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Patrice Gueniffey, *Le Dix-huit Brumaire: L'épilogue de la Révolution française: 9-10 novembre 1799*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2008. 422 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, chronology, index, and appendix. €24.00 (pb); ISBN 978-2-07-012032-1.

Review by Howard G. Brown, Binghamton University (State University of New York).

Shortly after crushing the Turks in the Battle of Aboukir on 25 July 1799, General Bonaparte learned of the mounting political and military crisis facing the republican regime in Paris. He quickly decided to leave his army in Egypt and return to France. After secret preparations, a month crossing the English-infested Mediterranean, and a triumphal procession from the coast to the capital, the celebrated hero arrived at his modest house on the rue des Victoires (of course) only to find it empty. His unfaithful wife had misjudged the route of his return and rushed out to explain herself before his brothers could describe her misconduct while he was away. After making up with his beautiful wife, he found Paris teeming with cross-cutting conspiracies. With little doubt about just who should replace the incompetent lawyers running the country, he joined forces with the best organized of the plots, that headed by Sieyès, a Trojan-horse member of the five-man Directory. The overthrow of the regime involved enough blunders to add suspense, but it was happily bloodless and provoked little resistance. Moreover, the actual event had a nice symmetry—that universal element of human beauty. The first half was sufficiently parliamentary and the second half sufficiently military to reflect the leading personalities in the drama. The new regime produced a string of successes—including peace with victory and peace with the pope—and so won almost universal approval from the French people.

Only a third-rate novelist would dare combine so much obvious symbolism with such a happy ending. But this is history, and so not subject to the same restraints, and historians have been delighted to tell the tale again and again. Patrice Gueniffey, *Le Dix-huit Brumaire: L'épilogue de la Révolution française*, is the latest version.

Gueniffey's book appears in a new series published by Gallimard entitled "Les journées qui ont fait la France." The publisher intends this series to "prend le relais des fameuses 'Trente journées qui ont fait la France' créées il y a plus d'un demi-siècle et dont elle va rééditer quelques titres célèbres." Not limiting the number of "journées" (and therefore books) to thirty allows Gallimard to extend the political history of France beyond the original series' terminus at the liberation of Paris on 25 August 1944 as well as to add books on other key events not included in the original series. All the same, five of the ten books published thus far in the new series are reprintings of books published in the original series. Rather than reprint Albert Ollivier, *Le dix-huit brumaire (9 novembre 1799)*, however, the editors at Gallimard commissioned a new one from Gueniffey. Knowing this raises expectations. One anticipates a fresh interpretation, maybe some new archival evidence, or perhaps an innovative approach to political history in keeping with Gallimard's hope to use the series to "illustrer le profond renouveau de l'histoire politique comme mode d'explication privilégié du destin des sociétés"; at the very least, one looks forward to a thoughtful engagement with recent scholarship. Sadly, these expectations are not fulfilled.

Ollivier's original volume from 1961 is certainly out of date. His prefatory claim of avoiding partisanship and seeking only the truth about the past appears distinctly old fashioned in an age of post-

modern skepticism about historical objectivity. And yet Gueniffey's book is even more old fashioned. Rather than wrestle with interpretations of the Brumaire coup developed by the leading French scholars of Napoleon over the past half century, such as Georges Lefebvre, Albert Soboul, Jean Tulard, Louis Bergeron, or Thierry Lentz, Gueniffey's book challenges nineteenth-century republican interpretations embodied in the works of Edgar Quinet and Jules Michelet. Having opted for an equally partisan approach, but without their flamboyant rhetorical style, Gueniffey describes the Directory (1795-99) as the culmination of revolutionary failures, utterly moribund, and on the verge of collapse. Under these conditions, the Brumaire coup could not be an act of "republicide" and instead becomes an act of political salvation. According to Gueniffey, Bonaparte's sudden ascension to the summit of power enjoyed such widespread consent as not really to be a coup d'état, but in essence an election that circumstances deprived of legal forms. Moreover, Brumaire immediately ended the French Revolution. Voilà! In six weeks France had a regime that combined political legitimacy with real authority.

Gueniffey's version is largely that propagated by the Consulate at the time and later bolstered by Napoleon and his fellow conspirators in their memoirs, which are excerpted uncritically throughout the book. But the emphasis is firmly on Bonaparte. For example, more space is devoted to his victory in the Battle of Aboukir than to the series of victories won by French armies in Switzerland, Germany, and Belgium, not to mention (and it is not) the turning of the tide on royalist insurrection in the south and west of France itself, all achieved before Brumaire. In Gueniffey's account, it was Bonaparte, rather than Sieyès and his fellow revisionists, who determined the nature of both the coup and its consequences. Moreover, Brumaire spared France the tragedy of a failed state, provided a relatively painless solution to the crisis of 1799, and restored (sic) the regular functioning of institutions on the basis of common values. Gueniffey dates the Napoleonic dictatorship to the Constitution of 1799, thereby eliding the political trajectory of the Consulate and justifying the dictatorship as an understandable, even inevitable, response to contemporary circumstances, namely revolutionary politics and foreign war. This conforms to the broad outlines of bonapartist historiography, represented best by the monumental works of Albert Vandal and Louis Madelin.

Failing to develop an original interpretation of Brumaire is understandable, given how much has been written about these events. Far less understandable, however, is basing such an interpretation on the opinions and prejudices of contemporaries while largely ignoring the abundance of painstaking archival research done on the period. This is not an epistemological choice based on preferring the voices of the participants to the voices of historians, for he also sprinkles his book with lengthy excerpts from secondary sources. Furthermore, Gueniffey does some good positivist sleuthing of his own. For example, he has carefully pieced together evidence to conclude—very credibly—that Bonaparte's return from Egypt in 1799 depended on the maverick strategy and personal complicity of Sir William Sydney Smith, the man in charge of English naval and foreign affairs in the eastern Mediterranean.

Nonetheless, Gueniffey does have strong methodological preferences. As a former student of François Furet, it is natural for him to emphasize the history of political ideas and institutions. Thus, Gueniffey interestingly investigates various eddies of thought, notably those of Benjamin Constant and Madame de Staël, that turned alongside the main current of constitutional revisionism. Such an approach leads him to ascribe the Directory's demise to its lack of democratic legitimacy. He asserts that the Directory sealed its own fate in 1797 by refusing to cooperate with the majority in the legislative councils led by lawmakers whom he describes as royalists who were "republicans despite themselves." The impasse led to the purge of Fructidor year V (September 1797). Thus, by failing to respect the logic of its democratic institutions, the Directory irredeemably compromised its chances to acquire legitimacy.

Such an analysis has both merit and appeal. However, it is too deterministic and overstates the importance of democratic ideals. Messier aspects of life under the Directory, such as the economy, religion, conscription and public order, mattered far more. Gueniffey's interpretation can only be sustained by ignoring a large body of scholarship on the period, much of it published in the last

generation. This work shows 1) that the Directory was an important period in the apprenticeship of democracy in France; 2) that the regime made major strides in state-building, especially in areas of tax collection, military professionalism, and law enforcement; and 3) that considerable continuity existed between the late Directory and the early Consulate. It is certainly true that the Directory did not enjoy much public support by November 1799; nevertheless, Gueniffey's impressionistic caricature of the Directory's failings is based largely on contemporary writings and ignores the fact that without the progress made by the Directory since 1795, the Consulate would never have succeeded.

Gueniffey prefers the writings of François-René de Châteaubriand, Hyppolite Taine, Jacques Bainville and François Furet over works that reflect the Sorbonne's tradition of combining archival research with socialist politics.<sup>[1]</sup> The reason is certainly ideological. It is just as importantly aesthetic. Gueniffey has both a taste and a gift for trenchant writing. Furthermore, his fondness for stark contrasts and interpretive pronouncements gives his book flair. The reader senses a frisson of excitement to see the dilemma of the Directory pithily reduced to unidentified opinion ["on tient la restauration pour impossible sans pour autant croire à la possibilité de la république" (p. 58)], to have Bonaparte's relationship to the Directory described as a contest between "une légitimité sans autorité légale [et] une autorité légale sans légitimité" (p. 244), or to read how 18 Brumaire resembled *le 13 mai* because the two chief protagonists could incarnate values untainted by partisanship: "Bonaparte, c'était la Révolution sans ses crimes, l'égalité unie à la gloire; de Gaulle, la France lavée des mauvais souvenirs de la défaite et de la collaboration" (p. 387).

But the price of such aphoristic insight is inevitably the loss of complexity and nuance demanded by an ever expanding corpus of scholarly research. Rather than debating more recent interpretations of the Brumaire coup d'état, Gueniffey prefers to return to interpretive first principles. These lead directly to unqualified certainties associated with the classical historians of the nineteenth century. After all, these seemed to promise both clarity and profundity. No doubt the *grand public* for whom this book was written will find this approach reassuring.

## NOTES

[1] One assumes that Gueniffey cites no Anglophone scholarship—other than a few sources pertaining to Bonaparte's dealings with Sydney Smith—due to a lack of facility with English.

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