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The Second Empire, 1852–70

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Q. How did Napoleon III come to power? What factors explain his political appeal?

A. Louis-Napoleon's opportunity came as a result of an intense crisis, beginning with poor harvests and agitation for electoral reform and culminating in the revolution of February 1848 which established the Second Republic and 'universal' (i.e. manhood) suffrage. Continued social and political tension characterized by a renewed insurrection in Paris in June, and its brutal military repression by a republican government, ensured that as a result of disappointed expectations, or in the case of conservatives, of fear of further revolution, substantial parts of the population were prepared to contemplate the election of a potential 'saviour'. This was the strength of Bonapartism – to be able to appear as 'all things to all men'.

Supported with reluctance by conservative politicians, Louis-Napoleon's victory in the presidential election in December 1848 was nevertheless overwhelming. He gained 74.2 per cent of the votes cast (5,534,520). His leading opponent, the republican, General Cavaignac, obtained only 19.5 per cent (1,448,302). In Paris the successful candidate gained 58 per cent of the vote, with higher proportions in the popular *quartiers* for the supposedly 'socialist' author of the *Extinction du paupérisme*. However, in a still predominantly agrarian country, it was peasant support which would remain the basis of Bonaparte's electoral strength for decades to come.

Initially Louis-Napoleon sought collaboration with conservative elites in the re-establishment of social order through increasingly intense repression of the *démocrate-socialiste* left, and with the Roman Catholic Church in the inculcation of 'moral order' through education. Increasingly, however, he also asserted his own independence as head of government by appointing ministers and officials responsible to him, while ignoring protests from deputies in the National Assembly elected in May 1849. Unable to secure the two-thirds majority in the Assembly which would have allowed him to stand for re-election in 1852, the President was well placed to employ the bureaucracy and army, in which his supporters had already been placed in key positions, to launch a carefully planned *coup* on 2 December 1851.

In Paris only very limited resistance occurred, due to preventive arrests, and to obvious military preparedness. Few workers were prepared to risk a repetition of the bloodbath of June 1848 to defend the rights of a conservative assembly against a President who presented himself as the defender of popular sovereignty and enjoyed the prestige that went with the name Bonaparte. The predominantly conservative deputies, who gathered in the town hall of the 10th arrondissement, refused to rally to a president who had broken his constitutional oath, but were unwilling to contemplate more than symbolic resistance to a *coup d'état* which promised to establish the strong,

authoritarian government which they believed was necessary to end the prospect of a socialist electoral victory in 1852.

Although easily crushed, more substantial resistance in rural areas of central France, and particularly the south-east was used both to justify the coup and a reign of terror directed at republicans. On 20 December a plebiscite was held to sanction the extension of the Prince-President's authority. The electorate was asked to vote on whether 'the people wish to maintain the authority of Louis-Napoleon and delegate to him the powers necessary to establish a constitution'. This appeal to popular sovereignty was to be a characteristic of the new regime. Louis-Napoleon was determined to secure a large majority as a means of legitimizing his actions. It was made clear to all officials, including village mayors, that their continued employment depended on enthusiastic campaigning. The basic theme was the choice between 'civilization and barbarism, society and chaos'. In place of the era of disorder which had opened in 1848, a new period of order, peace, and prosperity was promised. Nationally 7,500,000 voted 'yes', 640,000 'no' and 1,500,000 abstained. Ominously, opposition was concentrated in the major cities. Coercion was widespread but primarily the result was due to the immense popularity of the Prince-President. In the countryside he was perceived to be the only safeguard against renewed revolution and additionally offered protection against the restoration of the *ancien régime*. The following November, after a carefully orchestrated campaign, during which Bonaparte promised peace, order and reconciliation and which culminated in a triumphant return to the capital, where he was greeted by enthusiastic crowds and processed to the Tuileries Palace under a succession of triumphal arches, 7,824,000 voters approved the re-establishment of the hereditary empire, which was proclaimed on 2 December 1852, the anniversary of the Battle of Austerlitz.

Q. What was the nature of the Second Empire? How did Napoleon III rule?

A. The new regime's origins in a *coup d'état*, its authoritarian and repressive character, together with its ignominious collapse in the war of 1870, ensured that subsequently it received, and indeed deserved, a bad press. By the 1930s the Second Empire was being described as a precursor of Fascism. The system of government established following the coup was certainly constructed with the intention of strengthening the powers of the head of state at the expense of representative institutions. The Emperor appointed ministers and senior officials and assumed responsibility for decision-making. The Senate was packed with supporters, the role of the elected lower house – the *Corps législatif* – with around 260 members, was initially viewed as essentially consultative, although as its consent was required for legislation, it represented a potential centre of opposition. For this reason its members were carefully selected and every effort was made to determine the outcome of elections through manipulation, coercion and propaganda associating the regime with prosperity and social order. However, the decision to retain manhood suffrage clearly distinguished the Second Empire from previous monarchical regimes. This was a regime which owed its legitimacy not to divine right but to the popular will. In time, as fear of revolution declined, and repression eased, the social elites who had been deprived of power by the coup were able to make use of their dominant position in the administration and *Corps législatif* to criticize the restrictions on political liberty as well as the Emperor's adventurous foreign policy which had in 1859 led to the collapse of the Papal States, and in 1860 to the negotiation of a commercial treaty with Britain. Catholics and protectionists felt betrayed.

Q. How did the Second Empire change? Is it possible to talk about different particular phases of the Second Empire?

A. Unlike his predecessors, Napoleon was prepared to adapt and to engage in the difficult process of regime liberalization, in spite of warnings that he risked opening the flood gates. The gradual extension of political liberties culminating in the establishment of a liberal empire in 1870 represented a concession to liberal criticism from the social elite rather than to the growing republican movement. As well as much greater freedom of speech, the Emperor accepted that ministers should be responsible to parliament as well as to himself. Nevertheless, as the elect of the people, Napoleon retained considerable personal power, including the right to dissolve parliament and appeal to the people by means of elections or plebiscites, and the authority to negotiate treaties and declare war. The new constitution was approved by plebiscite on 8 May 1870 by 7,350,000 votes to 1,538,000. The future of the dynasty appeared to have been assured.

Q. How did the Second Empire transform the French economy and society?

A. The regime was fortunate in that it coincided with a world-wide period of economic growth. The impact was reinforced by investment in roads, railways and the electric telegraph as the means of achieving a transport 'revolution'. This, along with customs treaties with the country's main trading partners, was intended to ensure the development of more competitive markets and an environment conducive to investment in 'modern' technology. Substantial resources were also mobilized to finance the creation of a capital city fit for the empire, its broad boulevards flanked by new commercial and residential buildings and strategically placed barracks. Similar, if less ambitious, developments graced most provincial cities. Along with enhanced opportunities for profit, it was hoped that large-scale investment would provide employment opportunities and contribute to social stability. The objectives were clear but economic and social modernization takes time. Additionally, it was impossible to insulate the country against the vagaries of the economic cycle or political crises. Moreover, government intervention in economic affairs provoked considerable hostility from a variety of special interest groups. Nor did it follow that the improved living conditions would automatically promote a greater sense of loyalty to the regime.

Q. What was Napoleon III's foreign policy?

A. The final collapse of the regime was to be caused by the incompetent management of foreign policy. The waging of successful war had been an important source of prestige for the regime. Napoleon's foreign policy aims involved rejection of the 1815 treaties and a recasting of the map of Europe based on the principle of nationality as well as the territorial aggrandisement of France itself. As far as possible, these objectives were to be achieved through congresses of the powers but, if necessary, through limited war. The Crimean War in 1854 represented a first step, an alliance with Britain against Russia, the most reactionary of European states. War with Austria in 1859 united Lombardy and unintentionally, the duchies and the Papal Romagna, to the Kingdom of Piedmont-Savoy. As a reward, the territories of Savoy and Nice were triumphantly restored to France. The despatch of an expeditionary force to Mexico in

December 1861 and the dream of creating a French sphere of influence in the Americas would, however, illustrate the danger of policies difficult to justify as in the nation's vital interests. Moreover, concern about Prussian aspirations had been growing for some time. The rapidity with which Austria was defeated in 1866 came as a considerable shock. It represented a major upset of the balance of power. Subsequently relations continued to deteriorate.

Logically, a belief in the likelihood of war should have promoted an effort to ensure that the army was ready. Prussian successes suggested an urgent need to increase the French army's strength and create an adequate manpower reserve. Proposals to reform the conscription system were, however, emasculated following bitter opposition. Although international tension declined in 1869–70, news, early in July, of the candidature of the Prussian Prince Leopold for the Spanish throne and the prospect of Hohenzollern monarchs on the Rhine and Pyrenean frontiers created an atmosphere favourable to war. While the Emperor and Ollivier were willing to accept a simple Prussian withdrawal of this candidature, conservatives in the *Corps législatif* demanded guarantees which the Prussian Chancellor Bismarck refused, in terms calculated to enflame the situation. Rather than face another humiliating foreign policy reversal and risk a parliamentary defeat, which would have thrown the revised constitution, and particularly the Emperor's personal power, into doubt, Napoleon and Ollivier hoped that victorious Franco-Prussian war would consolidate the regime. Military credits were voted by the *Corps législatif* on 15 July with 245 deputies in favour, 10 against and 7 abstentions, revealing that many republicans and almost the entire liberal opposition had rallied.

Q. What events brought about the demise of the Second Empire?

A. The French army went to war suffering from major structural weaknesses. It suffered from numerical inferiority and a catastrophic lack of central co-ordination. The Emperor's presence with the armies and constant interference only made this worse. The first defeats on 4 and 6 August were a massive shock. The Emperor's response was, on 9 August, to replace the Ollivier ministry with a government made up of authoritarian Bonapartists under General Cousin-Montauban. At the same time efforts were made to mobilize more men and to re-establish popular morale. It was too late. In an effort to relieve the army of the Rhine which was encircled at Metz, Napoleon and Marshal Mac-Mahon led another army into a trap at Sedan. The Emperor surrendered on 2 September. News of this humiliating capitulation was received in Paris on the evening of 3 September. Catastrophic defeat destroyed the regime's claim to legitimacy. In this political vacuum the small group of 27 republican deputies in the *Corps législatif* demanded its replacement. They were supported by crowds which on 4 September invaded the Palais Bourbon. There was no resistance and no bloodshed. The more moderate among the republican *députés de Paris* seized their opportunity and established a *gouvernement provisoire de la défense nationale* partly to prevent the much feared seizure of power by the Parisian revolutionaries, partly to re-organize the military effort. In the provinces the Imperial administration collapsed and only the republicans had the organization and record of consistent opposition which allowed them to present themselves as the legitimate successors to the Empire. Generally even the conservative press called for unity in defence of the nation.

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