

NAPOLEON: CHILD OR BETRAYER OF THE REVOLUTION?

1769	Born on Corsica
1793	First command, against Toulon
1796–1797	The successful Italian campaign
1799–1804	One of three rulers in the Consulate
1800–1804	Code Napoleon
1804	Proclaimed emperor
1805–1807	Victories in Europe
1806–1810	Continental System against England
1812–1813	The disastrous Russian cam- paign and defeat at Leipzig
1814	Abdication and exile to Elba
1814–1815	“The Hundred Days,” defeat at Waterloo, and second exile, to St. Helena
1821	Died on St. Helena

Was Napoleon a child of the French Revolution? Napoleon himself felt that he was. And in one sense at least, the assertion is undeniably true. The Revolution had broken the caste system of the old military order, just as it had broken the social order of the Old Regime generally. In the struggling revolutionary republic, threatened with invasion and armed reprisal from every side, any man who showed the ability and the willingness to serve could advance in the military—even such an apparently unpromising officer as the young Napoleon Bonaparte, with his heavy Italian accent, his mediocre record as a military cadet and a junior officer, and his consuming interest in the politics of his native Corsica, which seemed to preclude any involvement in the great events that had been shaking France since 1789.

But Napoleon was not indifferent to those events. As early as 1791, he had become a member of the Jacobin Club in his garrison town of Valence, in the south of France, and was an outspoken advocate of Jacobin radicalism. His political views, rather than any proven military ability, secured for him his first important commission as com-

mander of artillery at the siege of Toulon against the royalists and the British. Napoleon was successful, and he caught the eye of the military commissioner Augustin Robespierre, who praised the young officer in a letter to his brother Maximilien, then at the zenith of his political career in Paris. Napoleon was appointed commandant of artillery in the army of Italy. But Robespierre and his faction soon fell from power, and Napoleon, deprived of his command, was arrested. After a brief imprisonment, he departed for Paris to try to rescue his fortune.

In 1795 the National Convention, its tenure running out, submitted to referendum the so-called Constitution of the Year III,¹ with its accompanying decree that two-thirds of the convention's members must be returned to the new legislative assembly. The royalists, enraged at this attempt to ensure continued radical domination of the government, rose in revolt. Someone remembered that the young radical Napoleon was in Paris, and he was given effective command of the defense of the convention. As the rebels marched on 13 Vendémiaire, Year IV (October 5, 1795), Napoleon had already positioned his artillery and coolly ordered it to fire. The famous "whiff of grapeshot" carried the day—though there is no record that Napoleon used the phrase—and friends and enemies alike began to call him "Général Vendémiaire." He was now a force to be reckoned with in the politics of the Revolution.

When the new government was formed, headed by a Directory, Napoleon was its military adviser. Within a year, he was given command of the army of Italy. The Italian campaign was at that time verging on failure, but Napoleon turned it around. He gained the loyalty of his troops—largely by authorizing them to live off the land they conquered in lieu of the pay their republic had failed to provide—and he won battles. Within less than a year, Napoleon was the master of Italy. Far exceeding his authority, he set up a series of Italian republics and forced the Austrians out of Italy entirely. Then Napoleon returned to Paris once more to engineer the Treaty of Campo Formio with the defeated Austrians. Although the Directory was far from pleased, Napoleon was fast becoming a popular hero.

Britain, with its formidable sea power and its wealth and industry, was clearly France's most dangerous enemy, and the Directory had formulated a plan for an invasion of England from across the channel. Napoleon was placed in command of the operation. After a cursory inspection, he rejected the plan, arguing instead for a strike at the British lifeline to India—a campaign in Egypt. Napoleon was able

¹The early leaders of the Revolution had proclaimed a new calendar dating from

to overcome the Directory but not the British sea power and the squadrons of Lord Nelson. The Egyptian campaign was a disaster. But rather than admit defeat, Napoleon returned to France and proclaimed a victory when in fact there was none. The French people believed him.

In 1799 Napoleon, with Abbé Sieyès, an ambitious member of the Directory, engineered a coup d'état. The coup, which took place on 18–19 Brumaire, Year VIII (November 9–10, 1799), was successful, and the Directory was replaced by a Consulate of three men, one of them Napoleon. Within a matter of weeks, a new “Constitution of the Year VIII” was proclaimed, making Napoleon First Consul and the government of France a military dictatorship. It is true that the constitution was overwhelmingly approved by plebiscite, after the fact. It is true that under its authority Napoleon launched far-reaching reforms, moving the nation in the direction of order and stability. But it is also true that the French nation had succumbed to the myth of Napoleon, a myth that was ultimately founded upon his military invincibility and—at least in Napoleon’s mind—upon continued military victories.

In 1802 Europe might well have had peace. Even Britain had agreed to the Treaty of Amiens. For achieving this diplomatic coup, Napoleon was granted lifetime tenure as First Consul, but even this did not satisfy his ambition. Napoleon demanded an empire and he got it: on May 18, 1804, he was proclaimed Emperor of the French. In the years that followed, Napoleon compiled an incredible list of military victories: he defeated the Austrians at Ulm and the Austrians and Russians at Austerlitz in the winter of 1805, the Prussians at Jena and Auerstädt in the fall of 1806, and the Russians alone at Eylau and Friedland in the spring and summer of 1807. By this time, Napoleon had redrawn the map of western Europe, and his own relations sat on half a dozen thrones. His plan was to organize the Continent against the stubborn British; to this end, he signed an agreement with the new Russian emperor, Alexander I, dividing Europe between them.

In 1810 Napoleon, standing at the apex of his power, decided to disregard his agreement with Alexander and invade Russia. It was a disastrous miscalculation, and it proved to be the crucial turning point in Napoleon’s career. Out of the almost half a million men who had massed on the banks of the Neman in the summer of 1812, fewer than ten thousand remained after the winter’s march back from Moscow. The myth of Napoleon was shattered, and the powers of Europe rose up against him. Not only had he defeated and humiliated them, but he had brought them the Revolution. Even if he had subverted the Revolution in France, he had, nevertheless, exported its principles along with his conquests. To the Old Regime of Europe, this was Napoleon’s greatest insult, the ultimate betrayal that they could not

forgive. But it was also perhaps Napoleon's most enduring claim to having been one of the makers of the Western tradition, for, whatever his motives, Napoleon introduced the Age of Revolution that persisted on the Continent, in one guise or another, through most of the nineteenth century and that fundamentally changed the nature of European government and society.

Napoleon was forced to abdicate and was exiled to the Mediterranean island of Elba. But even as the victors were gathering to undo his work and the Bourbons were returning to France, Napoleon escaped from Elba. This was the beginning of his Hundred Days. As Napoleon, with an escort of grenadiers, approached Grenoble, he met the first battalion sent to intercept him. His secretary, the Marquis de Las Cases, described the scene:

The commanding officer refused even to parley. The Emperor without hesitation, advanced alone, and one hundred of his grenadiers marched at some distance from him, with their arms reversed. The sight of Napoleon, his costume, and in particular his grey military great coat, produced a magical effect on the soldiers, and they stood motionless. Napoleon went straight up to a veteran whose arm was covered with *chevrons*, and very unceremoniously seizing him by the whisker, asked him whether he would have the heart to kill his Emperor. The soldier, his eyes moistened with tears immediately thrust the ramrod into his musquet, to show that it was not loaded, and exclaimed, "See, I could not have done thee any harm: all the others are the same." Cries of *Vive l'Empereur!* resounded on every side. Napoleon ordered the battalion to make half a turn to the right, and all marched on to Paris.²

With every mile resistance melted, and cries of *Vive l'Empereur!* swelled up from the throngs that lined the roads and from garrison troops and militia. Napoleon had returned and France was his. Even after the catastrophe at Waterloo, an officer lying in the mud with a shattered thigh cried out, "He has ruined us—he has destroyed France and himself—yet I love him still."³

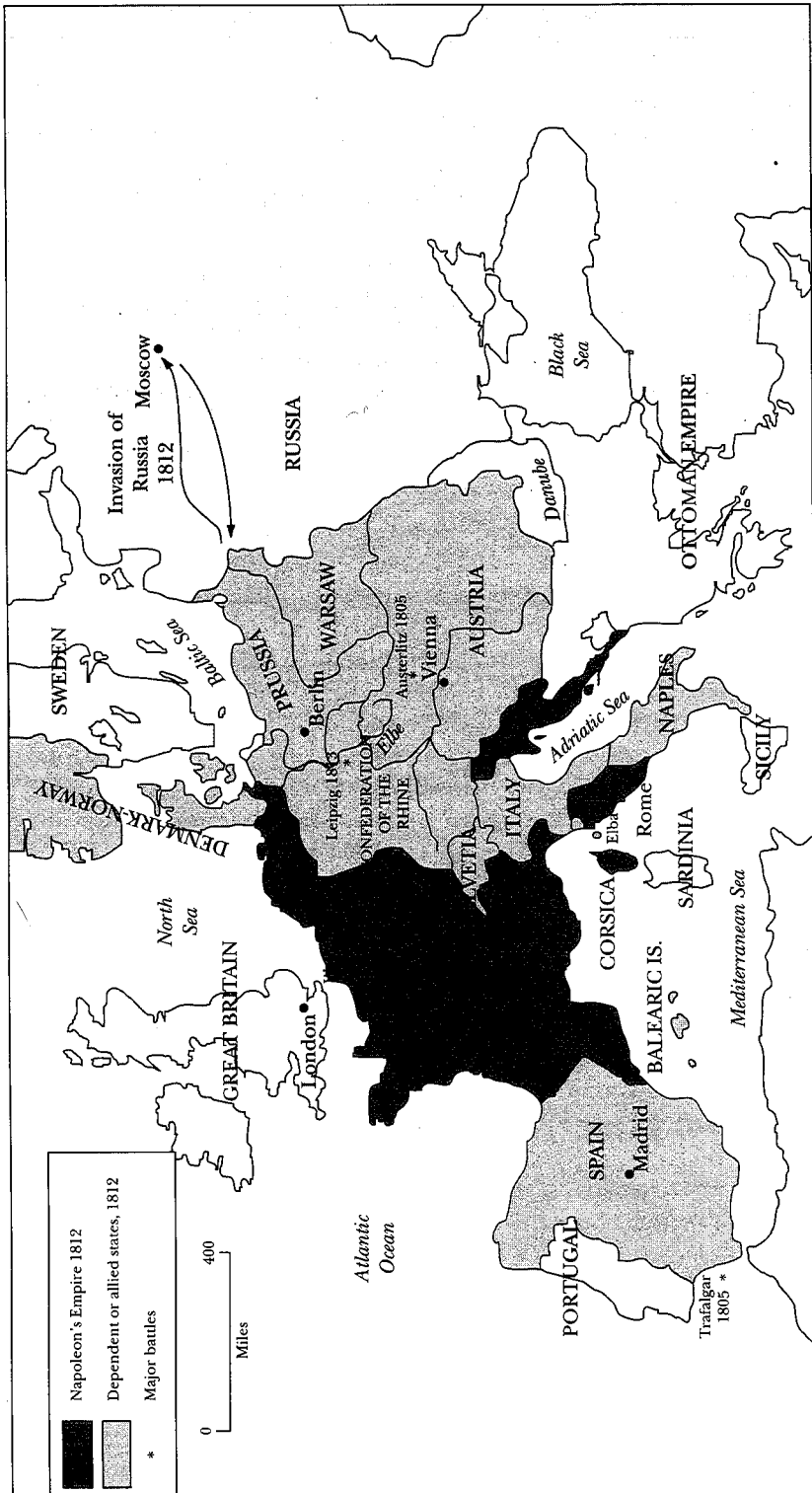
But what of the Revolution? The old veteran on the road to Grenoble and the wounded officer on the field of Waterloo wept for their emperor, not for the lost cause of the Revolution. Thousands unquestionably shared their views. But many thousands more were convinced that, despite the terrible cost of Napoleon's search for glory, he had carried the Revolution to its proper, even to its inevitable conclusion. Napoleon himself wrote:

²The Count de Las Cases, *Memoirs of the Life, Exile, and Conversations of the Emperor Napoleon*, new ed. (New York: Eckler, 1900), III, 295.

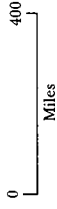
I purified a revolution, in spite of hostile factions. I combined all the scattered benefits that could be preserved; but I was obliged to protect them with a nervous arm against the attacks of all parties; and in this situation it may be truly said that the public interest, *the State, was myself.*⁴

The wheel had come full circle. Napoleon “the child of the Revolution” echoed the words often ascribed to Louis XIV: “I am the state.”

⁴Las Cases, *Memoirs*, III, 255–56.



Napoleon's Empire 1812
 Dependent or allied states, 1812
 Major battles
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Napoleon's Empire in 1812

Napoleon's Memoirs

THE COUNT DE LAS CASES

When, after Waterloo, Napoleon was sent into exile again, this time to the tiny, distant island of St. Helena in the south Atlantic, he was only forty-five years old, apparently in the prime of life. Might he not escape once more, even against all odds? Might he not be called back by one or another of the victorious allies, already beginning to quarrel among themselves? Might not France even summon its emperor again? Napoleon was planning for any eventuality, as carefully and methodically as he might plan a military campaign.

Napoleon had, of course, some limited contact with the Bonapartists in France, but this was restricted by the tight control over the island. He was able to carry on some correspondence, though much of it consisted of complaints to the British government about the conditions of his exile. But mainly Napoleon devoted himself to his memoirs, which he dictated to his secretary, the Marquis de Las Cases. Las Cases carefully transcribed the material, and then Napoleon read and corrected it himself.

Memoirs of the Life, Exile, and Conversations of the Emperor Napoleon is a vast and complicated work—four volumes in its final published form. In addition to Napoleon's own recollections of events, discourses, and opinions, it contains comments, reflections, and interpolations by Las Cases. It details Napoleon's bitter, petty, continuing controversy with the authorities on the island whose task it was to maintain his captivity. But primarily the book is Napoleon's own apologia, the justification for his policies and his career, directed to his own French people, to the allies, and to the tribunal of history. To Napoleon, the book was his final weapon.

It is in this work, more than in any other place, that we see the precise terms in which Napoleon considered himself the child, the inheritor, the "purifier" of the Revolution.

"The French Revolution was not produced by the jarring interests of two families disputing the possession of the throne; it was a general rising of the mass of the nation against the privileged classes." . . . The principal object of the Revolution was to destroy all privileges; to abolish signorial jurisdictions, justice being an inseparable attribute of sovereign authority; to suppress feudal rights as being a remnant of the old slavery of the people; to subject alike all citizens and all property to the burdens of the state. In short, the Revolution proclaimed equality of rights. A citizen might attain any public employment, according to his talent and the chances of fortune. The kingdom was composed of provinces which had been united to the Crown at various periods: they had no natural limits, and were

differently divided, unequal in extent and in population. They possessed many laws of their own, civil as well as criminal: they were more or less privileged, and very unequally taxed, both with respect to the amount and the nature of the contributions, which rendered it necessary to detach them from each other by lines of custom-houses. France was not a state, but a combination of several states, connected together without amalgamation. The whole had been determined by chance and by the events of past ages. The Revolution, guided by the principle of equality, both with respect to the citizens and the different portions of the territory, destroyed all these small nations: there was no longer a Brittany, a Normandy, a Burgundy, a Champagne, a Provence, or a Lorraine; but the whole formed a France. A division of homogeneous territory, prescribed by local circumstances, confounded the limits of all the provinces. They possessed the same judicial and administrative organization, the same civil and criminal laws, and the same system of taxation. The dreams of the upright men of all ages were realized. The opposition which the Court, the Clergy, and the Nobility raised against the Revolution and the war with foreign powers produced the law of emigration and the sequestration of emigrant property, which subsequently it was found necessary to sell, in order to provide for the charges of the war. A great portion of the French nobility enrolled themselves under the banner of the princes of the Bourbon family, and formed an army which marched in conjunction with the Austrian, Prussian, and English forces. Gentlemen who had been brought up in the enjoyment of competency served as private soldiers; numbers were cut off by fatigue and the sword; others perished of want in foreign countries; and the wars of La Vendée and of the Chouans, and the revolutionary tribunals, swept away thousands. Three-fourths of the French nobility were thus destroyed; and all posts, civil, judicial, or military, were filled by citizens who had risen from the common mass of the people. The change produced in persons and property by the events of the Revolution was not less remarkable than that which was effected by the principles of the Revolution. A new church was created; the dioceses of Vienne, Narbonne, Féjus, Sisteron, Rheims, &c., were superseded by sixty new dioceses, the boundaries of which were circumscribed, in Concordat,⁵ by new Bulls applicable to the present state of the French territory. The suppression of religious orders, the sale of convents and of all ecclesiastical property, were sanctioned, and the clergy were pensioned by the State. Everything that was the result of the events which had occurred since the time of Clovis, ceased to exist. All these changes

⁵The agreement (1801) between Napoleon and Pope Pius VII that restored Catholi-

were so advantageous to the people that they were effected with the utmost facility, and, in 1800, there no longer remained any recollection of the old privileges and sovereigns of the provinces, the old parliaments and bailiwicks, or the old dioceses; and to trace back the origin of all that existed, it was sufficient to refer to the new law by which it had been established. One-half of the land had changed its proprietors; the peasantry and the citizens were enriched. The advancement of agriculture and manufactures exceeded the most sanguine hopes. France presented the imposing spectacle of upwards of thirty millions of inhabitants, circumscribed within their natural limits, and composing only a single class of citizens, governed by one law, one rule, and one order. All these changes were conformable with the welfare and rights of the nation, and with the justice and intelligence of the age.

The five members of the Directory were divided. Enemies to the Republic crept into the councils; and thus men hostile to the rights of the people became connected with the government. This state of things kept the country in a ferment; and the great interests which the French people had acquired by the Revolution were incessantly compromised. One unanimous voice, issuing from the plains of France and from her cities and her camps, demanded the preservation of all the principles of the Republic, or the establishment of an hereditary system of government, which would place the principles and interests of the Revolution beyond the reach of factions and the influence of foreigners. By the constitution of the year VIII the First Consul of the Republic became Consul for ten years, and the nation afterwards prolonged his magistracy for life: the people subsequently raised him to the throne, which it rendered hereditary in his family. The principles of the sovereignty of the people, of liberty and equality, of the destruction of the feudal system, of the irrevocability of the sale of national domains, and the freedom of religious worship, were now established. The government of France, under the fourth dynasty, was founded on the same principles as the Republic. It was a moderate and constitutional monarchy. There was as much difference between the government of France under the fourth dynasty and the third, as between the latter and the Republic. The fourth dynasty succeeded the Republic, or, more properly speaking, it was merely a modification of it.

No Prince ever ascended a throne with rights more legitimate than those of Napoleon. The crown was not presented to him by a few Bishops and Nobles; but he was raised to the Imperial throne by the unanimous consent of the citizens, three times solemnly confirmed.⁶

⁶A reference to the successive plebiscites that Napoleon used to gain approval of his modifications in the government. The last sanctioned his assumption of the imperial title.

Pope Pius VII, the head of the Catholic religion, the religion of the majority of the French people, crossed the Alps to anoint the Emperor with his own hands, in the presence of the Bishops of France, the Cardinals of the Romish Church, and the Deputies from all the districts of the Empire.⁷ The sovereigns of Europe eagerly acknowledged Napoleon: all beheld with pleasure the modification of the Republic, which placed France on a footing of harmony with the rest of Europe, and which at once confirmed the constitution and the happiness of that great nation. Ambassadors from Austria, Russia, Prussia, Spain, Portugal, Turkey, and America, in fine, from all the powers of Europe, came to congratulate the Emperor. England alone sent no ambassador: she had violated the treaty of Amiens, and had consequently again declared war against France. . . .

The English declaration of war (1803) precipitated the imperial phase of Napoleon's career, during which, in victory after victory, he defeated the great powers of Europe. He hoped to complete his plans for Europe and for himself in the attack upon Russia. Here he reflects upon those plans and upon the Russian war.

. . . "That war should have been the most popular of any in modern times. It was a war of good sense and true interests; a war for the repose and security of all; it was purely pacific and preservative; entirely European and continental. Its success would have established a balance of power and would have introduced new combinations, by which the dangers of the present time would have been succeeded by future tranquillity. In this case, ambition had no share in my views. In raising Poland,⁸ which was the key-stone of the whole arch, I would have permitted a King of Prussia, an Archduke of Austria, or any other to occupy the throne. I had no wish to obtain any new acquisition; and I reserved for myself only the glory of doing good, and the blessings of posterity. Yet this undertaking failed, and proved my ruin, though I never acted more disinterestedly, and never better merited success. As if popular opinion had been seized with contagion, in a moment, a general outcry, a general sentiment, arose against me. I was proclaimed the destroyer of kings—I, who had created them! I was denounced as the subverter of the rights of nations—I, who was about to risk all to secure them! And people and kings, those irreconcilable enemies, leagued together and conspired

⁷Though the pope was present, Napoleon placed the crown on his own head, as depicted in the famous painting of the occasion by the court painter Jacques-Louis David.

⁸His creation of an independent Poland was an indignity Russian could not

against me! All the acts of my past life were now forgotten. I said, truly, that popular favour would return to me with victory; but victory escaped me, and I was ruined. . . .”

The ruin brought upon him by the Russian war was purely fortuitous, claims Napoleon, and in no way can obscure his true accomplishments.

“I closed the gulf of anarchy and cleared the chaos. I purified the Revolution, dignified Nations and established Kings. I excited every kind of emulation, rewarded every kind of merit, and extended the limits of glory! This is at least something! And on what point can I be assailed on which an historian could not defend me? Can it be for my intentions? But even here I can find absolution. Can it be for my despotism? It may be demonstrated that the Dictatorship was absolutely necessary. Will it be said that I restrained liberty? It can be proved that licentiousness, anarchy, and the greatest irregularities, still haunted the threshold of freedom. Shall I be accused of having been too fond of war? It can be shown that I always received the first attack. Will it be said that I aimed at universal monarchy? It can be proved that this was merely the result of fortuitous circumstances, and that our enemies themselves led me step by step to this determination. Lastly, shall I be blamed for my ambition? This passion I must doubtless be allowed to have possessed, and that in no small degree; but at the same time, my ambition was of the highest and noblest kind that ever, perhaps, existed—that of establishing and of consecrating the empire of reason, and the full exercise and complete enjoyment of all the human faculties! And here the historian will probably feel compelled to regret that such ambition should not have been fulfilled and gratified!” Then after a few moments of silent reflection: “This,” said the Emperor, “is my whole history in a few words.”

On Politics, Literature, and National Character

MADAME DE STAËL

There were many who, like one hostile critic, regarded Napoleon simply as “the Corsican ogre.” But there were other, more thoughtful critics who, though they condemned Napoleon, tried to understand why they did so. One of these was Anne-

Louise-Germaine, Madame de Staël (1766–1817). She was the daughter of the Swiss banker Jacques Necker, who, as Minister of Finance to Louis XVI, had tried without much success—and without much imagination—to rescue France from fiscal chaos on the eve of the Revolution. Madame de Staël had grown up in the highest circles of the French aristocracy and the court, marrying the Swedish ambassador to France, Eric Magnus de Staël-Holstein, in 1786. She lived through the Revolution and knew most of its leading figures, as she did Napoleon and the men of the counterrevolution.

But Madame de Staël was more than simply a fashionable aristocrat. She was one of the last great luminaries of the Age of Enlightenment and one of the most important European writers of her time. She was also one of Napoleon's most perceptive and persistent critics. Though Madame de Staël was a passionate champion of liberty and an outspoken French patriot, she was no friend of the Revolution. But then, she observed, neither was Napoleon! He was, in her view, nothing less than its most sinister subverter. Napoleon tried first to moderate her views, then to persuade her of his good intentions, but he failed altogether to understand the basis of her hostility. Finally, he sent her into exile, and from Switzerland, Germany, Russia, and England she continued to observe and to write about the unfolding of the events she had foreseen. We turn now to Madame de Staël: On Politics, Literature, and National Character, and her account of the rise and fall of Napoleon, so different in every way from his own.

The Directory was not inclined to peace, not because it wished to extend French rule beyond the Rhine and the Alps but because it believed war useful for the propagation of the republican system. Its plan was to surround France with a belt of republics. . . .

General Bonaparte was certainly less serious and less sincere than the Directory in the love of republican ideas, but he was much more shrewd in estimating a situation. He sensed that peace would become popular in France because passions were subsiding and people were weary of sacrifices; so he signed the Treaty of Campo Formio with Austria.

General Bonaparte distinguished himself as much by his character and mind as by his victories, and the imagination of the French was beginning to attach itself to him strongly. A tone of moderation and nobility prevailed in his style, which contrasted with the revolutionary gruffness of the civil leaders of France. The warrior spoke like a magistrate, while the magistrates expressed themselves with martial violence. . . .

It was with this feeling, at least, that I saw him for the first time in Paris. I could find no words of reply when he came to me to tell me that he had sought my father at Coppet and that he regretted having passed through Switzerland without having seen him. But when I was somewhat recovered from the confusion of admiration, a very strong sense of fear followed. Bonaparte at that time had no power;

suspicious of the Directory. So the fear he inspired was caused only by the extraordinary effect of his person upon nearly all who approached him. I had seen men worthy of respect, and I had seen fierce men: there was nothing in the impression Bonaparte produced upon me that recalled either the former or the latter. I very quickly saw, in the various occasions I had to meet him during his stay in Paris, that his character could not be defined by the words we ordinarily use; he was neither good, nor fierce, nor gentle, nor cruel, like others we know. Such a being, having no equals, could neither feel nor arouse any sympathy: he was more than a human being or less than one. His appearance, his mind, and his speech were foreign in nature—an added advantage for subjugating the French.

Far from being reassured by seeing Bonaparte more often, I was made increasingly apprehensive. I had a vague feeling that no emotions of the heart could influence him. He considers a human being a fact or a thing, not a fellow man. He does not hate nor does he love. For him, there is nothing but himself; all others are ciphers.

Every time I heard him speak I was struck by his superiority: yet it had no resemblance to that of men educated and cultivated by study or by social intercourse, such as may be found in England or France. But his speech showed a feeling for the situation, like the hunter's for his prey. . . .

General Bonaparte, at this same time, the end of 1797, sounded public opinion regarding the Directors; he realized that they were not liked but that republican sentiment made it as yet impossible for a general to take the place of civilian officials. The Directory proposed to him the assault upon England. He went to examine the coasts, and, quickly seeing that this expedition was senseless, returned resolved to attempt the conquest of Egypt.

Bonaparte has always sought to seize the imagination of men and, in this respect, he knows well how one must govern when one is not born to the throne. An invasion of Africa, the war carried to an almost fabulous country like Egypt, must make an impression upon every mind. . . .

But in his climb to power, Napoleon depended not only upon his growing military reputation.

The most potent magic that Bonaparte used to establish his power was the terror the mere name of Jacobinism inspired, though anyone capable of reflection knew perfectly well that this scourge could not reappear in France. People readily pretend to fear defeated parties in order to justify harsh measures. Everyone who wants to promote the estab-

lishment of despotism forcefully reminds us of the terrible crimes of demagogy. It is a very simple technique. So Bonaparte paralyzed every form of resistance to his will by the words: *Do you want me to hand you over to the Jacobins?* And France bowed down before him, no man bold enough to reply to him: *We shall be able to fight the Jacobins and you.* In short, even then he was not liked, only preferred. He almost always presented himself in competition with another cause for alarm, in order to make his power acceptable as a lesser evil. . . .

We cannot watch too attentively for the first symptoms of tyranny; when it has grown to a certain point, there is no more time to stop it. One man sweeps along the will of many individuals of whom the majority, taken separately, wish to be free but who nevertheless surrender because people fear each other and do not dare to speak their thoughts freely. . . .

General Bonaparte decreed a constitution in which there were no safeguards. Besides, he took great care to leave in existence the laws announced during the Revolution, in order to select from this detestable arsenal the weapon that suited him. The special commissions, deportations, exiles, the bondage of the press—these steps unfortunately taken in the name of liberty—were very useful to tyranny. To adopt them, he sometimes advanced reasons of state, sometimes the need of the times, sometimes the acts of his opponents, sometimes the need to maintain tranquillity. Such is the artillery of phrases that supports absolute power, for “emergencies” never end, and the more one seeks to repress by illegal measures the more one creates disaffected people who justify new injustices. The establishment of the rule of law is always put off till tomorrow. This is a vicious circle from which one cannot break out, for the public spirit that is awaited in order to permit liberty can come only from liberty itself. . . .

It was particularly advantageous to Bonaparte’s power that he had to manage only a mass. All individual existence was annihilated by ten years of disorder, and nothing sways people like military success; it takes great power of reason to combat this tendency instead of profiting from it. No one in France could consider his position secure. Men of all classes, ruined or enriched, banished or rewarded, found themselves one by one equally, so to speak, in the hands of power. Bonaparte, who always moved between two opposed interests, took very good care not to put an end to these anxieties by fixed laws that might let everyone know his rights. To one man he returned his property, while another he stripped of his forever. The First Consul reserved to himself the power of determining, under any pretext, the fate of everything and everyone.

Those Frenchmen who sought to resist the ever-increasing power of the First Consul had to invoke liberty to struggle against him

successfully. But at this word the aristocrats and the enemies of the Revolution cried "Jacobinism," thus supporting the tyranny for which they later sought to blame their adversaries. . . .

I sensed more quickly than others—and I pride myself on it—Bonaparte's tyrannical character and intentions. The true friends of liberty are in this respect guided by an instinct that does not deceive them. But my position, at the outset of the Consulate, was made more painful by the fact that respectable society in France thought it saw in Bonaparte the man who had saved them from anarchy or Jacobinism. They therefore vigorously condemned the spirit of opposition I displayed toward him. . . .

Madame de Staël's opposition led to her exile. But even in exile she continued to comment upon Napoleon and upon the rise and finally the decline of his military and political fortunes. In 1813, following the Russian disaster, the allies invaded France, heading for Paris.

From the moment the Allies passed the Rhine and entered France it seemed to me that the prayers of the friends of France must undergo a complete change. I was then in London, and one of the English Cabinet Ministers asked me what I wished for. I ventured to reply that my desire was to see Bonaparte victorious and slain. The English had enough greatness of soul to make it unnecessary for me to conceal this French sentiment from them. Yet I was to learn, in the midst of the transports of joy with which the city of the conquerors reverberated, that Paris was in the power of the Allies. At that moment I felt there was no longer a France: I believed Burke's prediction realized and that where France had existed we should see only an abyss. The Emperor Alexander, the Allies, and the constitutional principles adopted through the wisdom of Louis XVIII banished this gloomy presentiment.

There was, nevertheless, something of grandeur in Napoleon's farewell to his troops and to their eagles, so long victorious. His last campaign had been long and skillful: in short, the fatal magic that bound France's military glory to him was not yet destroyed. Thus the conference at Paris must be blamed for having made his return possible. . . .

Many people like to argue that Bonaparte would still be emperor if he had not attempted the expeditions against Spain or Russia. This opinion pleases the supporters of despotism, who insist that so fine a government could not be overthrown by the very nature of things but only by an accident. I have already said, what observation of France will confirm, that Bonaparte needed war to establish and maintain absolute power. A great nation would not have supported the dull

and degrading burden of despotism if military glory had not ceaselessly moved or exalted the public spirit. . . .

I shall never forget the moment when I learned, from one of my friends the morning of March 6, 1815, that Bonaparte had landed on the French coast. I had the misfortune to foresee at once the consequences of that event—as they have since taken place—and I thought the earth was about to open under me. I said, “There will be no liberty if Bonaparte wins and no national independence if he loses.” Events, it seems to me, have borne out this sad prediction only too well. . . .

. . . Enlightened men could see in Bonaparte nothing but a despot, but by a rather fatal conjunction of circumstances this despot was presented to the nation as the defender of its rights. All the benefits achieved by the Revolution, which France will never willingly give up, were threatened by the endless rashness of the party that wants to repeat the conquest of Frenchmen, as if they were still Gauls. And that part of the nation that most feared the return of the Old Regime thought they saw in Bonaparte a way to save themselves from it. The most fatal association that could overwhelm the friends of liberty was that a despot should join their ranks—should, so to speak, place himself at their head—and that the enemies of every liberal idea should have a pretext for confusing popular violence with the evils of despotism and thus make tyranny appear to be the result of liberty itself. . . . If it was criminal to recall Bonaparte, it was silly to try to disguise such a man as a constitutional monarch. . . .

Whether Napoleon lives or perishes, whether or not he reappears on the continent of Europe, only one reason moves me to speak of him: the ardent wish that the friends of liberty in France completely separate their cause from his and beware of confusing the principles of the Revolution with those of the Imperial *régime*. I believe I have shown that there is no counter-revolution so fatal to liberty as the one he made.

A Modern Napoleon

GEORGES LEFEBVRE

Napoleon has been the most enduringly fascinating figure in modern history, the subject of literally thousands of books—more than 200,000 by some estimates. Recent opinion has tended to divide along precisely the lines that appeared in Napoleon's own time—as suggested in the first two selections of this chapter—either “for” or “against” him, to borrow from the title of a famous book on the

*Napoleonic tradition.*⁹ The following selection is from *Napoleon: From 18 Brumaire to Tilsit 1799–1807*, by the distinguished French historian Georges Lefebvre, considered by many competent critics to have been the best modern scholar of the Napoleonic age. But Lefebvre was also a great authority on the French Revolution, and so we turn to him for his view on the relationship of Napoleon to the Revolution and his answer to the question of whether Napoleon was its child or its betrayer. It is the opinion of Lefebvre that the Revolution had betrayed itself long before Napoleon became its conscious heir; that only in the most elementary sense of its giving him the opportunity to rise to power could Napoleon be considered its offspring; that—as Madame de Staël argued—Napoleon was always the same, from the beginning to the end of his career, an autocrat; and that he did not purify the Revolution but rather manipulated it.

That the French Revolution turned to dictatorship was no accident; it was driven there by inner necessity, and not for the first time either. Nor was it an accident that the Revolution led to the dictatorship of a general. But it so happened that this general was Napoleon Bonaparte, a man whose temperament, even more than his genius, was unable to adapt to peace and moderation. Thus it was an unforeseeable contingency which tilted the scale in favour of “la guerre éternelle.”

For a long time the republicans had wanted to strengthen the central authority. One need only look at the constitutions they gave to the vassal states: in Holland, the members of the Directory controlled the treasury; in Switzerland, they appointed government officials; in Rome, they appointed judges as well. In the Helvetic and Roman Republics every department already possessed a “prefect.” All this is not to mention the Cisalpine Republic, which was Bonaparte’s personal fief. . . . The coup d’état of 18 Fructidor had provided the occasion sought by Sieyès, Talleyrand, and Bonaparte, but they let the opportunity slip. In Year VII, however, they hoped to bring about a new one. Without realizing it, the republicans were giving way to a tendency which, ever since the start of the civil and foreign wars, was pushing the Revolution in the direction of a permanent and all-powerful executive, that is to say toward dictatorship. It was this social revolution that drove the dispossessed nobility far beyond insurrection. Subsidized by enemy gold, it exploited the wartime hardships—that inexhaustible source of discontent—and particularly the monetary and economic crisis, thereby intending to turn the people against the government. The French did not want a return to the Old Regime, but they suffered and they held their leaders responsible for it. At every election the counter-revolution hoped to regain power. It was

⁹Pieter Geyl, *Napoleon: For and Against*, trans. Olive Renier (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1949).

awareness of this danger that led the Mountain¹⁰ in 1793 to declare the Convention in permanent session until the peace. The Thermidorians had intended to restore elective government, but they immediately returned to Jacobin expediency by passing the Decree of the Two-Thirds. Next, the Directory, overwhelmed by the elections of 1797, re-established the dictatorship on 18 Fructidor. Yet as long as the Constitution of Year III continued to exist, this dictatorship, put to the test each year, required a host of violent measures and could never be brought into working order. So it was still necessary to revive the principle of 1793 and invest it with permanence until such time as peace, settled once and for all, would persuade the counter-revolution to accept the new order. It was in this respect that Napoleon's dictatorship became so much a part of the history of the French Revolution. No matter what he may have said or done, neither he nor his enemies were ever able to break this bond, and this was a fact which the European aristocracy understood perfectly well.

In 1799, as in 1793, the Jacobins wished to establish a democratic dictatorship by relying on the Sans-culottes¹¹ to push it through the councils. Taking advantage of the crisis preceding the victory at Zurich, they succeeded in forcing the passage of several revolutionary measures: a compulsory loan, the abolition of exemptions from military service, the law of hostages, a repeal of assignments on public revenues which had been granted to bankers and government contractors, withholdings on the rente and on salaries, and finally, requisitions. These measures constituted a direct attack on bourgeois interests and brought that class to action. Thus it was symbolic that assignments on public revenues were restored the very night of 19 Brumaire. The Idéologues who gathered around Madame de Condorcet at Auteuil or in the salon of Madame de Staël wanted neither a democratic dictatorship nor even a democracy. . . . Madame de Staël expressed their desire: to devise a representative system of government which would assure power to the moneyed and talented "notables." Sieyès, who had become a Director, took his inspiration from the Decree of the Two-Thirds. Together with his friends he wanted to select the membership of the newly constituted bodies which would then expand themselves by co-optation, leaving to the nation only the role of electing candidates. Furthermore, those already in office saw in this plan the chance to keep themselves in power.

The people having been eliminated as an obstacle to the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, only the army remained. The Directory had already sought its help on 18 Fructidor, Year V, and had managed to

¹⁰The popular name given to the radical faction in the Convention.

¹¹Another popular name for the urban proletariat, especially of Paris, who tended

keep the upper hand, despite serious incursions. Now, however, the situation was very different in that steadfast republicans, not royalists, were to be driven out. Only a popular general could have carried it through, and Bonaparte's sudden return destined that it should be he. The will of the nation which was invoked to justify 18 Brumaire played no part in the event. The nation rejoiced at the news that Bonaparte was in France because it recognized an able general; but the Republic had conquered without him, and Masséna's victory¹² had bolstered the reputation of the Directory. Consequently, the responsibility for 18 Brumaire lies on that segment of the republican bourgeoisie called the Brumairians, whose leading light was Sieyès. They had no intention of giving in to Bonaparte, and they chose him only as an instrument of their policy. That they propelled him to power without imposing any conditions, without even first delimiting the fundamental character of the new regime, betrays their incredible mediocrity. Bonaparte did not repudiate the notables, for he too was not a democrat, and their collaboration alone enabled him to rule. But on the evening of 19 Brumaire, after they had hurriedly slapped together the structure of the Provisional Consulate, they should not have harboured any more illusions. The army had followed Bonaparte, and him alone. He was complete master. Regardless of what he and his apologists may have said, his rule was from its origins an absolute military dictatorship. It was Bonaparte alone who would decide the questions on which the fate of France and Europe hinged.

What sort of a man was he? His personality evolved in so singular a manner that it defies portrayal. He appeared first as a studious officer full of dreams, garrisoned at Valence and Auxonne. As a youthful general, on the eve of the battle of Castiglione, he could still hold a council of war. But in the final years as Emperor, he was stupefied with his own omnipotence and was infatuated with his own omniscience. And yet distinctive traits appear throughout his entire career: power could do no more than accentuate some and attenuate others.

Short-legged and small in stature, muscular, ruddy, and still gaunt at the age of thirty, he was physically hardy and fit. His sensitivity and steadiness were admirable, his reflexes quick as lightning, and his capacity for work unlimited. He could fall asleep at will. But we also find the reverse: cold humid weather brought on oppression, coughing spells, dysuria; when crossed he unleashed frightful outbursts of temper; overexertion, despite prolonged hot baths, despite extreme sobriety, despite the moderate yet constant use of coffee and tobacco, occasionally produced brief collapses, even tears. His mind was one of the most perfect that has ever been: his unflinching attention tirelessly swept in facts and ideas which his memory registered and classified;

¹²At Zurich over the Russians.

his imagination played with them freely, and being in a permanent state of concealed tension, it never wearied of inventing political and strategic motifs which manifested themselves in unexpected flashes of intuition like those experienced by poets and mathematicians. This would happen especially at night during a sudden awakening, and he himself referred to it as "the moral spark" and "the after midnight presence of the spirit." This spiritual fervour shone through his glittering eyes and illuminated the face, still "sulphuric" at his rise, of the "sleek-haired Corsican." This is what made him unsociable, and not, as Hippolyte Taine would have us think, some kind of brutality, the consequence of a slightly tarnished *condottiere* being let loose upon the world in all his savagery. He rendered a fair account of himself when he said, "I consider myself a good man at heart," and indeed he showed generosity, and even kindness to those who were close to him. But between ordinary mortals, who hurried through their tasks in order to abandon themselves to leisure or diversion, and Napoleon Bonaparte, who was the soul of effort and concentration, there could exist no common ground nor true community. Ambition—that irresistible impulse to act and to dominate—sprang from his physical and mental state of being. . . .

Ever since his military school days at Brienne, when he was still a poor and taunted foreigner, timid yet bursting with passion, Napoleon drew strength from pride in himself and contempt for others. Destined to become an officer, his instinct to command without having to discuss could not have been better served. Although he might on occasion have sought information or opinion, he alone was master and judge. Bonaparte's natural propensity for dictatorship suited the normal practice of his profession. In Italy and in Egypt he introduced dictatorship into the government. In France he wanted to put himself forward as a civilian, but the military stamp was indelibly there. He consulted often, but he could never tolerate free opposition. More precisely, when faced with a group of men accustomed to discussion, he would lose his composure. This explains his intense hatred of the *Idéologues*. The confused and undisciplined, yet formidable masses inspired in him as much fear as contempt. Regardless of costumes and titles, Bonaparte took power as a general, and as such he exercised it. . . .

. . . Having entered into a life of action, he still remained a thinker. This warrior was never happier than in the silence of his own study, surrounded by papers and documents. In time he became more practical, and he would boast that he had repudiated "ideology." Nevertheless, he was still a typical man of the eighteenth century, a rationalist, a *philosophe*. Far from relying on intuition, he placed his trust in reason, in knowledge, and in methodical effort. . . .

He seemed to be dedicated to a policy of realism in every way, and

And yet he was a realist in execution only. There lived in him an alter-ego which contained certain features of the hero. It seems to have been born during his days at the military academy out of a need to dominate a world in which he felt himself despised. Above all he longed to equal the semi-legendary heroes of Plutarch and Corneille. His greatest ambition was glory. "I live only for posterity," he exclaimed, "death is nothing, but to live defeated and without glory is to die every day." His eyes were fixed on the world's great leaders: Alexander, who conquered the East and dreamed of conquering the world; Caesar, Augustus, Charlemagne—the creators and the restorer of the Roman Empire whose very names were synonymous with the idea of a universal civilization. From these he did not deduce a precise formulation to be used as a rule, a measure, or a condition of political conduct. They were for him examples, which stimulated his imagination and lent an unutterable charm to action. . . . That is why it is idle to seek for limits to Napoleon's policy, or for a final goal at which he would have stopped: there simply was none. . . .

That a mind so capable of grasping reality in certain respects should escape it in others . . . can only be due to Napoleon's origins as much as to his nature. When he first came to France, he considered himself a foreigner. Until the time when he was expelled from Corsica by his compatriots in 1791, his attitude had been one of hostility to the French people. Assuredly he became sufficiently imbued with their culture and spirit to adopt their nationality; otherwise he could never have become their leader. But he lacked the time to identify himself with the French nation and to adopt its national tradition to the point where he would consider its interests as a limitation upon his own actions. Something of the uprooted person remained in him; something of the *déclassé* as well. He was neither entirely a gentleman nor entirely common. He served both the king and the Revolution without attaching himself to either. This was one of the reasons for his success, since he could so easily place himself above parties and announce himself as the restorer of national unity. Yet neither in the Old Regime nor in the new did he find principles which might have served as a norm or a limit. . . .

What about moral limits? In spiritual life he had nothing in common with other men. Even though he knew their passions well and deftly turned them to his own ends, he cared only for those that would reduce men to dependence. He belittled every feeling that elevated men to acts of sacrifice—religious faith, patriotism, love of freedom—because he saw in them obstacles to his own schemes. Not that he was impervious to these sentiments, at least not in his youth, for they readily led to heroic deeds; but fate led him in a different direction and walled him up within himself. In the splendid and terrible isolation of the will to power, measure carries no meaning.

Questions for Review and Study

1. In what ways did Napoleon view himself as the child of the French Revolution?
2. Why did Napoleon, in the end, fail in his imperial military plans?
3. Why was Madame de Staël so bitterly critical of Napoleon?
4. How does Georges Lefebvre interpret Napoleon's relationship to the Revolution?
5. In your view, was Napoleon a child of or a betrayer of the Revolution?

Questions for Comparison

1. Compare the French rulers Louis XIV and Napoleon. How did they variously symbolize French greatness? What were their relations to the rest of Europe? On what authority (ideologically speaking) did these rulers hold power? What social classes stood to gain or lose from their rule? Were they simply products of their times, or did they in some sense create their times by force of character? Who was more successful? What were their respective relations to the French Revolution?
2. Compare Catherine the Great of Russia and Napoleon as rulers. On what authority (ideologically speaking) did these rulers hold power? How did their paths to power constrain their actions once each attained power? What social classes stood to gain or lose by their rule? To what degree might each ruler be judged "enlightened"? Why? Would you describe these rulers as idealistic or pragmatic? Who was more successful?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Napoleon is linked inescapably with both the French Revolution, which created him, and with the nineteenth-century age of revolution, which he created. Thus, the first category of books to be recommended for Napoleon and his age treats this large topic. The best general work is probably *The Age of Revolution* by Erich J. Hobsbawm; it is a book of ideas rather than a factual survey, and the author is interested in the continuing social and cultural trends of the revolutionary age, in which he includes the topic of England and its industrial revolution. Of the same sort is Norman Hampson's *The First European Revolution, 1776–1850*, a brief, attractive survey and analysis that plays down the role of Napoleon in favor of the continuity of the idea of revolution. Donald Sutherland's *France, 1789–1815* is a revisionist social history emphasizing the importance of classes and ideologies across the whole French nation. George Rudé's

comprehensive is Franklin L. Ford's *Europe, 1780-1830*; both are excellent, straightforward accounts.

The outstanding modern work on the French Revolution itself is Georges Lefebvre's two-volume history *The French Revolution*, along with Lefebvre's brilliant analytical work, *The Coming of the French Revolution, 1789*. R. R. Palmer's *The World of the French Revolution* is a highly interpretive, brief, readable, analytical survey, while *The French Revolution* by M. J. Sydenham, also brief, is largely a political history. Alfred Cobban's *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* is a major critical work, revising much of the sociological theorizing about classes that had marked a generation of revolutionary studies. Cobban argues that the land-owning class eventually triumphed in revolutionary France and that in the course of the French Revolution the shift from title to property as the basis for social status was finally made. Norman Hampson's *Social History of the French Revolution* is a briefer and more balanced treatment of the same themes. Two recent revisionist histories of the French Revolution can also be recommended: in *Citizens* Simon Schama stresses the brutality of the revolution, and J. F. Bosher stresses the background forces of the revolution in *The French Revolution*.

Georges Lefebvre is the most important authority on Napoleon, as he is on the Revolution. The first volume of his *Napoleon* is excerpted in this chapter. J. C. Herold's *The Age of Napoleon* is not only a lush and beautiful book but an interpretive study; Herold is not an admirer of Napoleon and considers him at the best an ungrateful child of the Revolution. On the other hand, Robert B. Holtman's *The Napoleonic Revolution* sees Napoleon as a dramatic and important innovator in a score of fields, thus preserving the best gains of the Revolution. Felix M. Markham's *Napoleon and the Awakening of Europe* and *Napoleon I* are good short biographies. Several special studies are also recommended. For military history see the good, comprehensive, straightforward account *The Campaigns of Napoleon* by David G. Chandler and Owen Connelly's *Blundering to Glory*, a brilliant study of Napoleon as a strategic improviser. For specific studies of two crucial campaigns, see *Waterloo* by Christopher L. Hibbert and *1812* by Richard K. Riehn. A related work is the dramatic and exciting *The Hundred Days*, by Edith Saunders. The best book on Napoleon's army is *Swords around a Throne* by John R. Elting. See also the recent book by Brent Nosworthy: *With Musket, Cannon, and Sword*. Geoffrey Ellis's *The Napoleonic Empire* is an attractive, brief survey of the main institutions of Napoleon's imperial state.

R. F. Delderfield deals with the last years of Napoleon's military career in *The Retreat from Moscow* and *Imperial Sunset*. David Hamilton-Williams's book *The Fall of Napoleon* is also highly recommended, as is John Strawson's *The Duke and the Emperor*, on Wellington and Napoleon. An extremely interesting work on a subtopic of Napoleon is *Bonaparte in Egypt* by J. Christopher Herold. Pieter Geyl's *Napoleon* is a famous book of Napoleonic historiography. Finally, highly recommended is the luminous

- biography of Madame de Staël by J. Christopher Herold, *Mistress to an Age*. (Titles with an asterisk are out of print.)
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