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Napoleon's Opportunism in War and Politics

Bachelor's thesis in History - Bachelor's Programme

Supervisor: David Bregaint

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Napoleon's Opportunism in War and Politics

Introduction

«What a novel my life has been!»¹ Napoleon said those words while on exile on Saint Helena. He was right. His life does make for a very compelling story, and it's all the better because it really happened. Napoleon is arguably one of history's most brilliant military and political leaders. He was the last historical figure in western history to combine political power with a personal presence on the battlefield, like the kings of medieval Europe, or Napoleon's heroes from classical antiquity, Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great. He made himself emperor of the most powerful state in Europe only a couple of years after arriving in the country as a political refugee. During and after his rise to power in France, he fought many victorious campaigns, and carved out a vast empire for himself. Under his reign, French dominion stretched from the Iberian Peninsula to the Russian border.

Napoleon's genius did not only extend to the military sphere. He succeeded in clawing himself to the top of the French military hierarchy. He successfully launched a military coup and rewrote the French constitution. He managed to get the consent of the French people to crown himself emperor only a decade after France decapitated its king. His Napoleonic law code still forms the basis of the law codes of many nations today. He kept the French people on his side, and managed to keep his throne until he was forcefully thrown off it by invading powers. Twice.

Napoleon owes his great achievements to a long list of factors. Among the most important are Napoleon's adaptability and opportunism in both the realms of politics and warfare, as well as his skills as a propagandist. It is these factors that this thesis will focus on. This thesis will focus on the Battle of Austerlitz, and how it demonstrates both Napoleon's opportunism and adaptability as a military commander, as well as how the propaganda surrounding the battle shows Napoleon's adaptability in how he presents himself. It will also focus on how Napoleon used religion as a tool for political control, and how he was able to present his religious views in very different ways to different people.

Napoleon successfully presented himself as a divinely appointed monarch who wielded absolute power over the French state in the name of God when was at the height of his

¹ Roberts, 2014, p. 790

power.² Later he successfully presented himself as a constitutional monarch only interested in protecting the rights of Frenchmen when he returned from Elba.³ Napoleon's escape from Elba perfectly demonstrates the abilities that were so important in handing him his victories in the first place. It is a testament to his opportunism and adaptability that he took his chance at retaking his throne, rather than sit in relative comfort and ignominy on Elba, the fact that the French army rallied around him is testament to his ability to inspire his men, and the fact that the French people rallied to his support and volunteered in large numbers to fight for him is testament to his abilities as a political propagandist.⁴

He somewhat successfully presented himself as a Muslim to woo the Muslim masses of Egypt during his campaign there, yet he was a devout catholic when campaigning in Italy, and a secular ruler in the fashion of the enlightenment when he ruled in France. Napoleon's personal qualities were instrumental in his military victories in Italy and Egypt, his rise to the consulship and then the imperial throne of France, and his empire's conquests across Europe. Napoleon owed his success to his abilities. His ability to adapt his approach based on the problem at hand was extraordinary, both in military and political life. Napoleon was whatever he needed to be when he needed to be it.

Earlier Research

The volume of published writing concerning Napoleon is huge. More books have been written with his name in the title than there have been days since he died. This includes several thousand biographies that cover his entire life. Most of these were based on a selection of Napoleon's correspondence, which was published for propagandistic purposes during the reign of Napoleon III. Only recently has this begun to change, with the publishing of much more of Napoleon's correspondence by the *Foundation Napoleon*.⁵⁶ The subject of Napoleon is so vast that anyone who writes about it must rely on the work of others. This thesis is no exception.

Writing accurately and truthfully about Napoleon is made more challenging by the fact that the man frequently and consistently lied about his own life to make himself seem more impressive. For this reason, Napoleon's personal memoirs are to be read with a great deal of

² Holtman, 1949, 3

³ Roberts, 2014, p. 741

⁴ Roberts, 2014, p. 740

⁵ Roberts, 2014, p. XXVIII

⁶ Zamoyski, 2018, p. XXII

skepticism. This also goes for a lot of early biographies of him. Many people who knew Napoleon personally wrote untruthful or misleading biographies of the man, either out of personal grievances with him, or because they wanted to ingratiate themselves with the Bourbon regime that took over after Napoleon's Abdication and exile.⁷

Philip Dwyer has written about the subject of Napoleon as a propagandist.⁸ He has written a biography of the man, with a focus on his propaganda. Dwyer's article "*Napoleon Bonaparte as Hero and Saviour*" has been used as a source for this thesis, as Dwyer's focus on Napoleon's propaganda is relevant to the topic.

Napoleon's legacy is quite fiercely debated in modern historiography, and it has been at least since the Second World War. Napoleon is, both naturally and rather unfairly, often compared with Hitler.⁹ Debates surrounding Napoleon are often based around two main issues. The first is about Napoleon as a man. Was he a ruthless dictator, a proto-Hitler, or was he an enlightened leader and a champion of progress? Andrew Roberts has championed the second of these two perspectives quite heavily, while it is probably more common among historians to take the view that he was a tyrant.¹⁰

The second issue is about Napoleon's qualities as a leader, both in politics and war. His critics, Adam Zamoyski among them, argue that Napoleon's military successes are not as important as his defeats.¹¹ It is telling that Napoleon's two best known military endeavors, The retreat from Russia and the Battle of Waterloo, were both catastrophic losses. Napoleon's critics highlight that Napoleon's victories are not unique to him. France was the strongest military power in Europe long before Napoleon became the country's leader. Napoleon's failures, however, can be argued to be uniquely his own, as such misadventures as the invasion of Russia most likely never would have happen without his involvement. Napoleon's proponents, however, highlight that Napoleon rarely fought a battle he didn't win. Many of his political and military reforms were vital in making France into the state that it would become under him. His defeats, such as his ill-fated invasion of Russia, were made because of understandable reasons, and had he gotten a little luckier, Napoleon might have emerged victorious from those misadventures too.

⁷ Roberts, 2014, p. XXVIII

⁸ Zamoyski, 2018, p. XXIII

⁹ Roberts, 2014, p. XXXIV

¹⁰ Roberts, 2014, p. XXXVIII

¹¹ Zamoyski, 2018, p. XIX

This thesis remains neutral on whether Napoleon was an enlightened despot or a petty tyrant. On the second of the two issues, however, it firmly takes the side that Napoleon was an exceptional man, and that history would look very different without him.

Sources and Method:

For general information about Napoleon's life and career, I have relied upon two biographies. "Napoleon: A Life, by Andrew Roberts" and "Napoleon: The Man Behind the Myth" by Adam Zamoyski. The biographies take slightly different views of Napoleon, his life, and his qualities as a person. Roberts, on the whole, is a lot more positive towards Napoleon than Zamoyski is, however they are both based on a long list of primary sources. The conflicting views of the author's ought hopefully to limit the effect of each author's bias on this thesis.

Roberts portrays Napoleon as a military genius and a reformer whose influence on the world is still felt positively today. He summarizes his opinion of Napoleon well when he states that "The ideas that underpin our modern world—meritocracy, equality before the law, property rights, religious toleration, modern secular education, sound finances and so on—were championed, consolidated, codified and geographically extended by Napoleon." He also defends Napoleon from charges of waging aggressive war, stating that war was declared on him more often than he declared it on others.¹² Roberts does acknowledge Napoleon's faults, but he tends not to focus on them.

Zamoyski's stance on Napoleon is far more critical. On the first page of the preface of his biography he states that "I find it difficult to credit genius to someone who, for all his many triumphs, presided over the worst (and entirely self-inflicted) disaster in military history. (...) He was undoubtedly a brilliant tactician, as one would expect of a clever operator from a small-town background. But he was no strategist, as his miserable end attests."¹³ The tones for both biographies are set early. Their portrayals of Napoleon stay constant throughout the books. Roberts remains more positive, and Zamoyski more negative.

There are other differences between the biographies. Zamoyski places more emphasis on Napoleon's personal life than Roberts, while Roberts dives deeper into Napoleon's personal correspondence. However, the most important difference to note remains their differing views of the man himself.

¹² Roberts, 2014, p. XXVIII

¹³ Zamoyski, 2018, p. XIX

Napoleon's bulletins will be an important source for this thesis. The bulletins were issued while Napoleon was on campaign. He created several newspapers throughout his reign to spread information about his various military endeavors. These papers would publish bulletins written by Napoleon or by someone close to him and present his side of affairs in ongoing wars. The purpose of the bulletins was to control the narrative around the emperor. They were widely distributed through a long list of ways. They were published in the state newspaper, The *Moniteur*, and then republished in the non-state newspapers that were not censored by the state.¹⁴ After the Concordat in 1801, Napoleon even had priests read the bulletins aloud during religious services.¹⁵ Broadly speaking the bulletins were Napoleon's most widely spread tool for propaganda. Therefore, they are important in any discussion of how Napoleon portrayed himself to his subjects.

The paintings I have chosen to use were all commissioned by the French state, and Napoleon himself had influence over how the paintings were made, what they depicted, and how he was presented in them. They were made following a decree of March 1806 in which Napoleon commissioned these paintings and quite a few more, all depicting the events of the 1805 campaign, culminating in the battle of Austerlitz. The reason why I have chosen to focus exclusively on these three paintings is that they are the only paintings which exclusively focus on the battle of Austerlitz. The others depict other events during the 1805 campaign, which would be outside the scope of this thesis.¹⁶ The subjects of the paintings were specifically chosen to align with what was written in the post-battle bulletin. The intended effect was that the bulletins would reinforce the message of the paintings and make them seem more credible, and vice versa.¹⁷

Both the bulletins and commissioned paintings were based on actual events. Most French people of the time would have personally known soldiers fighting at the front. If the contents of Napoleon's bulletins or paintings were completely pulled out of thin air, people would have noticed. However, both Napoleon's bulletins and commissioned artwork depicted him in an idealized light. The bulletins and paintings clearly had propaganda value for the Napoleonic regime. Otherwise, they would have never been commissioned and published in the first place. They are thus perfect subjects for a discussion of Napoleon as a propagandist.

¹⁴ Denis, 2022, 25

¹⁵ Holtman, 1949, 18

¹⁶ Denis, 2022, 23

¹⁷ Denis, 2022, 24

A lot of the source material was originally written in French. This, of course, includes the bulletin I have used. In most cases the sources I have used have been translated into English by others. This is the case for every quote I have cited, as well as Napoleon's speech to the troops after the Battle of Austerlitz. In two instances I have used French sources directly. These are the bulletin, as well as *Représenter Austerlitz : le système icono-textuel napoléonien* by Denis. In these instances, the text was translated into English before they were used.

Several articles have been used in the thesis. Dwyer's *Napoleon Bonaparte as Hero and Saviour* covers the early years of Napoleonic propaganda, and how it was used to create a myth of Napoleon as a hero and a savior.¹⁸ It has been used to establish the importance of some of Napoleon's early battles when it comes to creating his image. *Napoleon and the Church* by Rayapen and Anderson covers how Napoleon attempted to reconcile the church and the state¹⁹, and it has been used for the same purpose in this thesis. It was also used to explain the background religion in before Napoleon. *The Catholic Church in Napoleon's Propaganda Organization*, by Holtman was used regarding Napoleon's utilization of the church for political ends. Denis' article, *Représenter Austerlitz : le système icono-textuel napoléonien*, discusses how Napoleon's propaganda efforts around the Battle of Austerlitz led to the battle becoming a political symbol of the Napoleonic regime.²⁰ It is used as a source for information regarding Napoleon's propaganda surrounding the battle, particularly when it comes to the paintings that this thesis discusses, as well as a source for some general information about the battle.

Structure:

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first will recount the broad outlines of Napoleon's life, to provide context. Chapter 2 will give a quick summary of the Battle of Austerlitz, it's preceding days and the outcome of the battle. Then the bulletin and Napoleon's commissioned paintings depicting the battle will be discussed to show how Napoleon manipulated public perception of himself for political gain. In chapter 3, Napoleon's religious faith or lack thereof will be explained, followed by demonstrating how Napoleon used religion for propagandistic purposes.

¹⁸ Dwyer, 2004, p. 379

¹⁹ Rayapen & Anderson, 1991, 117

²⁰ Denis, 2022, 23

Chapter 1: The Life of Napoleon

Napoleon didn't start the French revolution. In fact, when it kicked off, he was too occupied with the fallout of one of his father's failed business ventures to take much note.²¹ He was arguably, however, the man that ended it. He led the French armies to victory after victory, and a few disastrous defeats, made himself emperor in a nation that had cut off the head of their own monarch a decade earlier, and changed the political landscape of Europe completely.

Napoleon Bonaparte was born on the 15th of August, 1769 in Ajaccio, one of the largest towns on the island of Corsica.²² His family was one of the richer ones on the island, but they were far from rich by the standard of the French nobility.²³ At the time of his birth, his family were active in the resistance movement against the French. However, the Bonapartes eagerly welcomed the new French regime with open arms once it took control of the island.

Napoleon's father was a prodigious social climber, and he had, by 1777, managed to become Corsica's representative to the court of Louis XVI²⁴, a position he used to get Napoleon his position at the military academy of Brienne-le-Château.²⁵

Napoleon showed an early aptitude for mathematics, which gave him the opportunity of having a career in the artillery.²⁶ His French, however, remained poor his entire life.²⁷

Napoleon's early activities during the revolution are too complicated to be covered here. One important thing to note, however, is that Napoleon threw his lot in with the radical left.

Napoleon wrote a Jacobin political pamphlet in 1793, which endeared him to Augustin Robespierre, the brother of revolutionary leader and dictator Maximilien Robespierre, as well as to the politician Antoine Christophe Saliceti.²⁸ These political connections gave Napoleon his first proper military commission. He was to lead the artillery at Toulon.²⁹ He was instrumental in the city's reconquest.³⁰

²¹ Roberts, 2014, p. 27

²² Roberts, 2014, p. 3

²³ Roberts, 2014, p. 4

²⁴ Roberts, 2014, p. 5

²⁵ Roberts, 2014, p. 9

²⁶ Roberts, 2014, p. 16

²⁷ Roberts, 2014, p. 19

²⁸ Roberts, 2014, p. 46

²⁹ Roberts, 2014, p. 47

³⁰ Roberts, 2014, p. 51

A coup which toppled Robespierre's government occurred in late July 1794. Had Napoleon been in Paris during the coup, he likely would have been executed as well.³¹ The French government was restructured, with the Committee of Public Safety, which had served as the de-facto government of France during the early stages of the republic, being replaced by a body called the Directory. After saving the Directory from rebellion in 1795, Napoleon was placed in charge of the army of Italy.³² After crossing the alps, he set about waging war on the Austrians and Italians. He fought several battles of note in northern Italy. Among them were Lodi and Arcole, which later took on a great deal of importance in the myth of Napoleon.³³ Napoleon's campaign in Italy can safely be described as a work of genius. He took an undermanned, understaffed, underequipped, underpaid, and inexperienced army across the alps, and used it to conquer large new territories for the French republic.³⁴ On the 17th of October 1797, after lengthy negotiations, Napoleon signed the Treaty of Campo Formio, thus ending the War of the First Coalition.³⁵

The next chapter in the Napoleonic story takes place in Egypt. It was Napoleon who favored an Egyptian expedition. The Directory did eventually approve the expedition, partly to get Napoleon, who was becoming a growing political threat, out of Paris, so that he couldn't get up to any mischief.³⁶ Napoleon's campaign in Egypt achieved little more than getting a lot of French soldiers killed in the desert. The French sorely needed soldiers by then. The War of the Second Coalition had broken out, and France was in the process of losing all the gains Napoleon had made in Campo Formio.³⁷

The siege of Acre was a low point in Napoleon's career. The two-month siege ended on the 20th of May 1799, after which Napoleon returned to Cairo.³⁸ From there he made his way back to France where he was greeted, rather unfairly, as a conquering hero.³⁹ This is testament to his abilities as a political propagandist. Napoleon did have legitimate reasons to leave his army in Egypt and head home, however it's not overly cynical to point out how it does look a lot like he ran away.⁴⁰

³¹ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 79

³² Roberts, 2014, p. 71

³³ Dwyer, 2004, p. 381

³⁴ Roberts, 2014, p. 76

³⁵ Roberts, 2014, p. 150

³⁶ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 174

³⁷ Roberts, 2014, p. 201

³⁸ Roberts, 2014, p. 197

³⁹ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 209

⁴⁰ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 205

Well back in France, Napoleon resumed his political maneuvering. France had suffered a series of military defeats during his absence in the east, and Napoleon judged that the time was right if he was to take power for himself. Napoleon launched a military coup on the 9th of November 1799, with the help of other conspirators who he later sidelined. The coup had a rather shambolic character. Napoleon seemed to give in to nerves at several points⁴¹, However when the dust settled, Napoleon was proclaimed First Consul of the French Republic. He was now the leader of France.

When Napoleon finally felt safe that he wouldn't be immediately overthrown the moment he left France, he headed out to reverse France's recent defeats in the field. One of Napoleon's closes calls came at the battle of Marengo on June 14th, 1800. He was only saved from defeat by the unexpected arrival of reinforcements.⁴² Napoleon's victory at Marengo effectively ended the War of the Second Coalition. Peace was again negotiated, this time including Britain, and the Treaty of Amiens was finally signed on 25th March 1802.⁴³

On the 2nd of December 1804, Napoleon crowned himself emperor of the French.⁴⁴

Napoleon's coronation is a fascinating and important moment in his career. It was deliberately designed to be a spectacle. The clothes which were worn, the decorations, the paintings that were commissioned, and almost everything else about the coronation was meant to send a specific political message.⁴⁵

On the one-year anniversary of his coronation, Napoleon had what might be the crowning moment of his career. The War of the Third Coalition had broken out in early 1805.⁴⁶ The battle of Austerlitz on the 2nd of December 1805 effectively ended the war.⁴⁷ The French, despite being outnumbered, had killed, wounded, or captured about a third of the coalition army, and opened the road to Vienna. Napoleon himself regarded it as "the finest" of all the battles he had fought until that time.⁴⁸

In 1806, the war of the fourth coalition broke out. After decisive beating the Prussians at Jena and Auerstedt, and the Russians at Eylau and later Friedland, Napoleon had once again

⁴¹ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 231

⁴² Roberts, 2014, p. 266

⁴³ Roberts, 2014, p. 307

⁴⁴ Roberts, 2014, p. 357

⁴⁵ Roberts, 2014, p. 355

⁴⁶ Roberts, 2014, p. 358

⁴⁷ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 385

⁴⁸ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 383

defeated a coalition raised against him. Peace was declared at Tilsit on 7th July 1807.⁴⁹ After Tilsit, Napoleon made one of the biggest mistakes of his life. The Portuguese were Britain's last ally on the continent. As a means of pressuring Britain, Napoleon invaded Portugal in 1807.⁵⁰ The French got permission from the Spanish to march their armies through Spain to attack Portugal, but once the French were in Spain, they overthrew the Spanish monarchy, and replaced the king with one of Napoleon's brothers.⁵¹ This ended up being a major miscalculation by Napoleon. The Spanish effectively engaged in a years-long guerilla war against the French occupiers.⁵² Spain would never be fully pacified before the fall of the French empire.

Austria declared war on April 3rd, 1809.⁵³ Several clashes followed, and the war was settled at the battle of Wagram in early July the same year. The battle was a costly and indecisive victory for Napoleon; however, it did convince the Austrians to sue for peace.⁵⁴

Except for the continuing war with Britain, France was again at peace. As French armies had dominated the European mainland, Britain hid safely behind the English Channel. Napoleon's strategy for dealing with Britain was called "the continental system". Its purpose was to strangle the British economy through cutting off trade with continental Europe. According to plan, Britain had to eventually give in and sue for peace if they wanted to trade with the European mainland.⁵⁵ The blockade had always been very leaky. The invasion of Portugal had originally been an attempt to plug one such leak. When Russia more or openly defied the continental system, Napoleon made the fateful decision to go to war.⁵⁶ The French armies crossed into Russia in June 1812.⁵⁷

Napoleon's invasion of Russia has become legendary in military history for its disastrous character. I will not recount it in detail here, but Napoleon was driven out of Russia, through Germany and back into France where he capitulated to the coalition and went into exile. He returned briefly to make a bid for his throne once again, but after his defeat at Waterloo, he

⁴⁹ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 416

⁵⁰ Roberts, 2014, p. 473

⁵¹ Roberts, 2014, p. 480

⁵² Roberts, 2014, p. 496

⁵³ Roberts, 2014, p. 502

⁵⁴ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 456

⁵⁵ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 405

⁵⁶ Roberts, 2014, p. 556

⁵⁷ Roberts, 2014, p. 576

was once again sent into exile. This time permanently. Thus ended the military and political career of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Chapter 2: The Myth of Austerlitz

Introduction: The Myth of Austerlitz

Napoleon is one of history's most celebrated military leaders. He was also one of history's truly great political manipulators and propagandists. He had an impressive ability to manipulate his public image to suit his needs, be they political, military or otherwise. This talent for manipulation and self-advertisement is evident during the Battle of Austerlitz, and in Napoleon's propaganda regarding the battle. The battle itself is arguably Napoleon's greatest triumph. On the anniversary of his coronation, he secured a decisive victory which ended the War of the Third Coalition, reinforced the French position in Europe, and made Napoleon's position on the throne more secure. Napoleon's self-promotion surrounding the battle played no small part in this.

This segment of the thesis aims to discuss Napoleon's ability to adapt his persona according to the prevailing circumstances. Specifically, it will examine the emperor's conduct around the Battle of Austerlitz, as well as his later portrayal of the battle. Through an analysis of Napoleon's bulletins, commissioned paintings and various anecdotes, this section will demonstrate how Napoleon curated his image to consolidate his power, inspire his troops, and craft an aura of invincibility around himself.

Napoleon's strategic dissemination of the details of the battle through bulletins is central to this discussion. Through having a near monopoly on the reports of the battle that reached the French people back home, and through spreading the bulletins as widely as possible, Napoleon insured that it was his account of the battle that became the accepted narrative. The narrative promoted by Napoleon's bulletins, and amplified through his state-controlled media, was that he was a military genius, but also a paternal, caring figure who fostered bonds of loyalty between himself and his army. Moreover, this analysis extends to Napoleon's visual propaganda, such as his commissioned artworks which depicts in contrasting light. In one painting he might be presented as a relatable soldier among his men, and in another he might be presented as a god-like sovereign.

The Battle of Austerlitz

Austerlitz was perhaps Napoleon's greatest victory. Napoleon himself seems to have thought so at the time, or at least that is what he told his wife a few days later.⁵⁸ The battle had taken place on the one-year-anniversary of Napoleon's coronation and had resulted in a decisive victory for the French. The French inflicted 16 000 killed and wounded and took 20 000 captives. Napoleon, of course, hugely exaggerated these numbers, but at the cost of only a little over 8 000 French killed or wounded, it was a clear victory for the French anyway.⁵⁹ So clear, in fact, that the Austrians and Russians quickly came to the negotiation table, as they no longer saw a way to win the war.⁶⁰

It is worth discussing the Battle of Austerlitz in some detail. Like most battles of the Napoleonic wars, the pre-battle maneuvering was perhaps just as important as the fighting on the battlefield itself. Napoleon had made note of the battlefield of Austerlitz a couple of weeks before the battle was fought.⁶¹ According to people present at the time, on the 20th of November 1805, he is supposed to have remarked "Gentlemen, look carefully at this ground! It will be a field of battle! You will all have a party to play on it!"⁶²

The timing of the battle is of interest. First, Napoleon desired a quick victory in the field to bolster faith in his regime at home. There was a financial crisis in France going on at the time.⁶³ Napoleon was worried about its fallout and thought that a quick victory in the field might placate hostility on the home front. Secondly, he feared that if he delayed too long Prussia might enter the war on the opposing side.⁶⁴ Thirdly, the 2nd of December was the one-year-anniversary of Napoleon's coronation.⁶⁵ Napoleon saw the symbolic value of winning a battle on the anniversary. It would be a political statement that Napoleon had earned his crown on the battlefield.

On the days before the battle, Napoleon withdrew his troops from aggressive positions, and instructed other troops to withdraw if pushed by the enemy. It is debatable if he did this because he intended to withdraw⁶⁶ or if he already then was thinking of luring his enemies

⁵⁸ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 383

⁵⁹ Roberts, 2014, p. 390

⁶⁰ Roberts, 2014, p. 391

⁶¹ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 380

⁶² Ségur, 1873, p. 157

⁶³ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 381

⁶⁴ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 381

⁶⁵ Roberts, 2014, p. 353

⁶⁶ Denis, 2022, 25

into a trap. The result mattered little. On the 30th of November he busied himself preparing for battle and observing the terrain.⁶⁷

Napoleon was outnumbered at the Battle of Austerlitz. He had under his command 73,000 men and 139 guns. The Austro-Russian forces were facing him with 86,000 men and 270 guns. Napoleon did not let his preparations go to waste. He took what appeared to be defensive positions and instructed his right wing to fall back if attacked. Napoleon wanted to make the Russians overextended themselves by pushing off the high ground they were occupying, so that their retreat would become more difficult.⁶⁸

When the Russians on his right flank were out of position, Napoleon launched an attack on the allied center. At the same time, he had his left wing outflank his opponents right wing, which widened the gap between the Austro-Russian formations.⁶⁹ The resulting confusion worked greatly to Napoleons advantage; however, the battle was not over until generals Bessieres and Rapp led a cavalry charge, later immortalized in a government commissioned painting, which sent the Russian guard retreating and captured a Russian general. After this the allied army crumbled and fled the field.⁷⁰

As the battle neared its conclusion, segments of the Russian forces were forced to flee across the nearby lakes. Napoleon then ordered his gunners to open fire on the ice. This moment has since become iconic, not least because Napoleon himself played it up later. He, for example, mentioned it in his proclamation to his soldiers on the day after the battle.⁷¹ He also specifically requested that Gerard feature the lakes in the background of his painting, "Battle of Austerlitz, December 2, 1805." Despite the myth of thousands of drowned Russians at the battle of Austerlitz, the truth is probably far humbler. Recent excavations uncovered only a handful of bodies.⁷² Nevertheless, it serves as a great example of Napoleon's opportunism in action.

The combined Austrian and Russian losses reached 16,000 killed in wounded and 20,000 captured. 186 of their guns were lost to the French. French losses were much lower at around 8,300. Only about 1300 of these were fatalities.⁷³ Napoleon stated after the battle that "The

⁶⁷ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 381

⁶⁸ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 382

⁶⁹ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 382

⁷⁰ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 382

⁷¹ Napoleon I, 1805

⁷² Roberts, 2014, p. 289

⁷³ Roberts, 2014, p. 390

Russian army is not merely beaten. It is destroyed."⁷⁴ This was probably an exaggeration. The allies probably still had the capacity to fight on, however they had no will to do so. The War of the Third Coalition ended shortly afterwards⁷⁵.

The bulletin.

The Napoleonic regime commissioned medals⁷⁶ and numerous paintings to commemorate the battle, as well as publishing the usual post-battle bulletin.⁷⁷ Napoleon's bulletins were one of, if not his main method for disseminating his propaganda. Napoleon had issued his own newspapers since his campaign in Italy, and when he became leader of France, he published them far and wide as a tool for controlling the narrative around himself. The bulletins would be printed in the state sponsored newspaper, the *Moniteur*, and would later be reprinted in the other newspapers which the Napoleonic regime allowed to be printed. This served to reinforce the bulletins' message through repetition, as many Frenchmen would read the bulletins first in the *Moniteur* and then in other newspapers. It also served to increase readership of the *Moniteur*. You had to read it if you wanted up-to-date information about the wars of the French Empire.⁷⁸

Napoleon's portrayal of the Battle of Austerlitz in his bulletin from December 3rd, 1805, presents a very flattering picture of the emperor. It is a little unclear how well the battle was planned out by Napoleon in advance. A subset of experts on the warfare of the Napoleonic era think that the battle wasn't premeditated at all.⁷⁹ Napoleon's army was dangerously spread out and had to be recalled only a few days before the battle.⁸⁰ If Napoleon had a detailed plan for the battle in advance, it seems probable that he would have concentrated his army sooner. A counterargument to this is that Napoleon did scout the battlefield earlier in November. Several members of his staff recount that the emperor told them he intended to fight a battle on that location at the time.⁸¹

It is safe to say that it is somewhat ambiguous to what degree the Battle of Austerlitz was planned out in advance, and to what degree it is an example of Napoleon seizing an

⁷⁴ Kerautret & Madec, 2008, p. 873

⁷⁵ Roberts, 2014, p. 390

⁷⁶ Roberts, 2014, p. 391

⁷⁷ Denis, 2022, 23

⁷⁸ Denis, 2022, 25

⁷⁹ Denis, 2022, 25

⁸⁰ Roberts, 2014, p. 378

⁸¹ Roberts, 2014, p. 377

opportunity presented to him. None of this ambiguity exists in the account given by the bulletin. The bulletin presents Napoleon in a highly glorified light. He is a master of strategy. A cunning military genius, leading his enemies into a trap from which they cannot escape.⁸²

Napoleon is also depicted as deeply personally involved and connected to his army. He describes his soldiers as his children, and constantly portrays himself as willing to bear the same dangers and discomforts as his men. The love that the soldiers have for their emperor gets highlighted. The bulletin states that “80,000 men presented themselves to meet the emperor and greeted him with acclamations.”, and that Napoleon will feel a personal loss with every casualty taken.⁸³ The bulletin thus presents both the great love Napoleon has for his army, and the love that the army has for him.

It was obvious, even at the time, that Napoleon’s bulletins were not entirely truthful. The bulletins were held to be so untrustworthy that the phrase “to lie like a bulletin” became a saying in Napoleonic France.⁸⁴ What complicates the situation is that the bulletin was based on reality. The army did matter a lot to Napoleon emotionally. Thought of the army occupied Napoleon’s mind even as he lay dying on Saint Helena in 1821.⁸⁵ It is therefore clear that he did care about the army on an emotional level. It does however seem doubtful that he regarded every individual soldier as his own child. Napoleon could be inspiring and kind towards his troops, however he ultimately regarded them as a resource to be spent. This is demonstrated by how carelessly he threw away lives in Russia, how he abandoned the army of Egypt, and a long list of other events. Napoleon knew the army loved him, and that his rule was ultimately based on this love. It seems probable that he presented himself in such an intimate light in order to endear himself to the army and thereby make sure that they stayed loyal to him.

As stated earlier, the bulletin exaggerates how much control Napoleon had during the battle. If you believe the bulletin, Napoleon planned the entire battle in advance.⁸⁶ Even Napoleon’s enemies were playing a part in Napoleon’s masterplan. This portrayal is exaggerating Napoleon’s military talents; however, the fact remains that Napoleon was a military genius, and Austerlitz is some of his best work. Some experts on the topic think that Napoleon didn’t

⁸² Pascal et al, 1844, 169-187

⁸³ Pascal et al, 1844, 169-187

⁸⁴ Roberts, 2014, p. 92

⁸⁵ Zamoyski, 2018, p. 642

⁸⁶ Pascal et al, 1844, 169-187

premeditate the battle at all, or to a very small extent.⁸⁷ This seems unconvincing, given how the battle went, but even if it is true, it only shows Napoleon to be even more skilled as a general than he already seems. Napoleon was almost certainly not the omnipresent, all-knowing genius that the bulletin portrays him as, however he was closer than one might immediately think.

The Battle of Austerlitz in Painting

Napoleon commissioned a series of paintings depicting the Battle of Austerlitz.⁸⁸ There are too many of them for all of them to be discussed individually, however a few examples will be given. The painters were given instructions to make the paintings match the information given out in the bulletin. In this way the bulletin and the paintings strengthened each other's messages. Information found in the paintings seemed to be confirmed by the bulletin, and vice versa.⁸⁹ The paintings that will be discussed are *Battle of Austerlitz, 2 December 1805*, by Francois Gerard, *Napoleon's Bivouac on the Eve of Austerlitz*, by Louis-Francois Lejeune's, and *Napoleon I visiting the army bivouacs on the eve of the Battle of Austerlitz*, By Bacler d'Albe.

⁸⁷ Denis, 2022, 25

⁸⁸ Denis, 2022, 23

⁸⁹ Denis, 2022, 26

“Battle of Austerlitz, 2 December 1805”



Figure 1 Battle of Austerlitz, 2 December 1805, 1808, by Gerard. <https://collections.chateauversailles.fr/#/query/073880bb-9cd7-46c7-8a8b-2aaedc5ec442>

The painting *Battle of Austerlitz, 2 December 1805*, by Francois Gerard was commissioned by the Napoleonic regime in the aftermath of the Battle of Austerlitz. It depicts the moment when general Rapp returns to the emperor after his assault on the Pratzen Heights with captured enemy standards and a captive Russian prince. The assault on the Heights, and the capture of the enemy standards and Prince Nikolai Repnin-Volkonsky played a relatively minor part in the battle all things considered. It is therefore interesting to ask why this exact moment was chosen as the subject for the painting. Napoleon personally requested it.⁹⁰

One reason is that he called special attention to the moment in the bulletin.⁹¹ As mentioned, the bulletins and paintings were meant to reinforce each other. It lent the bulletin more credibility to so vividly depict one of the more striking scenes from it. The painting reinforced the message of the bulletin, and the bulletin that of the painting.⁹²

The painting, no doubt, does look quite striking. Napoleon sits stoically on his horse, watching as his enemy, and his banners, are brought before him. It is a timeless scene. A conquering hero having his vanquished foe brought before him in shame is a trope as old as time. A very similar scene could have been the subject of Assyrian propaganda. The Behistun

⁹⁰ Roberts, 2014, p. 386

⁹¹ Pascal et al, 1844, 169-187

⁹² Denis, 2022, 37

inscription, commissioned by the Persian king Darius I, depicts him in a very similar situation, having defeated his enemies who are brought before him in defeat.⁹³ It should therefore not be too surprising that Napoleon chose this moment to immortalize in painting.

The painting portrays Napoleon in an idealized light. He looks regal, almost God-like, and he is stoically unconcerned with the chaos that surrounds him. The Napoleon presented in this painting is not the friendly, warmhearted soldier shown in the bulletin. In this painting, Napoleon is an emperor in the style of classical antiquity.

“Bivouac on the Eve of the Battle of Austerlitz, 1st December 1805”



Figure 2 *Bivouac on the Eve of the Battle of Austerlitz, 1st December 1805, 1808, by Lejeune.*
<https://collections.chateauversailles.fr/?lng=gb#/query/a0a533d1-a0e8-451c-ac17-30744d1c89bc>

Louis-Francois Lejeune’s painting, *“Bivouac on the Eve of the Battle of Austerlitz, 1st December 1805”* does not depict the eve of Austerlitz. Instead, it depicts a collection of scenes

⁹³ Mark, 2019

that might have happened days apart.⁹⁴ Soldiers can be seen sleeping and eating, collecting firewood and straw for their camps, and tending to their horses. The painting portrays Napoleon in a personal, non-grand way. It is unclear why such a misleading title was chosen, but it is of little relevance. Napoleon is sometimes depicted as a larger-than-life, near godlike figure in paintings.

This painting, however, portrays Napoleon as the “little corporal”. He is not portrayed as particularly more striking or important than the other people in the painting. The only thing that gives him away as the painting's main subject is his central position and that he is illuminated by a ray of light. The painting depicts Napoleon in a modest light, probably as an attempt to foster familiarity between himself and the target audience of the painting.

“Napoléon Ier visitant les bivouacs de l'armée à la veille de la bataille d'Austerlitz, 1er décembre 1805”



Figure 3 *Napoléon Ier visitant les bivouacs de l'armée à la veille de la bataille d'Austerlitz, 1er décembre 1805, 1807, by d'Albe.* <https://collections.chateaubersailles.fr/?lng=gb#query/abffa85-fa5e-49d6-b021-70b772a2c3da>

⁹⁴ Denis, 2022, 27

Bacler d'Albe's «*Napoléon Ier visitant les bivouacs de l'armée à la veille de la bataille d'Austerlitz, 1er décembre 1805*» depicts exactly what the title describes. It is another scene taken from the 30th Bulletin of the Grande Armée. Napoleon visits his soldiers, who recognize him and spontaneously decide to light torches in his honor. The event did happen, but its depiction is heavily fictionalized. When Napoleon toured his camp, walking from bonfire to bonfire, a heavy fog set in. Torches were lit to make it easier to find the way. The soldiers responded by creating their own torches made from their own bedding and cheering the emperor as he passed.⁹⁵ Napoleon is supposed to have engaged in light banter with the soldiers. An account of one of these conversations is included in the bulletin.⁹⁶ The propaganda purpose of the painting is rather obvious. It's depiction of the soldiers' love for their emperor speaks more strongly than any statement the emperor himself could make. The troops' love for their general and emperor is what the painting is trying to portray.⁹⁷

In the 30th bulletin, Napoleon portrays himself in a similar way. Napoleon is a paternalistic figure, burdened by his great love for the army. The bulletin quotes the emperor as saying “This is the most beautiful evening of my life, but I regret to think that I will lose a good number of these brave people. I feel, through the pain this causes me, that they are truly my children.”⁹⁸ One must wonder if Napoleon thought of the men he abandoned in Egypt as his children too.

It seems highly doubtful that Napoleon was sincere when he made that comment. There is no evidence he said it at all, aside from the bulletin. The way Napoleon portrays his visit to the army bivouacs in the bulletin, and how it is portrayed in d'Albe's painting does, however, indicate how Napoleon wished to be viewed. Napoleon's portrayal, both in the bulletin and the paintings of the battle, is that of a military genius and paternal, caring commanding officer.

One should note how none of the paintings discussed so far show the battle itself in any degree of detail, or the defeat of the allied armies. This was deliberate.⁹⁹ When the paintings were commissioned, peace had been declared. Napoleon was courting the Russians as potential allies, and it would be imprudent, as well as poor form to insult the defeated enemies so soon after the signing of the Treaty of Pressburg. By not showing the moment of his

⁹⁵ Roberts, 2014, p. 382

⁹⁶ Pascal et al, 1844, 169-187

⁹⁷ Denis, 2022, 31

⁹⁸ Pascal et al, 1844, 169-187

⁹⁹ Denis, 2022, 34

triumph, Napoleon was presenting himself as a victorious general who was nevertheless gracious towards his defeated enemies.

Conclusion: The Myth of Austerlitz

The Battle of Austerlitz was one of the greatest that Napoleon ever fought, and he clearly recognized this himself. His maneuvering before the battle, his choice of battlefield, his tactical withdrawals and advances, and his impeccable timing all resulted in a crushing victory for the French forces, and a peace on favorable terms. Austerlitz shows Napoleon at his best.

There are similarities and differences between how Napoleon is portrayed in the art-pieces that have been discussed, as well as in the 30th bulletin. The bulletin portrays him as an unrivaled genius and puppet-master, who directed the movements of not only his own army, but the movement of the opposing army too. He is a friendly, warm, and fatherly figure with a deep love for his troops, who love him just as much as he loves them.

The Lejeune painting depicts him as a military man like any other. He is a soldier who endures the discomforts and dangers of military life side by side with his troops. D'Albe's painting shows the dedication of Napoleon's men towards their emperor. Gerard's painting stands out by depicting Napoleon in a grander way. He is clearly the superior of all other men in the painting, both in terms of the command structure, but also by his very nature. Gerard's Napoleon is a superior being, unlike regular mortal men.

This reveals something rather interesting about the nature of Napoleon's self-presentation. He had no problem occupying mutually exclusive roles at different times, depending on circumstances. This strategic flexibility in how he portrayed himself allowed him to connect with various audiences, from his soldiers on the ground to his people back home in France, to the political elite of Europe.

Napoleon's propaganda was not merely a reflection of his own vanity. Make no mistake, that was part of it. Napoleon was undoubtedly an arrogant man, however his propaganda was also calculated to help him reach his goals. By presenting himself as a relatable, paternal figure, he maintained morale among his troops and made them more loyal towards him. On the other hand, by emphasizing his genius for tactics and his stoic confidence, as the bulletin and Gerard's painting do, he projects an image of an invincible military leader. The study of the Battle of Austerlitz thus serves as a case study of the importance of branding and image, in

addition to being a great military victory. When it comes to maintaining one's grip on power, perception can matter just as much as reality, and Napoleon quite clearly recognized this.

Chapter 3: Faith as Propaganda

Introduction: Faith as Propaganda

Napoleon deftly manipulated his own image to adapt to the political realities of the time and place where he was. Napoleon had an almost chameleon-like ability to change his political messaging to suit the situation, to consolidate power, to increase his legitimacy, and to achieve the goals he set for himself. Depending on his audience he either presented himself as a protector of the catholic faith, as God's chosen on earth, as the protector of peace in Europe, and even as a devout Muslim.

There is little doubt that Napoleon's shifts in personality and religious affiliation depending on circumstance was calculated and opportunistic. In secular life he possessed a great ability to pretend to be the person who he needed to be at any given time to achieve his goals. He was "The Little Corporal" to his troops, he was a conquering hero in his commissioned art, and he was both the personification of the revolution and its end depending on his audience. As we shall see, he was capable of being a great many contradictory things when it comes to religion as well. This political adaptability was a cornerstone in his rule, and a major reason why he was able to command the loyalty of such a large segment of the French population.

This segment of the thesis will discuss how Napoleon's strategic modification of his own image helped him to manipulate, persuade, and control the populations under his rule, specifically regarding his strategic use of religion to serve his own political ends.

Napoleon's faith

Napoleon had an interesting, and as we shall see, rather cynical view of religion. When asked about his religious beliefs regarding Islam, he is reported to have replied "As for me, I always adopt the religion of the country I am in."¹⁰⁰ Napoleon made a series of statements that indicate he had an affinity for the Muslim faith. He used to joke about how close he had come to embracing Islam during his stay on Saint Helena.¹⁰¹ He also fantasized about becoming a

¹⁰⁰ Balcombe, 2005, p. 74

¹⁰¹ Roberts, 2014, p. 174

new Mohammed and writing a new Koran in later life.¹⁰² Later, on Saint Helena, he remarked that he preferred Islam to Christianity, stating that it was more credible than Christianity, which might suggest that he truly was a Muslim, however in the same statement he described Christianity as “our” religion, implying that he was a Christian.¹⁰³ Additionally, he stated in Milan in 1800 that he was catholic, and that Catholicism was favorable towards republican institutions.¹⁰⁴

The simplest explanation for Napoleon’s inconsistent religious views is that he held no strong religious views at all, and instead viewed religion as a tool for social control. He also viewed it as a way to win the favor of the local populations under his control. He regarded religion as a necessity for maintaining social order. In his words: “Society is impossible without inequality; inequality intolerable without a code of morality, and a code of morality unacceptable without religion.”¹⁰⁵

Napoleon thought that religion was a useful tool for rallying supporters. Years after his return from Egypt, he claimed that he intended to formally convert to Islam after the Siege of Acre, and that doing so would cause 200 000 Muslims to rise in support of him.¹⁰⁶ It seems improbable that he was right about this, and it is entirely possible he meant it half as a joke, but it does illustrate that Napoleon understood that religious faith is a useful tool to rally support. I will discuss another example of this a little later. Islam is not the only religion Napoleon used to rally men to his banner.

Napoleon toyed with the idea of converting to Islam, and later professed belief in the Christian god and in the truth of Catholicism. This is, however, best interpreted as a political tactic to win favor. Napoleon did believe in a divine power, but fundamentally he was an enlightenment sceptic.¹⁰⁷ It is impossible to know his real religious feelings, but it seems improbable that he had deeply held religious beliefs. He used religion too cynically for his professions of faith to appear genuine.¹⁰⁸ For Napoleon, religious faith was always a means to an end. He did, however, strongly believe in the necessity of a religion as a social force. He

¹⁰² Roberts, 2014, p. 197

¹⁰³ Salem, 2023, 1

¹⁰⁴ Roberts, 2014, p. 258

¹⁰⁵ Rudé, 1964, p. 237

¹⁰⁶ Roberts, 2014, p. 197

¹⁰⁷ Roberts, 2014, p. 22

¹⁰⁸ Rayapen & Anderson, 1991, 124

thought that it provided order and stability to society, and he knew just how powerful of a motivating force it could be.

Religion as Propaganda

Islam

Regardless of his religious faith or lack thereof, as we shall see, Napoleon repeatedly used religion for political ends. Among other things, he used it to make the populations he ruled more docile and submissive towards his rule, he attempted to use it to foment rebellion against his enemies, and he used it to increase conscription-numbers in France.

Napoleon seems to have tried to present himself as a friend of the Muslims while he stayed in Egypt. Napoleon printed proclamations which were intended for a Muslim audience. In one of these proclamations, he presented himself as the liberator of the Egyptian people from mameluke oppression, as well as an enemy of the Pope and the knights of Malta. In the words of the proclamation: “usurpers. I reverence ... God, his prophet Muhammed, and the Koran! ... Have we not destroyed the Pope, who made men wage war on the Muslims? Have we not destroyed the Knights of Malta, because those fools believed it to be God’s will to fight against Muslims?”¹⁰⁹

In another propaganda sheet, Napoleon came quite close to openly proclaiming himself a Muslim. The sheet recounts a conversation between Napoleon and three imams, and it quotes Napoleon as saying “Glory to Allah! There is no other God but God; Mohammed is his prophet, and I am one of his friends”¹¹⁰

In a later conversation, Napoleon shamelessly suggested that the will of Mohammad was for the Egyptians to ally with the French, as well as to trade with them. Napoleon, you see, had gained this insight into the prophet’s intentions through his personal study of the Koran.¹¹¹ The British later collected Napoleon’s proclamations to the Muslims and redistributed them to Syrian and Lebanese Christians, thus undermining Napoleons attempt to court them as potential allies.¹¹²

Napoleon did, in fact, not destroy the pope because of his hostility to the faith of Islam. Nor did he conquer Malta because he was standing up for the Muslims. It is also highly doubtful

¹⁰⁹ Bingham, 1884, p. 210

¹¹⁰ Bingham, 1884, p. 222

¹¹¹ Roberts, 2014, p. 176

¹¹² Roberts, 2014, p. 197

that Napoleon believed that the Koran had any opinions about a Franco-Egyptian trade agreement one way or another. It seems clear then, that Napoleon had no problem professing religious beliefs he did not possess, as a form of political propaganda. Napoleon must have thought that the Egyptian people would look upon him more favorably if they believed he was a Muslim, or at least a friend of the Muslims.

Catholicism

Another way in which we can see how Napoleon used religion as a cynical tool to achieve his own political way, is to examine his later dealings with the catholic church. The French revolution at been explicitly anti organized religion in general, and Catholicism in particular. Sometime after gaining the consulship Napoleon became convinced that he needed to reconcile the revolutionary government which he was leading with the catholic church. He stated so openly to a gathering of Milanese priests in June 1800.¹¹³

It is worth going into the background of religion in France before discussing Napoleon's relationship with the Christian faith in France. The church was an important part of Ancien Regime society. The French people still paid tithes to the church. The church owned large estates within the kingdom, and they had significant influence over the king. The catholic church in France was a deeply conservative institution, in the sense that it opposed reform. It was anti-intellectual, corrupt, authoritarian, and very anti-protestant. For all these reasons it was hated by the up-and-coming French middle class. It is therefore no surprise that, when the revolution came, the church and the revolutionaries were bitter enemies.¹¹⁴

The National Assembly attempted to reform the church in a long list of ways, including reforming the payment structure for French clergy and readjusting the borders of the dioceses. The result of the revolution's hostility towards the church was that a large majority of French bishops emigrated, with a number staying behind to foment religious uprisings.¹¹⁵ The uprising in the Vendée was partially religiously motivated.

As the revolution became more and more radical, it's relationship with Catholicism worsened. The church was firmly brought under the control of the state, with priests having to take an oath of allegiance toward the French state. An active process of dechristianization began which, among other things, led to the replacement of the Gregorian calendar with the new

¹¹³ Roberts, 2014, p. 270

¹¹⁴ Rayapen & Anderson, 1991, 118

¹¹⁵ Rayapen & Anderson, 1991, 119

revolutionary calendar, and the attempted establishment of new religions based on, among other things, the worship of reason.¹¹⁶ Napoleon inherited this chaotic religious situation when he came to power in 1799.

Napoleon's motivations for attempting to reconcile the church and the French state were many. One of his motivations was to put a final stop to the rebellion in the Vendée which was still raging. The rebellion had broken out, in part, because of the revolution's behavior towards the church. Reconciliation between France and the papacy could lessen the resolve of the remaining rebels, as one of their remaining grievances would be removed. France also wished to lessen tensions with their subjects in their puppet-states in the Low Countries, Italy, and Switzerland. Large portions of the populations of these countries were still staunchly catholic.¹¹⁷

Another motivation for reconciliation was that Napoleon had a healthy respect and fear of the power of the church to mobilize support or opposition. If he could gain the favor of the church, he could use faith to rally support to his side, that otherwise would be rallied against him. Alienating the religious population of France was not prudent, especially not this early into his reign. Not least because Napoleon's traditional support base of rural conservatives was also the segment of the population most inclined towards religiosity.¹¹⁸ In Napoleon's own words: 'The clergy is a power that is never quiet. You cannot be under obligations to it, wherefore you must be its master.'¹¹⁹

The final agreement between Napoleon and the Papacy was reached in 1802. It included many restored privileges for the church, but the concessions made by the church are more relevant. The church was obliged to advertise conscription as the duty of Christian Frenchmen, read the government's proclamations to their congregations, and hold religious services in honor of Napoleon's victories.¹²⁰ Napoleon thus made the church into a tool to spread his propaganda to the masses. In fact, it was this propagandistic effect the Concordat between France and the church that Napoleon highlighted when he spoke of it to the French legislature in 1803.¹²¹

Napoleon's bulletins, control of the press, and education system were of limited use against the mostly illiterate lower classes of France. Most of Napoleon's propaganda was therefore

¹¹⁶ Rayapen & Anderson, 1991, 119

¹¹⁷ Roberts, 2014, p. 271

¹¹⁸ Roberts, 2014, p. 270

¹¹⁹ Caulaincourt & Hanoteau, 1935, p. 392

¹²⁰ Roberts, 2014, p. 273

¹²¹ Roberts, 2014, p. 274

not targeted at them. Napoleon's control of the clergy therefore became an important tool in presenting his desired image of himself to the illiterate French population. Napoleon ordered the reading of his bulletins aloud during church services for just this reason.¹²²

One goal of Napoleon's religious propaganda was to increase conscription numbers. Draftees were more likely to report for military service if they believed it was their Christian duty to do so. The clergy also helped advertise Napoleon's victories to the French people, thus making a military life seem more appealing. To this effect, the clergy was ordered to hold public prayers for the success of Napoleon's armies. Prayers of this type were usually ordered by the government.¹²³

Napoleon controlled his own depiction in religious propaganda. In part he did this by giving instructions to bishops on what to say about him. In one instance, he wanted the bishops to present him as necessary for the prosperity of the empire and the Christian faith. His instructions specified that the bishops should claim that both Europe and France needed Napoleon, and that he was necessary for the protection of Christianity.¹²⁴ Napoleon sought by this instruction to present himself as a protector of the Christian faith to his, largely devoutly Christian, supporters, as well as to present himself as indispensable. He rules because he is the only one who can bring peace and happiness to the empire and to Europe.

This emphasis on Napoleon as a bringer of peace is interesting. Napoleon used the clergy to present himself as a peace-giver and a great man. A letter from the bishop of Bayeux from 1807 instructs his priests to emphasize that Napoleon's one goal in waging war is to bring peace. Peace would allow the blossoming of French culture, commerce, and science, as well as the strengthening of religion.¹²⁵ This is telling of both French society's desire for peace by 1807, as well as Napoleon's view of what French people desired and felt they were lacking.

A revealing example on Napoleon's use of religious institutions to spread his propaganda is his change to the catholic catechism in 1806. The changes emphasize loyalty and submission towards the state generally, and Napoleon specifically. To paraphrase, the catechism stressed that it is a Christian duty to show love and obedience towards the emperor, and to protect the empire by serving in the military.¹²⁶ Napoleon's accension to the imperial throne has proven

¹²² Holtman, 1949, 18

¹²³ Holtman, 1949, 4

¹²⁴ Holtman, 1949, 5

¹²⁵ Holtman, 1949, 6

¹²⁶ Holtman, 1949, 2

that he is god's chosen, and it is therefore a religious duty to obey him. Did he not, after all, reestablish the Christian faith in France? Did he not protect the people from foreign invasion? Surely all who do not service him faithfully shall be damned to hellfire!¹²⁷ One can, of course, not be a good Christian if one is not a good citizen.¹²⁸ And good citizens are, of course, loyal towards their sovereign.

In the modern context, such heavy-handed propaganda in the guise of religious ritual appears more than a little sinister. It is so heavy-handed, in fact, that it appears almost comical. It is important to stress, however, that Frenchman of the Napoleonic era took religion a lot more seriously than modern westerners do. Additionally, the target audience of the catechism is children, who are naturally more gullible than adults. It is undoubtful that Napoleon's religious reforms, catechism included, did have an influence on the youth of France.¹²⁹ What is in doubt is how big the influence was.

It seems clear that Napoleon regarded religion as a tool for political control. His propaganda routinely portrayed him as an ally of the Muslims, if not a Muslim himself, while he was in Egypt. Later, he co-opted the church of France, and used it to distribute his propaganda to the French masses. He cynically changed his own religious affiliation to whatever would be most attractive to the population he was governing at the time.

The effectiveness of his religious propaganda is debatable. According to one Arab historian and witness, many Egyptians regarded Napoleon as a prophesied savior, while another regarded him as a beastly creature who disrespected Islamic law.¹³⁰ It seems then, that the success of Napoleon's religious propaganda in Egypt was at best mixed. After all, the French invasion did end in failure.

Napoleon's co-opting of the church seems more successful, however. At least Napoleon himself seems to have thought so¹³¹. And the Concordat did achieve the intended effect of making the Napoleonic regime more popular among the people.¹³² At any rate, he never fully succeeded in subordinating the church to the state, and relations between himself and the pope remained tense for his entire reign, culminating in Napoleon's excommunication.¹³³

¹²⁷ Holtman, 1949, 3

¹²⁸ Holtman, 1949, 7

¹²⁹ Holtman, 1949, 17

¹³⁰ Roberts, 2014, p. 176

¹³¹ Roberts, 2014, p. 274

¹³² Roberts, 2014, p. 275

¹³³ Rayapen & Anderson, 1991, 123

Conclusion: Faith as Propaganda

In conclusion, Napoleon's approach to religion illustrates his ability to adapt his image to achieve political goals. His tactical adoption of various religious identities shows that he was flexible with how he presented himself, for propagandistic purposes. Whether presenting himself as a Muslim to gain the favor of Egyptian locals or allying with the Catholic Church to quell rebellion, solidify support, and boost conscription numbers in France, Napoleon demonstrated a profound understanding of religion's influence over the masses, as well as an equally profound ability for cynical manipulation.

Napoleon's professed religious faith changed depending on this political need at the time and was not motivated by any actual religious conviction. Instead, Napoleon used religion as a lever of control and influence in society. His modifications to the Catholic catechism, use of religious rhetoric and imagery in his proclamation and commissioned art and attempt to make the church subservient to the needs of the state were all calculated to enhance his authority, strengthen his regime, and boost his military power. The effectiveness of his various religious propaganda varied. He more or less succeeded in making the church subservient to the French state, however he made an enemy of the pope, and relations with the papacy were always tense. The attempts of his propaganda efforts in Egypt are more questionable.

Conclusion

Napoleon's political and military opportunism, as well as his skills as a propagandist is the reason he was able to rise to such prominence, why he was able to influence the world to such a great extent, and why he is still a household name today. He demonstrated this opportunism and political skill many times throughout his career.

The battle of Austerlitz perfectly illustrated Napoleon's adaptability and opportunism on the field of battle. His maneuvering, both before and during the battle, his impeccable timing when it came to ordering assaults or withdrawals, as well as his strategic choice of battlefield all demonstrate how Napoleon was a master at seizing opportunities provided for him by fate or happenstance. The choice of engaging in battle on the one-year anniversary of his coronation also shows that, even during military campaigns and in situations where he was in great personal danger, Napoleon never lost sight of the political implications of his actions. If he could score a great military and a great political victory in one fell swoop, he would do it.

Napoleon's commissioned paintings of the Battle of Austerlitz were deliberately made to reflect the post-battle bulletin. They all depict events discussed in the bulletin, and they reinforce the message therein. The bulletin portrays Napoleon as a brilliant puppet master who directs the movements of armies like pieces on a chess board, yet he is also portrayed as a kind and caring commanding officer with a deep love for his soldiers. The bulletin goes out of its way to stress how the soldiers love Napoleon in return.

The paintings of the battle depict Napoleon subtly differently. To Lejeune, Napoleon is a soldier who suffers the discomforts and dangers of the battlefield side by side with his men. A soldier, as well as an emperor. To d'Albe, the focus is on the army's love and dedication towards Napoleon. To Gerard, Napoleon is a superior being, like a hero from antiquity, superior to all other men. The contrasting depictions of the emperor reveals how Napoleon's opportunism stretched to how he chose to present himself in his own propaganda. He had no problem presenting himself in mutually exclusive ways to different target audiences. The Battle of Austerlitz, and the propaganda surrounding it show that Napoleon was capable both of winning great victories in the field with the help of his opportunism, and that he could manipulate his own image for maximum benefit to himself. The Battle of Austerlitz thus serves as a case study not only on how to win a great victory, but also a case study on the importance of public perception when it comes to maintaining one's grip on power.

Napoleon's approach to religion also demonstrates also demonstrates Napoleon's understanding of the importance of public opinion quite well. Napoleon's tactical adoption of various religious identities speaks to his ability to tailor his political messaging to whomever his target audience was at the time. Napoleon's ability to switch between roles, even going so far as to proclaim himself a Muslim to gain favor of the Muslim peoples of Egypt, demonstrate his understanding of the importance of religion when it comes to governing. He was able to rule his large, multi-ethnic, multi-religious empire based on this ability to change his identity to whatever was prudent at the time.

Napoleon personally seems to have almost completely lacked religious convictions. He was what one might today call an agnostic, or at most a cultural Christian. Napoleon did, however, have a strong belief in religion as a tool of social control. Napoleon used religion as a tool frequently to enhance his political and military power. The effectiveness of Napoleonic propaganda is up for debate. In the case of religion, Napoleon did succeed in making the French church subservient to the state, but he made a mortal enemy of the pope and large

parts of the catholic world in doing so, and his religious propaganda efforts in the Muslim world had even more questionable results.

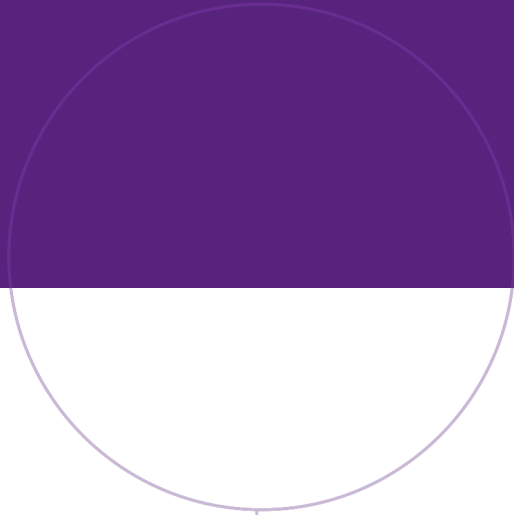
The question then remains, if Napoleon was such an impressive military and political mind, how did he fail? His empire collapsed only a decade after it was created. Napoleon left France smaller in terms of territory, and geopolitically weaker than he had found it. It is up for debate. Some sources for this thesis regard his ultimate defeat as self-inflicted, while others regard it as ultimately a question of bad luck. Ultimately the reason is outside the scope of this thesis and might prove an interesting topic for further study.

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