

Aphorisms  
and  
Thoughts

Napoleon Bonaparte

Selected by Honoré de Balzac

Translated by Charles D. Zorn



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*Preface by Honoré de Balzac*

THE AUTHOR OF THIS WORK must confess that his sole merit consists in the patience with which he has, over several years, scoured through books published on Napoleon and the *Moniteur* archives, all the way down to the last writings in which the words of this great sovereign have been recorded. Another merit is to have perceived the importance of the work resulting from it, which is to Napoleon what the Gospel is to Jesus Christ. Indeed, this book, which will be a treasure trove for many people, would have lost some of its value if all of Napoleon's thoughts had been published indiscriminately. La Rochefoucauld certainly did not make available the entirety of the maxims suggested to him by events: he selected, studied, weighed up and compared those that he handed down to us; whereas Napoleon did not think of

formulating a body of doctrine. The sub-lieutenant spoke without knowing the prime consul, the Emperor often had thoughts without foreseeing St Helena. It was also not an ordinary task to extract the man from each circumstance and to know his real thoughts through the conflicts into which the circumstances of his life had dragged him.

There was nothing to hesitate about in this choice: Napoleon is one of the most violent wills known in the annals of human domination: therefore there could be nothing more interesting about him than the rules by which he constructed and maintained his power.

However, from his starting point to his final destination, and from his throne to his tomb, he twice travelled, and in two different directions, the entire social state, which he managed to see and observe in its entirety; every time one of his words, as removed as it might be from politics, appeared to us fundamentally to light up certain episodes of human life, we have not omitted it: thus anyone will find here something useful to them, big or small, as

this mind, as sharp as a sword, has sounded every depth. The terrorist of '93 and the general-in-chief have been absorbed by the Emperor, the governor has often refuted the governed; but the phrases which the various crises tore from him and which collide against each other admirably reveal the great struggle to which he was condemned. Also, a single phrase in this collection often portrays certain phases of his life and several portions of contemporary history much better than historians have achieved until now. Can the book of the man who deliberates after the fact ever be worth the cry of the man struck in his heart? What poetry the pain of Napoleon!

Still it was necessary to prune several thoughts which were shared by the great people who preceded him in politics, and others from which his name did not take away their commonness. Nevertheless, we have provided the ones the Emperor has repeated often enough to impress on them the seal of fact; do they not consequently explain his genius, his opinions or his domination?

In the eyes of the masses, this book will be like an apparition: the soul of the Emperor will pass in front of them; but, for certain chosen minds, it will be his history in algebraic form: the abstract man will be visible in it, the Idea in lieu of the Action. Will it not be one of the most singular events in the destiny of this man that, after having so vigorously struggled against the manifestation of thought, he himself ends up being a mere book? This collection of axioms will above all be the guidebook of endangered powers: no one has had a better instinct for peril in the act of governing than Napoleon. We will do him the justice of recognizing that he was frank, and never shrank back from any consequence: he glorified Action and condemned Thought. That is in two words the spirit of this political testament. Many of these maxims will also seem Machiavellian, cruel, false, and will be criticized by many of those who in themselves take them to be just and ready to be applied. It is not unnecessary to point out that Napoleon never contradicted himself in his hatred for lawyers, idealists and republicans. His

opinion with regard to them amounts to banishing public discussion from government affairs.

We are not to take sides here for or against the experience that this great man has bequeathed to France: it is not up to anyone to defend or accuse Napoleon, it is enough to make him appear in front of all of us. His thoughts constitute a legislation which will be censured or adopted, but which had to be brought up to date in its most concise form; nobody will forget that they contain the secrets of the greatest organizer of modern times; if they are in direct opposition to France's current spirit, this vigorous contradiction was one further motive to publish them. Napoleon considered responsible governing to be impossible and press freedom as incompatible with the existence of power: what kind of flattery will be in store for the kings and ministers who will solve a problem they proclaimed was insoluble?

There is one more thing left to say about the divisions that we have made in this mass of thoughts, the suitability of which will, we hope, be well received.

It seemed to us possible to determine which maxims and ideas Napoleon came up with before 18th Brumaire, that is to say, while he was still a republican or citizen, subject or subservient to a recognized power.

After this first portion, we have put together all the thought concerning the art of warfare, which was the secret to his rise and the engine of his empire's power.

The third part contains all the ideas about the sovereign and those which the exercise of his power or his organization must have suggested to him.

Finally, the fourth is everything which experience and adversity have prescribed to him, it is the cry of the modern Prometheus.

If Napoleon is remarkable politically, it is thanks to his predictions on the state of Europe. Today his greatest enemies or those who sought to belittle him could not disagree that the eagle-eyed vision with which he embraced the battlefield also reached the broadest fields of politics; today the majority of the predictions he

pronounced on the future events of Europe and the world have been accomplished; as for the rest, there is no doubt for superior minds that they will be accomplished.

*(This is an edited version of Balzac's original 1838 preface to the collection, published under the name "J.-L. G\*\*\*y jeune".)*



*Aphorisms  
and  
Thoughts*



1

There are only two classes in Europe: that which wants privileges and that which rejects them.

2

If obedience is the result of the instinct of the masses, then rebellion is the result of their reflection.

3

A revolution is an opinion which discovers bayonets.

4

A revolution is a vicious circle: it starts with excess only to return to it.

5

The young fulfil the revolutions which the old have prepared.

3

6

The greatest republican is Jesus Christ.

7

In times of revolution one forgets everything.

8

Pitt was the banker for the French civil war and Revolution.

9

Most countries' laws were made to oppress the unfortunate and to protect the powerful.

10

Robespierre has been, in many respects, an honest man.

11

It is rare that a great assembly is reasonable: it is too readily passionate.

12

A club cannot support one enduring leader: it needs one for every interest.

13

Collective crimes make no one answerable.

14

Every assembly tends to turn the sovereign into a ghost and the population into a slave.

15

All great assemblies can be reduced to several cliques, and each clique to one man.

16

People are capable of judgement when they do not listen to sermonizers; lawyers will never save anything and will always be on the losing side.

17

If Louis XVI had stood trial before a counter-revolutionary court, he would have been found guilty.