Feature

The Resistible Rise of Napoleon Bonaparte

Malcolm Crook *examines the remarkable ascent to power of Napoleon at the turn of the nineteenth century*

The great Bicentenary of the French Revolution of 1789 may be drawing to a close, but that of Napoleon is about to commence. So now is an opportune moment to present a critical overview of his advent to power at the turn of the nineteenth century, before the commemorative bandwagon really starts to roll and we are treated to endless repetitions of the Napoleonic myth. Bonaparte (or Buonaparte, to employ the original formulation of the Corsican soldier's family name, which he altered in 1796) is often presented as the saviour of a France that had become trapped in a revolutionary *cul de sac*, from which there was no escape. Here is a typical example:

> What flourished in France when Bonaparte took control with the *coup d'état* of Brumaire (November 1799)? Almost nothing. For ten years, factional strife and foreign and civil war had forced a dreary succession of governments to live hand to mouth... the country was divided and devastated, only a fresh, strong man could put France back on its feet.[1]

Such hyperbole might be expected in popular accounts of Napoleon's rise to fame in late revolutionary France. Yet the legend of his political ascent is frequently echoed in studies which assume a more objective or critical stance. Three main strands of the myth will be subjected to critical scrutiny here. First, the blackening of the republican system overthrown by Bonaparte's *coup*, the regime of the Directory. Second, the assumption that France was awaiting a hero and received Napoleon with open arms. Third, the notion that the saviour quickly resolved the problems facing the country and equally rapidly consolidated his power. All three aspects of the legend must be seriously questioned, if not entirely overturned, though much work remains to be done on the relatively neglected topic of Napoleonic France. We must hope that the Bicentenary of Bonaparte will stimulate some historical reflection as well as the inevitable adulatory commemoration.

A Much-Maligned Directory

Sandwiched between the reign of Terror and the dictatorship of Napoleon, the regime of the five-man Directory which ruled France from 1795 to 1799 has frequently been dismissed as a colourless episode separating two heroic epochs.[2] Many histories of the Revolution end with the fall of Robespierre in 1794, when the pygmies allegedly took over from the titans to embark on a lacklustre interlude aptly incarnated in the unprincipled person of Paul Barras. This longest-serving member of the executive Directory was paid off by the conspirators who overthrew the liberal Republic in 1799 and promptly retired to the country to enjoy his ill-gotten gains. Meanwhile, the veteran politicians who occupied the two-chamber legislature, the so-called 'perpetuals', seemed to be more concerned with protecting their own interests than restoring those of the people.

In fact, the Directory was full of achievements, both beyond the frontiers and within France itself, and of late these have been receiving some of the recognition they deserve.[3] The territory of the First Republic was significantly expanded by the addition of annexed departments along the eastern frontiers of France and the creation of a series of 'sister' republics in Holland, Switzerland and Italy. The original eighty-three departments had now grown to almost 100 (see map). At home the administration was strengthened by the attachment of central agents, called *commissaires*, to the departments, where they acted as forerunners of the famous Napoleonic prefects. Meanwhile, the chaotic finances and fiscal policies of the revolutionary decade were radically overhauled, albeit at the price of repudiating much of the national debt. The much-derided Constitution of 1795, which sought to balance executive and legislature, was based on a broad male franchise, introduced annual elections and stimulated the rise of competitive politics in France.[4] This liberal regime lasted for four years, longer than any of its predecessors, and it represented the historic goal of the French Revolution, which was eventually realised with the Third Republic a century later.

The difficulties encountered by this constitutional experiment can be explained by the circumstances in which it took place, as much as by any inherent flaws in the political system itself. The aftermath of the Terror had inevitably left the body politic deeply scarred. There were many sectarian scores to be settled between those responsible for the violence, on the one hand and their victims, on the other. The absence of co-operation between previously warring factions was scarcely surprising; counter-terror succeeded terror. This failure to accommodate political opposition was compounded by the difficulty of compromising on the religious question; the formal separation of church and state in 1795 failed to resolve divisions among the clergy and the majority of practising Catholics remained deeply disaffected. Faced with successive challenges from royalists, who were seeking to restore the Bourbon dynasty, and radicals, who wanted a more democratic Republic, the executive Directory was naturally reluctant to contemplate the prospect of electoral defeat. However, its response in 1798, when annulment of unfavourable returns was promised in advance of the elections, was not calculated to inspire confidence in the regime. When

Bonaparte claimed that liberty was dead before his arrival in power, he could point to a series of *coups* that had already violated the constitution.

As a result of this continuing instability, the Directory increasingly relied upon the army to maintain internal control.[5] Martial law and military tribunals were routinely employed in an effort to restore order. The politicians also depended upon the soldiers to sustain the endless war abroad and, though the continental campaigns waged between 1796 and 1797 proved extremely successful, there was always the prospect of defeat in the long run. Beyond the frontiers the generals acted independently and commanded a professional army that looked to them for a livelihood. A galaxy of talented leaders had emerged from the ranks and, despite his heroic exploits in Italy, Bonaparte was not untypical in an exceptional era; Generals Hoche, Moreau and Masséna spring instantly to mind. Other generals were equally ambitious as Bonaparte, who was sent to Egypt mainly to remove him from political contention. Ironically the Egyptian expedition revived the anti-French continental coalition in 1798 and prompted the military crisis of 1799 that finally brought the Directory crashing down - to Napoleon's benefit.[6]

Yet at the moment this reversal occurred, the political system was showing some signs of new life. The elections of 1799 were poorly attended in most parts of France, but this time the results were allowed to stand without interference from the executive Directory. Legislation was under consideration to curb government manipulation of the electoral process and institute greater freedom of the press and association. To be sure, it was not an ideal moment to resurrect the liberal experiment. These developments raised fears of a revival of jacobin radicalism and coincided with royalist uprisings in western and south-western France. The net result was to encourage those who wished to replace the Directory with a more authoritarian system to begin plotting in earnest. Chief among these so-called 'revisionists', was Sieyès, author of the famous pamphlet *What is the Third Estate?*, which had launched the Revolution of 1789. He had been profoundly wounded by the refusal of the constitution-makers to take his proposals into account in 1795 and felt vindicated by the difficulties which had ensued.

A Close-Run Coup

In 1799 Sieyès became a member of the executive Directory and, with fellow Director Ducos, he began conspiring to subvert the regime from within.[7] He was able to attract the support of numerous leading politicians such as Fouché, Minister of Police, and Cambacérès, Minister of Justice. Above all, he required military support to maintain security while he persuaded the legislature to agree to his proposals for immediate constitutional reform. His gaze initially fell on General Joubert, who was inconveniently killed in Italy at the battle of Novi in August. While Sieyès was seeking an alternative, Bonaparte unexpectedly came back to France, having abandoned his unfortunate army in Egypt without official authorisation. Nonetheless, the returning general was so popular that he could not be ignored, and through the mediation of the ever opportunistic, former bishop Talleyrand, the politician and the soldier were brought together as co-conspirators.

Though the tide of war was turning and internal security was being restored, the moment was ripe for a successful plot. A profound sense of insecurity prevailed and it was relatively easy to demand emergency measures to counteract an insurrection that was allegedly brewing in the capital. Yet the *coup d'état* of 9-10 November (18-19 Brumaire of the Year VIII according to the revolutionary calendar then in use) nearly miscarried. The concern to preserve a facade of legality, by seeking the collaboration of the legislature in revising the Constitution (in defiance of elaborate and extremely lengthy procedures for doing so), led the conspirators to envisage a two-day affair. This ran the risk of allowing opposing forces the opportunity to organise resistance.

The first stage of the plot, which involved removing the

Bonaparte's coup d'état 19 Brumaire VIII (10th November 1799) Council of the Five-Hundred at Saint-Cloud. Bonaparte is the third figure from right.
The British Museum

legislature from Paris to the palace of Saint-Cloud on the western outskirts of the capital, as well as placing Bonaparte in charge of security measures, was successfully engineered on the morning of 18 Brumaire. The Directors Sieyès and Ducos then resigned, prevailed upon Barras to follow suit and took their remaining two colleagues into preventive custody. A new executive would now be needed to govern the country and this would serve as the pretext for its remodelling. However, on the decisive second day, 19 Brumaire, the element of surprise had been lost and concerted opposition to any change of regime was mounted when the deputies reassembled at Saint-Cloud.

Debate on a replacement for the executive Directory proceeded much too slowly for Bonaparte, who had nothing but contempt for 'parliamentary windbags'. He soon lost his composure and rashly marched into the assembly halls. He was badly received in the otherwise sympathetic Council of Elders, where he made an ill-judged speech that betrayed his habit of commanding, rather than seeking to persuade:

> Citizen Representatives, the situation in which you find yourselves is far from normal; you are sitting on top of a volcano. Permit me to speak with the frankness of a soldier...time is short; it is essential that you act quickly...Together let us save the cause of liberty and equality.

Despite the uproar, Bonaparte compounded his initial mistake by venturing into the much less kindly disposed Council of Five Hundred. Here his mere appearance provoked a tumult. Cries of 'Down with the Dictator' encouraged some deputies to surge angrily forward. Far from displaying the *sang froid* depicted in later illustrations of the scene, Bonaparte nearly fainted in the crush, though he was later able to turn the incident to his advantage by presenting it as an attempted assassination. A proposal was made that the general be declared an outlaw. It was left to his younger brother Lucien, who was president of the Five Hundred, to save the day by rallying the troops and ordering them to clear the hall. Many deputies escaped through the windows and sought refuge in the gardens, scattering their regalia in the process.

Representatives who had resisted royal bayonets at Versailles in 1789 succumbed to force a decade later at Saint-Cloud. A number were subsequently rounded up and meekly gave their blessing to the establishment of a provisional three-man Consulate, which would provide an interim government while a parliamentary commission drew up a fresh constitution. Sieyès was named consul together with the innocuous Ducos and, of course, Bonaparte. Sieyès had dearly wished to avoid recourse to arms so that he could stay firmly in control of the *coup*. Already Napoleon was revealing alarming political ambition though, as yet, the real victor of the murky events of Brumaire, the aptly-named month of fog, remained unclear.

A Gradually-Established Dictatorship

The outcome of this latest twist in the revolutionary tale was by no means a forgone conclusion. The conspirators had taken no chances in the capital, where the militant Parisian crowd had long been crushed, but there was some opposition from jacobins in the provinces. News of the *coup* was greeted with apathy rather than enthusiasm, though in a series of carefully prepared wall posters the provisional government promised to maintain the Republic on the basis of 'liberty, equality and the representative system' . Presented with a *fait*

accompli, most people preferred to wait and see exactly who and what would emerge from the wreckage of the unpopular Directory.

Bonaparte's own proclamation was a masterpiece of propaganda in which he declared himself a 'soldier of liberty, a citizen devoted to the Republic'. In spite of the efforts of agitators who were seeking to profit from the constitutional disarray, he had acted as a saviour who 'refused to be the man of any party'. The theme of Bonaparte standing above the sordid political arena, serving the country as a whole rather than any particular faction, was a constant refrain in the addresses that followed. There was naturally no hint of any dictatorial intentions and the supremacy which Napoleon subsequently asserted has been referred to as tantamount to a further *coup*.

In the struggle for power that ensued after Brumaire, Sieyès was elbowed aside by the young general who had only recently celebrated his thirtieth birthday. Bonaparte was determined to emerge as the leading player and was named as First Consul for a term of ten years when new political arrangements were enshrined in the Constitution of the Year VIII in December 1799. The sword proved mightier than the pen. Sieyès revealed his political ineptitude by failing to produce a detailed constitutional draft, and his suggestion that Bonaparte serve as a 'Grand Elector' provoked an exasperated, and crudely worded response from the general to the effect that he had no desire to become a mere figurehead. Though the new system maintained three consuls at the helm, there was no doubt that Napoleon was first among unequals and when asked what was in the constitution, the standard response was: 'There is Bonaparte'.

Cambacérès, the former minister, and Lebrun, who had served the old-regime monarchy, were also appointed as consuls. Sieyès had to content himself with the consolation prize of heading the new Senate (which was to serve as a constitutional watchdog). This offered him patronage over the composition of two parliamentary chambers, the Legislative Body and the Tribunate, where many deputies who had supported the *coup* were to find a new home.[8] The ultimate reward for Sieyès himself, rather ironically for such a notorious scourge of the nobility, was the title of count in Napoleon's Empire. The representative assemblies and the byzantine electoral process that Sieyès imposed on Bonaparte in 1800 were little more than window dressing. Real power resided with the First Consul and the Council of State he appointed to advise him.

Indeed, Bonaparte cleverly appealed over the heads of the politicians to the French people by submitting the new constitution to a popular vote or plebiscite. This was a device employed on two previous occasions during the Revolution, but it was a gamble that nearly came to grief at the turn of 1800, since relatively few of the adult-male electorate bothered to cast an opinion. Lucien Bonaparte, who had been made Minister of the Interior, came to his brother's rescue again, this time by grossly inflating the number of voters. As a result, he was able to announce a respectable turnout of almost 50 per cent with few negative votes. Only recently has the fraud come to light.[9] To be sure, in the midst of an economic crisis and general insecurity, and in the depths of winter, was not the best time to open the polls. Yet the relatively low level of participation suggests that most Frenchmen (women were not allowed to vote) were still reserving judgement on the new regime.

Evidently the Bonapartist regime was *far* from being firmly established. Many thorny problems from the 1790s remained to be resolved. Royalists were confidently predicting the general's imminent downfall in the spring of 1800, but they were to be disappointed in their hopes for a restoration. The return of the monarchy under an uncompromising Louis XVIII (younger brother of the last Bourbon, Louis XVI) would not be welcomed by wealthy property-owners, those 'blocks of granite' on whom Bonaparte aimed to found his dictatorship.[10] On the other hand, these 'notables' were not averse to swallowing a dose of political authoritarianism, provided their material interests were defended from the threat of radical republicanism.

There was certainly no shortage of repressive measures, which included the escalation of the campaign against peasant insurrection, especially in western France, and the use of military tribunals in the war against widespread brigandage.[11] Nor was Bonaparte squeamish when it came to liquidating implacable enemies like the jacobins (who were blamed for an abortive bomb plot, the 'infernal machine', in 1800), or royalists (whose plots provoked the judicial assassination of the Duc d'Enghien in 1804). The press was curbed and administrative controls were clamped on with the nomination of prefects and mayors to head departments and towns in the provinces. Yet the Consulate sought to reconcile as well as repress. Overtures were soon made to political exiles (the *émigrés*) and dissident clergy, two substantial groups whose disaffection constituted a formidable obstacle to the consolidation of civil peace.

This package of stick and carrot was topped by two strokes of brilliance: victory in war and a religious settlement. As events would prove, whatever Bonaparte's achievements at home - and they were substantial - his position ultimately depended upon success abroad. This was immediately evident in the spring of 1800, when campaigning in the war of the Second Anti-French Coalition reopened. A daring crossing of the Alps surprised the Austrian foe in northern Italy, but the French were almost defeated at Marengo, on the plains of Lombardy. It was General Desaix who saved the day for France, but he died in the battle, leaving a relieved Bonaparte to exploit the triumph in one of his famous military dispatches. To 'lie like a bulletin' became a favourite expression during the decade that followed, but for the moment Bonaparte was secure; as François Furet has put it, "Marengo, far more than Brumaire, was the true coronation of his power."[12]

After Marengo serious negotiations began to end the schism between church and Revolution. Pius VII had become Pope just as Bonaparte was seizing power in France and, like the general, he was anxious to find a solution.[13] For the past decade the revolutionaries had studiously ignored the Papacy in their dealings with the church, but Bonaparte adopted a robustly pragmatic approach and Pius was prepared to accept the extremely hard bargain that was offered to him. The terms of the settlement included state nomination to clerical posts (not for nothing were the bishops to be known as 'prefects in purple', and priests 'mayors in black') and an acknowledgement by the church that its former property, which had been sold in the 1790s, was lost forever.

Pius had paid a high price for the restoration of Catholicism in France, but it is worth stressing the risks that Bonaparte took. Anticlericalism was deeply ingrained in the army of the Republic, and one general cynically remarked that thousands had died in vain in the attempt to destroy religious mummery.

This explains why a Concordat that was signed in the summer of 1801 was only unveiled once European peace was proclaimed after the Treaty of Amiens with Britain in 1802. Repose from war for the first time in a decade was overwhelmingly popular and a propitious moment for the literal resurrection of the French Catholic church on Easter Day 1802.

With the return of both internal and external peace, the way was clear for Bonaparte's accretion of personal power in the Consulate for Life. Long before the expiry of his original term of office, Bonaparte was granted life-time tenure and the right to nominate a successor by the submissive Senate. On this occasion the accompanying referendum revealed much more solid and widespread support for the regime. Opposition was scant and almost half the registered voters delivered a positive verdict, though in truth they had little alternative but to recognise this latest *coup d'état*. Still, in the brief interval before war resumed with a vengeance, the reconstruction of France proceeded apace. Legislation passed during this second phase of the Consulate included the great Law Code, or Code *Napoléon*, which maintained equality before the law, despite its authoritarian and patriarchal provisions.

It is unlikely that Bonaparte had any fixed plans for further aggrandisement of his political status, though he had moved into the Tuileries palace as early as 1800 and his effigy was now appearing on coins. Opposition to any kind of monarchical system remained strong, not least in the army, and Josephine was unable to provide him with an heir. The resumption of war in 1803, however, revived the dreaded spectre of the First Consul's demise on the battlefield and the resurgence of royalist plots offered a convenient pretext to create the Empire. The requisite constitutional arrangements were once again submitted to the people and then consecrated with great pomp and splendour at the great cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris on 2 December 1804. Emperor Napoleon, as he now became, crowned himself; it was the supreme gesture of the self-made man who now exercised far more power than the kings of old. Though it would be wrong to posit a wholesale return to the *ancien régime* in the wake of this event, the effective end of the Republic is a convenient point at which to place the termination of the French Revolution.

Relatively little attention has been paid to ending, rather than beginning revolutions, yet the former is a much more onerous task, as even Napoleon was to discover. He succeeded in restoring stability to France and had many achievements to his credit. Yet the attempt to establish a fresh dynasty in post-revolutionary France would ultimately founder and Bonaparte eventually left the country in 1815 smaller than he had found it in 1799. Certainly civil liberty was a notable casualty of his dictatorial regime, and while he had cast a solid social and institutional mould, the turbulent quest for political freedom would remain the hallmark of nineteenth-century France. Bonaparte's remarkable but resistible rise to power proved to be a significant turning point in French history, but it was not to be an enduring one.

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Further Reading

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