
H-France Review Vol. 23 (July 2023), No. 131

William Doyle, *Napoleon at Peace: How to End a Revolution*. London: Reaktion Books, 2022. 231 pp. References, note on sources, index. \$22.50 (cl). ISBN 9-78-1789146172. \$22.50 (eb). ISBN 9-78-1789146189.

Review by Denise Z. Davidson, Georgia State University.

William Doyle, the distinguished historian of the Old Regime and the French Revolution whose *Oxford History of the French Revolution*[1] served as a cornerstone of the “Anglo-Saxon revisionist” interpretation of the Revolution, has turned his attention to Napoleon Bonaparte in this short, readable book. Largely a work of synthesis, the study nonetheless provides a fresh perspective on a man (and a regime) about whom one could reasonably argue we already know pretty much everything. In focusing on the narrow window of time between 1799 and 1802, and avoiding reference to what came later, we gain an understanding of these years that differs significantly from standard accounts, which tend to keep an eye on what Napoleon is most known for: his military prowess. Instead, the book focuses on Bonaparte’s efforts to address head-on the divisive issues that had proven impossible to resolve over the course of the previous decade. Although the book covers Bonaparte’s rise to fame as a military leader, Doyle’s primary goal is to analyze the general’s approach to the major political questions of the day, the issues that kept previous revolutionary regimes from building a strong, stable government. As suggested by his subtitle, Doyle focuses on how Bonaparte, in contrast to the political leaders who preceded him, finally managed to end the Revolution. He did this through a combination of audacity, brilliance, and sometimes luck.

Doyle argues that Bonaparte succeeded where others had failed in resolving three main issues that had proven intractable: religion, war, and monarchy. The structure of the book mirrors this argument. Following a brief preface and introduction, the author begins with a chapter explaining how Bonaparte came to power in 1799. The next three chapters explore Bonaparte’s approach to each of these issues. Those chapters are entitled “Winning the War,” “Treating with God,” and “Restoring Authority.” The last two chapters, “Curbing Disorder” and “An Experimental Peace,” address Bonaparte’s efforts to end the chronic insecurity that had plagued France for a decade and the 1801 negotiations leading to the Peace of Amiens. Each chapter begins with a brief explanation of the revolutionary events and policies that created the situation that Bonaparte inherited in 1799, and then treats his efforts to resolve the matter at hand, including, for example, the complicated maneuvers required to bring France back into the fold of the Catholic Church, which culminated with the signing of the Concordat, and the steps Bonaparte took to end the politicized insurrections in western France. After a brief conclusion,

the book closes with an eight-page epilogue entitled “Cutting Losses Overseas,” which focuses mostly on the French colonial possessions in the Caribbean.

As might be expected of an epilogue, this discussion seems somewhat disconnected from the earlier chapters, especially as it recounts a case where Napoleon was unequivocally not “at peace.” How the situation in the Caribbean and the question of slavery more generally relate to Doyle’s overall argument, which emphasizes Bonaparte’s domestic accomplishments, is not fully clear. Doyle mentions that Napoleon later described his defeat in the Caribbean and his approach to that region as his gravest error: “The Saint-Domingue affair...was the greatest administrative mistake I ever made. I should have dealt with the black leaders as the authorities in a province ... left Toussaint Louverture as viceroy, not sent in troops, left everything to the blacks” (p. 204). As the title of the epilogue suggests, Bonaparte sought to cut his losses when he came to realize that his efforts to regain control over Saint Domingue would not succeed. While it might have been preferable for Doyle to have found a way to integrate colonial policies into the broader narrative of the book, one could also argue that this violent conflict, which eventually led to Haiti’s independence and to the sale of Louisiana to the United States, would not have fit into the narrative of a book entitled “Napoleon at Peace.” In addition, by placing the discussion of slavery and the colonies in an epilogue, after exploring Napoleon’s domestic and (European) diplomatic accomplishments during this brief period of peace, Doyle’s study allows the reader to discern a point that may be less clear in accounts that focus on the colonial context: the necessity of signing a peace treaty with Britain prior to launching the military expedition to reclaim Saint Domingue. Though Doyle does not state this point explicitly, he seems to be suggesting that Bonaparte’s successes in treating the issues covered in the book’s earlier chapters were necessary precursors to his attempt to reinstate slavery in the French colonies.

Napoleon at Peace is directed primarily at general readers, though scholars in the field will find Doyle’s overview and analysis of this period enlightening as well. The book includes minimal scholarly references, citing sources only for quotations and ending with a very brief (three-page) “note on sources” listing some of the works that Doyle relied upon most often as he constructed his narrative. The narrative is engaging and presents a clear and convincing argument that Bonaparte’s focus on ending the revolution during these years was essential to his consolidation of power. One place where Doyle makes clear his view of Bonaparte’s relationship to the previous decade of revolutionary government appears in the chapter “Winning the War.” Referring to the period when Bonaparte returned to France after the expedition to Egypt and when the Russian alliance with Austria and the British was falling apart, Doyle states: “Contrary to his claims then and later, his presence was not necessary to save the Republic from external enemies. Instead, he was able to devote his entire energy and attention to subverting it from within, on his own terms” (p. 59). Although he supposedly told Josephine in 1802 that “I have made kings... with no intention to be one” (p. 137), in the end, Bonaparte brought back a monarchical regime. Regarding the 1802 plebiscite making him First Consul for life, Doyle writes: “In all but name France had a king again...Instead of a constitutional monarchy, Napoleon had created an absolute one...[but] there were no further steps towards ultimate enthronement so long as the peace of 1802 lasted” (p.140). On this point, Doyle provides a meaningful quotation from Joseph Fouché on what the French were thinking: “Most of the citizens who had voted to confer the supreme magistracy on him for life believed that they were bringing the monarchical system back to France, and with him rest and stability” (p.139). Napoleon’s domestic and diplomatic successes allowed him to construct an image of himself as the man who could finally end the chaos of the previous ten years.[2]

William Doyle has written an engaging and enlightening book that specialists and non-specialists alike will appreciate. It is based on deep knowledge and broad reading of the enormous secondary literature on the topic at hand along with a career's worth of reflection on the significance of the Revolution and Napoleon. It also includes eight well-chosen illustrations, one at the start of each chapter, that relate well to the topics covered by the chapters to which they are attached and allow the reader to consider the ways in which Bonaparte, his collaborators, and his opponents appeared in contemporary visual representations. The book contains countless meaningful reflections on the steps taken by Bonaparte to dismantle the Revolution and to position himself as the man who could bring stability to France, and Doyle convincingly argues that this brief period of peace was essential to that project. By focusing on this phase, Doyle makes clear that military conquest was only one part of Napoleon's success, even though it is often viewed as the primary explanation for his rise to fame. Ending the decade-long conflicts and political instability that had plagued France was, if anything, more important to the consolidation of his power.

NOTES

[1] William Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, rev. ed., 2018).

[2] Doyle's arguments complement Jean Tulard's classic account in *Napoléon ou le mythe du sauveur* 3rd ed. ([1977] Paris: Fayard, 1987) / *Napoleon: The Myth of the Savior*, trans. Teresa Waugh (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984).

Denise Z. Davidson
Georgia State University
ddavidson2@gsu.edu

Copyright © 2023 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172