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Annie Jourdan, *L'empire de Napoléon*. Paris: Flammarion, 2000. 351 pp.. Critical glossary, bibliography, and index. 54.18FF. ISBN 2-08-083003-1.

Review by John Lawrence Tone, Georgia Institute of Technology.

Annie Jourdan warns us that historians should not make moral judgments about the past. They should seek “to explain and understand” not “to condemn or absolve” historical actors (p. 9).

Fortunately for her readers, Jourdan intones this notion of scholarly “objectivity” only once and then forgets it. Indeed, Jourdan’s explicit ambition in her readable and argumentative *L'empire de Napoléon* is to combat “the rhetoric of necessity” that always has enveloped Napoleon and made him seem at times like the unwilling tool of larger historical forces, thus shielding him from responsibility (p. 20). In contrast, Jourdan, while recognizing that even the emperor of France faced constraints, emphasizes Napoleon’s ability to impose his will freely upon the world. This point of departure is critical for Jourdan precisely because it allows her to judge Napoleon. That judgment is often harsh. Jourdan finds Napoleon culpable for the creation of an empire founded on lies and abuses against democracy, liberty, and humanity.

To what end? In part, the empire served Napoleon’s need to dominate and control everyone and everything around him, providing him with the resources to bind allies to his side and to defeat opponents. This kind of reasoning will be familiar to readers of Geoffrey Ellis and many other Napoleonic scholars.[1] But Jourdan also argues something else: that the empire was the product of Napoleon’s vision for a confederated Europe modeled on French institutions (pp. 111-147). Readers will likely have some trouble with this aspect of Jourdan’s argument, yet it is essential to the author, whose philosophical approach requires that empire be a path freely taken by Napoleon rather than something forced upon him by circumstances.

Napoleon liked to ascribe both his successes and his failures to fate. Destiny had called upon him to perform marvels, and destiny had doomed him to ultimate failure. Either way, his path had been established for him. The very qualities that had allowed him to create an empire—boundless imagination, energy, and ambition—also brought him low when, like Icarus, he exceeded the bounds set to mortals. This formula contained all the essential ingredients—inexorability, tragic flaw, etc.—of classic tragedy and helped make Napoleon one of the most durably fascinating figures in all of history. For Napoleon the formula also served as a kind of cosmic absolution. Although the emperor never had to defend himself before any international tribunal, he found comfort during his long years of imprisonment on St. Helena by assembling a defense anyway: as a victim and tool of destiny, he could not be blamed for anything.

The myth of Napoleon’s fixed destiny, elaborated and spread by Bonapartists in the decades following Napoleon’s death (pp. 151-176), had various components. First, there was the seizure of power. According to the legend, the *coup d’Etat* of 18 Brumaire (November 9, 1799) was forced upon Napoleon.

Republican political life had become anarchic. French armies were in retreat. The government was on the verge of bankruptcy. France was once again threatened by a social revolution. At the edge of this abyss, the leaders of the faltering Republic begged Napoleon to step in to restore order. He did so, quite peacefully, on 18 Brumaire. On the following day, however, some of the deputies refused to accept the new state of affairs and threatened to plunge the country back into chaos. Force became necessary, but Napoleon applied it judiciously, defensively, just enough to stop the treachery of the Republican politicians. In the aftermath of Brumaire, Napoleon put an end to France's long nightmare of disorderly government and inaugurated a period of stability under the Consulate and Empire.

So much for the legend. In fact, this version of events was, in Jourdan's words, the "greatest deception in French history" (p. 50). Actually, very little happened on 18 Brumaire. The government had moved to the palace at St. Cloud, as allowed by the constitution, and had unwisely given Bonaparte the job of providing protection. France was not in danger. The armies were victorious on all fronts. The economy was stable and finances were healthy. Indeed, the only real danger to the Republic on 18 Brumaire came from Napoleon and his collaborators, who, on the following day, seized power, violently and illegally. Therefore, according to Jourdan, the day really worth remembering--and lamenting-- is 19 Brumaire--November 10, 1799 (pp. 45-51).

Another element of the legend of Napoleonic necessity claims that the endless warfare associated with the empire was not something Napoleon chose. It was thrust upon him in several ways. The Republic had achieved France's "natural" northern frontier along the Rhine, and this had resulted in the incorporation of the Low Countries into France. The rest of Europe, especially the British, insisted on a French withdrawal, but justice seemed to be on the side of the new frontier. After all, what could be more natural and reasonable than a boundary established by a great river? Leaving the Italian conquests to one side, France and Napoleon had a right to defend the new northern border. It was even a duty because it formed part of a grander defense of reason and nature.

More broadly still, the Bonapartist legend interpreted France's conflict with her most persistent enemy, Great Britain, as a thing quite beyond Napoleon's control. Were not the British and the French locked in metaphysical combat? Was it not a war between two different principles of civilization, a reprise of the ancient conflict between grasping, commercial Carthage and honorable Rome? A lone individual like Napoleon could not evade such a cosmic conflict, and it was the duel between Great Britain and France that drove everything else. The attempt to dominate Portugal and Spain, to control Denmark and the Baltic, to crush Calabria, to cripple Prussia, and so on, were all part of a "grand strategy" to isolate Great Britain from the rest of Europe and to establish a stable regime on the Continent. The strategy was part of history's design, and Bonaparte was a tool of history.

This was part of the "grand idea" that helped to bind the First Empire together. Napoleon's contemporaries conceived of the empire as the rebirth of Ancient Rome. They brought this conception to literature, sculpture, architecture, painting, and decorative arts, all of which self-consciously copied ancient Roman forms. The characteristic "empire style" in furnishing, clothing, coiffure, and other aspects of everyday life under Napoleon still strike us as familiar. It does not matter that this mimicry of the ancient world was a pose to hide the cruder realities of imperialism. In its day, the imperial style served as a real force, providing cultural unity to disparate and disputatious elites within Napoleonic France and her satellites. Napoleon, we know, placed great emphasis on matters of style and ceremony, and so does Jourdan. Indeed, Jourdan points out in this and in previous works that part of Napoleon's special genius was to patronize artists, intellectuals, and scientists, who, in turn, helped to provide the empire with cultural capital and legitimacy.[2] It was one of Napoleon's great achievements to use the common cultural heritage of Rome to manipulate and coopt European elites into becoming tools of a new empire.

In fact, the differences between France and Great Britain were not very cosmic, except in the overheated

imagination of Napoleon and his supporters. Napoleon and the Bonapartists “constantly sought to deform and falsify reality” (p. 73), as Jourdan makes clear. The representation of the British as implacable enemies of peace and stability on the Continent was one of the greatest and most successful of the Napoleonic lies. The truth was that the British, like most everyone else, were willing to reach an accommodation with France. It was the emperor who wanted war (pp. 116-120).

Why? Some scholars offer psychological and cultural explanations. Harold Parker, for example, places great emphasis on Napoleon’s early family life, when he learned to fight for the recognition and love that his mother and father gave freely to Joseph, Napoleon’s amiable older brother. Then too, as a Corsican, Napoleon was shaped by a violent, clannish culture that fed his later obsession with wiping out the rival Bourbons, founding his own dynasty, and establishing satellite kingdoms for the benefit of his siblings and in-laws. Above all, as Philip Dwyer has argued, Napoleon needed to dominate the people around him and to wreak vengeance on those who opposed him, and this led him constantly to provoke renewed hostilities and to seek new fields for military glory.[3]

Jourdan does not dismiss any of these arguments, but neither is she completely comfortable with them. After all, they do tend to re-inject an element of inevitability and necessity into the story, as Napoleon’s actions become the byproduct of his psychological and even physiological disposition. Instead, Jourdan takes Napoleon’s talk of a “grand idea” for European unity seriously. Napoleon wished to establish some sort of federated Europe founded upon “modern” principles: legal equality, the destruction of regional and local powers, secularization, the professionalization and bureaucratization of government functionaries, and the like (pp. 111-147).

Readers are likely to find this part of Jourdan’s essay to be confusing. Indeed, Jourdan’s argument in this particular would have suited the soldiers and administrators Napoleon sent to Italy, Spain, and other parts of the empire quite well. They always claimed that their fondest wish was to bring modernity to peoples suffering from clerical fanaticism and despotism. They tried to curb the power of the Church and Inquisition and to eliminate the decrepit edifice of estates and regional privileges that made the Old Regime, well, old. Incredibly, they found that their efforts met with resistance. This resistance served, in turn, to confirm the importance of the French modernizing mission, for it demonstrated clearly the recalcitrant backwardness of other Europeans who insisted on rejecting modernity, to paraphrase Jourdan (p. 135).

There is something perversely Bonapartist about this argument. Indeed, readers, in puzzlement, may wish to supplement Jourdan’s interpretation with that of Geoffrey Ellis, already cited. The expansion of the empire, Ellis argues, had nothing to do with altruism or enlightened modernity, nothing to do with any “grand design” for Europe whatsoever. The empire was about the extraction of material resources first and last. The reason Napoleon constantly resorted to warfare lay in the economic and financial difficulties that plagued France. True, Napoleon created the Bank of France, stabilized the currency, solidified the revolutionary land settlement, and established more efficient tax collection, in every case building on the work of previous regimes, as Jourdan points out (pp. 81-88). Yet these innovations were never enough. Napoleon always needed further conquests to make ends meet. Without tax receipts from Holland and northern Italy and without looting much of the rest of Europe, Napoleon would have lacked the resources to stay afloat and the booty he needed to bribe collaborators, who would otherwise have turned against him, as some eventually did when the empire receded and the opportunities for robbery ceased.

Napoleon was willing to break any agreement, any law, even his own Civil Code, whenever it suited him. In service of his boundless ambition, Napoleon restricted trade, taxed Europeans into a stupor, and hampered economic activity throughout the territories under his control because he could think of no better way to enrich France than through extra-economic exploitation. Napoleon allied himself with ancient noble families and created a new nobility and new fiefdoms. He even attempted to dismantle the

nations of Portugal and Spain to create new feudal satrapies with which to reward family and friends. Granted, Napoleon introduced more efficient conscription and tax collection in France, but, for the most part, what was so modern about the First Empire anyway? The puzzling thing, or perhaps it is just subtle beyond belief, is that Jourdan makes almost every one of the above points, and yet remains content to represent Napoleon's motivation as in some essential sense "modern." In an age when Europeans in Great Britain, Spain, and even in France have revised, or are striving to revise, constitutional arrangements in order to devolve central power to regions and localities, perhaps it is the word "modern" itself that is problematic.

This review would not be complete without mentioning one last important aspect of this work. Jourdan has attached to her essay a detailed (105 pages) critical glossary that readers will find valuable. The glossary is divided into "words and themes," "actors and institutions," and "places." The entries are insightful, emphasizing the opposition to Napoleon, resistance outside France to Napoleonic centralization, and, of course, the theme of Napoleon's responsibility. Of particular interest are the consecutive entries on iconography, ideologues, and cultural imperialism—concepts that are crucial to Jourdan's understanding of the empire.

NOTES

[1] Geoffrey Ellis, *The Napoleonic Empire*, London: 1997.

[2] Annie Jourdan, *Les Monuments de la Révolution*, Paris: Honoré Champion, 1997, and Napoléon. Héros, imperator, mécène, Paris: Aubier, 1998.

[3] Readers can access the arguments by Parker, Dwyer, and Ellis herein referenced by consulting their respective contributions to *Napoleon and Europe*. Ed. Philip G. Dwyer. London: Longman, 2001.

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