

Afterword: the *Coup D'État* of 18-19 Brumaire


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In many respects, the reason for Napoleon's absencing himself from the public eye after his return to Paris would become obvious. Throughout the summer of 1799, Siéyès, one of the five Directors, had been quietly organizing a conspiracy against his own government. He realized, as many others had, that the Constitution of the Year III—a constitution he wrote—possessed too many flaws and could not be revised by any other methods besides overthrowing it. ¹ To accomplish this *coup d'état*, he needed the support of a general and the army. Napoleon Bonaparte was only one of several possibilities, but by October all the others had proven unacceptable. Hoche had died in September 1797; Joubert had been killed at Novi in August 1798; Bernadotte was not to be trusted; Augereau and Jourdan were eliminated because of their Jacobin leanings; Moreau was approached but declined the invitation, suggesting that Bonaparte would be a better candidate. ² The only real choice was Napoleon Bonaparte, whose ambition Siéyès feared, but hoped to control. Certainly the coup of 18-19 *brumaire* could not have occurred without at least the general's tacit approval. In the weeks prior to the planned coup, then, Bonaparte limited his appearances in public to enhance his the impact of his eventual appearance in triumph. As he later told Madame de Rémusat:

I hid myself from the people, because I knew that when the moment came, curiosity to see me would bring them running after me. Everyone was caught in my nets and when I became head of state there was not a party in France that did not build some special hope on my success. ³

By November 1799, his popularity was such that he could rely on the French public to support and ultimately to legitimate his actions.


Although conceived well in advance of November by Siéyès and others, the *coup d'état* almost proved disastrous for the conspirators.

 [Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès](#) The central difficulty, as J. M. Thompson points out, was in trying to give an illegal act an air of legality. ⁴ Siéyès, for example, planned a two-day process and refused to order the arrest of leftist leaders, despite Bonaparte's encouragement. The Brumairians hoped to gain the support of the legislative bodies through such actions, but in reality such a plan allowed time for the opposition to organize itself, making the entire *coup d'état* more difficult to achieve.

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The first day proved deceptively easy. Under the pretext of protecting itself from an alleged Jacobin threat, the Council of Ancients voted to reconvene the following day in St. Cloud and turned command of the Paris garrison over to Napoleon. The Council of Five Hundred reluctantly agreed to follow their

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senior colleagues. Later that evening, General Moreau took up  [Paul Barras](#) position before the Luxembourg Palace, threatening those directors who were not part of the conspiracy; Moulin fled the scene, Barras resigned, and Gohier remained under house arrest until the coup was over. Thus, by the evening of 9 November, the Executive Directory had been completely neutralized and the legislature seemed likely to follow suit. 6


The second day of the coup, however, turned into a comedy of errors, saved only by the presence of mind of Napoleon's younger brother Lucien, who had recently been elected President of the Council of Five Hundred. Napoleon's impatience nearly proved his undoing. Concerned about the length and subject of the debate in the Council of Ancients, he decided to intervene personally:

Permit me to speak with the frankness of a soldier and, to escape the trap which is held ready for you, suspend your judgment until I have finished.

Yesterday I was quietly in Paris until you sent for me to notify me of a decree to transfer and to entrust me with its execution. I at once assembled my comrades and we ran to your help. Well! Today I am overwhelmed with calumnies. They are talking of Caesar, they are talking of Cromwell, they are talking of military government. Had I sought military government, would I have hastened to lend my support to the national representatives?

Citizen Representatives, time presses; it is essential that you take prompt measures. The Republic has no government. Four of the Directors have resigned; I have felt it necessary to place the fifth under surveillance, by virtue of the power you have invested in me. The Council of Five Hundred is divided; there remains only the Council of the Ancients. 7

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Bonaparte's speech, frequently interrupted by shouts from the legislators,  [Bonaparte's speech](#) fooled no one. Before he left the chamber, the Council of Ancients had not voted themselves out of existence as the conspirators had hoped, but had sworn allegiance to the Constitution of the Year III.

The scene in the Council of Five Hundred was even worse. No sooner had Bonaparte entered the building than he was greeted by shouts of "Down with the Dictator!" and calls for his arrest. As angry deputies pressed forward threateningly toward the rostrum, not even the President of the Five Hundred, Napoleon's brother Lucien, could regain control of the situation.

Napoleon himself nearly collapsed under the emotional stress. Supported by several of his grenadiers, the general escaped outside to his awaiting soldiers, shaken but safe. A few moments later, Lucien rushed outside, declaring that General Bonaparte had been attacked by assassins. General Murat, in turn, ordered a squad of grenadiers to clear the building. [8](#)

A rump session of the Council of Five Hundred called for the creation of a provisional government entrusted to Siéyès, Ducos, and Bonaparte as consuls. Paris remained quiet, and the value of government bonds on the Bourse jumped in value from 11.38 francs on 8 November to 20 francs a week later. [9](#) France appeared to have accepted the change of government. The coup succeeded in spite of Bonaparte's impatience; yet Napoleon's ill-advised actions also transformed the coup, making him the central figure.

As Felix Markham points out, there were actually two *coups d'état* in November 1799: the first was Siéyès's victory over leftist political forces on 9-10 November; the second was Bonaparte's ascendancy over Siéyès during and following the coup. [10](#) As early as 9 November, for example, Napoleon deviated from Siéyès's plans by altering the decree appointing him commander of the garrison in and around Paris. He now added to his command the guard units of both the Executive Directory and the two Councils. [11](#) During the first day of the coup, the general also publicly denounced the government:

What have you done with the France I left in such glory? I left peace, and I find war. I left victories, and I find defeats. I left millions from Italy, and I find it squandered by laws and misery. Where are the one hundred thousand men who disappeared from French soil? They are dead, and they were my companions in arms. This state of things cannot continue. [12](#)

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Jean Tulard sees this outburst as a complete success for Bonaparte, both rallying the soldiers to his cause and discrediting the entire political system. [13](#) While this may be true, it also tipped off the opposition, creating unnecessary difficulties for the second day.

In the weeks following the *coup d'état*, Siéyès found himself and his plans for a new government gradually pushed aside in favor of Bonaparte. In the first meeting of the provisional consulate, for example, Ducos offered the First Consul's chair to Napoleon because it was his "by right." [14](#) While Bonaparte's initial role in the *coup d'état* may have been that of a junior partner who brought with him the support of the military, by December 1799, he had emerged as the senior partner. It was Bonaparte, not his colleagues, who initiated much of the business of the provisional government, reinforcing for the public his role as lawgiver and leader. In writing a new constitution,

Siéyès repeatedly acceded to Bonaparte's modifications, giving the First Consul unrivaled power in the new government. [15](#) In the end, Siéyès could match neither Bonaparte's heroic image nor his influence over the army, and the stage was set for the Hero of Italy to become the ruler of France.

Notes:

Note 1: Martyn Lyons, *France Under the Directory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 195), 230-31; and Goodspeed, *Napoleon's Eighty Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965), 59. [Back.](#)

Note 2: Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 37; Lyons, *Directory*, 231; and R. Ben Jones, *Napoleon: Man and Myth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), 84. [Back.](#)

Note 3: Napoleon Bonaparte to Madame de Rémusat, as quoted in Goodspeed, *Napoleon's Eighty Days*, 82. [Back.](#)

Note 4: J. M. Thompson, *Napoleon Bonaparte* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), 154. [Back.](#)

Note 5: Napoléon Bonaparte, *Correspondence de Napoléon Ier*, Vol. VI (Paris: Henri Plon, 1858), 2, [number 4386](#). Hereafter abbreviated *Corr.* followed the volume number, page number, and by the appropriate document number. See also *Corr.* VI: 3, [no. 4387](#). [Back.](#)

Note 6: Jean Tulard, *Napoleon: The Myth of the Savior*, trans. Teresa Waugh (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), 12-13; Lyons, *Directory*, 231-32; and Thompson, *Napoleon Bonaparte*, 154. [Back.](#)

Note 7: *Corr.* VI: 3-6, [no. 4388](#). See also *Corr.* VI: 6-8, [no. 4389](#) [Back.](#)

Note 8: Lyons, *Legacy*, 40. [Back.](#)

Note 9: Lyons, *Directory*, 233. [Back.](#)

Note 10: Felix Markham, *Napoleon* (New York: Mentor Books, 1963), 77-78. [Back.](#)

Note 11: Markham, *Napoleon*, 74. [Back.](#)

Note 12: Auguste Frédéric Louis Vieusse de Marmont, *Mémoires du Maréchal duc du Raguse de 1792 à 1832*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1857), 95-96. See also *Corr.* VI: 6-8, [no. 4389](#). [Back.](#)

Note 13: Tulard, *Myth*, 12. [Back.](#)

Note 14: Tulard, *Myth*, 16. [Back.](#)

Note 15: Thompson, *Napoleon Bonaparte*, 156-59. [Back.](#)

[The Genesis of Napoleonic Propaganda, 1796-1799](#)