Bonaparte, a *Condottiere* in Revolution

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It took the revolutionary meritocracy for the military, organizational, and administrative genius of the future emperor to emerge. In the first volume of his biography (up to 1802), Patrice Gueniffey shows that Bonaparte was at the same time a "king of a new kind", an enlightened despot, a revolutionary, and a post-revolutionary, always driven by an iron will.

Reviewed: Patrice Gueniffey, *Bonaparte*, Biographies NRF, Gallimard, 2013, 860 p., 30 €, 32 illustrations and 7 maps.

The latest title on the never-ending list of biographies of Napoléon Bonaparte, Patrice Gueniffey's book, unlike some of the works that have been published recently in French or English, was not written on the occasion of the bicentenary that will end in 2015. Ever since 2004, the author has wanted to finish what his mentor, François Furet, had only been able to start: a book on Napoléon's life. Against current trends that neglect the individual in favor of epics about a specific era, focusing on the workings of imperial institutions in France and Europe – the last being Aurelian Lignereux's book on the French Empire (*L'Empire des Français*, Paris, Seuil, 2013) – Gueniffey intends to return to biography and to recount the splendors and the miseries of an extraordinary life. Admittedly, the era of war heroism of which Bonaparte saw himself as the standard bearer is outdated, but his figure also embodies modern individualism, given his faith in the power of will.

The *Condottiere*

The first part of this biography covers the years 1769-1802 and allows the author to describe the meteoric rise of a young Corsican whom nothing had predestined to conquer France and then Europe. It aims at capturing the moment when a man – in this case Bonaparte – "finds out, once and for all, who he is" (Borges). He certainly did not know it from birth, and was not even aware of it as a child. Gueniffey rightly insists on his childhood years and on the fact that Bonaparte was acculturated very early on. He is right to refute the deterministic analysis that claims that "when one is born a Corsican, one remains a Corsican". Thanks to his studies and his move to the mainland, the young boy became quickly "frenchified". His subsequent interest in the Island of Beauty partook at the very most of a melancholy for a bygone past – revived, perhaps, by Rousseau's 1765 *Constitutional Project for Corsica* [*Projet de Constitution pour la Corse*]. Moreover, his admiration for Corsican nationalist Pasquale Paoli (1725-1807) can be explained by the latter's fame, the enlightened reforms that he latter introduced in their homeland. Indeed, between 1755 and 1769, Corsica experienced a revolution, which therefore preceded those that were soon to shake the Western world. And yet we agree with the author that Paoli's Constitution was not as democratic as has been claimed. Composed of a mere nine pages listing the constituent principles of the government, the text was mainly intended "to establish authority based on the consent of all" (p. 38). The democratically

elected Diet represented the sovereign people, but the "Founding father", generalissimo Pasquale Paoli, was the irremovable source of all power. Did this clever, yet misleading construct mark a milestone, especially after the Coup of 18 Brumaire? Did it inspire Bonaparte's Consulate for life? The author does not say so, but let us not get ahead of ourselves.

The fact is that Bonaparte remained an ordinary man until the Italian Campaign. This is what made him aware of his own genius, and revealed it to a stunned Europe – not the siege of Toulon, which earned him the title of Brigadier General but no notoriety. In six months, the young general had conquered the peninsula. He did even better. He revolutionized it and created sister republics. This just shows how he put into practice skills he had not suspected he possessed until then, and that were not specifically military. Hence his subsequent remarks on the necessity of combining the force of arms with that of the mind. And his mind was powerful indeed. Able to seduce those whose help he needed, to refuse orders that antagonized him, and to impose his ideas on his contemporaries, Bonaparte discovered his own charisma and authority. In Egypt he also discovered the inhumanity of man, which confirmed his reading of Machiavelli on man's deep-seated wickedness and detached him from Rousseau once and for all. From then on, he adopted a behavior that seemed to have been modeled on the advice expressed in the *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*. Indeed, Gueniffey suggests that he had been one of Machiavelli's best students, which may quite be possible. The works of Machiavelli were displayed prominently in his successive libraries. In the 19th century, in fact, both his critics and his admirers had no hesitation in comparing the "Hero" with the figure of the *condottiere*. Stendhal wrote for instance that "In my opinion, we find the true antecedents of Napoleon's character among the *condottieri* and petty princes of the 14th century in Italy [...]. Marvelous men, not deep political thinkers [...], but men who were incessantly conceiving new plans, skillfully seizing fortune at the flood and turning it to their profit, and counting absolutely on themselves alone. Heroic souls born in an era of action and not of writing"[1]. It is that man of action, indifferent to conventional notions of good and evil, that the author patiently recreates throughout the hundreds of pages that constitute the prelude to his seizure of power and supreme rise in society.

What period other than the Revolution could have been more favorable for a young soldier from the gentry to access the generalship and the government of the State – apart from the Italian Renaissance? Not the Old Regime for sure, in which army ranks could be acquired only through "quarters of nobility" ("*quartiers de noblesse*") and the supreme power was in the hands of a hereditary sovereign. It took nothing less than a revolution to change all that. Never in history had social mobility been so shaken. The revolutionary meritocracy had changed everything.

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1 *Mémoires sur Napoléon*, quoted by Maurice Descotes in *La Légende de Napoléon et les écrivains français du XIXe siècle*, Paris, Minard, 1967, p.172.

The Son of the Revolution

Napoleon Bonaparte would never have become who he came up to be, had the times not been so extraordinary and so open to new talents. It was the Revolution that created him, but it created him as a revolutionary. Seen in that light, the military man educated at the school of the Old Regime knew which side to choose. Although Gueniffey mentions his sympathy for Robespierre's clan, he does not overplay Bonaparte's Jacobinism, which lasted only one summer – that of the *Souper de Beaucaire* in 1793 – when the country was in danger[2]. According to him, at the time of his first achievements, Bonaparte was both a revolutionary and a post-revolutionary (p. 254). Revolutionary because of his youth, his voluntarism, and his principles – equality above all. And post-revolutionary insofar as he embodied, like the army with him, Revolution without a civil war. He was "the son of the nation at war, not of politics" (p. 255). During the first phase of his career, it is because he was walking on the path to Revolution that he became who he was: the *héros italique* who liberated Italy and civilized Egypt. From then on, his fame spread. His return from Egypt and his triumphant journey from Frejus to Paris reflected this well, as did the many plays praising *The Return of the Hero.*

No one, however, expected him to seize power. At that time, the hopes for an effective overhaul of republican institutions were vested in the Abbé Sieyès. No one was calling for a Savior, especially not a military one, but for a good legislator, at best, as Sieyès was perceived at the time. We have also reasons to doubt that the Directory was "on the edge of the abyss" (p. 449) – a nice image, perhaps, but not a credible one. The fact that reforms had been considered did not mean that the reformers wanted to overthrow the regime. It is true that the Constitution of the Year III forbade any changes before 1804. But a middle ground was possible. "The Agony of the French Directory", which is the title of a chapter in the fifth part of the book, was very relative, especially since the situation had improved during the fall of 1799. Defeated in the previous summer by the anti-revolutionary coalition, the French armies had regained the upper hand; reforms in the domains of finances and public policies had started to bear fruit. Gueniffey does not dispute this, but he criticizes the Directory for failing to achieve these reforms faster. According to him, the French were above all anxious to preserve the gains of the Revolution, but they despised their government and its "weak institutions" (p. 457). Yet to a great extent, Bonaparte later reinforced these very institutions. There is an obvious contradiction here, and this is not the only one, since Gueniffey first claims that the French wanted "a return to a form of absolute power, if not a power of divine right" (p. 254), while according to him, the same French people, later saw "the Republic collapse without believing that the monarchy could replace it advantageously" (p. 456). Were they

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[2] *Le Souper de Beaucaire*, Paris, ed. 1939. In this pamphlet, Bonaparte defended the Mountain (*la Montagne*) against the Girondists and the Federalists, thereby showing his love of unity and indivisibility. Gueniffey is right: It is not so much to the Mountain that he subscribed to than the urgent need for national unity.

waiting for a new savior ? “A king of a new kind” (p. 457)? Any history or biography of the First Empire stumbles on this point, and Gueniffey’s *Bonaparte* is no exception.

The legitimate admiration for Bonaparte’s achievements did not mean that the French envisioned a regime change with a little general at its head. His reputation as a soldier was known, but who was aware of the civil and political experience that he had acquired in Italy and in Egypt? Bonaparte's contemporaries lacked the experience that we have today – of Pétain’s government or that of de Gaulle – and could not suspect the organizational and administrative genius of the generalissimo. For the previous ten years, politics had been in the hands of representatives elected by the people. The turnout for elections might have fallen, but those who did participate were highly motivated. The Directory was less democratic than previous regimes, but barely so. Had it not introduced a first degree suffrage, broader than that of the Constituent Assembly? Studies by Bernard Gainot and Pierre Serna[3] show that political life in France was far from dull. One could of course blame the Directory for trampling the national will when election results did not suit them, as evidenced by the coups of Fructidor Year V and Floreal Year VI. They did not lead, however, to a bloody repression, but to a few deportations at most. Furthermore there is general agreement that the living conditions of the people had greatly improved and that food was cheap[4].

The year 1799, it is true, was a testing time for the Republic. The election had been favorable to the Jacobins, which revived fears of a return to the government of the Year II, a feeling further increased by the defeats inflicted on France in Italy, in Switzerland, and on the Rhine. There were indeed talks about *levée en masse* (mass conscription), *loi des otages* (Law of Hostages), forced loans, and of the country in danger (p. 450). The Jacobin club reopened but it was not able to resurrect the spirit of the Year II. A few weeks later, Fouché, the new Minister for Police, who was far from being a moderate, had them closed again. Yet this brouhaha was not enough to worry the majority of the French. Were they even aware of it? Nothing is less certain. It is true that the Directory was criticized, in Paris especially, but just as any government can be criticized by some of its citizens. According to Von Humboldt, who was visiting the capital, it was criticized above all in places that had once been frequented by the court[5]. What else is there to say, except that it is unwise to conclude that a regime was unpopular in the light of what followed, especially when it happened by force and coercion. This is the question that we should ask ourselves when faced with assertions that would need to be thoroughly justified.

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[3] Bernard Gainot, *1799. Un nouveau jacobinisme*, CTHS, 2001; Pierre Serna, *Antonelle. Aristocrate révolutionnaire*, ed. du Félin, 1997.

[4] See the testimony of Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Journal Parisien (1797-1799),* Actes Sud, 2001, p.181. According to Von Humboldt, Destutt de Tracy used to say the same thing, *Ibid*., p.170.

[5] Humboldt, *op. cit*., p.183. At St. Cloud people hated the government and wanted to see things change. But most of the people interviewed admitted that they lived better than before.

The Consulary Dictator

"Power was not given to Bonaparte. He had to seize it" (p. 461). The author admits therefore that the hero's popularity did not lead to his appointment as head of State. A real conspiracy was hatched, thus making the final overthrow of the Directory possible. Sieyès took part in it with the idea of amending the Constitution so that the government would be more efficient. He, too, was not trying to give supreme power to a dictator, nor even to a President of the Republic in the American fashion. The legislative bodies (*Tribunat* and *Corps Législatif*) retained a privileged place, but they were no longer elected directly by voters. They were chosen by the Senate – or *Collège des Conservateurs*. The Head of State, appointed for life, was a purely honorary position. We know what happened next. Once he had carried out his coup, Bonaparte put pressure on his acolytes and managed to regain control of political debates and decisions. The result was a Constitution that was very different from the one the Abbé Sieyès had expected. It was Necker's task to demystify such mystification, when he realized that after the Coup of 18 Brumaire, the French Republic was nothing but a fiction, since the nation was stripped of its political rights and the constituted bodies could no longer communicate with public opinion. Only the First Consul would "come out armed from the head of the legislator". Gueniffey acknowledges this, but he accepts these changes readily since they might have enabled the acceleration of reforms, finally putting an end to the Revolution. One chapter is even entitled "The Last Day of the Revolution".

This does not mean that Bonaparte gave up on his previous achievements. The First Consul clearly intended to perpetuate them and set them in stone thanks to legislation. Once again, he was both a revolutionary and a post-revolutionary, only with a major difference – which does not seem to bother the author: the dictator had by then superimposed himself on the revolutionary. This was "A firm, wise, and benevolent dictatorship", according to Lacretelle (p. 534). Thanks to it, it took only four months to introduce reforms that five years of "managerial paralysis" had failed to carry out: the *Caisse d'amortissement*, the *Banque de France*, the administration of direct taxes, a prefectural system, and a reorganization of the judicial system. And most importantly, thanks to the "monopoly of decision" that he held, Bonaparte was able to streamline and strengthen the State (p. 586). He was able to do even better, donning the garb of the enlightened despot so typical of the eighteenth century. For Gueniffey, there is nothing contradictory in the presence of those various influences in one man. The nature of the consular regime was Republican, the form, monarchical, and the methods worthy of Joseph II or Frederick the Great. During the Consulate, Bonaparte therefore succeeded in personally combining the most conflicting trends of the century.

The Terrorist

All of this lead to resistance, of course, and thereafter to coercive measures. It is the least brilliant part of the consular policy, and the one that is usually the least emphasized. In 1799, not only did Bonaparte wish to eliminate the last of the Jacobins – thirty-four of

them should have been deported, but because of the outcry it provoked, they were only put under house arrest – he also tolerated no opposition. The freedom of the press that had been so dear to the Revolution (even though, of course, the Revolution had violated that freedom several times itself), was muzzled. In the departments, military commissions and special courts installed a reign of terror. The American historian Howard Brown calculated that in the year IX, no fewer than 1,400 to 1,500 people were executed, and in the year X, between 900 and 1,000 met the same end. Bonaparte wished to replace the revolutionary "anarchy" with order and authority, but he was only able to do so by using controversial means borrowed from the time of The Terror. He exchanged the uncontrolled repression of the Year II with a repression controlled from above, which was no less arbitrary. Gueniffey does not emphasize this enough. It is a pity, especially since the repression did not falter throughout Napoléon's reign. In 1810-1811, for example, police reports indicated around 4,500 to 4,700 people were jailed in the various Parisian prisons[6]. And yet Paris was no longer the exclusive center of repression as it had been in the Year II. Over the years the Fort of Ham, the Château d'If, the fortress of Fénestrelles, Corsica, and others were added. All this is, of course, material for the second volume of Gueniffey's biography, which will focus on the Empire. We can hardly blame the author for not having included it in the first volume, but he should at least have mentioned the intense atmosphere of coercion, whose goal it was to pacify the departments, as consular terror was aiming at restoring order and authority.

The Peacemaker

Once order was restored in Vendée and in the South of France, Bonaparte managed to pacify religious disputes by signing the Concordat. The chapter devoted to it is particularly interesting and illustrates the main thesis of the book about the strength of willpower. Bonaparte devoted days and months to the Concordat, did not let himself be put off by any obstacle, and stood up to those who opposed it. Likewise, from 1801 onwards, he reinvigorated relations with America and the colonies, and planned to restore a colonial empire – doomed to failure, as we know. This passage allows Gueniffey to study and give a more nuanced account of Bonaparte's position on slavery. He may have reintroduced it for pragmatic reasons rather than because of antipathy toward Black people (p. 595-599). Finally, William Pitt's withdrawal from the public eye gave the First Consul an opportunity to make peace with England. Such peace could not be sustained since it allowed France to sail the seas, reconstruct its empire, and become a threat to British maritime supremacy. Bonaparte was aware of it but he did nothing to appease France's main rival. He took this opportunity to increase his power in Europe and undertake expeditions in the East and the Americas.

Meanwhile, the writing of the Civil Code, of which Napoleon claimed full authorship, was coming to an end – while the first drafts dated back to 1793. Thanks again to his inflexible willpower, he completed what the Revolution had not been able to achieve. Both facts explain the conclusion that Gueniffey this part of Bonaparte's life, namely that

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[6] For the sake of comparison: In 1793, there were 1,500 prisoners in Paris; in 1794, numbers evolved between 5,500 and 7,300 at the height of the Terror, which was centralized in Paris.

"never again would we see him making such judicious use of his genius and his strength" (p. 683). He was rewarded by the Consulate for life, which effectively turned him into "a monarch – without the title". This is an intriguing conclusion, in a way, insofar as it heralds a paradoxical decline: that of the Great Empire.

At this point, the author has neglected Machiavelli and the influence that he might have exerted on Bonaparte. And yet, many reforms in the fields of religion, institutions, public order, court life and propriety, in the salutary terror that can be inflicted on opponents, in the authority that the new dictator must display – in military affairs in particular, including the weekly parade that was meant to remind the French of his status of "king of war" – seem to have been applications of the advice offered by the Florentine thinker a few centuries earlier. Could Stendhal have been right? Behind the heir of the Enlightenment and the Revolution, a *condottiere* of the Renaissance may indeed have been hiding - Machiavelli's Prince, both exceptional and amoral.

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