clothes.

"Yeah, you think I'm not adaptable? But, you can't be sure that no one tried to spike my drink. One lady at the gathering kept talking to me and pouring wine; I don't understand how she had such a high tolerance."

"And you were drinking with women and pretending? Well, was she pretty?" Joseph's mind suddenly ventured a guess.

"Very pretty," Lucien confirmed.

"What's her name?" Joseph speculated.

Lucien's response suddenly raised a suspicion in Joseph's mind.

Chapter 152: The Old Bull and the Tender Grass

"Baronne de Boisarnaud." Lucien said, "I promised to help her with a favor, and she's very grateful."

"Baronne de Boisarnaud? Wait, Boisarnaud? That name sounds familiar," Joseph pondered.

"Do you forget? In '94, in Belgium, the Baron de Boisarnaud lost his head due to the unsuccessful battles," Lucien explained.

"Oh," Joseph nodded, "What does she want you to help with?"

"She hopes I can find a way to retrieve her husband's sword," Lucien replied.

"Ah, I remember now. After her husband's death, does she have any family left?" Joseph inquired.

"She has a son in his early teens and a daughter," Lucien answered.

"Tell me, Lucien, what do you think of that woman?" Joseph asked again.

Lucien replied, "What do I think? She's a beautiful woman."

Listening to Lucien's casual response, Joseph felt somewhat relieved. In truth, Joseph didn't harbor much ill will toward Josephine Bonaparte from history. After living in France for so many years, he had been influenced by the French perspective. To the French, a little green on top of one's head didn't seem like a big deal. Compared to Napoleon's later wife, Josephine hadn't caused significant trouble. Honestly, Joseph did have some biases against Habsburg women.

But that didn't mean Joseph thought Josephine should become his sister-in-law in this timeline. Leaving aside the fact that she couldn't have children, Joseph believed it would create family problems to choose her as a wife for any of his brothers. In a family with several brothers who started a fortune, having legitimate heirs for each of them ensured the stability of the family's wealth and power structures. If one brother lacked a legitimate heir, he would have to adopt a child from another brother as an heir, effectively strengthening that brother's branch. This would inevitably lead to conflicts and fractures within the family.

"Lucien, do you know how she managed to survive after her husband's death?" Joseph asked.

"Why do I care? Wait... Wait a minute, Joseph, why are you suddenly so interested in her? Could it be... I should talk to Fanny, but..." Lucien began to counterattack.

"Good Lord! I'm worried about you! That woman's intentions are as clear as day. You need to understand that. Why wouldn't she just ask Barras to retrieve her husband's sword? She must know Barras, probably better than you. Are they not close? My naive brother, this is a trap, can't you see?" Joseph explained.

"What's there to be afraid of? If she has tricks, I have tricks. Armand taught me numerous tricks back then. Besides, you once said, 'Since ancient times, true feelings can't be kept, only tricks can win hearts,'" Lucien retorted. "And anyway, what do we have to lose? We're both in your position, and you don't even have a lover. You're being too Corsican!"

In Corsican nobility, having a lover was quite common. So, when Lucien referred to "being too Corsican," he meant "being too old-fashioned."

"Having a little too much to drink and not knowing your own limits!" Joseph exclaimed, feeling irritated. "Look, since you're not drunk, that's good. Come to my study and help me budget these plans!"

So, Lucien spent the entire night working on the budget.

The next morning, Joseph, in his sleepwear, received the budget from Lucien and waved him off, saying, "Well, good job. You can go to sleep now."

Before Lucien created the budget, Joseph had already estimated the approximate costs of the plans. After a quick review, he found that Lucien's figures aligned closely with his own estimates.

"It's just that widening the road costs too much," Joseph muttered to himself. Though, for the sake of safety, he had decided to stay where the Red Army could come to his rescue at any moment.

"But it's not just the research institute; other factories and facilities can also be located here, right? This can be called the North Paris Industrial Park, and it can be considered a government achievement, can't it? If that's the case, shouldn't the government pay for the road expansion?" Joseph realized.

Joseph slapped his thigh and shouted, "Lucien, Lucien!"

Lucien, who had just washed his face, was about to embrace his beloved pillow when he heard Joseph's call. He rushed over, looking nervous. "What's wrong? Did I make a mistake? That's impossible; I double-checked every data..."

"It's not about that," Joseph said. "The data is correct. I just wanted to remind you that the elections are approaching. You should be ready to enter the parliament. Once you're in, you can propose this plan..."

A few more hours passed, and Lucien finally went to bed.

With these arrangements in place, Joseph left Paris once again and returned to Toulon, where there was still much work to be done. He had to entrust the affairs of Paris to Lucien for now.

Considering Lucien's good performance during this time and with Fouchy by his side, Joseph believed Lucien wouldn't create any major problems.

However, since Lucien was temporarily handling Paris, some tasks that were originally Joseph's responsibility had to be managed by him personally. For example, the special tactical training camp. Joseph couldn't help but sigh, "You don't realize the value of something until you lack it."

Before leaving Paris, Joseph took the opportunity to visit Fanny once more. This time, her warmth and hospitality surprised him. When he was about to leave, Fanny finally expressed her desire for them to set a wedding date.

Upon hearing this request, Joseph's heart skipped a beat.

Fanny could help organize the educational materials for his younger brother, and from their interactions, it was clear that her mathematical skills were more than decent, certainly better than that fellow Armand. If she were to marry into the family, it seemed that many relatively straightforward yet somewhat cumbersome and confidential matters could be entrusted to her. This would essentially add another capable secretary to handle sensitive matters.

Thinking about this, Joseph quickly assured Fanny that he had been considering this matter for a while. He had just been unable to return to Paris due to his other responsibilities. Now that he was planning to settle in Paris soon, they should expedite discussions about their engagement.

"I'll be in Toulon for about two more months. When I return, I will propose to your father and try to bring you over as soon as possible," Joseph said.

Fanny couldn't help but kiss Joseph, not realizing that this man was already considering how to employ her in various roles, much like a man would do.

After Joseph's departure, Lucien was finally able to take a break. He began actively participating in various political activities and preparing for the upcoming elections. He successfully helped Baronne de Boisarnaud retrieve her late husband's sword, and they became quite close during this time.

Joseph was informed that Lucien had already taken on three or four lovers within a week. "Good Lord, no wonder he's spending so much money," Joseph thought.

However, Joseph didn't criticize Lucien for his spending habits. He understood that Lucien's lifestyle was a tradition in French politics. If he appeared too different from others in his position, it could complicate many matters.

"Furthermore, it won't be long before he becomes a member of parliament. He'll receive a government salary, which will help cover these expenses," Joseph thought.

As Lucien prepared for his new role as a member of parliament, he received a message. He had been successfully elected and became a prominent member of the "Committee on Military Production." Though he wasn't yet the President, he was making progress, and Joseph believed it wouldn't take long for Lucien to attain that position.

Around the same time, a group of Polish nationalists arrived in Toulon. These Poles were freedom fighters, and their recent uprising had failed, leading to the division of their homeland. They had come to France seeking technical support.

Chapter 153: Hopes of the Poles

Over a hundred Polish individuals had arrived, led not only by Vebitzki but also by a man named Dombrowski.

Dombrowski was a robust and burly figure. As Vebitzki introduced him, it was revealed that he had been a cavalry officer in the Polish army, having received training at the Dresden Cavalry Academy. He had also served in the Saxon army. However, he later joined the Polish uprising, distinguishing himself and earning the trust of his comrades.

"Nevertheless, it hasn't made much difference; we still can't defeat the Russian and Prussian aggressors. When we were at our lowest, I heard about your theories on sustained resistance and guerrilla warfare from my friend Vebitzki. It inspired me and gave me direction in our darkest moments. The French Revolution and Polish independence are not two separate issues but interconnected, mutually supportive endeavors. Vebitzki mentioned that you not only have advanced weaponry but also cutting-edge tactics and ideas. So, we've come here, hoping to receive your assistance."

Upon their first meeting, Dombrowski tightly shook Joseph's hand and spoke earnestly, as if a long-lost comrade had finally found his organization.

Joseph withdrew his hand from Dombrowski's grip and said, "Mr. Dombrowski, please take a seat and have a drink of water. As you said, the cause of the French people's revolution is closely tied to the liberation of all of Europe. I have always deeply admired the courage of the Polish people in resisting oppression, and I feel genuine sympathy for their long-standing sufferings."

He looked at Dombrowski, who had now taken a seat, and seated himself across from him.

"Mr. Dombrowski, if you've come seeking our help, there are some things I must clarify upfront. It may not be pleasant to hear, but for the sake of Polish independence, I hope you and your comrades will listen to what I have to say. I know that some in your country harbor unrealistic hopes that we, the French, will first defeat the main forces of the Russian and Prussian invaders on the battlefield, allowing Poland to regain its independence. I must tell you that if Polish revolutionaries hold onto such hopes, the eventual outcome may be disappointing."

Dombrowski said, "Please continue."

"Prussia, Austria, and Russia are formidable nations. France's enemies are not limited to them alone; we also contend with the mighty British and Spanish. In fact, our struggles against these foes have already been exhausting. Prolonged warfare has placed a significant burden on the French people. Therefore, since the outset of this war, we have been eager for an undisturbed peace. Presently, this longing for peace has grown even more urgent. So, even if we defeat the enemy on the battlefield, as long as they propose peace to France, it would be challenging for us to reject it and impose too many conditions. I understand my words may not be easy to hear, but for the cause of Polish independence, I hope that you and your comrades can comprehend."

Dombrowski inquired, "Are you suggesting that Poland's independence will not be part of the peace conditions France agrees to with its enemies?"

Joseph responded, "Yes, just as the success of the French Revolution primarily relies on the French people themselves, the freedom and independence of Poland ultimately depend on the Polish people themselves."

Dombrowski expressed his concern, "But our enemies are overwhelmingly powerful."

"Strength and weakness can be transformed," Joseph countered, "Wasn't Poland strong in the past? When Poland defeated the Teutonic Knights, captured the Russian Tsar, and vanquished a large Turkish army, wasn't she strong? If Frederick the Great of Prussia, Sigismund III Vasa, and Sobieski knew about the strength of their descendants, would they fear the Teutonic Knights, the Russians, or the Austrians?"

Dombrowski was nearly speechless.

"Weakness can become strength through unrelenting effort. My friend, I can impart various methods to make a nation strong, but we French cannot magically make Poland a powerful nation. An independent and powerful Poland can only be achieved through the efforts of the Polish people themselves. If Poland can only regain its independence through external forces, it will always be at risk of being divided again due to changing circumstances. Your own swords, your own soldiers, are your only hope on the battlefield. It may not be pleasant to hear, but I bear no ill will towards Poland. I hope you understand this."

Dombrowski conceded, "Mr. Bonaparte, you are correct. Only those who genuinely care about you will point out your problems. After hearing your words just now, I am certain that you are a true friend who genuinely cares for the Polish people. I came here to learn the path to self-improvement."

"Very good," Joseph said. "Speaking of which, I would like to ask you a question. How did Poland weaken, and where is the problem?"

Dombrowski had initially wanted to blame the so-called "traitors," but considering Joseph's question, he realized that this explanation, while commonly propagated, might not be entirely accurate. If he responded in this way, he might risk appearing too simplistic. After some thought, he said, "Poland has weakened because we are too conservative, clinging to outdated traditions, and our people are too apathetic."

"That is merely the surface," Joseph shook his head. "The nobility in your country clings to tradition because they believe it protects their interests. Similar to the situation in our country before the revolution, the nobility wanted to shift all burdens onto the people without regard for the people's interests. This led to a revolution in our country. However, in your country, the nobility is so strong that the people cannot stage a revolution; they are left apathetic. For the people, a country that doesn't consider their interests cannot truly be their country."

Joseph continued, "Look at Prussia, for instance. After the Battle of Kunersdorf, what was Prussia? But during the reign of Frederick the Great, Prussia rapidly ascended to become a significant European power. Why? Because Frederick the Great transformed his subjects into citizens. Prussian citizens shared rights and responsibilities. They saw the state as an extension of themselves, and they were willing to fight for the nation because they believed it was their own."

Joseph then turned his attention to the French army and its tactics, asking Dombrowski, "Have you noticed how important light infantry is in the battles of the French army compared to other nations? Mobile and agile light infantry is one of our most potent assets when defeating foreign intervention forces. But why can't our enemies, the Austrians and Prussians, utilize light infantry the same way?"

At this point, Joseph paused, gazing at Dombrowski, who had fallen into deep thought.

Dombrowski soon replied, "Because their armies lack the morale that the French army has. If they use light infantry extensively, those troops, without proper discipline, would easily flee the battlefield."

Joseph probed further, "So, are you suggesting that French soldiers inherently possess high morale? During the Seven Years' War, did the French army exhibit such morale?"

Dombrowski responded promptly, "Of course not. If the French army during the Seven Years' War had possessed the morale it does now, Prussia would have been wiped off the map long ago."

Joseph then asked, "So where does the morale of today's French soldiers come from?"

Dombrowski had an epiphany, "Because today's French soldiers believe that France is theirs, that the nation and their interests are inseparable, and they fight not just for the country but also for themselves. If Poland wants to become a powerful nation, it must first become a state that genuinely cares for the interests of its people."

Joseph agreed, "Exactly! Poland is currently subjugated, and in the occupied territories, you must emphasize that your fight is always for the people's benefit. Those people are not just the nobility but also commoners, even serfs. I heard that your country still has serfdom. The invaders are not in Poland to do charity but to exploit and oppress. They will inevitably infringe on the people's interests. This is determined by their aggressive nature, and it's unchangeable. This is your chance to win the people."

Dombrowski hesitated, "But, Mr. Bonaparte, the extent of oppression by the invaders"

Joseph interrupted, "Nonsense! Mr. Dombrowski, are you trying to say that the invaders' oppression of the people is currently less severe than the exploitation carried out by your country's nobility in the past?"

Dombrowski was red-faced and avoided eye contact, "Mr. Bonaparte, you're absolutely right, it's just that it's a sensitive issue"

Joseph concluded, "Sometimes the truth is uncomfortable, but it's crucial to confront it. If you truly want to lead a strong and independent Poland, you must first build a nation that serves the interests of its people. This is the path to resilience and strength. And remember, the strength of a nation comes from the unity of its people, their shared interests, and their shared destiny."

Dombrowski nodded, understanding that the path to rebuilding Poland would not be easy, but it was a path worth pursuing.

Chapter 154: The Choice of Paths

Joseph couldn't help but feel perplexed. "How did it come to this?" he wondered.

"Indeed, even in a country as grand as this one, there are flaws," Joseph thought to himself, "This Temo, a natural mage worse than the invaders, should be the least of our concerns."

"In fact, many nobles have joined our uprising because they feel that the Russian laws oppress the peasants too much," Dombrowski, with a resigned tone, made it clear.

"But Mr. Bonaparte, Vebitzki told me something different," Joseph countered.

"Mr. Bonaparte, Vebitzki... He's a man of the city. He left Poland early, spending more time in France and Italy than in Poland. Some things, I doubt he truly understands," Dombrowski responded.

"Polish serfs and the common people didn't directly join your enemies, unlike the peasants in Sardinia. That, in itself, is a miracle. But, look at your troops. What kind of people are they? They don't even know what their own country looks like, yet they are part of the leadership. It's like a child trying to bake bread," Joseph pondered internally while saying, "If that's the case, Mr. Dombrowski, your cause will face many challenges. Now, let me ask you a question."

"Please, go ahead," Dombrowski hurriedly responded.

"Who do you plan to rely on to rebuild the nation in the future? Will it be the nobility or the common folk? Which path will you choose?" Joseph inquired.

"What's the difference between these two paths?" Dombrowski asked.

"If you choose the path of the nobility, you will have to protect their interests to gain their support. But they all own land. You see, even priests have donkeys, but the church has no legs. To keep the church, they'll have to compromise with the invaders. So, unless your struggle continually leads from one victory to another, there will always be those who, to safeguard their churches, collude with the invaders, even after a minor setback. I believe you must have faced such situations during this uprising," Joseph said.

Dombrowski nodded reluctantly. That's precisely what happened. Once the rebel army started facing military setbacks, internal issues began to arise. There were spies everywhere. Sometimes, a

joke told at a military meeting to lighten the mood would appear verbatim at another meeting chaired by Suvorov the next day.

"Of course, they won't sell you out completely. They might even support your cause now and then to make the invaders realize that ruling Poland on their own is costly and troublesome. They'd prefer to delegate the governance of Poland to Polish nobles, as long as these nobles pay their taxes on time. In return, they may tolerate some 'autonomy' for Poland and might even allow the establishment of a 'puppet government' under their control. They know that with Polish nobles in charge, Poland will forever remain a weak nation, posing no threat to them," Joseph explained.

Evidently, this was not the outcome Dombrowski desired. So, he asked, "What about relying on the common people?"

"Ah, relying on the common people? That would require a strong commitment," Joseph replied with a smile. "Have you witnessed the revolution in France? Our nobility is relatively enlightened compared to yours, yet even they lost their heads in the revolution. If you don't have the determination to send the feudal aristocracy to the guillotine, like in France, this path is not an option."

Dombrowski fell silent. After a while, he spoke, "Is there no third path, where both sides can compromise?"

"The third path, why does that term sound familiar?" Joseph wondered to himself. "But trying to have everything without giving anything, wanting everything without paying a price, that can never lead to a good outcome. However, it's not my concern if the Poles themselves don't advance. As the Bible says, 'His blood will be on his head.'"

With these thoughts, Joseph continued, "I don't know if there is a third path, but perhaps you can find one on your own. As far as I know, there are only those two paths I mentioned earlier. Choosing the right path is a crucial decision, and you can go back to your accommodations to discuss it as a group. We can provide different training depending on your choice."

The conversation ended there, and Dombrowski returned to his quarters to convey Joseph's message to the over one hundred people who had accompanied him. This led to a heated debate among the group.

The discussion continued among the Poles for two days. Eventually, they split into two factions: the majority, who advocated relying on Polish nobility to preserve traditional Polish culture, consisted of over ninety people, and the minority, who believed in relying on the common people, consisted of just over ten individuals.

Interestingly, the majority were mainly Polish natives, while the minority were primarily long-term students who had been influenced by France. However, they might not have fully grasped the situation in Poland itself.

It is said that when the formal split occurred, Vebitzki, representing the latter faction, shook hands with Dombrowski, who had sided with the "reactionary feudal aristocracy," saying, "Yang, this is our final handshake. We cannot reconcile our differences. We'll meet on the battlefield from now on."

As a result, the Polish group that had come together was divided into two separate groups, each learning different tactics.

The Dombrowski faction, strictly speaking, didn't entirely support the reactionary nobility. Many in their faction, like Dombrowski himself, hoped for a so-called "third path." Since Joseph hadn't pointed out this third path, they spent two days brainstorming and developed a so-called "new path."

Their main focus was on learning various assassination techniques because their envisioned "new path" involved continually increasing the cost of direct Russian, Prussian, and Austrian rule in Poland through "low-cost" resistance. This strategy aimed to force these foreign powers to adopt a more indirect rule, granting some rights to the Polish people, eventually achieving Polish autonomy, and accumulating power gradually. Perhaps if the world underwent significant changes in the future even though Joseph had mentioned that Poland was not included in France's peace demands if other nations were significantly weakened by then, Poland might have an opportunity.

However, Dombrowski knew that if Poland didn't reform, even if it temporarily regained independence, its future would be bleak. But once Poland was independent, the nobles were not entirely unreasonable. They might agree to reforms, such as land issues that could be addressed through state redemption and social reforms that could be introduced gradually. Just as Russia, a backward feudal nation, had become a powerful nation through the reforms of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great. Therefore, it seemed that the third path was indeed viable, while the French approach was...

On the other hand, Vebitzki's faction believed that Dombrowski's so-called "third path" was fundamentally about preserving the interests of the reactionary feudal nobility, perpetuating their oppression of the Polish people. The promised "reforms in the future" were nothing more than self-deception. If they couldn't muster the determination to reform in the face of the nation's extinction, how could they reform after regaining independence? Pursuing "autonomy" first meant colluding with the invaders, essentially being traitors to the country! Supporting those nobles who would harm the nation for their own interests was akin to being lapdogs to traitors! Therefore, Vebitzki's faction believed that for a successful Polish revolution, not only should the nobles be sent to the guillotine but also their lackeys.

Vebitzki's faction was smaller in number, but their learning tasks were more substantial. In addition to learning various surveillance and counter-surveillance techniques, they had to study organization building and propaganda. Joseph even arranged for them to intern in Italy, assisting Napoleon's Italian legion in constructing "democratic autonomous zones" in the controlled areas. Training in various combat tactics took a backseat. Nonetheless, Joseph didn't have high hopes for the future of either of these two factions.

"But it doesn't matter; they are all just cannon fodder," he thought.

So, the Poles settled into the training camp, but a significant schism had occurred among them. As for the future consequences, well, in Poland, they experienced widespread and profound struggles. Joseph later humorously quoted a saying: "I came not to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. A man's enemies will be the members of his own household." At least in Poland, he had indeed achieved this.

Chapter 155: The Distant Bridge

In the land of the East, Durovski's people remained in Turin, undergoing technical training, while Vebitzki's men, having completed their theoretical studies and reconnaissance training, left France and headed to Italy for their practical experience.

Napoleon had already established himself in Italy and launched an offensive against the Austrian territories in Lombardy. With the deadly accuracy of the Bonaparte rifles and captured Italian cannons, he pushed the Austrian General Beaulieu into a series of retreats. During negotiations with the Kingdom of Sardinia, Napoleon compelled them to open the crossing at Valenza on the Po River. This condition was shared with the Austrians, as the Kingdom of Sardinia had lost confidence in its ability to regain lost territory and relied on the Austrians. They realized that unless the Austrians won, Piedmont would be forever separated from them.

Upon receiving this news, General Beaulieu wasted no time and concentrated all available forces near the Valenza crossing. In earlier skirmishes, he had already grasped the significant disparity between his forces and Napoleon's. Thus, the Po River became his last hope to halt Napoleon's advance.

Napoleon also brought his large army near the Valenza crossing, frequently dispatching small units to reconnoiter the river. He portrayed an image of preparing for a full-scale crossing, and the intermittent small-scale conflicts between the two sides never ceased.

These smaller confrontations greatly dampened the Austrian soldiers' morale. Firstly, the enormous gap in weaponry heavily favored the French, as their rifled muskets were quick-firing and highly accurate, making it nearly impossible for the Austrians to lift their heads. Furthermore, following their victory over the Kingdom of Sardinia, Napoleon's cavalry weaknesses were addressed. French reconnaissance cavalry, armed with revolvers, left the Austrian cavalry bewildered in these small skirmishes.

Since their entry into Italy, the army's morale had soared, not just due to victories but also because half their pay could now be received in silver coins rather than paper notes. In the years prior, their pay had been primarily in notes, which had suffered heavy inflation, rendering them almost worthless. With half their pay now in silver, it felt like suddenly being able to exchange French francs at a two-to-one rate for silver dollars. Soldiers received more substantial pay, and their spirits soared. Many of them couldn't resist writing letters home, encouraging their brothers to join them in Italy as volunteers to assist the French army in its battle for the country. The content of these letters varied, but one phrase was almost always identical:

"Here, the enemy is clueless, and the pay is excellent. Come quickly!"

Under this pressure, in order to guard the riverbank, General Beaulieu had no choice but to concentrate every available force near the Valenza crossing. On one hand, he sought to intercept the French at Piacenza, but when he realized his troops couldn't match the speed of the French advance, he quickly decided to retreat across the Adda River and use it as a defensive line.

General Beaulieu's decision was highly regarded by his subordinates. Through the series of small-scale confrontations with the French, everyone had come to realize one crucial fact: the French infantry, with their rapid-firing muskets, excelled in open field battles, and they were not to be underestimated.

Furthermore, the Adda River offered superior defensive terrain compared to the Po River. With its swift currents and treacherous shallows, there were hardly any suitable crossing points for a large

army. The most suitable bridge for large-scale troop movement was the sole crossing. Once the army had retreated across the river and the bridge destroyed, they might have lost a substantial portion of the Lombardy region, but at least they could temporarily secure half of Lombardy.

Napoleon, however, had realized the bridge's significance. As soon as he crossed the Po River, he sent Dagu with a unit of cavalry infantry to capture the bridge. He anticipated that General Beaulieu would directly confront him and planned for the French to achieve victory, cutting off the Austrian retreat route. But he didn't expect General Beaulieu to retreat so decisively.

So when Dagu and his cavalry infantry arrived at the bridge, they found the Austrians had already crossed it.

Dagu assessed his small force of merely five hundred soldiers against the Austrian group of at least twenty thousand, including Italian mercenaries. Furthermore, the retreat of the Italian mercenaries seemed disorganized.

Dagu realized this was their opportunity. If the Italians crossed the bridge and the Austrians blew it up afterward, it would be a much more challenging task to cross the river. Thus, he quietly descended from the small hill, gathered his soldiers, and ordered them to immediately form a skirmish line to engage the Italian mercenaries.

The French swiftly attacked the Italian mercenaries, and gunfire erupted. However, something unexpected occurred. Initially, the Italians held their ground for a brief moment, but then, abruptly, they fired shots into the air. Confusion spread among the Italian mercenaries, and they didn't resist but instead rushed toward the bridge, eager to cross it.

"Are these Italians perhaps a bit too adorable?" Dagu couldn't help but exclaim, witnessing this bizarre scene. The Italians on the bridge pushed and shoved each other, cursed, and inexplicably fired shots into the sky. Taking advantage of this chaos, Dagu's troops easily reached the bridge.

Most of the Italians guarding the bridge either fled across it or surrendered. Dagu found an Italian mercenary officer who spoke French and asked him why the Italians behaved this way.

"The Austrians had planted explosives on the bridge, and they ordered us to cross it immediately. Our task was to ignite the explosives. But after the gunshots earlier, a group of Austrian cavalry suddenly approached the bridge. They were not here to defend it, the cursed Judas; they intended to blow up the bridge without caring if we crossed. Those accursed Judases!"

Upon receiving the report that the French had secured the bridge, General Beaulieu was almost overwhelmed. However, he quickly regained his composure, realizing that his artillery was just behind him. He ordered the artillery to be pushed forward and started pounding the bridge with solid shots to cover the retreat.

The accuracy of the solid shot was far from ideal, but General Beaulieu managed to concentrate over fifty artillery pieces, creating a tremendous barrage directed at the bridge. The French forces who had just crossed the bridge couldn't withstand the assault, and they retreated back to their side of the river. However, the French rifled muskets were too sharp for the Austrians to overcome. Every time the Austrians attempted to launch a suicide mission to cross the bridge, they were pushed back.

Dagu coordinated his troops, blocked the bridge's surroundings with rifle fire, and deployed a squad to defuse the explosives planted beneath the bridge. However, due to the Austrian artillery blockade, reaching the other side of the bridge proved exceedingly difficult.

By evening, Napoleon's main force had finally arrived at the bridge. The sun was setting, and the two armies stood face to face across the river.

That night, Napoleon gathered his officers and assigned them tasks for the next day's battle, preparing for a breakthrough of the Austrian defense. Despite controlling the bridge, he was surprised to discover that General Beaulieu had moved ahead of him once again. In the dead of night, Beaulieu had ordered the firing pins of the large cannons to be removed, leaving behind over fifty heavy cannons. With his troops, he retreated.

Chapter 156: Sweeping Victory

Marshal Boliere swiftly left his cannons behind, running as fast as he could. Napoleon estimated the distance between the two armies and their respective speeds, coming to a conclusion: the enemy was advancing at an incredible pace, and his forces were falling behind.

Indeed, the French army had just completed a grueling fifty-mile forced march along the Po River, followed by another swift march to reach the bridge. Pursuing the Austrians at such a relentless pace took a toll, not only on the soldiers but also on the horses. Once the horses couldn't keep up, not only the cavalry and artillery suffered, but the crucial supplies lagged behind as well.

Napoleon predicted that Marshal Boliere would retreat to Milan. Losing so many cannons, he couldn't possibly defend the city with his remaining forces. From their previous encounters, Boliere didn't seem like the kind of leader who would stubbornly fight a battle he knew he couldn't win. Napoleon's only concern was how much Florins (a common Italian currency) Boliere would take with him during his retreat.

Considering the condition of his army, Napoleon decided to let his troops rest for a day before marching towards Milan, the capital of Lombardy.

The following afternoon, French reconnaissance cavalry approached Milan, and the city's representatives appeared before them. They informed the commanding officer, Ojero, that the Austrians had left Milan early in the morning, leaving it defenseless. The citizens of Milan eagerly welcomed General Napoleon.

After peacefully occupying Milan, Napoleon's army halted for rest and recuperation. Napoleon himself addressed the Milanese council, assuring them that he wasn't an oppressor like the Austrians. He had come to bring freedom and liberation to the people of Lombardy.

This speech initially relieved the Milanese, who feared they'd be subjected to looting and extortion by the French. However, they would soon learn the true meaning of "freedom and liberation" as defined by the French.

After a brief respite, Napoleon's forces resumed their pursuit of the Austrian army, following them to Mantua, the most vital fortress in Italy. Boliere and his remaining troops, around ten thousand in number, sought refuge behind the formidable walls of Mantua, awaiting reinforcements. Napoleon stationed his forces near Mantua, planning to lay siege and await relief.

Meanwhile, in the territories under Napoleon's control, the ideals of freedom and liberation were being vigorously implemented.

In Milan, some individuals supported by the French organized a group known as the "Freedom Club." They adopted a slogan that terrified the local aristocracy: "Just like Piedmont!"

They claimed that Lombardy should implement measures similar to those in Piedmont, confiscating all noble lands and distributing them freely to the peasants. Soon, conflicts erupted as armed mobs attacked the estates of nobles in the countryside. They burned "seized land deeds" and declared the land would be distributed to local farmers. The nobles were in distress; they lacked the military force to protect their wealth, and the French dismissed these events as "internal Italian conflicts."

This laissez-faire approach had two consequences. Some nobles left Lombardy, spreading stories of terror and atrocities committed by the "French thugs," while others covertly contacted the enemies of the French, such as the Austrians and the Papal States, seeking to use their influence to drive out the French and restore the "divine order."

In reality, most of these actions were anticipated by Napoleon. As he prepared to face the urgent reinforcements sent by the Austrians from the Rhine front, he sent General Ojero back to Milan to maintain order among the local nobility.

Simultaneously, with the support of the spoils acquired in Italy, new weapons were being mass-produced in Joseph's armament factories. These weapons, loaded onto frigates, were delivered to the neutral city of Genoa in Italy and continuously transported to Napoleon's army. Initially, when the Italian campaign began, only a few soldiers were equipped with new breech-loading rifles, but now most had the latest weaponry. In this way, Napoleon possessed a truly advanced army that outclassed the entire era.

On the night of April 10, 1796, General Ojero and his troops unexpectedly raided the home of Count Leonard de Patri, a prominent local noble in Milan. They arrested the entire Patri family and discovered a wealth of correspondence linking them to anti-French forces.

Soon after, the French began a mass arrest operation throughout Milan based on the list they found in Count Patri's possession. That single night led to the capture of over a hundred people by the French. Later, some sympathizers of these nobles would refer to it as the "Night of Terror."

Subsequently, an expedited revolutionary tribunal conducted swift trials in the French fashion. Within a week, over a hundred nobles were publicly hanged. Their assets were seized and distributed among landless peasants and impoverished city dwellers. Of course, it was rumored that the French also took away numerous artworks and gold coins from these nobles, although these items were not officially registered.

After being besieged for over twenty days, Marshal Boliere finally received reinforcements from Emperor Austria, led by Marshal Wurmserforty thousand troops in total.

Despite Marshal Boliere's repeated warnings about the extraordinary combat capabilities of the French army and their advanced weaponry in his pleas to the Emperor, these warnings were viewed as excuses for his consecutive failures. The Emperor's stance was supported by various other commanders engaged in conflicts with the French, like Archduke Charles, who, upon reading Boliere's warnings about the "exceptional quality of French infantry" and "a French army is invincible even if outnumbered," nearly suggested that Boliere should face a military court-martial.

Meanwhile, old Marshal Wurmser threatened to "whip this coward's behind in public" after he relieved the siege.

Nonetheless, the Austrians displayed a degree of caution. Their forty-thousand-strong army consisted of elite forces, and, with the ten-thousand trapped in Mantua, they had numerical superiority, even when faced with Napoleon's entire army. Moreover, Napoleon was forced to leave a significant portion of his troops as occupation forces in the recently captured areas. As a result, he could only concentrate around thirty thousand troops for the forthcoming battle, giving the Austrians a numerical advantage.

Historically, Napoleon had relied on the astonishing mobility of his army and exploited a division made by the old marshal to defeat the Austrian forces in previous campaigns. This time, however, Napoleon was confident that his army's absolute strength far surpassed that of the Austrians, rendering such tactics unnecessary. He simply aimed to obliterate the enemy in a direct confrontation.

On May 2, Napoleon's French troops and the Austrian army clashed in a major battle not far from Mantua, at Castiglione. Employing rifles with three to four times the range of the Austrian muskets and employing maneuverable skirmisher tactics, Napoleon, with less than twenty thousand troops, managed to defeat Marshal Wurmser's forty-thousand-strong Austrian reinforcement in half a day. Wurmser himself escaped with his personal guard, while the rest of the Austrian troops were either killed, captured, or scattered. French casualties amounted to less than two thousand soldiers.

On the morning of May 3, Napoleon dispatched an envoy, presenting over fifty Austrian flags captured during the battle to Marshal Boliere, who guarded Mantua. The Austrian troops in Mantua, from the marshal downward, were struck with fear. The following day, Marshal Boliere sent an envoy to Napoleon's camp to discuss the terms of surrender.

Upon securing victory, Napoleon displayed an unusual generosity towards Marshal Boliere, offering him favorable terms. The Austrian troops were allowed to retain their personal belongings and even a limited number of weapons for self-defense while leaving the fortress. In exchange, they were to ensure the preservation of the fortress facilities, cannons, and accumulated supplies, a gesture that astounded the Austrian defenders.

Such benevolence led General Davout to express his dissent, concerned that Napoleon was letting the tiger back into the mountain. "These are still over ten thousand trained soldiers. Allowing them to return will only strengthen Austria."

However, Napoleon dismissed the concern, saying, "They've already been terrified by our forces. Sending them back will make them sing our praises as if we were gods, seriously damaging Austrian morale. It's not a bad thing for us."

Napoleon's leniency greatly relieved the Austrian garrison within Mantua. They readily accepted his terms and surrendered the fortress.

Chapter 157: Selling Out Allies

Napoleon's victories in Italy sent shockwaves throughout Europe. The feudal rulers of Europe trembled before the might of France, especially those nations still at war with the French.

After the capture of the Mantua fortress, instead of immediately marching north to Vienna, Napoleon decided to return to Milan with his army, leaving a portion of his forces as garrisons.

In Milan, General Napoleon listened to General Augereau's report on crushing the counter-revolutionary uprising by the Milanese nobility. He praised Augereau for his bravery and resolve in quelling the rebellion, saying, "Those reactionaries must be defeated, just like you sweep away dust from a house!"

When he learned that some nobles involved in the revolt had fled to anti-French, reactionary nations to escape justice, Napoleon was furious. He stated, "Wherever they run, they cannot escape the hand of justice!" He also warned countries that supported the rebels in secret, emphasizing that the French people were kind but not weak. Those who insulted French dignity and interests would face the wrath of the French, no matter how far they fled.

Napoleon acted on his words, immediately sending diplomatic notes to the Duchy of Parma and the Republic of Venice, demanding explanations for their involvement with the rebels.

Parma and Venice were in a state of turmoil. These two neutral countries had never been particularly friendly towards France, having historical ties to Austria. However, their actions during the French-Austrian conflict had been somewhat neutral. As for the nobles who had fled to their territories, in those times, it was common for Italian nobles to move from one city to another. How could anyone claim they were secretly supporting the rebels?

But they knew that in the age of artillery, the French were clearly more formidable. They quickly sent representatives to apologize to General Napoleon, admitting their oversight in allowing the nobles to seek refuge and escape justice. They offered compensation for the inconvenience caused to Napoleon.

"Damn!" Napoleon said when he met the representatives, "What are you doing here now? You conspired with those rebels and now you're pretending to be the good guys?" Augereau quickly expressed his anger as well.

"Oh, we were truly fooled by them," one of the representatives replied. "They came to our country, claiming to do business. How could we have known they were criminals on the run? Now they've escaped to other countries that oppose the great French people, evading justice. We apologize, General Bonaparte. This was a mistake on our part. Fortunately, you, the French, and especially you, General, have always been generous and do not hold grudges against small countries like ours. We are willing to compensate to make up for your losses."

"However..." Napoleon said.

So, both countries compensated Napoleon (not France, which means the money didn't go into the treasury), paying him millions of florins. Napoleon's reputation as a conqueror was enough to scare the various Italian states.

Napoleon sent the money directly to Joseph. In a letter, he bragged about his success and asked, "You've been doing business for so long, how much have you earned? Look at me, I say a few words, and I've earned so much. So, you're not as good in business as I am."

After reading the letter, Joseph was reportedly infuriated and sent a reply. Napoleon's staff then noticed that the general hadn't slept well for several nights.

"General, is there something bothering you? You haven't been sleeping well these past few days," his aide asked.

"Oh, it's nothing," Napoleon replied nonchalantly. "There's just a little scrooge who gave me some very interesting math problems. You know, when I'm bored, I like to exercise my mind with math problems and relax a bit."

Joseph sent Napoleon several math problems. As soon as Napoleon opened the letter, he knew it was Joseph's revenge. But Napoleon, who never believed in bad luck, just smiled slightly and said, "A few math problems? Since there's nothing else to do, I'll let you win this one." He willingly fell into Joseph's trap.

"Have you solved those problems, General?" the oblivious aide asked.

"Oh, I've got some ideas," Napoleon said, his eyes gleaming.

Napoleon's victory also created pressure for the Spanish. Spain had some interests in Italy, and with Napoleon's success, nearly all of Italy had closed its doors to Spain, even so-called "neutral" countries. Nobody believed that Spain could protect itself. With no hope of victory in this war, Spain found itself in a tough spot.

Napoleon's triumph in Italy had left the entire anti-French coalition in despair. The British were still holding on, thanks to their powerful navy and their isolated island. But Spain was different. It shared a border with France.

Spain had a formidable navy, but its army was nowhere near as strong as Austria's. They used to console themselves by thinking that the Pyrenees Mountains would protect them, but after seeing Napoleon's performance in Italy, their confidence was shattered. If the mighty Alps couldn't stop the French, what chance did the Pyrenees have?

Additionally, Spain had some disputes with the British over their overseas colonies. Through various channels, they hinted at willingness to make peace with France based on equality and mutual respect.

During this time, Talleyrand, who had just returned from Italy to Paris and became Foreign Minister with Barras' support, saw his opportunity. He quickly contacted the Spanish through his connections and made a bold demand for war indemnities and colonial compensation. He informed them that Austria was also in talks with France and had even proposed trading Lombardy for the Rhineland. He warned Spain that if peace was achieved between France and Austria, Spain would have to pay more for peace with France.

Talleyrand's terms were quite harsh, and Spain found them difficult to accept. But with the bleak outlook of the war, they couldn't outright refuse. They knew that Austria was genuinely considering peace with France and had asked Britain for financial support. If the British couldn't provide the funds due to their ongoing economic crisis, Austria might seek a separate peace with France.

The timing was unfortunate for the British, as they were experiencing their own economic crisis. Although not as severe as later global crises, it still left them with limited financial resources. Italian banks, which they could have borrowed from under normal circumstances, had also become hesitant due to the situation in Italy. So when Talleyrand threatened that Austria was ready for peace, Spain believed him.

Since everyone was willing to sell out their allies, Spain decided to go all in. Talleyrand's initial demands were too steep, so the Spanish paid him a large sum of money. The exact amount remained undisclosed. In any case, Talleyrand was a man of integrity. As soon as he received the money, he

changed his tone. He quickly informed the Spanish that he had secured a peace deal without territorial cessions or indemnities. Spain would declare an alliance with France, working together to maintain peace and order in Europe and the world.

Amidst the astonishment of the Spanish delegation, they realized that the plan actually made sense. Since they were already betraying their allies, why not do it more thoroughly? So, the deal was sealed. In early July, Spain announced its withdrawal from the anti-French coalition and formed an alliance with France, jointly committed to preserving peace and order in Europe.

Chapter 158: The Technical Alliance

Just as Talleyrand had disclosed to the Spanish, the Austrians were indeed attempting to negotiate with the French, and their conditions were similar to what Talleyrand had suggested: Austria was willing to exchange the Rhenish region for Lombardy.

In fact, the government was quite intrigued by the Austrian proposal. Acquiring the Rhenish region would mean extending the French borders to the banks of the Rhine, providing a relatively secure natural boundary to the north. On the other hand, Lombardy, separated from mainland France by the imposing Alps, would be administratively challenging.

Even Joseph acknowledged that the Rhenish region held more value than Lombardy. It wasn't just about the natural border; it was also about valuable resources. In this era, the Industrial Revolution had not fully taken hold, and the significance of crucial resources for the nation was not yet evident. However, as a time traveler, Joseph knew that Italy was a resource-poor country, lacking the essential coal and iron mines crucial for the first wave of industrialization.

If there was one country in Europe with abundant mineral resources, it was Britain. They possessed both coal and iron mines. France had relatively significant iron deposits in Lorraine, but coal resources were not ideal. Lorraine had a small coal mine, a mere vestige of the Saar coal mine, and it was the largest coal mine in all of France.

If an agreement with Austria were to be reached, it would mean that the abundant coal mines of the Saar region would fall under French control. This would essentially provide France with the necessary resources for the first industrial revolution.

However, at this moment, both Joseph and Napoleon were against this proposal. The reason was simple: even if the Rhenish region were gained, it would belong to France and not the Bonaparte family. On the other hand, Lombardy, while not becoming part of France, would remain under the control of the Bonaparte family.

Joseph couldn't voice this reason openly, but any matter could have a noble pretext if one wanted. So, Lucien stood up in the council and delivered the following speech:

"For too long, the people of Italy, like the people of France, have suffered under the oppression of the Church and the feudal aristocracy. Now, we have defeated the priests and nobles who rode roughshod over them and have brought freedom and liberation to the peasants and commoners.

The entire Italy, the people of all Europe, they all await us, just as fields parched by a long drought yearn for dark clouds and thunderstorms. It is for this reason that when our armies advance in Belgium, the Belgian people rise in revolt in response to us. When our armies pursue the fleeing Austrian forces in Italy, the Italian people welcome us with bread and wine. They provide us with food, act as guides - why do they do this? Because they see us as their liberators! Why have we

achieved resplendent victories? It's not only because the entire French people stand behind us, but also because our armies, wherever they go, gain the support of the local people!

If, at this time, we abandon the Lombard people who have just, with our help, gained freedom and liberation, and push them back into the furnace of feudal despotism, I must ask, how will the people of Europe view us in the future? When those feudal states unite again to attack us in the future, can we expect the people of Europe to stand by our side?

Moreover, how reliable is this so-called 'peace'? Do our enemies genuinely desire peace?

No, they do not! I believe any reasonably intelligent person can see that our enemies harbor the same hatred for the French Revolution as they always have. They still shelter the traitors and exiles of France, they still support that pretender who calls himself the King of France, and in their propaganda, they still label us rebels. Anyone with eyes can see that they do not desire peace; they only want a respite to lick their wounds and regain strength. Once they feel they have healed, they will bare their teeth against us once more!

Gentlemen, I, like all of you, love France deeply; I also, like all of you, love peace. Because we, the French, are lovers of peace. But we, the French, are not fools! To betray our loyal friends for a peace that is destined to be torn apart, a peace that betrays every moral and military principle, is not something that the French can accept.

No, never! To accept such a peace is not only a betrayal of our allies, but also a betrayal of the ideals of France, a betrayal of France itself!"

Lucien's speech was indeed remarkable, but what truly made it influential was the attitude it represented. This attitude was clear: "The Rhenish region is ours, and Lombardy is ours. We will not give up either! If they want peace, they must accept this peace; otherwise, let the war continue!"

Of course, since this faction opposed this peace and demanded a "what's mine is mine, and what's yours is mine" kind of peace, it was up to them to achieve it.

As for how to achieve it, some suggested that it would be best to prioritize equipping the Northern Legion's troops with new weapons to enhance their combat capabilities and secure greater victories.

Alfred, a parliament member, proposed this idea, and it gained substantial support. Obviously, these individuals did not want to see Napoleon alone achieving too much glory, and they wanted to balance his accomplishments with those of Joubert and Mureau in the north.

Joseph and Lucien understood this, but they had no reason to oppose the proposal. Firstly, the northern front was indeed the primary battleground, and the equipment should have been prioritized there if not for the intense fighting in Italy. Secondly, Carnot also supported this view. Lastly, it was a matter of business, which meant money!

However, Joseph's military-industrial complex had a far less impressive production capacity than its grand name suggested because its production methods were still quite outdated. Steam engines and the Industrial Revolution had not yet made their way into military factories.

Joseph from the previous life had witnessed steam engines, at least the cylinder steam engine, being phased out. He only had a general idea of how they worked, and he was mostly ignorant of everything else.

This led to a paradox where the weapons produced by the "military-industrial complex" were incredibly advanced, but the methods used to manufacture them were still quite outdated, at least in Joseph's eyes.

To address this issue, Joseph instructed Lucien to suggest that other armories should be allowed to produce the new rifles under a licensing arrangement. In reality, the technology behind the Mini ball was rather simple, and once these rifles became widespread in the army, the secret couldn't be strictly guarded. Not just domestic manufacturers, even the Austrians, Prussians, and British would eventually learn about this technological secret. It would just take some time for them to equip their armies.

Furthermore, at this point, France didn't have a patent system. This meant that Joseph's competitors could also, over time, produce rifles that met military requirements. Even though Joseph could ensure that he profited the most from this arrangement through his influence in the military, others could still find ways to court non-Bonapartist generals, securing a share of the market.

Therefore, Joseph, with his knowledge from the future, devised a plan. He would use their technological advantage to create a cartel alliance, a plan that would ultimately help him build an industrial monopoly.

In general, the establishment of a technological cartel alliance requires a patent system. For someone like Joseph, a time traveler, patents were extremely crucial. Lucien had already proposed the establishment of a patent system in parliament. However, the proposal failed to pass, with a difference of about a dozen votes more against it than in favor.

This was a setback for Joseph, but launching a military coup over this defeat would be excessive. Joseph had a plan - he wanted to first attract some influential arms dealers who had the power to influence parliamentary voting through a technological alliance. Once these arms dealers joined the alliance, establishing a patent law would become a matter that greatly benefited them.

Once the patent law passed, this alliance would be tied even more closely, and the Bonaparte family, holding the source of the technology, would undeniably become the leaders of this cartel. Combined with Napoleon's influence in the military, Joseph believed he could transform this technological cartel into a conglomerate unified by technology patents and sales channels.

At that point, because there was no independent source of technology and sales channels, even if the companies within the alliance remained legally independent, all their economic activities would be subject to the headquarters' will. At that time, the "military-industrial complex" might truly live up to its name.

Chapter 159: Slaughtering the Yearling Pig

As Joseph continued to rally others into the alliance, he tirelessly pushed his factories to work overtime, producing weapons for Joubert and his troops, all the while updating Napoleon with every piece of vital information.

In the eyes of the two brothers, the French forces equipped with Minie rifles were now a formidable adversary, one that the Austrian army couldn't hope to counter. Even though the Northern Legion was far from matching the Italian forces in terms of funding, leading to a decline in their morale, they were not to be underestimated by the Austrians.

However, the process of re-equipping and transforming the Northern Legion into an effective fighting force wasn't something that could be accomplished overnight. Joseph, who had extensive experience as a staff officer, could gauge the readiness of the Northern Legion just by examining the orders, and he couldn't be fooled, not even by Joubert.

With this knowledge in mind, Napoleon decided that while Joubert initiated the attack, serving as a distraction to the Austrians, he would cross the Alps once more and advance directly towards Vienna, forcing Austria into submission.

But before he could proceed with his plan, he had another task in mind to extract some wealth from the Holy See.

If anyone in the world despised revolutionary France, it was undoubtedly Pope Pius VI. In 1791, when the new regime demanded that clergymen swear allegiance to the government, Pope Pius VI officially condemned the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, accusing the revolutionary authorities. In 1793, when the anti-French alliance was formed, Pope Pius VI played a significant role in it.

Even after Napoleon's consecutive victories against the Kingdom of Sardinia and the Austrian armies in Italy, the various small states on the Italian Peninsula, which had fallen under French influence, remained apprehensive and cautious. However, the resolute Pope Pius VI maintained his hostility towards the French Republic.

Napoleon dispatched a message to the Papal States similar to those he sent to the Duchy of Parma and the Venetian Republic. But the Pope was not willing to send an envoy to explain the situation to a bandit like Napoleon. Not only did he refuse to offer any bribes to secure his safety, but he also took the drastic step of excommunicating Napoleon and expelling him from the Church.

To be excommunicated or not didn't particularly concern Napoleon. After all, revolutionary France had already been excommunicated in its entirety. However, the Pope's defiant attitude did not sit well with Napoleon.

"Why does the Pope dare to act so arrogantly in front of me? Does he think he can take a nice vacation in Avignon? Does he forget that he only has a few regiments under his command?" Napoleon grumbled.

At that time, the Pope, unlike his successors, was a formidable figure. The Papal States included not only the small Vatican City but also a substantial portion of the Italian Peninsula. The Pope's military force wasn't limited to a hundred Swiss Guards; he possessed a small but competent army.

Yet, compared to Napoleon's grand army, the Pope's forces were truly inconsequential. With a single order, Napoleon's troops swiftly assembled. They vented their outrage at the Pope's actions, cursing him to fall into the same fiery pit that Dante had described. Simultaneously, they speculated on how much plunder they would acquire during this expedition. Their spirits soared.

"Bring the Pope back to Avignon!"

Such cries resonated throughout the army. The soldiers were determined to obliterate the stronghold of reactionaries and raise the banner of the revolution atop the dome of St. Peter's Basilica.

Upon receiving the news that the French army was preparing to march south, the Papal States fell into disarray. Clergymen fervently preached, urging people to fight bravely for their homeland and

faith. Pope Pius VI eventually managed to assemble an army of over ten thousand to resist the French demons.

He blessed this army and prophesied that, under God's protection, they would surely annihilate the French devils. However, Pope Pius VI forgot one crucial fact: whenever there was a conflict between France and the Holy See, God unequivocally stood by France! After all, France was God's obedient son, while the Holy See, at best, was the gatekeeper to God's house. Why else did the Papal banner feature two crossed keys?

As expected, as soon as the Papal States learned that the French army was nearing, their people revolted. The army, which had just been formed with great effort, declared its long-standing desire to stand with the revolution. Consequently, the French army approached Rome without any resistance, and Pope Pius VI had to flee the city, sending an envoy to surrender to Napoleon.

If the Pope had surrendered earlier, Napoleon's demands might have been far more reasonable, possibly just a couple of million francs (the currency had replaced the livre). But now, the Pope's intransigence had incurred additional costs, as employing the army required funds. Moreover, military expenditures had to be documented and reported, which meant sharing a portion with the French government.

Hence, Napoleon made a bold demand. He extended five fingers toward the Pope's envoy.

"Five million?" the envoy exclaimed in shock. "General, isn't that too much?"

"Five million?" Joubert chimed in. "Only five million? We've brought a hundred thousand soldiers all the way from Paris. Are you suggesting we settle for fifty francs per soldier? You must be dreaming!"

Of course, the French army didn't have a hundred thousand troops, even when including the Italian auxiliaries and the newly "converted" troops. They couldn't field such a vast force.

"But, Your Excellency, the Holy See doesn't have that much money at the moment."

"That's your problem."

"No money? Valuable items, then?"

"Paintings, sculptures, precious metals, and various relics we'll accept them. But don't try to deceive us with fakes!"

The French officers enthusiastically aided the envoy in calculating how to raise the five million francs, acting as helpful individuals.

Finally, the Holy See agreed to pay three million francs in cash (all in gold and silver coins of equivalent value) and provided numerous artworks. A peace agreement was reached with Napoleon, and the French army departed from the Papal States satisfied.

The soldiers sent back any surplus funds they received from the expedition to their families. This sparked tales in their hometowns, where they were lauded for following General Napoleon, fighting in foreign lands, and returning home to purchase houses and land and marry.

Some soldiers, having made enough money, left the army to return to their hometowns. However, more soldiers, motivated by the victory and the prospect of plunder, flocked to join Napoleon's forces. When Napoleon crossed the Alps for the first time, he had around forty thousand troops, but

now, considering only the expedition-ready combat troops, he had amassed an army of fifty thousand.

Based on the information provided in Joseph's letters, Napoleon assessed that Joubert's offensive was about to commence. He initiated his own preparations.

In September 1796, with the autumn winds whispering through the barren landscape, Napoleon's grand army left Lombardy and embarked on an assault toward Vienna, the capital of Austria.

In the Battle of Castiglione, with less than twenty thousand soldiers and fewer than two thousand casualties, Napoleon annihilated four times as many Austrian troops within half a day. Following this extraordinary victory, Archduke Charles was transferred from the Rhine front to Lombardy to prepare for a possible invasion.

After hearing firsthand reports from officers and soldiers who had retreated in defeat, Archduke Charles couldn't sleep, stricken by anxiety. The information he had received was no longer regarded as mere hearsay; it was now undeniable. If this intelligence was accurate, then the French forces, when confronting him, wouldn't need any sophisticated tactics a direct assault would be nearly insurmountable.

"Even the ancient sages' strategy cannot withstand this French army. What use are castles when facing the unstoppable?" Archduke Charles mused.

With the belief that the "wild field battles are absolutely hopeless," his only alternative was "infant city defense." Fortunately, the route from Lombardy to Vienna also involved crossing the Alps. This meant that Napoleon couldn't transport heavy artillery with him, which limited the magnitude of his assault. Thus, "infant city defense" appeared to be a reasonable strategy.

Of course, Archduke Charles couldn't completely brick up the city gates. He knew that this would be self-destructive, rendering his counterattack capability useless. If the enemy could easily bypass the city, it wouldn't have significant repercussions.

Instead, he set up strongholds along the mountain paths, although these were no match for Napoleon's army. The steep terrain made it difficult for the Austrians to move their cannons to these positions, and they could only store limited supplies, which wouldn't last long.

Additionally, Napoleon had experienced guides, willing Italians, and even some Austrians eager for a "share of the land," all of whom helped navigate the treacherous terrain. French skirmishers excelled in such landscapes, causing the Austrian forces to scatter.

"These strongholds may delay the French, granting the Austrian forces more time," Archduke Charles thought.

Once out of the mountains and onto the road leading to Vienna, the Austrians had done their utmost to construct a series of fortifications, big and small.

In Archduke Charles's opinion, if Napoleon attempted to conquer each fortification one by one, it would be costly. However, if Napoleon dared to bypass them, the cavalry stationed at these forts could harass the French army continuously, possibly even cutting their supply lines.

Capitalizing on the wealth Napoleon had acquired during his Italian campaigns, the Austrians barely managed to construct this network of fortifications, although their quality was subpar. Yet, these structures did provide Archduke Charles with some confidence to thwart Napoleon.

"I hope that these fortifications can delay the French, and together with our mounted troops, they may give us a chance to prevail," Archduke Charles pondered.

Chapter 160: Holding the Line

Napoleon's army encountered some minor Austrian strongholds as they crossed the Alps. However, in the grand scheme of things, these strongholds didn't pose much of a threat.

Considering the rugged terrain, these strongholds could have held out if they were determined. The Archduke Charles even made an effort to transport some small cannons to these positions. However, "the city is not unattainable, the moat is not too deep, the soldiers are not exceptionally fierce, and there's plenty of provisions..."

Most of these strongholds simply fulfilled their most critical duty once they spotted the French army sending a warning. To ensure a successful message delivery and avoid having their messengers intercepted by cunning French allies, everyone rushed to perform their most vital task: delivering the message safely.

And because they were in such a hurry to deliver the message, many of them hadn't even had the chance to destroy their supplies. After all, they weren't retreating; they were returning to send a message, and once that was done, they'd return to defend. Why would they burn their storerooms?

As a result, Napoleon unexpectedly acquired a bit of extra supplies.

Soon, Napoleon led his army out of the Alps. He knew that by this time, the Austrians had received word and were preparing for a serious showdown with him. Napoleon hoped for a grand battle with the Austrians, with the intention of dismantling their entire empire.

Therefore, Napoleon quickly dispatched a group of reconnaissance cavalry to survey the area and expand their understanding of the battlefield.

A few hours later, the scouts returned with ever-evolving information, now represented by new icons on the map.

"Is this really happening?" Napoleon was quite surprised as he studied the map.

On both sides of the road leading to Vienna, they discovered numerous strongholds. Due to the presence of Austrian cavalry and the fatigue from crossing the mountains, Napoleon's reconnaissance couldn't venture too far. As for the conditions further ahead, they remained uncertain.

Before the departure, Napoleon had inquired about the situation from the traders who traveled between Austria and Italy. Strangely, none of them mentioned such fortifications in Austria.

"How could they complete such extensive works in such a short time?" Napoleon decided to inspect the situation in person.

So, Napoleon personally led a group of cavalry to the nearest stronghold.

"What kind of shoddy construction is this!" Napoleon exclaimed as he saw the so-called stronghold in front of him. Its outer walls were not made of well-placed bricks and stones but simply stacked wicker baskets filled with stones. The interior of the walls was likely not well-packed earth but more of these wicker baskets filled with soil.

This kind of construction could even bypass the need for foundations. While it was undoubtedly a quicker process, it resulted in flimsy structures.

"Structures like these would crumble within a year, perhaps even a few months, after a few heavy rains or just regular wear and tear," Napoleon judged after a closer look through his spyglass. Nevertheless, for the time being, these "strongholds" served their purpose.

As Napoleon was studying the stronghold with his spyglass, a group of Austrian cavalry suddenly emerged and circled within firing range of the stronghold's cannons. They didn't charge, however.

Napoleon frowned. "Let's go back."

The Austrian cavalry near the stronghold watched as Napoleon's group retreated, but they didn't pursue.

On the way back, Napoleon had already figured out the Austrians' intentions. They no longer had the confidence to engage in a straightforward battle. Their aim was to force the French to siege each of these strongholds one by one.

In Italy, Napoleon wouldn't have been concerned about such tactics. Apart from the vast number of Italian cannons he had captured why worry about these strongholds when he had plenty of Italian artillery? Furthermore, he had countless Italian conscripts at his disposal.

With land redistribution, Italian-speaking veterans stationed as village chiefs in newly "liberated" villages, and daily wage payments, Napoleon could easily muster a large Italian workforce. Constructing longer walls than the Austrians was child's play. Then, just like the great Caesar, he could demand money from the Austrian Emperor for building the walls.

However, this was Austria, and Napoleon had limited artillery due to the Alps crossing. Furthermore, even the largest of his cannons had relatively small calibers. The six-pounders were in the minority, and the majority of his cannons were three-pounders.

Though the Mini rifles had a range advantage, the Austrians remained mostly concealed behind the parapets, often showing only their heads or briefly during their volleys. The range advantage of the Mini rifles was thus negated. Engaging in the laborious task of taking these strongholds one by one would lead to significant losses for his army.

But bypassing the strongholds and marching directly to Vienna would risk his supply lines being severed by the troops garrisoned inside the strongholds, especially Austrian cavalry. This was a risk Napoleon couldn't afford.

Nonetheless, Napoleon's resolve remained firm, and he even felt a touch of amusement. Back at camp, he gathered his generals and began discussing their strategy.

"The Austrians have employed a clever strategy, but it requires a complementary tactic," Napoleon explained his understanding of the enemy's intentions. "That tactic is strict scorched earth policy. The Austrians probably don't know how we've handled our logistics since crossing the Alps into Italy."

The officers chuckled.

It was currently the harvest season in Austria. This put the Austrians in a bind since it was impossible to effectively employ scorched earth tactics. If they abandoned their fields of wheat and

retreated into the cities, famine would strike later in the year. Transporting the unharvested grain to the cities required an enormous amount of time and storage space. Furthermore, the wheat had to be thoroughly dried to prevent spoilage or sprouting. The cities didn't have the necessary space to dry so much grain. Consequently, the harvest season was the biggest vulnerability in the Austrian strategy.

Napoleon swiftly assigned tasks. The following day, he personally led his troops to the area near the Austrian strongholds.

This move also alerted Archduke Charles. He personally visited the front lines and stood on his newly constructed but shoddy stronghold, nervously scanning the approaching French forces through a telescope.

Through his telescope, he noted that the French cannons were indeed scarce and mostly three-pounders. There weren't many six-pounders, which relieved some of the Archduke's anxiety. However, the confident expressions of the French soldiers revealed their high morale. Such high spirits hinted that this wouldn't be an easy fight.

Nonetheless, the French army didn't immediately launch an attack but halted near the strongholds. Archduke Charles observed this with growing apprehension. They seemed to be building temporary quarters not far from the strongholds.

"What are they up to?" Archduke Charles wondered.

His quick thinking led him to a possible answer. "They must be trying to loot our farms, to seize our wheat! They are keeping us under surveillance here to make it difficult for us to act, while they have certainly sent their cavalry to plunder."

He climbed a high watchtower and scrutinized the French force's composition. There appeared to be a relatively small proportion of cavalry.

"It seems they did indeed send their cavalry to raid. But at least, I've prepared for that," Archduke Charles thought.

By evening, General Oudinot, who had led the cavalry, returned to the newly established French camp with disheartening news. "General, these Austrians are truly ruthless! They set fire to villages within dozens of miles around us!"

"What about further away?" Napoleon inquired.

"We don't know yet, but I doubt they would set the entire country ablaze."

"Move farther tomorrow," Napoleon instructed.

The next day, General Oudinot led his cavalry brigade almost forty kilometers north and finally came across a relatively untouched estate. The estate's owners had long fled, leaving behind burned granaries. However, extensive unharvested fields of wheat still remained.

General Oudinot gathered the local peasants and had them inspect the burnt granaries. He then delivered a speech, explaining that the nobles' lackeys had set fire to the granaries to force the French into looting them. He organized the peasants to harvest the fields, agreeing to a distribution of 70% for the locals and 30% for the French.

"We might not be here for long," General Oudinot told them. "After we leave, hide the grain, and when the Austrians come, tell them that the French took all your crops. This way, you'll have enough to eat during the winter."

The peasants nodded in agreement.