

The Fox 181

Chapter 181: Turning the Tables (3)

The first outpost fell almost effortlessly. Even after capturing the outpost, a supply convoy entered, mysteriously becoming prisoners of the partisan forces.

They seized a large haul of supplies, including food, clothing, weapons, ammunition, medicine... an assortment that left the soldiers wide-eyed. According to the plan, after taking the outpost, they were supposed to take what they could and burn the rest on the spot, as long as it wouldn't affect their march.

However, after capturing the outpost, no one had the heart to burn these treasures. For example, the food what did the Irish peasants eat? Mostly, it was potatoes! The typical Irish diet consisted of boiled potatoes, boiled potatoes, and more boiled potatoes.

But in the outpost's warehouse, there were bags and bags of flour! That was perfect for making bread! It had to be carried away! And those clothes and blankets, with their fine fabric and thick cotton... how could they compare to what they had before? People couldn't help but want to take them. Then there were the weapons, not as good as what their French comrades had provided, but they would still be treasured when they brought them back for the county and regional units. And, of course, the most crucial items were the medicines things that couldn't be easily bought, and they couldn't afford to lose any of them. "What's the commander saying? I don't care, I want them, I want them..."

Fortunately, in this short operation, besides capturing a lot of supplies, they also took a considerable number of prisoners, especially the "militia" or "peacekeeping" forces, who almost kneeled as soon as the first shots were fired. In the days leading up to this, the partisans had made it clear that their policy was "surrender your weapons, and you'll be spared."

So, aside from a few who were too slow or foolish to surrender in time, most of the two hundred or so militia members emerged unharmed. Joyce summoned Sergeant Roy, "Take a squad and have these militia members carry as much of this stuff as possible back to our supply point. We're stretched thin, and you've got only ten men in your squad. Do you think you can handle over two hundred prisoners?"

"Reporting, Commander, no problem, even double that wouldn't be a problem!" Roy immediately replied.

Roy went to the warehouse and found several long ropes. He tied each of the militia members around the waist and lined them up in a chain. Then he loaded each one with as much as they could carry before leading them towards the marsh.

Joyce also utilized the captured wagons and sent them back slowly, carrying loads of supplies.

Joyce dared to do this because he knew that there were no large British forces nearby. So, in the short term, they were relatively safe.

However, this delay had negative consequences. Due to the excessive time spent at this outpost, when Joyce led his forces to the second target, he discovered that the British were well-prepared for defense.

"We lacked experience in handling war spoils, and this cost us too much time. What we could have taken with a surprise attack had to be seized through direct assault. This not only increased casualties but also gave the enemy an opportunity to destroy important supplies in the warehouse..." Joyce, "Summary of the Second Anti-Sweep Operation."

Joyce's second target was the Blackwater Pond outpost, which had similar defenses to the first target. But by the time they reached it, the British had raised a drawbridge, soldiers were on the high walls, and the cannons were ready to fire.

The commanding officer of the garrison was Captain Lloyd. After hearing about the attack on the Yellow Willow Ridge outpost, he dispatched a messenger to Dublin to report what he had learned. At the same time, he ordered the drawbridge to be raised, preparing for defense.

He was reasonably confident in their defense. According to Lord Norfolk's estimate, the rebels had limited siege capabilities due to the lack of artillery. So, although they had many soldiers, they couldn't take well-defended outposts easily. When he saw the Irish "rebels," his confidence grew. They didn't have artillery.

"Don't panic, they don't have any cannons! Without cannons and with their numbers, how could they possibly take our fortifications? As long as we hold the outpost, the Governor-General will reward us generously!" Captain Lloyd shouted loudly, boosting the morale of his soldiers and indirectly trying to reassure the "militia."

"Brothers, those bog-trotters aren't anything to fear. We have cannons; don't be afraid!" The soft voice belonged to the "peacekeeping" commander. Lloyd felt that the "peacekeeping" forces were a burden most of the time. Still, if they could fire some shots randomly over the walls, they might be of some help at a time like this.

"Rebels" stopped just outside the firing range of the cannons. They didn't seem eager to attack, appearing to be waiting for something.

"Tommy, what are they doing? Why aren't they attacking?" asked a British soldier.

"How would I know? Maybe... maybe they saw our cannons and got a bit scared?" answered the soldier named Tommy.

Captain Lloyd, who was standing nearby, remained silent. He knew what the "rebels" were waiting for. He remembered Lord Norfolk's teachings at the officer training course.

"The rebels lack the capability for direct assaults. So, when they have an advantage, they'll likely want to resolve issues through guerrilla warfare. Because they lack artillery, their offensive capabilities are limited. Therefore, they may opt for encircling key positions, luring our reinforcements, and ambushing our troops in the prearranged battle site. However, if they are forced to assault well-defended positions, they will probably choose night attacks."

"So, these rebels are either waiting for an ambush against other troops or waiting for the cover of night to launch their attack," Captain Lloyd thought.

Soon, night fell. In the fading daylight, Lloyd noticed that the opponents were becoming active.

The British had made some preparations for a night attack. They had placed mines around the outpost. The landmines, although extensively used by the Irish against the British, had also fallen into the hands of the British. Shamelessly, the British had started replicating them as soon as they

could. Besides landmines, they had set up illumination fires outside the walls. This way, even in the dark, the area would be slightly brighter.

Of course, it remained to be seen how effective these measures would be.

"If the rebels attack, they will have to pass through the minefield first. This will cause casualties and act as an indicator for the target," Lloyd commented as he inspected the cannon positions while waiting for the landmines to explode. Once they did, the artillery would immediately fire shrapnel in that direction to strike the potential attackers.

However, the landmines never exploded, leaving Lloyd increasingly worried. "What are those rebels doing in the darkness?"

The "rebels" were doing what you might expect clearing the mines. After discovering electromagnetic induction phenomena, the military-industrial complex had introduced a new toy the coil landmine detector. Powered by a simple dry battery, it effectively detected metallic landmines buried underground. The British, not being short of money, used these detectors to find and remove the mines they had laid around their outposts.

Next came the illuminated fires. These fires had limited illumination, but as long as the attackers didn't fear losing a few dozen yards, they could quickly cross the lit area. In this process, the enemy could fire at most once. Now, because the mines had not been effective, the enemy's attention wasn't on the fires.

At this moment, the artillery on the outpost's walls suddenly fired haphazardly in the direction of the minefield. Apparently, the British hadn't yet noticed the approaching Irish troops.

"Sound the signal!" Joyce ordered when his forces were in position.

The bugler stood up, raised his bugle, and the "drip, drip, drip" of the horn echoed. Amid this sound, the soldiers burst out of the darkness, crossing the illuminated area lit by the fires. They were now facing a trench.

The soldiers placed ladders against the trench and quickly crossed it. At this point, the defenders on the wall noticed them and began raining down musket shots. The attacking force suffered heavy casualties.

While under heavy fire, the attackers managed to place explosive charges at the base of the wall and ignite the fuses. They retreated quickly.

The rapid retreat of the "rebels" relieved Captain Lloyd. But immediately after, there were several large explosions, and large sections of the wall crumbled.

Chapter 182: Turning the Tide (4)

The battle did not end with the collapse of the walls. The British knew they had stirred the hornet's nest among the Irish, so they fought with exceptional ferocity. In the end, the First Division emerged victorious, but not without suffering hundreds of casualties.

The high casualty count left Joseph frustrated. If every stronghold required such a toll to capture, his First Division wouldn't last long in the field. What added to his anger was the British's scorched earth tactic. They set fire to the warehouses, destroying precious supplies.

This counter-sweep, no matter how successful in battle, would undoubtedly cause severe damage to their bases. In these circumstances, the captured supplies became all the more vital. Failing to secure more resources left Joseph increasingly disheartened.

Had he known of the Second Division's success, he would have been even more disheartened. Within a single day, they had taken four strongholds in the direction of Waterford with minimal casualties. General O'Hara, the Second Division's commander, divided his nine hundred troops into four teams, simultaneously assaulting the strongholds and securing them. The Second Division's spoils were far more significant.

In a fit of rage, Joseph not only killed all the British soldiers but also hanged the officers ranked higher than corporal, who had aided in the defense. With everything burnt, they had no use for them.

What Joseph hadn't anticipated was the impact of capturing the British-held strongholds in a night assault.

When news of the successful British stronghold captures spread, it shattered the confidence of the British troops who were guarding the other strongholds. However, bound by orders, they couldn't abandon their posts. In contrast, the local "Black Dogs," who had joined the defense, had different plans. The British soldiers had nowhere to run if they chose to flee, but the "Black Dogs" had no such inhibitions.

Previously, the "Black Dogs" believed that they could fight alongside the British against the guerrillas and, if things got too tough, they could surrender, expecting not to be harmed by the guerrillas. Hence, they initially sided with the British since there was food to eat, and they had an escape route if the British faltered. But now, it appeared that fighting alongside the British to defend strongholds might not provide an escape route in case of defeat.

Moreover, the results of their defensive battles were evident; they couldn't hold out. So, when Joseph led an assault on the third stronghold in the night, he found that the defense was surprisingly thin. Many areas were left unguarded, and Joseph quickly overran them.

Afterward, he learned that this stronghold had initially been manned by over fifty British troops and over three hundred "Black Dogs." But as soon as the "Black Dogs" heard that Joseph's forces were approaching, they scattered, and the rest is history.

As a result, the Duke of Norfolk had to issue an urgent order to abandon less important outposts and concentrate forces on the most crucial ones. He also ordered the return of troops from the front lines. This retreat almost implied the admission of the failure of their sweep. Some of the Duke's staff, still not ready to concede defeat, proposed recalling only a portion of the troops, arguing that they could secure the supply lines with fewer troops. However, the Duke firmly rejected this proposal.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the most common mistake in the world is to continue investing in a failing endeavor simply because we're unwilling to accept failure. Let's be generous and confident enough to admit that this insurrection in Ireland has exceeded our expectations. Moreover, they've nearly severed our supply lines," the Duke stated. "If we recall a portion of our troops, what will be the result? Such a move requires extreme caution and meticulous organization. New orders must reach every unit involved. Even then, chaos is inevitable. It will inevitably lead to a drop in our operational efficiency in non-pacified areas. At the same time, the logistical requirements for a force

of thousands operating in hostile territory are quite high. Even if the troops we recall now manage to restore the supply routes, can our front-line forces endure until then?"

He continued, "Yes, there are potatoes in the rebel's land, but they haven't ripened yet. And, do you expect our troops to be dispersed like gophers, digging for potatoes all day long?"

"Let's face reality, ladies and gentlemen. Every second we delay will cost us another second..."

Typically, in military operations, the most challenging aspect isn't the attack but the retreat, especially when the objectives remain unachieved. The British could manage such tactical retreats relatively well, but the untrained and demoralized "Security Force" struggled.

The county battalions and area companies, following the principle of "picking the ripe fruit," mainly targeted the "Security Force," neglecting to engage the British troops. The result was chaos, with over forty thousand "Security Force" troops becoming disorganized. While British officers were ordered to bring them back, they felt tempted to abandon them, as the situation grew increasingly chaotic. However, discarding the "Security Force" would have been akin to arming the rebels.

Guerilla fighters took advantage of the situation, setting up ambushes and planting landmines. Though each strike inflicted limited casualties, the cumulative damage added up. Had it not been for the Duke's strict orders to evacuate as many "Security Force" personnel as possible, many British officers would have eagerly shed their "Security Force" burden to return home.

The slow and cumbersome retreat, burdened by the "Security Force," was far from smooth. As all the forces or "suspected forces" regrouped and losses were tallied, the British had suffered over a thousand casualties, mostly due to landmines.

On the other hand, the "Security Force" had fewer accounted casualties, as both the dead and injured were simply abandoned. Yet, their "missing in action" numbers were quite alarming. Out of over forty thousand "Security Force" troops, less than thirty-four thousand returned, leaving six to seven thousand unaccounted for.

In addition to the missing personnel, their lost weapons were even more substantial. Over half their firearms were lost, and these weapons had undoubtedly found their way into the hands of the Irish people's liberation movement. However, since the Irish guerrillas were not conventional, they hadn't even bothered to issue receipts.

As a result, the British's second major sweep ended anticlimactically. Both sides returned to their respective territories to assess their gains and losses and draw conclusions.

Of course, such failures required accountability. The Duke of Norfolk faced inquiries in London. During the questioning, when members of the Whig Party asked who should bear responsibility for the failure, the Duke candidly admitted his role in it. He attributed his misjudgment to the increased French support for the Irish rebels, stating, "If we cannot sever the French influence over Ireland, this issue will not be resolved in the short term."

While the Whig Party members were dissatisfied with the Duke's statements, no one pressed him further. This was because the British political game was one of "if you think he's incapable, you go and prove your capability." Through the Duke's inquiry, even Whigs came to understand that Ireland was a quagmire, and nobody wanted to jump in. So, it was better to let the Tories continue to handle the situation.

The immediate concern now was to prevent the Irish from receiving further external support.

To this end, the British first renewed contact with the French and proposed new peace conditions.

Compared to previous offers, the British's new terms were remarkably sincere. They nearly acknowledged all of France's territorial gains on the European mainland, except Hanover, which they were willing to discuss for a potential exchange.

In the past, such terms would have likely been accepted by the French. Even now, many found them acceptable. However, Joseph strongly opposed it. He asked Napoleon during his visit to France, "What if peace is achieved? Where will you go to earn your laurels?"

Napoleon replied, "And what about you, Joseph? Where will your armaments consortium get its money?"

Consequently, the French proposed a counteroffer for peace. They suggested that, for the sake of peace, the British should grant the Irish a high degree of autonomy, allowing them to establish a truly representative autonomous government based on the Irish People's Association.

Thus, the peace talks naturally fell apart.

Chapter 183: War

Since the French showed no sincere interest in peace, the negotiations for a peace treaty had fallen through. It was evident that the British weren't too keen on peace either, as their longstanding policy of maintaining a balance of power in the European continent couldn't tolerate the rise of a hegemon there. Being an island nation, Britain couldn't compete with the entirety of Europe united under a single power. Therefore, even if they made peace with the French, it would only be a temporary ceasefire.

Since peace seemed unlikely, the focus shifted to expanding the war effort. The British turned to Prussia, offering substantial financial aid and assembling a land army of at least 80,000 troops to fight alongside them against France.

Prussia, too, was averse to a powerful France. Any European nation wished for its neighbors to remain weak, and Prussia's previous reluctance for war with France had been mainly due to a fear of the French army. However, with the British offering a considerable sum of money, Prussia found itself tempted.

Prussia made certain demands. First, the money had to be delivered upfront, and they wouldn't move without it. Second, the troops had to be ready.

The British saw the opportunity and hastened their negotiations with Prussia. However, as talks were progressing favorably, a new development unfolded. It wasn't clear where the information leaked, but the Emperor, far from sacred, Roman, or imperial, somehow learned about the substantial funds the British were offering to Prussia. This revelation unsettled the Emperor, who declared, "We are all fighting hard against the French, why should they receive money while we don't? No, we need money too! We need it more than Prussia!"

Reluctantly, the British had to appease the Emperor, which, of course, meant spending more money.

After significant expenditures, a new alliance was finally formed, leading to a new phase of the war. In November 1797, Austria and Prussia jointly issued an ultimatum to France, demanding the

French forces withdraw from Italy and Hanover. Unsurprisingly, France rejected this demand, leading to the outbreak of a new war.

The anti-French coalition launched attacks from two directions. In the north, British and Prussian forces targeted Hanover and the Rhine region controlled by the French. In the south, Austrian troops, along with newly joined Russian forces, attacked Italy.

The northern battles started with a formidable French opponent. The British and Prussian armies had upgraded their weaponry since the last conflict, and breech-loading rifles, once a disadvantage for them, were now common. The French, on the other hand, were at a disadvantage. Their army had started to meddle in politics during the suppression of royalist uprisings, resulting in a clear division. Political leaders within the military actively courted the generals, leading to a divide.

They revived the system of military representatives in factories and reinstated the older system where generals were responsible for procuring supplies. This allowed the military leaders to control the purchasing power directly.

This division led to two major factions: Joubert and his supporters in the north and Napoleon in the south. These factions had their respective arms industries. Napoleon had the "military-industrial complex," while those left out formed partnerships with Joubert.

Funding for both armies was not substantial, but sufficient. However, in the north, the situation was different when it came to procuring weapons. To win contracts with Joubert, suppliers needed to provide substantial kickbacks, increasing costs. As a result, weapons prices rose, and the overall quantity of equipment purchased decreased. Therefore, even in the north, the line infantry was still equipped with old-style rifles.

When it came to artillery, the northern army, once the elite of the French forces, had the most cannons but had not upgraded them. Many of the cannons had become less effective due to their age.

Hence, the northern French army initially struggled and had to resort to defensive measures and fortifications to counter the advances of the British and Prussian coalition.

In the south, the situation differed. The Russians were slower to act, and the Austrians, determined to act only when the Russians arrived, maintained a relatively calm situation. This situation made the British impatient, sending envoys frequently to urge action.

The Emperor responded, "We agreed to act together, and the Russians haven't arrived yet."

The Russians claimed, "Our grand army is on its way. Please wait; we will be there soon."

Indeed, according to the plan, the Russians should have arrived by now. However, the plan couldn't keep up with reality. Inside Russia, the Emperor was creating turmoil.

Reportedly, the Empress had never thought highly of the current Emperor, Paul I, feeling he was not up to the task and even wanting to skip him to crown her grandson, Alexander (later Alexander I, who, at a few months old, fell off a bed and no one noticed, having to sleep under the bed until morning, whereas Paul I had issues with his head). But due to the sudden stroke the Empress suffered, she remained unconscious, allowing Paul I to ascend the throne following the succession order. It was rumored that the Empress, at her first opportunity, wanted to destroy any will she may have left behind.

Perhaps because he was not the widely expected successor, Paul I was eager to prove his capabilities. Like many other monarchs, he had studied in Europe and enjoyed excellent hospitality in Prussia during his travels. Therefore, he initiated a Prussian-style military reform upon ascending to the throne. His reforms included not only military regulations and training methods but also the adoption of Prussian-style military uniforms.

This move was met with resistance within the Russian military. Not every officer had a questionable state of mind like their new Emperor, and many had experienced the glory of the Elizabethan era, making it impossible for them to admire Prussia. For instance, Field Marshal Suvorov openly expressed, "What's so great about Prussia? If it weren't for us, they would have been long gone. Even now, if we go to war, I can defeat them easily. Learn from them? That's absurd!"

The thin-skinned Emperor took this as disrespect and immediately removed Suvorov from his position. However, shortly after, the Emperor realized he had already agreed to send troops to fight in France. Due to the disruptions caused by the previous military reforms, there were no suitable candidates to lead the Russian forces when considering the critical position of overall commander.

As a result, the Emperor reinstated Suvorov and tasked him with leading the Russian expeditionary force to Italy. However, in this back-and-forth, the preparations for the war with France were not adequately made. The Emperor, with limited options for overall command, was compelled to bring Suvorov back.

Time passed amid this ongoing uncertainty and shifting allegiances.

Chapter 184: Northern Setback

Since the Austrians and Russians were taking their sweet time, Napoleon decided to lead his troops directly into Austrian territory. He wanted to keep the Austrians from idling around with nothing to do.

But Joseph stopped him.

"Napoleon, I'm not here to interfere with your military decisions. I have some information I need to share with you," Joseph said.

Joseph knew that while Napoleon might listen to him on some matters, in military affairs, Napoleon had a big ego. He had a tendency to act as if he knew best and loved to argue with Joseph, so Joseph had to be cautious and make sure Napoleon didn't go off on a tangent.

"Our people have discovered a massive coal mine in the Rhine region," Joseph stated.

Napoleon initially thought about saying, "What's so special about that?" but then he realized that a massive coal mine had great significance.

"How big is it?" Napoleon asked.

"It's enormous, possibly larger than all the coal mines we've found in France combined. And it's very close to Lorraine," Joseph replied.

"Lorraine has iron mines, and the Rhine region has coal mines... This is..." Napoleon clenched his right hand into a fist and tapped it on his left palm repeatedly, clearly excited about the scientific and strategic possibilities.

"It's a shame that both these resources are in the north. It would have been more convenient if they were in Italy," Napoleon sighed. "Joseph, are you suggesting that we should control these areas?"

"Of course. Such valuable resources are most effective in our hands, aren't they?" Joseph responded.

"I think it's not just these resources. The entire of France should be in our hands to achieve its full potential," Napoleon said.

"Are you thinking of becoming a Caesar?" Joseph suddenly asked.

"No, it's not just our family that needs a Caesar. Even France itself needs a Caesar. But you, my brother, always stay in the shadows, manipulating things with an invisible hand. It's safe and very 'Joseph,' but you have to admit, it's not the most efficient way. Even from a scientific perspective, a system with fewer intermediate links is more efficient. This is why you insist on the Zeus Project. In politics, your current approach artificially lowers our efficiency. I think it's time for me to step up and lead," Napoleon declared.

"Are you plotting to seize power?" Joseph asked.

"Not at the moment," Napoleon replied. "But, Joseph, you know me. I have ideas of my own. Tell me yours."

Joseph shot a sharp look at Napoleon and then said, "Napoleon, I think we need a crisis. A crisis that would disappoint everyone with the current government, a crisis that would make everyone look for a hero to save the day. I've studied the military situation in the North and the information we have on enemy deployments. Some of it you've seen, and there's more for you to review."

Napoleon remained silent, picking up the documents to read.

"The reason I don't want you to launch an attack right away is that I fear an early assault might allow the Austrians to get into serious trouble before our northern forces can act. It could end up relieving the northern front. But if you wait for them to concentrate their forces, you might not gain any advantage," Joseph explained.

"But if I wait, by the time their generals get their acts together, it may be too late for us to gain the upper hand," Napoleon responded. "The Archduke Charles of Austria, I've analyzed him before. He's competent. If it weren't for our superior weaponry last time, defeating him might not have been so easy. As for the Russian commander... Suvorov, have you ever studied his tactics and theories?"

"No, I've been quite occupied with other matters, and you are the expert in military affairs," Joseph said.

"Suvorov can be considered one of the best commanders of this era. Have you really never looked into his strategies and tactics?" Napoleon raised an eyebrow, relishing the opportunity to taunt his older brother.

Joseph didn't respond to Napoleon's provocation, as he believed in not engaging in warfare in areas where the enemy excelled. He then asked, "So, how do you think you'd fare against him?"

"I haven't fought him yet, but I'm looking forward to it," Napoleon replied.

Such words were rare for Napoleon to utter. This indicated that he had confidence but not certainty in facing Suvorov.

"So, you want to defeat the Austrians before Suvorov arrives?" Joseph questioned.

Napoleon nodded.

"Think about it. If the northern forces were defeated by someone like the Duke of Brunswick, and yet you could defeat Archduke Charles and Suvorov in Italy, wouldn't that be even better?" Joseph suggested.

"Do you have that much faith in me? What are you hiding from me, Joseph? Don't keep secrets!" Napoleon demanded.

"I do have some things to show you. Shall we go to the laboratory?" Joseph asked.

Napoleon's visit to the laboratory revealed what he had seen there, and he didn't seem particularly pleased when he left for Italy. It was said that he complained to his chief of staff, Berthier, on the way: "This war is no longer interesting. Annoying people have ruined the beauty of war with their crude methods."

Accompanying Napoleon to Italy were newly purchased military supplies, which he began using to construct new defensive fortifications as soon as he arrived.

On the northern front, the Prussian and British coalition's strength continued to grow rapidly. Thanks to generous British funding, Prussian mobilization was swift. Within a few months, they raised another 300,000 troops, mostly raw recruits with limited training. However, many of them would replace troops used to suppress Polish resistance in the Polish front.

Compared to the Irish independence fighters, the Polish nationalist movement was relatively subdued. The Polish nobility who supported the cause limited their actions to small-scale, mostly symbolic attacks, targeting low-ranking officials or even ordinary soldiers. High-level operations were mere intimidation, and any opportunities to use firearms were often at point-blank range.

The limited resistance had little impact. In Ireland, they had already hanged a duke, but the Polish nationalist faction could barely kill a major.

The lackluster resistance from the Polish nationalists, combined with betrayal by the nobility, resulted in the movement's either being defeated in battle or being hanged, leaving only a handful of survivors who managed to escape and flee to France.

On the northern front, the Prussian and British forces steadily increased in number. They had quickly amassed a significant numerical advantage over the French troops.

Prussia worked diligently, and the British worked even harder. They knew that they had to defeat the French to address the Irish issue. If they couldn't handle Ireland, which was right next door, or required immense effort to do so, Britain's global dominance would be greatly threatened.

Consequently, the British carried out extensive mobilization at home, quickly raising an additional 100,000 troops. In February 1798, 50,000 British troops landed in Emden, advancing south along the Ems River, posing a significant threat to the French forces stationed in Hanover.

The French had noticed this danger early. During the brief peace, they had begun fortifying the Monastery fortress. However, various factors had delayed the completion of the project.

With the imminent arrival of the British and Prussian forces, the French rushed to finish the construction. But even after the fortifications were completed, the French garrison there was weak.

The French forces were thinly spread, and many of the fresh troops Napoleon brought with him to Italy were put to work constructing new fortifications.

This defensive approach was more aligned with Napoleon's character. Though he had a formidable army, he preferred to let his fortified positions deter the enemy. His forces would act as a mobile reserve to react to enemy movements and threats.

With the construction of the Monastery fortress underway, the French army in Hanover braced itself for the coming invasion by the British and Prussian forces.

The success of the French northern forces would largely depend on their ability to defend Hanover and contain the British and Prussian invasion. However, with an enemy that was growing in strength and determination, the situation in the north was about to become increasingly challenging for Napoleon and his forces.

Chapter 185: Invincible Defense (1)

As the continuous flow of unfavorable news from the North painted a grim picture, in the South, on the Italian battleground, Napoleon faced the challenge of Austrian and Russian forces.

The dynamics of Napoleon's campaign in Italy and the Austrian attack differed from his previous conquests. While crossing the Alps was a prerequisite for both his Italian and Austrian campaigns, the presence of the combined British and Austrian fleets allowed the Austrians and Russians to directly land in Italy by sea.

In March 1798, the Russian-Austrian coalition made a landing in the region of Ravenna. Upon learning of the landing of the Russian-Austrian coalition, Napoleon ordered the abandonment of the less defensible Ravenna and concentrated his forces further north. Meanwhile, the Russian-Austrian forces, after landing in Ravenna, reorganized and pushed northward, with their sights set on Modena.

In the original historical timeline, Suvarov had achieved significant victories in Italy, essentially wresting away all the territories gained by Napoleon in Italy, except for his achievements. Suvarov might have even marched into France if it weren't for the Austrians and British hindering his progress. However, in this alternate timeline, Napoleon had not ventured off to Egypt, and thus, Suvarov finally confronted Napoleon in Modena.

Suvarov didn't rush into battle; he had his troops establish defensive positions and took a personal cavalry detachment to scout the French lines.

Suvarov had never engaged the post-revolutionary French army before, but he had closely monitored their battles during the initial anti-French coalition. He had paid attention to the French performance in those conflicts while simultaneously dealing with the Polish forces. His observations on the French army were as follows:

"The most critical trait of the French army, which often goes unnoticed, is their diverse tactics. Every so often, the French change their methods of warfare. Especially General Napoleon Bonaparte, he frequently leads these tactical innovations. If we base our expectations of the French army on our impressions from the previous war and think that preparing to face them as we did last time is sufficient, we're in for a rude awakening."

Even though, in the past few months, the British and Prussians had secured several victories against the French in the northern front, and the French had not exhibited any remarkable new tactics in these battles, Suvarov did not alter his opinion. He remarked to others, "The English and Prussians are not facing Napoleon Bonaparte."

Suvarov reached a small hill not far from the French lines and surveyed their defensive positions.

"Peter, what do you think of their defenses over there?" Suvarov lowered his telescope and asked the young general riding alongside him.

"It's quite unique," the young general pondered and added, "and quite formidable."

"Explain," Suvarov inquired, his tone carrying a hint of curiosity.

The young general seemed aware of the importance of his response and did not answer immediately. Instead, he raised his own telescope, surveyed the area, and continued, "Marshal, as I see it, the enemy has dug trenches on the ground, and the dirt excavated from the trenches is piled in front, creating a breastwork. This provides excellent cover during firing. Considering the new rifles' ability to fire accurately at nearly five hundred yards, infantry attempting to charge would endure three to five volleys of rifle fire. Even if they manage to close within a hundred yards, it's unlikely they can aim accurately. This kind of defense is formidable.

Furthermore, the enemy's movement inside the trenches is mostly concealed, enabling them to concentrate troops for a counterattack. Additionally, I have yet to see their artillery, but it's inconceivable that they lack cannons. I remember you mentioned earlier that General Napoleon Bonaparte was initially famous for his skill with artillery."

"Peter, you've observed so much. Impressive. I don't have much to add for now," Suvarov Marshal smiled. "So, Peter, do you have an attack plan?"

"Not at the moment," the young general replied. "I believe our best course of action is to force the French out of their formidable defenses and into open battle. Directly assaulting such a fortified position is daunting. If we could threaten the French from the rear, as the British did in Moste, compelling them to retreat to avoid encirclement, it would be ideal. Then, we could defeat them in a pursuit battle."

Suvarov Marshal nodded and was about to speak when the captain of his guards, Shemyo, interrupted, "Marshal, French cavalry is approaching." Suvarov turned to look and saw a unit of French cavalry drawing near.

"If they don't welcome us, then let's not overstay our welcome," Suvarov chuckled and turned his horse to descend the small hill.

Back in the camp, Suvarov first instructed his staff to summarize the obtained information and then convened a meeting of the Russian and Austrian commanders.

There had been some disputes between Russia and Austria about who should lead the coalition army. The Russians naturally wanted Marshal Suvarov as the commander, while the Austrians preferred Archduke John, the younger brother of Archduke Karl, to take the helm. In the end, it was decided that Marshal Suvarov would command the joint forces, with Archduke John serving as the deputy commander. Despite the Archduke's high reputation in Austria, he had less influence and authority in Suvarov's presence.

With everyone in place, Suvarov called for a discussion on how to approach the formidable French defenses.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is a rough sketch we've created based on the information we've gathered. The actual situation might differ from what's on this map, and I'm sure you're all aware of that. Now, let's discuss how we should"

During the discussion, the generals offered various suggestions. Some believed they should create an appearance of bypassing the French defenses, moving directly towards Milan to lure the French out of their defensive positions, and then defeating them in an open battle.

However, this proposal was met with immediate opposition. What if the French chose not to leave their defenses? Would they dare march to Milan without a guarantee of a swift victory? If they couldn't capture Milan quickly, the French could cut off their supply lines, leaving the coalition forces in dire straits.

One Russian officer then suggested, "What about using the port of Genoa for our supplies?"

"Genoa is a neutral territory," Archduke John replied. "While our ships can enter Genoa, its capacity to provide us with supplies is limited. We can't just militarily occupy a neutral country, can we?"

The plan was ultimately discarded, mainly because it was impossible to take Genoa in the short term, given its decent military defenses.

Since bypassing the French defenses was not feasible, the only option was to test the defenses through an attack. Suvarov, having examined the map, concluded that they could not discern much without a practical confrontation. Thus, he decided to prepare for a tentative assault the next day.

Chapter 186: Invincible Defense (2)

Early the next morning, the Russo-Austrian coalition launched a tentative attack on the French positions, just as any historic day during the "History of France" show would dictate. Naturally, it began with artillery fire, the purpose of which was to destroy various obstacles in front of the enemy positions and inflict casualties on the enemy troops.

The artillery bombardment from the Russo-Austrian forces was no different. In front of the French positions, there were various wooden obstacles meant to impede the cavalry's advance. These became the prime targets for artillery fire. Additionally, the small earthworks the French had piled up in front of their trenches could also be bombarded with cannons, potentially causing casualties among the French troops.

However, this was merely a fantasy on the Russo-Austrian side. In reality, the French infantry had not yet entered the front-line trenches.

As the Russo-Austrian forces began their artillery preparations, there were no soldiers in the first trench. Infantry would not enter the trenches until the enemy initiated their attack.

General Pyotr Ivanovich Bagration watched the artillery fire ahead. Suddenly, a peculiar sight caught his eye: a massive gray sphere was ascending on the French side, with a basket-like object hanging below it.

"What is that? Alyosha, fetch me the telescope," Bagration called out.

His aide, Alyosha, handed him the telescope. Bagration extended the telescope and peered through it at the large gray sphere.

The enormous sphere appeared to be made of silk, with a basket hanging beneath it. Inside the basket were two individuals wearing French military uniforms, one of whom was holding a telescope and scanning their direction.

"Isn't that a hot air balloon?" a voice beside Bagration remarked.

Bagration lowered the telescope and turned to see Marshal Soult approaching. "Marshal, you're here too?"

"Yes, Pyotr," the old marshal said. "Remember the last time I mentioned the idea of using hot air balloons for battlefield reconnaissance? It seems the French have beaten us to it."

Hot air balloons had been first invented by the Montgolfier brothers in France in 1783. In November of that year, they achieved the world's first manned hot air balloon flight.

In historical accounts, Napoleon's army had been equipped with hot air balloons, but Napoleon had not favored them and eventually removed them from service. The main reasons were the complexity of launching and maintaining these balloons and their susceptibility to weather conditions. However, in this alternate timeline, Napoleon seemed to have a better opinion of these contraptions, mainly due to Joseph's improvements to make them more practical.

The French balloon took the Russo-Austrian coalition by surprise, but their amazement was limited to that. After all, this was Europe, and such devices might seem mysterious in some places, but in Europe, they were seen as an example of French technological innovation.

Despite their astonishment, the battle had to continue. After half a day of artillery preparation, the Russian forces began their attack on the French positions with a loose formation of skirmishers.

"Louis, you see how quickly the Russians are learning? Look at their skirmishers; they're quite impressive. At the very least, it's clear their morale is much higher than the Austrians," Napoleon commented to the officer standing beside him. "Hold their advance. It shouldn't be a problem for you, but I want to minimize revealing our army's lesser-known tactics. However, we can't afford unnecessary casualties. Is that clear?"

The officer next to Napoleon was Louis-Gabriel Suchet, who, just like in history, had known Napoleon for a long time. In Toulon, he had fought under Napoleon's command, and later, he accompanied Napoleon to Italy. The key difference in this alternate timeline was that Napoleon had not embarked on the Egyptian campaign, so Suchet had not made the mistake of aligning with Napoleon's enemies, leading to an extended period of estrangement. In this timeline, Suchet remained one of Napoleon's close friends.

"It should not be a problem," Suchet replied succinctly. "I won't reveal more than necessary, except for the net in front of us."

"Very well, I'm leaving this to you. I'll go check on the other side," Napoleon said before taking a few men and heading towards General Mureau's unit.

In their pre-battle arrangements, once Suchet thwarted the Russian advance, Mureau's cavalry would be ready to launch a counterattack if the Russian forces retreated chaotically.

Napoleon was not worried about whether Suchet could hold off the enemy's advance, and he was also not concerned about the performance of Mureau's cavalry after launching their attack. However, he had reservations about whether Mureau could make the right judgment of when and if to launch an attack, making a personal inspection necessary.

Shortly after Napoleon left Suchet's position, the Russian skirmishers entered the range of French rifles. French soldiers had already taken their positions in the trenches, ready to open fire on the approaching Russians.

Initially, not many Russians fell victim to the rifle fire, as even with Mini rifles, the accuracy at that distance was limited. However, as the Russians closed the gap, the French rifle fire became more accurate, and the number of fallen Russians increased.

Despite their comrades' wails, the Russians continued their advance. This level of casualties was insufficient to make this victorious army retreat. Then, they entered the French minefield.

The French had made advancements in their minefield technology as well. Joseph's innovations were primarily cost-saving measures. To save on materials, the new mines were considerably smaller. At one point, Joseph even experimented with unglazed pottery as a substitute for cast iron but abandoned the idea after realizing that the cost savings did not outweigh the losses during transport. Nevertheless, he managed to reduce the amount of cast iron used by two-thirds.

In addition to reducing the use of cast iron, the amount of explosives used was significantly lower. With advancements in explosive production technology, the variation in explosive power had diminished, and today, each landmine typically contained only a few grams of explosive material.

Joseph's rationale was, "Based on the data we obtained from Ireland and Poland, the probability of a landmine, even one with a significant amount of explosive, killing several enemy soldiers, is negligible on average. Therefore, except for specific uses, it's a waste to make landmines too powerful."

Napoleon argued that these mines had so little power that they couldn't even kill a single man. To which Joseph responded, "Why kill them? Maiming them by blowing off a foot should be enough. In any case, such wounded soldiers are unlikely to return to combat. But their injuries don't guarantee death, and the enemy can't just finish them off easily. We have to care for them, and other soldiers have to witness their suffering, which significantly affects morale. Napoleon, you've said that soldiers aren't really afraid of seeing their comrades' corpses; often, it fuels their desire for revenge. But it's best not to let them see wounded soldiers, as the psychological impact is even greater than seeing the dead."

Napoleon was convinced by this argument, but he joked privately to his subordinates, "Don't call these things 'Napoleon's potatoes.' They should be called 'Abagon's potatoes.' Yes, this thing is filled with the stench of Abagon."

The cost of these landmines was thus reduced by nearly half and, when considering the decreased weight and volume, transportation costs decreased even further. This was reflected on the battlefield in the form of a significant increase in the number and density of landmines.

As a result, Ivan's men soon stepped on these landmines. With a sound that was not much different from a gunshot, one of Ivan's soldiers fell to the ground, clutching his bloody leg and howling in pain. The low-power landmine had just blown off one of his feet.

Another Ivan fell victim to an explosion shortly after, and more followed as they advanced closer to the French trenches, either through French gunfire or landmine explosions. The sounds of agony multiplied.

The wails of their comrades were the most effective weapon to shatter their morale, but the Russians continued their advance. This was when they encountered what appeared to be a net-like obstacle in their path.

Chapter 187: Invincible Defense (3)

If it were just a simple rope net in front of them, it wouldn't pose much of a challenge. They could easily cut through it with a knife or even climb over it. However, as Ivan and his men approached, they realized it wasn't a rope net; it was a mesh of iron wires.

What made matters worse was that these iron wires weren't ordinary; they were barbed wires, covered with sharp spikes. Trying to climb over them risked getting caught in the thorns, and cutting the wires proved to be an even more daunting task. It was nearly impossible to do so in a short amount of time.

Under normal circumstances, breaking such wires by hand or with tools wouldn't be too difficult. However, they were on a battlefield, and the distance from the French trenches to the iron wire was just about a hundred meters. From that distance, the Russian troops' rifles had a hard time hitting the French soldiers who had exposed themselves at the trench's edge. In contrast, it was much easier for the French soldiers to take precise shots at the Russians attempting to cross the wire.

The French had intentionally arranged the iron wire in such a way that it formed a funnel shape, effectively directing the advancing soldiers towards a central point. When the front soldiers were blocked by the wire, the ones behind them instinctively tried to circumvent the obstacle, inadvertently gathering at the bottom of the funnel. As soon as the soldiers gathered closely, the effectiveness of the defenders' firepower increased significantly.

Even if some soldiers recognized the trap, it was challenging to stop the instinctive actions of the majority. In many cases, some would manage to pass through, only to be trapped at the bottom of the funnel.

At this moment, in the French trenches, at the positions directly facing these funnel points, concealed traps were activated. The sand-colored camouflage netting was lifted, revealing the muzzles of cannons barely poking above the ground. With a thunderous roar, thousands of shell fragments were unleashed upon the tightly packed group of Russian soldiers at the bottom of the funnel.

Though they lacked machine guns, this close-range shotgun-like barrage of shell fragments was almost as deadly. Soon, heaps of bodies piled up in these locations.

Every army had a limit to the amount of casualties it could endure, and the brave Russian soldiers were no exception. Often, desperate situations could be even more demoralizing for soldiers than casualties themselves.

Ivan's men quickly fell apart in the face of this seemingly thin wire net. Some, driven almost to madness, tried to break the wire with the butts of their rifles and were shot by the French. Others shouted in panic and turned to flee, stepping on "Abagny's potatoes" in the process, dropping their weapons, and writhing in pain on the ground.

The retreat of Ivan's men was as rapid as their advance, perhaps even faster. In their haste to withdraw, they triggered numerous landmines, leaving behind wounded soldiers.

Suvorov had been observing the Russian offensive and subsequent retreat from his position without a word. Only when the soldiers began retreating did he turn to General Bagration and say, "Peter, take your cavalry and cover their withdrawal. Every man who makes it back is a treasure."

Bagration led a detachment of cavalry to provide cover for the retreating Russian soldiers.

"The Russian retreat was well-covered," Napoleon remarked as he put down his binoculars and turned to General Murat, who appeared eager to continue the offensive. "Well, Murat, your soldiers can take a rest now."

"General, let us pursue them," Murat suggested. "It's just a Russian cavalry unit. We can crush them."

"Did you see the exchange of fire between him and the enemy just now?" Napoleon glanced at Murat. "What kind of exchange do you think they just had? If you're confident you can produce the same results right now, I'll approve your attack. Do you have that confidence?"

Murat fell silent at Napoleon's question.

Bagration and his cavalry covered the Russian retreat and arrived back at their camp. However, the battlefield still held many wounded soldiers. Bagration furrowed his brows and ordered another officer to escort the retreating soldiers, while he led a detachment of cavalry to assist the wounded.

Bagration dismounted next to a wounded soldier who lay moaning, clutching his leg.

"Brother, can you still stand?" Bagration asked.

"My foot... my foot..." the wounded soldier simply cried out.

Bagration examined the man's leg and noticed a bullet whizzing past, not too far from their location.

Bending down, Bagration picked up the injured soldier and placed him on his horse's saddle, then led the horse towards another wounded man.

"General, should we open fire on them?" a soldier asked Xuxia.

"No," Xuxia shook her head. "Tell everyone to hold their fire. Let our troops go out into the minefield, rescue the wounded, and bring them back."

The gunfire ceased on the French front lines. A group of French soldiers, unarmed and carrying stretchers, emerged from the trenches. They unlocked the barbed wire and carefully entered the minefield, where they began loading wounded soldiers onto stretchers. They followed a peculiar, zigzagging route to navigate the minefield and safely reached the edge.

Once the wounded were secure, the French soldiers quickly left the area.

"General, there's a group of French soldiers approaching," a Russian soldier reported.

Bagration raised his head, observing a team of French soldiers carrying stretchers, each with a moaning Russian wounded soldier.

The French captain leading the group shouted, "You are already in a minefield, please don't move erratically, or you'll easily get hurt."

Bagration understood French and replied courteously, "Thank you."

The French captain seemed disinclined to speak further. After a brief exchange of words, the French soldiers left.

"General, should we...?" a soldier began to ask.

"Let's not make them think that we Russians are barbarians," Bagration said.

With those words, he looked down at the wounded soldiers, sighed, and gave the order, "Take them back."

Back in the camp, Bagration conversed with the senior officers and the returning soldiers, gathering intelligence on the French defense positions.

After learning the various aspects of the situation, Suvorov gathered the generals to discuss how to respond.

This time, everyone had a better understanding of the French defense, but it didn't boost their confidence; instead, it left them more disheartened.

"I've never seen such cunning defense," one Russian officer remarked. "The French are nothing like the Turks. We can overcome their mines and artillery shells, but the barbed wire is a problem that needs a quick solution."

"Can we use explosives?" someone suggested.

"We can try. Let's get some iron wire and make a model to experiment with."

"And their mines, letting them explode like that isn't a good idea."

"I heard the British deal with mines in a different way. It's quite effective..." a sudden idea came from an Austrian officer.

"How do the British handle them?" Everyone became interested.

"The British send some Irishmen ahead to step on the mines."

"Doesn't that turn them into savages?"

"Exactly, isn't that barbaric?"

"The British are savages to begin with."

Russians were often perceived as barbarians in Europe, and they relished the opportunity to mock others as such. However, the idea of sending herds of sheep or other animals to trigger the mines was quickly dismissed.

Nevertheless, the notion of using sheep or something similar to trigger the mines was intriguing, and they decided to give it a try.

Chapter 188: Invincible Defense (4)

The experiment with explosives to destroy the barbed wire had been quite successful, but the plan to drive away the sheep and trigger landmines was abandoned after just one trial. During the experiment, they had simply set off a firecracker among the sheep, causing the entire flock to scatter

in all directions. By calculating the direction in which most of the sheep had fled, they realized that the majority of the flock had gone in the opposite direction.

If they were to charge into battle with a flock of sheep, there wouldn't be too many landmines to step on, but the comical sight would undoubtedly dampen the morale on their side. After all, how could they expect the flock to form an orderly formation and bravely charge ahead to trigger the landmines?

In the end, Bagration suggested, "The French landmines have limited power. We can push hand carts in front, and the others can follow in the cart tracks."

"Doing that would expose us to long-range French artillery fire," someone pointed out.

Artillery had limited range when using shrapnel, and though solid shot projectiles had a longer range, their killing radius was quite restricted. They were effective against linear infantry formations, but when dealing with scattered troops, their effectiveness diminished. However, if they followed Bagration's approach, it would essentially be a column advance. In a column advance, they'd be vulnerable to solid shot projectiles, and getting hit by those would be catastrophic.

"I think if we're going to advance in a column formation, we shouldn't bother with pushing carts," Archduke John chimed in. "In the past, when we were fighting the French on the Northern Front, their troops lacked discipline and couldn't form proper formations. They often advanced in columns. They would charge towards us, facing artillery fire.

Columns are easier to maintain, even while on the move. With sufficient morale, an army can swiftly advance in a column. Though they might suffer heavy casualties if hit by artillery while in column formation, the fast approach reduces the number of times artillery can fire. Also, because they're in a column, the muskets can only harm the first one or two rows. So, the French, using column formation, rapidly attacked us, with fewer casualties than we expected.

Once they reached a close range, the French would deploy into line formation, volley fire, and then engage in bayonet combat. Relying on numerical superiority and high morale, the French repeatedly defeated us using such straightforward tactics."

"I think bullets are for fools; bayonets are for heroes!" Bagration exclaimed, clapping his hands in agreement.

"But this kind of strategy requires extremely high morale. When we tried to mimic their tactics in later battles against the French, we often failed. We didn't have the same fervent morale as the French, so we couldn't execute such tactics," Duke John explained.

Duke John, as a military leader, wasn't particularly remarkable in history, partly due to his frequent encounters with Napoleon. However, he possessed remarkable political acumen. He knew that uttering such words at this moment could have a significant impact.

Sure enough, the moment he spoke, the Russians nearby erupted like a powder keg set on fire.

"We're not afraid of death, are we? What's so difficult about that? We Russians have plenty of fearless heroes!"

"I agree. If the French can do it, there's no reason we can't. I think this is the way to go!"

"Yes, yes, bayonets are for heroes!"

The crowd erupted in a lively discussion, and many eyes turned to Marshal Kutuzov.

Kutuzov kept his head down, studying the map without saying a word. Finally, he raised his head, surveyed the group, and said, "Since everyone agrees with this plan, we will organize training accordingly. Once the training is complete, we will launch a full-scale assault on the French positions."

While Napoleon faced off with the Russian and Austrian coalition in Italy, the situation in the northern front was rapidly deteriorating for the French. After retreating to Lige, the French army faced a Prussian pursuit, and both forces found themselves in a standoff near Lige.

The French had suffered significant casualties during their retreat and had lost nearly all their cannons. Although they received reinforcements from within the country upon reaching Lige, the peculiar weapon procurement system meant that the reserve units received little funding for weapons. As a result, the troops mainly possessed outdated smoothbore muskets.

If not for the fortifications at Lige, the French would have been in dire straits once more.

However, a few days later, the British army arrived with their cannons, putting the French defensive position at Lige in jeopardy.

Even during the retreat from Hanover, the French government, especially Carnot, had realized that the situation on the northern front was becoming critical. The best course of action was to recall the Italian Army and rush north to confront the British. Otherwise, another battle like the Defense of Verdun might be on the horizon, and if that battle were to be lost, Paris would likely see white flags flying once more.

Consequently, the Provisional Government issued a flurry of orders to Napoleon, demanding that he promptly bring his troops back to France to confront the British. However, Napoleon claimed that the intense fighting and inability to retreat made it impossible. He disregarded all those orders. In one month, the Provisional Government sent twelve orders to Napoleon, but he remained unresponsive, firmly established in Italy.

For over half a month, the Russian and Austrian coalition had been in a standoff with the French, occasionally engaging in minor skirmishes. However, no major battles occurred, and it seemed like everyone was on holiday.

During this time, the Russian army diligently practiced the column attack strategy, using explosives to breach the barbed wire and other tactics. Finally, including Field Marshal Kutuzov, everyone felt that their training was sufficient. The time for the decisive battle had arrived.

Chapter 189: The Iron Wall

As the Russian army rapidly approached the French lines, just beyond the effective range of the French Mini rifles, Napoleon widened his eyes, "Isn't this our strategy?"

"General, over the years, many have tried to imitate our tactics," Exelmans remarked with a raised chin, "but no matter how they copy us, they will still be defeated by us."

"Hahaha..." Napoleon laughed, "Louis, do you know? Someone once said something very similar to what you just said."

"Who?" Exelmans asked.

"My brother Joseph the one who insists on wearing the Academy of Sciences badge whenever I'm in uniform, the man who talked about the 'military-industrial complex' products during our picnic. He said, 'We've always been imitated but never surpassed.' But honestly, when I see them changing formation just outside our rifle range, it seems like they've truly surpassed our previous standards."

Exelmans chuckled as well. Surpassing the French in this aspect, especially during the widespread use of column attacks, was no small feat. At that time, the French had employed this tactic primarily due to insufficient training and the inability to form neat lines.

Yet now, before their eyes, this army, at a greater distance, approached the French lines with a quick transition from a thin column to a line formation. This ability to change formation indicated the excellent training of this army.

After completing their formation change, the Russian army continued their advance, while the French cannons opened fire.

A cannonball hit a Russian column like a bowling ball striking a row of pins, toppling a large number of Russian soldiers. However, unlike bowling pins, the soldiers struck by the cannonballs were not as intact, especially those at the front, who were torn to pieces.

But the troops with Suvarov, veterans accustomed to life and death on the battlefields of Turkey and Poland, pressed on undeterred. Despite the heavy losses from the cannon fire, they maintained a steady pace, quickly entering the minefield.

The landmines exploded, and with the booming blasts, Russian soldiers fell, clutching their legs. Nevertheless, this couldn't halt the Russian advance. Soon, barbed wire appeared in front of them.

A few soldiers carrying explosives rushed forward, aiming to breach the barbed wire.

"Bang, bang, bang..." Smoke and gunfire erupted from the French trenches. Many of the explosive-bearing soldiers fell, but some managed to reach the barbed wire, placing their explosives beneath it.

With several explosions, the barbed wire was blown apart, creating gaps, almost simultaneously, Russian soldiers deployed in formation, bayonets ready, charged through the openings.

"They are incredibly brave!" Napoleon exclaimed.

"Indeed, their courage rivals our own!" Exelmans joined in. "Unfortunately, the braver they are, the faster they meet their end."

As the Russian troops rushed towards the gap in the barbed wire, not far from it, a line of "fougasses" detonated. Each fougasse released eight hundred iron pellets toward the approaching Russians. The simultaneous explosion was like a sudden downpour or a hailstorm in summer, flattening the wheat field as if it were all mowed down.

Looking out, almost all the Russian soldiers at the forefront were knocked down, and the explosion caused severe casualties, taking the lives of over a thousand.

"I never thought this thing could be so devastating!" Marshal Suvarov commented, putting down his binoculars. "When the British talked about its power, I thought they were exaggerating."

"French science and technology truly deserve their reputation as the best on the continent," Bagration added. "But with this, they won't be able to stop us."

Indeed, this round of attacks was brutal, but it was merely a stone thrown into a rushing tide. The stone splashed water and created a loud noise, but it was soon overwhelmed by the advancing troops.

More Russian soldiers crossed the fallen bodies and reached the first trench, which was the nearest one.

"They've reached it, they've reached it!" Bagration exclaimed excitedly.

"Not yet, Pyotr," Suvorov frowned. "Why hasn't there been resistance at this defensive line? If this defense is relatively important, why didn't they put up a fight when we reached the first trench? Are they planning something?"

"Are they planning to let us exhaust ourselves at the next line of defense, and then counterattack when our forces are weakened?" Bagration suggested.

Indeed, trying to cross the trench was a challenge. There was a wide gap between the trenches, and there was also barbed wire. In addition, there was a possible shortcut between the trenches, a communication trench connecting the two. The French had retreated from there earlier. Pursuing them seemed like a promising tactic as it could potentially lead to passing under the barbed wire.

So, some soldiers headed directly for the French communication trench. Initially, the chase seemed successful, but as they were about to reach the second trench, at the exit of the communication trench, a French soldier pulled a yellow cloth, revealing a cannon pointed directly at the communication trench. The cannon fired, and an 8-pound iron ball was sent hurtling.

The communication trench was not very wide, with no real place to hide. The artillery shells of that time may have been slow compared to modern ones, but they were still too fast for human reactions. Thus, the cannonball went through the communication trench, striking the Russian soldiers at the other end, turning them into fragments.

It seemed that assaulting through the communication trench was a poor idea as there was nowhere to hide. Even if the cannon firing was slow, and there was a brief moment when it was not firing, there was no way to reach the cannon. Moreover, there were French soldiers with rifles on the other side, ready to hold the Russian troops at bay until the cannon was reloaded.

Since attacking through the communication trench didn't work, the Russians had no choice but to advance on the ground. However, the ground was also fraught with dangers: landmines and barbed wire guarded by artillery pieces and more "fougasses."

Russian soldiers made another attempt during the French retreat, but this time they couldn't breach the second trench. Their courage and strength had been exhausted in previous engagements. They couldn't even get past the barbed wire and were pushed back by the French.

"The French are preparing a counterattack," Suvorov immediately deduced.

Indeed, the French began to counterattack, using their rifles and artillery loaded with canister shots to drive the retreating Russian troops back to the first trench. Russian soldiers leaped into the trench, seeking cover from the French shooting. However, the battle remained unfair, as the first trench, on the side facing the French, had no earthworks built up, so it didn't offer adequate protection.

As more troops retreated into the first trench, a bright flash suddenly burst from the trench, followed by a series of loud explosions.

The cunning French had previously laid electrical mines in the first trench, and now they detonated them, causing significant casualties among the Russian soldiers inside. Simultaneously, the French launched a counterattack.

At this moment, Russian reinforcements were also approaching the first trench. However, the French cannons thundered once more.

Suvorov had initially expected the French to continue using solid shot to fire at the reinforcements. But this time, the trajectory of the cannonballs was significantly higher. (In this era, artillery shells had a very low initial velocity, and their flight was visible to the naked eye.)

"These are not ordinary solid shot," Bagration remarked, "although a higher trajectory can make the cannonballs fly farther, it's difficult for them to skip. These are not ordinary solid shot."

Chapter 190: Bad News, Good News

The shells descended in a high arc, making it almost impossible for them to bounce effectively. These shells, intended for Napoleon, were prepared by Joseph and would once again change the role of artillery, a crucial weapon called shrapnel. At first, Joseph had grand ideas of developing high-explosive shells to bypass these, but he immediately encountered several challenges:

The first problem was the stability of the shell. High-explosive shells needed to ensure the fuse touched the ground, which required rifled guns. But rifled guns needed large amounts of steel, which in turn required...

If that wasn't feasible, using tail-fins for stability was another option. However, this introduced two more problems. One was the reliability of triggering the fuse, which seemed challenging in the short term. The other was the perennial issue of insufficient gunpowder and explosives. Thus, the need for shells with less explosive material led to the alternative of shrapnel. Even this alternative, however, further transformed the role of artillery in warfare.

After the appearance of the Mini rifle, cannons found themselves in an awkward position. Solid shot artillery couldn't effectively target dispersed infantry, and canister shot's effective range was even shorter than that of the Mini rifle. As a result, cannons, once front and center on the battlefield, became support weapons.

But the arrival of shrapnel shells shifted the advantage of range back into the hands of the artillery.

Shrapnel shells were essentially iron barrels filled with shot. They were fired from cannons and exploded at the right altitude, releasing the shot. These were winged shrapnel, specially designed to be fired at a 45-degree angle by specially made guns, even outdistancing solid shot shells. With their curved trajectory, they could even clear obstacles to strike targets behind them.

Additionally, shrapnel shells played a unique tactical role in creating barriers. When soldiers on both sides had engaged in close combat, artillery was typically rendered ineffective. After all, this wasn't a game, and the enemy could distinguish our artillery shells from the in-game magical ones.

However, troops equipped with shrapnel shells, with the assistance of observation balloons, could fire shrapnel over the intense melee, directly targeting the enemy's rear, hindering enemy

reinforcements. If our reinforcements continuously poured into the critical areas while the enemy's couldn't, the outcome of the battle was no longer in doubt.

French shrapnel rained down on the Russian reinforcements, and compared to the previous land mines, these falling objects resembled hail more, covering unfortunate Russian soldiers like sheaves of wheat falling in a storm.

In this battle, the Russian army lost nearly 8,000 men. While this number might not seem significant compared to the approximately 60,000 total Russian soldiers, these were all combatants. In fact, combatants typically constituted only about half of a military's total personnel. For a Russian army of 60,000, the loss of 8,000 soldiers was not a small number.

What's more, these 8,000 casualties were among the most elite of the Russian army. In a sense, this battle had thoroughly crushed the Russian army's offensive capabilities. Now the Russian army had no strength left to launch an attack against the French.

Even more devastating was the loss of confidence in the Russian army. Faced with the technology of the "First in European Continental France," perhaps even the "First in the World," Russian soldiers at all levels were filled with defeatism. Even the old marshal privately complained, "Why is the gap between our country's science and technology and France so vast? How can we fight like this?" In a letter to a friend's grandson encouraging him to study science, he wrote:

"Alyosha, I know you'd rather become a general. But your grandfather and I believe you have greater talent in science. Learning science well and becoming a scientist will be of greater help to Russia than becoming a general. You must know that science and technology are the most formidable combat power..."

The Russian army had lost confidence, and the Austrian army had even less. They already suffered from a severe case of Napoleonophobia, and this time, it was the Russian army being defeated. Because morale was so low, the Austrian army couldn't undertake an offensive role, even if it was the Russians who had lowered morale. Even when observing the state of the Austrian army, they unanimously concluded: "These people can't be used for the toughest breakthrough stage of combat; otherwise, they may become a clear and exploitable weakness."

So this time, the Austrians didn't get beaten up, but they watched how the Russians got beaten. In this battle, the Russians demonstrated higher tactical skill and combat spirit compared to the Austrians. The Austrians understood this well. However, despite losing the courage to attack, the Russians still had the courage to continue facing the French in a defensive battle. In the face of the French army, on the other hand, the Austrians lost even the will to defend. For several days, Austrian generals approached Archduke John, hoping he would request a retreat.

While Archduke John wasn't known for his strategic insight (mainly due to his poor adaptability), he still understood the basics. He knew that, given the current state of the allied forces, safe retreat in front of the enemy was impossible. True, if they retreated, the French would pursue relentlessly, and a complete rout was likely.

He also knew that his generals couldn't be ignorant of these facts. If even these generals were making impractical requests, it showed the extent of the Austrians' shattered morale.

"Your Highness, we can suggest to the Russians to divide our armies, and my forces will move to establish another camp to the northeast. This way, if the French attack, we can support each other

from different angles. Then, when the Russians aren't looking, we can run away quickly..." Some shameless individuals had even come up with such elaborate plans.

To appease everyone, Archduke John had to say to them, "Now, the British and Prussians have achieved significant victories in the north. The French will likely have to recall Napoleon's forces to defend Paris. We just need to hold out a little longer, and the French will likely have to retreat. If we run away first, will the Russians stay behind? Then, everyone will run, and in the end, no one will escape!"

Archduke John's assessment of the situation was rather accurate. On the same day Napoleon repelled the Russian general attack, the British-Prussian coalition also launched a general assault on Lige. Although the French put up a brave defense, their attacks were making steady progress. They captured several important positions, and the French defense in Lige was nearing collapse. The fall of Lige was almost certain.

Once Lige fell, there was no longer any defensible positions all the way to Verdun. And if Verdun couldn't be held, Paris would be directly exposed to the enemy.

In this situation, the provisional government had to send orders to Napoleon, urging him to return to defend Paris, while simultaneously calling upon the people of Paris to rise up, just like in 1792, to organize a militia and defend the homeland.

However, the people of Paris did not respond as they did in '92. The times had changed. To use the words of Sophie, a maid once employed by Joseph, "Before the revolution, I had no bread to eat; after the revolution, I still have no bread to eat. Did we not just have the revolution in vain?"

The government members, parliamentarians, and other respectable individuals had grown wealthy, but for the common people, they hadn't gained much real benefits. For them, the revolution that demanded their blood and sacrifice seemed to have been in vain. So why should they shed blood and sacrifice for it again?

Furthermore, in '92, the Duke of Brunswick issued a highly untimely threat to sack Paris, which riled up the people and served as the revolutionary government's best mobilization tool. But today, the more prudent British and Prussians no longer made such statements. Without their support, the provisional government struggled to mobilize the people.

Thankfully, Carnot's efforts in creating conscription mechanisms over the years had gradually improved, and through conscription, the provisional government managed to raise over a hundred thousand troops. But these soldiers, while more skilled militarily than the '92 volunteer militias, didn't possess the same morale.

In this regard, Paris was indeed in imminent danger.

This afternoon, Napoleon received new dispatches from Joseph, bearing bad news for France but good news for the Bonaparte family. "The British-Prussian coalition has captured Lige, and the French army has suffered heavy losses. General Joubert has fallen back to Verdun."

Upon receiving the dispatch, Napoleon was overjoyed. He immediately sent an emissary to the Russian-Prussian coalition, returning their wounded and proposing a ceasefire and peace negotiations.