



NAPOLEON: DICTATOR, OR POLITICAL VISIONARY? AN INTERVIEW WITH THIERRY LENTZ

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In this "Year of Napoleon," we are highly honored to present this exclusive interview with Thierry Lentz, who is the foremost authority on Napoleon Bonaparte. He has [written over sixty books](#) on the Consulate period as well as the First French Empire. He is the current director of the [Fondation Napoléon](#), and a Professor at the Institut catholique de Vendée.

On the occasion of the bicentenary of Napoleon's death (May 5, 1821), Professor Lentz is interviewed by [Arnaud Imatz](#), on behalf of the Postil.

Arnaud Imatz (AI): 2021 is the year of the bicentenary of Napoleon's death at [Longwood](#) on the island of Saint Helena, May 5, 1821. The historical figure of the Emperor of the French (although it might be more appropriate to say the "historical figures" of the Emperor) has inspired in the world, and not only in France, an infinity of novels, historical works, films (more than a thousand) and pictorial or musical works. The two legends of Napoleon, [black](#) and [golden](#), are now firmly established. But why does Napoleon still remain so much in our memories?



Thierry Lentz.

Thierry Lentz (TL): Napoleon is present in our memories for all the reasons you have just mentioned. He occupies a very special place in French history and memory. But beyond that, he is also linked to our daily life and our habits. Our state still resembles the one he created, our institutions are his and, above all, our daily life is influenced by the [Civil Code](#). Even though this Code has undergone multiple reforms, necessary to adapt to new times and mores, its framework is still the same. It influences our daily lives and even what happens after we die through inheritance law. We are thus aware of the importance of Napoleon in our history... without always remembering that he is indeed there, in our present.

AI: In 1815, the 15-year adventure ended in disaster; the black legend certainly seemed to have definitely won. Napoleon “the warmonger” deserved nothing but ignorance and oblivion. However, the situation did quickly change. How and why did he become the hero of the 19th century liberal romantics against monarchists and traditionalists?

TL: The defeat at Waterloo, and the [Treaty of Paris](#) of November 1815, were indeed a catastrophe for France: it was occupied for three years and had to pay a formidable war indemnity. As a result, the image of Napoleon was tarnished; and we can say that it is then that the black legend triumphed. Even his death, announced in Europe in July 1821, went almost unnoticed. The displays of mourning were sporadic.

It was two years later, with the publication of [The Memorial of Saint Helena](#) by [Emmanuel de Las Cases](#), that things started to turn around. As Lamartine came to observe, while France was bored, and Charles X passed away as the restorer of the Ancien Régime, that the image of Napoleon, presented as liberal by the *Memorial*, “recovered” and came to permeate both the arts and politics. The accumulation of references created a somewhat imaginary Napoleon; at the same time as the struggle to maintain the achievements of 1789 was once again becoming a reality. We put the emperor at the head of these struggles.

AI: Should we consider Napoleon as the continuator of the French Revolution, or as its “channeler,” if not its gravedigger? Did he want to conquer Europe in the name of a kind of revolutionary internationalism, or did he paradoxically contribute, by his invasions, to the creation of European nations? Was his ambition to disseminate ideas, relating to the rights of peoples, the defense of civil equality, the “intangible principles” of the Revolution? Or was he quite simply the continuator of Louis XIV, the bearer of the hegemonic aims of France, which then wanted to be dominant in the world as Spain had once been and as England and Germany would be or wanted to be, not to speak of the United States, Russia and China?

TL: Napoleon was undoubtedly the stabilizer of the Revolution, in his own version of 1789. He was certainly not a liberal in politics. But in social matters, he established civil equality, the right to property, the non-confessionality of the state and civil liberty (which is therefore not political). At a time when the country aspired to restore order and enjoy the achievements, he was the right man on the inside. In 1802, he had already accomplished much of the task: the great reforms were launched and civil peace returned.

Outside of France, things were a bit different. He was indeed the continuator of the diplomacy of the Ancien Régime and of the Revolution, halfway between seeking to impose French dominance in Europe and intending to spread the revolutionary principles (of 1789) in Europe. This is why the evaluation of his work outside France is so difficult. This was his main failure. While there is nothing left of the "Great Empire," a great deal of its political and social accomplishments yet remain in France and in Europe.

AI: Why was the French military superior to others at that time?

TL: The French military benefited from its modernization throughout the Revolution, mainly in terms of manpower through conscription. They were now fighting for ideas and every citizen was invited to participate. Napoleon reorganized everything again—his army corps, the doctrine of the employment of cavalry and artillery, the excellence of command, and the amalgamation of old troops and conscripts. He also benefited from the concentration of the army at Boulogne, where for two and a half years, the soldiers lived together and trained, while awaiting the hypothetical invasion of England.

This army would long remain the best in the world and would show this excellence in the campaigns from 1805 to 1807. It was finally led by a true military genius, with a unique eye and quick decision-making. Things did turn sour afterwards, with the war in Spain, which devoured ground-troops, prevented amalgamation and demonstrated that this Grand Army was not invincible.

AI: Until 1795, France had the third largest population in the world, behind only China and India. Isn't this the major explanatory factor for the Napoleonic conquests, rather than the merits and faults of the emperor?

TL: Regarding French military losses, which were poorly understood, it was not until the 1970s to have scientifically established figures. They are essentially derived from the work of demographer-historian [Jacques Houdaille](#). Making use of large-scale scientific surveys in the extensive records, he estimated that there were about 450,000 men killed in action and about as many deaths from injury or illness, along with a few tens of thousands of the "missing." It can be assumed that the actual losses are in the range of 900,000 to 1 million fatalities.

As for the allies and enemies of France, they suffered, it is often said, but without knowing how to prove

it, losses that were "slightly higher" than those of the [Grande Armée](#). If we adopt this principle, the wars of the Empire cost Europe from 2 to 2.5 million men over ten years. While this death toll is significant, it is still lower than in many previous and subsequent wars.

What is more, Europe was not drained of blood at the end of the period, neither economically nor demographically. There was no systematic destruction of towns and villages, and even less of the means of production, except in the Iberian Peninsula where the responsibility was largely shared between French and English troops.

Regarding demography, specialists have shown that France had nearly 1.5 million more inhabitants in 1815 than in 1790. For the whole of Europe, population growth was greater for the 1790-1816 period to what it had been from 1740 to the Revolution. These results are of course due to advances in medicine and the decline in infant mortality. But this general finding will no doubt surprise more than one.

AI: Politically, was Napoleon a "classic" dictator, in the Roman sense, or a totalitarian dictator in the modern sense? Do you consider that despite his mistakes, especially in the choice of ministers, often traitors and incompetents, he remained an exceptional leader or even a political visionary?

TL: It goes without saying that from 1799 to 1815, Napoleon spent every minute strengthening and defending the reign of the executive, even if it meant showing himself to be more and more authoritarian. But to speak of a dictatorship and, moreover, of a military dictatorship, is to make fun of history and the meaning of words.

According to the jurist and political scientist [Maurice Duverger](#)—who has devoted a good part of his work to the concept of dictatorship—three simultaneous conditions are necessary to characterize it: 1) that the regime be installed and maintained by force, in particular military; 2) that it be arbitrary, that is to say that it suppresses freedoms and controls the decisions of arbitral or judicial bodies; 3) that it be considered illegitimate by a large part of the citizens. The study of each of these points for the Napoleonic regime leads to the rejection of any such peremptory conclusion. Under Napoleon, the establishment of a strong and embodied state was not accompanied by the systematic use of illegitimate coercion or indiscriminate force, much less for the benefit of the army.

AI: In economics, was Napoleon an interventionist or a liberal?

TL: In economic matters, Napoleon was more of a "liberal." For him, the state did not have to intervene in the day-to-day economy, except for foreign trade which was carried out "for the grandeur of the state." It was also important to him that the social situation be as stable as possible; and that is why he was able to intervene with public orders at the time of the crises, in particular that of 1810, which was extremely serious.

AI: Is he the "father" of the modern French state?

TL: Napoleon put an end to the trial-and-error approach when it came to the organization of the state and its administration. He simplified the grid into a pyramid model, at the top of which was the executive, not always himself in person, but those who represented the government, such as ministers. This has been called the "French model," moreover adopted by most European states, with adaptations, even among its enemies.

AI: In his will Napoleon declared himself belonging to the Catholic religion. Can the leader of an army of soldiers from the Revolution, whose members were seen as dechristianizers in most countries of Europe, be presented as a Catholic? Wasn't his Catholicism more of interest than conviction?

TL: We will never know whether Napoleon believed in God or not. What is certain is that he saw religions, especially the Catholic religion, as an intermediary body that should contribute to social stability and public order. This is why he "reestablished" Catholicism, organized Protestantism and Judaism, leaving them a certain dogmatic freedom, but subjecting them to the law of the state.

AI: What is the difference between the non-denominational Napoleonic state and the tradition of French republican secularism that prevailed from 1880 onwards, under the Third Republic?

TL: The Napoleonic non-confessionality, established in principle by the Civil Code, is a first step towards secularism. It proclaims that the various churches are subject to the state and to the law. But with Napoleon, this is expressed through concrete measures: public and civil status, acceptance of divorce, submission of faiths to the laws governing public order. He had no ambition to intervene in beliefs; but on the other hand, he left nothing to be organized outside of social and political necessities.

AI: Freemasonry lived fifteen extraordinary years under Napoleon, multiplying the number of lodges

which went from 300 to 1220. Napoleon had many Freemasons in his family (including [Jérôme](#), [Louis](#) and [Joseph](#), whom the Spaniards nicknamed Pepe Botella); 14 of the first 18 marshals were Freemasons, as were a number of generals and most of the great dignitaries of the Empire. What was his relationship to Freemasonry? Was he himself a Freemason?

TL: Even if he himself was not (there is no proof of a supposed initiation in Egypt), Napoleon was surrounded by initiates such as his brothers, as well as [Cambacérés](#), [Lebrun](#), [Fouché](#), [Talleyrand](#), etc. In his Masonic policy, he relied above all on Cambaceres, who appeared to be the "protector" of the Order.

Initiated in 1781 in a lodge in Montpellier, Cambaceres climbed all the ranks and took this commitment very seriously, including at the time of the revolutionary interdicts. He then helped his friend [Alexandre-Louis Roëttiers de Montaleau](#), grand master of the [Grand Orient](#), to "rekindle fires" within the Directory. He thus participated in the first ranks in the meeting of June 22, 1799 by which, in the presence of five hundred masons, the Grand Lodge merged into the Grand Orient.

From that moment, French Freemasonry had almost regained its unity, further supplemented by the addition of the Grand Chapter of Arras to the Grand Orient, on December 27, 1801. It was not affected by the creation of a Scottish lodge, in 1803, an experiment immediately stopped by a new act of union signed a few days after the Imperial Coronation.

This unification of December 5, 1804, sometimes qualified as a "Masonic concordat," confirmed the primacy of the Grand Orient which, in exchange, admitted the maintenance of several rites within it. Napoleon would have liked Freemasonry to constitute an intermediary body supporting the regime. But it was too plural for that; it crossed too many parties to be able to be a real support. It was never that, and continued its existence without problem under other regimes.

AI: It has often been suggested that after his military expedition to Egypt (1798 - 1799), Napoleon Bonaparte professed great sympathy for Islam? Was he sincere?

TL: Napoleon studied Muhammad, especially through the works of Voltaire. He admired his determined and almost warlike aspect. His sympathy for Islam hardly went beyond that. He did not convert, nor was he inspired by it for the Civil Code, as we can sometimes read on websites that are sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood.

AI: Almost all European people had a place in the Grand Army (Dutch, Saxons, Germans, Poles, Spaniards, Portuguese, Italians, Belgians, Austrians, Bavarians, Swiss, etc.). Allied strengths even made up between 20% to 48% of the total force, depending on the campaign, but only the Poles remained loyal to the end. How do you explain that?

TL: It has been said, and we have come to believe, that it was out of pure personal ambition that Napoleon made war. But this forgets that, at that time, peace was a state of emergency and that all states were primarily concerned with preparing for inevitable conflict. This also forgets that history and geopolitics often made it inevitable. I have [written dozens of pages](#) on this subject to which I refer interested readers. I will just repeat here that Europe was not simply divided into two camps during the Napoleonic episode; otherwise, it would not have been until the fall of 1813 that a general coalition was formed against France.

Before that, the continental powers had come to terms with French dominance and tried to make as much profit as possible for themselves. It was the great success of British diplomacy to succeed in uniting all of Europe around its lowest common denominator (bringing down France and its leader), by playing on resentments and unfulfilled promises to some, and to others, on the economy and finances—much more than on the principle of a “liberation” of the Continent. This explains why many foreign contingents were placed at the disposal of the Grande Armée for nearly fifteen years, most often with the consent of their sovereigns.

AI: The controversies surrounding the figure of Napoleon have redoubled in virulence on the eve of the celebration of the bicentenary of his death. The exaltation of heroism and the spirit of sacrifice have now largely given way to victimist and navel-gazing ideology. On the other hand, the wave of political correctness and the nihilistic modes embodied in the woke spirit or the cancel culture originating in North America seem irresistible. As a result, the vast majority of the media see Napoleon only as a tyrant, an instigator of war, a misogynist, a supporter of patriarchy, a slaver (for having reestablished slavery eight years after its suppression and imprisoned [Toussaint Louverture](#), a black separatist, who had been appointed general under the Directory). How do you answer these charges?

TL: I answer them at length in the book I just published, [Pour Napoléon](#) (*For Napoleon*). I think we are at an important time in the fight against the trends that you describe.

Our rulers are paralyzed by groups which have made a specialty of amalgams and historical untruths to

impose their “agenda,” and to accuse their country of having “murdered” entire categories, and then defiling public places or calling for action and riot?

Nothing was done either to prevent or to combat the iconoclastic fever that came from the United States, after the tragic death of George Floyd. Even though we sometimes think that the famous “submission,” nicely denounced by [Michel Houellebecq](#), is a bit tricky, it is all the same the first word that comes to mind.

If one believes Montesquieu's warning that “oppression always begins with sleep,” one can only be frightened to see those we mandate to preserve national cohesion and unity sleeping soundly—or pretending to sleep so as not to see anything, which in the end comes to the same. As a historian and as a citizen, I thought that I could not remain inert in the face of this danger.

AI: Monsieur Lentz, thank you for this delightful conversation.

The [featured image](#) shows, “Napoleon I, crowned by the Allegory of Time, writes the Code Civil,” by Jean-Baptiste Mauzaisse, painted in 1833.

The [featured image](#) shows a portrait of Napoleon by Andrea Appiani, painted in 1805.

