

BOOK REVIEW

Andrew Roberts, 2014, *Napoleon: A Life*, Viking, USA, 926 pages, ISBN13: 9780670025329

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Andrew Roberts' biography of Napoleon Bonaparte is one of the latest works dealing with the life, as well as the political and military legacy of the French ruler. The relevance of another biography of Napoleon, one of the most influential characters of the 19th century is hardly a matter of debate. The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars have been considered one of the most important events, becoming the empirical fodder for scholars discussing revolutions in military affairs (Liaropoulos 2006¹, the balance of power², hegemony and imperialism³ or alliances⁴, while influencing the politics of the century.

The book, however, plots a different course, which is wholly devoted, while closely following the rise and fall of the Emperor, to a reappraisal of his

¹ For more information see Andrew N. Liaropoulos (2006), "Revolutions in Warfare: Theoretical Paradigms and Historical Evidence: The Napoleonic and First World War Revolutions in Military Affairs" in *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 70, No. 2 (Apr., 2006), pp. 363-384

² For more information see Kenneth N. Waltz (2008), *Realism and International Politics*, New York: Routledge, p. 214

³ For more information see Michael Brouers (2005), *The Napoleonic Empire in Italy, 1796–1814 Cultural Imperialism in a European Context?*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan

⁴ For more information see Stephen M. Walt (1987), *The Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, p. 27

personality and legacy. On several occasions, Roberts makes clear that his goal is that of tackling the impact British propaganda has had on the manner in which Napoleon and his legacy are viewed. Starting from the same Winston Churchill quote Pieter Geyl's *Napoleon: For and Against* takes off¹, in which the French Emperor's is compared with Hitler, Roberts wants to reach an altogether different conclusion: that, to a large extent, the depiction of Napoleon which has permeated culture and history and has served to justify British political actions and political positions owes much to the caricature and propaganda of the late 18th and early 19th century.

Moreover, Roberts is also keen on emphasizing the extraordinary qualities of a man for whom he openly confesses his admiration. His insistence on Napoleon's military and political abilities, as well as the numerous instances in which he alludes or gives clear evidence of his sarcasm, wit or humor are the starting point of the second part of the author's claim: that Napoleonic Europe was to a large extent the result of his actions. Inconspicuous, most of the times, sometimes openly, Roberts tries to answer another great Napoleonic historian, George Lefebvre – the Consulate and the French Empire, the Civil Code, his infrastructure program, were linked to the Revolutionary program, but were not the expression of a class-conscious policies.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part, "Rise", covers Napoleon's birth and his Corsican upbringing. Roberts discusses the role his family played in his early life, as well as the first steps taken into the French military education system. The tumultuous occurrence of the French Revolution and his somewhat ambivalent reaction to the events are discussed in detail by Roberts. His further actions, such as the Brumaire Coup are considered to be the direct expression of his early beliefs regarding governance, political power and sovereignty. Moreover, the section insists on his ascension through the ranks of the French military, following the Corsican debacle in which he was directly implicated following the outbreak of the Revolution. "Rise" chronicles the Italian and

¹ For more information see Pieter Geyl (1965), *Napoleon: For and Against*, London: Penguin Books, pp. 7-8

Egyptian Campaigns, insisting on the failure of his Acre siege and concluding with the Coup of 18 Brumaire.

The second part of the book, "Mastery" follows the civil achievements of the consular regime, as well as his Marengo victory. Roberts dedicates a chapter to describing the manner in which his legislative corpus was drafted and implemented. Another chapter deals with the details of the plots Napoleon managed to survive. The Austerlitz and Jena campaigns pave the way towards the imposition of the Continental Blockade, the Wagram Campaign and the invasion of Spain crowning the zenith of the Napoleonic Empire.

The "Denouement", the third and last part of the book records the context of the Russian 1812 campaign, arguing that its failure is not entirely the result of faulty decisions – the Russian strategy and the typhus outbreak being considered more relevant for the failure of his grandest defeat. The "Denouement" tracks the political causes that brought about the Hundred Days and the bitterness and melancholy out of which the last part of the Napoleonic myth was constructed in the solitude of Saint Helena.

Openly pleading against the hegemonic and imperialist interpretation of European history, contradicting the claims that see Napoleon as a representative of the French bourgeoisie and criticizing any form of structural interpretation of Napoleonic history, Roberts' book is rather more a history of Napoleon's court. The book engages the large number of memoirs written by the main actors of the age and glosses on their credibility. He does not shy away from discussing the gossips surrounding his person, the intrigues and the duplicitous and frivolous nature of many of the accounts of Napoleon's life. In a credible manner, the author tries to emphasize the passions that his actions or his politics stirred and the motivations that led great writers to take positions as diverse and reconcilable as Hugo or Chateaubriand.

The book does not ignore Napoleon's failures. The assassination of the Duke d'Enghien is thoroughly discussed, just as there is a wide debate on the motivation and subsequent justification of the massacre of Jaffa. Napoleonic propaganda and secret police are discussed at length, while the re-establishment of slavery in Haiti is not ignored. Roberts mentions several times Napoleon's

inability to grasp naval issues or naval strategy. While not openly justifying his actions, Roberts nevertheless insists, maybe not that convincingly, on a contextual interpretation of his decisions and his actions. While his account of the enduring success British counter-propaganda has had over the years in portraying Napoleon as a vile and ruthless leader bent on European domination, his attempts of contextualizing his failures sounds hollow at times.

Roberts' insistence on the civil institutions put in place, on the meritocratic nature of the Consular regime and of the Empire, his thoroughly ambiguous relation with the Revolution or with revolutionary ideals, but his altogether sincere acceptance of the Enlightenment make for a very interesting investigation of the "civil" part of Napoleon's reign, overshadowed most of the time by his martial prowess.

All in all, *Napoleon: A life* is a thoroughly pleasant and entertaining book and eminently researched. While Roberts' attempt to answer Geyl and Lefebvre might not be as poignant and as successful, his biography of the French Emperor's life is a must read.