

Chapter 6: Bonaparte, the Press, and "Passive" Propaganda

The Nature of "Passive" Propaganda

1

That Napoleon Bonaparte actively fostered the creation of his public image can hardly be doubted. From the manipulation of the French press through his carefully crafted dispatches, to the founding of newspapers that promoted his public image, to the innovative use of medals and medallions, he thoroughly mastered virtually every public medium of his day. Although other figures in history had manipulated these various media-Louis XIV, for example, employed painters, medal-makers, and journalists to promote his regal glory ¹-Bonaparte was the first private citizen in modern history to realize the limitless possibilities open to a master propagandist. One question remains: How can we judge the effectiveness of his image-making campaign? Most historians agree that this self-promotion was a resounding success, but there is no direct method by which to measure its impact on the French populace.

One way to attempt to evaluate the impact of Napoleon's efforts, however, is through what I will call "passive" propaganda, or secondary sources of media exposure initiated by others who sought to "cash in" on Napoleon's growing popularity. In the realm of "passive propaganda," Bonaparte's own efforts created a public demand for news about his achievements, which the French press, street-hawkers, engravers, and artists hurried to satisfy. This passive propaganda, unsought but not unwelcome, complemented and amplified Bonaparte's earlier image-making efforts. During the first few months of Bonaparte's command in Italy, the French press paid scant attention to the Italian campaign. However, in just three years, between 1796 and 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte transformed himself from an obscure Jacobin general into First Consul of the French Republic. While these were also three years of military and diplomatic success, without the success of his propaganda campaign such a transformation would have never occurred. Complementing Bonaparte's own propaganda efforts, passive propaganda began slowly and intensified between the summer months of 1796 and Bonaparte's *coup d'état* of 18-19 *brumaire*. By November 1799, it seemed that the press could cover nothing save for Napoleon and his activities.

Oddly, especially considering the war fatigue experienced by France in 1796, Bonaparte's initial victories received little attention and inspired little enthusiasm. "There is a collapse of public spirit; the victories reported by the Army of Italy have not produced the enthusiasm that the national honor naturally inspires in Frenchmen," wrote the editors of the *Gazette Française* ². Perhaps this inattention was conditioned by the fact many French campaigns began well, only to stall. On 20 April 1796, an

article in the *Ami des Lois* reflected this lack of enthusiasm, but offered a hope that this campaign would be different, that Bonaparte's early victories would influence Genoa to abandon its alliance with Austria. ³ Slowly, various newspapers began to express mounting expectations concerning Bonaparte's Army of Italy. On 26 April, for example, the editors of the *Ami des Lois* called attention to the feats of the "vendémiaire general" and the "sans-culottes" of the Army of Italy:

In eight days, Buonaparte has killed two thousand Austrians, has taken prisoners and flags, etc.; yesterday we learned that the left wing of his army has killed two thousand five hundred Austrians or Piedmontese, captured eight thousand prisoners (including the commanding general Provéra), taken all the artillery, all the magazines. ⁴

5

At least to the editors of the *Ami des Lois*, this Italian campaign was unlike other campaigns; very soon they were comparing Bonaparte's genius and victories with those of Caesar. ⁵ By late April and early May, the publicity floodgates had opened. Editors lauded the astonishing success of the Army of Italy and its commanding general. By July, the *Gazette Française* reported that, "It is to Bonaparte that everyday conversations turn." ⁶ By June 1796, which saw the announcement of the armistice with Piedmont, the press began to speculate about an eventual demand for peace with Austria, acknowledging that it was Bonaparte's Army of Italy that had made this potential peace feasible. ⁷ Following the fall of Mantua to the French in February 1797, the editors of the *Ami des Lois* commented: "General Bonaparte is covered in glory and at the same time he is honored by his acts of humanity as a 'sage' politician." ⁸ Later, Bonaparte was compared to Hannibal and found superior, not only because he knew how to wage war, but because he could also make peace. Apparently this opinion was so widespread that the editors boldly challenged anyone to express a contrary view. ⁹ Such news coverage, commentary, and speculation enhanced Bonaparte's image in the public arena, compounding the effectiveness of his own propaganda measures.

The Role of the Press in "Passive" Propaganda

Over the next year, the press, responding to a public demand for knowledge about the *héros italique*, seemed to report everything that Napoleon did, whether it had an obvious bearing on official business or not. On 15 August, for example, the *Gazette Française* reported that between 11 and 18 *thermidor*, "the general has not had a chance to take off his boots. Suffice it to say that when one read of the actions that took place during this period, this is wholly believable." ¹⁰ A month later, even the arrival of a courier from Bonaparte was deemed newsworthy—not solely for the news the

courier carried, but because of the courier's association with the victorious general. ¹¹ By the spring of 1797 and the announcement of the preliminary peace at Loeben, the appetite for all things Bonaparte had become insatiable. Even among the enemies of France, Napoleon's popularity was noteworthy. According to the *Messenger du Soir* (a right-wing newspaper which only a year earlier had been critical of the general), "Bonaparte has his admirers in England as in France." ¹²

In the absence of fresh news from the front, editors still felt obliged to say something about their triumphant general. On 19 June 1797, for example, when negotiations on the definitive peace with Austria and England had slowed, the editors of the *Ami des Lois* told their readers that "one can be assured that Bonaparte is going to command the army that will descend upon England if this power will not conclude a peace." ¹³ The *Clef du Cabinet*, lacking any breaking news to report, assured its readers, "Bonaparte continues to negotiate the peace at Montebello with the Austrians." ¹⁴ Similar sentiments appeared in October, when the editors noted that, although the negotiations appeared troubled, Napoleon would negotiate for the terms most favorable to the Directory. ¹⁵ On at least one occasion, the editors apologized for having no new news concerning Bonaparte.

Bonaparte's Celebrity

During the periods just before and especially following the signing of the Peace of Campo Formio, Bonaparte's every movement became newsworthy. In late November and early December 1797, the *Gazette nationale ou le  Treaty of Campo Formio* *Moniteur universal* traced his path as he departed the Army of Italy and traveled through Milan, to Mantua (where Napoleon was greeted with great celebration), to Bâle, to Morat, to his arrival in Paris on 5 December. ¹⁶ Every stop, every celebration was noted. In Paris, the general's every movement seemed to be tracked, with newspapers reporting the various parties he attended. ¹⁷ His unexpected appearance on the streets caused crowds to gather, who showered him with thunderous applause. ¹⁸ This, too, was now worthy of press attention, and such occurrences served to whet the appetite for even more coverage.

All of this attention, however, did not seem to affect the general, as the press was quick to point out. In February, the *Clef du Cabinet* reported: "General Bonaparte ... attended the Theater of the Republic and the Arts yesterday evening with his whole family, and as is his custom, hid from the applause that always follows him when he is recognized." ¹⁹ Despite Napoleon's celebrity, such recognition was not always instantaneous, as a humorous anecdote in the *Clef du Cabinet* illustrated:

The General was in Dunkirk and wanted to go to the theater, but the public learned of his plans and a considerable crowd gathered there [to wait for him]. True to his principles of modesty, he wore the clothing of a simple bourgeois and was able to mingle with the spectators on the main floor. A man standing next to him asked if anyone had seen Bonaparte in the building. Bonaparte responded that he did not think so. Another citizen asked the same question, pointing out a suspect. Oh no, responded a third person who was standing beside the general, "I know Bonaparte; he is much taller." [20](#)

Everyone, it seemed, desired to be near the triumphant general, even if they were not quite sure who he was.

The *Clef du Cabinet* was particularly vigilant in its watch on Napoleon. In early November, for example, the editors twice tried to dispel rumors of Bonaparte's arrival in Paris from Italy. [21](#) Several days later, the *Clef du Cabinet* promised to let its readers know everything concerning "*le héros italique*." [22](#) On 25 November, the *Clef* tracked the general to Basel, close on the heels of his aide-de-camp General Joachim Murat, who had passed through the town on 15 November. [23](#) On 5 December, Bonaparte visited Strasbourg with General Augereau. [24](#) So serious was the promise of the editors to keep the public informed about the whereabouts of Napoleon that they felt compelled to apologize on 20 February 1798 for not noting Bonaparte's return to Paris. The next issue made amends by announcing that "General Bonaparte arrived yesterday evening in Paris." [25](#) Several days later, when Bonaparte's duties took him to the Atlantic and Channel coasts for an inspection tour, the *Clef* announced, "General Bonaparte is leaving this evening from Paris with the Minister of the Marine to visit our coast between Granville and Brest." [26](#) Upon his return, Napoleon attended a dinner in his honor, at which he was presented "the Bridge at Lodi, ingeniously made of pastry; the *héros* smiled when he saw it." [27](#) Nothing Napoleon did seemed to escape the attention of the press.

Fêteing Bonaparte

A related area of "passive propaganda" was the reporting of celebrations. These began with the capture of Mantua in February 1797. With that fortress-city under Napoleon's control, the public sensed the end of the campaign, and celebrations broke out all over France and Italy and in the various armies of the Republic. On 27 February, for example, the *Clef du Cabinet* reported a large celebration by the Army of the Sambre and Meuse in Cologne honoring Bonaparte's victories in Italy and the

capture of Mantua. ²⁸ A month later, the *Messenger du Soir* reported that Milan was ready to celebrate the "glorious return of General Bonaparte" with an illuminated city and numerous celebrations.

In April, with the announcement of the preliminary peace at Loeben, the true celebrations began. According to the *Clef*, applause and cheers of "*vive la République*" erupted among the Council of Five Hundred, displaying an appropriate enthusiasm. ²⁹ The *Ami des Lois* reported that in Montauban, a celebration in honor of "Bonaparte's victories," complete with illuminations and an unceasing ball, lasted three days after the announcement of peace. ³⁰



When news of victory reached Limoges, with great fanfare the crowds shouted "*Vive la République! Vive Bonaparte!*" and spontaneously broke into strains of "*La Marseillaise*" and the "*Hymne de Chénier*," two of the period's more popular patriotic songs. The editors of the *Ami des Lois* assured their readers that it was a tremendous celebration. Similar fêtes across France memorialized the accomplishments of the hero of Italy, making him easily the single most popular person in France. The Directory itself sponsored a fête in honor of their most successful general.

15

Many of these festivities continued on into the new year. According to a letter from Citizen Marson, a commissioner of the Directory, a celebration of the recent peace and in anticipation of Bonaparte's future victories (implying a potential campaign against England) was held in a town in Loire-Inférieur. Two theaters were illuminated and, amid all the patriotic slogans which adorned the city, a "bust of the *italique*, decorated in oak and laurel, appeared to elicit the crowd's confidence in the hero and presage the success of the expedition [to England]." ³¹ Such celebrations- and the reporting about such celebrations-also kept Bonaparte's name and accomplishments before the public eye during his periods of inaction.

In addition, the character of Napoleon received much attention from the press, which tried to put a human face on the heroic figure. Often, however, this humanization simply augmented the legend. In an image anticipating David's famous 1812 portrait *Napoleon in His Study*, the *Clef du Cabinet* reported, "Bonaparte works incessantly for the success of planned government operations." ³² The editors continued their observations: "It is calm in the streets of Paris, but in every corner of London fear reigns." ³³ In addition, as already noted, the press praised Bonaparte's humility in the face of tremendous public adulation.

Still other press reports, especially those following his election to the Institute of France, dwelt upon Napoleon's intellect. In December 1797, the

general attended a dinner hosted by François de Neuchâteau in honor of Bonaparte's induction into the Institute, of which one newspaper wrote, "The hero astonished all guests by the variety and depth of his knowledge." ³⁴

Through such revelations, Napoleon Bonaparte became more than the conquering general; he stood out not only as a humble, tireless public  [Rue de la Victoire](#) servant, but also as a man of culture and intellect. In recognition of the 28-year-old general, the Department of the Seine changed the name of the street "where the conqueror of Italy lives" from rue Chantereine to rue de la Victoire. ³⁵ Such honors and recognition reinforced those propagandistic images that had been carefully crafted by Napoleon over the previous two years.

Celebrity and Bonaparte's Family

Bonaparte's popularity spilled over to his family as well. In addition to demanding more and more information about the famous general, the public welcomed news of the general's relations. In one of the earliest incidences of this type of broadening of interest, the 31 May 1796 *Gazette Française* informed its readers that Josephine was being called "our Lady of Victories" in polite society. ³⁶ By the end of 1796, even Josephine's movements were being tracked by the press, especially as they related to her famous husband. The *Messenger du Soir* in December reported her departure from Paris to join Napoleon while the army rested. ³⁷ Following the Peace of Campo Formio, the attentions of the press intensified. The *Gazette Française* noted the return of Josephine to Paris as well as plans by the Minister of the Exterior for a brilliant celebration in honor of General Bonaparte. ³⁸ At the end of the month, the *Clef du Cabinet* reported the disappointment of a Citizen Cacault, who had made wonderful plans in Florence to honor Josephine; she had not stopped in that city, but instead continued on to Paris to be with her famous husband. Yet, despite Josephine's desire to return to Paris as quickly as possible, her trip was delayed by celebration upon celebration all along her route. ³⁹

On other occasions, Napoleon's immediate family attracted the attention of the press. On 1 June 1797, for example, the general's mother experienced one the hazards of her son's fame. The *Ami des Lois* reported that the administrators of la Drôme offered her a house, only to discover that the offer was fraudulent—the promised lodgings did not exist. The editors condemned the authors of the note for a "violation of the most sacred rights" in their apparent attempt to gain political support by appearing to be generous to Madame Mère. ⁴⁰ On 12 December 1797, the *Clef du Cabinet* announced the engagement of "Mademoiselle Bonaparte" to the Prince de Santacroce. ⁴¹ This report, however, was most likely a mistake, as both Elisa and Pauline were already married, and Caroline was only fifteen.

In such ways, a passive propaganda industry sprang up—seemingly overnight—to satisfy the public appetite for all things Bonaparte when the press alone could not meet the demand. Unintentionally supplementing and complementing Napoleon's own propaganda efforts, a virtual army of engravers, hack writers, vendors, songwriters, and poets all contributed to the celebrity of Bonaparte's name, while earning for themselves a quick profit.

The General You Never Knew: Popular Biographies of Bonaparte

One must always remember that, before 1796, few people had ever even heard of Napoleon Bonaparte, and people wanted to know about his background. Who was this man who had seemingly come out of nowhere to achieve miracles on the battlefield? In an attempt to answer this question, many people turned to inexpensive popular biographies, dozens of which could be found on the streets beginning in the fall of 1797. One of the first to appear, a pamphlet entitled *Quelques notices sur les premières années de Bonaparte*, was advertised in the *Clef du Cabinet*. It was on sale at the Librairie de Dupont and was also available in the original English version. [42](#)

The writer's purpose was to make known to the world "the smallest details of a man who, at the age of twenty-eight, had already become the model of a hero." [43](#) The booklet went on to describe Bonaparte's career at Brienne, observing

a sort of instinct [that] secretly directed his choice of studies, which were to become the instruments of his glory. Mathematics, fortifications, strategy and tactics, and above all history occupied all his free time. He read without ceasing in his studies.... [44](#)

The writer also revealed the secret of Bonaparte's success as general: "Always active, always the same, whether he is fighting, negotiating, or punishing, it is always the affair of that single moment, of a single word. Never a hesitation." [45](#) This booklet left the impression that from the beginning Bonaparte was destined for greatness.

By the end of 1797, a second book of this sort went on sale throughout Paris. Although the title indicates that it might have been a critical work, *Correctif à la Gloire de Bonaparte, ou une lettre à ce général* proved to be nearly as pro-Bonapartist as *Quelques notices*. [46](#) In a manner reminiscent of Marc Antony's eulogy of Julius Caesar, Sylvain Maréchal wrote:

Others search mythology and history to find a surname to give you.
The pens of our writers are not rapid enough to keep up with your

victories. Some proclaimed you a hero, a demigod, the marvel of our time and a subject for astonishment for our children. Each day, our legislators, as our lawgivers, begin each session of both chambers with long speeches in your honor.

These are not bad accomplishments, especially for one so young-younger than Alexander. [47](#)

While giving such praise, Maréchal did find one thing in Napoleon's behavior that deserved criticism, namely his treatment of the Kings of Sardinia and of Naples and of the pope. Instead of removing these monarchs from power, Bonaparte allowed them to keep their thrones, thus preventing liberty from completely sweeping the Italian peninsula. [48](#) The work urged Napoleon to negotiate boldly with Austria and Prussia to restore ancient liberties to Europe and ended with guarded praise:

One nevertheless admires in your conduct the happy choice of contrasts. You first revolutionized Italy, then you preached prudence and calm. Protean, you took all the tones with equal success. By and by-warrior and legislator, you balance in your hands ... the destiny of Europe suspended by a golden chain. [49](#)

Thus, by the end of 1797, according to some, even the perceived faults of Bonaparte's conduct in Italy had been overshadowed by his abilities to wage war and make peace.

30

In February 1798, according to the editors of the *Clef du Cabinet*, another popular booklet and near-replica of the earlier *Quelques notices*, entitled *Bonaparte dévoilé aux yeux de la France et de l'Europe entière*, could be found everywhere in Paris. [50](#) As with the earlier work, the author of this book, J. T. Bigrat, sought to find the origins of Bonaparte's success in his childhood. According to Bigrat, Napoleon learned his good republican values from his reading of classical Greek and Roman texts, and it was this education that caused young Bonaparte to "embrace the principles of the Revolution with enthusiasm." [51](#) Also appearing in this booklet, for perhaps the first time, was the famous snowball fight scene at Brienne, in which the future hero single-handedly defeated his classmates. According to Bigrat, this episode was the first indication of Bonaparte's courage and leadership. [52](#) The rest of the piece traces the rise of the general's fortunes in the most favorable terms. The hero-worship ended by noting that, although the general's career had only just begun, he was already the most celebrated man of his day: "Bonaparte is the most honored of men in France, and his name, made illustrious by his victories, is one of

those that will burn with brightness in the eyes of posterity." [53](#)

Other pamphlets followed, and, with few exceptions, these  [Pamphlets](#) also sang the praises of Bonaparte and his conduct of the Italian campaign. [54](#) Most noted the general's "humble" origins, his solid republican idealism, and the diversity of his genius, as he was not only a great general, but also the possessor of a first-rate mind. Their authors, of course, had no way of knowing the scale on which these predictions of Napoleon's greatness would come true.

Anecdotal and Apocryphal Tales

Complementing these popular biographies were a host of anecdotal stories, plays, and imagined dialogues that discussed various aspects of the young general's greatness and his contributions to the welfare of France. As the general's fame and the public's appetite for information about his origins grew, apocryphal stories emerged. In September 1796, for example, a story appeared in *La Décade Philosophique* telling of Bonaparte's dramatic balloon ascent from the Champs de Mars in March 1784, designed to show the intrepidity of the future hero. The event never happened, at least with Bonaparte making the ascent. In the next issue, the editors published a letter from a reader, offering an eye-witness account. Bonaparte, the reader noted, would not have been at the École Militaire until several months after the incident, and it was the young Duc d'Orléans who actually took the balloon ride. [55](#) So astonishing and meteoric had been the growth of Napoleon's fame that even the editors of such an important newspaper could not question heroic anecdotes attributed to the general.

Following his successes in Italy, a number of plays also attempted to depict the heroism of General Bonaparte. In December 1797, for example, the Théâtre Lyrique presented a performance of *Le Pont de Lodi*. Although the review from *La Décade Philosophique* found the play to be poorly and hastily written, and veterans commented on its less-than-realistic portrayal of events, the broader public greeted it with "the most lively enthusiasm." [56](#)

Another play, a pantomime in four acts by Paschal Bruneti, described Bonaparte's capture of Alexandria and his magnanimous treatment of the defeated. The main plot was developed against this backdrop, following the dramatic (but fictional) rescue by Napoleon and General Berthier of a beautiful young French girl (and her father), who had been held captive in a dungeon by the city's lecherous governor. This same story was retold and printed at least two other times in both prose and verse forms. [57](#) Nothing, it seems, was beyond the abilities of Bonaparte, including rescuing damsels in distress.

One final, intriguing piece is "Sur Bonaparte: Conversation Entre un Soldat, un Royalist et un Rentier." Written on the eve of the *coup*

 [Sur Bonaparte ...](#) *d'état* of 18-19 *brumaire*, this piece attempted to show

_____ the benefits brought to France by General Bonaparte: he had brought glory to French arms, helped to end factional in-fighting, and given peace to the nation. With peace and political stability came prosperity. By the end of the seven-page dialogue, both the soldier and the *rentier* realize that these benefits had been squandered away by politicians of the Directory and by renewed war while Bonaparte was in Egypt, and that his return offered hope for the future. ⁵⁸ Thus, both through the popularity created by his own propaganda efforts and through the supplemental activities of largely unknown hack writers, Napoleon Bonaparte was perfectly positioned to participate in the overthrow of the Directory, replacing it with first the Consulate and eventually the Empire.

The Versification of Napoleon Bonaparte

Brochures such as these, however, were supplemented by a host of poems and songs that appeared in various newspapers of the day. The political importance of such pieces, as Laura Mason points out in her *Singing the French Revolution*, should not be underestimated. ⁵⁹ While the cost of newspaper subscriptions and (to a lesser extent) of these various pro-Bonapartist pamphlets prevented the average Parisian from having direct access to such propaganda, songs were more easily accessible. Virtually any would-be poet could compose a song, and songs could be written quickly, allowing them to keep up with events. In addition, song sheets were easy to print, easy to conceal, and inexpensive, making them a perfect medium for bridging the gap between the literate public and the masses. ⁶⁰ To ensure that the song could be easily learned (if a poem were intended as a song), the name of a familiar tune would be printed next to the title of the new piece, such as "*Air: Du pas redoublé de l'Infanterie*," "*Air: Du serin qui te fait envie*," or "*Air: O Filii et Filiae*," so that people would not have to struggle with learning new music along with the words. ⁶¹ As with his coverage in the popular press, Bonaparte benefited from a realm of propaganda he did not directly influence in the form of songs sung in his honor and to the glory of his army.



35

Perhaps no figure after 1796 was as lionized as Napoleon Bonaparte — he seemed to be the object of everyone's interest. According to one police agent, while patrolling the notorious Faubourg St. Antoine several months after Bonaparte's return from Egypt and his *coup d'état*, "I went to Lefevre's.... There were a lot of workers there with their wives.... They sang republican songs, and everyone seemed quite content; they drank toasts to Bonaparte and to all the armies...." ⁶² These typical working-class Parisians offered not only toasts to Bonaparte, but also songs praising the general for his victories and for the peace he delivered.

As Mason has discovered, several songbooks appeared during the fall and

winter of 1796-97 to promote popular songs, and each month new issues were released. In one of these, the *Dîners du vaudeville*, the following song appeared in its *vendémiaire*, an 6 (September/October 1798) issue:

La Paix

Hail to our soldiers' leader,
Who, courageous as well as wise,
Leads the French into combat,
Or restrains their bravery.
Of Europe, the victor,
And the pacifier.
Glory to the able warrior,
Who, not yet thirty years old,
Joins to the valor of Achilles,
The virtues of Nestor. [63](#)

Even Rouget de Lisle, the author of "La Marseillaise," tried his hand at praising Bonaparte in his "Le Chant du Combat. À Bonaparte." With the general's return from Egypt, the songwriter encouraged France to stand fast against her enemies: "... Stand up, stand up, children of victory/Here in the instant of perils and of glory/It is necessary to vanquish or die as soldiers." [64](#)

Supplementing these songbooks were songs and poems that appeared in the newspapers, further extending their prospective audiences. On the first page of the 14 February 1797 issue of *Le Moniteur universel*, for example, a poem entitled "On the Capture of Mantua" extolled the virtues of "the unconquered hero" by noting-among other things-that "the birthplace of Virgil [Mantua] had at last recovered its glory in liberty" because of Bonaparte's efforts. [65](#) In April, the *Journal des Compagnes* printed a short six-line poem entitled, "À Buonaparte," which began, "Young hero, conqueror of Italy." A month later, another poem, "Sur la signature des préliminaires de la paix," appeared in the same journal, celebrating both the end of the war and the man responsible: "Bonaparte! We sing to you and your immortal brigades!" [66](#) On 20 April 1797, the lead item of the influential *Ami des Lois* (a newspaper with a circulation of approximately 5,000) was a poem/song entitled "Rimes sur un grand homme." [67](#) A week later, even the right-wing *Messenger du Soir* (a newspaper claiming a circulation of nearly 12,000) included a brief poem/song, "Au Général de l'Armée d'Italie," by the initialed author, C. B.:

Young Buonaparte! from victory to victory,
You have given us peace, and our hearts are touched;
But do you want to conquer all kinds of glory?
Remember our prisoner at Olmus [Lafayette]!"

Another opportunity to sing the praises of the "Hero of Italy" occurred with the fête given for him following the signing of the peace. Henriette Derenty offered this impromptu: "Young hero, vanquisher of Italy/take this bouquet from the hands of innocence./All the French love your modesty;/it also assures me of your indulgence." ⁶⁹ In December 1797, the *Journal de Paris* even advertised a piece of piano music dedicated to General Bonaparte entitled, "La paix entre la France et l'empereur, ou les prodiges de l'armée d'Italie" ["Peace between France and the Emperor, or the Prodiges of the Army of Italy"]. ⁷⁰ Several days later, the *Clef du Cabinet* printed a short poem, expressing sorrow that even poets could not sufficiently glorify Napoleon: "Trust to celebrate you, these various rhymers/only afflict our eyes and our ears with boredom!" ⁷¹ Yet, if even poets and songwriters could not adequately praise the *héros italique*, the growing deluge of press accounts helped Napoleon Bonaparte to become larger than life.

The Hero Returns from Egypt

Through his initial efforts to manipulate the French press with the careful wording and timing of his dispatches, the founding of his own newspapers that further promoted his public image, and his use and patronage of the arts—especially with his "Five Battles" series of medals and his relationships with key artists—Napoleon Bonaparte had succeeded in creating the idealized, heroic image of himself that would enable him to become the ultimate political player of the Revolutionary era. So effective had this brilliant self-promotion been that, by 1799, with France once again at war both externally and internally (in the Vendée), and with the government paralyzed by corruption in the face of crisis, only one figure appeared to be a plausible candidate to save France from impending disaster.

Public Jubilation

Nowhere can this phenomenon be more clearly seen than in Napoleon's triumphal return from Egypt in the fall of 1799. News of Bonaparte's landing at Fréjus in the Department of Var became public on 13 October. ⁷² Breaking almost simultaneously was news of Napoleon's victory over the Turks at  [Relation des campagnes ...](#) Aboukir. ⁷³ Shortly thereafter, General Alexandre Berthier, Napoleon's chief of staff, published his *Relation des campagnes du général Bonaparte en Egypte et en Syrie*—both serially in newspapers and as an individual booklet—giving the public a very favorable account of Bonaparte's activities in Egypt and Palestine. ⁷⁴ These events could not have been better timed. According to the *Clef du Cabinet*:

The hero who began this series of triumphs and who has become so glorious, Bonaparte, returns victorious from the Orient; he is at Toulon, and the Directory has just received news of his arrival. Victory which has never abandoned this hero seems to have wanted him to return to his country victorious. [75](#)

45

As newspapers traced the route of his perilous return and sang praises to the general as he made his way to Paris, an electric excitement seemed to sweep across war-weary France. In every town and village along the general's route, cries of "*Vive la République!*" and "*Vive Bonaparte!*" and spontaneous celebrations recall the celebrations following the Treaty of Campo Formio—cities were lit up at night and the crack of musket and pistol fire filled the air. [76](#) In Lyons, on 11 October, the general attended a play written in his honor, *Le Héros de retour d'Égypte* (*The Hero Returns from Egypt*). According to one report, when Bonaparte appeared at the theater, the applause and the "bravos" redoubled and were joined by those from outside as well. [77](#) In Aix, as the general passed through that city, someone in the crowd called out: "I don't need anything more, Bonaparte is with us!" [78](#)

Everywhere was the anticipation that he alone could change the tide of the war, that he would confront Russian Field Marshal Suvarov, reconquer Italy, and avenge the defeats of General Jourdan. [79](#) According to the *Journal des Hommes Libres*, "What strengthens our hope regarding the return of liberty to Italy is the unexpected return of Bonaparte." [80](#) The *Clef du Cabinet* offered additional praise for the "*héros italique*," noting that his return has increased "the patriotic furor of every soul." [81](#) The *Ami des Lois* even observed that, since Napoleon's return, soldiers who had deserted returned to their units because of the confidence inspired by Bonaparte. [82](#)

Calculated Public Appearances

On the morning of 16 October, a week after landing at Fréjus, Bonaparte  [Rue de la Victoire](#) arrived at his house on the rue de la Victoire. As was the case following his triumph in Italy, crowds gathered for a chance to see the "savior" of France, as many now believed Napoleon to be. [83](#) Unlike his return from Italy in 1797, however, Bonaparte made few public appearances in the wake of his return from Egypt. In fact, between 29 October and 3 November, news about Napoleon abated. Yet when he did appear in public, the results were invariably the same, and the press reported every detail it could. Such was the case with a government-sponsored banquet held in the honor of both General Bonaparte and General Moreau, which was held on 6 November, just two days prior to the *coup d'état*. It was a lavish affair at the Temple of Victory (formerly the Church of Saint-Sulpice), the site that housed all Bonaparte's military trophies from Italy. Of the 500 seats prepared, 300 were reserved for the

members of the Council of Five Hundred and the Council of Ancients. [84](#) Although the evening was to be in honor of two generals, only one was truly lauded. By all accounts it was "very brilliant" affair, with the hall adorned with flags captured during the campaign of 1796-97. Of special interest were the toasts offered by the principal figures: Moreau toasted the fidelity of France's allies; Bonaparte drank "To the Unity of all French!" [85](#) In so many ways, this toast summed up much of what Bonaparte had tried to express in his Italian newspapers, and it reinforced an image that would serve him well over the next several days: Napoleon Bonaparte was a man above politics who did what he did for the welfare of the entire nation.

Having carefully manipulated the French public using every means at his disposal-his military dispatches, the press, artists, engravers, poets, playwrights, and songwriters-Bonaparte carefully crafted for himself the heroic image the French desired and set himself up as a political power to be reckoned with. His victories gave him fame, but it was his propaganda that transformed the "*héros italique*" into the most famous person of the age and made possible his eventual domination of the coming *coup d'état*. On the eve of 18-19 *brumaire*, Napoleon Bonaparte had become at once conqueror, peacemaker, lawgiver, patron of the arts, and man above politics. He had become everything the French desired.

Notes:

Note 1: See, for example, Claude-François Menestrier, *Histoire du roi Louis le Grand par les médailles, emblèmes, devises, jettons* (Paris: Nolin, 1693); and Joseph Klaitz, *Printed Propaganda under Louis XIV: Absolute Monarchy and Public Opinion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).[Back.](#)

Note 2: *Gazette Française* (Paris), 11 *floréal*, an 4 (20 April 1796).[Back.](#)

Note 3: *Ami des Lois* (Paris), 11 *floréal*, an 4 (20 April 1796).[Back.](#)

Note 4: *Ami des Lois* (Paris), 11 *floréal*, an 4 (26 April 1796).[Back.](#)

Note 5: *Ami des Lois* (Paris), 11 *floréal*, an 4 (28 April 1796). This sentiment was echoed in the 5 *brumaire* session of the Council of Five Hundred, when Rion paid tribute to Bonaparte: "It is above-all the young hero of Italy, this general who has surpassed himself in heroism, who deserves our attention. Like Caesar, he could say: 'I came, I saw, I conquered.' But Caesar attacked the rights of the people, and Bonaparte fights for liberty." See *Gazette Française* (Paris), 6 *brumaire*, an 6 (27 October 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 6: *Gazette Française* (Paris), 9 *thermidor*, an 4 (27 July 1796). In this

case, the topic of conversation was Bonaparte's calling the Army of Italy *his* army. The editors noted that neither Lafayette nor Dumouriez had dared commit such effrontery. Other newspapers, however, called attention to other deeds of Bonaparte's. According to a report in the *Nouvelles Politiques*, even the tiny republic of San Marino sang the praises of Bonaparte, comparing the French general to Hannibal and showing him to be superior to all the heroes of antiquity. See *Nouvelles Politiques* (Paris), 15 ventôse, an 5 (5 March 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 7: *Gazette Française* (Paris), 29 prairial, an 4 (17 June 1796).[Back.](#)

Note 8: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 17 floréal, an 5 (6 May 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 9: *Ami des Lois* (Paris), 13 ventôse, an 5 (3 March 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 10: *Gazette Française* (Paris), 28 thermidor, an 4 (15 August 1796).[Back.](#)

Note 11: *Gazette Française* (Paris), 27 fructidor, an 4 (13 September 1796).[Back.](#)

Note 12: *Messenger du Soir* (Paris), 19 prairial, an 5 (7 June 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 13: *Ami des Lois* (Paris), 1 messidor, an 5 (19 June 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 14: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 3 messidor, an 5 (23 June 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 15: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 2 brumaire, an 6 (23 October 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 16: *Gazette nationale ou le Moniteur universel* (Paris), 9 frimaire, an 6 (29 November 1797); 10 frimaire, an 6 (30 November 1797); 13 frimaire, an 6 (3 December 1797); 14 frimaire, an 6 (4 December 1797); 16 frimaire, an 6 (5 December 1797); 17 frimaire, an 6 (6 December 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 17: *Gazette nationale ou le Moniteur universel* (Paris), 19 frimaire, an 6 (9 December 1797); and 21 frimaire, an 6 (11 December 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 18: *Gazette Française* (Paris), 18 frimaire, an 6 (8 December 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 19: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 6 ventôse, an 6 (24 February 1798).[Back.](#)

Note 20: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 9 ventôse, an 6 (27 February 1798).[Back.](#)

Note 21: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 11 brumaire, an 6 (1 November 1797) and 13 brumaire, an 6 (3 November 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 22: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 21 brumaire, an 6 (11 November 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 23: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 5 frimaire, an 6 (25 November 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 24: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 15 frimaire, an 6 (5 December 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 25: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 1 *thermidor*, an 5 (19 July 1797) and 4 *ventôse*, an 6 (22 February 1798).[Back.](#)

Note 26: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 7 *thermidor*, an 5 (25 July 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 27: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 2 *nivôse*, an 6 (22 December 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 28: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 9 *ventôse*, an 6 (27 February 1798).[Back.](#)

Note 29: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 8 *floréal*, an 5 (28 April 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 30: *Ami des Lois* (Paris), 10 *floréal*, an 5 (29 April 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 31: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 30 *nivôse*, an 6 (19 January 1798).[Back.](#)

Note 32: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 11 *nivôse*, an 6 (31 December 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 33: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 11 *nivôse*, an 6 (31 December 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 34: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 25 *frimaire*, an 6 (15 December 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 35: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 17 *nivôse*, an 6 (6 January 1798).[Back.](#)

Note 36: *Gazette Française* (Paris), 12 *prairial*, an 4 (31 May 1796).[Back.](#)

Note 37: *Messenger du Soir* (Paris), 4 *nivôse*, an 5 (24 December 1796).[Back.](#)

Note 38: *Gazette Française* (Paris), 26 *frimaire*, an 6 (16 December 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 39: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 9 *nivôse*, an 6 (29 December 1797) and 11 *nivôse*, an 6 (31 December 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 40: *Ami des Lois* (Paris), 13 *prairial*, an 5 (1 June 1797); and *Ami des Lois* (Paris), 15 *prairial*, an 5 (3 June 1797). See also the right-wing newspaper the *Messenger du Soir* (Paris), 14 *prairial*, an 5 (2 June 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 41: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 22 *frimaire*, an 6 (12 December 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 42: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 2 *vendémiaire*, an 6 (24 September 1797) and 18 *vendémiaire*, an 6 (9 October 1797). This second advertisement adds that, "It is possible that Bonaparte is more popular in England than in France." The reason for this statement is revealed in the 28 *pluviôse*, an 6 issue of the *Clef*-the pamphlet was a translated English brochure.[Back.](#)

Note 43: C. H., *Quelques Notices sur les premières années de Bonaparte* (Paris: Librairie de Dupont, 1797), 10-11.[Back.](#)

Note 44: *Quelques Notices*, 21 and 22.[Back.](#)

Note 45: *Quelques Notices*, 58.[Back.](#)

Note 46: *Gazette Française* (Paris), 28 frimaire, an 6 (18 December 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 47: Sylvain Maréchal, *Correctif à la Gloire de Bonaparte, ou lettre à ce général* [A Corrective to the Glory of Bonaparte, or a Letter to this General, or a letter to this general] (Venice: Chez Lenfant, an 6), 3-4.[Back.](#)

Note 48: Maréchal, *Correctif à la Gloire*, 5-6.[Back.](#)

Note 49: Maréchal, *Correctif à la Gloire*, 25-26.[Back.](#)

Note 50: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 28 pluviôse, an 6 (16 February 1798).[Back.](#)

Note 51: J. T. Bigrat, *Buonaparte dévoilé aux yeux de la France et de l'Europe entière* [Buonaparte Revealed to the Eyes of France and to the Whole of Europe](Paris: Imprimerie des Nouveautés, n.d.), 7-10.[Back.](#)

Note 52: Bigrat, *Buonaparte dévoilé*, 8-9.[Back.](#)

Note 53: Bigrat, *Buonaparte dévoilé*, 8-9.[Back.](#)

Note 54: See, for example, F. B. Tisset's *Vie privée du général Buonaparte* (Paris: Chez les Marchands de Nouveautés, 1798); Anon., *Bonaparte, général en chef de l'armée d'Italie, traité comme il le mérite* (Paris: Imprimerie de Guilhemat, n.d.); Anon., *Épître à Buonaparte* (Paris: Imprimerie de Lenormant, an 5); Anon., *Sur Bonaparte: Conversation entre un soldat, un royalist, et un rentier* (n.p., [1799]); Vaddi, *Les crimes de Bonaparte, ou Actes d'accusation contre tous les généraux de l'armée d'Italie* (Paris: Imprimerie de l'étoile du soir, n.d.); and Général Baron F. R. de Pommereul, *Campagne du général Buonaparte en Italie pendant les années IV et V de la République Française, par un officier général* (Paris: Plasson, 5 [1797]).[Back.](#)

Note 55: *La Décade Philosophique, littéraire, et politique* (Paris), 20 fructidor, an 4 (6 September 1796); and *La Décade Philosophique*, 30 fructidor, an 4 (16 September 1796).[Back.](#)

Note 56: *La Décade Philosophique*, 30 frimaire, an 6 (20 December 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 57: Paschal Bruneti, *La Descente de Bonaparte en Égypte, ou la conquête d'Alexandre, ballet tragic-pantomime en quatre acts* (Paris: Charles Pougens, an 8); Simonot [Jean Bouche-d'Or et Quiditou], *Événement extraordinaire arrivé au général Buonaparte à Alexandrie* (Paris: Imprimerie de Renaudiere, n.d.); and Anon., *Entrée triomphante de general Buonaparte dans trios villes; événement qui lui est arrive* (Paris: Imprimerie de Renaudiere, n.d.).[Back.](#)

Note 58: Anon., *Sur Bonaparte: Conversation entre un soldat, un royalist, et un rentier* (n.p., [1799]), 1-7.[Back.](#)

Note 59: Laura Mason, *Singing the French Revolution: Popular Culture and Politics, 1789-1799* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).[Back.](#)

Note 60: Mason, *Singing*, 193.[Back.](#)

Note 61: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 26 nivôse, an 6 (15 January 1798); *Messenger du Soir* (Paris), 8 ventôse, an 5 (26 February 1797); and *Journal de Bonaparte et des Hommes Vertueux* (Paris), 3 ventôse, an 5 (21 February, 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 62: Report by Agent 5, as quoted in Mason, *Singing*, 193.[Back.](#)

Note 63: "La Paix," as quoted in Mason, *Singing*, 199.[Back.](#)

Note 64: Rouget de Lisle, "Le Chant du Combat. À Bonaparte" (Paris: Imprimerie de P. Didot l'aîné, an 8).[Back.](#)

Note 65: *Moniteur universal* (Paris), 26 pluviôse, an 5 (14 February 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 66: *Journal des Compagnes* (Paris), 20 germinal, an 5 (9 April 1797) and 14 floréal, an 5 (3 May 1797). In her analysis of songs from the era of the French Revolution, Mason frequently uses songs and poems interchangeably, no doubt because of their similarities. I have adopted the same convention.[Back.](#)

Note 67: *Ami des Lois* (Paris), 1 floréal, an 5 (20 April 1797). For the circulation figures, see Jeremy D. Popkin, *The Right-Wing Press in France, 1792-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 177.[Back.](#)

Note 68: *Messenger du Soir* (Paris), 8 floréal, an 5 (27 April 1797). For the circulation figure, see Popkin, *Right-Wing Press*, 179.[Back.](#)

Note 69: "Petit In-promptu prononcé par Henriette Derenty accompagnée du fils de Palloy, à la fête donnée par les représentans du peuple au Général Buonaparte à l'occasion de la paix" (n.p., n.d). Salle des Imprimés. Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Paris.[Back.](#)

Note 70: *Journal de Paris* (Paris), 15 frimaire, an 6 (6 December 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 71: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 22 frimaire, an 6 (13 December 1797).[Back.](#)

Note 72: *Journal des Hommes Libres* (Paris), 22 vendémiaire, an 7 (13 October 1799); *Ami des Lois* (Paris), 23 vendémiaire, an 7 (14 October 1799). For Napoleon's dispatch announcing his return, see Napoléon Bonaparte, *Correspondence de Napoléon Ier*, Vol. 5 (Paris: Henri Plon, 1855), 578-79, [no. 4381](#). [Back.](#)

Note 73: *Ami des Lois* (Paris), 22 vendémiaire, an 7 (13 October 1799).[Back.](#)

Note 74: Alexandre Berthier, *Relation des campagnes du général Bonaparte en Egypte et en Syrie* (Paris: Imprimerie de P. Didot l'aîné, an 8); *Gazette Nationale ou le Moniteur Universel* (Paris), 19 vendémiaire-2 brumaire, an 8 (11-24 October 1799); cf. *Relations de l'expédition de Syrie, de la Bataille d'aboukir et de la reprise du fort de ce nom; imprimée sur les pieces originales et officielles* (Paris: Chez j. Gratiot et compagnie, n.d.).[Back.](#)

Note 75: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 22 vendémiaire, an 7 (13 October 1799).[Back.](#)

Note 76: *Journal des Hommes Libres* (Paris), 29 vendémiaire, an 7 (20 October 1799); and *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 29 vendémiaire, an 7 (20 October 1799).[Back.](#)

Note 77: D. J. Goodspeed, *Napoleon's Eighty Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 50; L. -Henry Lecomte, *Napoléon et le Monde Dramatique* (Paris: H. Daragon, 1912), 11; *Journal de Paris* (Paris), 28 vendémiaire, an 8; and Marvin Carlson, *The Theatre of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 280. Carlson notes that both this play and *Le Retour à l'espérance ou L'Arivée du général Bonaparte* were performed in Paris as well, the former in the Théâtre Gaîté and the latter in the Théâtre des Troubadours.[Back.](#)

Note 78: *Ami des Lois* (Paris), 30 vendémiaire, an 7 (21 October 1799).[Back.](#)

Note 79: *Ami des Lois* (Paris), 26 vendémiaire, an 7 (17 October 1799); and 28 vendémiaire, an 7 (19 October 1799). The *Ami des Lois* cited several other Parisian newspapers that expressed similar ideas.[Back.](#)

Note 80: *Journal des Hommes Libres* (Paris), 22 vendémiaire, an 7 (13 October 1799).[Back.](#)

Note 81: *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 30 vendémiaire, an 7 (21 October 1799).[Back.](#)

Note 82: *Ami des Lois* (Paris), 10 brumaire, an 7 (31 October 1799).[Back.](#)

Note 83: *Ami des Lois* (Paris), 1 brumaire, an 7 (22 October 1799).[Back.](#)

Note 84: *Journal des Hommes Libres* (Paris), 15 brumaire, an 7 (5 November 1799); cf. *Ami des Lois* (Paris), 11 brumaire, an 7 (1 November 1799).[Back.](#)

Note 85: *Le Moniteur* (Paris), 16 brumaire, an 7 (6 November 1799); *Clef du Cabinet* (Paris), 17 brumaire, an 7 (7 November 1799); *Journal des Hommes Libres* (Paris), 17 brumaire, an 7 (7 November 1799); and *Ami des Lois* (Paris), 17 brumaire, an 7 (7 November 1799). See also Goodspeed, *Napoleon's Eighty Days*, 100.[Back.](#)

[The Genesis of Napoleonic Propaganda, 1796-1799](#)