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Book Review II

Napoleon

By R.S. Alexander



Reviewed by John Prendergast '13

As evident by the thousands of works detailing his life, Napoleon is one of the most intriguing characters in modern history. Authors spend years trying to uncover the very core of Napoleon's character, and he is seen as anywhere from good to evil, conqueror to unifier, et cetera. Pieter Geyl has called Napoleon "the debate without end," as a consensus to Napoleon's character will likely never be reached.¹ An Associate Professor of History at the University of Victoria in Canada, R.S. Alexander avoids the trap of a blow-by-blow, chronological account of Napoleon's life. Instead, Alexander takes a unique approach by analyzing the many reputations associated with Napoleon and how these reputations have evolved over time.

Alexander uses the first chapter to highlight the critical parts of Napoleon's life as well as France's condition during the time period. This is the first and only occasion in the book where such a chronological setup is employed. Napoleon was born in Corsica in 1769 to Carlo and Letizia Buonaparte. His father was never really around much, typically off on business—both professional and adulterous.² This left Letizia to care for Napoleon and his siblings, but even Napoleon was soon off to military school. He entered the military school of Brienne in 1779 at age 10; nine years later he was commissioned as a lieutenant, still a mere teenager. Soon, France fell prey to turmoil. Louis XVI was executed in 1793, the extremists initiated the Reign of Terror, and many members of the nobility fled the country. This paved the way for people like Napoleon, who used his training coupled with success in the field to gain recognition. He was so promising that he landed himself in prison for much of August 1794 by Saliceti due to a feared takeover. The very next year in October, Napoleon was charged by Paul Barras to suppress a

¹ R.S. Alexander, *Napoleon*, London: Oxford University Press (2001), 6.

² *Ibid*, 11.

royalist uprising—from which we derive his famous phrase that he had cleared the streets with a “whiff of grapeshot.”³

Napoleon really got his first taste of rule in Italy, where his success ultimately led to an “oriental complex”⁴ of sorts: he wanted a piece of the Middle East. He landed in Egypt in June 1798, but he departed the next year after defeat as well as news of French losses in the European theater. His return to France in August 1799 signaled the establishment of the Consulate which some might have saw as a precursor to dictatorship, but this is not clear.⁵ What is clear is that Napoleon formed a significant power base within the army and public, he made himself First Consul, the Church became a puppet of the state, and criticism of the state was put down—this was the so-called price of effective government.⁶ Ultimately, Napoleon crowned himself Emperor on December 2nd 1804. Key government posts were given to his family members in France and abroad as it became clear that France sought to expand her limits. He divorced Josephine in 1809 and married Marie-Louise, mostly because Josephine could not provide him with an heir. Napoleon continued his look outward with wars of liberation in 1813-1814, but the Empire eventually fell because “Napoleon failed to extricate himself from Spain prior to taking the Grand Army deep into Russia.”⁷ Alexander provides some analysis in that Napoleon was unwilling to settle for anything less than victory.

Unfortunately for Napoleon, defeat led to an exile to Elba where he was under close watch from Francis I of Austria who held Marie-Louise and Napoleon’s son to ensure good behavior. This did not deter Napoleon, and Napoleon returned to Paris in March 1815 amid potential plots against the regime. He essentially declared that he was the revolution, and he threatened to “hang priests and nobles from the lampposts if they did not desist in attacking the rights of the nation.”⁸ The following period, known as the Hundred Days, led to a movement of Napoleon’s followers to take back the government but, ultimately, they were defeated at Waterloo on June 18th 1815, and Napoleon was transferred to St. Helena where he would remain until his death.

Alexander next shifts the focus to the post-Napoleon period of the nineteenth century, particularly how his character and leadership shaped those after him, as well as the adoption of Napoleonic principles from both the Left and Right, also known as Bonapartism. When Louis-Napoleon rose to power, he tried to emulate his uncle’s philosophy—“liberal division of powers combined with a strong executive led by an Emperor who would implement the will of the people.”⁹ He also understood the idea of “France first” when advancing the military into conflicts for expansionist reasons. His defeat at Sedan damaged Bonapartism until the 3rd Republic and the New Right but, even then, patriotism became exclusive to “France only” and there lost a sense of “bringing progress to less fortunate peoples”¹⁰—an ideal of the Left that was in line with Napoleon’s vision.

³ Ibid, 16.

⁴ Ibid, 18.

⁵ Ibid, 19.

⁶ Ibid, 20-24.

⁷ Ibid, 30.

⁸ Ibid, 32.

⁹ Ibid, 46.

¹⁰ Ibid, 52.

Napoleon as the Great Commander and Man on Horseback also came to fruition in the nineteenth century. The latter image refers to the leader whose power originates from a military position but then soon broadens to encompass the social and political arena. Alexander notes that Napoleon certainly had his fair share of defeats in battle, but “[his] failures were more than balanced by his victories.”¹¹ He often employed a high-risk strategy, one which saw casualties as essentially irrelevant. Most European commanders were hesitant about this, but there are elements of this philosophy in World War I and II—this notion of “seizing the initiative and imposing [your] will on [your] opponents”¹² was appealing but, generally, casualties were not as liberally accepted as Napoleon would have it. Napoleon, after all, is viewed as the first modern dictator by many and, thus, there comes with that a certain role which does not always bring out the most humane qualities that one would typically look for in a leader today.

In this vein, there developed what Alexander describes as the Black Legend, an attempt to demonize Napoleon during the nineteenth century. These portrayals originated abroad, usually from German, Italian, and Russian writers which leads one to suspect that they were simply jealous of France’s success against their own people. These authors paint Napoleon as “scheming, ungrateful, cruel, and a physical coward”¹³ who turned his back on those loyal to him. They also invoked powerful language, such that Napoleon was “the source of all evil and the end of all good...a patricidal demon spawned by Hell...”¹⁴ et al. Some of the darker tales speak of Napoleon’s poisoning of his own troops at Jaffa, and his slaughter of Turkish prisoners at El Arish.¹⁵ Many people took all this for what it was, rhetoric, but the French government actually incurred some criticism, so this technique did work to an extent. After all, most Europeans viewed Napoleon as a conqueror.

Despite this, there are many commanders who use Napoleon’s style as a model for their own undertakings—and rightfully so given Napoleon’s undeniable talent and success in the military realm. Alexander points out the four Haitian Men on Horseback, specifically Henry Christophe and Faustin Soulouque as drawing the closest comparison to Napoleon. Alexander also invokes General Santa Anna of Mexico for comparison, noting how both he and Napoleon used plebiscites to keep the hoi polloi involved, they recognized the importance of propaganda, and the “prevention of alternative accounts [of propaganda] when they had the power to do so.”¹⁶ Santa Anna’s flight in the face of American invaders also boasts a similarity to Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow, although Napoleon has an entire overture to show for his failing, Santa Anna does not.¹⁷ Alexander keeps the topic still slightly on character comparison in Chapter 4 but, instead, entertains the question: was Napoleon the precursor to fascism? This analysis is simply the result of circumstance. In other words, Napoleon would not be studied in this light had it not been for the European hegemony movement of the twentieth century by the likes of Hitler and Mussolini. The answer to this question also depends on how fascism is

¹¹ Ibid, 66.

¹² Ibid, 67.

¹³ Ibid, 71.

¹⁴ Ibid, 72.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, 80.

¹⁷ I am alluding to Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*, musically depicting Napoleon’s retreat from the Russian capital after yielding to “Mother Winter’s” fury.

defined, but Alexander does his best to situate Napoleon within the general, broad interpretation of fascism: “[Napoleon] exploited disillusionment with parliamentary government to establish the authoritarian regime that emerged as the Empire” and he “likened himself to famous forerunners... [and associated himself] with a seemingly incongruous variety of heroes.” Moreover, Napoleonic Rule was that of one person, not one party, and his government repressed “all political and social organization, not just opposing associations”¹⁸—plebiscites were really only there to be used at his convenience. While it is true Napoleon was concerned about public opinion, “the ethos of the regime was less to represent than to direct opinion.”¹⁹

On the other hand, Alexander answers his own assertions. First, France’s police state was too benign when compared to the fascist regimes of Hitler and Mussolini. Additionally, Napoleon’s renewal of social hierarchy has more in common with conservative ideology than a fascist one. It is also interesting to point out that Napoleon never made claims for land as the Nazis had done through lebensraum policy, but yet the French Empire was obviously rooted in a desire to conquer and expand. Alexander does not take a concrete position here in regards to Napoleon and fascism, but he does note that “the image of Hitler and Mussolini are sufficiently powerful that they do not need any association with Napoleon to heighten effect.”²⁰

The focus shifts in the next few chapters to Napoleon as depicted in literature and art, as well as how he stands next to the common man. Art renderings almost always show Napoleon in a positive, superhuman light. Placing his hand to stomach at an almost 90 degree angle of his arm is a popular depiction—divine-like, yes, but also a modest image. Simplicity was a way of saying that it was the talent beneath which made this man special. Jacques-Louis David is probably the most notable Napoleon artist that Alexander mentions, and it was always David’s goal to depict Napoleon as “symbolic of France, glory, and selfless dedication.”²¹ Because of such extraordinary portrayals, Alexander believes, opponents felt compelled to respond with equally embellished interpretations, albeit written, via the Black Legend.

Napoleon has been used by many authors in literature throughout the years, each obviously in different ways. In *Crime and Punishment*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky invokes not Napoleon ‘the man,’ but rather Napoleon as a ‘type’ of person. Napoleon had Europe in a state of terror right before his retreat and, moreover, he died with the blood of thousands on his hands—yet he celebrated and glorified by many. Similarly, the protagonist Raskolnikov in the Dostoyevsky work wanted to be glorified after he committed murder, thus comes the line: “I wanted to make myself a Napoleon, and that is why I killed her.”²² Alexander discusses other authors who reference Napoleon for the ‘type’ of person he was, but most notably is Arthur Conan Doyle. In *Sherlock Holmes*, Doyle’s protagonist Detective Holmes describes his rival Professor Moriarty as “the Napoleon of crime!”²³ This implies a sense of genius, one who is “unswerving in relentless application if his will.”²⁴

¹⁸ Alexander, 92-95.

¹⁹ Ibid, 95.

²⁰ Ibid, 113.

²¹ Ibid, 123.

²² Ibid, 136.

²³ Ibid, 141.

²⁴ Ibid, 142.

Many students are not convinced that Napoleon shared characteristics with the common man. After all, pensions in the army were low, he did little to improve medical service, and there was certainly a lack of food, clothing, and arms provisions. With that said, Alexander notes Napoleon drew his greatest support and loyalty from the rank and file because he was friendly towards them: he learned the names of veteran servicemen, appeared amongst the men at campfires, and he even rode along through the lines before battle. By identifying as the “Little Corporal,” Napoleon made himself more human and likeable but, at the same time, he was still the protector of the people.²⁵ This idea changed a bit in the twentieth century, especially through movies. No longer was there this image of a martyr awaiting his Christ-like death on St. Helena, but rather Napoleon was a tyrant—indifferent to the people.²⁶ Able Gance’s 1927 work presents Napoleon as “a man of destiny...conquering the elements, with no time to waste of crowd adoration.”²⁷ Alexander concludes that Napoleon was “singularly talented and not truly of the people, but there are many aspiring Napoleon’s among the people.”²⁸

Alexander wraps up his study with yet another question: will Napoleon be remembered as a conqueror or unifier? It is once again appropriate to invoke Geyl’s “a debate without end,” though Alexander attempts to somewhat help along the ‘unifier’ advocates. Napoleon promoted the modern state outside of France, which was assisted through the exportation of the Napoleonic model. Additionally, the power of the central government was extended, and the model enhanced the means through which the state could act. With that said, Alexander comes back to the idea of ‘conqueror’—the concept of “France first” during the Empire cannot be ignored.

Just as Alexander depicts the good and bad about Napoleon, there are both good and bad qualities regarding this work. First off, Alexander utilizes a thematic, topical organization which puts him off to a good start. Blow-by-blow chronologies can often be boring and too long-winded, losing the attention of the reader. Alexander elects to use the thematic setup to analyze how Napoleon’s reputation has evolved throughout the past two-hundred years. If there is a particular area the reader wants to explore, they have the luxury to do so without reading the entire work (aided by a simple, yet nice table of contents). Another big strength of this work is its very diverse, large range of citation. Both the chronology table and bibliography are, to phrase it in Latin, *mirabile visu*. This demonstrates a well-researched piece of literature not cheated by lack of preparation. Alexander compliments the range of reference with a few photographs throughout to illustrate the relevant theme—but they were employed so few and far between that their use was of dubious effect.

The major flaw with Alexander’s work is the lack of a clear and concise thesis. When there is such a lack of a tangible thesis, the reader is left to assume that the thesis lies implicit within the work, but even this does not seem to be the case here. Just about every chapter makes a point but then issues a rebuttal to that point. There is nothing wrong with rebuttal or playing devil’s advocate—such ability actually adds analytic

²⁵ Ibid, 158.

²⁶ This idea/image of Napoleon lacking virtue reminds me of his statement, “They wanted me to be another Washington; I could not be a Washington.” Regardless of how he presented himself to the people, he was, first and foremost, power-driven. If you impeded this mission, you were expendable.

²⁷ Alexander, 167; This reinforces the aforementioned point.

²⁸ Ibid, 173.

depth to such a work. However, the author must come back and rebut the rebuttal, so to speak. Only then can conclusions or arguments be put forth. Unfortunately, Alexander fails in this regard; for instance, in the conqueror vs. unifier debate, he demonstrates the points for each but then does not take a position. The same can be said for the fascism debate. He offers very little analysis throughout the work but, when he does, it does not advance any argument—it merely contextualizes a minor point. Putting forth all of the competing visions of Napoleon without establishing a superior point of view leaves nothing more than a confused audience member.

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