

La Grande Armée

Rob Gibson



Campaign by semaphore 1809 – Napoleon's Strategic Blunder

Napoleon remarked in 1805 "...a man has his day in war, as in other things – I myself shall be good for another six years". In 1809 his time was running out fast. At the outset of the Austrian campaign of that year, he first made an error which he was to repeat on a grand scale in Spain and Portugal for the next four years – he attempted to direct an Army by remote control, using semaphore stations and mounted couriers to transmit his orders over hundreds of miles.

Many writers, past and present, have accepted Napoleon's condemnation of Berthier's dispositions in the face of the Austrian advance, as justified a mere staff officer overreaching himself. Berthier was more than a mere staff officer, he was also a capable fighting general and the organiser of Napoleon's lightning campaign in Italy in 1800 which ended at Marengo. Major S.J. Watson in his biography of Berthier shows evidence that these dispositions were as a result of orders given him by Napoleon himself.

The first order, dated 28th March 1809 (Plan 'A') placed the corps of Davout, Bessieres and Vandamme on the right bank of the Danube near Donauworth, and the corps of Massena, Lefebre and Oudinot, around Augsburg.

The second, dated 30th March 1809 ordered a forward concentration of the whole army around Ratisbon. This was to be acted on in the case of the Austrians remaining inactive after 15th April (thus Plan 'B') and was not implemented.

The Austrians slowly advanced across the river Inn on the 10th of April, and Berthier implemented Plan 'A'. On the same day, Napoleon despatched further instructions to Berthier, which arrived on the 12th. Massena, Lefebre and Oudinot should assemble at Augsburg, but Davout, Bessieres and Vandamme would be disposed at a days march around Ratisbon "in spite of anything that may happen". This order split the army into two groups five days march apart, which would have been disastrous had the

Austrians moved faster. Berthier executed this order despite complaints from Davout – it is preserved in the French Army archives, but is conspicuously absent from Napoleon's correspondence.

On the 12th April at 8pm Napoleon heard of the Austrian declaration of war (despite the fact that the Grande Armee in Bavaria was well aware of the advance of the Austrian Army, news took so long to travel it is doubtful if he could have known earlier). Accordingly, a further order was despatched to Berthier, telling him to revert to Plan 'A' after all. It reached Berthier on the 16th of April. Mercifully, the Austrians were slow in advancing; when Napoleon arrived on the 17th they had still not made contact – the golden opportunity was gone.

To simulate the effect of the initial French confusion in the 1809 scenario of 'La Grande Armee' a new initial set up is needed for the Allies (French) (the Austrians remain unchanged) as follows:

Nuremberg: Davout, five 2-5, two 0-4 units within 3 hexes.

Ratisbon: Bessieres, one 1-8 unit.

Munich: Lefebre, two 2-5 units.

Landshut: One 2-5 unit.

Straubing*: One 2-5 unit.

Ulm: Massena, three 2-5, one 1-8, one 0-4 unit within 2 hexes.

Augsburg: Oudinot, one 2-5, one 1-8, one 0-4 unit.

Stuttgart: Vandamme, one 2-5 unit.

Donauworth: One depot counter.

(* the actual location of Straubing is 1 hex north-west of the location shown on the game map.)

In playtesting using the revised deployment and a more energetic Austrian commander, the French had a hard fight on their hands. This is a good alternative to the standard 1809 Scenario; an experienced player can take the Allied (French) side against a less experienced player as the Austrian with a fair degree of play balance.

A future article will examine the possibilities of revolt in Germany in the 1809 Scenario.

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