

Napoleon Bonaparte: An Assessment by Historians & Contemporaries

Document 1

There is thus no doubt about the interpretation to be given to the historic role of Napoleon Bonaparte. For the rest of the world, indeed, he remained the fearsome propagator of the Revolution, or the admirable instrument of reason governing: the world, of progress of the spirit in its long "discourse with time" (Hegel). But for France? . . . Bonaparte belongs to the Revolution, surely, in matters that seemed irreversible at the time— civil equality, the destruction of feudalism, the ruin of the privileged position of the Catholic Church. As for the rest, the enjoyment of liberties, the form of political institutions, there had been since 1789 so much instability, so many contradictions between grand principles and the practice of governments, so much persistent uncertainty on the outcome of the war and the unity of the nation, that the field lay open for a strong man who, on condition of preserving the essential conquests of the Revolution, would do something new in the matter of government and refuse to be embarrassed by scruples. By anchoring France securely to the shores that the Constituent Assembly had been unveiling to leave, Bonaparte accomplished somewhat late in the day that "revolution from above" of which the old monarchy had been incapable. The political trade-off was a certain number of amputations of the immediate Revolutionary inheritance, a few backward movements, and disconcerting borrowings from the Old Regime. In a sense, the dynamism of Bonaparte and his rigorous administration revived the experiment of enlightened despotism, somewhat belatedly, since in the setting of Western Europe it was already a bit out of date. . . .

It was his political genius, as it is generally agreed to call it, to combine his own clear and strongly held personal ideas and convictions, reinforced by his great individual prestige, with a sure sense of the necessary and the possible in revolutionary France—after ten years of revolution. "My policy is to govern men as the great number wish to be governed. That, I think, is the way to recognize the sovereignty of the people." While implacably suppressing the most actively opposed minorities, he overcame the apathy and the wait-and-see attitude of the majority of the French. In matters of social hierarchy and the administrative system he forced upon the French, who from citizens were soon to become subjects again, a coherent construction which he intended to be permanent, and which reflected his taste for uniformity, symmetry and efficiency, the signs of a rational organization in which a single mind transmitted impulses to the most distant members. What we see as rigid or even oppressive in the survivals of the Napoleonic system were at the time the source of its strength, making of it a model to be envied, and one of unequaled modernity.

SECONDARY SOURCE: Louis Bergeron, *France Under Napoleon*, 1981.

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Napoleon himself believed that his work was a kind of crowning of the Revolution, and he was remarkably honest about his friendship with Robespierre's brother. He defended Robespierre from the charge of being bloodthirsty; he respected him as a man of probity. Napoleon would never have imagined that his own career could have flourished as it did without the surgery performed on French society by the Revolution. He was born in Corsica of poor, proud, petty-noble parents, and before the Revolution he could not possibly have risen above the rank of captain in the French army. Also, he had read Rousseau and sympathized with much of the Jacobin philosophy.

Napoleon had two different aspects. He believed in the overthrow of the old aristocracy of privilege; on the other hand, he believed in strong government—and he learned both of these beliefs from the Revolution. He was both an authoritarian and an egalitarian. Yet, admittedly little of this seems to fit the man

who created a new aristocracy, who prided himself on being the son-in-law of Francis of Austria, referred to his late "brother" Louis XVI, and aspired to found a new imperial dynasty.

However, if we judge Napoleon on what he actually did and not only on those things that are usually remembered (despotism and foreign conquest), we must concede that his armies "liberalized" the constitutions of many European countries. They overthrew the aristocratic system in Italy and Germany, and even, to some extent, in Poland and Spain. A great many European liberals rallied to Napoleon's banners, particularly where French administration was at its best (as under Napoleon's brother Jerome in Westphalia). Napoleon's armies did bring many of the ideals of the Revolution to Europe: the basic ideas of the overthrow of aristocratic privilege, of a constitution, of the *Code Napoléon* (which was a codification of the laws of the French Revolution). In this sense Napoleon was a revolutionary. He turned his back on revolution to the extent that he was authoritarian and contemptuous of "the little man," but certain important accomplishments of the Revolution—peasant ownership of land free from feudal obligations, expropriation of the possessions of the Church and of the *émigré* nobility—were retained and even extended beyond France's borders. Napoleon was indeed a military despot, but he did not destroy the work of the Revolution; in a sense, in a wider European context, he rounded off its work.

SECONDARY SOURCE: Georges Rudé, 1971.

Document 3

First, women acquired the nationality of their husbands upon marriage. This made a woman's relationship to the state an indirect one because it was dependent on her husbands. Second, a woman had to reside where her husband desired. Women could not participate in lawsuits or serve as witnesses in court or as witnesses to civil acts such as births, deaths, and marriages. Such a reduction in woman's civil status enhanced that of the individual male. Moreover, the Code reduced, if not eliminated, male accountability for sexual acts and thrust it squarely on women. For example, men were no longer susceptible to paternity suits or legally responsible for the support of illegitimate children. Women were weakened economically if they bore illegitimate children, whereas men were not so affected if they fathered them. Finally, female adultery was punished by imprisonment and fines unless the husband relented and took his wife back. Men, however, suffered no such sanctions unless they brought their sexual partner into the home. The sexual behavior of women was open to scrutiny and prescribed by law, whereas that of men, almost without exception, had no criminal aspect attached to it. Thus male sexuality was accepted with few limitations, but women's was only acceptable if it remained within strict domestic boundaries. The Napoleonic Code institutionalized the republican responsibility of women to generate virtue—a term that began to acquire sexual overtones to its civic definition.

The Napoleonic Code also defined the space women would occupy in the new regime as marital, maternal, and domestic—all public matters would be determined by men. This circumscription was made more effective by the way the property law undercut the possibilities for women's economic independence and existence in a world beyond the home. In general, a woman had no control over property. Even if she was married under a contract that ensured a separate accounting of her dowry, her husband still had administrative control of funds. This administrative power of the husband and father replaced arbitrary patriarchal rule and was more in tune with modern ideas of government. Instead of serving the king's whim, governmental officials served the best interests of the nation just as the father increased the well-being of the family. This kind of economic control of women held in all classes. Women's wages went to their husbands, and market women and others engaged in business could not do so without permission from their husbands. Once a woman gained permission she did acquire some kind of legal status, in that a business woman could be sued. On the other hand, she had no control over profits—these always passed to her husband, and court records demonstrate the continuing enforcement of this kind of control. Moreover, the husband's right to a business woman's property meant that the property passed to his descendants rather than hers. All of these provisions meant that, in the strictest sense, women could not act freely or independently.

The Napoleonic Code influenced many legal systems in Europe and the New World and set the terms for the treatment of women on a widespread basis. Establishing male power by transferring autonomy and economic goods from women to men, the Code organized gender roles for more than a century. "From the

way the Code treats women, you can tell it was written by men," so older women reacted to the new decree. Women's publications protested the sudden repression after a decade of more equitable laws. Even in the 1820s, books explaining the Code to women always recognized their anger. The justification for the Codes provisions involved reminders about men's chivalrous character and women's weakness. Arguments were based on nature both to invoke the equality of all men and to reinforce the consequences of women's supposed physical inferiority. Looking at nature, one writer saw in terms of gender mans "greater strength, his propensity to be active and assertive in comparison to woman's weakness, lack of vigor and natural modesty." At the time the Code was written, the codifiers were looking at nature in two ways. In theorizing about men alone, nature was redolent of abstract rights. As far as women were concerned, however, nature became empirical in that women had less physical stature than men. Although short men were equal to tall men, women were simply smaller than men and thus were unequal.

According to jurists, therefore, women needed protection, and this protection was to be found within the domicile. The law, they maintained, still offered women protection from individual male brutality, in the rare cases when that might occur. Legislators thus used the law officially to carve out a private space for women in which they had no rights. At the same time, law codes were supposed to protect women from the abuses allowed in the first place. The small number of abuses that might result were not seen as significant drawbacks by the jurists. They saw the Code as "insuring the safety of patrimonies and restoring order in families." It mattered little to them that the old regime carried over for women in the form of an "estate"—a term that indicated an unchangeable lifetime situation into which people were born and would always remain. Estates had been abolished for men in favor of mobility, but it continued for women.

By the time the Napoleonic Code went into effect, little remained of liberal revolutionary programs for women except the provisions for equal inheritance by sisters and brothers. The Code cleared the way for the rule of property and for individual triumph. It ushered in an age of mobility, marked by the rise of the energetic and heroic. The Code gave women little room for that kind of acquisitiveness or for heroism. Instead, women's realm was to encompass virtue, reproduction, and family.

SECONDARY SOURCE: Bonnie G. Smith, *Changing Lives: Women in European History Since 1700*, 1989.

Document 4

I can understand how it was that men worn out by the turmoil of the Revolution, and afraid of that liberty which had long been associated with death, looked for repose under the dominion of an able ruler on whom fortune was seemingly revolved to smile. I can conceive that they regarded his elevation as a degree of destiny and fondly believed that in the irrevocable they should find peace. I may confidently assert that those persons believed quite sincerely that Bonaparte, whether as consul or emperor, would exert his authority to oppose the intrigue of faction and would save us from the perils of anarchy.

None dared to utter the word "republic," so deeply had the Terror stained that name; and the government of the Directory had perished in the contempt with which its chiefs were regarded. The return of the Bourbons could only be brought about by the aid of a revolution; and the slightest disturbance terrified the French people, in whom enthusiasm of every kind seemed dead. Besides, the men in whom they had trusted had one after the other deceived them; and as, this time, they were yielding to force, they were at least certain that they were not deceiving themselves.

The belief, or rather the error, that only despotism could at that epoch maintain order in France was very widespread. It became the mainstay of Bonaparte; and it is due to him to say that he also believed it. The factions played into his hands by imprudent attempts which he turned to his own advantage. He had some grounds for his belief that he was necessary; France believed it, too; and he even succeeded in persuading foreign sovereigns that he constituted a barrier against republican influences, which, but for him, might spread widely. At the moment when Bonaparte placed the imperial crown upon his head there was not a king in Europe who did not believe that he wore his own crown more securely because of that event. Had the new emperor granted a liberal constitution, the peace of nations and of kings might really have been forever secured.

SOURCE: Memoirs of Madame de Remusat, early 19c.

Document 5

To date from the publication of the present decree, feudal rights are abolished in Spain.

All personal obligations, all exclusive fishing rights and other rights of similar nature on the coast or on rivers and streams, all feudal monopolies (banalities) of ovens, mills, and inns are suppressed. It shall be free to every one who shall conform to the laws to develop his industry without restraint.

The tribunal of the Inquisition is abolished, as inconsistent with the civil sovereignty and authority.

The property of the Inquisition shall be sequestered and fall to the Spanish state, to serve as security for the bonded debt.

Considering that the members of the various monastic orders have increased to an undue degree and that, although a certain number of them are useful in assisting the ministers of the altar in the administration of the sacraments, the existence of too great a number interferes with the prosperity of the state, we have decreed and do decree as follows:

The number of convents now in existence in Spain shall be reduced to a third of their present number. This reduction shall be accomplished by uniting the members of several convents of the same order into one.

From the publication of the present decree, no one shall be admitted to the novitiate or permitted to take the monastic vow until the number of the religious of both sexes has been reduced to one third of that now in existence. . . .

All regular ecclesiastics who desire to renounce the monastic life and live as secular ecclesiastics are at liberty to leave their monasteries. . . .

In view of the fact that the institution which stands most in the way of the internal prosperity of Spain is that of the customs lines separating the provinces, we have decreed and do decree what follows:

To date from January 1 next, the barriers existing between the provinces shall be suppressed. The custom houses shall be removed to the frontiers and there established.

SOURCE: Napoleon's Imperial Decree at Madrid, December 4, 1808.

Document 6

The internal situation of France is today as calm as it has ever been in the most peaceful periods. There is no agitation to disturb the public tranquility, no suggestion of those crimes which recall the Revolution. Everywhere useful enterprises are in progress, and the general improvements, both public and private, attest the universal confidence and sense of security. . . .

A plot conceived by an implacable government was about to replunge France into the abyss of civil war and anarchy. The discovery of this horrible crime stirred all France profoundly, and anxieties that had scarcely been calmed again awoke. Experience has taught that a divided power in the state is impotent and at odds with itself. It was generally felt that if power was delegated for short periods only, it was so uncertain as to discourage any prolonged undertakings or wide-reaching plans. If vested in an individual for life, it would lapse with him, and after him would prove a source of anarchy and discord. It was clearly seen that for a great nation the only salvation lies in hereditary power, which can alone assure a continuous political life which may endure for generations, even for centuries.

The Senate, as was proper, served as the organ through which this general apprehension found expression. The necessity of hereditary power in a state as vast as France had long been perceived by the First Consul. He had endeavored in vain to avoid this conclusion; but the public solicitude and the hopes of our enemies emphasized the importance of his task, and he realized that his death might ruin his whole work. Under such circumstances, and with such a pressure of public opinion, there was no alternative left to the First Consul. He resolved, therefore, to accept for himself, and two of his brothers after him, the burden imposed by the exigencies of the situation.

After prolonged consideration, repeated conferences with the members of the Senate, discussion in

the councils, and the suggestions of the most prudent advisers, a series of provisions was drawn up which regulate the succession to the imperial throne. These provisions were decreed by a *senatus consultus* of the 28th Floreal last. The French people, by a free and independent expression, then manifested its desire that the imperial dignity should pass down in a direct line through the legitimate or adopted descendants of Napoleon Bonaparte, or through the legitimate descendants of Joseph Bonaparte, or of Louis Bonaparte.

From this moment Napoleon was, by the most unquestioned of titles, emperor of the French. No other act was necessary to sanction his right and consecrate his authority. But he wished to restore in France the ancient forms and recall those institutions which divinity itself seems to have inspired. He wished to impress the seal of religion itself upon the opening of his reign. The head of the Church, in order to give the French a striking proof of his paternal affection, consented to officiate at this August ceremony. What deep and enduring impressions did this leave on the mind of Napoleon and in the memory of the nation! What thoughts for future races! What a subject of wonder for all Europe!

In the midst of this pomp, and under the eye of the Eternal, Napoleon pronounced the inviolable oath which assures the integrity of the empire, the security of property, the perpetuity of institutions, the respect for Law, and the happiness of the nation. The oath of Napoleon shall be forever the terror of the enemies of France. If our borders are attacked, it will be repeated at the head of our armies, and our frontiers shall never more fear foreign invasion.

SOURCE: Napoleon Bonaparte, December, 1804.

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Answer: Christians owe to the princes who govern them, and we in particular owe to Napoleon I, our emperor, love, respect, obedience, fidelity, military service, and the taxes levied for the preservation and defense of the empire and of his throne. We also owe him fervent prayers for his safety and for the spiritual and temporal prosperity of the state.

Question: *Why are we subject to all these duties toward our emperor?*

Answer: First, because God, who has created empires and distributes them according to his will, has, by loading our emperor with gifts both in peace and in war, established him as our sovereign and made him the agent of his power and his image on earth. To honor and serve our emperor is therefore to honor and serve God himself. Secondly, because our Lord Jesus Christ himself, both by his teaching and his example, has taught us what we owe to our sovereign. Even at his very birth he obeyed the edict of Caesar Augustus; he paid the established tax; and while he commanded us to render to God those things which belong to God, he also commanded us to render unto Caesar those things which are Caesar's.

Question: *Are there not special motives which should attach us more closely to Napoleon I, our emperor?*

Answer: Yes, for it is he whom God has raised up in trying times to reestablish the public worship of the holy religion of our fathers and to be its protector; he has reestablished and preserved public order by his profound and active wisdom; he defends the state by his mighty arm; he has become the anointed of the Lord by the consecration which he has received from the sovereign pontiff, head of the Church universal.

Question: *What must we think of those who are neglecting their duties toward our emperor?*

Answer: According to the apostle Paul, they are resisting the order established by God himself, and render themselves worthy of eternal damnation.

SOURCE: An excerpt from *The Imperial Catechism*, April, 1806.

Document 8



SOURCE: "Napoleon Crossing the Alps," by Jacques-Louis David, 1801.

Document 9



SOURCES: *Napoleon I* by Baron Francois Gerard, 1805.



Napoleon I, King of Italy by Andrea Apiani, 1805.

Document 10

'Tis done—but yesterday a king!
And armed with kings to strive—
And now thou art a nameless thing:
So abject—yet alive!
Is this the man of thousand thrones,
Who strewed our earth with hostile bones,
And can he thus survive?
Since he, miscalled the Morning Star,
Nor man nor fiend hath fallen so far.

Ill-minded man! Why scourge thy kind
Who bowed so low the knee?
By gazing on thyself grown blind,
Thou taught'st the rest to see.
With might unquestioned,—power to save,—
Thine only gift hath been the grave,
to those that worshipped thee;
Nor till thy fall could mortals guess
Ambition's less than littleness!

Thanks for that lesson—it will teach
To after-warriors more,
Than high philosophy can preach,
And vainly preached before.
That spell upon the minds of men
Breaks never to unite again,
That led them to adore
Those things of sabre sway
With fronts of brass, and feet of clay . . .

The desolator desolate!
The victor overthrown!
The arbiter of other's fate
A suppliant for his own!
Is it some yet imperial hope
That with such change can calmly cope?
Or dread of death alone?
To die a prince—or live a slave--
Thy choice is most ignobly brave! . . .

SOURCE: *Ode to Napoleon Bonaparte*, Lord Byron, 1814.

Document 11

Such are all great historical men—whose own particular aims involve those large issues which are the will of the World-Spirit. They may be called Heroes, inasmuch as they have derived their purposes and their vocation, not from the calm, regular course of things, sanctioned by the existing order: but from a concealed fount—one which has not attained to phenomenal, present existence—from that inner Spirit, still hidden beneath the surface, which, impinging on the outer world as on a shell, bursts it in pieces, because it is

another kernel than that which belonged to the shell in question. They are men, therefore, who appear to draw the impulse of their life from themselves; and whose deeds have produced a condition of things and a complex of historical relations which appear to be only their interest, and their work.

Such individuals had no consciousness of the general idea they were unfolding, while prosecuting those aims of theirs; on the contrary, they were practical, political men. But at the same time they were thinking men, who had an insight into the requirements of the time—what was ripe for development. This was the very Truth for their age, for their world: the species next in order, so to speak, and which was already formed in the womb of time. It was theirs to know this nascent principle; the necessary, directly sequent step in progress, which their world was to take; to make this their aim, and to expend their energy in promoting it. World-historical men—the Heroes of an epoch—must, therefore, be recognized as its clear-sighted ones: their deed, their words are the best of that time.

SECONDARY SOURCE: G. W. F. Hegel, "The Role of Great Men in History," mid-19c.

Document 12



SOURCE: "The Third of May, 1808" by Francisco de Goya, 1814.

Document 13

Traitor to the Revolution?

One of the accusations often leveled against Napoleon is that he "betrayed" the higher ideals of the French Revolution, retarding democratic progress in both France and Europe. People making this argument apparently forget that the revolution had its truly dark side and fell a good deal short of being an ideal society. Life was not more secure nor more prosperous. France was not friendlier to Europe under the Committee of Public Safety or the Directory than it proved to be under the Consulate or Empire. Napoleon's initial achievements are a remarkable compromise with revolutionary ideals and the requirements of a country bled white by the excesses of failed governments. He signed the Peace of Amiens, which brought an end to years of war. His enthusiastic participation in and endorsement of the codification of law embodied and certified the social revolution. He negotiated the Concordat and made peace with the Catholic Church, but on revolutionary terms, making it subordinate to the state, and the dominant faith of the French once again became a steadying and unifying influence on daily life.

Yet given his singular opportunities, it is often said that he might have gone further and established a truly democratic state, a goal one might argue went against political trends both within France and on the continent. Democracies were more conceptual than actual in the era, with the American experiment still in its infancy, and it might be said that the violence of the previous decade had made the French population indifferent to the virtues of democracy.

Outside France, it might also be argued that whether France was a totalitarian state or a democracy made little difference to her enemies. If there was a perceived difference, perhaps a democracy might have caused more fear among the reactionary states than the civil monarchy that actually came into being. If this was the case, perhaps Bonaparte acted more out of pragmatism than idealism, attempting to solve foreign and domestic problems by establishing a stable government that was theoretically more acceptable to everyone. He might have reasonably imagined that any man who could achieve that successful transition deserved the reins of power.

Warmonger?

Bonaparte is also frequently held responsible for the "Napoleonic" wars and seen as a prime cause of them. It is argued that he should have prevented those wars with better statecraft and convinced the rest of Europe that France's new and ideologically threatening government was not an enemy. Whenever that policy failed, he should have won wars he could not avoid and negotiated generous treaties, making friends of former enemies, showing the world that diplomacy and not warfare was the proper tool of statesmen.

Yet could any one man, acting unilaterally, defy centuries of rivalry and aggression to end the state of recurrent war in Europe? Hardly a decade seemed to pass without one conflict or another in the previous two centuries. Would any leader of the day have even considered a durable peace to be a real possibility, or is this more of a modern-day concept?

Bonaparte's use of war to defend and enrich the state of France was anything but unique, excepting that it was consistently successful, something the Bourbons might have envied him. If waging war is now considered strictly a policy of last resort and inherently wasteful, there doesn't seem to be a major player of Napoleon's day who was above employing it to achieve their aims. It may be fair to accuse Bonaparte of failing to create a durable peace, but a study of his contemporaries and their policies would likely prove there were other guilty parties.

Corrupt?

Napoleon Bonaparte is often described by his detractors as a corrupt individual, bereft of morality, one who could not see that his actions were dangerous, damaging, and the cause of great anguish. His successes in war made him rely on war as an instrument of policy, and he was insensitive to its human cost. The execution of d'Enghien was criminal, the imprisonment of the Pope immoral, and Napoleon's quest for total dominance a reflection of his warped psyche. Lord Acton's adage "*power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely*" has come to be permanently identified with Bonaparte as its foremost example of veracity.

But was Bonaparte's theoretical depravity a thing apart from his contemporaries? The assumption seems to be that it must have been, or else we would not make so much of it, yet how does this assertion hold up when Bonaparte is compared to other monarchs or society as a whole? Bonaparte shouldn't be judged on a moral scale comparing him to a theoretical ideal, but against his contemporaries, people born in his day and living in his world. Comparisons of corruption are not hard to find. Britain financed and facilitated an assassination attempt on the First Consul. Tsar Alexander was implicated in the murder of his father. In America, Washington and Jefferson owned slaves, and Jefferson used ethnic cleansing to further territorial expansion. Some of these incidents were natural enough in their day, although we now find them indefensible. If Bonaparte was corrupt, he certainly had some notable company.

Megalomaniacal?

Napoleon is often described as being ruled by a gigantic ego. His lust for power, the *coup d'etat Brumaire*, his dismissal of democracy and the establishment of Empire, are all seen as benchmarks of rampant ambition. Comparisons with contemporary leaders are regarded as irrelevant or even futile, presumably because Bonaparte is assumed to have been greater than they, and presented with unique opportunities, all squandered on a quest for personal aggrandizement.

But if Bonaparte was indeed unique, and expected to accomplish deeds other men could only dream of, would he not need an ego as large as his ambitions? Achieving democracy in France and peace for Europe is not a task for a modest man, so was Napoleon's ambition simply a sin because it pursued goals we disapprove of, or that it pursued those goals using methods we disapprove of?

As the leader of a totalitarian state, Napoleon made his own ambitions synonymous with those of France. With few abridgements to power, he was able to act as he saw fit, and is judged accordingly. Yet almost all the European states reflected the egos of their monarchs, and few of them were intent on fostering democracy, limiting their borders, or improving civil rights. Rather, each used their position to satisfy their ambitions, expand their borders, and increase their control over the nobility and populace. There was little respect for minor states like those in Italy or Poland and their borders were redrawn after each conflict. Bonaparte, in this company, seems to be regarded as megalomaniacal largely because he did not inherit his position, but achieved it by aggressively pursuing the same agenda as those born to power and doing so more effectively. It seems that absolutists may be forgiven their sins for being born to them, but parvenus are guilty for having freely chosen them.

Conclusions

Of course, Bonaparte was anything but pure, anything but modest, anything but democratic, and anything but a peacemaker. But in the end, who else that sat on a throne in Europe could claim to be? Should he be assailed for sins that were so sadly common? What is it about Napoleon Bonaparte that makes him the object of such unique criticism? Is it because he holds a special place in our imaginations, a place that we hope would be an example of our better selves? Was his genius, good fortune, and opportunity enough to condemn him, not so much for what he did, but what he failed to do? In the end is our greatest disappointment in Bonaparte simply that he was merely human?

SECONDARY SOURCE: Essay by Maxwell Sewell, "Feet of Clay: An Examination of Napoleon Bonaparte" from the web site, www.NapoleonSeries.org.