

2015: Bicentenary of Waterloo. The legacy of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Foreword

After Leipzig defeat and the escape from the Elba island, when Napoleon got to the mainland Louis XVIII sent to Grenoble the 5th and 7th regiments to stop him. On 7 March 1815, in Laffrey (20 km south of Grenoble) Napoleon stepped out in front of the regiments, ripped open his coat and shouted: “Soldats, me reconnaissez-vous? S'il en est un parmi vous qui veuille tuer son Empereur, me voici!” (“Soldiers, you recognize me. If any man would shoot his Emperor, he may do so now!”). There was a brief silence, then the soldiers shouted: “Vive l'Empereur!”. Napoleon was back in power, but only for 100 days.

How was it possible that Napoleon, the most powerful man in Europe could ever possibly be defeated? The Quadruple Alliance was a unified effort with Great Britain, Russia, Prussia and Austria against him. The defeat at Leipzig in 1813, preceded by the tragic Russian Campaign, will be followed by the fateful Waterloo's battle in which Marshal Grouchy, who lacked the charismatic spirit necessary in such event, was unable to join Napoleon at the most critical time when Blucher with the Prussian Cavalry supported Wellington in the final and decisive push.

Napoleon Bonaparte

In his “Speech to the French Academy” on 3 June 1841, Victor Hugo did maintain: “At the beginning of this century, France was for the nations a splendid spectacle. A man filled it then and made it so large that it filled Europe. This man, left the shade, had arrived in few years at the highest royalty which never perhaps astonished the history. A revolution had given birth to him, a people had chosen him, a pope had crowned him. Each year he moved forward the borders of his empire...He had erased the Alps like Charlemagne and the Pyrenees like Louis XIV. He had built his State with center of Europe like a citadel... All in this man was disproportionate and splendid: he was above Europe like an extraordinary vision.”

Napoleon knew how to make 36 million French obey him without any authority but his genius. Complicated character and multifaceted figure, he is considered by the “Larousse Grand Dictionnaire Universelle du XIX^{ème} siècle” the greatest, most glorious, most radiant name in history and on the opposite side, a political and military dictator, an imitator of Caesars.

Napoleon wanted to take over all of Europe, and he almost did. At the height of

power his empire extended from the North Sea to the Mediterranean, from the Atlantic Sea till Russia. He ruled over the Dutch, German, Polish, Italian, and Austrian.

He was seen as a threat by the reactionary feudal regimes still ruling much of Europe in his time: to the crowned heads of Europe he represented something similar to a Lenin or a Mao, a charismatic leader at the helm of a powerful nation infected with subversive political notions whose spreading had to be contained at any cost. Hence the “Napoleonic Wars”, an international effort to beat France and destroy her remaining revolutionary virus by successive coalitions organized by a reactionary England, the great defender of the global “status quo” in the 18th and 19th centuries.

He was a military genius on land but was unable to defeat Nelson on water. After Trafalgar he had to give up his plans to invade Great Britain with the Grand Army, 200,000 strong, already assembled along the English Channel coast: but if he was accused of an anti-British obsession was not there the same obsession across the Channel against France?

Leader, Master and Commander

One thing is undeniable: Napoleon was an astounding leader. He was a great motivator of people, from the lowest soldier to the high ranking generals and aristocrats. Bonaparte knew that in order for him to succeed he had to have the people around him enthusiastic about the mission. A leader must win the trust of the people he is leading: his soldiers knew that he would always find a new and clever way leading to victory.

Napoleon was well aware that if the soldiers felt appreciated they would perform with an intense sense of duty to their country and leader.

To reward them of accomplishment, he created the Legion of Honor. He would also encourage soldiers in other ways. While visiting formations he would ask the battalion commander: “Who is the bravest man in this battalion?” Once the commander had selected the bravest man, Napoleon would take a medal off of his own coat and pin it to the selected soldier. The finest example of his humanity was after the battle of Austerlitz, when he announced that the wives of those killed in battle would receive lifetime annual pensions, and he literally adopted the children of the dead, paying child support and education expenses, and allowing them to add the name of Napoleon to their own.

He was very willing to show gratitude and say “thank you” to his soldiers, presenting them with rewards and gifts, letting them know how much he valued their effort and how much they meant to him.

In the battlefield he was close to his men, risking his life and sharing the dangers of war: he did not wait on a hill, rather he led the charge so that he won

the respect of the soldiers around him who felt that he was one of them. This was his outstanding approach to leadership: he perfectly knew that an army based on honor, pride and personal loyalty is difficult to overcome.

By resorting to surprise, speed and management of information he conducted rapid and decisive offensive attacks over defensive positions (anticipating the German Blitzkrieg). His troops were amazing: they marched 50 miles in 36 hours during one campaign in Italy in 1796 and accomplished 275 miles in 23 days during the Austrian campaign in 1805.

In the end what cannot be overlooked is that through all the highs and lows in his career, his troops adored him and the people admired him. Even his enemies respected his abilities, including Wellington: "In this age, in past ages, in any age, Napoleon".

Napoleon had an amazing capacity for work, to the point of being a workaholic. He used to stay up through the night making notes, reviewing reports from the field, and writing letters (80,000 throughout his career). He was extremely lucid, aware of every detail and well versed in many subjects. He was fascinated by History. Socially, he had a quick and clever wit.

What made him extraordinary was his awareness, his ability to see the forest and the trees. It was awareness that enabled him to craft the vision of a better future in a time of extreme chaos, to understand what motivates troops and the public at large, to negotiate successfully with foreign diplomats, to achieve victory after victory through awareness of the territory, of the enemy and of his likely next moves.

Politician, Lawmaker, Administrator and Innovator

While his armies were busy securing the military domination of Europe, Napoleon was also extending the reforms within France to Europe (the Napoleon Code, corps of civil servants, careers opened to talent and equalized taxes). His domestic policy, influenced by the Revolution, affects five areas: government, religion, law, education and economy. Serfdom and manorial dues were abolished. Freedom of religion was permitted, guilds were abolished, uniform systems of weights and measures were established, roads and canals were built, and secular education was promoted.

Napoleon was a real man as well as a legend. In his *Memories* he tells us his aim was to defend the Revolution and consolidate its gains. He emerges as a champion of equality, a supporter of popular sovereignty, a destroyer of privilege and a lover of peace.

He was an extraordinary man, a self-made man. His drive, will, military genius and charisma made him a great man, a world historical figure. Machiavelli would have found Napoleon to be his perfect Prince. Moreover, by spreading

revolutionary ideals and institutions, he made it impossible for the restoration of the ancient regime. After Napoleon there was no turning back: feudalism was dead, society was secularized, the modern nation-state replaced the dynastic state, and the bourgeoisie became the new class of privilege and status.

In some respects Napoleon was an evil necessity: the Napoleonic wars helped expurgate the European System by eliminating many small, but not viable states; expanding others and consolidating yet others. Also, the wars gave many European countries the necessary impetus to introduce reforms that modernized the state administrative machinery. The methods of organizing and running the state (taxation, recruitment, police and justice) were largely maintained by Restoration governments (which regime can boast of having left a legacy hardly modified by his successors? Not many. Food for thought...). Europe after Napoleon was better equipped to deal with the international problems that it had to confront, and usually did so in a spirit of conciliation and co-operation.

Waterloo

Whenever God is against a thing it cannot survive. In his description of Waterloo, Victor Hugo asks: "Was it possible that Napoleon should win this battle? I answer no. Because of Wellington? Because of Blucher? No. Because of God! For Bonaparte to conquer at Waterloo was not the law of the 19th century. It was time that this vast man should fall. He had been impeached before the Infinite! He had vexed God! Waterloo was not a battle; it was the change of front of the Universe."

The Battle of Waterloo was fought on 18 June 1815: a French army under the command of Napoleon was defeated by the armies of the 7th Coalition, comprising an Anglo-allied army under the command of the Duke of Wellington combined with a Prussian army under the command of Blücher.

Napoleon's plan of action was a masterpiece: go straight at the center of the allied line, make a hole through the enemy, cut him in two, seize Waterloo, drive the Germans into the Rhine and the English into the sea.

Notwithstanding the horrible weather that had softened the ground - retarding till 11.35 a.m. the attack scheduled at 06.00 a.m. - and a series of drawbacks and unfortunate events Napoleon was able to turn the battle in his favor: Wellington was starting to withdraw when Blucher arrived with the Prussian cavalry thus causing the defeat of Napoleon. Had Blucher only arrived an hour later, he would have witnessed the triumph of Napoleon who had already dispatched a messenger to Paris announcing his victory. But that brilliancy called history is pitiless: it has this strange and divine thing about it, that, all light as it is, and because it is light, it often throws shadows over spots before luminous.

The real hero and moral victor of Waterloo was, anyway, Cambronne leading the few squares of the Imperial Guard still strenuously opposing the enemy's advance. Requested to surrender Cambronne, feeling deceived and oppressed by injustice and falsehood, foaming at the mouth, uttered in anger and pride at the enemy: "Go to hell!". Following this insulting word, the formidable and legendary remnant of the Guard was annihilated by the English batteries: it was thus that the French legions expired at Waterloo.

After Waterloo the kings placed themselves in the gap left unfilled by the disappearance of Napoleon, and old Europe took advantage of it to effect a reformation. But the ardent eyes of the youthful generation were turned toward the star of liberty. Waterloo had no other effect than to continue the revolutionary work on another side with the arrival of the thinkers: the age which Waterloo wished to arrest marched over it, and continued its route towards liberty. Napoleon's phantom caused the old world to tremble, and kings sat uneasily on their throne, with the rock of St. Helena on the horizon where Napoleon was dying while the sixty thousand men who fell at Waterloo rotted calmly, and something of their sacrifice spread over the world.

Napoleon's death

After the defeat of Waterloo, Napoleon was exiled and imprisoned on the island of St. Helena (1815), where he was to remain until his death (1821). His death was almost uneventful for such a political icon who was surely entitled to a more heroic death. Nevertheless, his exile and "simple" death did not affect the mystery and admiration that surrounded him.

During his lifetime, Napoleon was an enigmatic and complicated figure, and this was very much the case after his death. Both of Napoleon's funerals, the simple and private ceremony in St. Helena and the magnificent procession in Paris, witnessed the overwhelming emotion felt by the French. Both funerals were however extremely silent, which shows just how much respect people had for the emperor. The return of his remains was a momentous event for the French population, eventually united in recognition of their former emperor.

It is certain that his death in exile and the wait of twenty years for him to return to his beloved country was one of the biggest contributing factors to the endurance of his posthumous image, giving the French public time to grow fonder of their late emperor and to come to terms with his impact on the nation. A complex individual who combined profound historical achievements with a rich romantic legend, Napoleon Bonaparte is like few other characters in the history of the modern world.

Napoleon and Europe

Napoleon, by keeping in mind previous attempts, came closer to unifying the European continent than any other person. His specter continues to haunt opponents of the EU.

Is Napoleon the real father of Europe? Many of the EU's features – federal law, the common market, the dismantling of frontiers, the promotion of the idea of the rights of man – can be traced back to him. Even the Grand Army brought together people from 20 nations.

Had he only won the war in Russia “Europe would soon have been but one people, and anyone who traveled anywhere would have found himself always in the common fatherland”. “I wished to found a European system, a European Code of Laws, a European Judiciary: there would be but one people in Europe” declared Napoleon nearly 200 years ago.

He was an early exponent of the European integration or even a sort of progenitor of the current EU: during a conversation in St. Helena, Napoleon remarked “Europe thus divided into nationalities freely formed and free internally, peace between States would have become easier: the United States of Europe would become a possibility”.

It was a European vision: his goal was to unite a continent under a common system of administration and justice, anticipating Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman.

This is why Napoleon legacy should be understood in terms of his political ambitions, a dream of exercising power and domination as much as a dream of providing stability and civic order. He brought what for many Europeans, subject to absolute rule, aristocratic privilege and feudal law, could seem like real progress. People in Europe, for the first time, were given equal access to administration, to justice and to professions regardless of their social origins or religious affiliation. States better governed with more professional standards of bureaucracy, less corruption, more efficiency. He was not a libertarian or pluralist but his ideology was based not on division or hatred but on administrative efficiency and submission to the law in a state to remain stubbornly secular.

His successes were unparalleled. By fighting against the inequalities of monarchy and creating order in a time of chaos, he was able to rise from obscurity to become the ruler of all Western Europe in a few years, something that the Romans took hundreds of years to accomplish.

Even in exile Napoleon had an eye to posterity. In his *Memories* he promotes the view that he was a beneficent, enlightened ruler, a lawmaker who wanted to unify Europe in much the same way as the Roman and the Carolingian Empires. He managed to disseminate the Revolution through a policy of expansionism that the revolutionaries could not have conceived and to bring the French

administrative model to places where it would never have otherwise gone.

Napoleon's legacy

For some he was the savior of the Revolution against the forces of reaction and the architect of French greatness, while for others he was an exploiter who used France as a platform for his ambitions as usurper, tyrant and warmonger. In the Memorial of St. Helena published in 1823, after his death, Napoleon presented himself as a savior of France, a friend of liberty and builder of a European Confederation.

The 1969 bicentenary of his birth stimulated a revival of interest. Although recent works claim to be impartial and critical, the lines of debate are often clearly drawn between those who imagine Napoleon as a hero and those who see him as a villain.

After the bicentenary of the French Revolution there was renewed scholarship on Napoleon, much of which saw him as heir to that revolution and starter of a new model of law, justice and administration, successively exported to Italy, Germany and Low Countries.

Considered a father of modern democracy and of fascism, he continues to fascinate so many people: besides being a superb general, Napoleon was an extraordinary able and complex man able to speak directly to the elemental feelings of the human psyche.

Byron, not known for his modesty, considered himself “an insect when compared to this man”, Goethe used Napoleon to embody his complex concept of the daemonic. Carlyle and Wagner assumed that greatness existed and was palpable in humanity past and present, with heroes like Napoleon still walking the earth.

In today's France Napoleon elicits a mixed response. In Italy he is much admired, as participants in the “First International Napoleon Congress” in Alessandria in 1997 can attest. Milan's “Museo del Risorgimento” has Napoleon inaugurating the movement that led to Italian independence. Germany has a huge “Napoleon Society”. In England Napoleon arouses far more interest than any other figure of the age, including the man who defeated him, Wellington.

Napoleon, besides mesmerizing Hugo, Balzac, Dostoyevsky inspired also a number of novels, poems, paintings and, starting from the 19th century, films as well.

Considerations

Napoleon brought an end to the violence of the French Revolution while preserving many of its core ideals. He became the model of the autocratic, popular leader who takes absolute power with the will of the people (Hitler, Mussolini, Franco) Tyrant or hero? Perhaps a bit of both. He knew that to consolidate the Revolution and bind together the different social classes he had to become both a statesman and a tyrant.

He was not only a military strategist but a political leader who when he had no political authority but the power deriving from military supremacy did not hesitate to seize political initiatives but without allowing the army to assume political control in France or elsewhere.

Napoleon was neither a democrat nor a republican: he was an enlightened despot, the sort of man Voltaire might have found appealing. He admired efficiency and strength and hated feudalism, religious intolerance, and civil inequality. Enlightened despotism meant political stability. He knew Roman history well: after 500 years of republicanism, Rome became an empire under Augustus.

By 1848, the ideals embodied in the French Revolution and codified in the Civil Code spread through Europe once again. Revolutions broke out in Prussia, Austria, Germany and Italy, as well in France, as citizens demanded greater rights. Today, many of the current legal structures of nations that defied Napoleon are based on the concepts of his Civil Code which assured the spread of the new ideals, thus identifying Napoleon as a symbol of revolutionary change. "There is no immortality", Napoleon said, "but the memory that is left in the minds of men".

Unfortunately, in the end, power got the better of Napoleon, clouded by his overwhelming desire to protect his territorial gains and his legacy. When he realized it, it was too late: the damage had been done. Fifteen years after becoming the ruler of all Western Europe, he was a prisoner on the stormy and desolate island of St. Helena, writing his memories, isolated, defeated and alone.

Conclusions

In the list of the top 100 most significant figures in History Napoleon ranks 2nd, just behind Jesus and before Muhammad and Shakespeare (1).

Simple narratives of Napoleon can fill whole books, let alone detailed discussions of his achievements, and historians still remain divided over the Emperor: was he a cruel tyrant or an enlightened despot?

He is, and remains, so fascinating because of the massive effect he had on

Europe through a warfare that lasted for twenty years. Few individuals have ever had such a huge effect on the world, on economics, politics, technology, culture and society.

Absolute military genius, superb politician, outstanding legislator, Napoleon was able to combine all his potentials and, by resorting to talent and force of will, to build and steer an empire.

It was the French Revolution to create Napoleon and, although much of his accomplishments over fifteen years seemed to undermine the principles of 1789, the end result was that many of the achievements of the Revolution were made manifest across Europe: as Napoleon's soldiers marched they carried with them ideas of equality and seeds of liberalism which, once planted, were impossible to eradicate.

Like most men of stature and power (Alexander, Augustus, Charlemagne, Peter the Great, Hitler and Stalin) Napoleon was a complex personality. His intellectual ability was clearly impressive. He had grandiose ideas. He had a philosophical mind. He was a rationalist, a philosopher who placed his trust in reason, in knowledge and in methodical effort. But his personality was not pure intellect: he also had a love of action and a boundless ambition. "I live only for posterity", he said, "Death is nothing....but to live defeated and without glory is to die every day." He was an artist, a poet of action, for whom France, Europe and mankind were but instruments. He had charisma, he could move men to obedience, to loyalty and to heroic acts.

Stendhal, after a pilgrimage to Laffrey, wrote : "Here it was decided the fate of one of the most romantic and noble enterprises of modern times". He also predicted that a statue of the emperor would one day grace the site, as indeed was to occur: today an equestrian statue of Napoleon is located in Laffrey in the place named "Prairie de la Rencontre" (Meeting Meadow).

(1) Time Magazine, December 2013. Each candidate was evaluated by aggregating millions of traces of opinions into a computational data-centric analysis and by integrating a diverse set of measurements about his reputation into a single consensus value