

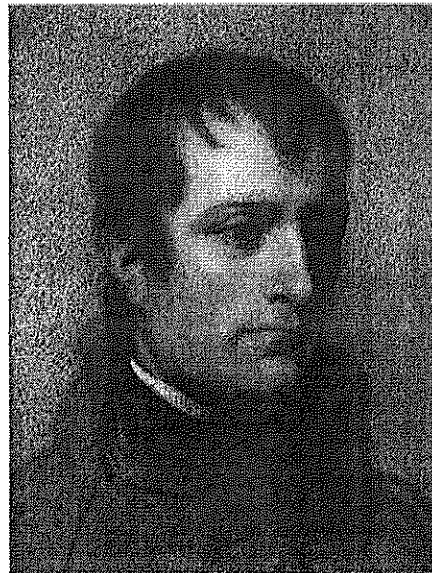
## A CLASSIC DICTATOR?

Laurent Joffrin looks at the paradoxes surrounding a man who has fascinated the French for two hundred years.

**T**HE MORE CLOSELY YOU LOOK at the myth, the more the paradoxes mount. Napoleon was heir to the Age of the Enlightenment yet held his people in an iron grip; he was the guardian of the Revolution yet founded a dynasty. He was a despot who remains a hero to republican France.

Napoleon regarded the whole world as a theatre in which he was simultaneously playwright, actor, director – even financial backer. To him, Europe was a building site in which he was demolition expert, architect and stonemason. He saw other people as instruments of his visions – and the higher he rose, the greater those visions became.

He was also the epitome of a modern dictator the world over. He showed this in the way he imposed his will on any situation, in his charisma, in his reason, in his conviction, in his brutality, in his firm resolve to tame and to conquer, in his equally fierce determination to build, to transform, to create, in his innate sense of action, in his outrageously grand schemes and in his attention to the tiniest details. Put together, these traits made for tumult on a continental scale, and they resulted both in the fulfilment of some of the grandest ambitions ever seen, and in the most widespread destruction Europe was to experience before the



Napoleon as First Consul, painted in 1802 by Thomas Phillips (1770-1845). The artist was commissioned by the Duke of Northumberland to go to Paris to paint Bonaparte's portrait following the Treaty of Amiens.

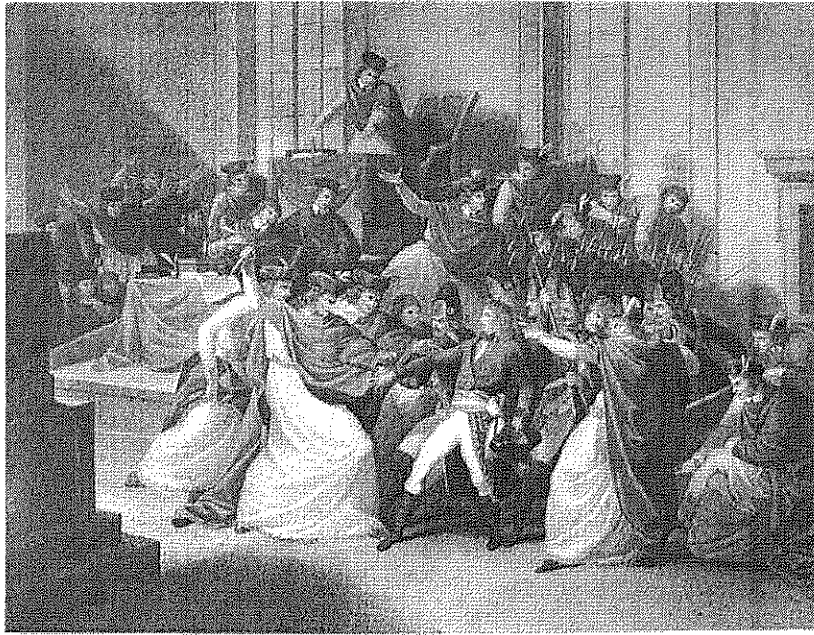
twentieth century.

He was also a model of a *good* dictator. His despotism was mainly an enlightened one. The Emperor of the French was – at least until the excesses of his final years – a Cartesian, a realist bounded by rules. He believed in order and hard work as

the foundations of greatness. He wanted to assert the rule of law, but he dared to write the laws himself. The ends he aimed for were driven by an idea of civilization, but he was often barbaric in the means he employed to achieve them. Had he not had such lofty goals, he would soon have been relegated to history's house of horrors.

Although he deeply compromised the Revolutionaries' ideas of liberty, and although his incessant wars led to the deaths of well over a million French soldiers and civilians, Napoleon Bonaparte remains lodged in French memory as a man with a mission, the man who restored the state and embodied the Enlightenment. As General Bonaparte in the 1790s, he was, and remains, a hero of the Revolution, and as First Consul he still arouses admiration. Had he died before crowning himself Emperor in December 1804, he would be remembered as fondly as George Washington is in the United States. When Napoleon is criticized today, it is as the unthined despot of his imperial years, the man who introduced the disastrous Continental System and who adopted the garb of monarchy.

The *coup d'état* of 18 Brumaire (November 9th, 1799) that swept away the weak and corrupt Directory and brought Napoleon to power,

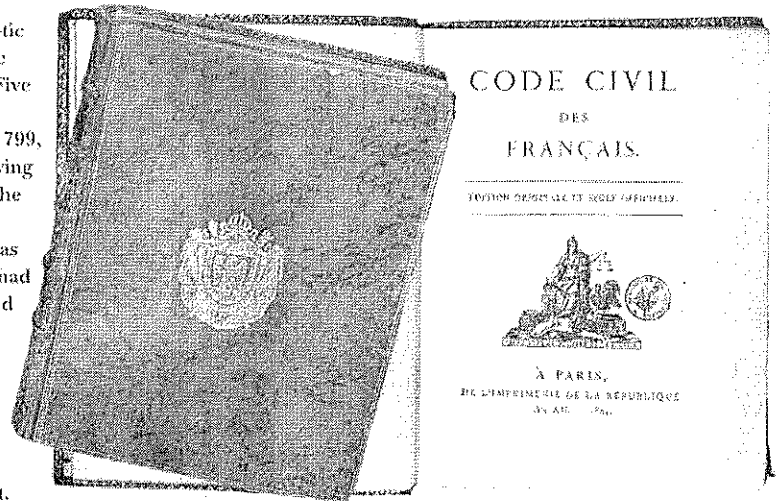


might have been a peaceful one. Over the previous years the Revolution had effectively turned from a democratic to an authoritarian regime, albeit its form of authoritarianism operated through constitutional channels made up of new notables, men of the Convention and national worthies. Yet the coup ran into difficulties, and when Napoleon addressed the Council of Five Hundred the following day, he was received so badly he had to be rescued by Murat and his grenadiers who dispersed the deputies. So the political coup became a military one.

The Abbé Sieyès, the Directory member who was Bonaparte's chief associate in Brumaire, devised a new constitution. The victorious general didn't much care what sort of régime it was, just so long as he himself was in charge. During the commission set up to frame its fundamental laws, one of the participants began, 'a good constitution should be brief ...'; Bonaparte finished the sentence for him: '... and obscure'. But the 'obscurity' seemed clear enough to the public. 'What is in the constitution?' people asked. The answer came straight back, 'Napoleon is in it.'

The Directory was replaced with the three-man Consulate with Bonaparte, Sieyès and Roger-Ducos as consuls, but at their first meeting, Bonaparte took the chair. He didn't relinquish it for fifteen years, and made it his throne. Now he began to issue orders, effortlessly and incessantly. His gifts amazed contemporaries. Napoleon was a dictator who spent all his time dictating,

Above: chaotic scenes at the Council of Five Hundred in November 1799, when, on trying to dissolve the Council, Napoleon was jostled and had to be rescued by soldiers. Right: The *Code Civil* of 1804: Napoleon's greatest achievement.



On waking at sunrise, he went straight to his bureau, and exhausted his secretaries with his unwavering command, 'Write this!' His orders were methodical, precise, even repetitious, so as to dispel any confusion. They issued from his study, like shot from a cannon, relentless, burning and hard as newly cast metal. At night he could still be found in the same place, hands clasped behind his back, forehead wrinkled, tobacco crushed on his sleeve – but with his mind as clear as it had been at dawn.

In the years of the Consulate (1799-1804), aware of his large areas of ignorance, he decided nothing without first taking advice, interrogating advisers whom he selected for their competence and who gave him their opinions, man to man. But once the decision had been taken, the execution was savage – woe betide any servant who was slow, who forgot to implement or who tried to

digress from his orders. Anyone who misinterpreted the will of the master did not last long.

By sheer force of will, in three years he untangled affairs of state that neither the Convention nor the Directory had been able to resolve. He defeated Austria at Marengo in 1800, and made peace with Britain at Amiens in 1802; restored internal order and balanced the budget; the previous year he had found a compromise with the Church, accepting that Catholicism was the religion of the majority of Frenchmen; and overall his administration was efficient and honest. Finally, he effected a slow but indisputable reconciliation between the two halves of the

nation divided by the events of 1793: the *émigrés* began to return while the regicides were given assurances for their safety. To achieve all this required exceptional energy and faultless organization.

Yet alongside his extraordinary capacity went implacable methods. First and foremost was the anger, not always feigned, that he felt about insult and injustice, which sometimes led him to behave in a manner more suited to the boxing ring than to the administration of a state. His ministers might find themselves pushed around, even knocked onto a settee; functionaries received dressings-down, and secretaries were deafened by his diatribes. One day, when he dared to contradict the master on a naval matter, Admiral Bruix was threatened with a horse-whip. Pale as death, he took a step back and put his hand on his sword – then an aide intervened.

Napoleon's second technique was repression. Repression of the conquered territories by means of the army — through summary executions, villages burned, opponents imprisoned; and of France itself by means of the new police forces. He loved the police so much that he set up several separate forces, each organized to spy, to manipulate and to inform him about everything from great plots to minor indiscretions. These systematic denunciations became a standard means of government.

The repression was most severe towards the two factions that menaced him — the Jacobins on one side, and the monarchists on the other.

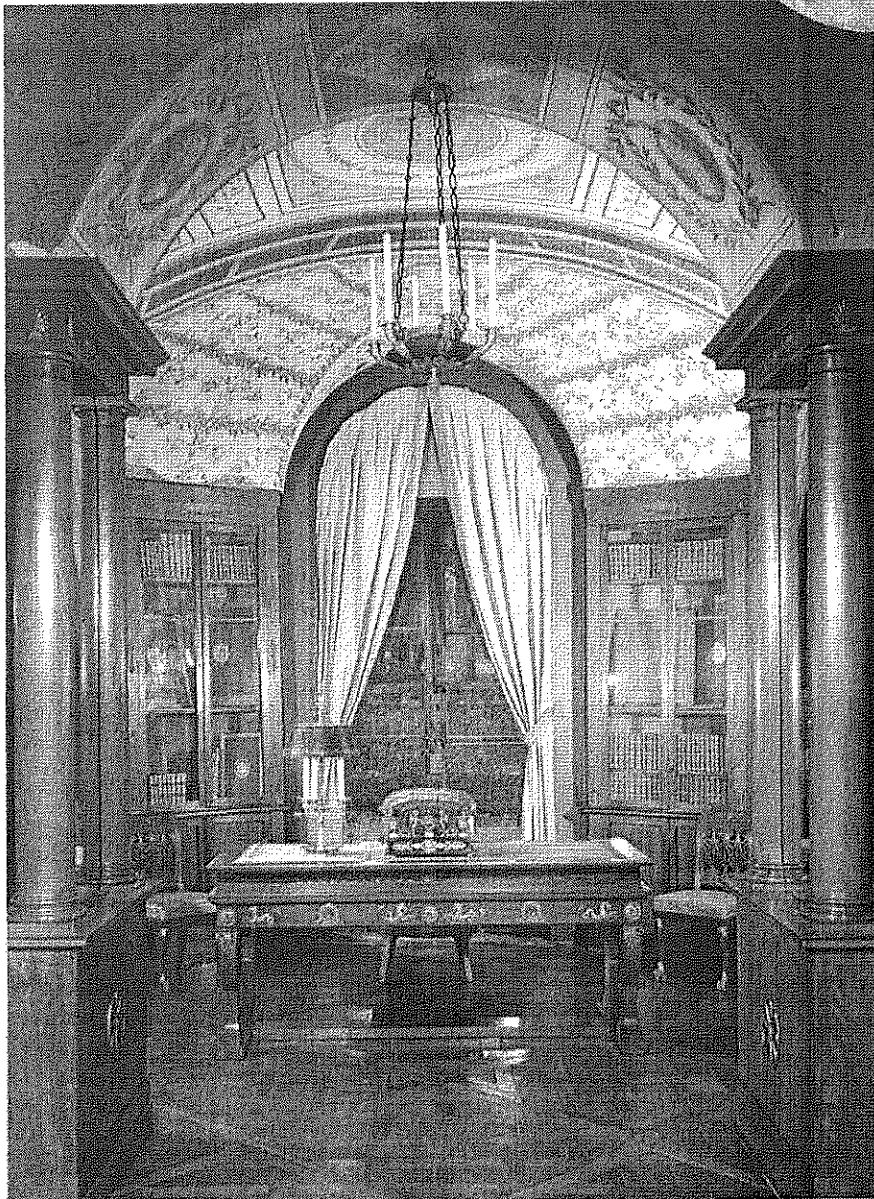
After the failed assassination attempt of December 24th, 1800, when a mas-

Right: Josephine as Empress, painted in 1808 by Jean-Baptiste Isabey. Below: Napoleon's study at Malmaison, Josephine's *château* where Napoleon lived and worked as First Consul and Emperor until their divorce in 1809.



sive bomb exploded in the rue Saint-Nicaise as Napoleon and Josephine were on their way to the opera, a hundred Jacobins were exiled and the royalist suspects were tortured, and no one doubted who gave the orders for this. After the failure of the second plot to murder him in 1804, the duc d'Enghien, scion of the Condé family, was falsely accused of conspiring with the British to take over France. The duc was seized from across the Rhine, quickly tried and executed, in an episode which horrified much of Europe but reassured the men of the Revolution by placing a corpse between Bonaparte and the Bourbons. In this way methods more suited to war were used in the attempt to establish peace; techniques of arbitrary government practiced to re-establish the rule of law.

Napoleon's third means of government was his control of public opinion in a manner that was minutely detailed yet ever-expanding. Bonaparte built up his own image at the same time as he rebuilt France — he kept a close eye on newspapers, theatres and literature, changed the ending of plays, wrote articles himself that were published anonymously, commissioned paintings, statues and monuments to his own glory. 'If there is no good literature in France,' he once wrote to Fouché, minister of police, 'the police department is to blame.' Key to his style of propaganda was a way of attaching falsehoods to truth. He commissioned Baron Gros to paint him at the head of the attack on the bridge at Arcole in Italy in 1796, a moment that established his reputation in the field; when in fact General Augereau actually led the charge. He had David paint him on a rearing horse riding up the Great St Bernard Pass — he had ridden up it on a mule. The campaign in Egypt, though muddled and murderous, was presented as a triumph. The *Bulletin* of the *Grande Armée* were riddled with falsehoods:





'lying like the Bulletins' became a favourite saying among his soldiers.

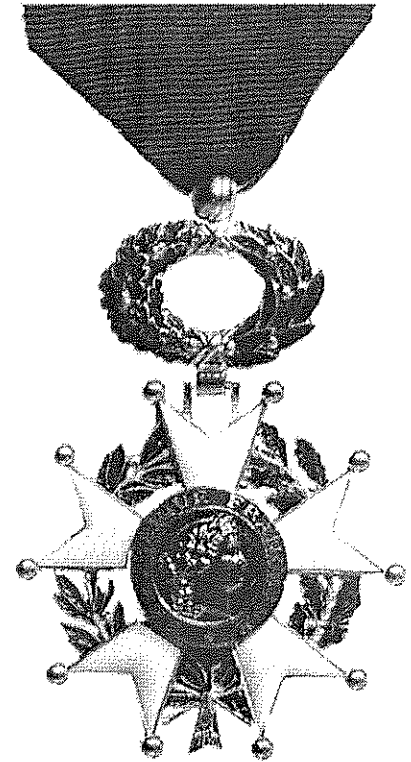
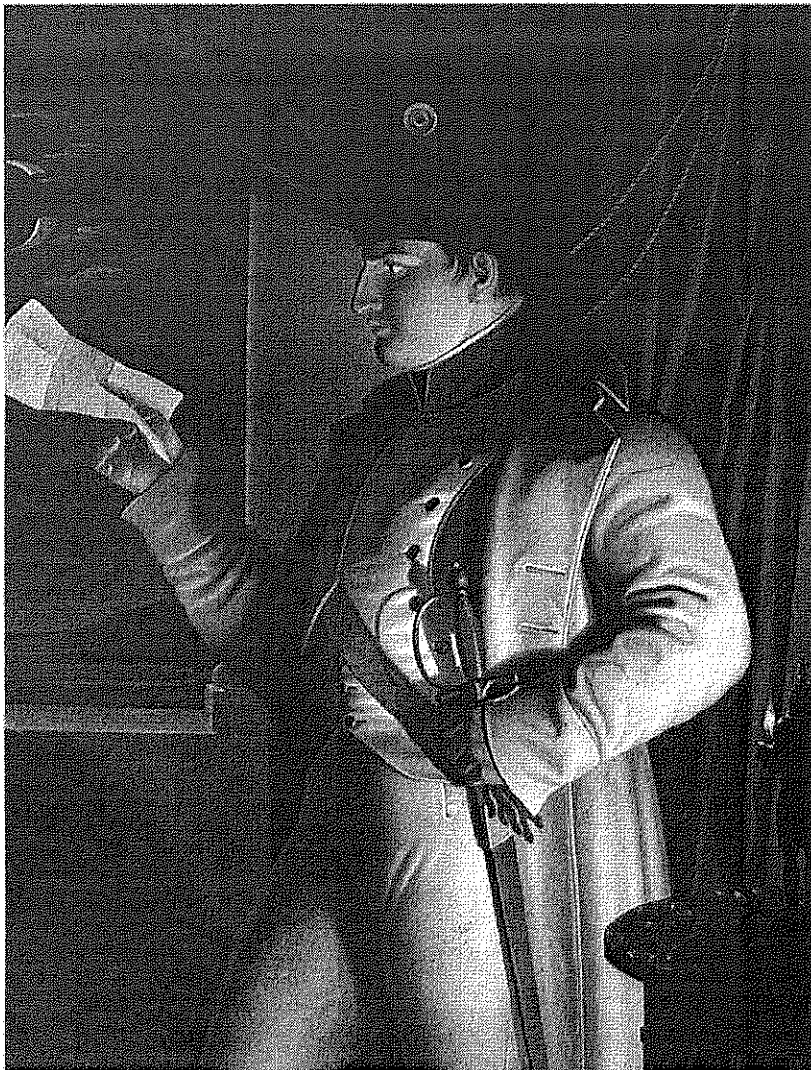
Nothing escaped his eagle eye. He silenced actors, exiled writers, sacked journalists, he imprisoned club-leaders. On one occasion when he learned that priests were praising his victories from the pulpit, he issued an immediate ban. 'If I let them comment on my victories, they will comment on my defeats.'

But ultimately, Bonaparte's dictatorship was not like those of Caligula or Timur. Unlike them, he wanted to create new forms of legality, to guarantee the rule of reason, and to establish limits to power. One phrase summed up his thinking, 'It is essential to impose the government that the people desire.' This is not a typical tyrant speaking, and he truly believed he could govern the premier country of Europe just as it most profoundly wished. After en-

during revolutionary convulsions far beyond anything that men had imagined or could control, and wracked by tidal waves of bloody violence, France now had to find a point of equilibrium. Napoleon's self-appointed task was to be the one to locate this point and impose it on the country.

He did not ignore the art of compromise, which led him to soften, with a blend of concessions and threats, the great forces jostling for political and social power. The new bourgeoisie, just as much as the old aristocracy, needed to be given jobs and honours. If the people were to enjoy the achievements of 1789, they needed security – the original aim of the Revolution – as well as order.

By adopting both brutality and subtlety to seek this end, liberty was sacrificed. When he wrote his memoirs on St Helena, Napoleon would



Above: The *Legion d'Honneur*, an order instituted in 1802 for Frenchmen who had acted bravely on the battlefield or had served civil France; a few years later it was opened to people of all nations and by 1814 25,000 people were members. Left: the workaholic emperor, painted in 1810 by Pietro Benvenuti.

explain how it happened. We were coming out of a civil war, he said; without an inflexible authority, it would have been impossible to stabilize France, or to avoid a return to terror.

Before he could become a guide for the French nation, he had to be its arbiter. A member of no party but in a position to dominate all parties, he sought a national role and governed from the centre. Thence derived the innumerable civil and religious arrangements that he imposed on the rival factions; thence arose his obsession with restoring the state, with justice, police and administration. Through these instruments he sought to build a new order for a society that had been too rebellious, and he tried to reassure the citizens that political passions once aroused could now be contained, and a proper tranquillity could be established within which the potential of French society could truly flourish.

He did rule arbitrarily, in the sense that he fixed plebiscites, re-wrote the constitution at his own discretion and produced his own



The disasters of war unleashed by Napoleon and engraved by Goya.

decrees. But he left his subordinates with a punctilious respect for the law. One day he learned that a general, acting on his own initiative, had decided that he needed no mandate to search the property of some peasants suspected of brigandage. This misdemeanour was met with a vengeful missive from the Emperor, in which he ordered the military to return to barracks and submit immediately to civil authorities. The Emperor himself might act arbitrarily, but others had to obey the law. There was to be a single master of France, but no petty tyrants. The Civil Code, which he introduced in 1804, was his proudest achievement: the foundation of institutions designed to ensure his fondest wish. He was a soldier passionate for civilian business, and if he made war, it was only in order to be able to govern better.

He might have stopped there. But the heir to the Enlightenment was also the embodiment of the excess and the folly of Romanticism. Once crowned Emperor, drunk on his victories, he abandoned his own search for equilibrium. The end of his reign was the era of great mistakes. His propaganda became obsessive, with the change of the calendar – in 1806 he proclaimed the feast of ‘Saint Napoleon’ on his birthday, August 15th, and he inflicted an imperial catechism on children. Military defeats became a form of butchery, and the utter coldness of his heart left him indifferent to the suffering

for which he was responsible. The constitution became ever more authoritarian, and the occasional voices of criticism were snuffed out.

Now he created a new nobility, and succumbed to his dynastic obsession which led him to place members of his family on thrones across Europe. He became entirely intransigent and refused to listen to advice. His daring turned to presumption and his proclamations grew ever more grandiloquent. All this made him appear a despot without restraint. The very qualities that had once brought him resounding successes now, as his fortune began to dwindle, led him to great disasters and cruelty, especially in Spain, Russia and Germany. His dictating now became a kind of delirium, a furious lamentation on a lost greatness. The rational science of strategy was abandoned in the pursuit of a strictly personal adventure.

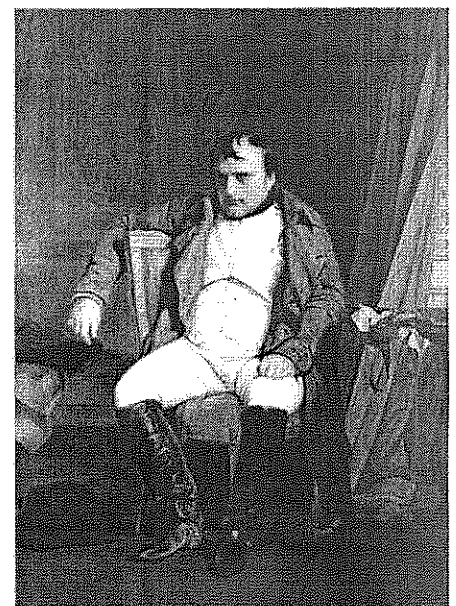
Now he resembled all dictators at the bloody moment of their nemesis. In the dark days of 1814 the despot had to fight alone, facing the hostility of all those whom he had conquered and humiliated in a search for glory and riches.

His fall restored some restraint to him, and he returned from Elba inspired by the failures of his enemies. When he took up the reins of power again, he adopted the spirit of compromise in the *Acte Additionnel*

*aux Constitutions de l'Empire*, a balanced adjustment to the constitution constructed with the help of the liberal theorist Benjamin Constant, a man who previously had bitterly resisted Napoleon's appetite for martial glory and arbitrary rule. But it was too late. Europe saw its old nightmare returning, and when the dictator felt it necessary to go on the attack once again, he got no further than the deadly slopes of Mont-Saint-Jean, in front of the village of Waterloo. The Hundred Days, the most fascinating of the whole Napoleonic era for France's incredible switch-back of fortune, could not rescue his regime from the disasters of the previous years.

Dictator for sixteen years, Napoleon endures in the French spirit two centuries later. The paradoxes have woven a kind of spell: despite the blood and the death, despite the wars and the repression, his taste for rule and his mania for building have meant that the despot is seen as the favourite dictator of the French republic.

Laurent Joffrin is Editor-in-Chief of the weekly news magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*. His many historical works include *Mai 68*, *La Régression Française*, *Les Batailles de Napoléon* and *La Princesse Oubliée*. This article is translated and adapted from one published in France in *Historia Thematique*, December 2004.



After the fall: painting by Paul Delaroche.