

**“THE ECONOMIST” NAPOLEON BONAPARTE  
A BRIEF SKETCH PORTRAIT**

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**Abstract**

*“Napoleon – the glory and the shame” – this is the approach that many historians have regarding the evolution of the great emperor’s career, even after two centuries of his fall. “Glory and shame”, fascination and execration, admiration and hate. I believe that the arguments sustaining the positive values are more solid and numerous – despite his great ambition that would often make the great emperor unstoppable, his braveness would always hover positively on all spirits. The “shadowy” side is sustained by frail arguments. Either way, Napoleon was the main subject of hundreds and hundreds of paperworks (one of them belonging to my grandfather, General Dumitru Vrăjitoru) not only in the past days, but also in our current times. There were also millions and millions of articles, dozens and dozens of movies - both in the past and nowadays. Therefore, it is impossible for such a great character not to gain public attention.*

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*“Great characters make their own pedestal.  
It’s the future that handles the statues” – Victor Hugo*

**1.** We’re talking about Napoleon who saved the Revolution (a revolution that was heading for chaos), we’re talking about the man who largely created – politically, socially, culturally and economically speaking – modern France. We’re talking about Napoleon, the universal character who influenced (and still influences) the civilian life of most countries of the

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world: The Civil Code, administrative structures, laws, future-oriented vision. We're talking about Napoleon, the man, the general that also influenced the military life: his mastery, his most "well covered" campaigns, his uniforms that are still used in Argentina, Venezuela etc. Moreover, we're talking about the man who set meritocracy, in the context of a country like France, dominated, until the Revolution of 1789, by the aristocracy class' land contempt towards the people. It was Napoleon the one who granted many high military positions to persons with humble origins. Many officers that were excellent organizers and became even marshals of France, for example, were sons of inkeepers or servants. These kind of appointments did not only apply to military positions; Napoleon also granted some of these persons, gifted with great skills and clever minds, despite of their humble origins, with high public functions such as doctors, writers, artists, manufacturers etc.

Among others, it is also worth mentioning the fact that he founded "The Legion of Honor", given to all those who proved to have military and administrative merits. However, his military successes are not the only reason for which Napoleon is still kept in the posterity's memory; The Civil Code he established and his unique manner of society organization were also very important. Napoleon was not popular, loved and admired due to his carefully studied deeds and gestures, but rather for his ability to identify himself with his people, in both positive and negative aspects.

Still: what about "the shame"? What about "the execration"? They are also present, of course, in a given weight, but I personally wouldn't name them this way. Napoleon also had a tyrannical side, he was well known for being a violent conqueror. But this is the way things were happening in the past – there were no "peaceful conquerors". Another argument that's said to be sustaining his "dark side" is the fact that he encouraged slavery, outside France, inside the French colonies. Now, the question would be: how many didn't do the same?! Even after Napoleon's times... and not only in France, but in the entire world! And eventhough this cruel regime was not called "slavery" (they called it "anti-republican" at some point), it was based on the same principles as the ones that other slave regimes have imposed.

So... "genius" or "salaud"? Civilizing or rude? As I was saying, intuitively, I tend to reduce the negative aspects and put more emphasis on the genius and civilizing side of the character.

Based on my own knowledge and helped by the excellent study belonging to professor Pierre Branda - „Napoleon, le sauveur de l'économie”

(„Napoleon, the savior of the economy”), released in the special edition of the French magazine „Historia” (January/February, 2014), a study totally dedicated to the great emperor, entitled: „Napoleon: la gloire et la honte”, I will try to explain why Napoleon could be called “an economist” and also bring arguments to my point of view that highlights “the glory” and not “the shame”. As a matter of fact, the study itself dedicates 46 pages to Napoleon’s great deeds and accomplishments (described as being a great war strategist, the apostle of meritocracy, the founder of the modern state, the architect of the Civil Code, the savior of the economy, the reconciliatory between the church and the state, the genius of communication), whereas the pages describing the “shameless” deeds and behavior (the human butcher, the tiran, the engrained liar, the supporter of slavery, the manipulator) are in a smaller number: 27. Obviously, this disproportion matters. In my opinion, regardless of his flaws, Napoleon will remain forever an illustrious character. However, returning to our concern: the economist Napoleon Bonaparte, “the saviour of the economy”? Why? And most importantly - how?

2. The economy of France during the 17th century, the 18th century and during the begining of the 19th century, are subjects I already wrote about, many times. First there was „The affair of the necklace”, sustained by France’s weaknesses. Then the case of Nicolas Foquet - an intelligent man and a worthy specialist, too obsessed, however, by luxury and riches – confronting the great financier Jean Baptiste Colbert – a much more lucid and honest person. Then there was the John Low scandal, or, in other words, the peak and the collapse of the world’s first major share company, whose major consequences lead, among others, to the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789. I’m also refering to the incisor journalist of the Revolution, Camille Desmoulin, who was beheaded, along with Danton; of course, economical reasons were also implied here as well. Continuing with the major events, I can also mention the young general Bonaparte’s expedition in Egypt – a campaign that indicated great management skills, as well as an outstanding capability for prediction. In other news, there’s also the episode in the land of the pharaohs, with the beautiful Pauline Fourès, the pecuniary generosity of the emperor towards his family, his mistresses and his generals. Nevertheless, the Waterloo defeat with its many economical issues etc. There are, however, other two episodes which I found unfair from Napoleon’s side and, therefore, hard to neglect: one of them was heading, overnight, towards France and

leaving his army in Egypt. The other episode was similar, except that it happened in Russia, not long after his retreat from Moscow – again, he left his army alone during the cold winter, prey to the Russians. Eventhough the army counted 400.000 soldiers at the beginning, only 20.000 of them managed to get out of Russia. As an argument to his acts, Napoleon mentioned some “troubled situations” going on in Paris, that required his immediate presence. In my opinion, that could not count as an excuse, for how could one abandon his army, knowing this will lead to its death, in order to save his own career? Economically speaking, these episodes were very serious.

**3.** So, Bonaparte „the economist”. But what does the economist do? He takes into consideration the inputs, he calculates, evaluates, provides, invests having always the market in his mind. Nothing from which I have shown so far, regarding Napoleon, has created a proper context for the French economy. In fact, the entire European economy was having some problems back in those days. Returning to our main focus, however, which concerns the French economy after 1795, we can state the fact that between 1795-1976, the economy of France was basically destroyed. As Pierre Branda states, in his excellent study that has already been mentioned, back in those days, in France, there were only 167.000 remaining francs, while the normal and proper state’s functionality – a developing state with high hopes on one hand and fierce enemies, on the other hand – would cost between 1-2 million francs/day. “For Bonaparte, who had to lead a military campaign against Austria (which was threatening France’s boundaries) and also to enterprise great reforms, the situation was dramatic. His regime was facing the risk of being defeated, just like the other regimes before”. So, what did the future emperor do? He did exactly what these kind of situations require to be done. First of all, he gathered all the main bankers of Paris and France at the Luxemburg Palace, and held them a great speech. He presented them his main concerns and disappointments, as well as some possible advantages. The bankers promised loans of 12 million francs, assuring, in the end, only 3 millions of them, with an interest rate of 40% per year (the attitude also applies to nowadays cases, from all around the world). This amount was far too small compared to the real needs. As I stated before, the financial deficiencies of the old regime, as well as the ones caused by the Revolution, have both had a serious impact. Much more was needed and the new regime was forced to prove his capacity in a crisis situation. As a result, Napoleon, along with his finance specialist,

Martin Mihcel Gaudin and other specialists, has started to massively recover financial resources from “those who had higher or lower outstanding taxes”. For most of them, companies or private businesses, the recovery period consisted in one month. Afterwards, many categories of public agents were forced to pay “a bail”, in order to continue to practice their activities, a bail that would go to The Public Treasury. A contest, states P.B, followed afterwards: the regional department that will be the first to honor his financial contributions will have his name offered to one of the most beautiful markets, to one of the most beautiful places in Paris. The contest proved to be a success.

4. They were significant measures, but they didn't manage to gather too much money, or to reestablish the people's trust in finances. Therefore, measures regarding France's tax structure had to be taken. The nature of the taxes was not put in doubt and the state was still in charge of the registration rights and the stamps. However, three years ago, the Constituent decided that all direct contributions should be in the concern of the municipal administrations, which made it difficult to obtain the proposed goal: the local corruption (and not only) being one of the impediments. Napoleon, however, will be about to solve this. In the 13<sup>th</sup> of December, 1799, he will decide to create a “Direct Contribution” reglementation, which will have the missions of “establishing and sending tax matrices”. This was a reglementation that belonged exclusively to the Ministry of Finance, assuring, therefore, a direct link between the administration and the taxpayer, which inevitably lead to less corruption. The financial resources started to increase and after only two years of leadership, the national budget started to balance, with the help of Bonaparte. The First Consul of Bonaparte was achieving resources that could serve other purposes as well, such as: the economic health of the country, quality economic development. “If France is getting rich, Napoleon stated, the state is also getting rich, thanks to the taxes. Therefore, economic development must be assured.” The focus was becoming much wider – there were a lot of inventions being promoted, as well as technologies, schools that could provide qualified labor force, like The National Conservatory of Arts and Crafts. “Nothing was neglected”, says professor Pierre Branda.

Moving on, the banking system also needed to be reviewed. This would have given the state, as well as the entire economy, the opportunity to obtain the finances required by the needed investments. Merchants would also

need commercial credits, as well as bank notes, in order to simplify their transactions. The banks – especially the credit loan – were “indexed” during the Revolution, the noble fortunes were seized without encouraging wealth creation, which means that creating a new great bank for France became one of the first measures that needed to be taken into account. Two decrees from the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 1800, will enshrine the creation of The bank of France. The initial capital consisted in 30 million francs, that is 30.000 shares, with a share value of 1000 francs/share. The state’s contribution was about 10 million francs, which represented the “bail” taxes aforementioned. The next step was a fusion with The House of Current Accounts, which held an entire network of offices and qualified individuals. The Bank of France will officially begin its activity in February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1800. In 1803, the bank will gain the exclusive privilege of issuing notes and coins. It will master the credit and facilitate the currency. As a result, its ticket circulation will increase from 29 million francs in 1802 to 111 million francs in 1812. A significant change, but it was still not enough...

Bonaparte, soon to become emperor Napoleon, still needed to organize the monetary anarchy. How could he have done this? What was the situation? The fact that a great part of the old regime’s coins – the golden “ludovics”, the silver ecu and “sous” (copper coins) was retired, in order to recover the material, is well known. Meanwhile, the fake coins brought from England or from French sweatshops were abundant. Moreover, there was also a great quantity of foreign coins, back from the times of revolutionary wars, that gained power in the territory. In order to complicate everything, P.B. writes, “The pound continued to count as currency, despite the adoption of the franc, as a national monetary value. In other words, buying and selling remained complicated activities, which was affecting or even slowing down the economic development.” A very pertinent remark. In fact, between the “laissez-faire” policy and an actual intervention, Bonaparte waited 3 years before “frontally attacking” the problem. The law from April 1803 (Germinal, year XI) will devote a new powerful coin, the franc called “germinal” – after the name of the month, April, after the Revolution. The main advantages of this new coin were: its weight was about 5 grams of silver, close to the pound’s weight from 1726. Which made it possible, according to some specialists, to come back to a certain stability, after the revolutionary upheaval. Moreover, due to the ratio between gold and silver, established at 15,5, “the germinal franc” had an exchange power that was adapted to its

central position in Europe, even for the countries in which gold was considered to be privileged, like England and Netherlands, but also for the countries that found silver as being a priority – like Spain and Portugal. However, the decimal system – the devisions – were preserved. Plus, “the germinal franc” represented both a currency and a real coin. There were clear signs of changes that allowed an economic recovery.

5. Moving on – Bonaparte loved France in the completeness of its components of one kind or another. Was he a protectionist? Yes, he was, in the extent that, back in those days, kings and emperors, as well as heads of states were all protectionists. Was he a liberal? Well of course he was, giving and offering credit to new, fresh ideas, without taking credit for the ideas offered to him by others, just for the sake of his own glory. The commercial blockade with England, which was largely established by the English, offered Napoleon the chance to recover the national French spirit, energy and intelligence. There were many other foreign ideas that were proposed to him, or that inspired him in order to improve the French economy, a fact that underlines that the emperor always kept his mind open. Napoleon tried hard to improve the relationships between merchants, employers and employees. He continued to have a strong interest in all social aspects. He also issued laws, advices the government regarding the development of the economy, industry, agriculture and commerce. He established The Commerce Chambers, having the same responsibilities as they do now, all around the world. He also improved the network of canals and navigating rivers. He was also the one to imagine the uniforms of the watching guards, this being another way of offering uniqueness to those kind of activities. Napoleon also built many bridges and roads and even established An Imperial Institution for Bridges and Roads, having some of the best existing engineers. According to statistics, between 1804 and 1813, the French state spent almost 860 million francs on activities meant for public improvements, without adding the departmental and municipal spending. He will also establish the “Court of Accounts”, which will have attributions regarding the control of the public money spending. There are institutions, actions and measures that were based on these french models and adopted in the whole world. This, however, would be just one of the many other factors that could bring Napoleon the title of a “society constructor”.

6. Of course, all the great final results must also be accompanied by the costs of these projects, supported by France and by the entire world. The costs that the sudden falling of the emperor have brought should also be taken into consideration. However, the enthusiastic welcome he received when returning to France, after evading the Elba Island, and the fact that he crossed the entire Paris without shooting a single fire, being acclaimed „Vive l’empereur”, „Vive Napoleon” – eventhough the king declared him a bandit and a brute - only proves the fact that Napoleon was always in the hearts of the French people. In fact, many of them would have been ready to gave their lives for the emperor, regardless of the latest circumstances. This is not a common situation. During his leadership, France has gained great fame, under the auspices „Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité”. This remained forever – a fact that I personally consider as being priceless. Napoleon is, therefore, a precursor of the European Union, under the auspices „Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité”. The difference is that he didn’t only realize it through conquest, but also through seductions... and that could be the main reason for such a quick fall...

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