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Napoleon Bonaparte and the Origins of Modern Europe: Napoleonic Reforms in the Grande Armée and the Rhineland

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Napoleonic scholarship on the conquest of Europe is in general agreement regarding the military aspects of Napoleon's consolidation of power. In general terms, the Emperor's rapid succession of military victories allowed him to consolidate authority and subsequently to implement the Napoleonic reforms in France and abroad. The overall aim of this paper is to broaden historical understanding of how the Napoleonic reforms were implemented and impacted European society at a grassroots level. This paper begins with an examination of how the meritocratic reorganization of the Grande Armée gradually expanded into a comprehensive overhaul of European political and economic institutions; a progressive development unprecedented in scope in European history. Specifically, this paper argues that the impact of the Napoleonic reforms outlasted the Emperor's fall in 1815, and was instrumental in laying the legal and economic foundations of modern Europe.

Keywords: Code Napoléon, Kleinstaaten, Rechtsstaat, Rhineland, Zollverein.

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1. Introduction

The renowned Bonapartist Stendhal, in his classic 19th-century novel *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830), described the provincial paper merchant Falcoz as a man who considered contemporary French life under Charles X (r. 1824-1830) tragically-diminished from the glories of the Napoleonic age that had preceded it. Falcoz's nostalgia for Napoleonic rule was reflective of a broadly-held view among the French populace that Napoleon had helped elevate France to unprecedented heights of military and political power. Thus, Falcoz's laudatory opinion of Napoleon the man became inextricably linked with the perceived 'greatness' of the nation over which he ruled.

The brief reign of Napoleon I (r. 1804-1815) marked a watershed point in the development of continental Europe. Napoleonic scholarship generally agrees that the emperor's personal influence played an instrumental role in establishing the imperial administrative structures of the empire that bore his name. However, beyond Napoleon's immediate impact as a battlefield commander and a head of state, the systems of governance that emerged around him can be understood as both derived from

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his individual worldview and self-sustaining models shaped by regional and national influences. The Napoleonic reforms of military administration, for example, reflected the emperor's meritocratic orientation while simultaneously constituting a self-regulating system that operated independently of Napoleon himself. Outside of France itself, the conquered European territories were subjected to fundamental state-directed changes that affected every aspect of political, economic, and social life. Thus, the figure of Napoleon the man became inextricably intertwined with the nations over which he came to rule.

In *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1840), the eminent English historian Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) wrote that Napoleon's was "a soul to dare and do. He rose naturally to be the King. All men saw that he was such." (Carlyle, 1871, p.202) Carlyle's 'great man' theory of history suggests that the charismatic force and personal drive of particular leaders grant them the power to essentially redefine the trajectory of political, military, and social developments. Although the systemic changes wrought by Napoleon's reign were undeniably transformative, historical scholarship remains divided regarding the question of whether the influence of the Napoleonic reforms outlasted the fall of the *Premier Empire* or, alternatively, were subsumed within the ensuing nationalistic backlash.

A prominent school of Napoleonic scholarship, including Michael Rowe and Jonathan Sperber, attests to the enduring influence of Napoleonic progressivism in Europe. However, even within this perspective debate continues regarding the manner in which the reforms were implemented, specifically as to whether they constituted a comprehensive grassroots process or should rather be defined as a primarily urban-centred, elite phenomenon. An alternative view put forth by Michael Broers and Acemoglu et. al. posits that the Napoleonic reforms were compromised by an unsustainable idealism and imperialistic overtones which ultimately resulted in their being cast aside after the fall of the *Premier Empire*. In other words, European liberalism should not be defined as a pure byproduct of French progressivism but also an outgrowth of a continent-wide shift away from the feudal systems that had dominated European social, political, and economic life since the Middle Ages.

This paper parallels Jonathan Sperber's grassroots-based view that Napoleon's reign catalyzed transformational and lasting change at all levels of the European social hierarchy and develops that analysis by scrutinizing specific aspects of the reforms, notably his establishment of a meritocratic military officer class and comprehensive overhaul of European political and legal structures. Lastly, this paper will also contextualize Napoleon's recalibration of Europe's political and social landscape by focusing on the effects of the Napoleonic reforms in the former Holy Roman Empire.

2. Military reforms

Maximilian Weber (1864-1920), the German sociologist and political theorist, defined three categories of leadership authority from which political power can flow: legal authority (imparted by law), traditional authority (transmitted through custom), and charismatic authority, which Weber defined as "a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities." (Weber, 1947, p.229) The imposition of Napoleonic rule across Europe initiated a major shift in European institutions of governance, a transformative process in which Napoleon's own charismatic influence fueled the establishment of transcontinental political and economic systems.

Beginning with his early exploits at the Siege of Toulon and on the Italian front of the War of the First Coalition, Napoleon garnered fierce loyalty from the soldiers he led. Even at the earliest stages of his career, Napoleon's exceptional leadership ability and fierce ambition were clearly apparent to his superiors. Following Toulon, General Jacques-François Dugommier endorsed Napoleon's promotion to the rank of Brigadier General with a careful combination of praise and forewarning; "Reward this young man and promote him, for if he is ungratefully treated he will promote himself." (Napoleon, 1993, p.83) Although Napoleon's rise to power contained an undeniable element of personal ambition, once in power he also made a point of acknowledging and rewarding demonstrated merit; a revolutionary ethos initiated in earnest with his reform of the military establishment.

Although France had maintained a standing army since 1652, the military bureaucracy remained under aristocratic control until the overthrow of the Bourbon Monarchy in 1791. Accelerating a trend begun during the early revolutionary period, the Napoleonic army was characterized by an ethos of meritocratic achievement, a reputation derived in part from the aspirational implications of the

Emperor's own selfcharted rise to power. Granted, such a monumental task could not have been accomplished on the basis of one man's actions alone. Rather, Napoleon established a meritocratic bureaucracy expressly designed to precipitate the broad-based implementation of radical reforms, imprinting first the military and then the nation as a whole with a transformational political vision outlined in the *Code Napoléon*. Thus, Napoleon's charismatic authority ultimately "[became] rather, dissociated from the person of the individual leader and embodied in an objective institutional structure" (Weber, 1947, p.363) thereby allowing for a much broader application of the revolutionary ethos. The popular appeal of a meritocratic political and military infrastructure was due in no small part to the popular perception that the new system embodied the egalitarian values of the Revolution. Yet, in Napoleon's view, the fervor of revolutionary idealism had not necessarily elevated the right men to command positions:

"Throughout the Revolution, non-commissioned officers and ensigns had been promoted to the higher ranks of the artillery. Many of them were capable of making good artillery generals, but many had neither the ability nor the knowledge necessary for the high rank to which their seniority and the spirit of the times had promoted them." (Napoleon, 1993, p.74)

Upon being promoted to Brigadier General in 1793, Napoleon took steps to replace the feudal tradition of lineage-based advancement with an explicitly merit-based system. The objective merits of recognizing natural ability over inherited title were manifest in the French Revolutionary Army's series of successful engagements in the Wars of the First and Second Coalition (1792-1802). Napoleon's progressive attitude towards military organization would not be replicated by another major European power until Prussia's effective implementation of the *Militärische Gesellschaft* in 1849 and the Cardwell Reforms of 1871 in Great Britain. From a social standpoint, the military reforms of the Napoleonic period transformed popular opinions about military service and inspired personal loyalty to the Napoleonic regime among the soldiery.

However, in order to effectively contextualize Napoleon's progressive attitude towards reforming the military bureaucracy, a clear distinction must be drawn between Napoleon's progressive management style and his nepotistic attitude towards high-level appointments. The preeminence of military affairs in Napoleonic historiography tends to overshadow Napoleon's appointment of close relatives to the thrones of Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, and Germany. These appointments were often highly unpopular; Joseph Bonaparte's brief reign as King of Spain was marked by widespread civil unrest from a populace threatened by a progressive reform program envisioned by Napoleon and aggressively implemented by his brother in Naples and in Spain. The liberal ideals represented by the reforms stood in direct opposition to conservative (and deeply-Catholic) elements of Spanish society, which had historically benefited from "local and provincial rights and privileges" (Thompson, 1951, p. 245) that had been in place since feudal times. In this regard, Napoleon's nepotistic appointments can be understood as a means by which he could directly influence change throughout his empire by placing blood relations in positions of authority. Napoleon's personal reputation was also enhanced and extended by the fact that the new rulers shared his name, symbolizing the establishment of a new dynasty to rival the Habsburg or Bourbon monarchies.

Over the long-term, the lasting impact and charismatic appeal of Napoleonic idealism can be seen in the persistence of *Idées Napoléoniennes* and the enduring popularity of the Bonapartist movement during the reign of Louis-Napoleon (r. 1852-1870), who capitalized on the revered legacy of his ancestor to both legitimize his rule and to justify a progressive reform program of his own. Nevertheless, an interpretation of French national glory under Napoleon cannot be characterized as a pure derivation of his charismatic authority and military legacy. Alternatively, mapping the origins of Napoleonic greatness requires a critical examination of less conspicuous aspects of his reign, notably a comprehensive program of legal and economic reforms that wrought radical and lasting socio-political change upon European civil society writ large.

3. Continental socio-economic reforms

The Napoleonic efforts to implement legal and economic reforms in the newly-conquered territories were particularly successful in the former Holy Roman Empire, where the new policies were forcefully enacted at both local and regional levels. The initial changes interwove the *Landrecht für die*

Preußischen Staaten (General State Laws of the Prussian States) with the Napoleonic Code; a progressive civil framework that systematized formerly disparate legal relationships into a widely-applicable model that remains the judicial cornerstone of modern French law. Contrasting the extent of Napoleon's reformist efforts with the turmoil and reactionary backlash engendered by the Jacobin regime, "it is Napoleon, not the Girondins of 1792, who emerges as the true revolutionary." (Broers, 2001, p.151) The powerful impact of the Napoleonic reforms on feudal structures was apparent in the emergent concept of the *Rechtsstaat* (state of law) in German political discourse, a codification of progressive policies that accelerated economic integration, fueled the rise of a continental middle-class, and laid the groundwork for European industrialization.

Napoleon's implementation of legal reforms in the Rhineland was facilitated by the cooperation of local elites. The implementation of new civil codes in the former Holy Roman Empire left of the *Elbe* between 1802 and 1815 received "support within the ranks of these urban elites of Northern Italy, Western Germany, and the Low Countries." (Broers, 2001, p.138) Furthermore, the diverse social and ethnic backgrounds of the officials appointed to provincial judicial positions (known as Prefects) comprised a mix of French and foreign nationals that underscored the pan-European vision of progressive statehood Napoleon advocated. (Whitcomb, 1974, p.1099) Rowe (1999) mentions a Prussian Prefect named Christophe Wilhelm Sethe who earned the Emperor's disfavor for his inability to suppress a Knüppelrussen rebellion in Gummersbach. (Iskjul, 1986, p.59) Arriving in Paris, Sethe was warned that he could face capital punishment for his failure. Undaunted, Sethe replied that if the Emperor wanted to shoot him, "then he would have to shoot the Law first." (Bavarian Academy of Sciences, 1875-1912) Napoleon's advocacy of progressive civil and legal change was critical to establishing the Code's legitimacy across Europe while also indirectly buttressing the glory of Napoleonic France in the eyes of other nations. Even after the collapse of the territorial empire in 1815, the enduring influence of Napoleon's legal reforms could be seen in the growing influence of the *Rechtsstaat*, a concept strengthened by the uncompromising and relatively egalitarian ethos of the Napoleonic Code. In a broader sense, the institution of an egalitarian social and political governance model can also be understood as the precursor of a broader trend towards social liberalization encompassing increased population mobility, expanded legal equality, and enhanced meritocracy, all essential components in the creation of the modern European state.

The political reform of the Holy Roman Empire was supported by the consolidation of formerly disparate fiefdoms. Prior to Napoleon's conquest of the former Holy Roman Empire, the territory was an agglomeration of approximately 391 small feudal states called *Kleinstaaten*. As the Holy Roman Empire declined and the central authority of the Emperor weakened after the Peace of Westphalia, these fiefdoms became increasingly fragmented, each governed according to its own respective traditions and individual princes. Consequently, economic growth was hampered by restrictive trade policies and a lack of integration. The French-led Mediatization of 1803 unified the *Kleinstaaten* into cohesive and larger *Mittelstaaten*, disempowering the ecclesiastical authorities and divesting the feudal lords of their ancestral lands, resulting in a reorganization of property unprecedented in German history. (Whaley, 2013, p.620-632) The Confederation of the Rhine, an alliance of German princes under Napoleonic authority, was pushed to enact a series of sweeping economic measures designed to abolish the feudal structures of the *Kleinstaaten*. These reformist measures - which included the abolition of serfdom, comprehensive agrarian reforms, and the elimination of guilds - were initiated under French administration in the Rhineland in 1804 and implemented in Hessen-Kassel and Hanover in 1808. (Acemoglu et al., 2001, p.3292)

In conjunction with concurrent legal and economic reforms, the binding of approximately 390 *Kleinstaaten* into 35 *Mittelstaaten* under the Confederation of the Rhine marked a watershed point in the evolution of German national identity. Subsequent attempts by post-Napoleonic authorities to revert to the old ways were met by strong resistance from large swaths of the population, elements of which adopted pro-Napoleonic symbolism and French revolutionary sloganeering to reinforce their claims, as witnessed when the peasantry of Cologne chanted "Vivat, long live Napoleon" while protesting onerous tax burdens. (Sperber, 1989, p.202) Thus, the Napoleonic reform measures in the Rhineland and across the former Holy Roman Empire were successful in part due to the increased potential for social mobility they offered the lower classes. Although the introduction of progressive

social legislation was embraced by a broad cross-section of Rhenish society, the former beneficiaries of feudal privilege were less amenable to the changes.

One of the corollary effects of Napoleon's systematization of legal frameworks and integration of disparate political spheres was the disenfranchisement of a rural nobility that had drawn power from feudal land ownership and the Kleinstaaten system of the Holy Roman Empire. (Broers, 2001, p.139) In its place rose a power structure centred on urban elites and the serfs, with many of the latter group responding to the changes by joining the ranks of Napoleon's army or migrating to urban centres which offered a wider array of economic opportunities than had been available under the feudal system. Furthermore, an increasingly flexible labor market fueled new business creation and lay the groundwork for urbanization in later years. For instance, the French-driven creation of *Amtsgericht* (local courts) throughout the Rhineland facilitated the fair resolution of business disputes and played a critical role in the rise of local enterprises. (Acemoglu et al., 2001, p.3290)

The consolidation of the Kleinstaaten into *Mittelstaaten* not only yielded political unity but also removed many of the trade barriers that had impeded economic growth in the former Holy Roman Empire. Although it negatively impacted economic activity in the short term, the Continental System of 1806 also promoted free trade through the imposition of a single-toll system. The issue of economic disunity resulting from internal tariff boundaries was voiced in Friedrich List's 1819 proposal for the establishment of an economic union among the German states, in which he argued that; "Thirty-eight customs boundaries cripple inland trade, and produce much the same effect as ligatures which prevent the free circulation of the blood." (Hirst, 1965, p.137) In structural terms, the Mediatization of 1803 was a template for the *Zollverein*, a Prussian-led economic institution integral to German unification. In a broader historical sense, Napoleon's progressive reforms lay the groundwork for the development of the modern European nation-state, fueled the development of an urban-middle class, and lay the seeds of 19th century industrialization. Thus, Napoleon's reign presaged the political and economic transition from the old Europe to the new.

4. Conclusion

As we have seen, the Napoleonic era was marked by transformational progressive changes, not only in France but throughout Western and Central Europe. Notably, the formulation and effective implementation of a model *Rechtsstaat* promoted a progressive understanding of how the ideals of the French Revolution could be implemented in a phased and comprehensive fashion that tapped into Napoleon's charismatic authority while laying the institutional foundations of modern European nation-states. Thus, just as Napoleon linked his own rise to power to the national prestige of the nation he led, the Napoleonic reforms offered a structural template for subsequent progressive developments in continental Europe. The sheer ambition and inherent contradictions of this audacious enterprise epitomizes both the 'greatness' and the hubris of Napoleon's reign.

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