

Debate: Was Napoleon Great?

Professor Charles Esdaile and Professor Andrew Roberts let the BJMH in on their recent correspondence about Napoleon. These exchanges coincide with the publication of *Napoleon the Great* by Andrew Roberts which is reviewed in this issue of the Journal. All correspondence was by e-mail.

Monday 29 September 2014

Dear Andrew,

First of all, many congratulations on your new book. At the moment I only have the proof version thereof, but I am sure that the end product will look splendid, whilst reading the proofs was interesting enough in itself. All in all, then, well done! To paraphrase Voltaire, I might not agree with what you say, but I shall defend to the death the manner in which you say it: for the life of me, I cannot understand the current trend towards making works of history more-and-more inaccessible!

Anyway, to business. I am sorry that I have not been able to put finger to keyboard until now, but the delay has at least allowed me to give some thought to how we might manage things, and it seems to me logical to carry out our discussion under a number of different headings, namely, France, the empire and the downfall. How does this sound?

However, first of all, I should like to kick off with something else. In brief, in your book on Napoleon and Wellington, you say the following: 'Napoleon's programme, of a politically united Europe controlled by a centralised (French-led) bureaucracy, of careers open to talent and of a written body of laws, has defeated Wellington's assumptions of British sovereign independence, class distinctions and the supremacy of English common law based upon established, sometimes, ancient, precedent ... There is some irony in the fact that Waterloo was fought a mere twelve miles from Brussels, the capital of today's European Union. For, although Wellington won the battle, it is Napoleon's that is coming true.' Rightly or wrongly, I have always taken this passage to suggest that, like me, you were not an admirer of Napoleon: am I not right in thinking that you are very much a euro-sceptic? The first and most obvious question is how someone who takes such a position can possibly come to adopt the sort of pro-Napoleonic stance that you do in the biography: I must say I was genuinely surprised to find that it took the direction it did.

But it is not just what seems to be a radical change in direction on your part. There is also the little matter of the relationship between the European Community and the Napoleonic Empire. To be honest, comparing the two really does seem to be akin to comparing apples and pears. I will grant, of course, that there are certain similarities, some of them very obvious. Thus, Napoleon believed in both a common currency and a common corpus of law, whilst the career open to talent is one that every member of the European Community would subscribe to. Yet that is about as far as it goes. In the European Community, then, there is freedom of trade (a) amongst all its members, and (b) with the rest of the world, whereas the Napoleonic Empire on the one hand saw both an attempt to exclude all British exports and re-exports from Europe's ports and the erection of massive tariff barriers designed, first, to protect French industry from the import of German and Italian goods, and, second, to turn the rest of the continent into - quite literally - a captive market. Meanwhile, there is also the question of political power: in the Napoleonic Empire France had the determining voice - indeed, really the only voice - whereas in the European Union each country has equal representation. And, finally, there is the issue of finance: whereas the European Union spends billions of pounds on the less developed parts of the Continent, Napoleon expected those self-same parts of the Continent (and, indeed, everywhere else) to dispatch their resources the other way. One could go still further, meanwhile, and consider the issue of territorial change: Napoleon consistently employed force to achieve his goals, whereas the European Union has, inside Europe at least, has forsworn any resort to arms.

In short, then, can Napoleon really be seen as a precursor to the European Union? I think not, and would say the same to euro-enthusiasts and euro-sceptics alike: the comparison really is not a helpful one and should be avoided by both sides in the argument.

So, over to you ... I await your response with interest.

All best wishes,

Charles

Sunday 5 October 2014

Dear Charles,

Thanks for your letter, and your kind praise of my writing, which is all the more worthwhile coming from someone whose own books on the Napoleon Wars in general and the Peninsular War in particular I greatly admire.

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It was at your 'Napoleon at the Zenith' conference at Liverpool University back in 2007 that I first started thinking seriously about the Emperor, though obviously, as the title of my book implies, in a very different way from you! Since then more time has passed than Napoleon spent on Elba and St Helena put together!

You rightly point out the alteration in my view of Napoleon vis a vis the European Union since 2004. What has changed since I published 'Napoleon and Wellington' is that during the 2008/9 economic meltdown the EU failed to protect its outlying satrapies - Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and so on - so it was clearly not the monstrous all-powerful entity that I had feared. If anything, the euro came close to collapse rather than all-powerful mastery. Indeed, rather than comparing it to the Napoleonic Europe, if anything today the EU looks more like that toothless contemporaneous body, the Holy Roman Empire. Although the EU territorially holds sway in areas Napoleon never coveted in Central and Eastern Europe, and probably would like to become a super-state, I no longer think that is a primary danger post the Great Crash. And as you point out, the EU has no army. (Those who ascribed European peace since the 1940s to the EU were always wrong in my view, as that was down to NATO.)

Since we're discussing Napoleon's greatness or lack of it, can we therefore change the subject from the slight cul-de-sac of the EU to the non-military achievements of his period as First Consul and afterwards? In your review of 'Napoleon the Great' in the Literary Review, you rightly readily accept that Napoleon 'left behind a long-lasting institutional legacy', yet your attacks on the Code Napoleon, his prefectorial system and the gendarmerie are – in particular – too harsh. The Code replaced 42 French legal codes, which was a pre-requisite for France to operate as a fully-functioning nation state. The fact that it has been adopted fully or in part by over forty countries across all the inhabited continents is surely a good advert for its efficacy. And although it was undoubtedly sexist, as you correctly point out, the French didn't give women the franchise until 1946, a full 142 years after the Code, so Napoleon can hardly be blamed for that.

Similarly the central control of France's departments through the prefectorial system was hardly such a revolutionary advance on the powers of Louis XIV's intendants, or the Republic's systems, so much as a sensible evolutionary development in a country that needed to operate as a single unit; Napoleon's introduction of the metric system might be another example of this. To blame Napoleon's local administrative reforms of 1804, as you do, for 'the collapse of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1830-31, the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991 and the regional problems which beset Spain today' is surely outrageous hyperbole.

Similarly, the war against French brigandage that Napoleon fought partly through the extension of the size and powers of the gendarmerie absolutely had to be won if France was to function effectively, as the internal market could not operate while such large swathes of France were effectively controlled by bands of highwaymen and brigands. His commendable success in that struggle can't be blamed for 'playing a central role in the emergence of such revolutionary creeds as anarchism' since it was anarchism in the countryside that was being defeated, and which remained defeated throughout his rule.

In your reply, I'd also like you to cover if possible Napoleon's other achievements of the Consulate period, such as the creation of the Legion d'Honneur, which is still coveted by Frenchmen to this day, and the Concordat with Rome that ended the absurd situation whereby the worship of Jesus Christ was made illegal by Revolutionary France.

My best wishes, as ever,

Andrew

Tuesday 7 October 2014

Dear Andrew,

Thank you very much for this most interesting letter, and, of course, your kind words about my books: over the years I have tried very hard to produce work that is at the very least accessible, and I shall take your words as proof of a degree of success. Very good: to business, then. First of all, the European Community. Yes, of course: no worries about setting this aside though I do hope you will at least concede that maintaining that said body has even the remotest connection with the Napoleonic Empire really is pretty difficult. At the same time, I also have no option but to take issue with you about your claim that the EU holds sway over areas in eastern and south-eastern Europe that Napoleon never coveted. That Greece and various other Balkan states are members of the EU is obviously an established fact, but you are quite wrong about Napoleon here. There are indications that the fellow was thinking of a renewed descent on the Ottoman Empire as early as 1803 (why do you think he sent troops to Taranto and Brindisi?), whilst in 1808, faced by the danger that, unless he took action, the Russians would march on Constantinople alone, he actually took steps to order such a descent. What would have happened is not clear - the scheme was aborted by the outbreak of the Peninsular War - but it is probable that Napoleon would have wanted the whole of the Adriatic coast, mainland Greece and the islands in the Adriatic (and that just for starters: a further

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goal would undoubtedly have been Egypt). I fear, then, that your remarks in this respect are clearly in error. I will admit, of course, that the conquest of Greece and, for that matter, Egypt were not in any sense a part of some master plan: they were rather attractive ideas that cropped up and commended themselves to the emperor's attention from time to time, whilst it might even be said that he was driven to consider carving up the Ottoman Empire in 1808 by factors beyond his control, namely the need to stop Russia grabbing a large expanse of territory without France obtaining a shred of compensation. Yet, like it or not, for whatever reason, Greece certainly did come to represent a focus of the imperial attention. And, even were that not the case, what about Venice's Balkan and Adriatic possessions, the various Habsburg territories in Slovenia and Croatia in 1809, and, finally, the Republic of Ragusa (annexed to the Illyrian Provinces in 1808)? Again we see an interest in the Balkans that cannot be ignored.

But let us move on from this. You say you want to discuss the reforms of the Consulate. Very good, but let me first say that I have never denied the extent or, indeed, the efficacy of those reforms. Quite simply, France was transformed from a near failed state to the greatest military power in Europe, and that in about six years flat. The prefectural system was about as effective as anything anyone could have hoped to create in 1800; the reform of the gendarmerie wiped out brigandage and ensured that conscription produced the men it was supposed to; the Concordat turned the French Church into a subservient branch of the French state (slightly later, the affair of the Grand Sanhedrin saw Napoleon attempt to do precisely the same thing with regard to the Jews, or, more precisely, to unite France's Jews in a single religious organization that could be manipulated in the same way as the French Church); the Civil Code turned the family into one more instrument of repression; the flourishing press of the days prior to 1799 was reduced to a mere handful of papers that all said pretty much exactly what Napoleon wanted; and, finally, yes, the Legion of Honour provided a handy bauble by which men could be led (I paraphrase Napoleon himself here). Where I would differ from you in all this is imagining that most of this had anything much to do with liberty. Yes, of course, the Civic Code had lots of good things in it - above all, equality before the law - just as it made for much greater speed and consistency in the administration of justice, and, yes again, it was excellent that Catholics could again go to Mass, but these were boons that came with some fairly massive strings attached. But taking the picture as a whole what we see is a Napoleon bent on the creation of a powerful state that could deliver the men and money he required above all else, a Napoleon, indeed, who created not some paradise on earth, but rather a machine that existed in the first instance simply to do his bidding.

So much for what Napoleon did in France during his time as First Consul, and then, either directly or indirectly, in the grand empire in the period after 1805. As for the

issue of his long-term legacy, well, yes, there is much that has survived. That it has done so is certainly proof of its value to many forms of state, while it would be churlish not to recognise that, suitably amended, the Code Napoleon has served France and certain other states (which ones?) very well ever since. However, I am afraid that you have completely refused to address the various points I raise in my review about such matters as the trouble that was often caused by prefectural-style rule in such states as Spain, and, for that matter, the torture, brutality and abuse of civil rights characteristic of many French-style gendarmeries after 1815 (with regard to my point about anarchism, indeed: you are quite wilful in such response as you have made - the anarchism I was referring to was not the brigandage that beset the French countryside in 1799, brigandage, incidentally, that in many instances sprang directly from resistance to conscription, but rather the particularly violent and destructive brand of socialism that ended up playing such a catastrophic role in the coming of the Spanish Civil War). Today, thank God, most of that is behind us, but I confess that I find what Napoleon created, and not just in this respect but many others, is very difficult to admire. And to raise the issue of how the Napoleonic model actually developed in many south-European states in particular is not 'outrageous hyperbole' at all: the emperor himself may have been a friend of fair and efficient government, but, in Spain for certain, the system that he created, or, if you want, was copied from him, was productive of terrible problems that really do continue to rumble on into the current era.

To conclude, then, whilst I am the first to recognise that Napoleon achieved extraordinary success in France in the period of the Consulate, I am afraid to say that this is a gift horse that very definitely needs to be looked at in the mouth. Just as an example, let us return to brigandage: yes, brigandage is a pretty nasty business and something that can scarcely be allowed to flourish. However, if the object of the suppression of brigandage is not just law and order per se, but also to line up the elites behind a de facto dictatorship, to make wholesale conscription a reality and to allow France to engage in wars of aggression, how can one be anything other than sceptical?

There are, of course, plenty of other things that we could talk about, some of which you raise in your recent article in BBC History, but it is very, very late, and this particular regiment has been marching and fighting pretty much non-stop since well before dawn, so you will forgive me if I pitch camp, sit down by the campfire - well, all right, the television! - and, for tonight at least, sound the last post.

Warmest best wishes,

Charles

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Tuesday 14 October 2014

Dear Charles,

Of course you are right to describe Napoleonic rule as a dictatorship, and therefore fundamentally at odds with democracy and representative government, but let's see it in its proper European, and indeed French, context. The French Convention, Committee of Public Safety and lastly the Directory had, in your correct words, turned France into a 'near failed state' with massive inflation, civil war in the Vendée, the flight of the émigrés (many of whom were France's brightest and best), the Terror and so on. Napoleon, as you generously admit, transformed France, and I'd like you to say whether you think that that could have been genuinely achieved under the old Constitution of the Year III, which took both chambers to approve any change three times before a plebiscite then confirmed it, a process that could take nine years? I'd argue that nothing short of a dictatorship could have possibly created the situation in which, in your correct phrase, 'France was transformed from a near failed state to the greatest military power in Europe, and that in about six years flat.' One of the reasons France was a 'near failed state' by 1799 was that the free press ensured a level of political animosity in which any kind of political national unity – a vital requisite to the transformation you've yourself described – was impossible. The pro-Bourbon papers of the Right, some of them fantastically scurrilous scandal-sheets, others more impressive royalist propaganda, needed to be suppressed if any kind of 'amalgam' of France was to be possible. Let's recall that there was no genuinely free press in Austria, Russia, Prussia or Naples either at the time, and that in England a number of the papers were owned by members of the Government or their families. Furthermore, in a time of war, even democratic governments have the moral right to exercise censorship, as for example the Ministry of Information sometimes had to do even here in the Second World War. 'The truth is so important in wartime that it needs to be protected by a bodyguard of lies,' said Winston Churchill, and of course his hero Napoleon would have agreed.

While I stand corrected by you about Napoleon's long-term, totally circumstantial plans in the Balkans in the event of a Russian victory over the Ottomans, I think the point stands that he did not even go to Cyprus, Greece, Finland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Latvia, Estonia and some other countries of the present European Union, so analogies between his empire and the EU must be pretty shaky. (By the way, military planning staffs often have plans that exist for certain situations that are unlikely to transpire; the USA had plans for the invasion of Canada right up to the 1920s, for example, and our Chiefs of the General Staff drew up plans to go to war with Russia in 1945.)

I wasn't deliberately mistaking the anarchism of the French rural brigands for that of

the Spanish Civil War-era anarchist and socialist organizations, I assure you. I just can't see how a man who lost power in 1815 and died in 1821 can genuinely be blamed for a political movement that only sprouted up a century later.

Your seemingly contemptuous dismissal of the Légion d'Honneur is surely unfair, and worthy of your looking at again. It is fully the equal of our honours system and was revolutionary the time as it was open to all classes, right to the upper echelons. Napoleon didn't call the Legion d'Honneur a 'bauble' in a negative way, by the way; he was responding in the Conseil d'Etat in May 1802 to an attack by Théophile Berlier on the concept of the Légion and was pointing out – the full context can be seen in pp. 348-50 of my book – that the French respond to calls to honour.

There are three other achievements of the Consulate that I'd like you to respond to, which I've no doubt you'll also dismiss as an 'instrument of repression', in the way you did the Code Napoleon (elements of which, since you asked, can be found in the legal systems of most European countries except the Scandinavian ones, and in places as far afield as Quebec and Louisiana: hardly repressed nations).

The first is the lycée system of grandes écoles in secondary education, which spread scientific learning far further than ever before. The next is the Banque de France which he helped set up and which brought inflation in down from Zimbabwean levels to manageable ones. The third is his beautification of Paris. How were the building of the quais of the Seine, the four bridges over that river, the reservoirs, boulevards, galleries, Bourse, fountains, gardens and sewers that he built there instruments of repression rather than useful and in some cases architecturally glorious additions to world civilization?

I hope you're feeling better after what sounds like an exhausting day.

Best regards as always,

Andrew

Saturday 18 October 2014

Dear Andrew,

Many thanks for this letter. Many apologies about the slight delay in replying, but last weekend I was hit by the proofs of my next book (on Burgos' experiences in the Peninsular War) and normal life came to a complete standstill. What made the experience doubly awful was that I had to produce the index as well: a thoroughly

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hateful job that I loathe more than almost anything else I have to do. Anyway, after a lot of hard grind, all of that is behind me, so back to Napoleon.

The first thing to be said, I suppose, is that there is much that we can agree upon. Did Napoleon beautify Paris? Of course. Did Napoleon give France an excellent system of secondary education? Of course, again. Did Napoleon create an honours system that was fairer and more accessible than almost anything seen elsewhere? Absolutely. Did Napoleon save France from chaos? Yes, pretty much: one can dicker over whether or not the Directory was wholly useless, but, like you, I believe that only Napoleon could have achieved the results that were actually achieved. None of these things are at issue, and trying to make them a part of the debate rather misses the point. What matters is what Napoleon did with them. None of the changes are morally bad, and I am prepared to go a lot further and say that in and of themselves they are wholly commendable, even the proverbial 'good thing'. The problem, of course, is the uses to which they were put. As I have already implied, the prefect and the gendarme were beyond doubt an answer to the problems of the 1790s, but they were also fundamental pillars of the wars of aggression which Napoleon embarked on after 1803. Equally, the lycee turned out an excellent product, but it was a product moulded to the needs of a state devoted to war and empire, just as the legion of honour was above all used to reward the military (of all ranks, admittedly). All these things have survived in the France of today because they were all very useful in themselves, and because they were all capable of adapting to a very different France (just as over the past 200 years they have adapted to a whole series of very different Frances), but the fact that they are still around in 2015 does not change what they stood for in 1815 (or, just in case you throw the 'liberal empire' at me here, 1805). And, as for the beautification of Paris, nothing can alter the fact that the many things of beauty which Napoleon created represented anything but art for art's sake: they were there to extol his victories and flatter the crowd, for whom, incidentally, they created a large number of jobs.

Let us then set all these things aside. I am also happy to set aside the issue of the EU: this has absolutely nothing in common with the Napoleonic Empire, and not just because it happens to be bigger - the question of whether or not Napoleon went to Cyprus or Romania or sundry other places is neither here nor there. Before doing so, however, I must necessarily challenge you on the question of the Ottoman Empire: as the invasion plans of 1808 were aborted by the Spanish crisis, we cannot say for certain that they would actually have been implemented - for one thing a last minute deal with Russia might have changed the situation yet again - but the fact is that they were more than contingency plans. On the contrary, clear orders were issued to Decres in their respect whilst every indication is that they were also behind the final take-over in Spain. But all that is by-the-by: in the end neither you nor I can prove anything one way or the other. The real issues, then, come elsewhere. Let us begin

here with the question of the Code Napoleon, or, rather, the Civic Code: one thing that cannot be taken away from the Directory is that it already had the process of codifying the civil law well in hand before Napoleon came to power, the change of name really amounting to little more than a hijack. Now, let me be clear about this: there can be no possible objection to the codification of French law and no possible objection to many of the principles enunciated in the Code just as a mere glance at the Code is sufficient to convince the reader of its simplicity and good order. Nor do I deny that it has informed the development of modern legal systems in many European and extra-European countries, and that in some instances (the states that emerged from the French empire, for example) it was copied lock, stock and barrel. But, again, you leave yourself open to attack: of course, the European states which use it today, and, indeed, some others, are in many instances - indeed, almost every instance - parliamentary democracies with pretty good human rights records, but that is not the point: in brief, I rather doubt that any of them have retained the repressive aspects of which I am so leery. Meanwhile, you say in an earlier letter that it is unfair to blame Napoleon for the more sexist aspects of the Code: well, I would have to check this, but I am fairly certain that one of the areas in which he intervened in the debates of the committee most strongly was that of women. Perhaps I am wrong in blaming Napoleon in person for this particular problem, but the fact is that French women had in principle acquired quite extensive rights in the course of the Revolution with regard to such matters as divorce, rights that were now, alas, swept away. If Napoleon was not the only sexist around in the France of 1800, it is therefore harder to exonerate him than you imply. Beyond that, meanwhile, there is the problem of slavery: let us make no bones about this - Napoleon restored order in France and slavery in Sainte-Domingue, whilst his treatment of Toussaint l'Ouverture was harsh in the extreme.

We next come to the question of the press. Here I will naturally admit that in a state of war a degree of censorship is often necessary and, further, that in the France of 1799 something had to be done to get the press to stop venting the hatreds of the past. But influencing or regulating the press is one thing, and turning it into, in effect, a state concern, is quite another. As for things being no better elsewhere, that is simply neither here nor there: nobody is claiming that the *ancien* regime was a beacon of liberty (though, in several instances - Spain, Portugal and Sicily - a free press did emerge in the course of the struggle, just as in Britain there were always plenty of newspapers that supported the Opposition).

Finally, there is the Spanish Civil War. I have never blamed Napoleon for the emergence of an anarchist movement in Spain, and it is unfair of you to suggest that I do any such thing. If you look more closely at what I have said, I am rather arguing that, applied to societies such as Spain, the prefects and the gendarmes were extremely well-suited to the application of rigid centralization, electoral

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management and the defence of a social order that was one of the most unjust in Europe, and that by the most brutal of means. My point, then, is that, applied in different conditions to those that characterised Napoleonic France, the system created by Napoleon created not some utopia, but rather the very opposite. Meanwhile, to argue that Napoleon's intervention in Spain left terrible wounds which, to reiterate, have still not healed to this day, is hardly controversial: on the contrary, the recent bicentenary of the Peninsular War saw it repeated many times over.

I am afraid, then, that I cannot but stand my ground, and that I shall continue to do so. However impressive what Napoleon did in France was - and that it was impressive I do not for one moment doubt - the fact is that in the end almost all his reforms were directed towards the end of making France a war machine that would be ready to serve his interests. Thus, the Concordat greatly reduced the threat of further Vendées whilst turning the Church into an instrument of propaganda; the gendarmerie and the prefects between them finally got conscription to work properly; the Civil Code both extended the police powers of the state and ensured the support of the 'masses of granite'; the beautification of Paris kept the sans culottes quiet and sang a loud hymn to military glory; and the Legion of Honour at last gave common soldiers something very tangible to fight for. And, finally, you will note that it is not actually all about repression: Napoleon was prepared to use this, certainly, but he also flourished his carrot at least as much as he did his stick and tried very hard to persuade France to follow him willingly. For a time, it even worked, but that, as they say, is another story. Perhaps we can turn to it in our next exchange?

All best wishes,

Charles

Sunday 26 October 2014

Dear Charles,

Why do you have to produce your own indexes? You're a scholarly historian and university professor and you shouldn't have to do such a laborious task. I've had some great indexers for my books – including the legendary Douglas Matthews – but I've never envied them their task. Is this yet another new imposition publishers are coming up with to cut costs, such as making us pay for our own illustrations and now also maps?

As for Napoleon, I'm delighted that we can agree on the fact that he, in your words,

beautified Paris, gave France an excellent system of secondary education, created an honours system that was fairer and more accessible than almost anything seen elsewhere, saved France from chaos, and that 'only Napoleon could have achieved the results that were actually achieved.' I think the only difference between us now is that I think that all these achievements – and others such as ending the war in the Vendée, introducing comprehensive tax reform and public accounting, the Legion d'Honneur, the Concordat with Rome, the Conseil d'Etat and appeal courts, the return of the emigres, the crushing of brigandage, and the building of the useful, non-beautiful parts of Paris such as the abattoirs, warehouses, bridges, canals, reservoirs, fountains and sewers – when taken together mean that Napoleon deserves the title 'the Great', whether these were designed to make France a more efficient fighting nation or not. (No-one builds sewers and abattoirs for the glory of it or to 'flatter the crowd', by the way.)

Although Napoleon did indeed militarize and centralize France, many of the building blocks for that – primarily of course the mass conscription of the levée en masse – were already in place under the Committee of Public Safety. Once the cry of 'La Patrie en danger' went up, and something approaching Total War engulfed France with the Austrian and Prussian invasions of 1792, you'll agree that a certain degree of militarization would be inevitable in pretty much any society throughout history.

Although I agree that the absurdly opportunistic attack on Spain in 1812 and the doomed war against Russia were indeed what you rightly call 'wars of aggression that Napoleon embarked upon after 1803', I would dispute that the wars of the 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th or 7th Coalitions fall into that category. In 1805 Austria invaded France's ally Bavaria; what was Napoleon meant to do in those circumstances? In 1806 Prussia declared war on France and ignored Napoleon's peace offer. In 1809 Austria rearmed and declared war, also ignoring the pleas for peace Napoleon made to Metternich. In 1813, 1814 and 1815 the Legitimists also pursued their jihad against Napoleon, despite several peace offers Napoleon made. The campaigns of 1814 around Paris and the Waterloo campaign can hardly be described as wars of aggression. With Britain funding any Continental power willing to fight Napoleon, to the extent of spending 14% of her GDP on subsidies, Napoleon wasn't the only warmonger of the age, though of course he was one in both Spain and Russia. (Although Tsar Alexander I had plans to attack him.)

With regard to the Code, of course you're right to say that the Directory was contemplating reform of France's legal system, but so too was the Committee of Public Safety and the Convention. It was one of the fundamental desires of the Enlightenment philosophes before 1789 too. But in the ten years since the fall of the Bastille, endless commissions, dozens of committees and sub-committees debated reform but nothing had happened. There's no indication that had the Directory

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survived a new Civil Code would have been passed into law. Napoleon's active, passionate political advocacy and gerrymandering of the Senate, Legislative Body and Tribunate was a necessary prerequisite for that, and even then it only squeaked past in some votes in those chambers. That's why I believe it deserves to be called the Code Napoleon and why Napoleon deserves the soubriquet 'the Great', because it unified France more than any other factor in the 19th century.

I fully take your point about Napoleon's attempted – albeit failed – reintroduction of slavery in St Domingue (present-day Haiti), and anyone who has visited L'Ouverture's freezing cell in the Jura mountains won't take issue with your description of his punishment as 'harsh', but once again we need some historical context. Spain and Portugal kept Slavery until the 1880s, America needed a civil war that killed 600,000 people to get rid of it in the 1860s, and even we British didn't abolish the Slave Trade till 1807 and the institution of Slavery till the 1830s. Napoleon did at least abolish the Slave Trade when he came to power in 1815, although admittedly that was as much for propaganda as policy.

We'll just have to differ on the questions of censorship and Napoleon's responsibility for the long-term agonies of Spain, and let anyone who is still reading these exchanges at this point to their own minds up. While I accept that Napoleon's reforms were, to paraphrase you, directed towards the end of making France a more efficient war machine, I would argue that that wasn't his primary purpose – the Code had little military application, for example, yet he devoted enormous amounts of time to it – and anyway when you are subjected to repeated coalition wars being declared on you, an efficient war machine is no bad thing. As an Enlightenment autocrat he believed he was delivering more efficient, modern and fairer government with these reforms than anything that had existed on the Continent before; it wasn't just about warfare. Taken together, the reforms – many of which like the Banque de France, Code Napoleon, Conseil d'Etat, Legion d'Honneur, Cours des Comptes, Seine bridges and so on are still functioning two centuries later – justify Napoleon being seen as a great man.

Yours ever

Andrew

Tuesday 4 November 2014

Dear Andrew,

Thank you for this latest dispatch. I am afraid, however, that, far from demonstrating

just how close we are, it rather suggests a gulf between us that is utterly unbridgeable. There is much that I will concede, or, to put it another way, there is much in the anti-Napoleonic camp that I will not go along with, but I will not have you associate me with your views, and remain fundamentally at odds with them.

The central problem is that you insist on emphasising Napoleon's domestic achievements while glossing over the international background. This was also very much a feature of your recent appearance on Radio 1, and, albeit to a lesser extent, of your article in *BBC History*. In this letter, then, let us set aside the issue of domestic policy (though I note that you fail to say anything with respect to my point about Napoleon being responsible for the more sexist attitudes of the Civil Code, and would contest your remark about sewers and abattoirs: nobody builds such things for glory, perhaps, but they might well do if by doing so they can provide jobs for a crowd that they are terrified of). Also to be set aside, I think, is the issue of Napoleon's abolition of slavery: yes, of course lots of other countries permitted slavery in 1802 and continued to do so for a long time afterwards, but the difference is that Napoleon is constantly acclaimed as an apostle of liberty, and it is therefore difficult not to see him as a special case that ought to be held to higher standards. And, finally, I am very glad to see that you have not made that much of Napoleon's 'emancipation' of the Jews: subjected to the cold light of day, this looks like nothing so much as the unification of France's Jews into a single body that could be brow-beaten and manipulated in the same way as the Catholic Church.

So, if you will pardon the phrase, to war ... There is so much to say here that I do not know where to begin. However, given that you mention it, let us begin with 1792-93. Here the obvious thing to say is that France was threatened neither by an ideological crusade nor by total war. The Austro-Prussian invasion of 1792 was a pretty shambolic affair that did not even aim at the overthrow of the Revolution, whilst in 1793 things were only slightly more serious: few of the Allied armies penetrated very far into France, whilst several of the states that were supposed to be at war with the Republic did not send a single man to join the fight. The fact is that the situation in Poland was always more important to Prussia and Russia, and that none of the powers fighting France were prepared to set aside their traditional foreign-policy concerns. Britain was pretty unremitting in her hostility, but even she could have been brought to the peace table in certain circumstances. What saved her was essentially the invasion of Egypt, this being, in all honesty, a quite ludicrous enterprise that defies explanation in strategic terms and seems to have been motivated by the absurd belief that the Turks would afford Napoleon a cheap victory by simply handing over Egypt without a fight. Meanwhile, France became involved in the quite unnecessary War of the Second Coalition, and it was actually this (and not the levée en masse of 1793) that gave rise to the system of conscription inherited by the Consulate.

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It is impossible to pretend that Napoleon was not at least in part responsible for the Egyptian expedition, but let us set the 1790s aside and rather concentrate on the events that took place in the course of his rule. I suspect that we are never going to agree about who was responsible for the rupture of Peace of Amiens, but I would argue very strongly that Napoleon did not behave in the style of someone who wanted peace and in effect provoked Britain into declaring war. In 1803, however, Britain was on her own, and there she would have remained but for a series of actions that provoked, first, Russia and then Austria to join her: if there is one thing that is very clear it is that Napoleon could almost certainly have contained the conflict had he adopted a different policy - neither Alexander I nor Francis II wanted war, whilst the former, in particular, was deeply hostile to Britain. As for 1806, well, yes, quite right: Prussia declared war on France, but only in the wake of a series of snubs, insults and provocations that were cynical even by the standards of Napoleon. Much the same holds good, meanwhile, for the campaign of 1809: Austria went to war, certainly, but the fact is that this was only because there were genuine fears in Vienna that what had happened in Madrid in 1808 might very soon be repeated there.

However, as Napoleon won these campaigns, I suppose we might set them aside. What cannot be set aside, however, is the extraordinary manner in which the incipient alliance with Russia that was forged in 1807 was simply thrown away. This really was the key to victory - with Austria and Prussia quiescent and Russia and Spain allied to France, Britain was absolutely up against the wall, and yet Napoleon wildly overplayed his hand, embarking on an extremely risky policy in the Iberian peninsula, and pushing Alexander into a corner in which he could not but adopt a hostile stance (incidentally, please don't try to play the 'Pitt's gold' card here: by 1813, British money was only on offer to powers that had already gone to war with Napoleon and shown that they meant business).

Finally, what jihad? Over and over again in 1813 and 1814 Napoleon was offered generous peace terms that would have kept him on the throne of a France that was bigger than she had been in 1789. If you don't believe me, then check out the works of the many other historians who have argued much the same, the most recent being Munro Price's *Napoleon: the End of Glory* (a further feature of this work is the manner in which it explores the attitude of the French population in the last days of the empire). The catastrophe of 1814 was therefore pretty much entirely the work of Napoleon, and it is this that is perhaps the most important reason for challenging the title 'Napoleon the Great'. To be blunt, great statesmen do not throw away the enormous strategic advantages of 1807 and bring down disasters of the scale that afflicted France in the wake of the battle of Leipzig.

I am sorry, then, but we must agree to differ. As for my indexing, to be honest, I do

not have the funds to employ a professional, but, even if I did, I prefer to keep control of the process myself: at least I can then be certain that things will be organised in a sensible fashion.

All best wishes,

Charles

Wednesday 12 November 2014

Dear Charles,

You're quite right; our views are indeed 'utterly unbridgeable' and I wouldn't for a moment want to 'associate' yours with mine or vice versa. However, I have found this interchange useful and informative and I hope so have our readers.

I really cannot let you get away with the inverted commas that you put around the word emancipation when it came to Napoleon and the Jews. Everywhere the French army went, it closed the ghettos and allowed Jews to have civil and political rights, often for the first time in centuries. He stopped Jews from being forced to wear the yellow star in the Papal States, for example, which in 1815 with his defeat they were forced to wear again. He stopped Jews being sold into slavery in Malta and allowed them to build a synagogue there, which they had hitherto been banned from doing. What he did for the Jews in Poland, Germany, Italy and Spain was indeed genuine emancipation, which is why he still enjoys a high reputation amongst modern Jewry. As for your remark about 'apostle of liberty', I think it's perfectly possible to ascribe that attractive epithet to William Pitt the Younger - along with Churchill the greatest of our premiers, in my view - yet there's no point in denying that Pitt also presided over both the slave trade and, in our West Indian and other colonies, the institution of slavery. As with everything, this needs to be seen in its historical context and in terms of what was politically and economically possible at the time, where the two apostles of liberty Pitt and Napoleon were equally constrained.

Simply because the Austro-Prussian invasion of 1792 was shambolic, which I don't deny, and didn't get very far into France, does not detract from the fact that the French understandably saw it in ideological terms and were worried by it, for how were they to know how it would end? The radicalization of the Revolution as a result of that invasion is undeniable – the King was executed and in September 1793 the prisons saw terrible massacres at the hands of the fearful, angry mob – but anyhow Napoleon was only a lieutenant at the time and didn't fight Austrians or Prussians. Equally immaterial is the outbreak of the war of the second coalition, as he wasn't

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even in Europe when that happened.

As you point out, he was in Egypt, which he managed both to capture and to defeat both Turkish armies sent against him, at the battles of Mount Thabor and Aboukir. When he discovered the catastrophes that had overcome French arms in 1799 in Europe, France's best general returned to the sound of gunfire, which was the patriotic thing to do. The next year he crushed the Austrians at Marengo and reversed all France's losses in Italy of the previous year. So I don't for a moment 'pretend that Napoleon was not in the least part responsible for the Egyptian expedition' – of course he was – but I just don't see it as the unequivocal disaster that you do. Taking Cairo a few days after landing in Egypt was a genuine achievement.

Similarly I agree with you that it was extraordinary that the Russian alliance forged at Tilsit was thrown away, but it was Tsar Alexander I who did as much of that throwing as Napoleon. He provided nil support for Napoleon in the 1809 war against Austria, as he had promised to do. Overnight in 1810 he cancelled the provisions of the Continental System he'd signed up to at Tilsit. He wrote to Polish aristocrats trying to get them to revolt against Napoleon in 1810 and 1811, and told the Prussians and his mother in 1811 that he was planning to attack Napoleon. It takes two to stick to a treaty, and from the Congress of Erfurt onwards the Tsar had gone cold on a deal that had effectively given him control over the eastern part of central Europe, as well as the right to invade Finland. Your assumption that every breakdown of peace is always Napoleon's fault is the key reason why our differences over him are utterly unbridgeable.

Of course you are right that France faced catastrophe in 1814 in the wake of the defeat at Leipzig in 1813, and that as my friend Munro Price correctly points out in his excellent book, Napoleon could have saved a truncated and humbled France which nonetheless was likely to have been a bit larger in Belgium than the France of 1789. But that wasn't what he'd promised in his coronation oath, which was to protect the integrity and borders of the France of 1804, which is what he meant to do. (King George III had dismissed William Pitt sooner than break *his* coronation oath too; it wasn't a case of special pleading but of genuine conscience.) As it was, Napoleon won four battles in five days in the 1814 campaign, and who knows what would have happened if Marshal Marmont hadn't so notoriously treacherously surrendered Paris to the Allies?

I suspect that if Napoleon had bowed and agreed to continue in power as a supplicant of the Allies, rather than abdicating and attempting to return as he did, he would not be considered as iconic a figure as he is today. It took his Churchillian resilience and refusal to submit for him to be the figure he presents to us today:

Napoleon the Great.

My best regards as ever,

Andrew

Sunday 30 November 2014

Dear Andrew,

Thank you for this latest dispatch. I am afraid that, as was all too predictable, I find that there are things I cannot but respond to in it.

First of all, the Jews. Yes, I agree, in those parts of the wider French imperium where there were Jewish communities (Germany, Poland, Italy, certainly, but not Spain and Portugal: in so far as I am aware, there were no more than a tiny handful of individuals in those countries at this point), things got better, and sometimes a lot better. However, what happened varied from place to place, and I would have to check to see how directly Napoleon was involved, if, to be frank, he was directly involved at all. But in France emancipation certainly came at a massive cost: in the first place, all debts owing by gentiles to Jews were arbitrarily cancelled; in the second, the right to be Jewish in cultural terms - i.e. to dress differently, etc. - was effectively abolished; and, in the third, an attempt was made to force all Jews to become part of a single faith community that would have had the same sort of relationship to the French state as that involved by the Catholic Church. You will forgive me, then, if I am not very starry eyed!

As regards the War of the First Coalition, I do not deny that Robespierre and co. thought that they were waging an ideological war in 1793-94, and that the Directory may at times have thought the same thereafter. But analysing the Allied war aims suggest that in absolutely no case whatsoever was anybody actually challenging France in this fashion: Russia did not get to war until 1798; Spain made peace in 1795 and forged an alliance with France in 1796; Prussia never pulled her weight in the campaign and then turned neutral in 1795; and even Britain considered a compromise peace in 1797 and actually signed one in 1802. So...

Next, the War of the Second Coalition. What you say here is beyond me: Napoleon may well have been in Egypt when the war broke out, but this ignores the fact that the invasion played a major role in sparking off that conflict, not least by finally jerking the Russians out of their previous isolation. As for whether it was a disaster or not, well I suppose that peace terms that allowed France to keep Egypt might have

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made it all worth while in the end, but, unless Britain could be utterly crushed militarily, such terms were never likely to be forthcoming. When one considers, too, that Napoleon was almost beaten at Marengo for want of troops, the thought of the 25,000 or so men tied down in Egypt tends to loom large.

Moving on, we come to Napoleon's relations with other powers. There were, of course, always elements in most countries who wanted only to fight the French and were keen to bang the drum of war on almost every occasion, just as it is certainly true that Alexander considered going to war against Napoleon in 1811. Yet the first group really only succeeded in making themselves heard when Napoleon's actions opened the way for this - for example, in 1808-1809 the war party in Austria would never have secured the influence they did but for Napoleon's intervention in Spain. And, as for Alexander, he never broke with the Continental Blockade per se - the Ukase of 31 October 1810 is rather about slapping massive tariffs on French imports - and was only driven to consider war by Napoleon's annexations in Germany and augmentation of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw in 1809-1810 (the charge of not helping Napoleon against the Austrians in 1809, I accept, but I fear that Napoleon had already shown bad faith here by refusing to give any support to his war against Turkey). At the same time, in the end he backed away from the idea and instead adopted a defensive strategy. In short, unlike Napoleon, you could say that he gave peace a chance.

Finally, 1814 and all that. Well, I suppose we will never be able to prove anything, one way or the other, but by 1814 I think that the French people would have been only too happy to free Napoleon from his coronation oath. As for the frontiers of 1804 (if you mean by that metropolitan France and the then Italian Republic), it is clear that he could almost certainly have got precisely that if he had only come to terms in the summer of 1813 or even in the wake of the Battle of Leipzig. As for his defence of France in 1814, I am actually on record as saying that the campaign was one of the most skilful in his career, but that does not for one moment change the fact that it was as utterly futile as it was self-indulgent. Unlike Louis XIV, Napoleon forgot that statesmanship is the art of the possible, and that, of course, is but one more reason why he does not deserve the title that you have accorded him.

All best wishes,

Charles