

Napoleon's Discordant Historical Legacy: Republican Hero or Opportunistic Tyrant?

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ABSTRACT

Heroic republican crusader to some, brutal despot to some, there is perhaps no more divisive European figure of the 19th century as the French general Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon is often characterized as one of two extremes, hero or tyrant, and this paper seeks to seek out a more nuanced historical image. This paper explores the major sociopolitical and military events that occurred around the newly founded Republic of France as she entered the 19th century which allowed for Napoleon to rise to power, and seeks to shed light on both Napoleon himself as an individual, as well as the impacts of his conquests and political decisions.

Introduction

As France took its first steps in the advent of the 19th century, the country stood in a precarious state. Just a decade prior, a popular revolution had led to the collapse of the *Ancien Régime* under Louis XVI and the establishment of the First French Republic. This seismic shift within European geopolitics was almost immediately followed by declarations of war from neighboring powers who sought to contain the new radical ideology taking shape in Paris thus beginning the War of the First Coalition (and later, the War of the Second Coalition). The prospect of foreign invasion, combined with a healthy dose of paranoia within the newly-founded Republic, paved the way for Maximilian Robespierre and the radical Jacobin party's rise to power. They would oversee the infamous "Reign of Terror", marked by political oppression and mass executions. Finally, in 1794, Robespierre and his cronies were booted from power and executed as a result of what became dubbed the Thermidorian Reaction, named after the French Revolutionary calendar's month in which political moderates and other Jacobin opposers successfully plotted to oust Robespierre from power and end his authoritarian streak.

With Robespierre and the Jacobins out of the picture, a new, much more conservative government was formed under the Directorate, a 5-person committee which oversaw much of the recovery from the damage caused by the Reign of Terror, as moderates replaced prior radicals in government. During this period, a prominent array of politicians whom author Andrew Jainchill terms "the Republican Center" grew to prominence (2). Jainchill states that this Republican Center's main goals consisted of not only recovering from the Terror period, but also to protect and preserve the gains made during the French Revolution, and as a given, France itself (Jainchill 2019). With France's surprising victory in the Wars of the First and Second Coalition under the Directorate (as well as other military successes, such as Napoleon's famous expedition to Egypt), the threat from foreign incursions were seemingly curbed, but internal strife threatened to destroy France from within. The Directorate became hopelessly plagued by political division (especially as a few Jacobins made their way back into politics), the French economy seemed to show no signs of improvement, and by the time France approached the 19th century, many members of the Republican center had become disillusioned with the Directorate entirely. A new power was needed to replace the Directorate and steer France back to stability, as to ensure that the works of the Revolution were preserved.

One of the most influential members of the Republican center (who himself sat on the Directory), Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès (also known as Abbé Sieyès), believed he had found this very power. An up-incoming

military hero known as Napoleon Bonaparte, happened to be triumphantly returning from his military victories in the Middle East. And thus, history was set into motion on November 9th, 1799, or as the French Revolutionary Calendar would mark it, the 18th of Brumaire. This paper will seek to examine the character of Napoleon Bonaparte, who would shape not only French affairs for the next decade and beyond, but for Europe as a whole. The first portion of this paper will examine his rise to power and reign, while the second will analyze his authoritarian tendencies, and finally, the third will give a perspective on his Republican achievements.

Napoleon's Rise to Power, Reign, and Despotism

The Coup of 18 Brumaire, as it would come to be known, saw Napoleon successfully seize power in France, bringing an official end to the era of the Directorate, and according to many historians, the French Revolution.

Shortly after securing power, Napoleon and his supporters would enact the Constitution of the Year VIII, which immediately would hinder democratic elections while ironically, being passed through with a fraudulent plebiscite. It would also be the beginning of Napoleon's strategy to consolidate power through seemingly democratic means gradually, rather than complete seizure all at once, which assisted his Republican image considerably. While an undemocratic action at heart, this would mark the start of Napoleon's campaign to depoliticize France, which would have remarkable effect at fixing, or perhaps more accurately, concealing, the internal partisan conflicts that had plagued the French government in years prior, whether it be between royalists and revolutionaries, or Jacobins and Girondins.

Any chance of a major counter-revolution from the more leftist elements of the French government was drastically curbed after the Plot of the Saint-Nicaise, an assassination attempt made on Napoleon's life. While the plot was conceived of and executed by Bourbon royalists, this did not stop the newly-appointed First Consul from using this event as justification to imprison and deport a large number of leftist, classical Republican politicians, citing "anarchists" as having been behind the attack. However, Republican opposition still most definitely was vocal in the time shortly after Brumaire, even from those who had helped Napoleon seize power, most prominently the architect of Brumaire himself, Sieyés.

Sieyés had helped launch Brumaire with the aim of replacing the directory with a stronger executive branch so as to secure France's safety from internal strife, but was undeniably far from a despot. He had long-proposed a new, complex governmental system within France that would be overseen by a grand elector, a ceremonial head of state, who would appoint consuls. Consuls would primarily lead France along with oversight from the already-existing senatorial bodies. For Sieyés, Napoleon, a war hero and celebrity, would have been a perfect fit for either position. However, before, during, and after Brumaire, Napoleon continually voiced his disapproval of Sieyés' system, despising the idea of becoming either Consul or Head of State, which he saw as positions lacking in political power or glory. Despite any misgivings that may have come from these contentions, Sieyés and other Republicans still supported Napoleon's overthrow of the Directory. Sieyés had hoped that after the coup, Napoleon could be reasoned with, or that he could be disposed of. On the contrary, Napoleon had already begun to create a cult of personality around himself that solidified his role as an essential leader in the coup, meaning that while Sieyés may have been the primary planner of Brumaire, Napoleon had become both the face of it and the sword used to accomplish it. In a matter of years, any dreams of Sieyés' new France were dashed; the weapon he had used to achieve his aims, had now taken a life of its own; while formally only holding the title of "First Consul", he had effectively come to dominate French affairs.

Internal affairs aside, after Napoleon's ascension to Consul, the dust in France finally seemed to settle. It is essential to recognize that Napoleon's seizure of power was followed by an unprecedented amount of stability, as not only partisan divisions became sealed through centralization, but France also would see great success in her foreign affairs. The War of the Second Coalition would finally come to an end shortly after Napoleon's famed victory over the Austrians at the Battle of Marengo, as well as the following Peace of Ami-

ens, where Great Britain and France finally agreed to peace terms, bringing an end to multiple years of continuous conflict on the continent. A war-weary population in France was jubilant, and of course, most of the credit would go to the war hero himself, the First Consul. All the meanwhile, Napoleon gradually took more and more power for himself; he came to control the senate like a puppet-master, as later on, he would spy on opposition politicians and would ultimately give himself the power to appoint new senators, leading to yet another illusion of a democratic system that was incredibly slanted in order to effectively unanimously support Napoleon's every move. While also appealing to Republicans, Napoleon subtly ensured to gain the support of those who had been driven away by the revolution. He would restore the previously banned Catholic Church in France, and would re-welcome conservative politicians excluded by the former Revolutionary governments. Because of these moves, Napoleon's support base grew meteorically, until finally, on December 2nd, 1804, he would crown himself Emperor of France, and proclaim the First French Empire.

Napoleon's coronation (supported by yet another fake plebiscite) left no room for doubt that the nation was now all but an autocracy, Napoleon's prior works of raising public opinion, as well as continual emphasis on the mission to protect France and Republicanism as a whole, meant that there was little opposition from either politicians or the populace. On the other hand, alarm bells shook the European continent once again, as nations rallied against Napoleon's new regime, officially beginning the Napoleonic Wars, with the opening of the War of the Third Coalition. The following years of Napoleon's reign would almost be completely dedicated to war, as France fought against an ever-growing coalition with few allies of her own. In the initial years of war, however, French dominance seemed to be never-ending; a crushing Austrian defeat at the Battle of Austerlitz effectively brought an end to the Third Coalition, while a major French victory over Prussia at the twin Battles of Jena-Auerstedt would lead to the downfall of the Fourth Coalition.

Despite these successes, one nation would continue to be a thorn on Napoleon's side; Great Britain. While the military situation for the Coalition was close to disastrous on land, on the sea, British naval supremacy was solidified at the Battle of Trafalgar, masterminded by the famed Lord Nelson, who would die during the battle. The Franco-Spanish fleet was decimated, leaving any possibility of a naval invasion onto the British mainland itself unfeasible. Great Britain would continue to be at the forefront of mobilizing European nations against France, and contributing greatly to organizing new coalitions as well as acts of resistance against Napoleon. Attempting to contain the British threat, Napoleon would implement the Continental System, a trading policy that attempted to embargo Great Britain into submission. However, this policy would spell disaster for France, as many of Europe's neutral nations as well as her own allies were unwilling to put French foreign policy ahead of their own economies. Notably, Portugal, a neutral nation, and Spain, a French ally, would disavow French warnings and continue to trade with Britain. It was clear at this point that the Continental System was failing, and Napoleon faced a decision. He could either accept his system was dysfunctional, and find an alternative means to fight Britain, or he could try to save his creation through military force. Whether due to his own ego, or a genuine belief that the Continental System would work, Napoleon would choose the latter despite protest from his subordinates. France would invade both Portugal and Spain under the pretext of the Continental System, beginning the Peninsular War.

Unlike France's prior entanglements, the Peninsular War would be far from quick and decisive. While French troops managed to capture Madrid and overthrow the Bourbon monarchs of Spain, whom Napoleon despised, much of the Spanish population, which were fiercely Catholic and vehemently anti-revolution, saw Napoleon and the revolutionary ideals he espoused as the devil incarnate. A campaign of guerilla warfare would tie down French troops in Spain for years to come, and some of Napoleon's most decorated commanders would leave Spain defeated, and in disgrace.

Despite these worrying signs, Napoleon's ambitions knew no bounds; the empire would soon reach its greatest territorial extent, but yet, Napoleon wanted more. In 1812, Napoleon would make a fateful decision that sealed the empire's fate; he would launch a massive invasion against Russia. Napoleon's glorious *Grande Armée* would march into Russia with about 450,000 soldiers, and retreat with roughly 27,000 remaining.

Throughout the campaign, Napoleon's military commanders, cognizant of the dangerous fact that the French army was overextended, would continuously ask for a withdrawal. Napoleon ignored them, leading to the infamous, disastrous forced retreat from Russia during a historically cold winter. Such a debilitating defeat as well as continual failures on the Peninsular front would see clear cracks begin to form in Napoleon's image as an undefeatable war hero. As domestic uncertainty increased, Napoleon would ramp up oppressive measures back home.

As the emperor's image began to worsen, any form of defamation directed at him would erratically be responded to with intimidation, threats, imprisonment, or other means; although, the Napoleonic regime knew that it had to maintain the image of a Republican nation to continue to curry popular support. This was a balance that the regime could not maintain. Incidents such as drunken citizens being imprisoned for making brazen comments against the emperor only to be released a few days later, did not help public relations in the slightest. And as Napoleon attempted to rebuild his *Grande Armée* through mass conscription programs, his popularity began to wane.

The failures of the Continental System, the inability of Napoleon to bring about a decisive victory in Spain, and the disastrous invasion of Russia, not only harmed Napoleon's image, but also severely weakened the French Empire. Militarily, these campaigns would harm the quality of the *Grande Armée* as most of Napoleon's most experienced soldiers would die in either Russia or Spain, and they would come to be replaced by young, inexperienced conscripts. These weaknesses reared their ugly heads as France was slammed in the War of the Sixth Coalition, as French troops were steadily driven out of their continental holdings, and eventually decisively defeated at the Battle of Leipzig, and in the blink of an eye, Coalition troops had taken Paris. Napoleon's marshals and subordinates confronted him with the reality of his predicament—his mighty empire had crumbled to dust. Napoleon, finally defeated, would eventually surrender, and be exiled to the remote island of Elba. Meanwhile, Napoleon's empire would be carved into pieces, and would have the Bourbon monarchy restored to the throne. After 10 years, the First French Empire had met its end.

While Napoleon would make a brief escape from Elba, his defeat in the Hundred Days and Waterloo in 1815 to the Seventh Coalition solidified his downfall. He had truly fallen from power. Exiled to the even more remote island St. Helena, Napoleon would spend his last days writing his memoirs, and contemplating on his rule. In the decades after his death, Napoleon would be marked by historians of the time as an opportunistic tyrant who had threatened to destroy Europe's balance of power.

Napoleon's Republican Legacy

Despite these criticisms, it is undeniable to see that Napoleon's rule also brought about genuine advances in Republicanism both in France and throughout Europe. This perspective may seem completely counterintuitive to reality due to the nature of conquest that Napoleon practiced. After all, how could Republicanism be reasonably practiced along with military expansionism? However, Jainchill (2008, Ch.4) notes that moves towards foreign expansion started from days of the Directory under the Republican center, with examples such as Bonaparte's own expedition to Egypt. Of course, many Republicans in France were concerned with the notion of an expansionist Republic. Many historians and politicians of the time theorized that once France grew past her "natural borders", a set of borders they agreed was the maximum extent to which France could exist, the nation would fall into turmoil and collapse internally (Fatefully, this prediction would prove to be somewhat true with the collapse of Napoleon's empire.) However, other Republicans, such as Charles-Guillaume Thérémis, also believed nothing was self-contradictory about France's military exploits, claiming that as the birthplace of the Revolution, France had a duty to spread Republicanism and liberty throughout the continent. Inspired by famous philosopher Immanuel Kant, who believed that an ideal world would be one where a powerful Republic would lead a federation of other Republics, this new ideology would become the backbone of Napoleon's empire.

It is also essential to acknowledge that as Jainchill (2008, Ch.4) mentions, under both Napoleon and the Directorate, all forms of “Republican expansion” were driven by at least some degree of genuine want to spread liberty. These factors combined would lead to the establishment of sister republics and kingdoms that functioned as French client states outside of France’s natural borders and became a means to amend the concerns of the more pacifist elements of Republican politicians. Admittedly, these client states were far from self-representing, independent, democratic states. Many were ruled directly by those in Napoleon’s inner circle, and held little autonomy when it came to assisting France. However, despite these flaws, under French influence, these client states would be exposed to radical new ideas which laid the foundations for future, modernized, and independent nation-states.

For example, the Napoleonic Code, a newly-created legal code practiced widely throughout the French empire, would be enforced in the majority of her client states. The Napoleonic Code sought to reform outdated feudal laws, and contributed to the abolishment of serfdom in states like the Helvetic Republic (modern-day Switzerland), which furthermore led to stability in these once conflict-laden lands. Meanwhile, some of Napoleon’s client states would serve as precursors to later self-determined nations, like the Confederation of the Rhine, which would serve as an ancestor to modern Germany, and the Duchy of Warsaw, which would ultimately precede the resurrection of Poland in the aftermath of World War I.

This vision of Republicanism practiced under Napoleon’s regime is termed by Jainchill as “modern republicanism”, a shift from the more classical republicanism that had emerged initially from the French Revolution. Rather than an emphasis on radical reforms, according to historian Howard Brown, a form of “liberal authoritarianism” arose, emphasizing protecting and spreading Republican values above all else, a move that ironically would end up endangering these very rights due to the rapid centralization France would go through under Napoleon to pursue such a mission (Brown 2006). Taking all these facts into consideration, it can clearly be seen that Napoleon’s legacy is not a simple story, but one of nuance, complexity, and contradictions. Despite all his despotic deeds and unstoppable ambition, Napoleon also contributed largely to the modernization, self-determination, and democratization of many European nations. So the question remains, who really was Napoleon? A tyrant? A hero?

Conclusions & Final Thoughts

In the end, just like any other historical figure, it is difficult to ascertain the specific motivations of Napoleon Bonaparte in his exploits. However, from what records we have, it is clear that Napoleon was an incredibly ambitious man from his youth, spurning defeat even when playing games in his childhood. Such a man would become a revolutionary supporter, disillusioned with the aristocracy within the military that kept him back, but also would become an aristocrat himself, proclaiming himself emperor. Max Hastings criticizes the idea that Napoleon’s rule was beneficial to France, pointing out Napoleon’s statements emphasizing personal glory, and indeed, with Napoleon’s actions, we could easily see the image of a selfish man who put himself before France (Hastings 2014). We also see this with moves such as refusing the offer of relatively lenient peace negotiations from Klemens von Metternich during the War of the Sixth Coalition, a move that possibly sealed his empire’s fate for good. His despotic handling of domestic instability also brings doubt to his dedication to the Republican cause. After all, how could a true Republican go about crowning themselves and their inner circle as monarchs?

However, even if this characterization of Napoleon is accurate, it does not discount the benign progress that his empire would ultimately bring to Europe and its future inhabitants, as well as his lifelong Republican affiliation and his domestic reforms. Even only if done for superficial image-building and propaganda, the reforms Napoleon put in place were real, and would have tangible, significant impacts for the nations they affected. Moreover, the narrative of a despot only concerned with power seems to falter when taking into consideration that despite holding absolute power, even with all the despotism, Napoleon still enacted Republican ideas and policies such as the Napoleonic Code.

Of course, this does not magically erase the acts of tyranny Napoleon conducted; he is undeniably also not a perfect Republican hero. While the argument for tyrant seems more feasible, neither narrative perfectly encapsulates the actions he took. At the beginning of this paper, it was promised this paper would delve into the character of Napoleon Bonaparte. Hopefully, it has been illuminated through such an examination that he is a man that requires further continual study for generations to come, as possibly the most polarizing yet influential figure in 19th-century Europe. A figure who undoubtedly left behind a shattered legacy of both a modern hero of the triumphant Republican advance, as well as one of an opportunistic dictator, who shook Europe to its very core.

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