

Chapter 48

France and the Problem of Napoleon

Return to Paris, the Abdication, the Danger

I

NAPOLEON HAD BEEN ON HIS FEET since dawn on Sunday 18 June, had lived through a day of increasing strain, and had been forced to flee on horseback all night. He had passed through Charleroi at 5 a.m. on the 19th and reached the French town of Philippeville four hours later, a distance of over 33 miles from La Belle Alliance. Those who speak of Napoleon's poor health affecting his faculties and performance during the campaign should also remember this remarkable eleven-hour ride by a stout man aged almost forty-six, who had just passed through four days of constant pressure and fairly constant activity. At Philippeville he issued fresh directions to the little circle gathering round him, Bertrand, Drouot, and then Maret and Soult as they arrived. These directions were for the commanders of such units as might re-form after the rout. A message was sent to Grouchy enjoining his retreat on Laon. The commanders of the northern military districts were told to hold firm among the frontier fortresses. Orders went to other outlying forces: Rapp in Alsace, the large force in the Belfort region, and Lamarque in the Vendée were to march and join him at Paris.¹

Then the Emperor dictated a confidential note to Joseph in Paris, admitting the dire facts, with a second much less discouraging letter to be shown to the ministerial council recounting the campaign and minimising the disaster as much as possible. His confidential note spoke of rallying 150,000 men of the army, plus 100,000 national guards and 50,000 from depot battalions. He would use high-bred horses to pull cannon. He would call for a *levée en masse* in the loyal provinces. He would

give Paris and France time for them to do their duty . . . Everything can still come right. Let me know the effect this horrible affray [*échauffourée*] has produced in the Chamber. I believe that the deputies will see their duty in

these great circumstances, and join with me in saving France. Prepare them so that they support me with dignity. Courage, firmness!²

Then he sat down to compose a most remarkable *Bulletin* for publication. This was completed and dated 'Laon, 20 June', but as Napoleon arrived there only at 7 p.m. on the 20th, and as it was well over 2,000 words long, much of it may have been thought through and composed while on his journey. At first he outdistanced the terrible news, and was received with cheers by crowds at Rocroi. But by the time he reached Laon the news was already spreading, and when he halted and changed his carriage horses, people looked at him in silent astonishment, and when a few cheered him he raised his hat in salute. He raced on to Paris, by which time the army that had stood at La Belle Alliance amounted to 2,600 men at Philippeville and another 6,000 at Avesnes. To have stayed with the army, as his brothers suggested, would have been of little use. In 1814 he had abandoned Paris, with dire consequences; this time he would hold it and restore his position.

II

The *Moniteur* of Monday, 19 June, had published Soult's report to War Minister Davout on the victory at Ligny, and that of the 20th gave further details from a staff officer with the army: 'it is said that the enemy has lost 50,000 men; the Prussians are in total disarray, and we shall have nothing to say about them for some time. As to the English we shall see what will become of them today; the Emperor is there.'³ But Paris was filling with rumours on 20 June, and during the late evening the gist of what Napoleon had told Joseph spread through political circles. Houssaye blamed for this leakage the man whom he consistently presents as the arch-villain – Fouché; that may be so, but he also admitted that during an evening party the minister and great patriot Carnot let slip the alarming news.

Joseph left a note of what happened elsewhere on the night of the 20th: 'In the night a large number of members of the Chamber of Deputies met in M. de La Fayette's house where they fixed on the way, not to save the nation and the Emperor, but to drop the Emperor to save the nation . . .'⁴

Joseph's words go to the heart of the problem: was the interest of France the same as the interest of the Emperor? Talleyrand had successfully protected France from savage retribution in 1814 by making the distinction. The leaders of the Chamber could not avoid it. They suspected, and rightly suspected, that Napoleon was intent on further war despite losing his last army in catastrophic defeat.

The appearance the next day of Napoleon's Laon account in the *Moniteur* left nothing still to doubt. Napoleon himself reached the Elysée Palace in Paris at 8 a.m. on 21 June, took a bath, then spoke to his ministerial council. He told his ministers of how he could meet and surmount the crisis: 'To save the nation what I need is to be given a great power, a temporary dictatorship. In the public interest I could seize this power, but it would be more useful and national if it were given me by the Chambers.' This was received with a significant silence: ministers were divided between those like Davout who approved these views, and Fouché who opposed them. Napoleon mentioned the word abdication only to deride the idea. The army drew its strength from his name; once he had abdicated all would collapse, whatever the Chamber might decree. 'They do not wish to see that I am merely the pretext [*sic*] for a war, and that it is France that is the object . . . I am part of what the enemy attacks; and thus I am part of what France must defend.' To give up Napoleon would be for France to recognise its own defeat.⁵

In another part of Paris men of different views were taking steps to protect France as far as they could. Many in the Chamber were willing to follow La Fayette's lead. To them he proposed five resolutions. They were carried without great argument: the independence of France was in danger; the Chamber should sit in permanence and any attempt to dissolve it would be treason; the army and national guard were worthy of the nation; the Parisian national guard should be strengthened and should protect the capital and the Chamber; the ministers of war, foreign affairs, interior and police should at once report to the Assembly.⁶ The resolutions were sent to 'the other branches of representative authority', meaning the Chamber of Peers and Napoleon, but making him a branch only, and emphasising the Lower Chamber's status.

Napoleon was furious, exclaiming, 'I should have dismissed those gentry before I left Paris – they will ruin France.' He sent a message back to the president of the Lower Chamber stating that he was putting in place fresh measures for national defence, and wish to concert with them on national safety. 'I have formed a committee comprising the Minister of Foreign Affairs [the moderate Caulaincourt], Comte Carnot, and the duc d'Otrante [Fouché, Duke of Otranto], to renew and follow negotiations with foreign powers to establish their true intentions and to bring an end to the war if that is compatible with the nation's honour and independence.' But in vain he sent his ministers led by his brother Lucien (the former president of the Chamber at the coup of 18 *Brumaire* that brought Napoleon to power in 1799) with this message.⁷ If he had expected difficulty with the Lower House he was right, but the defection of the usually complaisant peers shook him.

He sent brother Lucien to make a second appeal. But when Lucien spoke of France's inconstancy in dropping Napoleon, La Fayette retorted that 'France's constancy towards him in the sands of Egypt and the deserts of Russia had cost her the blood of three million Frenchmen.' That retort was decisive.

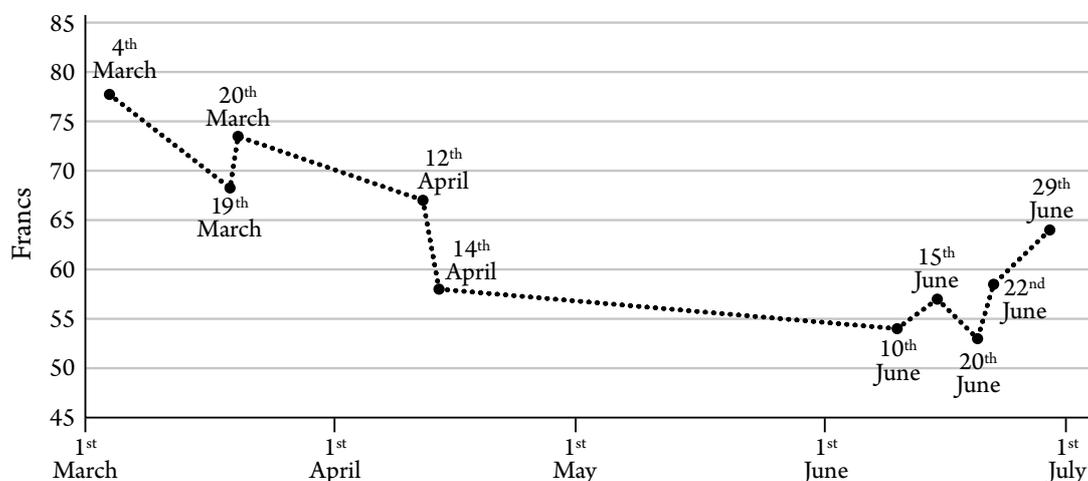
Napoleon veered between dissolving the Chamber and abdicating. He half-thought of appealing to the mob, but his deepest lifelong instinct was hatred of mobs and their destruction of 'order', and so he declared that he could never be 'a king of the *Jacquerie*'. Finally on 22 June he gave way to the more moderate of his advisers, and dictated an act of abdication:

In commencing the war to uphold national independence I called for the united efforts and willpower of all in authority: in that I placed my hopes of success. Circumstances have turned otherwise. I offer myself as a sacrifice to the hatred of France's enemies. May they be sincere in their declarations of seeking nothing but my person. Let all of you unite for the nation's independence and safety.

[A postscript was added:] I proclaim my son under the name Napoleon II, Emperor of the French. [Five words eventually deleted are shown here in italics:] *Princes Joseph and Lucien and* the present ministers will form a provisional government. My interest in my son leads me to invite the Chamber immediately to organise a regency by an act of law.⁸

Fouché read the abdication to the Lower Chamber, Carnot read it to the Peers. A five-man provisional government was voted, incidentally totally ignoring the rules of the imperial constitution and thus the automatic accession of Napoleon II. The Lower Chamber nominated three ministers: Carnot, Fouché and the moderate General Grenier; the Peers chose Caulaincourt and the ex-regicide Quinette. The next day Fouché voted for Carnot as leader, Carnot voted for Fouché: Grenier, Caulaincourt and Quinette inclined to Fouché. On 23 June the Chamber debated whether to recognise Napoleon II, and although Houssaye strongly suggests that the outcome was pure chicanery, the account of the speeches tends to suggest a genuine puzzlement and an attempt to satisfy as many parties as possible so as to present a united front to the foreigner. Two resolutions were passed: that the Chamber declared Napoleon II as Emperor by the abdication of his father and by the imperial constitution; and that the newly established provisional government assured the nation's liberty and quiet, and enjoyed the entire confidence of the people. Such ostensibly was the imperial form. In reality whatever power still remained rested in the new and strange combination that took over the duty of saving something from the defeat, under the most astute of French politicians.

'La Rente', French Government Funds, 1815



The men of business in Paris had watched the past week and had registered their hopes and fears in the movement of *La Rente* (the Funds). On 15 June the *Rente* stood at 57 francs. On 20 June it had fallen by 4 francs, but on the next day as news of the defeat was confirmed and the debates developed in the Chamber it rose to 55. On 22 June 1815 it rose another 4.50 to 59.50, on the prospect of an early peace.⁹

III

It is perhaps impossible for anyone but a Frenchman, and even then only Frenchmen whose memories go back to the stresses and revolts that came out of the Indo-China and Algerian conflicts or even the defeat of 1940, to understand the difficulties that the new provisional government faced. French society was deeply divided by ideology and by region: royalists, Bonapartists, republicans watched each other with distrust and even detestation, as the massacres in Marseilles on 25–26 June were to demonstrate. The north and west and the south were generally against Napoleon, the centre and east – the lands that had seen the invasion of 1814 – were for him; but within these regions many simply wanted peace, an end to conscription, and lower taxes. How to control and manage these discontents and divisions was a frightening enough problem in itself. Then there was the need to find some accommodation with the Allies, after the most shattering and decisive defeat, and that in turn added to the social tensions, for it necessarily raised the question of who, if anyone, should take the throne of France. As Fouché was to say, the new provisional government sat on no bed of roses.¹⁰

On 23 June that able and unscrupulous man drew up his first ideas on a negotiation for peace, and a delegation list. The ideas were plainly optimal as a first step in negotiation: integrity of French territory; no imposition of the Bourbons on France through foreign demand; recognition of Napoleon II; safety and inviolability of Napoleon I in his retirement. The delegates were of several minds, not all being hardened Bonapartists. They left Paris on 24 June. On this day Soult, in accordance with Davout's orders, called on the Prussians to agree to an armistice: this was rejected the next day. Napoleon was already considering his future safety. He asked the new authorities that two men-o'war should be provisioned at Rochefort for a voyage to America. On 26 June the ministers authorised the provision of these vessels and for an escort to guard him while in France, but they refused authority for the vessels to sail unless and until a safe-conduct had been given by the Allies. However, on this same day the team of negotiators at Laon warned the government that according to discussions with Blücher's suite it was Napoleon's person that was sought: 'It is our duty to warn that we believe that his escape before negotiations are complete will be seen as bad faith on our part, and that could in essence compromise the safety of France.'

On hearing this, Fouché immediately said to the ministerial meeting that it was necessary to halt Napoleon's departure; and none of the twenty present at that meeting (which included Carnot, Caulaincourt and Davout) disagreed. Houssaye saw this as a cunning move by Fouché to ensnare the Emperor, and yet the dilemma was real: it was desirable to see Napoleon removed far from Paris, even as far as the United States, unable to raise new armies; but was it wise to permit him to escape if the consequence was that France had to pay an additional penalty for his adventure?¹¹

As to the escape to America, there were in any case two problems over which the new French government had no control. The British naval blockade made the project so hazardous that a safe-conduct pass was needed. The safe-conduct request was addressed by the government to the Allied commander most opposed to Napoleon's execution, only to receive a reply that it was a matter for the combined Allied governments to decide upon. Marshal Davout, as part of the provisional government, had already gone to see Napoleon at the Elysée on 24 June and told him of the need to leave the capital: 'the meeting was cold and the close even more so', said Davout. The ex-Emperor left Paris for Josephine's old home of Malmaison on the 25th. There, on the two following days, guarded by a military detachment that was not only for his protection but for his surveillance, he renewed his request for the two ships. By this time the attitudes of the victors were becoming clearer, and the danger of Napoleon falling into the hands of the rapidly

advancing Prussians much greater. On the evening of 28 June, Fouché, concerned at the intransigent attitude of the victors as regards Napoleon, wrote that 'actual circumstances raised fears for Napoleon's safety', and thus he ordered that the safe-conduct stipulation no longer applied, the vessels could sail at any time, and Napoleon should leave at once so as to avoid risk of capture.¹²

At this point Napoleon suddenly changed his mind, and rumours of a new plan immediately circulated. Marshal Davout wrote at 2 a.m. on 29 June that rumours were current that Napoleon intended going to the fortified heights of Montmartre: if that happened Masséna and the national guard should take action to stop him. And indeed Napoleon did make a final appeal:

France need not submit to a handful of Prussians . . . The situation of France, the wishes of patriots, the cries of soldiers, clamour for my presence to save the country. I ask for the command, not as Emperor, but as a general whose name and reputation can yet have a great influence on the fate of the nation. I promise on the faith of a soldier, citizen and Frenchman to leave for America, so as to fulfil my destiny, on the day that I have beaten the enemy.

It may have been sincere, but it contained echoes of the appeal from the rock of Elba just a few months earlier, and by now the Allies were in France in overwhelming strength. Unsurprisingly the government rejected this appeal and wrote to warn him to leave at once as 'the Prussians are marching on Versailles'. Napoleon left for Rochefort around 5 p.m. on 29 June.¹³

IV

The idea of a distinction, as between Napoleon and France, did not prove acceptable to an older generation of French historians. Partly this may be because of anger that, for whatever reason, foreigners had brought a French king back to Paris with a Bourbon flag, after France's Revolutionary and Imperial *tricolor* had proudly flown over many of those foreigners' capitals in The Hague, Madrid, Rome, Vienna, Berlin, Moscow. But also it must be in part the singularly unpleasant fact that the safety of France depended to a considerable extent not on a saintly heroine like Jeanne d'Arc, but on a most unprincipled and unsavoury character, the former pupil of the *Oratoriens*, ex-school-teacher, ex-regicide, a most feared police minister, and possibly the most powerful of Napoleon's ministers during the Hundred Days, Joseph Fouché, Duke of Otranto.

The role of Fouché was critical to the future of France, but it is impossible to be certain of the extent of his plans. Clearly his own survival came first,

but there is no doubt that he sought to limit the damage to France itself. For a long time he had not regarded France and Napoleon as synonymous: perhaps that is why Houssaye hated him so much. Moreover he had already seen that in the longer term, despite any early victories, Napoleon must fail in this new endeavour. According to Chancellor Pasquier, on 3 May 1815 Fouché had remarked that Napoleon 'will be obliged to leave for the army before the month end. Once he has left we shall be masters of the ground. I wish him to win one or two battles, but he will lose the third; and then our role will commence. Believe me, we shall bring about a good dénouement.'¹⁴ Now a crushing defeat had come. Peace and the avoidance of dismemberment were the two national objectives, and to those objectives Napoleon was an encumbrance that had to be disavowed. Whether Napoleon II was desirable seemed doubtful, although from Fouché's contacts with Metternich a regency over the Franco-Austrian child *might* be negotiable; the duc d'Orléans was a possible and acceptable choice for moderate monarchists and had been seen by many inside France and beyond as preferable to the old line;¹⁵ a republic was unlikely to please the Allied sovereigns; and there was always Louis XVIII, with whom Fouché had maintained contact. As with Talleyrand in 1814, so for Fouché in this year, all lay in the art of the possible.

Houssaye denied the distinction between France and Napoleon, and adopted without qualification Napoleon's view of who was responsible for war and thus for France's current woes; in a neat inversion of the reality he wrote: 'The good sense of the public understood that if the Emperor was the cause of *or the pretext* for the war, he was in no way its promoter. *It was Europe that had willed and made inevitable* this war, so feared and execrated [my italics].'¹⁶

This thesis that Napoleon and France were one and the same, and that those who disputed this were in some way false to France, led to some strange contortions. Henri Welschinger, writing in 1893, went so far as to claim that when Louis XVIII and Talleyrand stated in the Cambrai proclamation (28 June 1815) that it was the treason of March 1815 that had 'called foreigners to the heart of France', they should not have blamed *Ney* for treason, *but Talleyrand, for it was he who had called them in* – since once Napoleon had returned to France Talleyrand recognised that foreign assistance was necessary to save the King. Thus he and not Ney was the real traitor!¹⁷

The indefatigable if violent enthusiast Frédéric Masson was equally vehement on the treason of Napoleon's critics after Waterloo. Since for Masson it was a *sine qua non* that only Napoleon could save France, he described La Fayette's intervention on 21 June as,

a coup d'état against the national sovereignty, an insurrection against legal authority, a crime of *lèse-patrie*, the most cowardly and foolish of aggressions against the sole man who could yet save the nation [*sic*]: this was the work of one who in the annals of his sad life registered three memorable dates: 5 October 1789, when he betrayed the king; 20 August 1792, when he went over to the enemy; 21 June 1815, when he dragged down the Emperor.¹⁸

After such warnings, and after the disappearance of 'the sole man who could yet save the nation', what could France expect from the vengeful and victorious Allies? Could any Frenchman undertake the task with any hope of success? Could any foreign statesman? Was France doomed to destruction? That must be the subject of a later chapter.

Chapter 49

The Allied Advance

And the Return of King Louis

I

THE TWO ALLIES HAD TO ENSURE their victory would end the Napoleonic regime for ever. Their basic plan for the invasion of France had been agreed in the exchange of views between Blücher and Wellington on 27 May, and so there was little need for discussion on the evening of 18 June. They would advance as rapidly as possible, but separately, partly for reasons of supply, but would still remain close to each other as surety against any sudden attack by the French. Also they would have to detach parts of their armies to the reduction of some of the French frontier fortresses that otherwise would menace their supply lines. In addition Blücher had a personal objective: to kill Napoleon. That objective Wellington did not share and indeed he was totally opposed to killing Boney; instead he was more concerned to ensure a smooth restoration of Louis XVIII. These differences – though in many ways to be expected by those familiar with the histories of coalition warfare – make for the main interest of these days, but the differences were more of degree, or over method, than about the great objective: freeing Europe from the menace of Napoleon’s restless genius.

Waterloo was rightly termed by Wellington a battle between giants, and such a contest demands extended treatment, but nobody can seriously claim for the days that followed an equivalent number of pages; the combats and sieges took place between opponents of very different morale and power, so that long extracts from daily orders about routes through villages where no resistance was expected to be (or was) encountered, would be boring. Even when there was fighting occasionally, the tale of these skirmishes and escalades is so minor in the context of a world-shaking campaign that the episodes belong rather to regimental history than to this account of Great Powers at war. And so neither the brief British siege of Cambrai nor the Prusso-French clashes at Villers-Cotterêts will receive more than a passing mention.