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David P. Jordan, *Napoleon and the Revolution*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. xiii + 327 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$90.00 (hb). ISBN 978-0-230-36281-9

Review by R. S. Alexander, University of Victoria, British Columbia

Among the images that battle for predominance in Napoleon's reputation, that of the "Jacobin on Horseback" is a venerable one.[1] In recent times it has been shouldered aside by other, less positive images, partly due to the decline of the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution. According to classic Marxist scholars such as Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul, 1789 brought the triumph of the bourgeoisie. As the heir of the Revolution, Napoleon consolidated this transformation, although his incessant warmongering ultimately cost him the support of the bourgeoisie and brought about his fall. Only the reforms of the Consulate, which entrenched bourgeois power, proved enduring. His imperial adventures achieved little.[2] Wishing to "push back" against more recent works in which the image of "unprincipled conqueror" (p. x) has taken center stage, David P. Jordan, a distinguished scholar whose previous studies have focused on Edward Gibbon, the trial of Louis XVI, Robespierre, and Baron Haussmann, has now reprised the image of "Jacobin on Horseback." At a time when association with the likes of Hitler has been all too evident in the literature, Jordan's *Napoleon and the Revolution* should restore a more balanced assessment of Napoleon and is welcome.[3]

Jordan's interpretation of Napoleon as heir of the Revolution is in several regards more complex and more convincing than the Marxist one. Rather than view Bonaparte's military accomplishments as basically irrelevant to his main historical role, Jordan places them at the center of his interpretation, and the book contains a fine series of concise descriptions of the main battles. Napoleon was the "sword bearer of the Revolution" (p. xii) and the army was the instrument by which he could spread the Revolution beyond French borders. Conquest gave him security at home, partly through the export of violence and disorder abroad. Although constant warfare ultimately led to the fall of the Empire, by then Napoleon's version of the Revolution had become so deeply rooted in France that the other great powers did not seek to remove it in 1814-15.

Also unlike the Marxists, Jordan does not link Bonaparte to the "inevitable" triumph of the bourgeoisie. Instead he draws heavily upon Hegel's belief that Napoleon was an "unwitting" agent" (p. 113) and savior of the Revolution who unintentionally fostered creation of a new world. While Bonaparte failed in his designs, he inflicted so much damage upon the Old Regime that the Vienna Settlement could not prevent the age of revolution from continuing. For a work that is semi-biographical in character, such a perspective has several advantages. Shifting emphasis towards long-term impact means that discussion of Napoleon's intentions and character does not need to be favorable or sympathetic. Thus, Jordan's version of the "Jacobin on horseback" can shed the hagiographical elements of earlier variants, and his assessment can be said to be both "for and against" Napoleon.[4] Many of Napoleon's least attractive character traits are on full display. He is a bully in his treatment of subordinates (including his brothers Joseph and Louis) and conduct of diplomacy, vindictive in his persecution of Germaine de Staël and Pope Pius VII, and he habitually blames others for his own mistakes. Indeed, in a chapter on the failed expedition to Egypt, many of the episodes upon which the "black legend" is based come into view to

make him a cruel, callous warlord and false prophet. Recognition of these traits does not alter Jordan's main argument, although it does suggest that "unprincipled conqueror" might be part of the story.

*Napoleon and the Revolution* largely consists of twelve narrative chapters interspersed with six thematic ones. As Jordan notes, this structure enables him to be "selective about just how comprehensive is my narrative" (p. xii). Given the volume of writing on Napoleon, such an approach makes sense, but it does raise questions as to what has not been selected. For example, the author's analysis of Napoleonic imperialism focuses mostly upon Italy. Here, Napoleon's determination to impose his Civil Code, including civil marriage and divorce, does powerfully support the image of the "Jacobin on horseback." Yet, as Jordan admits, Bonaparte's attitude to Poland was "cynical" (p. 165) and not very revolutionary. Moreover, Geoffrey Ellis's interpretation of the Empire as partly a spoils system based upon dynastic placements, fiscal levies, and land gifts, is not truly addressed, despite a brief allusion to it (p.44).<sup>[5]</sup> Even where Italy is concerned, interpretation of the pillaging of art treasures as the cultural dimension of revolutionary war seems partial (pp. 38-42). Plunder by another name is still plunder.

Despite its advantages, interpreting Bonaparte as an unwitting agent of the Revolution rests uneasily with the tenor of much of the book. Repeatedly the author argues that Bonaparte "saw clearly what he was doing: the work of the Revolution" (p. xi). As Jordan ably demonstrates, the Revolution was a complex phenomenon, offering much from which Bonaparte could pick and choose. It is certainly true that "those who saw him as the gravedigger of the Revolution have a case" (p. 284). Napoleon's desire to rule without interference meant that he was no friend of political or economic liberty. Yet Jordan's description of Bonaparte as an authoritarian revolutionary is also apt. Like others before him, he intended to impose revolution from above. A large part of his program consisted of eradicating the privileges upon which the society of orders had been based—hence his otherwise surprising sympathy for Robespierre and remarkable observation that the Terror was an inevitable consequence of the night of 4 August 1789 (pp. 201-2). If the army was an instrument of the Revolution, so too was the Civil Code.

Jordan's analysis of the complexity of the Revolution thus lends strength to his interpretation. Less convincing is his use of the Old Regime as a foil to Revolutionary/Napoleonic France. While broadsides aimed at Admiral Horatio Nelson's status as hero hit their target, describing the Allied Coalition of 1815 as the "ancien régime militant" (p. 217) tells only part of the story. Few historians now argue that the wars of the era were essentially, or even largely, ideological in character. Neither Pitt nor Castlereagh was motivated simply by a desire to see counter-revolution triumph in France. They waged war to defend and promote British geo-strategic interests, and their relations with French *émigrés* varied in accordance with this fundamental point. After the collapse of the Empire, neither the British nor Tsar Alexander showed much interest in destroying Napoleon's adaptation of the institutions of the Revolution beyond reducing the size of the French army. Indeed, it was pressure from them that led Louis XVIII to "grant" France a constitution with a parliament that possessed significant powers. Jordan rightly underlines the extent to which the Settlement was a struggle for spoils. Napoleon was not the only conqueror, but this perspective needs to be balanced with Paul Schroeder's observation that the powers had come to recognize that peace required at least some recognition of the interests of other powers.

It is likewise not entirely accurate to say that the collapse of the Empire led to the uprooting of all French reforms in the former empire, save for "French efficiency in collecting taxes" (p. 294). Though many were removed, to a surprising extent French institutions or practices, especially those that enhanced state power, were maintained in one form or another.<sup>[6]</sup> As the author notes, erosion of the society of orders was already apparent in Italy before Bonaparte arrived (p. 44). In part, such erosion was a product of the onslaught of enlightened despotism upon institutions that restricted state power. Viewed from this perspective, the image of Napoleon as "enlightened despot" has much to commend it. It helps to explain why subsequent despots found some of Napoleon's reforms attractive, and it suggests

that Napoleon combined elements drawn from both the Revolution and the Old Regime to create his own synthesis. Yet, as with all the images, that of the “enlightened despot” is insufficient. Jordan’s point that Napoleon could not found his regime on the legitimacy claims of other monarchs is a crucial one.

Ultimately *Napoleon and the Revolution* has many of the advantages and shortcomings of skillful polemic. It is remarkably consistent in viewing what Napoleon said and did through the filter of the Revolution, and in so doing it recognizes the complexity of the latter. In adopting Hegel’s interpretation, Jordan avoids the element of hero worship that once accompanied the “Jacobin on horseback” and gives fair play to the importance of the army in Bonaparte’s historical role. Partly because he pursues his main theme of Napoleon’s relation to the Revolution so rigorously, however, the author tends to downplay other ways of viewing Napoleon. Bonaparte was an heir of the Revolution, but he was not the only one. In putting his stamp on history he drew upon Revolutionary tradition, but he also drew upon other, earlier, sources. The objective of pushing back against the current prominence of the “unprincipled conqueror” is a good one, and the book succeeds in this regard. Nevertheless, neither the “unprincipled conqueror” nor the “enlightened despot” image will disappear, nor should they. Geyl’s “debate without end” will continue, although it has now been much advanced by a book that is thought provoking and engagingly written.

#### NOTES

[1] See R. S. Alexander, *Napoleon* (London: Arnold, 2001).

[2] For a relatively recent work that largely follows the Marxist line, see Martyn Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1994).

[3] For analogy to Hitler, see Alan Schom, *Napoleon Bonaparte* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997) and Paul Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics 1763-1848* (Oxford: University Press, 1994).

[4] See Peter Geyl’s classic *Napoleon: For and Against* (Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1986).

[5] See Geoffrey Ellis, *The Napoleonic Empire* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1991) and *Napoleon* (London: Napoleon, 1997).

[6] See David Laven and Lucy Riall, eds., *Napoleon’s Legacy* (Oxford: Berg, 2000).

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