

# The Generals

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Published by Headline Review

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# Chapter 1

## *Napoleon*

*Paris, 1795*

It was a hot day early in August and the heat lay across the tiled roofs of Paris like a blanket, smothering the still air with the odours of the city: sewage, smoke and sweat. In his office at the corner of the Tuileries Palace, Lazare Carnot sat at a large desk piled with paperwork arranged in labelled trays. Each tray's contents had been prioritised by his staff, so that Citizen Carnot – as he styled himself – could expedite the most pressing documents concerning the French armies struggling to defend the infant Republic. Ever since the execution of King Louis the enemies of France had regarded her as a monstrous aberration. Monarchs and aristocrats across Europe would not rest easy until the revolution had been mercilessly crushed and the Bourbons returned to the throne. So war raged across the continent as great armies clashed beneath the standards of Austria and the tricolour flags of France. And it was Carnot's duty to see that his countrymen were organised and supplied to achieve the victories that would guarantee the survival of the ideals of the revolution.

The armies were ever hungry for more recruits, more uniforms, boots, gunpowder, muskets, cannon, remounts for the cavalry and the minutiae of military equipment that was necessary for an army to march and fight. Every day Carnot had to cope with the urgent demands of the generals, meeting their needs as best he could from the finite resources available. There

were shortages of everything the armies needed, most of all money. The treasury was all but empty and the National Assembly had been forced to issue paper currency – assignats – that were openly traded at a fraction of their face value. Carnot smiled grimly at the thought as he initialled a requisition for artillery uniforms from a textile mill at Lyons. At least it cost the government nothing to print yet more assignats to pay for the uniforms. If the mill-owner made a loss trading them on that was his own affair. Carnot reached for his pen, dipped it in the inkwell and signed his name with a flourish: Citizen Carnot, on behalf of the Committee of Public Safety.

An ironic name for a committee, he reflected, given that its members had been responsible for the deaths of thousands of their fellow citizens in order to safeguard the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. The Committee ruthlessly suppressed any symptom of dissent inside France even as it directed the war against external enemies. Yet membership of the Committee carried its own danger, as Robespierre and his hardcore Jacobin followers had discovered, and paid for it with their heads. Carnot sighed as he slipped the signed requisition into the out tray.

Unless the fortunes of war changed and the political situation in France stabilised, then the revolution would fail, and all that had been gained, and all that might be gained, for the common people would be lost. Then the retribution of the monarchists, the aristocrats and the church would be even more terrible than the very worst of the excesses of the early years of the revolution.

Carnot leaned back in his chair and tugged at the collar of his shirt. The heat had made his skin feel prickly and a trickle of perspiration ran down his back. Even though he wore a dark coat over his shirt there was no question of removing it. Carnot was a soldier of the old school and discomfort had always been part of the profession.

A soft knock at the door broke his concentration and he sat up stiffly as he responded. ‘Yes?’

The door opened and through the gap Carnot could see to the far end of the much larger office outside. His staff sat on stools behind their desks in neatly regimented rows. Carnot’s

secretary was a thin man with cropped grey hair, who had worked in the War Office since he left school and still served his new masters with the deference he had learned under the old regime. He stepped into Carnot's office and creased into a bow.

'Sir, Brigadier Bonaparte has arrived.'

'Bonaparte?' Carnot frowned. 'Does he have an appointment?'  
'So he says, citizen.'

'Does he now?' Carnot could not help smiling. Though he had never met the young brigadier, he had dealt with a steady stream of correspondence with the man ever since Napoleon Bonaparte had taken command of the artillery outside Toulon nearly two years ago. The quality of Brigadier Bonaparte's mind shone through the operational plans he had drafted for the Army of the Alps and the Army of Italy. So, too, did his impatience and his insistence on having his way. For a moment Carnot was tempted to make the officer wait. After all, his time was precious and Bonaparte had not made an appointment to see him through the proper channels. Perhaps the young pup should be reminded of his place in the grand scheme of things, Carnot mused. Then he relented, partly from a desire to see if the man matched the mental image Carnot had constructed from Bonaparte's voluminous correspondence.

'Very well.' He shrugged. 'Please show the brigadier in.'

'Yes, citizen,' the secretary replied and automatically bowed again on his way out, closing the door quietly behind him. Carnot had time to scan another requisition and was dashing off his signature when he heard the door open again and the scrape and creak of boots on the floorboards.

The secretary coughed. 'Brigadier Bonaparte, sir.'

'Very well,' Carnot replied without looking up. 'You may leave us.'

As the door closed Carnot read back over the document he had just signed and nodded with satisfaction before he slipped it across the desk into the out tray. Then he raised his head.

On the other side of the desk stood a slight figure, short and thin with dark hair that fell to his collar. The fringe was cut severely across the top of his pale head in a straight line. The grey

eyes gleamed and darted round the office, seeming to take in every detail before they settled on Carnot. The young officer's nose was fine and narrow and his lips reposed in a faint pout, then parted in an impulsive smile before he forced his features into an impassive expression and stiffened to attention.

Carnot stared at the brigadier, rueing the fact that so many young men had achieved such rapid advancement through the ranks in the space of a few years. Many officers had fled the country during the revolution and Robespierre had culled the ranks of those that remained. Inevitably, a shortage of officers had arisen and promotion was thrust upon any man who demonstrated raw courage, or the least indication of a sound military brain. Brigadier Bonaparte was one of the few who possessed both.

'Welcome, Bonaparte. I've been wanting to meet you for some time.'

'Thank you, citizen.'

The voice was soft, and agreeable to Carnot's ear, and he relaxed his face into a smile. 'I had not expected you to arrive in Paris so soon. How long have you been here?'

'We arrived last night, citizen.'

'We?'

'My staff officers and I. Captain Marmont and Lieutenant Junot.'

'I see. And you have found comfortable quarters?'

The brigadier tilted his head to one side and shrugged. 'I have taken some rooms in a hotel in the Latin quarter. It's cheap, but comfortable enough. I might find something more suitable,' Bonaparte paused to add emphasis to the words that followed, 'once I am returned to full pay, citizen.'

Carnot shifted in his chair as he recalled the circumstances of the brigadier's reduction in pay. Bonaparte had been a protégé of the Robespierre brothers and when they had fallen many of their followers had been executed. Others, like Napoleon's fellow Corsican, Antoine Saliceti, had gone into hiding. Others, like Napoleon Bonaparte, who openly espoused Jacobin politics, had been proscribed. Trumped-up charges of corruption and selling information to foreign powers had been enough to see

Bonaparte sent to prison for several days. Even though the charges had been dismissed, Bonaparte had been only provisionally released on half-pay to continue his service in the army. No wonder the brigadier sounded bitter, Carnot reflected.

‘I assure you, I am doing what I can to restore your rights.’ Carnot opened out his hands. ‘It’s the least France can do for one of its most promising young officers.’

If he expected a modest expression of gratitude at the remark, he was instantly disappointed. Napoleon simply nodded.

‘Yes, citizen . . . the very least. I have given good service to France, and I have been loyal to the revolution, and it is still my ambition to serve both as well as I can.’

‘France and the revolution are one and the same, Bonaparte.’

Napoleon gestured towards the window. ‘You might say that, citizen, but there are plenty of voices on the streets that do not. I must have passed a score of royalist notices plastered across the walls as I walked here. Not to mention a man selling royalist pamphlets, not a hundred paces from the entrance to the Tuileries. I doubt he would consider that France and the revolution are the same thing.’

‘Then he is a fool.’

Napoleon’s eyebrows rose. ‘I wonder how many more fools are out there, citizen?’

‘Enough to provide encouragement for the enemies of the republic,’ Carnot admitted. ‘Which is why they must be crushed without mercy. It is the duty of every officer in the French army to assist in the process, distasteful as that no doubt seems to you. Do you find such a duty distasteful, Bonaparte?’

‘I do. As you will know from my letter.’

‘Ah, yes, I recall. It seems that you do not wish to take up your post with the Army of the West.’

‘I am certain that my talents could be put to better use in other armies, citizen. There is no glory to be had in fighting one’s countrymen, no matter how misguided their politics. What chance have they got against professional soldiers? They will be slaughtered like innocents. Yes, I find that distasteful.’

Carnot leaned forward and lowered his voice. ‘For a bunch of

innocents they are raising merry hell in the Vendée. Attacking our patrols, burning supply depots and poisoning the hearts and minds of simple peasants and workers. And who do you think is backing them? England, that's who. English ships land spies and troublemakers on our coasts almost every day, their pockets loaded with English gold. Do not delude yourself, Bonaparte. The war we fight inside France is every bit as vital as the war we wage against foreign enemies. Perhaps it is more important. Unless we win the battle for France it does not matter what happens on the plains of Italy, or along the banks of the Rhine. If we lose the battle for control of our country then all is lost.' He leaned back in his chair and forced a smile. 'So you can understand why the Committee wants to appoint its best officers to the army facing the most difficult task.'

Napoleon looked faintly amused. 'I wonder how much this posting has to do with my ability, citizen.'

'What do you mean?'

'I am an artillery officer. My speciality is the movement and disposition of cannon. Find me a fortification to lay siege to, or the massed ranks of an army to shatter with my batteries. I can do that as well as any other artillery officer in the service. What use would I be to the Army of the West? Unless they want me to bombard every barn in the Vendée, or fire grapeshot at shadows flitting along the edges of woods.'

'You will not be required to command artillery, as you already know. You have been appointed to an infantry brigade.'

'Precisely, citizen. You make my point for me. I am a gunner. I should be placed in command of cannon, not cannon fodder.'

'You have demonstrated other talents,' Carnot replied tersely. 'I've read the reports of your work at Toulon. You lead from the front. That's the kind of inspiration our men need in taking on the rebel scum in the Vendée. Also, you know how to organise. Most of all, you are single-minded and perhaps ruthless. That's why you are needed in the Army of the West.'

Napoleon was silent for a moment before he replied. 'Even if that is true, I can conceive of another reason why the Committee

wants to send me to the Vendée.'

'Oh?' Carnot stared back at him and said acidly, 'Do please explain yourself.'

'It would appear that my loyalty is still doubted. At a time when good artillery officers are desperately needed in the other armies, why else would the Committee send me to fight Frenchmen, except to prove that I have no common purpose with the rebels?'

'The Committee has its reasons, and it is not obliged to share them with you, Bonaparte. You have your orders. You are a soldier; it is not your place to question orders. So you will join the Army of the West as soon as possible. That is the end of the matter.'

'I see.' Napoleon nodded. 'Unless the Committee has cause to reconsider its decision.'

'It won't.' Carnot raised his hands and folded the palms together beneath his chin. 'There's nothing more to be said. Now, if you don't mind, I have work to do.'

Napoleon was still for a moment before he replied. 'Of course, citizen. I will take my leave.'

Carnot's shoulders relaxed a moment as the tension eased slightly. He had feared that the brigadier would prove more obdurate than this, and felt that he ought to offer some last word of encouragement. 'If you serve us as well in the Vendée as you served us at Toulon, then I'm sure you will find that the next posting will be more agreeable, more . . . glorious.'

Napoleon fixed him with an even stare. 'I understand, citizen.'

'Then, good day to you.' Carnot quickly reached for his pen and pulled another requisition off the pile.

Napoleon turned and strode to the door, then paused and looked back. 'Before I take up my new command, there are a few personal matters I need to attend to. I have not had any leave for over a year. I would appreciate some time to get my affairs in order, citizen.'

'How long?'

Napoleon pursed his lips for a moment. 'A month. Perhaps two.'

‘Two months, then. No more. I’ll have my secretary inform the Committee.’

‘Very well. Thank you, citizen.’ Napoleon bowed his head and stepped out of the office, closing the door loudly behind him.

Carnot winced and muttered, ‘Damn the man . . . Just who the hell does he think he is?’