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What Napoleon could teach our age, 1941.

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WHAT NAPOLEON COULD TEACH OUR AGE

By
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

At
The Temple



On
Sunday morning, April 20, 1941

On the desk of Mussolini you will find a bust of Napoleon. When Hitler entered Paris in triumph a few months ago, the first place he went to was the tomb of Napoleon. Both men, Mussolini and Hitler are quite consciously imitating Napoleon, even as Napoleon imitated Caesar and Alexander the Great. All three men share the same complex. Both Mussolini and Hitler might well have taken to heart the lessons of Napoleon. They might have thought of St. Helena where Napoleon spent the last six bitter years of his life in exile, even as Napoleon in his day might have thought of the end of Caesar -- with an assassin's dagger thrust in his back.

Mussolini and Hitler might have remembered what Napoleon did for France after twelve years of war and conquest in which the blood of France was spilled and the wealth of France was drained. Napoleon in his defeat left France overrun by enemies, its boundaries conscripted to where they were before the French Revolution, compelled to pay huge indemnities and with foreign garrisons in their own fortresses.

But unfortunately, those who have the Caesar complex never benefit by the experiences of the predecessors. They are confident that they will avoid the mistakes of those others, that they will differ. They are confident that the empires which they build up will last a thousand years.

When you come to think of it, there are many startling parallels in the life of Napoleon and in the life of Hitler. Napoleon was not born in France but he came to rule France. Hitler was not born in Germany and he came to rule Germany. Neither had a high sense of national loyalty. That is why it was easy for both of them to trample over the national sentiments of other people. Both began their careers as little corporals in their respective armies and rose to become the commanders-in-chief of the most powerful armies in the world although the career of Napoleon was far more successful in a professional sense than that of Hitler.

Both rose to power in the ebb-tide of a long period of national revolution and chaos. A series of fatal wars during the reign of Louis XV had reduced France to the position of a second rate power. The French Fleet had been driven off the high seas. The Colonial Empire in North America had been destroyed. France, under the reign of Louis XV and Louis XVI was corrupted by national debt, and was facing stark bankruptcy. The sense of national humiliation, financial difficulties, crushing taxes, fanned the flames of liberalism in the hearts of the French, and revolution broke out, revolution which ~~z~~ shook France to her very foundation. And when foreign enemies threatened to invade France, a reign of terror took place in France. Executions, massacres, political riots swept over the country for month and for years until the French people became wearied of it all. They wanted order, security. And all these sentiments of a war-weary and revolution-weary people came to focus themselves in this brilliant young man who was to representative of French elan, courage, love of glory, who was so successful in his military expeditions, who was so ardent in his revolutionary zeal and who was so devoted to the ideals of the Republic -- Liberty, Equality, Fraternity - yet who was opposed to all the radicalism and extremism. And so they rallied around this man, Napoleon. The people pushed this very willing leader up and surrounded him. They voted Napoleon power. They, the people, overwhelmingly voted him Consul, then Consul for Life, and then overwhelmingly Emperor for the French. The masses willingly helped him to become what he wanted to become -- dictator. The French people, beguiled by the military glory which he brought to them in surprising numbers, intoxicated by the conquests of territorial expansion of France which he made possible, did not notice

how Napoleon was destroying the Republic and undermining the Revolution, how Napoleon was depriving them of their liberties, trapping them into a network of espionage, putting a rigid censorship on their books and newspapers. They did not notice how he was leading the French from one military adventure to another, destroying the man power of the French, draining their national wealth and how he was leading France step by step along the paths of glory to the grave.

That is the story of Napoleon.

The story of Hitler is all too well known to need repetition and rehearsal at this time. The remarkable parallel will not escape even the casual observer. The incidents are different. The trends are the same. Germany was defeated in the World War, was humiliated, then national bankruptcy, then revolution and counter revolution, bitter party strife. This went on for months and years until a weary people began to pray for ~~an~~ order, discipline, strong government. And all the longings and prayers of the people centered themselves around this man -- Hitler. It was the people of Germany by and large who pushed this leader step by step up to power. They voted him time and again greater and greater power.

The parallel between Hitler and Napoleon can be carried a step further. Napoleon came in the beginning of a new era in Western European civilization. The American Revolution and the French Revolution put a period to the Age of Feudalism. The modern world had begun. New voices, new slogans, new ideals, political emancipation, intellectual emancipation -- rights the ~~rise~~ of man -- a new order after the dark ages. Had Napoleon, having attained all the power, been content to live in peace, devote his talents to developing his country, to building France into a strong and free nation, it would have been a blessing to France and to mankind. But he was not made

of that stuff. His ambitions which knew no bounds, his vanity was consummate. His lust for power drove him on. All the wars of France after the first few defensive wars which revolutionary France was compelled to wage against European conditions of the Napoleonic era were of his own making. He was out for conquest. He was out for universal sovereignty. He did not continue the new order which the French and American Revolutions had ushered into the world. He did his best to restore the old order. But at the same time he used the patriotic resources of the revolution, the revolutionary slogans, sentiments, idealism to help destroy the ideals of the revolution. He betrayed the revolution, his own revolution, thought he was a Jacobin, a follower of the teachings of Rousseau. When he fell, Europe and France rushed back to the Middle Ages, back to feudalism. And it took Europe another half century of revolution to recapture the heritage of the French Revolution.

Here, again, the parallel is very striking. Hitler came at what seemed to be the beginning of a new era in history. After the World War a new day had dawned in Europe. It was to be a day of freedom for all people and for all empires. It was to be a day of the League of Nations, a day of new and better experiments rather than conquest. It was to usher in progressive disarmament, industrial democracy. That was the way of the future which the World War set in motion. But Hitler, while loudly proclaiming these ideals did more than any other man in Europe to destroy them. He helped to destroy the League of Nations. He contemptuously subjugated one small nation after another in Europe. He destroyed democracy. He destroyed industrial democracy. He betrayed the new world. He brought back all the black orthodoxies and all the dark torture chambers of the Middle Ages. He put taskmasters and scourges over the minds of men in Europe. Napoleon at least paid lip service to progressive

human ideals. Wherever the armies of Napoleon came, the ghetto walls collapsed. Wherever the armies of Hitler come democracy and freedom collapse. They establish ghetto walls. They dot the countries with concentration camps. Napoleon created a code of civil law for France. Hitler has destroyed all law and has built up a form of life ruled by the will and the whim of a person. All the wars since 1938 in which Germany has been engaged have been of Hitler's own making. He used one pretext after another, one decision after another to justify wars of his own making. He said that Germany was bound to establish a new order in Europe, a re-organized Europe. Actually this new order is just a new disguise for the old dream of Pan-Germanism which was popular among the people, the dream of establishing a German empire which would stretch from the Baltic to the Indian Ocean.

Napoleon sought to unify Europe and model his Empire after Charlemagne - to unify Europe under French control. Hitler is attempting to unify Europe under German control. Napoleon almost succeeded. He broke one dynasty after another. He defeated the Hapsburgs and the Romanoffs, but he could not defeat the people themselves. Once a war of liberation set in, Napoleon was doomed.

It remains to be seen whether this parallel will also be true in the case of Hitler.

There is also an interesting parallel in the military experiences of Hitler and Napoleon. Napoleon succeeded in conquering Europe because Europe was divided. He beat one nation after another. Europe could not organize against him. It did not know how. The Holy Roman Empire was neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire. It was a congeries of loosely knit states and powers ready to fall apart. There was no German

nation in those days. There was no Italian nation in those days. France was a united and powerful regime. Napoleon was in a position to defeat one nation after another. When some of these nations attempted a coalition against them, they attempted it too late.

The parallel there is quite clear. Hitler has succeeded in defeating Europe because Europe did not know how to unite against him. He defeated one nation after another. Every nation thought of protecting itself by preserving neutrality instead of uniting with all other ~~xx~~ nations in defense of this oncoming menace which threatened them all. The last victim was Yugoslavia, a nation which might have offered much stronger resistance had it early enough joined forces with other nations in a united resistance to the conqueror.

Napoleon enjoyed an almost unbroken series of victories, breathtaking victories - Austerlitz, Jena, Friedland, Vienna, Berlin. He made himself master of the continent until there was left only one country that challenged his power on the continent - England. England in those days had a Prime Minister, William Pitt, who had many of the qualities of Churchill today. He was not an appeaser. He was not terrified by Napoleon. He was determined to break him. And after nearly fifteen long years, England broke the back of Napoleon. England proved the undoing of Napoleon, England and the English Navy. Napoleon realized who his real enemy was and he tried to break the back of England first by striking at the English life line in Egypt, just exactly as the Nazis tried to do. And he invaded ~~Egypt~~ Egypt. He hoped to cut England's communication with the East and with India. But England and the British Navy under Nelson defeated the French Fleet not far from Alexandria. Napoleon and his army were left stranded in Egypt. Following a disastrous campaign in Syria, Napoleon returned to Egypt. He left his army in Egypt and he himself fled to France. His army was, after a while, captured by the

English.

Napoleon knew who his foe was and a few years later, in 1804, he resolved to invade England. He gathered together a large army and a huge flotilla of flat-bottomed boats and prepared for a large-scale invasion of the British Isles. Napoleon was so certain of victory that he struck a medal and erected a column at Boulogne to commemorate the triumph of his projected invasion. The English Fleet was to be decoyed away from the Channel. Napoleon was to "jump the ditch" into England and make a march on England. But again in the Battle of Trafalgar, Nelson scrapped what remained of the French Fleet. The invasion never took place.

It was this defeat in 1805 which really spelt doom of Napoleon although it took ten years to really break him. Because of his inability to invade England, he tried other methods to destroy England. Napoleon tried to blockade England but the British then resorted to the device of convoyed ships covered by armed ships and that enabled them to break Napoleon's attempted blockade of England. Napoleon then resorted to a more desperate effort - a continental blockade of England. The whole European continent was not to permit British ships to sail into any ports and neutral ships coming from the continent were to be seized by the French. This increased the privations and sufferings of the people of Europe and one nation after another refused to comply. Portugal, Spain and later on Russia resisted this continental blockade and this forced him to meet one defeat after another.

It remains to be seen whether this parallel will hold good - whether Hitler will succeed in invading England, where Napoleon did not.

Napoleon believed that "might makes right". Cynically he said that "God is on the side of strongest battalion". To him, too, justice was always ~~on~~ the right of the stronger. That was his philosophy. That is the philosophy of the Nazis. Napoleon came to know at the end of his life

something that the Nazis have not yet learned and that is that you can do an awful lot of things with bayonets, but you can not sit on them. You can not keep a whole people in subjugation. The Nazis, of course, possess far more efficient weapons and methods than Napoleon did in his day. They are far more streamlined. They have developed the technique of propaganda and the technique of terrorism and of espionage to a far greater degree than in the days of Napoleon. Napoleon had secret police, spies, agents, all over Europe for propaganda purposes, fifth columnists in the enemy camps, but certainly not to the degree of the Nazis today.

But this is as true today as it was more than a century and a ~~half~~ quarter ago. Nations, however long suppressed, will ultimately come to claim their freedom. The revolt of nations may be postponed, but ultimately it comes. It can not be postponed indefinitely. You cannot re-organize the continent of Europe without the consent of the peoples of Europe. You can only organize Europe in freedom, in law and in respect for national rights.

What Charles V and Philip II failed to accomplish in the Sixteenth Century, Ferdinand II, Louis XIV in the Seventeenth Century and Napoleon in the Nineteenth Century it is not likely that Hitler will accomplish in the Twentieth - not as long as there is an England, as long as there remains a people like the Greeks who will shed their last drop of blood, not as long as there remains a Free Norway, Holland, a Free Denmark, a Free France and a Free Czechoslovakia who will wait for the first break in the series of victories of the Nazis, rise in revolt for the liberation of their people.

A scholar of the Napoleonic Era asks this question: "Why did Napoleon fail?" and he answers it. "He failed because England fought on

against apparently insuperable obstacles; because Russia was opposed to his drive to the east against Turkey; because the subject people in Germany and Holland, in Italy and Spain were ready to revolt at the first opportunity; because the French were fed up with 'living heroically', weary of the increasing burden of financial and military conscription, outraged by the mounting arrogance and increasingly despotic conduct of their leader, and because they had long since ceased to see any glamour in the 'glory' of military victories and imperial dominion. Until 1808 Napoleon seemed to control events; afterwards events ceased to occur 'according to schedule.' More and more, events forced him to do things he did not want to do, compelling him to remain in Spain after he realized that the invasion was a serious blunder, to fight the Austrian war of 1809 against his will, to break with Russia before he was ready to do so. The more his empire expanded, the more difficult it was to control it, the less brilliant and economical his military victories became, and his first serious military reverse was the beginning of the end. The fundamental reason is that his empire was created by naked force directed by irresponsible will, and when the force failed the will was without effect because there was nothing in reserve to support it -- neither law nor custom nor political tradition, nor popular assent, not even the inertia of ingrained social habit."

These are the reasons why Napoleon failed. Is there any reason to doubt why these reason will not bring about the failure of this Napoleon of the Twentieth Century? There is nothing inevitable about the advance of Hitler. There is nothing invincible about his armies any more than about Napoleon's. Napoleon ultimately met his Waterloo.

Had N. - having attained all the power - been content to ¹⁸
live in peace - devote his talent to devot. his country -
Build F. into a strong, free nation - & realize the
ideal of F. - what a blessing he would have bestowed
on F. - on Mankind. But he did not! His
ambition - vanity - lust for power drove him on. All
the while of F. after the first few difficulties were which
Rev F. had to fight against European countries - men of his
own making! He was ^{a universal forger} ^(he described F. in blood) ~~not~~ ^{He did}
not condemn the New Order which the R. had worked in.
He restored the Old Order - ~~which~~ ^{and} ~~using~~ ^{used} the patriotic re-
sources and slogans of the R. to accomplish it. He
betrayed the R. - his own earlier Rev. convictions - for in
his youth he was a R. - a Tactician - a follower of
the teaching of Rousseau. When he fell - Continental
Europe along with F. - returned to the ~~Dark Ages~~ regime
of pre-R. days. - Only a series of subsequent revolutions
- more than 1/2 a century - restored to E. the heretofore
the F. Rev.

Now, again, the parallel is ~~so~~ striking. H. came
at what seemed to be the beginning of a new era - following
World War. ^{Feder. 95th - 1st of Europe's history by F. and} ~~League~~ - ~~End~~ ^{Inter. Cooperation!}
Nat. self-determination - ^{Democ. - (Inherent. Democracy)} ~~Disarmament~~ ^{That was}
the wave, the Future! But while loudly proclaiming
many, the ideals, the new age - he has done more
any other man to destroy them. ~~Wretched League!~~ ^{Nat.}
~~self-determination~~ ^{Disarmament} ~~Democ. -~~

- which defeated James, Philip II, Louis XIV
But England was his undoing. The English Navy!! ^{men money ships} ^{Coalition} (5)
→ He tried to strike at England by invading Egypt - and cutting her line of Empire with India. - Same as H. Suez Canal!

But Lord Nelson Bay of Aboukir - left them this army stranded in E. Following a disastrous campaign in Syria - he returned to E - & leaving his army he fled to France.

b). In 1804 - tried to invade England. Army & Fleet of flat-bottom boats - Boulogne - "jump the ditch"

→ So certain of victory - struck a medal and erected a column at Boulogne to commemorate the triumph of his projected invasion! (Gubbels)

→ Decoy Eng. fleet away from Channel -

→ Nelson - "Battle of Trafalgar" - No invasion!

→ This defeat - 1805 - really spelled his doom - this it took 10 more years of fighting to destroy him. → ① Destroy Br. Commerce - Invasion

Blockade! Countered by ② Continuous - total Blockade

Increased piracy, smuggling & people's sample - war with Portugal, Spain & Russia resulted from that: His first major defeats there

→ It remains to be seen whether H. can succeed - or no - where N. did not.

6. Might is Right - "God is on side / Strongest Bo Baker"
 Justice is the Right, the Stronger!

7. Baronets. You cannot keep a continent in subjection.
 New efficient weapons - methods - Gestapo - ^{Termin} last a
 little longer. N. too. had his spies - 5th Column - Secret Police
 His propaganda agents - His partisans in the enemy's camp. The
 → Nations will rise to claim their freedom. The
 Revolt, Nations may be put down - not indefinitely -
 You cannot re-organize Europe, without consent
 of peoples themselves - Org. in Freedom - Law - respect
for nat. rights.

What Charles V + Philip II (16c)

Ferdinand II, Louis XIV (17c)

Napoleon - (19c)

it is not likely that Hitler will achieve in 20c -
 as long as there is an England - a U.S. - and the
Spirit of Greece! Norway - Holland - Free Denmark - Free
France - Free Czechoslovakia

8. (Note) p. 451.

His permanent triumph is not "merit" - It is
victories will destroy him. Waterloo

same law must run throughout Europe. I shall fuse all the nations into one. . . . This, my lord Duke, is the only solution that pleases me." When these words were spoken, everything seemed favorable to his success. Yet within thirty months the empire that he had labored for twelve years to create was a thing of the past.

Why did Napoleon fail? He failed because England fought on against apparently insuperable obstacles; because Russia was opposed to his drive to the east against Turkey; because the subject people in Germany and Holland, in Italy and Spain were ready to revolt at the first opportunity; because the French people were fed up with "living heroically," weary of the increasing burden of financial and military conscription, outraged by the mounting arrogance and increasingly despotic conduct of their leader, and because they had long since ceased to see any glamour in the "glory" of military victories and imperial dominion. Until 1808 Napoleon seemed to control events; afterwards events ceased to occur "according to schedule." More and more, events forced him to do things he did not want to do, compelling him to remain in Spain after he realized that the invasion was a serious blunder, to fight the Austrian war of 1809 against his will, to break with Russia before he was ready to do so. The more his empire expanded, the more difficult it was to control it, the less brilliant and economical his military victories became, and his first serious military reverse was the beginning of the end. The fundamental reason is that his empire was created by naked force directed by irresponsible will, and when the force failed the will was without effect because there was nothing in reserve to support it—neither law nor custom, nor political tradition, nor popular assent, not even the inertia of ingrained social habit.

Analogies prove nothing, and Hitler may succeed where Napoleon failed. He has certain advantages. He is far more

① fanatical and ruthless, far less inhibited, than Napoleon was. Napoleon created the Civil Code, but Hitler is destroying all law. Napoleon censored the press, established an educational system and endeavored to direct opinion through it, but he was not an enemy of science and did not disperse or liquidate nonconformist intellectuals on principle. He suppressed overt opposition, refused to allow Madame de Stael to reside in Paris, had a German bookseller shot, and shanghaied and executed the Duc d'Anguien; but he had no concentration camps, did not indulge in torture or systematic pogroms against entire races or parties, or dissolve and redistribute cohering opposition groups and reduce them to servitude. In any case, mechanized power makes it more difficult for disarmed people to organize effective resistance to Hitler, and mechanized propaganda makes it easier for him to deceive and render stupid both his own and conquered people by official decree. Perhaps Napoleon was not sufficiently ruthless in employing the naked power at his command; perhaps the power at his command was not sufficiently effective. This may be why he only created confusion tempered by apprehension, whereas Hitler is creating anarchy tempered by terror.

① Hitler may, therefore, succeed where Napoleon failed. But the greater his success the greater the failure of Europe, and particularly of the German people, who have contributed so much to the civilization which Hitler denies; the German people particularly, because it does not profit a nation, any more than a man, to gain the whole world and lose its own soul. He may succeed for a time, since the power at his command is indeed efficient. But when it is said of anything that it is efficient, the relevant question always is —efficient for what? The creators of the so-called “new order” have been efficient indeed, but chiefly for compulsion, for suppression, for destruction and dissolution. They have been efficient as death is efficient. Surveying the pres-