

**The Role of Propaganda in Destabilizing the Directory and Securing Napoleon's Power**

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Since the end of the French Revolution historians have constantly debated the reasons why the Coup de Brumaire and Napoleon's rise to power was so successful. Napoleon's control and manipulation of propaganda allowed him to develop a cult of personality, that in its most organic form, dictated the mindset and opinion of the people of France during his Italian and Egyptian campaigns. Propaganda has always played a large role in any prominent figures' rise to power, but Napoleon's engagement and employment of propaganda in his campaigns exceeded any form of media manipulation that preceded him. Napoleon's control of media outlets, the creation of his own glorified dispatches, and the formation of six newspapers catering to his every will, helped build up the media empire that would aid him in his rise to power. The historiography surrounding Napoleon's control of the press and the fall of the Directory is ambiguous at best and does not give Napoleon's employment of propaganda enough credit when discussing his rise to power and the fall of the Directory. In recent years the image of the Directory as an incompetent government has changed and it has come to be viewed in a more positive light by numerous historians, although there are still those who view the Directory in a very negative light. Some historians believe that it was the people's love of the famous general that allowed him to overthrow the Directory, while others acknowledge that it was the ineffective governance of the Directory that would have allowed any prominent Frenchman to seize power. If one believes in this new school of thought surrounding the positive achievements of the Directory, new questions are raised about why the government eventually fell. Although there are a plethora of possibilities to explain the Directory's downfall, one compelling piece of evidence is their ineffective use of propaganda when compared to Napoleon's mastery of it. An analysis of Napoleon's military dispatches, along with excerpts from the *Courrier de l'Arme d'Italie*, one of Napoleon's newspapers, offers a deep insight and understanding into Napoleon's

control of the press and the impact that it had on the French people. There is excess evidence that the Directory was effective at governing, but lacked the charisma and skill to manipulate propaganda that Napoleon so easily wielded and took advantage of during his military campaigns in Italy and Egypt before the Coup de Brumaire.

Martyn Lyons, in his book, *France Under the Directory*, outlines the effective policies and reforms that the Directory implemented in their quest to resurrect the government, economy, and culture of France out of the ashes of the Reign of Terror and the Thermidorian Reaction. Lyons states, “The Directory attempted to provide a stable and liberal form of government, which would preserve the moderate social gains of the Revolution, but would avoid a repetition of the repressive violence and tyrannical dictatorship associated with the Terror.”<sup>1</sup> Lyons discusses how the Directory was successful in creating a permanent government bureaucracy along with laying the groundwork for a sound fiscal system in France through their reforms of the taxation system.<sup>2</sup> In terms of the French economy, the Directory was able to achieve financial stability throughout France along with the advancement of the cotton industry, agricultural achievements, and the continued mechanization of French industry. Lyons states, “... industrial production at the end of the Directory reached two-thirds of its pre-revolutionary level.”<sup>3</sup> Lyons falls into the Revisionist side of the historiography of the French Revolution, while the Marxist school of thought on the Directory takes a profoundly more negative approach to their analysis. Another recent historiographic argument, which differs from Lyons’s interpretation of the Directory, has erupted between James Livesey, who believes that a sense of democratic republicanism emerged in France under the Directory, and Howard Brown who argues that the ultimate failure of liberal democracy resulted from the chronic violence that

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<sup>1</sup> Martyn Lyons, *France Under the Directory*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 163.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 188.

plagued France under the Directory. The Directory, even with all of its flaws, was able to enact meaningful change during its time in power to rebuild France, and as a result, Lyons attributes the fall of the Directory to the political apathy surrounding the governing body and its inability to sway public opinion in an attempt to outline the reason why it was eventually overthrown.

The compelling nature of the evidence presented above make a strong and captivating argument for the effective administration of the Directory; but the internal strife and political apathy of the French people towards the government is paramount in an analysis and examination into the reason why the Directory was easily overthrown. Lyons continuously cites examples of the French people showing a lack of passionate enthusiasm for the Directory and discusses how the government made the minimum demands on its private citizens in an attempt to end the upheaval, ongoing since the start of the French Revolution, and to allow the people of France to return to a normal life.<sup>4</sup> The infighting between the directors, the Neo-Jacobin and Royalists factions, along with the ineffective administration of some of the provinces by the Directory, correlates and contributes to Lyons' argument that the lack of enthusiasm for or against the Directory contributed to its ability to be easily overthrown.<sup>5</sup> This sense of normalcy and stable governance that the Directory projected in its policies allowed it to make considerable strides towards the establishment of a stable government bureaucracy but allowed the French people, for the first time in a while, to take the back seat and return to the political atmosphere that surrounded the Old Regime, which after years of revolutionary patriotism and activism created a sense of indifference towards the Directory. The Directory's policies towards censorship were somewhat a reversal of the previous republican governments, since the Directory was far more tolerant of criticism and opposition within the French popular press,

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

which contributed to their lack of media manipulation and ability to influence public opinion. The Directory faced a dual problem with the lifting of censorship laws and the reduction of revolutionary fervor, which led to the inability of the Directory to amount significant popular support. This lack of popular enthusiasm for the government, according to Lyons, is the reason why so many coups were successful during the years of the Directory. Lyons examines the coup of fructidor V as a prime example of the Directory undermining the credibility of the Constitution of Year III and its own authority as a republican government in an attempt to remove the royalist faction from the government. Lyons states, “After the coup d’etat of fructidor V, the elections were annulled in forty-nine departments, and all together a total of 195 deputies were excluded from the legislature.”<sup>6</sup> The coup of fructidor V, along with the political apathy that surrounded the Directory, undermined the credibility of the Constitution of Year III and dislodged and overshadowed many of the Directory’s positive accomplishments. Lyons humanizes a controversial governing body that was effective at stabilizing the country, but was plagued by infighting and, further, was ostracized by the French people as a result of propaganda, as the reason that Napoleon Bonaparte and his collaborators were able to seize power so easily and eventually build on many of the programs that the Directory put into place to stabilize the French bureaucracy and economy.

Napoleon’s manipulation of media began during his Italian and Egyptian Campaigns and David Bell, in his book, *The First Total War*, details the changing culture of warfare throughout Europe during the Napoleonic era, along with the emergence of total war in an attempt to explain Napoleon’s quest for military glory and the fame that surrounded him. Bell believes that, from 1794-1799, war became a phenomenon that society would begin to desire more and more, and

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 215.

that Napoleon was the embodiment of this desire.<sup>7</sup> Napoleon's emergence as the embodiment of the desires of the French people did not happen overnight, it was the result of a well-planned propaganda campaign that elevated Napoleon's status to unprecedented heights. Bell states, "He quickly established a popularity in the French population unmatched by any other figure, civilian or military. He could not have accomplished this all without a very keen sense of how to speak to his fellow countrymen- and more, how to touch them, emotionally."<sup>8</sup> Bell goes on to examine the ways in which Napoleon improved the conditions of his troops during the early months of his Italian campaign. Bell categorizes Napoleon as the world's first "media general" by detailing how Napoleon seized every opportunity that he could to popularize and craft his own image. Bell credits this to the beginning of a cult of personality that surrounded Napoleon which allowed him to be seen as the extraordinary man who embodied the phenomenon of war, which was so desperately desired by the French people.<sup>9</sup> As the very nature and atmosphere surrounding warfare was changing during Napoleon's Italian and Egyptian Campaigns, Napoleon's ability to latch onto this changing nature and manipulate it in a way that suited his own rise to power explains why his popularity within the army and back in France rose drastically during this time period. Although some historians may discredit Napoleon's fame as being fake and calculated, Bell details his research through personal memoirs from the period that all testify to the widespread adulation for Napoleon, confirming that his popularity was genuine and not manufactured.<sup>10</sup> Napoleon's Egyptian campaign, although a military and political failure in almost every regard, helped bolster Napoleon's public image back in France. Bell states, "... the expedition had only inflated his legend further, precisely as he had hoped. In

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<sup>7</sup> David A. Bell, *The First Total War*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 191.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 196.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 198-199.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 201.

worker's districts in Paris, police spies reported that he was now being hailed as the 'exiled hero' and as 'our father, our savior' in popular songs."<sup>11</sup> Napoleon's ability to reshape his image based on the re-glorification of war and his quest for military glory sits well with Bell's thesis about the changing culture of war during the Napoleonic era. Napoleon's mastery of propaganda is a testament to his ability to manipulate public opinion in a way that the Directory was never able to comprehend. Bell is able to produce a fresh way to look at Napoleon's fame as a result of the new culture and the re-glorification of warfare and how Napoleon's media manipulation campaigns played a role in shaping his new image.

Napoleon's use of military victories to coerce public opinion is a crucial factor in his rise to fame, but David Jordan, in his book *Napoleon and the Revolution*, focuses on how Napoleon's revolutionary ideology won him the support of the French people. Jordan believes Napoleon to be the flawed savior of the Revolution who kept the other European powers at bay long enough so the ideals of the French Revolution had time to take root in French culture and society. Jordan states, "Napoleon, for all his faults, all the misery and humiliation he had inflicted on France, was the embodiment, however imperfect, of the Revolution."<sup>12</sup> Jordan views the Directory as a failed government and attributes Napoleon's use of propaganda to his willingness to create a cult of personality grounded in the idea of Napoleon as the embodiment of revolutionary principles. Jordan, when describing Napoleon's image, states, "He had mastered the culture of the democratic politics of the Revolution: public opinion not only ruled, but it could be shaped."<sup>13</sup> Jordan makes the claim that Napoleon mastered the culture of the Revolution, in an attempt to prove his thesis. Jordan, expanding on Napoleon's popular image, details how some government officials attempted to revise the Constitution of Year III to allow Napoleon to become a director,

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 220.

<sup>12</sup> David Jordan, *Napoleon and the Revolution*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

showcasing his support not just within the army but the government as well.<sup>14</sup> Although Jordan's argument about Napoleon being the embodiment and savior of the Revolution is considerably flawed, and contradicted throughout his own writing, Jordan does agree with Bell on Napoleon's charisma, personality, and his ability to manipulate media as the reason behind Napoleon's takeover. Jordan may also be one of the most critical authors of the Directory and uses their failures to explain why France needed Napoleon to take power. Jordan, in an attempt to characterize Napoleon as the savior of the Revolution, focuses on the negative aspects of the Directory, but Jordan's diminutive blows against the Directory do not compare to the powerful impact found in Lyons's arguments on the subject.

Philip Dwyer, in the chapter entitled, "Seizing Power, 1799," from his book, *Napoleon The Path to Power: 1769-1799*, examines the days prior to the Coup De Brumaire and details Napoleon's far reaching fame and grasp over the French people and the weakening grip that the Directory held over France in 1798. Dwyer recognizes the success of the Directory during its reign and includes information about how the directors were able to control internal strife; including piracy and brigands in the different departments, the return of economic and financial prosperity to certain parts of France, and the expansion of the government to include almost one hundred departments.<sup>15</sup> Although these successes were promising, Dwyer cites the Directory's attitude towards liberal press censorship, its duty to nullify elections and various coups, along with the emergence of extreme poverty in certain areas of France during the years of the Directory, as part of the reason that, by 1797, the Directory began to lose its grip on France. Dwyer, when discussing censorship laws, states, "The upshot was that greater freedom of the press lead to greater criticism of the government. The opposition press... was unsparing in its

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>15</sup> Philip Dwyer, *Napoleon The Path to Power 1769-1799*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 462.

attacks on the Director, which contributed to the general impression that the Directory was on the verge of collapse.”<sup>16</sup> The leniency and acceptance of a more liberal and free press eventually hurt the Directory in the end as they failed to acknowledge the need for their own media outlets and underestimated the effectiveness of well-planned propaganda. One interesting observation that Dwyer makes is that the fall of the Directory had nothing to do with its policies but is better attributed to the moral decay of French society and the fact that moral corruption, exposed by propaganda, was equated with political decadence.<sup>17</sup> Although the Directory itself was not necessarily corrupt, the people’s perception of it as a corrupt institution contributed to its downfall. Dwyer attributes the fall of the Directory to its failure to employ effective propaganda to rally the people behind its positive achievements, while also citing the decaying French society and a lack of information and focus on the political sphere.

Dwyer, after discussing the downfall of the Directory and its failure to utilize propaganda, moves into a discussion on how Napoleonic Propaganda, specifically during Napoleon’s Egyptian Campaigns, continued to bolster Napoleon’s already well established image. Dwyer acknowledges that the Egyptian Campaign helped swell Napoleon’s popularity in France through propaganda that overemphasized his victories and turned his defeats into minor setbacks. Dwyer states, “The savior image was maintained during Bonaparte’s absence in Egypt and Syria, thanks to both Louis and Lucien, who published flattering articles about their brother in Paris... Pamphlets had also appeared calling for Bonaparte to... save the Republic from the ‘clique’ that had brought about the loss of his conquests in Italy.”<sup>18</sup> Dwyer also examines the type of Napoleonic propaganda that was circulating throughout France during Napoleon’s campaign in Egypt in an attempt to showcase how Napoleon, and his supporters, used this hold

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 464.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 464.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 456.

over society numerous times to bolster his own image. The propaganda was highly effective and convinced the French people that the Directory was not able to save France from the Second Coalition and that Napoleon, their savior and revolutionary hero, was the only one suited for the job.<sup>19</sup> Dwyer details the role of the Bonaparte family in the expansion of Napoleonic Propaganda and cites multiple examples of the Bonaparte family paying off journalists in an attempt to cover up any news they had received about any of Napoleon's blunders in an attempt to protect Napoleon's image.<sup>20</sup> Overall, Dwyer effectively captures the media frenzy and propaganda surrounding Napoleon's ascent to power, which Dwyer maintains was the most important element in the success of the Coup de Brumaire.

Napoleon's military dispatches along with excerpts from the *Courrier de l'Arme d'Italie* makes a clear and persuasive case for the effectiveness of his media campaigns. One of Napoleon's military dispatches reads:

When the drums of combat have beaten, it is necessary to march straight at the enemy, your bayonets at the ready.... Soldiers! Strive to be deserving of yourselves. I will say only two words to you, they will suffice for Frenchman: Italy! Mantua! The peace of Europe, the happiness of your parents will be the result of your courage. Do once more what we have done so often before, and Europe will not contest our title of the bravest and most powerful nation in the world.<sup>21</sup>

This dispatch, sent by Napoleon to the Directory and later printed in the press, is a primary example of the way that Napoleon often wrote and spoke. The way that Napoleon portrayed himself to the public was as a patriotic son of the French Revolution; this would then evoke a plethora of emotions and patriotic sentiment among his troops and the French people. Napoleon used dispatches, like the one quoted above, throughout his Italian Campaign to

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 457.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 457.

<sup>21</sup> Napoleon Bonaparte, *Correspondence de Napoleon Ier*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Henri Plon, 1858), 106-107, number 1180.

generate a sense of nationalism in France which helped him develop a cult of personality that was grounded in an image of Napoleon as the savior of the Army of Italy and patriotic soldier fighting for the ideals of the French Revolution. Whether this was true or not, the way that Napoleon used his own military dispatches, along with other mediums of propaganda, effectively convinced the French people of his status as a hero and respected revolutionary general. Napoleon's newspaper the *Courrier de l'Arme d'Italie* was created solely for the purpose of bolstering Napoleon's own image within the army and in France as well. The newspaper was distributed to the soldiers in the Army of Italy and was also available for sale in Milan and Paris.<sup>22</sup> This form of propaganda operated as a salient vehicle for Napoleon to convey his political ideology to the populace in a convenient and effective manner. The paper served Napoleon as a way to attack the royalist press in France who occasionally challenged his own authority within the government and as a morale builder for his troops during the campaign. In response to royalist attacks against Napoleon in the French press, the *Courrier de l'Arme d'Italie* published a diatribe that read, "The press is becoming the means of destroying, as it was the means of creating the Republic. The deputies have publicly cooperated with the journals... this gives the press daggers and companies of writers and bands of royalist thugs a means to kill republican opinion and to kill republicans."<sup>23</sup> This attack on royalist papers in Paris demonstrates Napoleon's ability to counter political opponents and make them seem like immoral and corrupt politicians/lobbyists who want to dispel the ideals of republicanism from France. Napoleon's employment of propaganda is unwavering and his renowned fame and heroism clearly explains why he was able to influence the mindset of so many Frenchmen, as Wayne Hanley expands on in *The Genesis of Napoleonic Propaganda, 1796-1799*.

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<sup>22</sup> *Courrier de l'Arme d'Italie* (Milan), 6 September 1797.

<sup>23</sup> *Courrier de l'Arme d'Italie* (Milan), 12 September 1797.

Hanley argues that Napoleon was one of the greatest masters of propaganda of all time, while detailing the different methods of propaganda that Napoleon employed in his endeavors. Hanley, when discussing Napoleonic Propaganda, states, “What strikes one almost immediately is the depth to which Bonaparte understood the art of propaganda and the degree to which he was personally involved in its creation.”<sup>24</sup> Napoleon’s rise to power would never have been possible if he did not utilize propaganda to manipulate his public image into something that the people adored time and time again. Hanley states, “Napoleon created for himself the image of the Revolutionary hero- a creation that enabled this once unknown Corsican to become a household name, and ultimately, a power to be reckoned with in France.”<sup>25</sup> It was during these early years (1796-1799) that Napoleon learned how to properly craft his image as a propagandist and was able to effectively hone his skills as a manipulator of public opinion. Hanley argues that it was during this formative period of Napoleon’s career that he employed a variety of diverse, yet effective, methods of propaganda to alter his public image and craft himself into the savior and hero of France. Napoleon employed many mediums of propaganda to achieve his goal including: dispatches, bulletins, proclamations, newspapers, art, the coercion of intellectuals, medals, medallions, and trinkets.<sup>26</sup> Hanley acknowledges that all these forms of propaganda had been used previously in one way or another, and states, “...he merely employed them on a scale and in ways never before attempted, proving himself to be among the first masters of the art of image making.”<sup>27</sup> Napoleon truly was the first master of propaganda and was able to win the support of millions of people through the cult of personality that he created for himself in the early years of his career.

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<sup>24</sup> Wayne Hanley, *The Genesis of Napoleonic Propaganda, 1796 to 1799*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 21.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

As public opinion of the Directory fell from 1797-1799, Napoleon's public image was increasing dramatically as a result of Napoleon's charisma, military genius, and the propaganda surrounding him and his victories. Napoleon's employment of propaganda and the public fame that resulted from it demonstrated the fact that he was able to tap into something profound and unique in the revolutionary spirit of the French Revolution that no one else could. In a time of uncertainty, unrelenting strife, constant warfare, and political corruption Napoleon manipulated his own image in a way that spread hope and the promise of a better more secure future to the French people. Although the Directory may have been effective in administrating France, it never amassed the support of the people because it was never able to recognize the need for a positive public image that had to be created and fostered outside the realm of politics. This positive image could only be forged with a rudimentary understanding of the mechanisms of public opinion and the manipulation of propaganda which, unfortunately, the Directory never exploited, leading to a lack of popular support for the government. Napoleon, unlike the Directory, clearly understood the practicality of propaganda in his rise to power and effectively employed it throughout his early career to amass wide-spread support that would eventually pave the way for him to overthrow the Directory in the Coup de Brumaire and assert himself as the ruler of France.

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