Napoleon Review Article

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200 years on, the figure of Napoleon Bonaparte continues to fascinate, and it is therefore no surprise to find that the bicentenary of his downfall has seen the publication of a number of major works by leading specialists in the Napoleonic epoch. With Britain currently in the grip of remembrance for the First World War, meanwhile, this seems doubly apposite: a century ago the words ‘the great war’ were already in use, but they were universally understood as applying to the conflict of 1803-1815, a conflict that saw a greater proportion of Britain’s manpower mobilised than was to be the case than in that of 1914, a larger proportion of those men who were actually sent off to war make the ultimate sacrifice (albeit far more due to disease than to the ravages of the battlefield), and, in terms of the number of casualties inflicted per square yard by far the worst scenes of carnage in British military history (specifically, one thinks here of the fields of Waterloo and Albuera, and, still worse, the tiny space in front of the breaches in the walls of Badajoz that saw no fewer than 2,200 British soldiers fall in the space of just two hours on the night of 6 April 1812). And, if Britain went to war in 1914 and fought on with such relentless determination thereafter, at bottom it was for precisely the same reasons as she did so in 1803: essentially, it was a case of taking a stand against Napoleon, or allowing a single power to dominate the power-politics of the whole of Europe and then turn her much augmented guns against a Britain who would find herself fighting entirely alone without any hope of finding the Continental allies that were always vital to securing her aims in Europe.

If the figure of Napoleon retains its fascination, then, it is also one that remains relevant, however much it should be stressed that the emperor was neither a Kaiser Bill, nor, still less, an Adolf Hitler. Few serious historians would make any such comparison in the current era – much as he is completely frank in his loathing of the little corporal, it is certainly not a position subscribed to by the author of this review essay – and the fact that it is specifically condemned in the first of works that we shall be looking at, namely Michael Broers’ *Soldier of Destiny* therefore smacks a little of tilting at windmills. This remark is, perhaps, a little harsh, but, even so, Broers’ work is distinctly favourable in its judgements, and, to use the terminology of the renowned Dutch historian, Pieter Geyl, very much belongs in the camp of ‘Napoleon for’. That said, we are talking about something very different from such regurgitations of the Napoleonic legend as, say, Vincent Cronin’s truly lamentable *Napoleon Bonaparte*. In the first place, this is a work of real scholarship in that Broers has made full use of the new edition of Napoleon’s correspondence that is currently emerging volume-by-volume in Paris courtesy of the Fondation Napoléon, this containing so many documents that have hitherto remained unknown that it cannot but shed much light on many crucial moments in the emperor’s career. And in the second place, for all that his knowledge of Revolutionary and Napoleonic France is far greater than that of such figures as Cronin, Broers is a specialist not on France, but rather on Italy, this giving him an insight into both the Corsica from which Napoleon sprang and the Cisalpine Republic, the satellite state that gave him his opportunity for him to translate his political ideas into reality.

Quite genuinely, then, there is much to value in Broers’ work (and not just value, but also enjoy: beautifully written, the text is full of sparkling witticisms). As an example, we have a rather different view of Napoleon’s relationship with both Josephine de Beauharnais and his family. Thus, of these, the former comes off rather badly – whilst recognising her warmth, generosity and charm, Broers shows her no mercy in respect of her repeated infidelities – whilst the latter do much better than normal, with emphasis being placed on the love and loyalty which most of them displayed in respect of Napoleon to the very end, and the much-reviled figure of Joseph Bonaparte even receiving considerable plaudits in his own right in respect of the skills which he displayed as a diplomatist. Often stressed in the legend, meanwhile, the tenderness and concern which Napoleon at all times showed for his family is revealed to be no mere pious invention by, for example, the many loving letters which he wrote to his step-daughter, Hortense de Beauharnais, another aspect of the story that is revisited in this context being Napoleon’s relationship with his father, Carlo. And, on a more exalted level, there is also much detailed coverage of episodes that other biographers have tended
to gloss over: as an Italian specialist, Broers can be expected to have much to say on the governance of the Cisalpine Republic, but he is also very good on Napoleon’s actions as the de facto viceroy of Egypt.

Thus far, thus good: in brief, Broers has made an important contribution to the historiography which should enjoy a prominent place in the library of any scholar working on the Napoleonic period. That said, it has unfortunately to be said that the book’s message is not entirely convincing. Completely to demonise Napoleon is obviously as shortsighted as it is ahistorical: he was, beyond doubt, a man of extraordinary talents who rose further and faster than almost anyone else either before or since; a man of unlimited charisma who won almost equally unlimited admiration and devotion; a man of vision who was sincerely committed to achieving a society founded on the thoroughly laudable precepts of equality before the law and the career open to talent; and even, within certain rather obvious limits, a man of decency and humanity who eschewed the concept of the vendetta, sought genuinely to unite the competing factions of French society into a single polity, was capable of immense personal charm and sent very few political opponents to either the firing squad or the guillotine: not for 18 Brumaire the bloody scenes that followed the fall of Brissot or Robespierre. And, above all, however much terrified contemporaries may have stigmatised him as a Jacobin, Napoleon was no Terrorist and, more than that, someone who, having witnessed the slaughter of 10 August 1792, felt real horror at the notion of unleashing the crowd on the rest of society, it being to his very great credit that he refused to do so even in the dark days of 1814.

All this the author of this review can concede and much more besides. Yet one does not have to be an admirer of the ancien régime to feel that Broers’ work is open to challenge. Let us set aside the odd slip – France’s alliance with Spain, for example, dated from 1796 rather than 1800 – not to mention the fact that Napoleon, Soldier of Destiny is pushing at an open door: in brief, any study of the first half of Napoleon’s career has a great many subjects to play with that are inherently positive, whether they are the military genius displayed in the Italian campaign of 1796, the policies of amalgame and ralliement, the reforms of the Consulate, or even a Napoleon who is not the portly, brooding and pasty-faced figure of later years but rather the boy-hero of the famous painting of the passage of the Saint-Bernard pass. And let us set aside, too, the occasional oddity of judgement: it is, for instance, difficult to share Broers’ evident admiration for Stephen Englund’s Napoleon: a Political Life.(2) More worrying is the fact that on more than one occasion there is a sense of elision, a sense, indeed that the author does not wish to engage with certain issues. Let us take the issue of the invasion of Egypt. In fairness, Broers is very critical of the handling of much of the campaigning that followed, but the reasons for Napoleon’s support for the plan are dealt with in a single paragraph only, whilst no attempt whatsoever is made to analyse whether the version which is given of the general’s thinking made any sense. Thus, according to Broers Napoleon was motivated by defensive considerations in that he believed that France’s acquisition of the Ionian Islands at Campo Formio – an event for which he himself was wholly responsible – had brought the Ottoman Empire to the point of collapse, and that in consequence the Directory should immediately move to secure the vital commercial interest represented by Egyptian cotton. At least there is none of the usual nonsense here about plans for an attack on India, but, even so, one wonders how Broers can take such ideas seriously. The first problem is that the idea that that Napoleon’s support for the scheme arose from defensive considerations is open to question - if the idea did not originate with him, his actions at Campo Formio are quite enough to suggest that an attack on the Ottoman Empire was very much on his agenda at this time - but, even if this is discounted, one is left wondering how Napoleon, or, indeed, anybody else, could possibly have believed that a French outpost in Egypt could ever have been sustained, let alone turned to commercial advantage, in the face of British naval superiority. In short, viewed in strategic terms, the invasion made no sense whatsoever, the implication being that Napoleon (and, with him, Talleyrand) must have been up to something else. Either that, or the French commander was, as Broers puts it in respect of the flow of grandiloquent remarks unleashed by the occupation of Cairo, not quite right in the head even before he took ship for Alexandria.

And, as with Egypt, so it is with other key episodes such as the collapse of the Treaty of Amiens and the formation of the Third Coalition, in each case Broers being inclined to fall back on the line that such events were the fault of anybody else other than Napoleon. This, however, is not good enough; there is certainly a point of view to argue here – with regard to the failure of Amiens, for example, though beyond doubt one of
the keys to a lasting peace with England, the trade agreement that the First Consul refused to contemplate could not but be damaging to French commercial interests – but to put it forward it is necessary to argue with greater care and in more detail than is the case in *Napoleon, Soldier of Destiny*. Thus, according to Broers, the Third Coalition was primarily the product of British diplomacy, and yet it is now widely accepted that the key figure here was not William Pitt but rather Alexander I. With regard to this latter view, there is, once again, room for debate, but to carry his point, Broers really should have given his readers rather more than the few brief remarks which is all that they actually get.

Sadly, then, one has to conclude that, thought-provoking, entertaining and brilliantly written though it is, *Napoleon, Soldier of Destiny* is, in the end, somewhat less of a contribution to the historiography than it might have been. All the more is this the case if it is read side-by-side with Phillip Dwyer’s *Citizen Emperor*. Of course, in doing so, one is not comparing like with like in that Broers only takes the story up to 1805, while, having already dealt with the years up to 1799 in *Napoleon: the Path to Power* (3), Dwyer begins his narrative with the aftermath of 18 Brumaire. And, in terms of a comparison, this period is a very good place to start, presenting us, as it does, with the issue of Napoleon’s approach to the restoration of order to a France ravaged from end to end by the brigandage that was a natural consequence of economic disruption, desertion, draft evasion and, to a limited extent only, ideological counter-revolution. That this was an issue that had to be dealt with no-one can deny – brigandage was, after all, a merciless enemy that was a threat to the whole of society – whilst, dependent as he was on the support of the famous ‘masses of granite’, it was one that faced the First Consul with obligations that were not just moral but political. Also impossible to avoid, meanwhile, is the conclusion that its suppression required a degree of ruthlessness that appears lamentable to modern eyes: amnesties could be tried, certainly – and, indeed, were tried – but, unless the basic causes of the chaos could be addressed, pacification was only going to be achieved through violence. In fairness, Broers does not seek to avoid this issue: ‘The Rhône valley, Provence, the western departments centred on the Vendée, the six new Piedmontese departments and the Belgian departments … all felt the brunt of the new regime’s wrath. This took the form of military commissions with wide powers of arrest and judicial competence … These commissions executed more people in four months in 1801 than the Directory had managed in over two years’ (pp. 306–7). Quite so, but for all that it is difficult not to feel that the comparable passage in *Citizen Emperor* has a sharper edge. Thus: ‘The violent and often brutal repression against rebels practised by the revolutionary government was continued under the new consular regime. To drive the point home, examples were made of a number of individuals. The first was a young man by the name of Henri de Toustain, in Paris to visit his brother in the Temple by virtue of the armistice. He was nevertheless arrested, dragged before a military commission and, despite no evidence being brought to bear against him other than a few white cockades … found in his hotel room, condemned to death … On another occasion, Bonaparte promised the Chouan leader, Louis de Frotté a personal amnesty, but when Frotté gave himself up he was summarily executed without so much as a trial … Bonaparte liked to set examples … and was capable of doing so at the expense of human life … The repression of unrest … was ruthless … Bonaparte ordered General Brune to clean up the Vendée … Brune’s tactics were brutal. On 25 January [1800] Republican troops took control of Pont-du-Loch, killed 500-600 rebels and were then unleashed on the surrounding villages … Bonaparte specified in a letter to one of his generals fighting in the west that any rebels caught should be “exterminated”’ (pp. 21–2).

Clearly, then, this is a rather darker Napoleon than the one given us by Broers. Meanwhile, Dwyer certainly does not believe in pulling his punches. For example, ‘What might have happened, what could have been, had Napoleon been less driven, more complacent, or more determined to pursue peace rather than conquest? What if he had paid heed to the words of Fontanes, “Woe to a conqueror who is only great at the head of his army”? But that would be to argue against Napoleon’s very nature. He possessed a “drive to glory”, an innate desire to control and dominate’ (p. 258). Writing of particular episodes in the history of the empire, meanwhile, Dwyer is still more damning. Here, for instance, is what he has to say in respect of the French occupation of Rome in 1808: ‘Two motives govern Napoleon’s … behaviour: impatience and an inability to make the least concession to his adversary. As a result, he always opted for force as a solution to his problems … His dealings with the Pope [also] show a lack of understanding that is stunningly obtuse, born
of an inability to see his opponent’s point of view. This would point to a lack of intelligence on the part of any other head of state, but how does one explain this ingrained inability … to come to workable arrangements with his interlocutors? The answer is simple: he was an inveterate bully who could have no equals, only vassals, and who could not understand the pope’s spiritual strength and determination’ (p. 260).

Words of this sharpness might lead one to expect that Citizen Emperor to prove but a demonization of Napoleon. Such an impression, however, would be unfair. On the contrary, on many issues Dwyer is prepared to give Napoleon the benefit of the doubt. If the overthrow of the Spanish Bourbons is roundly condemned as a crime and a blunder produced by little more than an opportunistic flexing of imperial muscle, it is accepted that the basic decision to intervene in the Iberian peninsula was the fruit of genuine strategic consideration, whilst the emperor is acquitted of the frequently-made accusation that he had been plotting to overthrow Charles IV and his successors since at least 1804. Equally the collapse of the Franco-Russian accord initiated with such éclat at Tilsit is ascribed at least as much to Alexander I as it is to Napoleon (also visible with regard to Russia is a hint of Napoleon’s argument that he was a prisoner of circumstances, in that Dwyer appears to argue that he was trapped into marching on Moscow by the impossible logistical demands generated by the concentration of 600,000 men in the impoverished wastes of eastern Europe). And, finally, with regard to the escape from Elba in 1815 Dwyer accepts pro-Bonapartist claims to the effect that not only was Louis XVIII deliberately starving the exiled emperor of the income that he had been assigned by virtue of the Treaty of Fontainebleau, but also that plans were afoot to have him transferred to Saint Helena and possibly even to arrange for his assassination. Indeed, the very title of the book can perhaps be read as a gesture of goodwill towards the notion that Napoleon came to power with the sanction of the French people, or, still more so, that he till the end remained a man of the Revolution. Such judiciousness, however, is not enough to get the emperor off the hook. This is not, perhaps, the all-out assault mounted by this reviewer’s Napoleon Wars: an International History (4), but even so the French ruler does not come off well, and it will therefore be interesting to see how far Broers manages to uphold his infinitely more roseate approach when he comes to march over the same grim fields.

Dwyer’s Napoleon, then, is far more ‘man of blood’ than he is the hero of the legend of Saint Helena (pointedly enough, indeed, Citizen Emperor omits any coverage of the period 1815–21, thereby denying the writings of Las Cases and his companions any chance of cloudying the issue). So much for Dwyer’s argument, but it would be churlish indeed to end this section of the current essay without doing something more to extol the praises of what is truly a magnificent book, and one that, along with its companion volume – Napoleon: the Path to Power – for the time being at least must be judged to remain the standard text of its day. If only one thing can be highlighted here, let it be Dwyer’s integration into his text of numerous analyses of the artwork of the period. There is, of course, plenty of material available on this subject – indeed, little enough of what Dwyer has to say is particularly novel – but it is rare to find it treated in so prominent a fashion in biographies of Napoleon, and the reviewer, at least, was much appreciative of the manner in which such passages broke up the flow of the military, political and diplomatic narrative, a narrative, meanwhile, that Dwyer does not allow to become bogged down in regurgitations of episodes – above all, the battles – whose details are readily available elsewhere.

To borrow an analogy from the grande armée, works such as those of Broers and Dwyer may be seen as hard-hitting élite forces such as the famed cuirassiers. However, the presence of such troops in a line of battle does not obviate the need for other types of unit, such as, for example, the no less élite but far more nimble voltigeurs. We come here to Alan Forrest’s Napoleon, this being the latest, but by no means the least, in the long series of single-volume biographies of the emperor that may be traced back to Waterloo and even before. To compare works of this sort with the massive tomes that have thus far formed the subject of this review seems scarcely fair, and it is perfectly obvious that Forrest cannot possibly hope to offer the same weight of information as his competitors. Nevertheless, while one might have hoped to see a cleaner bill of health in terms of errors – the Allied army that fought at Valmy in 1792 was Austro-Prussian rather than Anglo-Prussian whilst the Spaniards never captured Perpignan in 1792 – his work is strong on analysis, and an excellent place to start for anyone wanting a basic introduction to the subject; more than that, indeed, it stands head and shoulders above many of the recent alternatives. Thus, there is real insight here. In so far as
this is concerned, it is not just that the much recounted story of Napoleon is given the occasional new twist – a good example is Forrest’s decision, first, to divest the young Bonaparte of the ‘Jacobin’ tag that has hitherto often been attached to him, and, second, to argue that his political ‘frenchiefication’ dated from as early as 1790 rather than being the product of his expulsion from Corsica in 1793. Also important is Forrest’s vocalization of the important point that le grand empire, and, before that, the reforms associated with the Consulate, were very far from being the work of Napoleon alone, but were rather the responsibility of a whole generation of statesmen, officials, army officers and men of letters from whom Napoleon himself sprang and without whom he would have been if not helpless, than at the very least much weakened.

This qualification, of course, is vital. Forrest never denies the French ruler’s genius – on the contrary, he explicitly admits to it – but the result is inevitably a Napoleon who is slightly de-heroicised in that his success is tied firmly to a particular moment in time that uniquely favoured what he was about. But what was he about? In so far as this is concerned, Forrest deludes neither himself nor his readers: his account of the so-called ‘great reforms’ is tempered by the explicit admission that ‘the First Consul might speak the language of a republican, but … frequently betrayed the instincts of a dictator, silencing opponents and concentrating power on the small group of men he felt he could trust’, and further, that ‘if the Consulate was a period marked by important measures of judicial, educational and religious reform, it also … drastically eroded the civil liberties that had been granted in 1789 by the national assembly’; meanwhile, from the very beginning we see a Napoleon motivated by ambition, even addicted to self-aggrandisement. Yet, as Forrest points out, there really was much to admire in the France that emerged from Brumaire, whilst, as far as ambition was concerned, in this the young Corsican was hardly alone, the desire for personal advancement in any case being a force that could hardly have been absent given the manner in which the Revolution had broken the chains that had hitherto bound up French society. At the same time, he continues, Napoleon was never just about personal ambition. Thus, if he rallied to the Revolution, it was not just because of opportunism, but also because of a sincere attraction to its ethos and values; if he established the Cisalpine Republic, it was not just to provide himself with a petty principality, but also to extend the benefits of 1789 to Italy; and, if he invaded Egypt, it was not just because he desired fresh laurels, but also because he was genuinely fascinated by the wonders of its past.

Like Broers, then, Forrest is very keen to find positive things to say about Napoleon, and in doing so he writes very well, indeed, even persuasively. However, his cause is one that can only be advanced so far, and even then is open to serious challenge. Once again a touchstone here is the invasion of Egypt. For Forrest, this was rather more the fruit of issues of military strategy than is the case with Broers, but that is really by-the-by: whether the prime objective was economic or colonial matters very little when the fact is that there was never the slightest hope that France could establish a long-term foothold on the Nile, this being something that Forrest singularly fails to address. As for the idea that somehow the invaders ‘built up solid working relations with local people and laid the foundations of a French colony in Egypt’, this is really an apologium too far: in Cairo as in every other city that they occupied, the French found ready collaborators – in this instance, mostly Greeks and Coptic Christians – but the keynote of French rule was never anything other than violence, whilst it is a little disturbing to see Forrest praise Napoleon as ‘an innovator and pioneer in colonial government’: so he was, perhaps, but this is scarcely a label that automatically amounts to a badge of honour.

If Forrest comes to grief with respect to Egypt, still more is this the case with regard to the wars Napoleon waged in Europe after 1803. Thus the author of the current review is specifically mentioned as being amongst those historians who are inclined ‘to discount [Napoleon’s] periodic attempts at diplomacy and attribute all the blame for the wars to him and him alone’ (p. 175). In fact, this is something of an exaggeration – I have actually repeatedly said that, happy thought though this might be, even had Napoleon been killed at, say, the bridge of Lodi, the last years of the 18th century and, very possibly, the first years of the one that followed, would have almost certainly been a period of great blood letting – but let as us accept that in Britain in particular a ‘black legend’ of Napoleon as nothing but a warlord and conqueror has indeed survived. What, however, does Forrest oppose to this view? In brief, an argument straight out of the Napoleonic legend. Thus: ‘Certainly, Napoleon … made no secret of his expansionist ambitions … But war
was for him a means to an end rather than an end in itself. His ambition was to create a Europe united under French hegemony, liberated from feudalism and absolutism by his armies … Napoleon had not forgotten the lessons of the Enlightenment, nor turned his back on the humanism of the Revolution’ (p. 176). Forrest is a dear friend of the current author, a scholar whom he deeply respects and admires, and a valued counsellor who has supported him through thick and thin for the entire length of his career to whom he will ever owe a very deep debt of gratitude, but this, again, is a claim too far. Even if one can accept the notion of a Napoleon fighting in the interests of the oppressed masses of Europe (or, rather, perhaps, those of the same ‘masses of granite’ that backed his rule in France), short of the utter elimination of Britain, Austria, Russia and Prussia alike, such a programme could not but mean eternal war. Moreover, as Forrest himself accepts, the attempt to defeat Britain – in Napoleon’s eyes ever the real motor of the opposition which he faced – by economic means that came to represent the chief pillar of his strategy was itself likely to produce the very same end: ‘In retrospect, the Continental System must be seen as a strategic error, a measure that ran counter to the interests of local communities, that aroused resistance, and that led to further measures of police repression across Europe. It was a crudely exploitative system that served to bully and alienate Napoleon’s allies, and it failed in its main objective of bringing Britain to her knees’ (pp. 193–4) Quite simply, the position is indefensible, and it is difficult to understand why Forrest has felt the need to maintain it.

In fairness, Forrest’s book does not completely follow this line. We hear, for example, that ‘the needs of war were paramount in Napoleonic France’, that ‘the institutions that were put in place … ceased, as John Davis has noted in the case of Italy, to offer any true reflection of the “egalitarian aspirations of the Revolution”, and that ‘imperial policy [became] prey to over-arching ambition and to Napoleon’s own rash and opportunistic decision taking’. (pp. 195–9 passim). Elsewhere, meanwhile, Forrest becomes downright brutal. For example, ‘Napoleon was deaf to those of his ministers who counselled caution, who shrank from squandering yet more blood on the battlefield in a cause which they deemed already lost. And he had spilt plenty … With every campaign the carnage grew worse … Not without reason was Napoleon accused by his enemies of being a cruel and heartless butcher, prepared to condemn thousands to die in pursuit of glory’ (pp. 287–8). However, in the end, it is not such passages that set the tone. On the contrary, this reader, at least, cannot but feel that what he is witnessing is some sort of gallant last stand, the parallel that comes to mind, of course, being the campaign of 1814: like Forrest’s book, this was a tour de force in terms of tactical brilliance, and yet, however many battles Napoleon won, victory was simply not within his grasp. That being the case, it is very fitting that we should now move to a study of the dramatic events of 1813–14. In the wake of the retreat from Moscow, the emperor was still master of all he surveyed: the loss of the grande armée in Russia, the occupation of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw and the decision of Prussia to join the victorious Alexander I notwithstanding, France, Holland and Italy remained quiescent, whilst, with the exception of tiny and highly vulnerable Mecklenburg, not a single one of the German states responded to the efforts made by the Allies to get them to change sides. Yet, scarcely a year later, Paris was under foreign occupation, the empire a mere memory and Napoleon himself on his way into exile in Elba. All this makes for an exciting story and it is one to which Munro Price has devoted himself with consummate skill. Thus, as its title suggests, Napoleon: the End of Glory is a detailed study of both the diplomacy and the military campaigns that saw the emperor move from early success at the battles of Lützen and Bautzen to utter humiliation at Fontainebleau.

In tackling this subject, Price, who writes with a fluency and accessibility that is wholly admirable, immediately confronts one of the most tenacious aspects of the Napoleonic legend. Thus, down to the present day, there are those – good examples are David Hamilton-Williams and Michel Franceschi – who would insist that to the very moment of his abdication Napoleon had the support of the French people, and that in consequence his overthrow was to be ascribed to a combination of the determination of the Allies to restore the ancien régime at all costs and the treason of a number of prominent statesmen and generals, including, most notably, Talleyrand, Marmont and Augereau. Only slightly more nuanced, meanwhile, are those who follow in the footsteps of the late 19th-century French historian, Henri Houssaye, who accepted that popular disaffection had become widespread by the beginning of 1814, but claimed that the ferocious behaviour engaged in by some of the Prussian and Russian troops who were by then pouring into north-
eastern France in effect stabilised the situation and enabled the emperor to put up a desperate last-ditch stand that might well have succeeded had Talleyrand and the senior ranks of the army turned their backs on their master in a collective dash to save their own skins. For a recent example, one might here cite Ralph Ashby, whose *Napoleon against Great Odds* (5) not only recapitulates whole swathes of Houssaye’s material, but also seeks to prove that accounts of draft evasion and desertion are wildly exaggerated.

Needless to say, such arguments have not been allowed to go unchallenged: in *Napoleon’s Wars* I argued strenuously that to the very end Napoleon was offered numerous chances of a compromise peace that would have kept him on the throne of a France that would have been greater in extent than the one of 1789, and, further, that the Allied invasion prompted not defiance but disintegration as the populace, the notables and, finally (note the word), the marshals abandoned a ruler who was clearly concerned only with the perpetuation of his personal dictatorship at all costs. Elsewhere, meanwhile, in *Napoleon, 1814: the Defence of France* (6) Andrew Uffindell has seriously challenged the notion that the Allies were confronted with substantial guerrilla resistance as they advanced on Paris in the course of the campaign of 1814. However, plausible though the arguments presented in these works were, to make them stick what was needed was a monograph founded on a more extensive programme of research in the French archives than was possible for either of the authors concerned, it being precisely this sort of study that Price has now so successfully brought to fruition. Thus, basing his work on the reports that were regularly submitted to the imperial government by the prefects and the Ministry of Police, Price shows unequivocally that all talk of popular support for Napoleon in 1814 is based on little more than wishful thinking. Active support for the Bourbons, true, was far from widespread, but trust in the emperor had been shattered, while there was little desire to fight for him. This does not mean, of course, that all the elements in the traditional story can be thrown aside – at the very end Talleyrand and a number of the emperor’s senior commanders did, indeed, decide to bring him down – but Price shows quite clearly that this was not the treason condemned by the Napoleonists: on the contrary, from as early as the summer of 1813 many of the figures concerned had been urging Napoleon to make peace, and they only took the law into their own hands once it had become clear that Napoleon had lost all grip on reality.

So much, then, for the French side of the situation, though one cannot but feel that Price might have gone further here, one source that is completely ignored is the numerous French folk songs such as the *Conscrit de 1810* that lamented Napoleon and his wars, and another the numerous British accounts that can be drawn upon to paint a picture of French public opinion in 1814 (one thinks here not just of the extensive material generated by the soldiers of Wellington’s army, but also the various memoirs written by men who found themselves caught up in the invasion either as prisoners of war or as civilian internees). What, though, of the Allies? Here Price is even more decisive. In brief, having successfully located a considerable amount of material that has never been exploited by those who have written on the international history of the period, he shows beyond all doubt that peace (and, not just peace, but survival) really was on offer had Napoleon but stretched out his hand to take the numerous olive branches held out to him. This, however, throws up the question of why the emperor proved so obdurate. In so far as this is concerned, Price is very much at his most interesting. Hitherto the current author and others have seen this matter solely in terms of a determination to hang on to power at all costs, but Price examines Napoleon’s motivation in more detail and concludes that at the heart of all the bombast respecting his determination to secure peace with honour was the very terror that any retreat from the geographical gains of the Revolution - in other words, the so-called ‘natural frontiers’ was the very real fear that the result of a peace that thrust France back to the frontiers of 1789 would precipitate not just popular unrest but a fresh storming of the Tuileries that would lead to his butchery at the hands of a mob. Such fears have, of course, been noted before, but they have generally been dismissed as mere pretexts whereas Price demonstrates that they were in reality ever present in the mind of the French ruler. Yet to say this is in effect to lead the debate back to familiar channels in that what comes to the fore is growing self-delusion: so desperate was France for peace in 1814 that it is no more possible to see where the unrest which Napoleon so greatly feared would have come from than it is to imagine a scenario in which his armies could have triumphed in the field.

In all this, however, there is a theme that is worth picking up and taking further. As the Allies poured into
France in 1814, so support for Napoleon collapsed. However, to this tendency there was one exception. The behaviour of the marshals notwithstanding, at a lower level the emperor’s diminishing band of officers, NCO’s and common soldiers defended his cause with a loyalty and heroism worthy of a better master. There was even then much desertion, certainly, but the resilience shown by Napoleon’s outnumbered troops as they stood off Wellington in southwestern France – neither Orthez nor Toulouse were easy victories – and endlessly tramped from one battle to the next is little short of extraordinary. What is more the death-wish seems to have been catching: one can understand grizzled veterans of the Old Guard fighting to the death, but how can one explain the desperate gallantry exhibited by General Pacthod’s two divisions of recently mobilised National Guards at the battle of La Fere-Champenoise? It cannot but be felt, then, that we are in the presence of a phenomenon that has few parallels in military history. In brief, where did such courage and devotion come from, and of what did it consist? In so far as these issues are concerned, an excellent starting point is constituted by the last work to be considered by this essay, namely Michael Hughes’ *Forging Napoleon’s Grande Armée*. Centred on the Consulate and the Austerlitz-Friedland period, this looks at the emergence of a powerful military culture that not only inculcated a deep-rooted loyalty to Napoleon, but also appealed to an equally deep-rooted sense of masculinity and held up an idealised picture of manhood to which young soldiers could not but feel a strong desire to conform.

In short, what we see in the French army is a particularly powerful system of so-called ‘normative compliance’ that built on foundations that had already been laid down in the course of the French Revolution (one thinks here of John Lynn’s concept of the forces of the Republic as an ‘army of virtue’ motivated above all by a selfless desire to defend Revolution, Republic and Fatherland alike). As Hughes observes, this development – one, be it said, that involved a real sea-change in the norms involved, Lynn’s ‘army of virtue’ rather becoming an ‘army of honour’ – did not exclude other systems of compliance: though the savage floggings associated with the *ancien régime* were now a thing of the past, soldiers who deserted or committed other crimes could still be executed, whilst those who distinguished themselves in battle could hope for promotion or, even better perhaps, a transfer to the relatively cushy billet represented by the Imperial Guard. Yet the existence of these alternative forms of compliance was no disadvantage, the fact being that they coalesced with the appeal to loyalty and masculinity to keep the army loyal even when it became ever more apparent that Napoleon was waging a series of aggressive wars which simply rendered peace ever more distant. What is more, while conscription may have been hated, it is abundantly clear that once the young men of France had actually been installed at their campfires it was powerful enough to socialise them very quickly and thereby integrate them into their new lives. Impeccably researched as it is, *Forging Napoleon’s Grande Armée* is therefore an important study that is a must for every bookshelf.

Where, then, are we? Quite clearly, while there are historians, the current author and, to a lesser extent, perhaps, Phillip Dwyer, included, who have no truck with the Napoleonic legend and regard Napoleon as, above all, a warlord, there are others who, moved by an instinctive sympathy for the Revolution and dislike of the *ancien régime*, not to mention a respect for the emperor’s reforms, see him in a much more positive light. Between these two camps, meanwhile, there is in the end no middle ground, the historical profession never having succeeded in escaping the dialogue of the deaf so neatly analysed by Pieter Geyl: some 70 years on from the time at which Geyl was writing, the syndrome that reigns is very much that of ‘Napoleon for and against’. The three biographies that we see here clearly are no exception, and, however much Broers, Dwyer and Forrest alike adopt stances that are models of urbanity and moderation, it is difficult to see how such works in the end do much to advance the subject, what the reader gets being rather the more-or-less clever restatement of positions and arguments that have in reality been rehearsed over and over again for the past 200 years. With Price being locked into the same problem, albeit in the context of a much narrower canvas, the cream of the crop is necessarily represented by Hughes’ *Forging Napoleon’s Grande Armée*. Though not without its faults, this is an example of a sort of monograph of which we need a lot more of in respect of Napoleonic France and its institutions. At some time or other every specialist in the period needs to conjure up his or her Napoleon, but let it not be forgotten that biographies are no substitute: 200 years on the amount of work that remains to be done remains considerable.
Notes

5. Ralph Ashby, *Napoleon against Great Odds* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2010). Back to (5)

Professor Hughes is grateful for the reviewer's comments about his book, and declines to respond further.

Other reviews:

Financial Times

History Today

Scottish Herald

Daily Mail

Spectator
http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/9097952/citizen-emperor-by-philip-dwyer-review/ [10]

Times
http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/books/non-fiction/article3956934.ece [11]

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