

Patricia Sorel, Napoléon et le livre. La censure sous le Consulat et l'Empire (1799-1815). Préface de Jean-Yves Mollier, Rennes (Presses universitaires de Rennes) 2020, 194 p. (Histoire), ISBN 978-2-7535-7893-7, EUR 22,00.

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par
Anaïs Nagel, Strasbourg

This book, written by Patricia Sorel, focuses on a topic rarely studied by historians. Apart from the decree in 1810, well known by the specialists of the Napoleonic Empire, which stipulated the regulation controlling the publication and the circulation of books at that time, knowledge is lacking regarding the management and the practical control of the book world by Napoleon, who was very keen to regulate almost every aspect of social and cultural life. This historiographical lack explains the small number of books on this subject, Patricia Sorel quotes around 50, as well as a rather out-dated bibliography to which the author refers. Hence, the absolute necessity of updating the scientific standpoint.

Nevertheless, the author neither focuses on the relationship the Emperor had with books, even if she notes that he was an »avid reader« (p. 35), nor on the help given to writers producing propaganda, nor on the print and printing seizures of works of art and of archives, which were retrieved from the countries occupied by Napoleon. Patricia Sorel's book is focused instead on the censorship of the regime between 1799 and 1815. Even though the main title is »Napoleon and the book«, the subtitle »Censorship during the Consulship and the Empire« would seem more accurate to describe the content.

In addition to the few major studies quoted in the bibliography, the author has based her research on the collection of the French National Archives: the series F/7 (Ministry of The Interior) and F/18 (Printing and Library Directorate), which are well known by historians but are far from having revealed all their secrets yet and might be interesting material for further historical investigations in the future.

Patricia Sorel's book is divided into four chapters of varying length and differing guidelines. Chapters I, II and IV are chronologically organized. Chapter I describes the evolution of the organisation and the functioning of the censorship from 1799 to 1810. Chapter II talks about the period from 1810 to 1814. Chapter IV focuses on the removal of the censorship, which took place in the period between the two Restorations and the Hundred Days. These chapters show that, during the period of 1799–1815, an institutionalized book-surveillance system was introduced, and the State established tools of supervision, which were deemed necessary. Patricia Sorel's study, thus, reveals a centralisation



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

around some specific services and ministerial offices: the Freedom of the Press division in the Ministry of Police directed by Joseph Fouché (1804) and the Press Office in this same department, before a Printing and bookselling body was created in the Ministry of The Interior by the decree of 1810. The author proposes a prosopographical approach, which is pleasant to read despite the succession of biographies, and provides some information about the founding group of the imperial censorship, composed of, as Patricia Sorel describes them »literary men either impecunious or in need of recognition« (p. 64).

In addition, the role played by Napoleon was not just based on anecdotal evidence, censorship was one of the tools used to strengthen the regime's propaganda. Censorship was, actually, an answer to the wish to promote the image of the »providential man«, embodied by the Emperor, who was also concerned about limiting the prerogatives of his police minister. That's why Napoleon encouraged competition and emulation between these administrative bodies, sometimes deliberately involving himself in these entanglements. His interference was also intended to disavow some censors, who were over-zealous, in his opinion. As Patricia Sorel points out: »This is one of the paradoxes of the regime: the censorship introduced was implicit and not called by a name« (p. 91). The Emperor refused to admit entirely that »the freedom of opinion had been abolished« (p. 91) and that »the individual freedom is not respected« (p. 91). As an example, the author takes the senatorial commission for freedom of the press, set up in May 1804 to guarantee the rights of writers and book professionals. The commission had only met eight times in ten years and, in actual fact, did not protect the rights of the book professionals at all. There was indeed only a very limited amount of prosecution and there were only a few books prohibited in comparison to the whole production, only around 3 % of all publications of 1813, which was due to the severe penalties imposed on writers and printers. The repression discouraged them, and the fear of seizure, fines or imprisonment forced them to censor themselves.

Chapter III, being the only chapter that does not follow the chronological organization, presents the four main, broad book-categories, for which censorship applied. Firstly, all the writings unfavourable to the Old Regime were censored, especially those written about the Revolution or the death of Louis XVI, which were »taboo issues« (p. 110). As a matter of fact, as Patricia Sorel writes: »the excesses of the revolution should not be highlighted out of proportion« (p. 110) and Fouché, Napoleon's police minister, explained that the Emperor chose to seize some books written about the Revolution in order to protect his new wife – Marie-Louise, Marie-Antoinette's niece – who would have been shocked by these writings. But, despite the censorship and the seizures, the books about the royal family continued to be in great demand and to be sold.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Apart from that, any prints suspected of being an outrage to public decency, those about religion or all the political writings that were even tracked down after the texts had reappeared in other novels, were all censored. The censors had to control the increasing number of songs, almanacs and short books as well as church books. Even though the bishops oversaw religious issues, Napoleon refused to entrust them with moral issues, which fell under State jurisdiction due to the Concordat regime.

This chapter also shows the limitations of the role of the censor. Around a thousand books, on average, were published every year before 1810, four times more in 1811-1812. That's why, even with the increasing number of censors, they were unable to check every book on the market.

To conclude, Patricia Sorel's study about the printing censorship between 1799 and 1815 is a very pleasant book to read. The style of writing is fluid, clear and simply expressed. Even though the author uses a great number of quotations – proof that it is a real archival work – they are always used to underline a particular claim and to reinforce the historiographical interest of the book. Patricia Sorel succeeds in demonstrating that the Napoleonic system was a real achievement that lasted over 60 years without any significant changes. This success was not only due to Napoleon's personality but to a number of actors, the censors in particular, who contributed to the dissemination of the Emperor's propaganda, which, in fact, strengthened his aura: The control of books was, indeed, an essential instrument of the Napoleonic propaganda system. The study of the Napoleonic censorship system as well as the actors and the mechanism involved enables us to have a better understanding of how the politico-administrative sphere adapted to and answered the challenges posed by the rise of printing during the nineteenth century.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)