Essay:
The Truth About Napoleon

Jerry Manas

History is the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon. —Napoleon

What Is Truth?

When we speak of lessons from history, it is important to dig deep, to get past the propaganda and politically motivated half-truths, if possible, in order to get to the real facts of value. As Abraham Lincoln said: "History is not history unless it is the truth." It is the same in business, where the history of past successes and failures is often either undocumented or tainted to paint a desired picture. This destroys history's most valuable asset—being a guideline of what to emulate and what to avoid.

But what is truth, really, when we're talking about the history of a person's actions? How much can we really know about someone, even our closest friends? How can we possibly know the inner motivations behind the actions? All we have to go on are a person's words, deeds, and the perceptions of others close to him or her. There is so much more that is unknowable, except by the subject. Certainly, it helps to keep the actions in proper context by examining the situation at the time. As Napoleon said, "Such a judgment must take men as they were in the midst of circumstances which governed their actions." Even with this, however, we still get only an approximation of the truth—an impressionistic painting, if you will.

Saint or Sinner?

No doubt, the variety of opinions and accounts about Napoleon certainly presents a challenge for any author hoping to remain objective. Napoleon was an anomaly, portrayed over the years as either a heroic champion of the middle class or an egocentric, Machiavellian dictator. His merits and faults are debated to this day. What makes it somewhat difficult to reconcile these varied viewpoints is that many of the accounts seem to contradict one another. Alas, even Napoleon's own words and actions seem to contradict themselves at times.

Holocaust survivor and Dutch historian Pieter Geyl realized this challenge when his attempts to compare Napoleon to Hitler led him to conduct extensive research on the various points of view, pro and con, of French historians. The result was a fascinating book titled *Napoleon: For and Against*, unique in its truly objective approach. In his book, Geyl had the following to say about the challenge of finding the true Napoleon, albeit a challenge that had its rewards:

> *It goes without saying that the various writers who have tried to express their opinions of him and his career have reached different conclusions. No human intelligence could hope to bring together the overwhelming multiplicity of data and of factors, of forces and of movements, and from them establish a true, one might almost say, the divine, balance. That is, literally, a superhuman task . . . Truth, though for God it may be one, assumes many shapes for men. Thus it is that the analysis of so many conflicting opinions concerning one historical phenomenon is not just a means of whiling away the time . . . The study even of contradictory conceptions can be fruitful.*[1]

Incidentally, Geyl came to the conclusion that Hitler's persecution of entire classifications of people, including the Jews, "had no parallel in Napoleon's system" and that Napoleon's concepts of equality and human rights would have been "utterly incompatible" with Hitler's unilateral extermination and oppression of a group solely based on birth and blood. I would add that Napoleon was voted dictatorial powers by the Senate and an overwhelming majority of the public, while Hitler seized power through coercive means. Geyl did point out, however, unavoidable similarities in that both felt so righteous in their initiatives that any opposition was considered contemptible, if not criminal. When we examine the facts known to us, we find that Napoleon was neither demon nor demigod, butmerely a man; he was driven by an intense desire to make a difference in the world; he was catapulted to power by skill and favorable circumstances; and he was ultimately consumed by his passion, his stubbornness, and his paranoia.

No doubt, his successes were unparalleled. By fighting against the inequalities of monarchy and creating order in a time of chaos, he was able to rise from obscurity to become the ruler of all Western Europe in but a few years, something the Romans took hundreds of years to accomplish. He achieved victory after victory on the battlefield, often against all odds and against larger armies, putting France at the pinnacle of the world.

As respected as Napoleon was for his successes on the battlefield, perhaps he had even greater impact as an administrator, managing his vast empire and creating laws and codes that are used to this day. His third and final private secretary, Baron Fain, had this to say about his administrative abilities:

> *His skill in the art of war is the outstanding quality that was least disputed during his lifetime; it was however attributed to good luck . . . Perhaps his administrative superiority is more to his credit. Certainly, no one admires more than I his genius for war, his amazing activity, his admirable gift for stirring crowds and finding order in disorder. And yet this great man seems to be greater still as an administrator than as a general. Senator Fontanes has already proclaimed that "his renown as a conqueror will in future be the smallest part of his glory."*[2]

Napoleon's political platform was based on equality and liberty, albeit a distorted version of liberty. Although he was passionate about freedom of religion, occupation, and even speech, to a degree, when it came to the press or any publication that threatened the image of the state or himself, censorship was the rule of the day. That said, he did not believe in censoring anything that may have offended a person or a belief, as he felt it was more important not to strangle ideas that could be useful. Thus, his control was limited to affairs of the state.

Still, the concept of liberty was a limited one in that Napoleon decided what was permissible to print. He also favored rigid organization and organized hierarchy, which generally tends to suppress free thought. The so-called free thought that did exist was often influenced by strategically placed propaganda. As Baron Fain wrote: "Was it not said of Mirabeau himself that he loved liberty, provided he remained its absolute master and nothing held out against him? Perhaps Napoleon had that in common with Mirabeau."[3]

Perhaps J. M. Thompson said it best in his landmark book, *Napoleon Bonaparte*, when he said of Napoleon's centralized approach: "Liberty was the fruit of discipline; and the remedy for indiscipline was less liberty."[4] When it came to equality, however,

there was no greater champion than Napoleon—this truly was his passion, as evident in his most lasting achievement, the Code Napoleon, known today as the French Civil Code.

Before we begin to idealize Napoleon as the misunderstood defender of equal rights or, as many in his day called him, the Son of the Revolution, we must also remember that this was a man who periodically used extreme means to achieve his objectives and maintain his control. For example, he once ordered the assassination of a duke suspected of possibly collaborating with the British, although many people deemed the evidence circumstantial. This was an unpopular decision worldwide, but arguably understandable, given that it happened in an environment of continued plots against Napoleon's life.

Napoleon always claimed to be acting in the defensive. Early on, he and his supporters would say that his penchant for tight control was necessary to maintain order after the chaos of the French Revolution and that many of the battles were entered in defense—until the invasion of Portugal, this was true. Later, beginning with the invasion of Portugal, the excuse was that such actions were needed to preserve the glory and values of France by proactively eliminating any threat to the empire.

Some of these concerns were justified, as England was constantly funding coalitions and plots to bring about Napoleon's demise. While that may be true, however, it is also true that some of Napoleon's methods would prove harmful in the long run. Even Napoleon later acknowledged that although his principles were sound, his means were sometimes misguided in the heat of passion; and in particular, he pointed out the forced abdication of the Spanish royal family as the turning point that began his downfall—an opinion many historians agree with.

Much of the Napoleonic era was nothing more than a chess match between England and France, a battle of ideals with the rest of Europe jostling for position as it befitted them. Neither party could claim total innocence. Both were stubborn. Despite his amazing accomplishments, as his power and influence grew, Napoleon became so paranoid about losing territory to England's expanding colonial empire—and thus losing what he had fought so hard to gain—that he began to lose sight of his own principles.

In the end, though, what cannot be overlooked is that through all the highs and lows in Napoleon's career, his troops adored him and the people admired him. Even his enemies respected his abilities, including his greatest adversary, Wellington, who said, "In this age, in past ages, in any age, Napoleon."[5]

Napoleon the Man

What was he really like, this legendary, larger-than-life figure from whom we have learned so many lessons? Was he a cruel, self-serving egotist, as some have suggested? What were his strengths, his character traits? What was he like to be with and to work for? What were his working habits and social behaviors? What made him extraordinary?

Some details vary, but most of his closest associates and staff, many of whom have written books of their own, paint a parallel picture. Napoleon had an amazing capacity for work, to the point of being a workaholic. He was known to go with very little sleep, staying up through the night making notes, reviewing reports from the field, and writing letters—he wrote some eighty thousand letters throughout his career. He was extremely lucid, always aware of every detail, and well versed in numerous subjects.

Napoleon excelled at mathematics, a skill he retained from childhood and to which he attributed much of his later success. He also had an insatiable thirst for

knowledge and was fascinated by history. Aware of his skills and always sure of himself, he sometimes came across as domineering and arrogant, especially to those who tried his patience. He was said, however, to be very amiable with his closest associates and extremely generous to his private staff and servants. Concerning his nature at home, Méneval, his second private secretary, had this to say:

> *As a general rule he liked to talk in a familiar way. He was fond of discussions, but did not impose his opinions, and made no pretensions of superiority, either of intelligence or of rank. When only ladies were present, he liked to criticize their dresses, or tell them tragic or satirical stories—ghost stories for the most part.*[6]

Socially, Napoleon had a quick and clever wit and could be downright charming when he needed to be, but many people thought he came across as distant. He referred to himself as "dry as parchment," especially in his younger days, before he mastered the fine art of socializing. Later, according to the observations of those closest to him, his moods were often calculated, carefully controlled according to the audience and the image he was trying to portray, hence the conflicting reports of his personality. Once caught up in the heat of conversation, however, he tended to ramble on, which often led him to reveal more than he should have, according to Bourrienne, his first secretary.[7]

Still, he was not as coldhearted as he liked to often appear, as evident by his numerous internal struggles when faced with moral decisions. For example, when pressured to divorce Josephine because she couldn't produce an heir—not to mention her history of infidelity, he resisted in principle for several years. Eventually, he succumbed to mounting pressure for an heir and did divorce her, just before the Russian invasion. As

evident in his letters, however, he struggled with this decision and never stopped loving Josephine.

As another example, when his second wife, Marie-Louise—who just happened to be the daughter of Francis I, emperor of Austria—was in mortal danger during childbirth, Napoleon instructed the doctors to spare her life in favor of the child's. Fortunately, both mother and child survived. All this was despite his well-known bitterness against women—probably aggravated in his earlier days with Josephine, when she was known to have had numerous affairs.

Possibly the finest example of his humanity was after the battle of Austerlitz, when he announced that the wives of those killed in battle would receive lifetime annual pensions, and he literally adopted the children of the dead, paying child support and education expenses, and allowing them to add the name of Napoleon to their own.

All of that said, Napoleon was at his best when speaking to a crowd and was said to generate excitement by his willingness to get his hands dirty, always leading by example; by his legendary successes enhanced through creative propaganda; and by his rousing speeches, which perceptively catered to the soldiers' needs and egos. Standing nearly five feet seven inches (five feet two inches in French measurement), which was the average height for the time, he was said to appear to grow considerably in stature as he spoke to his troops before a battle—he might as well have been ten feet tall.

Ultimately, however, what made Napoleon extraordinary was not his persona, but his awareness—his ability to see the forest as well as the trees. It was awareness that enabled him to craft the vision of a better future in a time of extreme chaos. It was awareness that enabled him to understand what motivates troops and the public at large.

It was awareness that enabled him to negotiate successfully with foreign diplomats—building much-needed allies in the process. It was awareness that enabled him to achieve victory after victory—awareness of the territory, the enemy, and the enemy's probable next moves. Finally, it was awareness that enabled him to create the Code Napoleon, which, with its emphasis on freedom of religion and occupation, is the basis for most civil codes today.

Unfortunately, in the end, power got the better of Napoleon, as it so often does with those who achieve it. The very awareness that brought him to such heights eluded him later in his reign, clouded by his overwhelming desire to keep England at bay and to protect his territorial gains—and his legacy. When he did come to his senses, it was too late; the damage had been done. Fifteen years after becoming the ruler of all Western Europe, he was a prisoner on the stormy and desolate island of St. Helena, writing his memoirs—isolated, defeated, and alone. And in these memoirs, he took the opportunity to defend his actions and clear his name for prosperity:

> *I have stopped up the abyss of anarchy, and produced order out of chaos. I have cleansed the Revolution, ennobled the nations, and strengthened the throne. I have encouraged all talents, rewarded all meritorious services, and have advanced the boundaries of fame. Of what could I be accused from which an author would be unable to defend me? Is it my intentions? He holds sufficient material with which to acquit me. My despotism? But he will prove that the Dictatorship was unavoidably necessary. That I put an end to freedom? But he will demonstrate that license, anarchy, great confusion were standing and threatening on the doorstep. That I was too fond of war? He will show that I was always acting on the defensive. That I was striving after world monarchy? That was the accidental result of*

circumstances, and our enemies led me towards it themselves step by step. That I was ambitious? Yes, this historian will find me guilty of ambition, but surely the greatest and loftiest ambition that ever was! —namely to restore and consecrate at last the kingdom of reason, the full development, the whole enjoyment of all human abilities! And here the writer of history will perhaps feel compelled to regret that such an ambition has not been satisfied, not fulfilled.

Indeed.

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Appendix

1. Pieter Geyl, *Napoleon: For and Against* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1949).
2. Fain, *Napoleon: How He Did It*.
3. Ibid.
4. J. M. Thompson, *Napoleon Bonaparte* (Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton Publishing, 2001).
5. Neillands, *Wellington and Napoleon*.
6. Baron C-F de Menéval, *Memoirs of Napoleon Bonaparte* (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1910).
7. Louis Antoine Fauvelet de Bourrienne, *Memoirs of Napoleon Bonaparte* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890).