

VARIA

Napoleon and His Authority

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Abstract: *Napoleon, his meteoric personality and the same activity left an indelible mark in the history of humanity. Being a soldier, warrior he at the same time was enormously attentive to the civilian fields, understood and highly appreciated their importance for the life of society. He was born by revolution, but being its son he always tried his best to streamline revolutionary chaos and bring society into a balanced condition. He is still treated as an usurper, dictator, but what kind of governance was his sole rule? He was soldier, but had militaries any superiority over other, civilian bodies in the field of rule and country politics? The answer is irrefutably negative. Being highly appreciated, the militaries were just an ornament of the life of society, manifestation of glory and bravery. Civil bodies always were on the top of the social ladder, never had been subjugated by military ones. Napoleon always stressed the superiority of civil bodies and civilian statesmen over military ones. The success of his coup d'état was predetermined by the hatred which ruling bodies caused in grass roots. Being sole ruler he embodied the achievements of Revolution in legal code and created political system which guaranteed promotion to any subject of Republic and later of Empire too notwithstanding of the social origin of the status seeker. Popularity of his authority was proved at least by pro-Bonapartist rallies and slogans while post-Waterloo days. Therefore his authority gained specific name – Bonapartism, i.e. regime supported by broad layers of the population, or as an national unity, the protection of public order, social equality, and the inviolability of the individual and private property.*

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The French Revolution seemed to reject heroes, turning its back on them as a phenomenon. Everyone was cut from the same mold – universal leveling and equality –which Thomas Carlyle compared to the flooding of the market with counterfeit money (a rejection of the hero, a rejection of gold). And yet, this very revolution gave birth to Napoleon. “As long as man remains what he is, the revolution

will always produce a Cromwell and a Napoleon to restrain sans-culottism,” wrote Thomas Carlyle.

Napoleon carved out a highly distinctive path in various spheres and introduced many innovations. In this respect, the sphere of authority was no exception. His state was an entirely new type of empire, in which subjects were guaranteed equality before the law, religious tolerance, freedom

of belief, access to the achievements of civilization, and where advancement, material well-being, and spiritual development depended not on origin or lineage, but solely on personal talent, labor, and ability.

But one really intriguing fact must be stressed. On 10th of August, 1792, when the king Luis XVI was dethroned, the infuriated mob was levelling to the ground everything, what was dealt with monarchy, then dancing around guillotine, and finally prostrated in front of man, who being an ordinary officer, an unnoticed man was an eyewitness of that terrible scene and turned into their supreme ruler. 1. What did this man offered to a people emerging from the fiery womb of revolution – people driven by a single desire: the complete destruction of the old and the construction of something entirely new, unknown, and unprecedented –that caused those who had danced around the guillotine during the king's execution shouting "Long live the Republic!" to shout even more fervently, "Long live the Emperor!"? What does this fact prove? It places us before a choice: either we silently acknowledge the boundless greatness of this man and his personality, or we accept that people, in any era, are nothing more than a crowd(mob) that a hero (to use Thomas Carlyle's term) can manipulate at will.

Here again we must invoke Thomas Carlyle, who said that "the French Revolution seemed to reject heroes... yet it gave birth to Napoleon". From this, Carlyle con-

cludes: "As long as man is what he is, revolution will always produce a Cromwell and a Napoleon to restrain sans-culottism." The French Revolution, like the English Revolution, brought forth its own king, though without official credentials. In other words, revolution is always followed by one-man rule, the characteristics of which are shaped by the history, traditions, and ethnopsychology of a given nation.

This man paved a unique path in many fields and introduced numerous innovations. His empire was of an entirely new type, guaranteeing equality before the law, religious tolerance, freedom of confession, access to civilization's achievements, and advancement based solely on personal merit. For example, he promoted a junior officer who had distinguished himself in battle but was illiterate – something his immediate superiors had previously avoided doing for that very reason.

Finally, there was the idea of a united Europe, so that other nations might share in these benefits: "We need a united Europe – with one border, one currency, and one legal system," he said. In Poland, Napoleon's Civil Code remained in force until the Second World War. Emperor Francis of Austria expressed admiration and astonishment at the exemplary roads built by Napoleon after his conquest of certain Austrian territories, even remarking, "I wish he had conquered more land".

What determined his success, particularly in seizing power? First, be-

fore the 18th of Brumaire, the government was headed by individuals deeply hated by the people¹. There were departments in the country where authority effectively did not exist and where bands of brigands ruled, imposing taxes on the population. France was plunged into corruption and anarchy. The decay of the Directory – the highest executive body – had become legendary, and the population responded with equal hatred. As evidence, one may cite the play *La Caverne* (“The Cave”): with a four characters, thieves. “Where is the fifth?” someone in the audience shouted loudly, alluding to the five-member Directory, provoking laughter and applause².

Thus, the government was openly referred to as a group of thieves. The republic that Napoleon attacked and overthrew was, one might say, doomed. It was governed by thoroughly corrupt individuals who had lost all human and civic dignity. Therefore, the coup of the 18th of Brumaire was carried out with great ease. On that day, one could often hear in street conversations: “Well, we’ll get rid of that garbage today” – General Bonaparte will remove those five pigs³, referring to the five directors. According to Napoleon’s valet, Constant Wairy, three-quarters of the French population participated in the coup, such was the level of hatred toward the government.

The claim that Napoleon destroyed the revolution must be categorically rejected. “On the contrary,” says Gustave Le Bon, “Bonaparte

embodied society’s desire to officially establish the gains of the revolution, which is why the country accepted him so readily. He incorporated the principles of the revolution into institutions and laws. It is therefore incorrect to say that his rise ended the revolution; rather, Napoleon legalized and consolidated its principles”⁴. It is also absurd to claim that Napoleon’s coup of the 18th of Brumaire ended freedom, because at that time freedom, as such, did not exist in France”⁵.

A similar view appears in modern French historiography: “Napoleon saved the revolution by completing it. The French received the republican monarchy they had long desired,” writes the historian François Furet. Although a military man, Napoleon consistently emphasized that all power derives from the people: “I have been granted supreme power by the decision of the people, and I cannot believe that it still trusts its chosen one until my authority receives the approval of the entire nation.” For this reason, plebiscites preceded both his lifelong consulship and his proclamation as emperor. He understood that public opinion had made him a sole ruler and vested him with supreme authority. Despite being carefully prepared, plebiscites still carried risks and could have disrupted his plans, meaning Napoleon took a calculated risk. What ensured the success of the coup and made the consulate a viable form of governance?⁶. The fact that the true driving force behind the coup was the gov-

ernment itself, while its accomplice was the whole of France⁷.

From a formal standpoint, this was a dictatorship. But did it possess the defining characteristics of such a regime? We must answer this question in the negative. First of all, because the military did not enjoy any particular advantage in governing the country or in social, political, economic, or any other spheres. The military element was more of an adornment of the existing regime and of the people themselves, embellished with military glory and the brilliance of triumphant victories.

At the same time, Napoleon did not grant even the slightest right to the military establishment – or to soldiers in general – to oppress civilians, infringe upon the civil sphere, or demonstrate superiority over the population. When a revolt broke out among the cadets of the Metz artillery school and the rebels even attacked civilians, Napoleon immediately suppressed the uprising and then addressed both the military and civilians as follows: “The Prussian army treated the civilian population poorly, and when it was defeated, the citizens greeted this event with jubilation. The defeated army disappeared because the population did not support it. The French army is so for trying a soldier in a military court for a civilian-type offense. In 1808, he made a particularly revealing statement that clearly demonstrates his stance toward civil and military institutions: “There are two powers in this world: the sword and the spirit. By

the spirit, I mean civil and religious institutions. In the end, the spirit will defeat the sword”⁸. In other words, he unequivocally gave primacy to the civilian sphere.

Napoleon constantly stressed the superiority of the civilian factor over the military. His own words confirm this: “We are 30 million people united by the ideas of the Enlightenment, property, and trade. Three or four hundred thousand soldiers are nothing in comparison.” Or: “Soldiers are nothing more than the sons of the nation. The nation itself is the greatest army.” Antoine-Claire Thibaudeau, chairman of the Council of Five Hundred and later a prefect and member of the Council of State after the 18th of Brumaire, reports that the emperor often said at meetings: “I have said and will say again that when military and civil principles clash, I will always give preference to the latter”⁹.

Even during the Empire, there was no institution resembling a military caste that controlled everything from politics to the economy. Of course, due to frequent wars, the entire system was imbued with a military spirit: glorification of the emperor, strict discipline, propaganda of war, and various symbols of martial glory. But ultimately, there was nothing comparable to the military-dictatorial regimes of Latin America¹⁰. Napoleon was a general, a commander, a military figure only during wartime – on the battlefield, from the beginning to the end of campaigns. In times of peace, he was a sta-

tesman, a civilian. After the proclamation of the Empire and Napoleon as emperor, it becomes even more difficult to classify his rule. Neither the Consulate nor the Empire resembled a pure military dictatorship. There was no military body with universal control. Instead, we see a complex interweaving of one-man rule and egalitarian governance principles.

Particularly noteworthy is the oath pronounced at the coronation, especially its civil component. It represents a whole set of promises emphasizing the limitation of imperial power and its republican character¹¹. "I swear to uphold the territorial integrity of the Republic; to respect and enforce the Concordat; freedom of religion; political and civil liberties; the inviolability of the sale of national lands; to levy taxes only according to law; to support the institution of the Legion of Honor; and to govern with the sole aim of the interest, happiness, and glory of the French people." The ending of the oath is especially significant: "Napoleon, Emperor by the grace of God and by the Constitution."

There are other well-known facts that point to the hybrid political nature of the newly established empire. The term "Republic" remained on coins minted by the emperor until 1808. The republican calendar was abolished in 1806. Napoleon's official title itself gave the imperial institution a popular character: "Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of the French Republic." In this way, he fashioned

an image of himself as a kind of popular leader. However, "La Marseillaise" as the national anthem was replaced by another piece, *Le Chant du départ* ("Song of Departure"), composed by Étienne Méhul with lyrics by Marie-Joseph Chénier in 1794. It became the official anthem of the First Empire and is today the unofficial anthem of French Guiana as well as an official ceremonial piece of the French presidency. The tricolor flag remind unchanged. Particularly striking are the lyrics of this anthem: "Lead us against tyrants; republicans are brave, slaves are but children. Before God we swear to destroy oppressors; the French will bring peace and freedom to the world."

Yet, despite being the supreme leader of the nation, Napoleon cannot be equated with a classical Eastern despot, who traditionally embodies a detached grandeur and appears among his subjects as a kind of god-man. Napoleon, by contrast, depended entirely on himself – on his own ability to win victories and lead his empire¹². "Conquest made me what I am, and conquest will preserve me in that state," he said. This self-assessment is extremely important for understanding the essence of his power¹³. The factor of his personality is extraordinarily significant. For this reason, he once told the Austrian chancellor Metternich during negotiations:

"Your rulers are born to the throne and cannot understand the feelings

that drive me. They can return defeated to their capitals without concern. But I am a soldier – I need a name and glory. I cannot appear dishonored in front of my people. I must preserve my greatness in their eyes in order to inspire their admiration”¹⁴.

It is precisely here that we see this man’s attitude toward the people—their opinions and their judgment. These are the thoughts and words of a man who paved his own way in life and, thanks to his genius, rose to the peak of socio-political life. He had defeated many kings, yet their reputations did not suffer from it. In this respect, Napoleon is an exceptional phenomenon. He depended on himself. One might say he had no right to stumble.

His victories captivated everyone, especially ordinary people – they won their hearts. That is why ordinary Parisians so fervently opposed his abdication. At the end of the Hundred Days, after the Battle of Waterloo, one of the leaders of the Parisian mob rushed up to him and demanded that he refuse to step down. “What are you doing, where are you going?!” he said to the emperor. To reinforce his argument, he even reminded Napoleon of the 13th of Vendémiaire, when, on the orders of the Directory, Napoleon suppressed a royalist uprising. In other words, that man believed Napoleon should resort to any means – even violence – to retain power. But Napoleon replied: “That was a different time.” One might call this a kind of universal answer.

Further evidence of Napoleon’s popularity among the population and the sympathy of working people toward him can be seen in the uprisings of 1818-1819 in France, when common people took to the streets with the slogans: “Down with the Bourbons! Long live the Emperor!”

For which they were even imprisoned.

Against the backdrop of such facts, Napoleon appears as a kind of popular leader, a “king of the proletarians,” who sat on the imperial throne together with his people and, to please them, humiliated other monarchs in his reception hall”. This assessment belongs to Napoleon’s contemporary, the well-known writer and politician, the ultra-royalist Chateaubriand. Goethe named Napoleon a revolution crowned with an imperial crown. In a certain sense, he may even be called a citizen-emperor. Therefore, we agree with the view that Napoleon Bonaparte passed through all the stages of military service and, before becoming emperor, was first a citizen. Thus, citizenship was by no means extraneous to him¹⁵.

Was this an usurpation? An interesting perspective is offered by the emperor’s valet, Constant Wairy, who wrote in his memoirs: “If the emperor usurped the throne, he had more accomplices than all the tyrants of tragedies and melodramas combined, since three-quarters of the French people participated in this conspiracy”¹⁶.

From all of the above, we may conclude that Napoleon's rule – at first as First Consul and then as Emperor – cannot be unequivocally classified as either a monarchy or a dictatorship based on its defining characteristics. Here again, Napoleon appears as an exceptional and unique phenomenon. For this reason, his system of rule acquired a specific

name characteristic of him – Bonapartism. This type of authority is characterized as one-man rule supported by broad layers of the population, or as an ideology based on a strong, centralized regime, national unity, the protection of public order, social equality, and the inviolability of the individual and private property.

Notes

- ¹ V. Cronin, *Napoleon*, Harper Collins Publishers, 1994, p. 209.
- ² F. McLynn, *Napoleon. A Biography*, Pimlico, 1998, p. 208.
- ³ Ibidem, p. 214.
- ⁴ Gustav Le Bon, *The Psychology of Revolution*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1913, pp. 263-264.
- ⁵ F. McLynn, *op.cit.*, p.222.
- ⁶ I. Woloch, *Napoleon and his Collaborators. The Making of Dictatorship*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2002, p.92.
- ⁷ Gustav Le Bon, *op.cit.*, pp. 263-264
- ⁸ V. Cronin, *op.cit.*

- ⁹ www. Napoleon org Jean Tulard. The Empire. Dictatorship? Monarchy? Napoleon. Org.
- ¹⁰ Ibidem.
- ¹¹ Stephen Englund, *Napoleon. A Political Life*, Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 245.
- ¹² Ibidem.
- ¹³ Ralph W. Emerson, *Representative Men. Seven Lectures*, N.Y., 1850, p. 221.
- ¹⁴ B.B. Тарле, *Наполеон*. М., 1957, с.336.
- ¹⁵ Ralph W. Emerson, *op.cit.*, 1850, p. 223.
- ¹⁶ Stephen Englund, *op.cit.*, p. 245.

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