

## Introduction

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In 1976, Jean Tulard, one of the most prolific and respected Napoleonic scholars in the world, noted that there have been more works written about Napoleon Bonaparte than there have been days since his death. <sup>1</sup> Given this profusion, it seems almost obligatory for every historian writing on some aspect of Napoleon's life or on the Napoleonic era to apologize for adding a study to the corpus. Nearly 40 years ago, for example, F. G. Healy began his *The Literary Culture of Napoleon* with such an apology, despite the fact that his is the only monograph on the subject and represents a model for similar studies on other historical figures. <sup>2</sup> With such a corpus of work, one might easily conclude that every major event in Bonaparte's life is known in detail and that all that remains to be written is the minutiae of Napoleon's life and the filling in of the details. <sup>3</sup> But has everything worth knowing about Napoleon Bonaparte and about Napoleonic Europe already been studied? As Harold T. Parker pointed out in a 1987 article addressing this very question, the answer is, perhaps surprisingly, No.

While there is general agreement as to the events of Napoleon's life, much remains to be studied. This is particularly true for the social and cultural impact of his life and career, not only as they affected France, but Europe as well. <sup>4</sup> Distinguished monographs on these topics, such as Louis Bergeron's masterful study of French society, *France under Napoleon*, have only begun to appear in the past twenty years. <sup>5</sup> Other topics likewise are still relatively neglected, or earlier analyses have become dated by the study of previously unexamined materials. Napoleon's use of propaganda is a notable example of this last category of Napoleonic studies.

That Napoleon Bonaparte was one of the greatest masters of propaganda is beyond dispute. Robert Holtman's superb *Napoleonic Propaganda* (1950), along with a host of articles, biographies, and monographs, helped to establish this fact. <sup>6</sup> "The evidence," writes Holtman, "leaves no doubt that the French government under Napoleon devoted considerable attention to creating a favorable public opinion." <sup>7</sup> Such a conclusion is supported by Holtman's discussion of the various forms, media, and techniques used by Napoleon to influence public opinion throughout the Consular and Imperial periods. From theater to newspapers, from his famous bulletins to his patronage of the arts, from his censorship of the press to his own writing of newspaper articles, Napoleon proved to be a consummate master of public relations.

What strikes one almost immediately is the depth to which Bonaparte understood the art of propaganda and the degree to which he was personally

involved in its creation. This is particularly true of Napoleon's relationship with the press. <sup>8</sup> Time and again, Bonaparte himself wrote not only his famous bulletins and proclamations, but articles to be included in the official press as well. <sup>9</sup>

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How successful were the Emperor's propaganda campaigns? One only needs to reflect on the commonly held opinion of the Directory for a partial answer to this question. Many view this period as one dominated by a corrupt and venal government, one almost requiring Bonaparte's *coup d'état* to rid France of its domestic inefficiencies and foreign policy disasters. However, as Martyn Lyons and others have pointed out, the Directory has gained an undeserved and tarnished reputation, in large part because of Bonaparte's efforts to justify his actions of 18-19 *brumaire*. <sup>10</sup> Indeed, many of the achievements claimed by Bonaparte during the Consular period were merely continuations of the great and lasting accomplishments initiated during the Directory: an efficient civil administration, an effective tax system, economic stability, military security, and even the legal reforms which would culminate with Napoleon's famous Civil Code. The literature on the late Revolutionary, Consular, and Imperial periods makes obvious how important building a favorable public image was to Napoleon's art of statecraft and to his political success. Surveying the entire scope of Napoleonic propaganda, Holtman concludes that, aside from some minor setbacks, Napoleon's efforts were largely successful. <sup>11</sup>

Although it was a ground-breaking study, *Napoleonic Propaganda*, as Holtman acknowledged, was not intended to become the definitive work on the subject. <sup>12</sup> Indeed, Holtman examined Napoleon's use of propaganda only from the period after Bonaparte had become master of France, with all the powers of state to support his efforts. Virtually unexplored, both in Holtman's and in other studies, is the genesis of those image-making techniques that Napoleon would refine and employ with such finesse as Emperor.

During the first Italian campaign (March 1796-October 1797), through conscious manipulation of dispatches, correspondence, medallions, and, especially, of the press, Napoleon created for himself the image of the Revolutionary hero—a creation that enabled this once-unknown Corsican to become a household name, and, ultimately, a power to be reckoned with in France. While commanding the Army of Italy, for example, Bonaparte owned two minor newspapers, the *Courrier de l'Armée d'Italie* and *La France vue de l'Armée d'Italie*. Both were designed for something more than maintaining troop morale in a foreign land. <sup>13</sup> As Owen Connelly notes in passing in his *Blundering to Glory*, "without these newsheets, Napoleon might not have returned from Italy so overwhelmingly famous. He realized the value of propaganda early on."

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Despite the voluminous scholarship on Bonaparte's life and career, and despite Holtman's essential work on the Emperor's later propaganda efforts, what still remains to be written is a study of these early efforts in image-making, the ones begun before Bonaparte was master of France. It was during this formative period that he learned his craft as a propagandist and honed his skills as a manipulator of public opinion. It is this genesis of Napoleonic propaganda that is the subject of this book, a study intended to deepen our understanding of Napoleon's mastery of the art of propaganda.

One logical place to begin is with an examination of how Bonaparte began to shape a favorable public image through his careful wording and strategic use of his bulletins, dispatches, and proclamations. In this process, he was aided by two important factors: the phenomenal growth of the popular press during the Revolution and the changing fortunes of war which, for the most part, favored Bonaparte's army. Napoleon's early dispatches and bulletins, ostensibly written to keep the Directory informed of the actions of the Army of Italy, had two ulterior purposes: to contrast the superior military prowess of the French army in Italy with the inferior military efforts of the Austrians, Piedmontese, and Italians, and to promote the political interests of Napoleon Bonaparte. In addition, Napoleon had a genius for capitalizing on the accidents of war, exaggerating his successes and taking advantage of every opportunity to keep his name associated with victorious and heroic action. An analysis of Napoleon's correspondence reveals that by the close of the Italian campaign in October 1797, he had nearly perfected his skills as a propagandist. 15 The evolution of these skills, which were to prove instrumental in elevating Napoleon to the status of a national hero, is the subject of the next chapter.

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Chapter Three, "For Morale or Propaganda? The Newspapers of Bonaparte," examines Napoleon's manipulation of the press, using the newspapers founded or strongly influenced by Bonaparte himself. These papers represent one of the best examples of Bonaparte's transformation of an existing medium to suit his political goals. As Marc Martin points out in his *Les Origins de la Presse Militaire (1770-1799)*, by 1796, newspapers produced by the various French armies were not uncommon; in addition to the official government-sponsored military newspapers, several of the major armies periodically produced one of their own. 16 Supplementing these publications, the Directory (and the Convention before that) had authorized the free distribution of several of the more revolutionary newspapers (including the radically republican *Père Duchesne*) among the armies to maintain morale and to inspire the citizen-soldier. 17 In fact, one can view the development of these specialized newspapers as a logical outgrowth of the ever-expanding role of the popular press in Revolutionary France. 18 Bonaparte's *Courrier de*

*l'Armée d'Italie* and *La France vue de l'Armée d'Italie* are examples this traditional form of the military press, with one notable "mutation." <sup>19</sup> In these two newspapers, Napoleon Bonaparte subtly altered the form from a medium focused on providing the news and bolstering the morale of the army to one devoted to furthering the political ambitions of its commanding general. In these newspapers, perhaps even more than in his dispatches and correspondence, Bonaparte set himself up as a man above faction and as the defender and champion of the ideals of the Revolution. In the process, Napoleon's emerging political ambitions become obvious.

The fourth chapter begins with a brief discussion Bonaparte's use of art and his association with France's intellectual elite in his blatant attempt to win over the educated French middle class, who would eventually become the mainstays of future Napoleonic regimes. <sup>20</sup> Important in this courtship were Bonaparte's patronage of French artists and his political uses of captured Italian art. Not only did Napoleon court and allow himself to be courted by the leading artists of the day, including Jacques-Louis David and Antoine-Jean Gros, <sup>21</sup> but he cultivated a host of lesser engravers and portraitists as well. The profusion of likenesses of the young *héros italique* ensured that the popularity of Bonaparte's image would eventually surpass both that of Marat and David's *Oath of the Horatii*. <sup>22</sup> Bonaparte supplemented this effort by carefully timing the arrival of his captured art, or "trophies of conquest," to amplify and prolong public attention to his military triumphs. <sup>23</sup> These great works of art would eventually be permanently displayed at the Louvre, forever linking great art with the Bonaparte name. <sup>24</sup> The culmination of these efforts to associate himself to the intellectual elite came with Napoleon's election to the Institute of France in 1798 as a mathematician. The combined effect of these propagandistic efforts produced for the French public the image not only of a seemingly invincible general and peacemaker, but also that of a man of cultural refinement and intellect: a universal man to whom nothing was impossible.

Perhaps even more innovative, however, was Bonaparte's use of medals, medallions, and trinkets as propaganda devices, the subject of Chapter Five. This method of shaping public opinion has generally received much less attention than Napoleon's employment of more conventional forms of propaganda. In addition to exploiting a growing popular press, Bonaparte also capitalized on the explosion in the production of medals and medallions during the years immediately preceding his rise to power. <sup>25</sup> Key to understanding Napoleon's tremendous popularity is the effect his patronage of a series of commemorative medals known as the *Cinq Batailles* had on the French demand for all things Bonaparte. The future Emperor used these medals to promote his desired mythology, that of the simple revolutionary hero, capable of achieving what the government of France had been incapable of achieving—namely military success and peace. <sup>26</sup> The success of

these propagandistic medals, in turn, stimulated the market for even more medals, each further enhancing Bonaparte's popularity, often at the expense of the French government. According to Robert Miquel, "All these trinkets and mementos greatly disconcerted the Directory." <sup>27</sup> Thus the medals of Napoleon became a physical manifestation of a growing distance between the goals of the Directory and the ambitions of its general. <sup>28</sup>

As Jean Tulard so succinctly put it, the Napoleonic legend was not born on St. Helena, but "in the plains of Italy." <sup>29</sup> It has been noted that Bonaparte's military genius was not that of an originator, but rather lay in his status as one of the most able "scramblers" or adapters in history. The same is true of his genius for propaganda. All the techniques and tools of propaganda used by the young general—the popular press, propagandistic art, and even medals—already existed; he merely employed them on a scale and in ways never before attempted, proving himself to be among the first masters of the art of image-making.

Finally, in addition to the methods mentioned above, there is an element of Bonaparte's propaganda campaign that has received little discussion in the literature and that might be identified as "passive" propaganda. Napoleon's use of propagandistic devices and techniques began, at least initially, out of military necessity: the need of a commander of a small French army, operating solely in conquered or occupied territory against armies twice as large, to project an image of strength, both to his adversaries and to his potential Italian allies. <sup>30</sup> By the end of his first year as commanding general of the Army of Italy, Bonaparte's growing political ambitions had begun to supersede his military goals, and his increasingly effective propaganda campaign began to take on a life of its own. It was as though the public image of Bonaparte that Napoleon had created had become self-perpetuating. Newspapers tracked his every movement, transforming even mundane events into brilliant, heroic actions. Portraits and medals augmented his soaring popularity; merchants used his likeness to sell everything from books to fans to bonbon boxes; plays and café songs commemorated his deeds and the achievements of his army. By November 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte had transformed himself into an icon of France triumphant. The stage was set for his *coup d'état* of 18-19 *brumaire*. <sup>31</sup> It appears, then, that Bonaparte owed his fortune not only to his "star," but also to his own devices.

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## Notes:

**Note 1:** Jean Tulard, "L'ère napoléonienne: Problemes et perspectives de recherche," *Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1750-1850* (1976): 1. Donald

Horward notes that by as early as 1908, over 200,000 books had been written about Napoleon or his impact on Europe; see Donald D. Horward, "Napoleon in Review: A Bibliographical Essay," *Military Affairs* 43 (October 1979): 144. [Back.](#)

**Note 2:** F. G. Healy, *The Literary Culture of Napoleon* (Geneva: Librairie E. Droz, 1959), 11-12. [Back.](#)

**Note 3:** Harold T. Parker, "Napoleon Reconsidered: An Invitation to Inquiry and Reflection," *French Historical Studies* 15 (Spring 1987): 144. A similar consensus of interpretation also dominated the larger field of French Revolutionary studies at least until the 1960s, when a series of articles and books began to challenge the classical Marxist interpretation of the Revolution. [Back.](#)

**Note 4:** Parker, "Napoleon Reconsidered," 144-45. [Back.](#)

**Note 5:** See Louis Bergeron, *France Under Napoleon*, trans. R. R. Palmer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). A co-authored work by Louis Bergeron and Guy Chaussinaud-Nogaret should also be noted. Their *Les "masses de granit": Cent mille notables du Premier Empire* (1979) analyzes the social composition and the fate of the moneyed and landed elite of Napoleonic France. [Back.](#)

**Note 6:** See particularly Robert B. Holtman *Napoleonic Propaganda* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1950). Noteworthy among other less specialized works are Geoffrey Ellis's *Napoleon* (London: Longman, 1997); François Furet's *The French Revolution, 1770-1814* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996); Martyn Lyons's *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Furet's, *Revolutionary France, 1770-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Albert Boime's *Art in the Age of Bonapartism, 1800-1815* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990); Jean Tulard's *Napoleon: The Myth of the Savior* (London; Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984); R. Ben Jones's, *Napoleon: Man and Myth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977); Marc Martin's *Les Origines de la Presse Militaire en France, 1770-1799* (Chateau de Vincennes: Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, 1975); André Cabanis's *La Presse sous le Consulat et l'Empire (1799-1814)* (Paris: Société des Études Robespierriennes, 1975); J.M. Thompson's *Napoleon Bonaparte* (1952); Albert Léon Guerard's *Reflections on the Napoleonic Legend* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924); Romi's "Bibelots de propagande ou de souvenir," *Mirror de l'histoire* (1959): 46-51; and the entries for propaganda in Tulard et al.'s *Dictionnaire Napoléon* (Paris: Fayard, 1987) and Owen Connelly et al.'s *Historical Dictionary of Napoleonic France, 1799-1815* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985). Holtman's, Martin's, and Cabanis's works aside, most of these studies offer little analysis of Bonaparte's methods. [Back.](#)

**Note 7:** Holtman, *Napoleonic Propaganda*, 245. [Back.](#)

**Note 8:** Holtman, *Napoleonic Propaganda*, 44. See also André Cabanis, *La presse sous le Consulat et l'Empire (1799-1814)* (Paris: Société des Études Robespierriennes, 1975), 3. [Back.](#)

**Note 9:** Holtman, *Napoleonic Propaganda*, 61-62. See also A. Périvier, *Napoléon journaliste* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit et Compagnie, 1918), ii; and Cabanis, vii. [Back.](#)

**Note 10:** See for example, Martyn Lyons, *France Under the Directory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); and Lynn Hunt, David Lansky and Paul Hanson, "The Failure of the Liberal Republic in France, 1795-1799: The Road to Brumaire," *Journal of Modern History* 51 (December 1979): 734-59. [Back.](#)

**Note 11:** Holtman also points out that many of the setbacks were directly the result of "incompetence on the part of his subordinates" (202). [Back.](#)

**Note 12:** Holtman, *Napoleonic Propaganda*, vii. Also little discussed by Holtman, despite the fact that he included a chapter on the arts, were Napoleon's relationships with the great artists of the day and his influence over the visual arts through patronage and official contests. [Back.](#)

**Note 13:** Napoleon owned or strongly influenced at least six minor Revolutionary newspapers, including: *Le Courier de l'Armée d'Italie*, *La France vue de l'Armée d'Italie*, *Journal de Bonaparte et des hommes vertueux*, *Journal de Malte* (no complete run is now extant), *Courier de l'Égypte*, and *La Décade Égyptienne*. Because of his focus on the Consular and Imperial eras, Holtman mentions none of these papers. [Back.](#)

**Note 14:** Owen Connelly, *Blundering to Glory: Napoleon's Military Campaigns* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1987), 30. [Back.](#)

**Note 15:** From the earliest periods of his career, Bonaparte exhibited a keen understanding of basic propaganda techniques: the use of simple, direct, forceful language to appeal to a mass audience; the use of repetition and half-truths to sustain audience appeal; and the use of *ad hominem* and *ad populum* appeals to inspire approval and/or confidence and to create hatred and/or distrust. These propaganda strategies are noted in Holtman's first chapter, "The Message"; also see Cabanis's part 2, chapter 1, for a fuller discussion of Napoleon's use of these techniques during the Consular and Imperial periods. [Back.](#)

**Note 16:** Marc Martin, *Les Origins de la Presse Militaire à la fin de l'ancien régime et sous la Révolution (1770-1799)* (Château de Vincennes: Service Historiques de l'Armée de Terre, 1975). [Back.](#)

**Note 17:** See Marc Martin, "Journaux d'armées au temps de la Convention," *Annales Historique de la Revolution Française* 44 (November-December 1972): 585; and Marc Martin "Journaux militaires de Carnot," *Annales Historique de la Revolution Française* 49 (July-September 1977): 409-10. [Back.](#)

**Note 18:** For excellent discussions on the growth of the popular press during the French Revolution, see Jeremy D. Popkin, *Revolutionary News: The Press in France, 1789-1799* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press,

1990); Hugh Gough, *The Newspaper Press in the French Revolution* (Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1988); J. Gilchrist and W. J. Murry, eds., *The Press in the French Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971); Claude Bellanger, Jacques Godechot, Pierre Guiral and Fernand Terrou, *Histoire Générale de la Presse Française, Vol. 1, Des origines à 1814* (Paris: Presses Université de France, 1969); and Jacques Godechot, "L'expansion française et la création de la presse politique dans le bassin méditerranéen," *Cahiers de Tunisie* (1954): 146-71. [Back.](#)

**Note 19:** Martin, *Les presses militaires*, 295. [Back.](#)

**Note 20:** See, for example, Geoffrey Ellis, *Napoleon* (London: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1997); Louis Bergeron, *France Under Napoleon*, trans. R. R. Palmer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); and Martyn Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994). [Back.](#)

**Note 21:** Daniel Wildenstein and Guy Wildenstein, *Louis David: Recueil de documents complémentaires au catalogue complet de l'oeuvre de l'artiste* (Paris: Fondation Wildenstein, 1973), 136 and 141-43; Jacques-Louis Jules David, *Le Peintre Louis David 1748-1825: souvenirs et documents inédits* (Paris: Victor Harvard, 1880), 338-40; Warren Roberts, Jacques-Louis David, *Revolutionary Artist: Art, Politics, and the French Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 131-33; and David Joseph O'Brien, "The Art of War: Antoine-Jean Gros and French Military Painting, 1795-1804" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1994), 74-77. [Back.](#)

**Note 22:** Robert Herbert, *David, Voltaire, Brutus and the French Revolution: An Essay in Art and Politics* (London: Viking Press, 1972), 103; and David Lloyd Dowd, *Pageant-Master of the Republic: Jacques-Louis David and the French Revolution* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1948), 137. [Back.](#)

**Note 23:** See Cecil Hilton Monk Gould, *Trophy of Conquest: The Musée Napoléon and the Creation of the Louvre* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965). See also W. Treue, *Art Plunder: The Fate of Works of Art in War and Unrest*, trans. Basil Creighton (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1961). [Back.](#)

**Note 24:** During the First Empire, for example, the Musée du Louvre would be known as the Musée Napoléon. [Back.](#)

**Note 25:** Jean Babelon, *La Médaille de France* (Paris: Larousse, 1948), 77, and Jean Babelon, *La Médaille et les Médailleurs* (Paris: Payot, 1927), 193. [Back.](#)

**Note 26:** Romi [Robert Miquel], "Bibelots de propagande ou de souvenir," *Mirror de l'histoire* 109 (1959): 46; Lyons, *Directory*, 212; and R. Ben Jones, *Napoleon: Man and Myth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1977), 11. See also Albert Léon Guerard, *Reflections on the Napoleonic Legend* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1924), which discusses Bonaparte's manipulation of events and achievements to foster his legend. As far as the desire for peace, any number of contemporary newspapers expressed the desire for peace. The 6 October 1796 issue of the *Gazette Française* contains a lengthy

article on the topic. [Back.](#)

**Note 27:** Romi, "Bibelots de propagande," 48. [Back.](#)

**Note 28:** Lyons, *Directory*, 202. [Back.](#)

**Note 29:** Jean Tulard, *Napoleon: The Myth of the Savior*, trans. Teresa Waugh (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), 61. [Back.](#)

**Note 30:** Perhaps nowhere is this desperation better explained than in Guglielmo Ferrero's *The Gamble: Bonaparte in Italy (1795-1797)*, trans. Bertha Prichard and Lily C. Freeman (New York: Walker, 1961). [Back.](#)

**Note 31:** See, for example, Laura Mason, *Singing the French Revolution: Popular Culture and Politics, 1789-1799* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); and Marvin Carlson, *The Theatre of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966). [Back.](#)

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