

**Gérald Arboit, Napoléon et le renseignement,  
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Gérald Arboit is not primarily a historian of the Napoleonic era but a specialist in defense and national security studies, subjects on which he has written a number of important works, among them histories of the intelligence services in France in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Here he assesses the achievements of the Consulate and First Empire in collecting intelligence, at a time when France had to cope with both foreign war and internal insurgency and Napoleon was himself the target of several near-fatal assassination attempts. In these circumstances, access to reliable information, to intelligence on the activities of both his adversaries abroad and enemies closer to home, would be essential to his own survival as well as to the success of his empire. It quickly assumed a high priority for the French state, with repercussions across Europe as lands were conquered and annexed and new *départements* added to the Hexagone, where they were subjected to the same policing regime and placed under the same military surveillance as France itself.

Of course, collecting intelligence on the enemy's intentions and spying on subversive elements at home had a long history, both in France and in other European states. The Revolution had sent police spies to bars and markets to act as *agents provocateurs*, listening in to private conversations and alerting the authorities to potential disaffection. With the declaration of war in 1792 and 1793 police activity was further extended. Information was collected on public opinion, on *esprit public* in towns and rural areas of the country, while specially selected *agents secrets* were sent to France's frontier departments and to regions liable to royalist unrest, most notably the Midi, the Lyonnais, and, most urgently, the Vendée and the Loire valley. Spies reported from prisons and army barracks. Ideological divisions meant that policing was almost inevitably politicized, defending not just the country but also the regime. It had its origins in the sophisticated system of civil control that had been established in the reigns of Louis XIV and Louis XV, but it was not fully developed into a modern secret service until well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, during the Napoleonic era the state that had come closest to creating a secret service of the kind we would recognise today was probably Great Britain, where William Pitt's government not only policed the taverns of London to prevent contagion from revolutionary France but also, as historians from Maurice Hutt to Elizabeth Sparrow have shown, established a foreign secret service to support counter-revolution abroad. William Wickham, as Britain's principal spymaster, had networks covering much of the continent. »British gold«, as Sparrow comments, »made espionage the growth industry of



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Europe«. In many areas, not least the eastern Mediterranean, it was also a powerful weapon of war.

As with so much of Napoleonic innovation, changes to France's system of intelligence gathering were largely administrative in nature, making sure that information was passed between agencies and ministries and turning it to the advantage of the military. They involved an extension of the powers of the Haute Police, now operating beyond France's boundaries, and the creation of offices inside the ministries with responsibility for collecting and passing on information to those best able to exploit it. In particular, imperial reforms involved collaboration between personnel from the diplomatic corps, the interior ministry and the Ministry of War as well as with the »Cabinet noir«, a newly created intelligence-gathering office inside the postal service. The result, as Arboit explains, was the invention of the concept of »renseignements généraux«, the collection of intelligence that could help formulate state policy. Agents were employed and foreign informers bribed to produce relevant information, all of which, of course, required considerable expenditure at a time when the imperial treasury was chronically short of money, and Napoleon had to intervene personally to make sure that his network remained well funded. Money was raised from a variety of sources – through taxation, of course, but also by creaming off surpluses from existing budgets and diverting the profits of smuggling along the Channel coast – and from these sources Napoleon funded the secret dealings of Fouché, Savary, Talleyrand and others. As the years passed, costs escalated as espionage begat counter-espionage and increasing sums were needed to counter the activities of others, most particularly but by no means exclusively the English, who took to spying on France.

How effective was Napoleon's system of intelligence collection? It employed more people and became much more wide-ranging than its revolutionary predecessor, targeting royalists and Jacobins with equal fervour and seeking out sedition in all its forms. It turned to diplomats and diplomatic contacts to report on state ambitions and military movements. It called on the navy to report on shipping movements and on the naval manoeuvres of rival states. And it was largely successful. Arboit provides evidence of a wide range of effective operations in which cooperation between different government agencies led to the exposure of terrorist plots or thwarted British attempts to come to the aid of Royalists and Chouans. He shows how special operations were launched in support of Napoleon's military campaigns and emphasises the degree to which espionage helped him wage economic warfare against his opponents, not only cutting off vital supplies but reducing their tax income and hence their ability to invest in troops and weaponry. Intelligence took many forms, and it relied on both the commitment of French agents and the corruptibility of foreigners whose services they bought. Of course there were failures and missteps, when the activity of French agents inadvertently alerted the enemy, or when rivalries and jealousies prevented the ministries from cooperating in a common



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cause. Much depended on their success in establishing networks of agents to supply information, working through informers or seeking favours from local officials. In Spain, where no such network existed, little intelligence was collected, and this gave their opponents a significant operational advantage which they did not enjoy elsewhere.

Gérald Arboit shows how much Napoleon came to depend on intelligence gathering. Undercover agents were deployed in foreign states and the information they provided found its way to the Emperor in diplomatic bags. To that degree it is legitimate to talk of France having developed a *service de renseignement* during the Consulate and Empire. Napoleon studied maps to understand the lie of the land. He collected a wealth of statistics to evaluate the strength of his opponents. He demanded to hear the rumours circulating in the courts of Europe. But his achievement stops there. He was not a true innovator in these matters: he invented no new forms of espionage, and he did not create a modern secret service. These developments lay in the future; indeed, it was only after France's intervention in the Crimea in the 1850s that the general staff would think it necessary to incorporate a discrete intelligence service into the French military establishment.



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