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David A. Bell, *Napoleon: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. xx + 160 pp. Maps, images, notes, bibliography, and index. \$8.96 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 978-0199321667.

Review by Donald M. G. Sutherland, University of Maryland.

David Bell has written an excellent introduction to Napoleon, one that will have easy appeal to undergraduate audiences because of its thorough coverage and clear exposition. His aim is to provide a basic introduction and to make Napoleon more accessible than the specialist tomes of Philip Dwyer and Patrice Gueniffey.[1] Thus, he covers the expected territory from his struggles with Paoli on Corsica to the disaster at Waterloo. The book concludes with a welcome chapter on the legacy including the election of Louis-Napoleon and an exposition on the For and Against debates of the great historians.[2]

As a basic introduction, the book works very well. The second aim is more thought provoking. Bell also wants to link Napoleon to the Revolution. He is careful to define the Revolution as civil equality, the land settlement, and religious toleration. This is what used to be called the 'bourgeois revolution,' and since it endured, it is much better than alternate definitions that Napoleon betrayed the egalitarian anti-clerical republic. The analysis of warfare also works very well. Not only is the writing clear and vivid, Bell makes his case that Napoleon took advantage of the upheavals of the Revolution and advances in military theory. Total war, as Bell made clear in an earlier book, operated on an increasingly large and multi-national scale.[3]

It is possible to push these insights further and say that France remained a revolutionary power until the end, irrespective of the intentions of the Emperor. Michael Broers argued that Napoleonic conquest imposed a template of reforms in administration, judicial procedures and punishments, in ecclesiastical property and in contract and testamentary law.[4] Making conquered territory look like France was revolutionary in the legal context of the period. From the abolition of private jurisdictions and seigneurialism in western Germany to the abolition of serfdom and the institution of legal equality in Poland, the French overturned the continental Old Regime.

The experience in Spain best illustrates how revolution provoked resistance. Despite retaining the Catholic monopoly on worship, and a non-privileged nobility, the Napoleonic Constitution of Bayonne (July 1808) was still too liberal for many. Among other things, it abolished the Inquisition, which—in popular opinion anyway—preserved the unity of the faith. The French blamed the resulting backlash on backwardness and the plotting of a small cabal of nobles and prelates who deceived the credulous—exact echoes of the republican analysis of the war in the

Vendée in 1793. Besides the savage repression, Napoleon also issued the Decrees of Chamartin in December 1808. These abolished feudal rights, personal servitudes, and banalities of fishponds, inns, ovens and mills. Finally, the decrees confiscated some ecclesiastical property, including all property belonging to the Inquisition. In Napoleon's words, the Decrees of Chamartin were intended to regenerate Spain. The war of Spanish liberation that followed thus in part was a revolutionary war designed to defeat religious peasants, bandits, deserters and miserable smugglers.

Bell also detects signs of weakness in the Empire that followed from the rapidity and decisiveness of the victories between 1805 and 1808. This created huge problems of how to absorb and administer vast new annexations and satellites. Moreover, the nature of the war against Great Britain after Trafalgar required the Continental System and with it, further expansion and more war. Bell also asserts that Napoleon's health declined, speculating that, like most men in their forties at the time, he was plagued with illnesses and parasites. Maybe so, but these maladies barely slowed him down, if at all. The extraordinary energy and self-discipline were obvious down to 1815.

The argument that the seeds of final defeat were planted at Trafalgar or, alternatively, in the glories of 1805-08 has a certain elegance to it, but it privileges hindsight and narrative.[5] Fortunately, the author does not belabor this point. In his gripping presentation of the end, Bell points out that the disaster in Russia was not as decisive as many think. He notes that the losses in men were made good in 1813, although the new recruits badly needed training, and the loss of cavalry horses could not be repaired so easily.

Bell has very little to say about other measures of strength like tax arrears and obedience to conscription. Amazingly, the French paid their taxes and answered the call to arms even in the dark days of 1813. Nor was political opposition much to worry about once the police exposed the Cadoudal Plot in 1804. In 1810-11, there were just 300 political prisoners incarcerated in eight state prisons throughout the Empire. Interestingly, many of these were priests opposed to the Concordat. In addition, the Malet Conspiracy of 1812 illustrated how weak the opposition was. It was nipped in the bud, and although its existence was known as far away as Italy, it made little impact. Finally, even in 1814 when defeat should have been obvious, the old counter-revolutionary bastions of the West did not budge.

This could not have been very easy book to write. "A Very Short Introduction" means that the author must make some difficult decisions about what to include. Understandably, Bell has chosen to emphasize the military and diplomatic aspects of Napoleon's reign. Fortunately, this means we hear little of the Emperor's love life, and we are spared the tedious denunciations of the ambitious traitor to the Revolution. Unfortunately, the format means a lot must be left out: the new literature on the governance of the Empire; the pacification of the *chouans* of the West and the *brigands royaux* of the Midi, which used the same ruthless military tactics and judicial forms of the Year II; the social and cultural impact of the Concordat and its effect on nineteenth century religious practice; the revival of the rural economy; and much else. Another "Very Short Introduction" could cover these too.

NOTES

[1] Philip Dwyer, *Napoleon: The Path to Power, 1769-1799* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Philip Dwyer, *Napoleon in Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015); Patrice Gueniffey, *Bonaparte: 1769-1802* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013).

[2] The allusion is to Pieter Geyl, *Napoleon, For and Against* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), *passim*.

[3] David A. Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It* (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007).

[4] Michael Broers, *Europe Under Napoleon* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 60. See the brief nuance in Philip Dwyer, ed., *Napoleon and Europe* (London: Routledge), 8-9.

[5] Jean Tulard, *Napoleon: The Myth of the Saviour* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), 137.

Donald M. G. Sutherland
University of Maryland
dsutherl@umd.edu

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