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NAPOLEON'S RISE:
THE FRENCH CONSULATE



While the French Republic would technically survive until 1804, from this point on it was a RINO: Republican in Name Only. Perhaps the greatest confirmation of this fact was the complete lack of popular anger over the coup. The Parisian population, previously so quick to rise up against tyranny (both real and imagined), did absolutely nothing when a general forcibly overthrew the government and put himself in charge. The revolutionary energy simmering in 1789, percolating in 1791, and finally boiling over in 1793-94, had all but fizzled out by the turn of the century. The truth was that after a decade of foreign war, civil war, economic crisis, famine, and political persecution, the people were sick of revolution and wanted to get back to their normal lives. Napoleon recognized this and promised a competent government that would ensure order and stability. All he asked for in exchange was absolute power.

The first thing Napoleon needed to do was outmaneuver Sieyès in forming the new constitution so that he came out on top. Sieyès was a moderate conservative at heart and made no bones about the fact that he favored a constitutional monarchy on the 1791 model. Only such a system could provide



the stability
 necessary
 for his
 ideal
 society
 “devoted
 to the pur-
 suit of mate-
 rial comfort.”
 Sieyès’ prop-
 osal was for
 the creation of
 a ‘Grand Elector’
 as Head of State, who

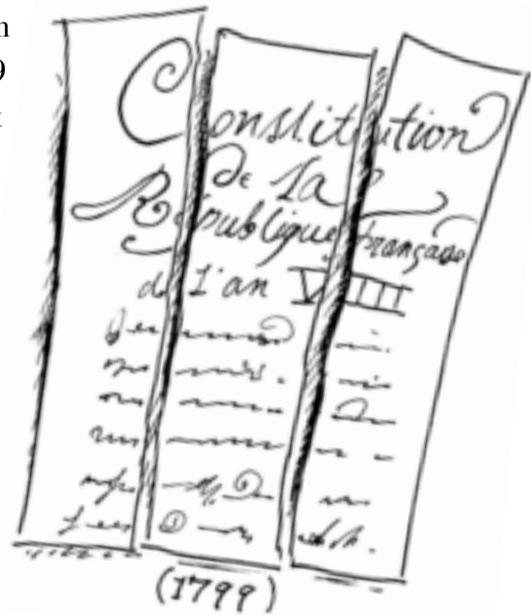
would serve for life and act as

a kind of republican king. Other than ceremonial functions, the Grand Elector’s only real duty was the appointment of state officers, including the two Consuls who would share executive power, one dealing with domestic and the other with foreign affairs. Napoleon had no intention of serving at the pleasure of anyone else; instead, he proposed a system of three Consuls, one of whom would sit above the rest as First Consul (guess who that would be?). Napoleon won support for his system, which became the final version.

It only took the commission assigned to draft the new constitution a month to complete it. Rather than have a legislative body vote on its approval, as had been done in the past, Napoleon instead pushed for approval of the constitution via nationwide plebiscite. This established a precedent that Napoleon would utilize his entire career and later became an essential feature of Bonapartism – the use of plebiscites to legitimize expansions of power. By appealing directly to the people, Napoleon could circumvent rival politicians (whom he had little patience for anyway) while simultaneously portraying himself as a populist. The whole exercise

was a charade since the constitution (known as the Constitution of 1799 or the Year VIII) went into effect ‘provisionally’ prior to approval anyway, and the vote in January of 1800 returned the highly dubious result of 99.9% in favor of adoption.

In formulating this new government with himself at the head, we see Napoleon’s long-term strategy playing out. Unlike Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great, two other great generals who rose to political prominence,



Napoleon did not have the advantage of being born into a rich and powerful family. Hailing from the lower Italian nobility, he would likely have been stuck in a midlevel officer position his entire career if not for the Revolution. Unlike most of his fellow officers who chose to emigrate, Napoleon seized the opportunity it presented. By doing so he formed an entirely new breed, the self-made leader, and made up the rules as he went along. Napoleon prided himself from a young age on having an intuitive understanding of human nature, and he used it to his advantage. He knew most people could care less about Jacobinism, or royalism, or any other ‘ism’ for that matter. What they cared about was having enough to eat, a steady job, a roof over their heads, safety for them and their families, and freedom to practice their religion. If he could just ensure those needs were met, the vast majority of the population would support him, regardless of ideology. He also knew that while most people liked some aspects of the Revolution – the abolition of feudalism and guarantee of basic rights for instance – they longed for the grandeur, prestige, and stability the monarchy offered. It was this ability to reconcile tradition with progress while playing both extremes against the middle that made Napoleon such a formidable political force.

The new French Consulate self-consciously modeled itself on ancient Rome. Napoleon admired the Romans and saw post-Revolutionary France as carrying on their legacy. The government itself took its name from the Consuls, the two-person executive of the Roman Republic. In addition to the Consuls, there was also a Senate in the Roman tradition, which Sieyès would head up as a consolation prize. However, all real governing power belonged to Napoleon as First Consul. From this point until 1815, the saga of France's continuing revolutions is so closely interwoven with the story of Napoleon that it is nearly impossible to pull them apart.

Much like the Directory had (unsuccessfully) attempted before him, Napoleon wished to portray his reign as the Revolution's successful conclusion. To add credibility to this argument, he needed to end the two things tearing France apart since 1792 – religious strife and foreign war. In the same way as Robespierre, Napoleon was not a religious man, but he understood how important the rituals of Catholicism were to most French people. If anything was responsible for the epidemic of popular revolts against the government in the countryside, it was the policy of dechristianization. It was wholly unenforceable outside the large cities, and it gave the priests and royalists an easy way to caricature the Republic as being an agent of Satan. If Napoleon could restore relations between France and the Roman Catholic Church, it would both boost the legitimacy of the Republic itself and shore up his own reputation as a diplomat and statesman. An expert reader of people, he knew that the new Pope, Pius VII, was eager to make a deal.

The Church at the turn of the 19th century was facing its most serious crisis since the Protestant Reformation. Godless revolutionaries occupied Rome and the last Pope, Pius VI, had actually died while in French captivity. Of the traditional Catholic powers, Spain was in terminal decline, Austria looked weaker than ever, and France was now her greatest enemy. Napoleon knew that if he made Pius VII an offer of reconciliation, the Pontiff would have to take it. Negotiations between the Pope and First Consul began in November of 1800, and dragged on for nine months as both sides postured, gave ultimatums, stormed out of the room, and angrily returned

to the bargaining table. Yet on July 15, both Napoleon and Pius VII signed the Concordat of 1801, restoring full relations between France and the Holy See. As part of the agreement, Napoleon recognized Catholicism as the religion of the “great majority of the French” (although he refused to make it the official state religion like the Pope wanted), agreed to abolish the Revolutionary Calendar (which nobody really liked anyway), and restored the Pope’s ability to appoint bishops (of limited use since the State still nominated them). The Pope agreed to recognize the Consulate as the sole legitimate government of France, give up the Church’s claims on confiscated lands, and have priests swear a loyalty oath to the State in exchange for their salaries. Like all good agreements, nobody was entirely happy with the results, but it rallied popular support behind Napoleon’s regime while allowing him to undermine both the royalist and Jacobin opposition by taking the religious issue off the table.

With peace at home, Napoleon set himself to the task of making peace abroad. France had been constantly at war since 1792. The only way to break the cycle of extremism and create the kind of stability needed to consolidate the gains of the Revolution was to end the uncertainty of war. None of the Coalition members felt much inclined to make peace with Republican France, so Napoleon had to impose it on them. Following another lightning campaign through northern Italy, Napoleon’s army crushed the Austrians at the closely fought Battle of Marengo. In addition to driving Austria out of Italy, Napoleon milked the battle for every ounce of propaganda value it was worth. Marengo solidified Napoleon’s hold on power, causing both his political enemies and rival generals to fall in line. Austria sued for peace once again, ceding even more of her German and Italian territories to France.

With Russia quietly bowing out of the war a year prior, Great Britain remained the only belligerent power left. The British people were sick of war and her merchants wanted the resumption of normal trade. Napoleon capitalized on this desire, sending peace feelers out through French foreign minister Talleyrand. Parliament decided to accept, sending Lord Cornwallis to negotiate on behalf of His Majesty’s Government (yes, the

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same Cornwallis who surrendered to George Washington at Yorktown). Napoleon sent his older brother Joseph to represent the French Republic. The budget deadline was fast approaching and Parliament needed to know whether to appropriate war funds for the next fiscal year. Joseph used this to his advantage and purposefully dragged out negotiations, hoping that by running down the clock he could force Cornwallis to accept an unfavorable peace treaty, which is exactly what happened. Both countries signed the Treaty of Amiens on March 25, 1802, inaugurating a single year of uneasy peace between England and France. It would be the only time the two countries were not at war between 1793 and 1815.

Although Napoleon successfully ended the wars abroad (for a time) and restored peace at home, he still faced constant threats to his rule. In the span of two months, the First Consul faced two serious assassination attempts – a stabbing and a bombing, the latter of which resulted in the deaths of several innocent bystanders. While Napoleon's military victories and the restoration of order at home made him extremely popular with the French people, he needed a way to solidify his hold on government.



FRENCH REVOLUTIONS FOR BEGINNERS

Using the assassination attempts to show that there were extremists seeking to overthrow the government, Napoleon pushed for an amendment to the Constitution, changing his position from First Consul to Consul for Life. The proposal was once again put to a national referendum where it passed with over 99% approval. On August 2, 1802, the Constitution of the Year X went into effect, abolishing all pretext of republican government. The monarchy was now restored in all but name. The only thing left for Napoleon to do was put a crown on his head, which he did two years later.

