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# Why did Napoleon Invade Russia? A Study in Motivation and the Interrelations of Personality and Social Structure\*

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Harold T. Parker

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*“Your character and mine are opposed. You like to cajole people and obey their ideas. Moi, I like for them to please me and obey mine.”* Napoleon to Joseph, March 1814.

*“You ideologues, you act according to a system, prepared in advance. Moi, I am a practical person, I seize events and I push them as far as they will go.”* Napoleon to Dalberg, 1806.

*“I am of the race that founds empires.”*

THIS essay is an interim report on an ongoing reconnoitering research expedition into Napoleon's foreign policies, a working paper if you please. It attempts to answer tentatively three questions that arose in the inquiry. In the summer of 1982, when I was writing a series of biographical articles for Owen Connelly's *Historical Dictionary of Napoleonic France*, I noted to my astonishment that Napoleon's closest and most trusted counselors advised against an invasion of Russia. From 1810, Jean-Jacques Régis de Cambacérès, archchancellor, in effect Napoleon's chief judicial officer, and during Napoleon's absences from Paris supervisor of the routine of administration; Armand-Augustin-Louis Caulaincourt, ambassador to Tsar Alexander (1807-1811) and

\*The original version of this article was presented in a session of the Bicentennial Meeting of the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 28-30 September 1989 at Florida State University and that version appeared in the *Bicentennial Proceedings* published by Florida State University Press (1990).

then as grand master of horse personally responsible for Napoleon's safety; Jean-Baptiste de Nompère de Champagny, minister of the interior (1804–1807) and of foreign affairs (1807–1811); Pierre-Antoine-Noël-Bruno Daru, in Napoleon's view his ablest administrator, after 17 April 1811 minister of state charged with the daily expedition of Napoleon's correspondence; Géraud-Christophe-Michel Duroc, whose duties as grand marshal of the palace brought him into daily contact with Napoleon; Jean-Gérard Lacuée, who as indefatigable minister of the administration of war undertook the gigantic task of organizing the supply of the 650,000-man invasion force; and Jacques-Alexandre-Bernard Law, comte de Lauriston, one of Napoleon's favorite aides-de-camp who in 1811 succeeded Caulaincourt as ambassador to Tsar Alexander—all gravely warned Napoleon against an invasion of Russia.<sup>1</sup> Why did Napoleon overrule them and proceed? That is the first question.

Then, in an article, "Napoleon Reconsidered," published in *French Historical Studies* in 1987 but prepared in 1984, I projected a brief interpretive psychosocial biography of Napoleon that would integrate him into the ongoing Corsican, French, and international European societies in which he moved, with emphasis on his values and those of environing social structures. To relate him to Corsican society, the first one he entered, proved not too difficult, thanks to the labors of Fernand Beaucour, Dorothy Carrington, Jean Defranceschi, Thadd Hall, and Ange Rovère. Nor did his relations to the French army, his second home, offer too much difficulty, since the field had been already opened up by Jean Bertaud, David Chandler, Owen Connelly, André Corvisier, Donald Horward, John Elting, John Lynn, Samuel Scott, and many others. Here, of course, we are dealing with three French armies, the changing royal army of the last two decades of the Old Regime, the popular revolutionary force of the early 1790s, and the imperial professional army Napoleon himself did much to create. Similarly, international diplomacy, into which the young Bonaparte was thrown in 1796, has been the subject of brilliant description and analysis from Garrett Mattingly and Albert Sorel to André Fugier, Orville Murphy, and Paul Schroeder. It remained *only* to inquire how did Napoleon's personality relate to the diplomatic structures and values that have been so ably portrayed?

1. See Harold T. Parker, "Cambacérés," "Caulaincourt," "Champagny," "Daru," "Duroc," "Diplomacy," "Napoleon I, Daily Round," and supporting references in Owen Connelly, *Historical Dictionary of Napoleonic France* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), 94, 103, 104–5, 143, 154–55, 160, 286–87, 357–58.

That endeavor led to a third question. At another consortium on Revolutionary Europe, when I happened to mention that I was working on Napoleon's foreign policy, Paul Schroeder observed, "But did he have one? Or even policies?" We shall see.<sup>2</sup>

## I

Suppose we first remind ourselves of the continuing, underlying dispositions of Napoleon's personality, then recall the structures of international politics at the close of the eighteenth century, and finally interrelate the two, personality and structures.

With a smile, let us follow current fashion and start with the prenatal life of our hero.<sup>3</sup> Recent articles have warned pregnant American women to be careful about which television programs they watch, for the fetus is listening too and after birth will resonate to programs it has previously heard. Be that as it may, Napoleon's elder brother Joseph, born on 8 January 1768, was the outcome of a relatively tranquil pregnancy and was a smiling, happy baby who automatically charmed everyone who approached him. Napoleon, as a fetus, had a very hard ride as his mother, Letizia, six months pregnant, seated on a mule, fled from French troops over the rocky Corsican mountain trails. A scrawny baby with spindly legs and an abnormally large head, he repelled those who viewed him and had to win their attention and respect with an effort.

2. For the formulation of the questions I am deeply indebted to Orville T. Murphy's *Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes: French Diplomacy in the Age of Vergennes 1719-1787* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982) and Paul Walter Schroeder's keynote address, "The European International System, 1789-1848: Is There a Problem? An Answer" in *Proceedings of the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe 1985* (Athens, Ga.: Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1986), 2-26. They are not responsible, of course, for the answers I have offered.

3. These paragraphs on Napoleon's personality are a distillation of several of my articles on Napoleon's life and psychology: "Napoleon and Conquered Territories 1805-1807," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 51 (1952): 70-84; "The Formation of Napoleon's Personality: An Exploratory Essay," *French Historical Studies*, 1971-1972, 6-26; "Symposium—Napoleon: Civil Executive and Revolutionary," *Proceedings of the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe 1972* (Gainesville, Fla.: University of Florida Press, 1973), 18-49; "Napoleon's Changing Self-Image: A Sketch," *Proceedings of the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe 1983* (Athens, Ga.: Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1985), 446-63; "Napoleon Reconsidered: An Invitation to Inquiry and Reflection," *French Historical Studies* 14 (1987): 142-56; "The Writing of 'The Formation of Napoleon's Personality': A Fruitful Collaboration," *Proceedings of the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe 1989* (in press). Add to these and their references, Dorothy Carrington, *Napoleon and His Parents on the Threshold of History* (London, 1988).

Letizia's milk for once failed her, and he was placed with a wet nurse in a back room while Joseph remained in the parents' bedroom until the third child, Maria-Anna, arrived in 1771. When at age two Napoleon emerged, so to speak, from the back room, he could probably sense that he was excluded from the more intimate relations existing between his mother and his father, Carlo, and between both of them and his brother Joseph. To gain attention he became a scrapper. In 1813 he chided his own two-year-old son: "Lazybones, when I was your age I was already beating up Joseph." However, his mother set standards: you do not gain attention and respect by being naughty, but only by accomplishment.

This constellation of family relationships can be described and interpreted in terms of at least four major psychological theories: Sigmund Freud's Oedipus complex, Alfred Adler's sibling rivalry, Kohut's ego psychology, and Silvan Tomkins's script hypothesis. In their own way, they all fit the data and illuminate some aspect, and if we had space we could discuss the psychobiographic issues thus raised. For the moment, for our purposes, Tomkins's script theory seems heuristically more convenient and fruitful.

Tomkins asks us to look at the scene—the actor, the situation, the action, and the accompanying multiplying affect—and at the repetition of like situations, like responses, like affects, until the response becomes a habit, an underlying disposition, a script determining behavior.<sup>4</sup>

In Napoleon's life the scene—the two-year-old emerging from the back room perceiving a situation to be competitively and combatively conquered and won—was repeated again and again. Napoleon was an irrepressible climber within his own family; his family were irrepressible social climbers in Ajaccio, in Corsica, and in France. The Bonapartes were nowhere near the top in Ajaccio (as Napoleon later said, they were *petits gentilshommes*), but from 1769 they schemed and connived and used every opportunity to get ahead. The child and youth Napoleon was part of that scheming conversation and effort.

The scene was repeated at the collège of Brienne, that the nine-year-old Napoleon entered in 1778. To a degree he provoked the developing scenario. The new kid on the block, with a Corsican chip on his shoulder, he provoked merciless hazing by the disdainful young scions of the French nobility. He responded by hard work in subjects that interested him—he was the star pupil in mathematics, thus revealing his

4. This concise capsulation does not do justice to the warmth, subtlety, and sophistication of Silvan S. Tomkins's theories. See his *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*, 3 vols. (New York: Springer Publishing Company 1962).

analytical powers—and by extravagant fantasy; hand-in-hand with Paoli he would free Corsica from the French conquerors. Fantasy and implementing work were linked in his student preparation of a history of Corsica. It is interesting that Joseph, the smooth charmer, had no trouble gaining acceptance at the boarding school of Autun; he too had his methods of making his way.

To skip over the intervening years, the scenario was repeated when Napoleon became First Consul, then emperor. A new arrival, he must win competitively and combatively the acceptance and subordination of the kings and emperors of Europe, of distinguished lineage. He did it by calculated scheming in the service of outrageous fantasy, and by hard work. He would not accept a position of subordination or even of equality. He must dominate. As he wrote to Joseph, “Your character and mine are opposed. You like to cajole people and obey their ideas. *Moi*, I like for them to please me and obey mine.”<sup>5</sup> It can be argued that his desire to dominate combatively any situation in which he found himself grew more compulsive with age and drove him into the plains of Russia.

A qualification: in a brief paper such as this there is always the risk of oversimplification. There is always the danger of making Napoleon a stick figure, a dominating, domineering despot. Yet, like most people, he was a bundle of conflicting emotions. An example: he admired, he respected, he adored his mother (he never said he loved her); yet even at St. Helena the memory still rankled that on one occasion she had tricked him: “You *never* trick a child,” he said. He had “small patience with his father’s failings—extravagance, addiction to pleasure”;<sup>6</sup> yet he admired his father’s youthful patriotic dedication to the cause of Corsican independence, and he came to understand and appreciate his success as a persistent, “clever climber” in Corsican-French society. Napoleon competed with Joseph, and from age two sought to win out over him. Yet he loved Joseph (“I have never loved anyone except perhaps Joseph, and him only a little”) and was remorseful when at primary school he had compelled Joseph to become a defeated Carthaginian so he could be a triumphant Roman. The ambivalence toward Joseph came out in two episodes during the week of the imperial coronation (1804). When Napoleon’s wet-nurse recalled that Joseph had been “*un joli enfant*” (a charming, happy, smiling, gurgling baby), Napoleon, master of Europe and certainly of Joseph, blackened with

5. Napoleon to Joseph, Reims, 14 March 1814, in Napoleon Ier, *Supplément a la Correspondance de Napoléon Ier* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1887), 207.

6. Carrington, *Napoleon and His Parents*, 40.

rage. Yet when he and Joseph were splendidly attired for the coronation ceremony, Napoleon said to his brother, "If only our father could see us now," which may express resolution of conflict with both his father and brother.

Nevertheless, even with these qualifications, Caulaincourt, Napoleon's equerry who knew him very well, accused Napoleon early in 1812 that he desired only mastery: "Undoubtedly your majesty would not make war on Russia solely for the sake of Poland, but rather that you should have no rival in Europe, and see there none but vassals."<sup>7</sup> As if corroborating Caulaincourt, Napoleon himself on 25 February 1812 instructed his foreign minister, Hugues Bernard Maret, to write Lauriston, his ambassador to St. Petersburg, that Russia must be "placed back in the situation of inferiority in which she was" at the time of Tilsit.<sup>8</sup>

## II

Now to introduce the young Bonaparte into the realm of international diplomacy. A decisive break occurred in his life when in March 1796 he was given command of the Army of Italy. Hitherto, in his family, at school and garrison, as lieutenant colonel of the National Guard of Ajaccio, and as captain of artillery at Toulon, he had been actively engaged in face-to-face relations with people whom he could see and who could see him. In 1796 he was thrust into a world where he must control people beyond his visual perception. He had to learn how to animate his generals and soldiers, however distant, how to move his army across the Italian landscape in campaign and battle, and how to deter and destroy enemy forces. Although he had read Bourcet and Guibert and studied the theory of combined operations (infantry, cavalry, and artillery), nothing had really prepared him for the daily experiences of giving orders in dark and shifting situations. Brilliant but green, he had to improvise and scramble to glory. Likewise, although he and his family had been conquered persons subject to the innovative consolidating measures of an enlightened Bourbon monarchy, and although he probably knew something of the problems French generals had encountered in applying French revolutionary legislation to the Belgians and Rhinelanders, nothing had really prepared him for the daily experiences of managing the mystifying Italians. When in his first encounter with Francesco Melzi d'Eril, head of the delegation of Milan,

7. Armand-Augustin-Louis Caulaincourt, *With Napoleon in Russia* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1935), 25; see also, 26, 298.

8. Quoted in Albert Vandal, *Napoléon et Alexandre Ier*, vol. III, *La Rupture* (Paris: E. Plon, Nourrit et Cie, 1900), 311.

Bonaparte offered the Milanese liberty, the greatest gift within the power of the French Republic to bestow, Melzi did not appear interested. "Well, then what do you want?" "Tranquility," was Melzi's disconcerting reply. Again, Bonaparte had to improvise measures to manage conquered peoples. He had even less background for day-to-day negotiations through professional French diplomats with the Italian rulers—the kings of Sardinia and Naples, the doges of Genoa and Venice, the dukes and granddukes of Modena, Parma, and Tuscany, the pope—and eventually with the Austrian emperor. Again, he inventively improvised. And in all three fields out of improvisation grew a way, a style of making war, of managing conquered peoples, and of conducting international relations that later developed and crystallized into Napoleonic policies and institutions.

When in April 1796 the young Bonaparte crossed the Alps into Italy, he was entering the land where the modern phase of the contest for power among states had long since begun. The fifteenth century had seen a continual vying for power and jockeying for position among the larger states of Florence, Milan, Venice, the Papal States, and the Kingdom of Naples. Occasionally one of these states and then another tried to dominate the Italian peninsula while other states (usually Florence) for their own purposes attempted to maintain a balance of power, just as later one state or another would try to dominate Europe while other states (often England) for their purposes would try to maintain an equilibrium. In Italy, as in later European politics, there were a few smaller states that struggled to survive and to remain neutral. There were accredited resident ambassadors, alliances, ultimatums, threats, and wars; and diplomats who "fenced with nice weapons of cunning and deceit, aiming rather to thrust through the weak point of their foe's armor than to beat him down in strength, seeking always to catch him unawares, to trick him by fair promises, and betray him by false hopes."<sup>9</sup> A former diplomat of the Florentine staff, Niccolò Machiavelli, described in his classic manual *The Prince* (1513) these methods of securing power at home and abroad that were being used by Italians and by foreigners who intrigued in Italy. Perhaps unintentionally he held up for the emulation of later generations of European statesmen the Italian methods and their underlying philosophy that the end (power) justifies the means.

Then in 1494 France under Charles VIII took the side of Milan, and Spain in the person of Ferdinand of Aragon sided with Naples, and the

9. Conyers Read, *Mr. Secretary Walsingham and the Policy of Queen Elizabeth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 1:24.

contest for power that had begun among the small city-states and principalities of Italy spread until today it includes and involves virtually the entire planet. In the eighteenth century the great European powers were, at the center, France, Austria, Prussia, and (in title at least) Spain, and on the wings the relatively invulnerable Great Britain and Russia. There were also in Italy, in the antiquated Holy Roman Empire, and in Scandinavia, a host of lesser states. Among the great powers the normal relationship was not friendship but rivalry of ambition; watchful self-interest, suspicion, distrust, and fear; and a steady calculus of the chances of securing an advantage through the building of military power, negotiation of alliances and deals, and, if it seemed appropriate, war.

Rulers, that is, emperors and kings, might communicate with each other directly, but usually they operated through their foreign ministers, their bureaucratic foreign offices, and the network of accredited ambassadors resident in each capital city. The organization, standard operating procedures, and staff of the French foreign service was considered to be a model for all the rest.<sup>10</sup>

In this world of international politics, rulers or governors of inordinate territorial ambition were not unknown: Chatham, that arrogant genius of the Seven Years' War ("I know I can save England, and I know no one else can") might well have swept up nearly all the major colonies of France and Spain had he not been removed from office; Tsaritsa Catherine II dreamed of placing a Russian prince on the throne of Constantinople. Surprise attacks were sometimes launched without warning or declaration of war: Frederick the Great's invasion of Silesia in 1740, thus violating a solemn treaty promise to respect the integrity of the Austrian empire ("I take what I want; there will always be plenty of professors to justify what I do"), precipitated the War of the Austrian Succession; Britain's attack in 1755 on four French forts in North America announced the beginning of the Seven Years' War. Dynasties were moved about from one state to another; populations were transferred without so much as a glance at their wishes; states were diminished, divided, and even extinguished (as in the partition of Poland).

In this apparent chaos of conflict, "as on a darkling plain," several patterns of desire, rivalry, enmity, and policy existed. One rivalry was

10. Jean Baillou, ed., *Les affaires étrangères et le corps diplomatique français*, Tome I, *De l'ancien régime au second empire* (Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1984); Frédéric Masson, *Le département des affaires étrangères pendant la Révolution 1787-1804* (Paris: E. Plon, 1877); Edward A. Whitcomb, *Napoleon's Diplomatic Service* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1979).

between Austria and Prussia for influence in Germany. Another developing rivalry was between Austria and Russia over expansion into the Ottoman Empire. But from 1689 perhaps the central rivalry was between France and England. Learning from the experiences of four wars, England had formulated a strategy that exploited the advantages of her island position and played on the multiple temptations of France's geographic situation. The strategy: pay subsidies to one continental ally, or to several, to keep them fighting and to divert France's resources from the construction of a large fleet and the dispatch of overseas expeditions; win naval superiority and set up a blockade of the French coast that protected British commerce, ruined French trade and the industries dependent on it, and prevented the French from sending supplies and reinforcements to their beleaguered garrisons overseas; then, dispatch expeditions to pick up French colonies, as fruit from a withered vine. The French government, simultaneously enticed by multiple opportunities of continental aggrandizement and of overseas expansion into the Mediterranean and to America and India, yet unable to make choices and concentrate its resources on one area or the other, lost out in both.<sup>11</sup>

Now, finally, enter Bonaparte. Eighteenth-century international politics rewarded the cleverest, most energetic, resourceful, dexterous, and persistent schemers. The values and intrigues of a provincial Corsican society had prepared Bonaparte to operate competitively in high-level international diplomacy. In the eighteenth century a Corsican child was born into an elementary nuclear family. To the family and the promotion of its interests he owed time, energy, loyalty, and trust. There may have been sibling rivalries for attention, influence, and position (as we have seen, Napoleon, a second son, was an irrepressible climber), but the members of the family could trust each other not to cheat. The child was also member of an extended family, to the degree of third cousins perhaps, and likewise had ties of spiritual kinship with his godfather and godmother. He could count on these for practical support. Unrelated families, the outside world, were regarded with distrust and could be treated with calculated ruse, deceit, and guile. When Napoleon was a boy, his great-uncle, the archdeacon Luciano Bonaparte, had prophesied for him a great future because he knew how to lie.

11. This sketch of eighteenth-century politics owes much to Murphy's *Ver-gennes*, Schroeder's keynote address, and volume 1 of Albert Sorel's *L'Europe et la Révolution française* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1885). My earlier ideas are contained in "Reflections on Thucydides and Some Aspects of Modern Coalition War," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 78 (1979): 73-83.

In the kaleidoscopic Corsican factional quarrels of his early maturity (1789–1793), his career became a continuously changing calculation as he adapted his remarks to the situation and the recipient. Thereafter, not a single statement, taken alone, can be trusted. It may be true; it may be false; in either case, it was once thought to be manipulatively useful. He had been readied to participate warily in the conniving scheming of international politics.

He early displayed and later developed his own type of participation.<sup>12</sup> (1) Almost from the start in 1796 he insisted that he was in sole charge of a combined operation whose elements were interrelated, intersupportive, and coordinated—conduct of a military campaign, management of conquered peoples, diplomatic negotiation, and securing of financial resources. The army, for example, gave the power to manage conquered peoples; that management gave the financial resources to sustain the army. The introduction of usable, progressive French reforms (equality before the law, uniform weights and measures, rational administrative circumscriptions and channels of communication and command, representative assemblies, conscription) created a stable base for the army and a counter for diplomatic negotiation. Negotiation, backed by force and utilizing the professional staff of the French foreign office, formed alliances and coalitions, and craftily obtained and nailed down what the army and management had won.

(2) From this unified operational command several corollaries followed. (A) Since Napoleon was a unitary personality, the qualities displayed in war were also displayed in negotiations: energy, quickness, wariness, craft, guile, dexterity (one of Bonaparte's favorite words), and calculation; persistence even in the face of apparently insuperable odds, remorseless exploitation of every opening, whether in relentless pursuit of a fleeing enemy army or in the exaction of concessions from

12. The ensuing description is based on a reading of Napoleon's *Correspondance*, including a close study of volumes 1–3 (the Italian campaign), 7–8 (relations with England, 1801–1803), and 20–23 (events leading up to the invasion of Russia). These give the story from the viewpoint of Napoleon. I have also read Henry Adams's nine-volume *History of the United States during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison*, whose chapters of diplomatic history supply an excellent account of Napoleon's diplomacy from the standpoint of his transatlantic victims, the presidents, secretaries of state, and Paris representatives of the United States. In addition, I have glanced at the standard secondary accounts of Emile Bourgeois, Edouard Driault, Herbert Butterfield (*The Peace Tactics of Napoleon 1806–1808*), André Fugier, and Sorel. Of these, those of Butterfield and Fugier seem closest to historical reality. For the characteristics of Napoleon's military personality see chapter 2 of Owen Connelly's *Blundering to Glory: Napoleon's Military Campaigns* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1987).

a demoralized adversarial plenipotentiary; an analytic brain in the service of a vaulting imagination. (B) A strategic military decision in peacetime (to construct a strong navy or to reinforce a major fortress) was often as significant a foreign policy action as a diplomatic initiative. (C) If, to follow Clausewitz and Napoleon, war was a continuation of politics by other means, aggressive diplomacy was for Napoleon frequently a way of making war in times of peace.

(3) The consequence of each unified operational campaign was residual regional foreign policies to be maintained and elaborated later. In 1806 Napoleon, always self-observant but not always self-observant enough, remarked to Dalberg: "You ideologues, you act according to a system, prepared in advance. *Moi*, I am a practical person, I seize events and I push them as far as they will go."<sup>13</sup> Thus, in the negotiations leading to the Treaty of Campo Formio with Austria (1797), pushing events and the Austrian negotiator, he established regional foreign policies for years to come: possession of Belgium and the Rhine frontier; continuing intervention as arbiter in the affairs of Germany; a dominating French presence in Italy, including a progressive client Cisalpine Republic; and acquisition of outposts along the Dalmatian coast, to serve as a base for observation of and participation in the affairs of the Ottoman Empire—and as a stepping-stone to Egypt, whose seizure might damage England, and to India, if Napoleon were ever free to respond to the lure of the East. These policies, set in treaty provisions that were later affirmed and elaborated in further treaties of 1801, 1805, and 1809, assured a deeply unreconcilable Austria.<sup>14</sup>

Austria disposed of, it was England's turn. On 18 October 1797, the day after the Treaty of Campo Formio was signed, the victorious young Bonaparte wrote Talleyrand, then minister of foreign affairs, a remarkably clear-sighted analysis of the international situation.<sup>15</sup> France, he said, now has strong defensive frontiers. The Austrian emperor is only biding his time; he will try to hit back, but we can handle him. England is a redoubtable enemy. The English are intriguing and active: they will seek to form another coalition against us. They will thus divide our resources, destroy our commerce and navy, and continue to pick up our colonies and those of Spain and Holland as well. The only solution

13. Quoted in Fugier, *La Révolution française et l'empire napoléonien* (Paris: Hachette, 1954), 219.

14. The Treaty of Campo Formio and its secret articles, dated 17 October 1797, are given in nos. 2303, 2304, and 2305 of Napoleon Ier, *Correspondance de Napoléon Ier* (Paris: Henri Plon and J. Dumaine, 1859), 3: 379-89.

15. Napoleon to the Minister of Foreign Relations, General Headquarters, Passariano, 18 October 1797, *ibid.*, no. 2307, 3:390-92.

is for us "to concentrate our activity on the navy and destroy England. That done, Europe will be at our feet." (Notice, even then, he was dreaming of mastery of Europe.)

*Intellectually*, he perceived the international structures in which he was operating and the dangers of yielding simultaneously to the twin temptations of overland and overseas expansion. *Intellectually*, he opted for a rational foreign policy. But in action what happened? We all know the story. He tried the maritime route: a contemplated invasion of England (1798), an expedition to Egypt (1798), retrocession of Louisiana to France (1800), peace with England (1802), measures to construct a powerful French fleet, and an expedition to San Domingo. But he met with disaster at San Domingo, and he declined in peace to abstain from aggressive actions that alarmed England and threatened her vital interests: his continuing dominance of Holland and hence the Cape of Good Hope, his refusal to negotiate a favorable commercial treaty, his spying missions to the Near East—the report of General Sébastiani—not to mention the annexation of Elba, Piedmont, and Parma, and the invasion of Switzerland. Like Louis XIV and Louis XV, Napoleon soon found himself in a double war, facing a relatively invulnerable England and the successive coalitions she subsidized. In this war his construction of a strong fleet continued, and a policy of commercial exclusion initiated in 1803 against England, pushed to the utmost, became the Continental System. The same pattern of behavior appeared during the outbreak of war with Prussia (1806) and, for that matter, Russia (1812): a refusal, perhaps an inability, to concede points important to the adversary in order to preserve a major strategic purpose.

By 1810 the result of pushing local, special policies and aggressions to the utmost left Napoleon with a congeries of possessions and protectorates that had little in common except that they had once been the fruit of his acquisitive instincts.

Shall we grant Napoleon a fundamental or overall aim? That depends on whether we understand his changing self-image. There were periods in his life when he lived in a dream about himself. At Brienne he dreamed of working with Paoli to liberate Corsica from French oppression. By 1805 his dreaming had become imperial. "I am of the race that founds empires," of heroes who conquer space and install institutions. The nature of the empire changed in his mind. At first it was to be a federated empire, with loyal relatives governing satellite kingdoms. When these arrangements did not work, except under his stepson Eugene in northern Italy, he began moving by 1810 toward a progressive unitary empire with a uniform law code, equality before the law,

uniform coinage, weights, and measures, and a rational administration.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time his relation to people and to the reality in which he was operating became more distant. The process of distancing started with his assumption of command of the Army of Italy. An intense, chatty, eager young man, he deliberately assumed a manner of reserve, brevity, and command. At Marseilles, as he was proceeding to his post, an old comrade moved to embrace him, but a look from Bonaparte checked him. He adopted the manner to impose on others, but eventually the manner imposed on him, and the manner became the man. By 1810 he was quite seigneurial. His reality became his office, his administrative papers, and his dream. "My empire shall last a thousand years."

### III

To explain why Napoleon invaded Russia, our third question, would require a complex story (history) too long to be told here. It would involve not only the personality of Napoleon, the structures of international politics, and his entrapment in a double war but also the personality of Tsar Alexander, the characteristics of Russian society, the ambiguities of the Tilsit treaties, the intrigues of Talleyrand, and much else besides. But if we ask why did *Napoleon* invade Russia with emphasis on his personality, motives, and policy, the simpler question of *when* did Napoleon decide to invade Russia and under what circumstances may yield a clue.

To answer that simpler query of *when* we must imaginatively enter his *cabinet de travail* and his daily round. As empathetically we read with him the incoming reports and outgoing dispatches, we discover that the decision to invade Russia moved through three stages: an awareness that war with Russia, always possible, was actively looming; a recognition that one issue was so vital that he would have to attack; then the decision to attack. The first two dates are easy to identify. On 4 August 1810, in a letter to the king of Saxony, his loyal ally and viceroy in the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, Napoleon instructed him secretly to strengthen his armament from Napoleon's arsenals and to reinforce the Polish fortress of Modlin, less vulnerable than Warsaw to a Russian attack. "My relations [with Russia] are very good," he explained, "but

16. Owen Connelly, *Napoleon's Satellite Kingdoms* (New York: Free Press, 1965), 333-35.

one must be prepared.”<sup>17</sup> By 6 October he was more explicit. He ordered the king to raise sixteen cavalry regiments, especially lancers—“in case of war they will deliver us from the swarms of Cossacks who inundated us during the last war”—and he strengthened his forces in northern Germany and Danzig.<sup>18</sup> By December he had identified the issue on which he could not retreat without jeopardizing the security of his policies and his imperial position: Alexander’s violation of his solemn promises at Tilsit to declare war on England and enforce the Continental System. If Alexander opened his ports to neutral ships carrying colonial and English merchandise, and in effect made peace with England, Napoleon warned, war would come.<sup>19</sup> When Alexander did open his ports to neutral ships, thus effectively ending Napoleon’s continental blockade of England, Napoleon responded in January and March 1811 with the organization and massive buildup of the Grande Armée in Germany and northern Italy.<sup>20</sup> On 17 April he ordered the preparation of a large military map of European Russia, and on the same day dismissed his minister of foreign affairs, Champagny, by reason of his opposition to the invasion.<sup>21</sup> If the decision to invade Russia had not yet been made, Napoleon was well along in his preparations for an attack if Alexander continued to receive neutral ships bearing colonial and English goods.<sup>22</sup>

17. Napoleon to Frederick Augustus, king of Saxony, Trianon, 4 August 1810, in Napoleon Ier, *Correspondance*, no. 16762, 21: 19–29.

18. Napoleon to Frederick Augustus, king of Saxony, Fontainebleau, 6 October 1810, *ibid.*, no. 17009, 21: 192–94; Napoleon to Clarke, Fontainebleau, 6 October 1810, *ibid.*, no. 17000, 21: 181–87.

19. Napoleon to Champagny (for transmission to the Russian ambassador Kurakin), Paris, 2 December 1810, and Napoleon to Champagny (for transmission to Caulaincourt, French ambassador at St. Petersburg), Paris, 5 December 1810, nos. 17179, 17187, 21: 297–99, 302.

20. Napoleon to Clarke, Paris, 3 January 1811, *ibid.*, no. 17264, 21: 349–51; Napoleon to Lacuée, Paris, 10 January 1811, in *ibid.*, no. 17277, 21: 357–58; Napoleon to Davout, Paris, 24 March 1811, in *ibid.*, nos. 17514, 17515, 17516, 21: 503–9.

21. Parker, “Champagny,” in Connelly, *Historical Dictionary of Napoleonic France*, 104; Napoleon to Champagny, Paris, 17 April 1811, Napoleon Ier, *Correspondance*, no. 17614, 22: 71.

22. It is still difficult to pinpoint the exact date when Napoleon decided to invade Russia. The buildup of forces in Germany and Italy, with requests for maps all the way into Russia, started in October 1810. These might have been defensive measures against the threat of a Russian attack. Defensive measures shifted to offensive buildup in January and March 1811, but still the actual decision to attack remained unavowed for many months.

During those nine months (August 1810 to April 1811) he was dealing with many issues such as the construction of a huge French navy, the pregnancy of Marie Louise, Masséna's advance into Portugal and his repulse, the management of the satellite rulers (Jerome, Eugene, Joachim Murat, and Joseph), the dethronement of Louis, and the annexation of Holland and the North Sea littoral. But the focus of his obsessive attention was the expansion and enforcement of the Continental System, as he tried to bend a continent, including Russia and Alexander, to his will. Within the context of his policy the decision to invade Russia was rational, but it was taken by a person who had distanced himself from the reality in which he was operating, who had pushed events to an insane degree, who continued to display an inability to yield on lesser issues important to the adversary, and who had become, as his closest advisors noted, "an imperial madman."

### Concluding Reflections

A recurring refrain in Orville Murphy's biography of Vergennes is the effect of a diplomat's personality on his diplomacy. What was moderately so of the intelligent, moderate Vergennes was momentarily true of Napoleon. Mme de Staël once remarked that Napoleon was unlike any other man she had ever known. She was more profoundly correct than she realized. Every life (and every life history) is unique, but Napoleon's was more unique (so to speak) than most in the qualities of his genius, the trajectory of his career, and the variety of influences he absorbed and fused in the crucible of an intense interior personal life.

His underlying disposition toward combative mastery and control (he really enjoyed a fight, especially when successful) was laid down in a Corsican family and town; his abilities and his dedication to hard work were strengthened by a French education, in the collège of Brienne, in a French army then undergoing progressive reform, and in his reading of the *philosophes* and history; his Corsican style of craftiness was practiced in the factional island quarrels. The French Revolution opened up opportunities to his great military and administrative gifts and revealed his superiority to himself and to a large public; a youth who in his historical reading had resonated to Robert Bruce, the liberator of a small country, now resonated to Alexander, Caesar, and Charlemagne, heroes who had conquered space and founded institutions.

His personality and dexterous, crafty practices, formed outside the system of international diplomacy he was entering, approximated sufficiently its values and methods that he could operate within it. The

French revolutionary army, which he transformed into an imperial professional force, the excellent French foreign service which he improved, and the European practice of arranging supporting alliances offered him instruments for the achievement of great successes on the battlefield and at the negotiating table. Great rewards reinforced the disposition to seek mastery of everything in view and to push events to the utmost. But great success and the habitual exercise of command from the self-isolation of his office blinded him to the reality of what was possible. Restless, illimitable striving eventually entrapped him into a double war against two relatively invulnerable powers, England and Russia. Like Louis XIV and Louis XV before him, he lost on both fronts.

*David B. Ralston*

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