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To what degree can the period 1800-1814 be described as the 'Napoleonic' era in European Politics and culture?

A twenty-five year old in 1815 would not have been able to remember a time when Europe was not at war. From 1792 until 1815, warfare was more or less continuous, with France pitted against a succession of coalitions. It was a Great War[1] unlike any precedent, involving huge armies, fast manoeuvres, decisive battles and tactical novelties such as the use of artillery on the battlefield, or columns and skirmishers. As Bobbitt underlines, this was the birth of the "state-nation", a state mobilising a nation to act on behalf of the State[2], as opposed to the "territorial states" regulated by the concept of the balance of power. In this context, it is not surprising that a French military general would rise to pre-eminence and use the momentum of the Revolution, although it could be that it was the Revolution itself which inevitably had to spawn a "Napoleon" to spend its energy. The revolutionaries had recognised the importance of art and culture for propaganda and indoctrination, a lesson that Napoleon clearly learned, meeting in David his ideal hagiographer. As Boime points out, through him a system evolved, "Bonapartism", which would survive him to exert its hegemony well over a century[3]. Moreover, his opponents in the war also used art, but for resistance. To analyse to what extent this period constitutes a 'Napoleonic' era, it is therefore necessary to study the context, the French state and its hegemony, as well as the use of art on various sides of this epic conflagration.

[1] Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles*, p.146.
[2] *The Shield of Achilles*, pp.146-178.
[3] Boime, *Art in the Age of Bonapartism*, Introduction, pp.xxi-xxvii.

The Revolution had already deeply changed the French state: conscription, introduced in 1792[4], had created huge armies motivated by the cry of "the Fatherland in Danger"; an almost complete replacement of the officers had triggered reorganisation and opened new tactical and strategic possibilities; regional differences had been drastically removed through reorganisation and standardisation (e.g. the metric system, abolition of the old ad-hoc taxes and introduction of more uniform ones), making government more efficient; first drafts of the "Code Civil" (the future "Code Napoléon" of 1807) had been produced in 1790[5]. Importantly, there was now a rich symbolism which could be used to galvanise the people: the tricolour flag, the idea of the citizen as opposed to the subject, the Declaration of Human Rights, the concept of the French state as an embodiment of the theories of the philosophers of the Enlightenment, also linked to the need to "liberate" other peoples from the yoke of absolutism. Enemies within or without could be evoked to justify action and repression, although the memories of the Terror of 1793-1794 were still quite vivid.

It is thanks to these enemies, the Austrians at the border and the "Chouans" counter-revolutionaries in the country, that Bonaparte came to power during the coup of the "18 Brumaire Year VIII" (9 November 1799), having basically abandoned his army in Egypt[6]. A popular general since his brilliant Campaign of Italy in 1796-1797, without credible rival since the death of Lazare Hoche that same year[7], he quickly translated his military prestige into political power. His bravery had already been illustrated by Gros in

[4] Blanning, T.C.W. *The Short Oxfort History of Europe: the Eighteenth Century*, p.206.
[5] Doyle, W. *The Oxford History of the French Revolution, 2nd ed.*, p.393.
[6] Doyle, pp.374-375.
[7] Ibid, p.332.

his *Bonaparte at Arcole*[8]: the young, dashing general taking hold of the tricolour flag and shaming his reluctant troops into action. He used his reputation to win plebiscites: to become First Consul, Consul for life and finally Emperor in 1804. Of course this was anything but democracy: he closed 64 out of 73 French newspapers in 1800-1801 and turned the *Moniteur* into the government mouthpiece, called back Fouché to lead his police, and made justice far more repressive, basically turning France into a military dictatorship[9]. Through careful propaganda he created and cultivated his image of the soldier-emperor, of which David's two portraits, *Napoleon Crossing the Saint-Bernard*[10] and *Napoleon in His Study*[11] are prime examples. Napoleon's initials, his bees and eagles can be found on all buildings, all the furniture of the period (plates depicting his campaigns were quite popular). He extended his control over the arts and sciences, attracting international talent to the "Institut" and creating the "Ecole Polytechnique" – still an elite engineering school - and enhanced the prestige and professionalism of the army: better uniforms, better weapons, an elite officer corps and the "Ecole Saint-Cyr", a prestigious war college (then as now). However, as Hobsbawm stresses out[12], a key element of his myth was "the apotheosis of the man of the people", of the "Little Corporal": Napoleon as the archetypal self-made man.

This system was not only valid for France itself, but also for conquered and occupied countries. By 1810, the French Empire controlled directly or indirectly most of

[8] Antoine-Jean Gros, *Bonaparte at Arcole*, 1796, sketch, Musée du Louvre, in Boime, p.34.
[9] Taylor, P.M. *Munitions of the Mind*, pp.154-157.
[10] Jacques-Louis David, *Napoleon Crossing the Saint-Bernard*, 1801, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, in Boime, p.39.
[11] Jacques-Louis David, *Napoleon in his Study*, 1812, Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., in Boime, p.53.
[12] Hobsbawm, E. *The Age of Revolution*, pp.97-98.

Europe, and was keeping Prussia and Austria in check; only the United Kingdom, which ruled the sea, and Russia were outside its sphere of influence[13]. In what would become Belgium and the Netherlands but were for now part of the Empire, in Italy and in the Confederation of the Rhine, in parts of Poland, the "Code Napoléon", "départements" and "préfets" were introduced, mirroring the French institutions[14]. Where encountered, feudalism and serfdom were abolished. The Holy Roman Empire, a relic from the time of Charlemagne, vanished. Italy and Germany were drastically reshaped and rid of the small medieval enclaves that dotted them (such as the Italian city-states like Venice, or the German Episcopal principalities of Cologne, Mainz, Treves and Salzburg). Even Napoleon's enemies had to adapt, adopting conscriptions and reforming their government to be able to conduct warfare in the new manner forced upon them, as Bobbitt underlines[15].

Countries occupied or annexed by the Empire also ended up as a source of revenue and loot: taxes would be collected and sent back to Paris, artworks "transferred" to museums in France. It was in Spain, however, that the myth of the soldier-emperor liberating peoples found its greatest opposition. Having intrigued to take control of the Spanish monarchy, in 1808 Napoleon triggered the abdication of King Carlos IV and his son Fernando; on the 2nd of May, however, the Spanish people rose up in protest at the French occupation and were brutally repressed, marking the start of vicious guerrilla warfare, with British troops under Wellington joining the fray[16]. Goya, eye-witness to the

[13] *The Age of Revolution*, map of 'Europe in 1810', p.374.
[14] Ibid, p.115.
[15] *The Shield of Achilles*, p.159.
[16] Boime, pp.199-200.

brutality of this five-year war, would capture its horrors in his unflinching series of engravings, *The Disasters of Wars*[17] (drawn between 1810 and 1820): executions of the defenceless, desperate heroes being slaughtered, mutilated corpses, bayoneted women and children… It is a damning portrayal of the imperial troops, although Goya also takes aim at the brutalisation of the guerrillas and at the rigid social order of Spanish society. Goya's *The Giant*[18] with its towering colossus terrorising the countryside, is as Boime suggests a response to Ingres' Jupiter-like *Napoleon I on the Imperial Throne*[19]. In Spain, the French Empire awakened the spirit of nationalism; the success of the guerrillas in holding Napoleon at bay would inspire many others throughout Europe, including in Germany with the rise of romanticism[20].

As the Napoleonic hegemony was based on the soldier-emperor, its momentum could only be maintained by military victories, an unsustainable strategy in the long term; as his empire stretched out and his enemies learned from their past defeats, it was inevitable that the tide would turn, which happened during the disastrous Russian campaign of 1812, although it took three more years to finally stop the juggernaut. Yet it was clear to the participants of the Congress of Vienna in 1814-1815 that the world had changed irreversibly, that the state-nation was there to stay[21]. As France's star waned, Europe was now dominated by two states: Britain and Russia, and the old balance of power had been replaced by the Concert of Europe.

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[17] Boime, pp.307-312.
[18] Francisco Goya y Lucientes, *The Giant*, c. 1808-1812, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, in Boime, p.304.
[19] Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Napoleon I on the Imperial Throne*, 1806, Musée de l'Armée, Hôtel des Invalides, Paris, in Boime, p.50.
[20] Boime, pp.326-328.
[21] Bobbitt, pp.160-163.

It is undeniable that France under Napoleon exerted a major influence on European politics and culture, either through its hegemony or by opposition to it. However, although Napoleon took great pains to propagate a cult to his personality, what really took root was a system, Bonapartism, a reworking of revolutionary ideas by the bourgeoisie, with legal, cultural and political frameworks geared towards the middle-classes. Ironically, it is after his downfall that Napoleon became an icon, evoking fond memories to the “demi-soldes”, the veterans of his wars, inspiring writers such as Victor Hugo, or even, across the oceans, the Liberator Simon Bolivar. So it could be said that 1800-1814 was made the ‘Napoleonic Era’ in hindsight, with Napoleon as a French King Arthur sailing away in the end to his own Avalon.

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