



1.2. *Napoleon Crosses the St. Bernard*, Jacques-Louis David.
Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

THE FIRST EMPIRE

Bonaparte's long reign, during which he created many of the institutions of modern France, was much more than just a coda attached to the end of the Revolution. The ultimate symbol of the great man in history, and of the self-made man, Napoleon inspired controversy and admiration among both his contemporaries and later historians. Much of the controversy swirls around his relationship to the Revolution. Did Napoleon reinforce and sustain the principles and achievements of the ten revolutionary years, or did he bring them to an end? Proponents of the first perspective emphasize his support for religious tolerance, his codification of French law, and his abolition of serfdom throughout Europe. Advocates of the second perspective focus on his abandonment of the republic for an empire, his reconciliation with the Church, and his restoration of slavery in the French Caribbean. Good arguments exist on either

side, but perhaps Napoleon's most important legacy was the myth of individual achievement he created, a myth that would inspire millions in the decades to come and would become a core belief of bourgeois society in modern France.

Napoleon Bonaparte is especially important for transnational approaches to French history. He reaffirmed the significance of the Revolution for Europe as a whole, destroying medieval institutions across the Continent. However, the way in which this imperial mission reshaped France is also important, and intriguing. Out of the ashes of royalty and republicanism Napoleon created an empire, a political formation whose significance for modern France has not always been acknowledged. This is paradoxical on a number of levels. In general, the history of modern government has been away from multinational empires and toward more unified nation-states, yet the French case is much more complicated. What is the historian to make of Bonaparte's empire, containing so many features of the French nation-state yet at the same time claiming to apply its principles to all imperial subjects? The Napoleonic empire represented the most powerful example of French national universalism up to that time, one that would constitute a leitmotif for both French society and its relationship to the wider world ever since.

It is also important that this universalism would take the shape of empire. Students of French colonialism have often been perplexed to discover that, in doing library searches on the term "French empire," they come up with references to Napoleon's regime as much as to colonial Africa or Indochina. This is no mere semantic coincidence, for the first empire did in fact lay out the basic outlines of French overseas imperialism in the modern era. Bonaparte failed to make France a global power, thanks largely to the power of the British navy. He abandoned Egypt, sold the vast Louisiana territory to the Americans, and failed to reconquer Saint-Domingue. Yet his expansion of French dominance throughout Europe anticipated in many respects the themes of empire in Africa and Asia. It would eventually inspire another European leader, Adolf Hitler, to attempt his own version of empire in Europe. Moreover, his complex blend of revolutionary and imperial themes would make empire an enduring part of the heritage of 1789; the Third Republic, which made permanent many of the achievements of the Revolution, would also take the paradoxical form of a republican empire.

Napoleon's imperial vision rested on the revolutionaries' belief that they were engaged in a war for liberty against the tyrants of Europe, a war of liberation rather than conquest. As we will see, while this vision inspired one of the greatest series of military triumphs in modern world history, it failed to

convince many Europeans that French arms had come to free them. Instead, the French occupation often inspired the birth of local nationalist movements, modeled on France's revolutionary patriotism and ranged in opposition against it. Both the outlines of modern empire and of wars of national liberation in response have come down to us from the Napoleonic empire, a model for France and the world as a whole.

Within a few years of the Directory's overthrow, Napoleon Bonaparte had secured his power at home and abroad. The new constitution of 1799 made him first consul with complete executive authority and an essentially powerless legislature. It was the first French constitution since 1789 that made no mention of the rights of man. He also increased government censorship of the media and of free expression, sharply reducing the number of newspapers in Paris and submitting all artistic performances to government approval. In 1802 Napoleon signed a concordat with Rome; while affirming state control over the Catholic Church, it restored religious holidays and the religious calendar, recognized Catholicism as the faith of most French people, and ended the religious conflict that had traumatized the nation for a decade. This step, plus his overtures to the nobility, healed some of the wounds caused by the Revolution and helped secure the new leader's authority.

Bonaparte's continued success on the fields of war and diplomacy also facilitated his claims to absolute rule. In 1800 he renewed the war against Austria, defeating that nation handily at the battle of Marengo in June. He then made the Austrians sign a peace treaty accepting French control of Belgium and parts of Italy. With Austria out of the war, and Russia distracted by conflict with the Ottoman Empire, Napoleon forced the British to sign the Peace of Amiens in 1802, in which London recognized French conquests in Europe and also returned the Caribbean colonies it had seized from France. With this new treaty France was finally at peace for the first time in a decade. Napoleon took the opportunity to proclaim himself consul for life in 1802, a decision that was duly ratified by a plebiscite. However, this did not satisfy the great general, who worried about his legacy for France. Several assassination attempts convinced him he needed to found a dynasty, so on December 2, 1804, in an elaborate coronation ceremony in Notre Dame Cathedral, he took the title "emperor of the French," becoming France's first emperor since Charlemagne a thousand years earlier. Ever the self-made man, rather than wait for Pope Pius VII to crown him he seized the crown from the pontiff and crowned himself. It was a fitting gesture, perhaps, for a new type of monarch.

By 1804 Napoleon Bonaparte had realized the dream of both Louis XIV and the Revolution, centralizing state power to an unprecedented degree. Showing a talent for administration as well as warfare, he transformed the French state. He reinforced the departments by creating the office of prefect to administer them; the prefects resembled governors of American states, except for the fact that they were appointed by the central government (namely, Napoleon himself), not locally elected. Prefects in turn had the power to appoint mayors, while at the same time Paris appointed all judges. More than ever before, the capital became the center of France.

One of the emperor's greatest achievements was the creation of a unified legal system. The Civil Code, or Napoleonic Code, ensured the equality of all French men before the law. It also confirmed the end of feudal laws as well as the transfers of land under the Revolution, a move that won Napoleon the support of those who had acquired new property. It reaffirmed rights to religious liberty, while sharply limiting the rights of employees. Most strikingly, it inscribed a strongly patriarchal vision of French society into national law. Reversing the gains that women had made under the Revolution, the Civil Code made wives legally dependent on their husbands and restricted their right to divorce. It also strengthened the authority of fathers over their children, for example, allowing the former summarily to imprison the latter for up to six months. The Napoleonic Code created the legal basis for bourgeois patriarchal society, and not just in France. One of the modern world's most influential documents, it was widely adapted and imitated throughout Europe and Latin America.

In other ways Napoleon reshaped France according to his desires. Building on the work of the Directory, he invested heavily in education, creating the *lycées*, schools, which dominate French secondary education to this day. He also founded the Bank of France to ensure efficient management of the economy. He engaged in a massive construction program, especially in Paris, building the Arc de Triomphe to commemorate his many victories, as well as other neoclassical monuments. In addition, Napoleon wooed both the aristocracy and the wealthy bourgeoisie by reestablishing a system of noble privilege, but one based on wealth and achievement rather than historical lineage. To deal with those not seduced by these accomplishments, Napoleon also improved and increased the police force, including secret police constantly on the lookout for seditious comments. Thanks to all these measures and more, Bonaparte not only modernized France but also forestalled any serious domestic challenges to his reign.

For all these important achievements, however, Napoleon's primary interest, and his ultimate reputation, lay with military conquest. Perhaps no other world leader in modern times has been so closely identified with triumphs on the battlefield. Time and again Bonaparte overwhelmed opposing forces with a combination of brilliant military strategy and the patriotic ardor of a huge citizen army, something the largely mercenary forces of the rest of Europe could rarely resist. Britain and France went to war again, and Britain eventually paid both Austria and Russia to join a new coalition against Napoleon, one soon joined by Prussia as well. Yet British subsidies went for naught, as French armies crushed all three nations in a series of brilliant victories in 1806 and 1807. Napoleon's armies occupied Berlin in 1806, then took Vienna in 1809. By 1810 France controlled the largest European empire since the Romans, directly ruling or in close alliance with countries from Spain and Portugal through the Low Countries, Italy, Germany, Austria, and Poland. The little man from Corsica had in short order become not only the emperor of France but the ruler of Europe.

Napoleon's one great military failure during the first decade of his rule came in the Caribbean. In 1801 Toussaint L'Ouverture proclaimed the independence of Saint-Domingue, taking the name of Haiti for the new nation. A year later Napoleon sent a fleet to invade the young nation and restore slavery. His forces successfully overthrew the revolutionary regime in Guadeloupe and reestablished slavery on that island. Haiti proved a harder nut to crack. Bonaparte captured Toussaint and imprisoned him in an alpine fortress, where he died in 1803. However, the Haitians fought back fiercely, this time aided by the British, and much of the French occupying force perished from yellow fever and other tropical diseases. What was left of the French force finally surrendered in 1804, making Haiti once again an independent nation and France's first former colony.

For the millions who lived under French rule, the Napoleonic occupation of Europe brought unprecedented changes, some desirable, some not. In less than a decade Bonaparte implemented the innovations of the Revolution on a Continental scale. He abolished feudalism and serfdom, prompting the sale of millions of acres of land, often to wealthy commoners. He imposed the legal standardizations of the Napoleonic Code as well as religious toleration. Napoleonic troops liberated Jews from ghettos throughout Europe, and in 1807 he convened an international body of Jewish theologians to debate the future of its people in the Great Sanhedrin, an ancient rabbinical body that had not met for eighteen centuries. Bonaparte also built bridges and canals, unified

customs areas, and promoted a uniform system of weights and measures. Most dramatically, he redrew the map of Europe. He created a new Polish state, replacing the one gobbled up by Prussia, Russia, and Austria in 1795. He reduced the number of Italian states and reorganized the peninsula into two kingdoms. In 1806 Napoleon abolished the centuries-old Holy Roman Empire, reducing the number of German states from over three hundred to roughly thirty, organized in the new Confederation of the Rhine. In effect, Napoleon ruled Europe as the ultimate enlightened despot, imposing progress and reason through the power of the sword.

Napoleon's policies and the ideology they represented benefited, especially at first, from considerable support among Europeans. Urban elites and members of the middle class often applauded (and benefited from) his abolition of the feudal order. Religious toleration offered Jews and other religious minorities opportunities undreamed of by earlier generations. These reforms succeeded best in the Low Countries, Switzerland, the Rhineland, and other relatively prosperous areas. In Mediterranean and eastern Europe, in contrast, they encountered resistance. The French takeover of Spain in 1808 triggered a massive insurgency that gave the world the term *guerrilla*. But even in the areas that had greeted French troops as liberators, the occupation frequently provoked significant resistance. In large part this arose from the nature of the occupation. As was traditional with European armies, the French imposed heavy duties and reparations on the countries they occupied, but theirs were unusually large, in part because of the sheer size of the revolutionary armies. Whereas many French people saw this as legitimate, believing the people of Europe should help foot the bill for their own liberation, those who had to pay often viewed it as a conqueror's tax. Moreover, the siphoning off of considerable European wealth to France (a major reason for the strength of the French economy under Napoleon) turned many against the occupation, as did the damage to trade caused by the economic boycott of Britain, which devastated the economy of the Netherlands and other areas. As in France, attacks on the Church often prompted resistance, especially in southern Europe. Finally, the increasingly repressive nature of the occupation and its promotion of a new nobility rather than the forces of democracy cost Napoleon the support of many. What had begun as a revolutionary liberation now seemed to be the imposition of foreign rule by force.

As a result, the Napoleonic occupation of Europe helped create the very nationalism it exemplified, but this nationalism was now directed against the French. Germany became a prime example of this. Many German intellectuals

had welcomed the French Revolution and hailed Napoleon's rise to power. As Bonaparte became increasingly authoritarian, some reconsidered their earlier support of him. The great composer Ludwig van Beethoven had initially dedicated his *Eroica* symphony to Napoleon, only to tear off the dedication page in disgust upon learning of his intention to proclaim himself emperor. At the same time, writers and thinkers began to consider a German patriotism that could inspire resistance to Napoleon. Lacking a single nation-state, they focused instead on language, history, and culture, inspiring a cultural movement that would blossom as romanticism. It challenged the rationalism of the Enlightenment, so that German resistance to France was not just political but cultural as well. Bonaparte himself had contributed to this new idea of German unity by sharply reducing the number of German states. The new German nationalism thus owed much to France even as it excoriated the French invader.

French rule did not produce a nationalist resistance everywhere in occupied Europe: Italy and Poland were two noteworthy exceptions. Nonetheless, the rise of anti-French movements in Napoleonic Europe testified to the failure of national universalism. Napoleonic rule, and the revolutionary precedents on which it rested, could not be both French and the property of all men at the same time. The fact that German intellectuals turned from enthusiastic membership in an international Republic of Letters to an embrace of their own cultural and national traditions illustrated the depths of this failure. For the variety of reasons outlined above, even though Napoleon carried out many reforms long desired by Europeans, he could not convince them that this was a liberation rather than an occupation. Without their support, Napoleon's dominance of Europe had to rest on France's strength and his own formidable military genius. Ultimately this was not enough.

Napoleon's France was at the height of its power by 1810, completely dominating the Continent. Only Britain and Russia actively opposed Bonaparte. The emperor's fortunes soon turned, however. In 1812 the army that had defeated all other opponents invaded Russia. Napoleon scored several major victories but could never trap and destroy the Russian armies, which retreated across eastern Europe destroying everything in their path that the French might use. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of French troops were tied up fighting the insurgency in Spain, thus weakening the emperor's forces. In October, after occupying Moscow, Napoleon ordered a general retreat, too late to escape the brutal Russian winter. Cold and hunger decimated the French armies: less than one in ten of those who had set out from France returned. The clear weakening of French strength inspired the Prussians and

Austrians to rejoin the war against Napoleon. In 1813 this new coalition took the field, defeating France at the Battle of Nations near Leipzig in October. At the same time, Britain's Duke of Wellington invaded southern France with an army of British, Spanish, and Portuguese soldiers.

By 1814 Napoleon's situation was desperate: the allied armies were closing in and the French people did not respond to his pleas for more men and treasure to fight the invaders. Like Robespierre in 1794, Napoleon discovered that repression only weakened his power base. At the end of March the allies reached Paris, prompting Bonaparte to abdicate the throne on April 6, 1814, after his generals told him that they would no longer fight. The victors treated Napoleon generously, exiling him to the Italian island of Elba, which they turned into his own personal kingdom. This proved to be a mistake; on March 1, 1815, Bonaparte escaped and made his way back to France. During the extraordinary episode known as the Hundred Days, Napoleon quickly regained control of the country, forcing the new king, Louis XVIII, into flight, and raised an army to liberate France from the allies. Yet this dream sequence would not have a happy ending. Bonaparte met the British and Prussian armies in battle at the small Belgian town of Waterloo, only to suffer a crushing defeat. Once again the allies exiled him, this time farther afield to the island of Saint Helena off the African coast, where he died in 1821 at the age of fifty-two. The extraordinary saga of one of world history's greatest figures had finally come to an end.

Waterloo conclusively ended the French Revolution, over a quarter of a century after the storming of the Bastille. During those years some 8 million Europeans died in warfare, and the struggles unleashed in Paris transformed the Continent. What did these tumultuous decades mean, for France and for the world as a whole? What changed as a result of the Revolution, and what legacy did it leave to future generations? Historians, political activists, and many others have debated such questions from 1789 down to the present day, and the debate is far from over.

The French Revolution launched the idea of modern political universalism, writing the script for future movements that aimed to change the human condition. The very notion of ideology, a comprehensive view of the world, was born in the Revolution and testifies to its universalist character. Modern liberalism, conservatism, nationalism, and socialism originated in the cauldron of revolutionary Paris, as did the very concepts of political left and right, which began with the seating choices of deputies in the National Assembly. Such ideologies, and the concept of ideology in general, have been adopted by

peoples and political movements throughout the world, constituting perhaps the greatest global legacy of 1789.

For France itself, the Revolution brought momentous changes. While scholars have challenged the notion of a bourgeois revolution, noting that the aristocracy survived and that landed property remained the dominant form of wealth, in 1815 France was a much more liberal society and economy than in 1789. The rise of Napoleon, and his emphasis on achievement over pedigree, conformed to bourgeois ideology and constituted a powerful bequest to the people of modern France. At the same time, the Revolution vastly increased the powers of the centralized French state, realizing to a much greater extent the dream of Louis XIV. The Revolution transformed French men from royal subjects to citizens equal before the law. It introduced new rights for women, even if in large part it reaffirmed patriarchal double standards. Finally, it abolished slavery in the colonies, a process of abolition that only a second revolution in 1848 would render permanent.

Above all, the Revolution pioneered the concept of France as a universal nation, a central theme of modern French history. Core values of liberty and citizenship took shape in the context of struggles not just in France but also throughout Europe and the Caribbean, so that the idea of France as a light to all the people of the world became inseparable from French identity. Millions of French men fought for the Revolution abroad, bringing home with them a core belief in both the superiority and the universality of French ideas of freedom and justice. France's national universalism may have failed to win over many Europeans, but for the French themselves it provided a new way of defining their country in an era that challenged previously dominant monarchical and ecclesiastical paradigms. The enduring influence of the Revolution throughout the world would only underscore this vision of universality. The Revolution also created the two primary forms of universal nationalism, the nation-state and the empire, and the interaction of these two would shape the history of modern France.

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Notes

1. Jack R. Censer and Lynn Hunt, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 53.
2. Lesley Sharpe, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Goethe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 154.

TRANSNATIONAL FRANCE



*The Modern History
of a Universal Nation*

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