

The Napoleon Series

General Bonaparte's Private Views, Summer 1797

By [John Hussey](#)

Miot de Melito (1764-1841), later a Councillor of State, but then a French commissioner in the conquered Italian provinces, and about to go on mission to Corsica, recorded a private two-hour conversation in the summer of 1797 with General Bonaparte and the leading Milanese noble and citizen, Melzi d'Eril (1753-1816), who dreamt of a northern Italian kingdom "from the Alps to the Adige" separating Austria and France. This took place at Mombello (or Montebello), Bonaparte's residence near Milan. Miot himself says that he was so struck by Bonaparte's remarks that he recorded them at the time. The leading Napoleonic scholar Jean Tulard terms the memoirs "a fundamental source".

This extract comes from Comte Miot de Melito, *Mémoires*, Paris, 3 vols, 1858: vol 1, pp.162-66. The translation from the French and all notes and explanations in square brackets are by John Hussey.

Bonaparte said:

"What I have done so far is as nothing. I am only at the start of the career that I must run. Do you think that it is to give greatness to the lawyers of the Directory - the likes of Carnot, of Barras - that I triumph in Italy? And do you also believe that it is to found a republic? What an idea! A Republic of thirty million beings! With our morals and our vices! How should that be possible? It is a chimera which has infatuated the French, but which will pass away like so many others. What they want is glory, the satisfaction of their vanity. But as for Liberty? - they understand nothing. Look at the Army! The victories that we have just gained, our triumphs, have already shown the French soldier his true character. I am everything to him. If the Directory were to think of depriving me of the command it would soon see who is master. The nation requires a chief, a chief rendered illustrious by glory, and not by theories of government, of phrases, of discourses by ideologues to which the French don't listen. Just give them baubles and that will suffice; they will amuse themselves with them and let themselves be led on, provided however that one is adroit enough to conceal the end to which one is leading them."

"As to your country, M de Melzi, there are even fewer elements of republicanism than in France, and we will treat it with less consideration than any other. You know this better than anyone; we shall do just as we like. But the time has not come; we must put up with the present fever, and we shall create one or two republics in our style. Monge will arrange that for us. In the meantime I have already wiped out two [*Venice and Genoa*] from Italian soil, and although they were very aristocratic republics they showed the greatest public spirit and strongly held views, which could have caused us much embarrassment

later. For the rest, my mind is made up: I shall not cede Lombardy or Mantua to Austria. You (*still speaking to M Melzi*) can count on this, and you can see that whatever we may decide for this country, you can adopt my views and not fear in the least the return or the power of Austria. As compensation I shall give her Venice and part of the *terra firma* of that old republic.

“We both at once protested at such a project that would leave Austria still at the gates of Italy, and destroying every hope of a people that he himself had surely not freed from the yoke of an odious oligarchy, only to put it under that of an absolute monarchy in a slavery no less intolerable than that from which the people had escaped. He replied that we should not cry out before we were bitten.”

“I shall not do that unless by some stupidity of Paris I am obliged to make peace, for my intention is in no way to finish with Austria so soon. Peace is not in my interest. You see how I stand and what I can do now in Italy. Should peace be made, if I am no longer at the head of this army that is attached to me, I shall have to renounce this power, this high position I hold, to pay court to the lawyers at the Luxembourg [*Palais*, seat of the Directors]. I would not wish to leave Italy to play a role in France similar to what I play here, but the moment has not yet come, the pear is not ripe. But all this does not depend solely on my own actions. There are disagreements in Paris. One party is raising its head to restore the Bourbons; I don't want to contribute to its success. One day I should much like to weaken the republican party, but for my own profit and not that of the former dynasty. Till then one must march with the republican party. Peace may be necessary to satisfy the desires of our Parisian idlers, and *if* it has to be made it is I who shall make it. Were I to leave the merit to someone else, that act of kindness would place him higher in public opinion than all my victories”.

The People Mentioned

Among the people mentioned here Carnot (1753-1823) had made his name as an engineer officer who had saved France in 1793 by raising and equipping armies: “the organizer of victory”. To call him a lawyer was to diminish and somewhat insult him. At this time he was a leader among the five Directors and out of sympathy with the other leading Director, Barras (1755-1829). The latter, who once had served as an army officer (1771-86) and as a commissioner with the revolutionary armies, had from the time of the siege of Toulon in 1793 constantly promoted Bonaparte's career, had used his services in putting down the royalist rising in Paris of 13 Vendémiaire Year IV (5 Oct 1795), and had personally appointed him to the Italian command on 2 March 1796, whereas Carnot by contrast sought to place commissioners with that army to rein-in its political activities. Monge (1746-1818) was in 1797 the French commissioner handling surrendered or seized Italian works of art – mostly destined for France. He was to remain a useful servant of Napoleon until 1815 in numerous posts concerned with works of art and with education.

The Political Background in France under the Directory.

After the fall of the monarchy and the Great Terror France was divided by different views as to the future of the country. Carnot tended to the political right at this time, and was open to some form of reconciliation with the *émigrés* and the pro-royalist *Clichyens*. This group won a majority in the elections of April 1797, suppressed the 'communist' Babeuf conspiracy and sought to bring closure to the Revolution. How far this might have gone is a question as fascinating as it is futile. Bonaparte meanwhile organized petitions from his army against the *Clichyens* and when the Directors sought a nomination for the command of the Paris military district, he sent his follower General Augereau. The majority of the Directors then organized the coup of 18 Fructidor (4 Sept 1797). Carnot fled into exile.

The outcome was to make the Directory reliant on the revolutionary left, upon rule by executive decree, and upon the army – which increasingly meant Bonaparte. Barras thereafter tried to check Bonaparte's political influence by appointing him to distant posts, but when the latter returned from Egypt in late 1799, Barras still sought to use him for his own purposes in fomenting the coup of 18 Brumaire. The coup succeeded. It led to Barras' eclipse the next day! He was thereafter kept at a distance and spent several years in rustication and even exile, never to hold power again.

Carnot was permitted to return to France after the 1799 coup, briefly employed as War minister but found Bonaparte's rule unacceptable and resigned in 1800. He opposed most of the acts of the Consulate and Empire, but when France was invaded in 1814 he offered his services to Napoleon and was made governor of the Antwerp naval base and fortress. For patriotic reasons he again served in 1815 as Minister of the Interior, thereafter finishing his life in exile, a sad end to one of the greatest of his nation's servants.

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