

Bicentenary of Napoleon's death: Macron praises Bonapartist police-state rule

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On May 5, French President Emmanuel Macron spoke on the bicentenary of the death of Napoleon Bonaparte on May 5, 1821, in exile on the island of Saint Helena.

Napoleon, his military genius and the sweep of his political life have been the topic of countless official speeches these two centuries. His career—from the radical era of the French Revolution in 1793, through his seizure of power in a 1799 coup and his decision to crown himself Emperor in 1804, to his defeat at Waterloo in 1815—is marked by all the contradictions of the era of the French Revolution. What official speakers have chosen to highlight about Napoleon has typically said more about their regimes than about Napoleon's place in history.

In this, Macron's speech was no exception. Delivered as the French army publishes fascistic threats to mount a coup, and Macron himself ignores scientific advice and calls to "live with the virus" after COVID-19 has claimed over 1 million lives in Europe, it testified to the mortal crisis of democracy in France and across Europe.

Though he is the president of a Republic and owes his office to election, Macron hailed Napoleon for having secured bourgeois property through a coup and the reestablishment of inherited titles, after the French people overthrew monarchs claiming to rule by divine right.

Addressing high school students at the Institute of France, Macron said, "After months of failure, of France besieged, of latent violence, Napoleon discovered how to be the very incarnation of order. ... Napoleon understood very rapidly the necessity of responding to the dizziness provoked by the end of rule by divine right, substituting for it another legitimacy, another transcendence."

Macron then hailed Napoleon's decision to end the French First Republic and crown himself emperor in 1804: "His greatest intuition was how to fill the void left behind by the figure of the King on January 21 [1793, at the execution of Louis XVI by the guillotine]. The solution ... was radical and expressed in his extraordinary

oxymoron: 'The Republic has an Empire.'"

Macron's view that the 1789 revolution's toppling of the monarchy left a "void" that must be filled reflects authoritarian conceptions that now prevail in the French ruling class. As Macron spoke, the neo-fascist magazine *Current Values* was preparing yet another letter by thousands of officers, threatening "civil war" and pledging to intervene militarily on French soil, at the cost of thousands of lives. Remarkably, Macron was totally silent on this threat in his speech.

If, peering out at France and the world, Macron sees only failures and hidden threats, it is because he is speaking not of the era of the 1776 American, 1789 French and 1791 Haitian revolutions, but of France today. Rather, he is discussing his own presidency.

The decade between the people's taking of the Bastille on July 14, 1789 and Napoleon's 1799 coup was not one of failure, nor was its violence "latent." In the five years after the taking of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, revolutionary France defeated the allied armies of Europe's monarchies and expropriated feudal property. Within France itself, it crushed counterrevolutionary revolts, of the Vendée in the west and of the federalists in the south.

After the execution of Maximilian Robespierre and the ending of the revolution's radical period in the Thermidor of 1794, the bourgeois Republic crushed several revolts calling for the holding of property in common, like Gracchus Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals. Initially disgraced for his ties to Robespierre's younger brother Augustin, who had decorated him for retaking the Toulon port from Britain in 1793, Napoleon became the strongman of the new order. Waging war on Europe's feudal monarchies, he consolidated capitalist property in France and across much of Europe.

Echoing his "Republican salute" to neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen the night of his election, Macron

praised Napoleon for allying with both democrats and monarchists. “Napoleon understood he had to constantly seek national unity and greatness. ... He did it by working to reconcile those the revolution had opposed in blood,” Macron said. He praised Napoleon’s decision to use the bee, an emblem of France’s early Merovingian dynasty, as a symbol during his coronation as emperor.

Such obscure references reflect one indubitable political fact. Macron looks back at Napoleon, especially at the vast police apparatus he set up against both royalist conspiracies and left-wing opposition, because he is consciously seeking to appeal to traditions of Bonapartist rule in France to fashion an authoritarian regime in the 21st century.

A Bonapartist regime relies on the military and police to present itself as balancing between classes, in the higher interest of the nation. However, it always proves to be the mailed fist of the capitalists against the working class.

The classic example was the French Second Empire set up after the 1848 revolution in Europe by Napoleon’s nephew, Louis-Napoleon, in 1851. Toppling the bourgeois Second Republic, which had discredited itself with its bloody suppression of the Paris proletariat in June 1848 and its heavy tax burden on the peasantry, he set up a police state that censored the arts and spied ceaselessly on the working class. After his humiliating defeat by Germany in 1871, his army massacred the Paris Commune, the world’s first workers state, killing an estimated 20,000 people during the “Bloody Week.”

In one of his last articles, “Bonapartism, Fascism and War,” Leon Trotsky characterized the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime of Marshal Pétain, voted into office by the National Assembly of the Third Republic in 1940, as “a senile form of Bonapartism in the epoch of imperialist decline.” In its early period, it enacted a corporatist “Labor Charter,” promising to adjudicate between workers and capitalists based on national interests. It then joined in the Holocaust, the Nazi war of extermination against the Soviet Union, and the bloody suppression of the French resistance.

To be sure, Macron still hangs on to the trappings of the Republic and democratic rule. However, his presidency has seen not only 100,000 COVID-19 deaths but a surge in police violence against strikers, students, and “yellow vest” protesters demanding greater social equality. Since Macron hailed Pétain as a “great soldier” before sending riot police against the “yellow vests,” there have been tens of thousands of arrests, thousands of wounded, and several people killed by police.

As French generals warn of a global discrediting of the social order amid the pandemic and talk of killing thousands in military interventions inside France itself, plans are being furiously worked out in the military staffs for a vast escalation of repression.

Macron made a show of acknowledging the divisions over Napoleon, referring to one of his great crimes, the reestablishment of slavery in 1802—criticized by various forces, including recently, petty-bourgeois forces linked to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Napoleon, Macron said, “reestablished slavery that the Convention had abolished in 1794. In 1848, with Victor Schoelcher, the Second Republic repaired this moral error, this betrayal of the spirit of the Enlightenment.” At the same time, Macron stressed his “determination not to give an inch to those who would like to erase the past because it does not correspond to the idea that they have of the present.” He concluded, “I have no intention to say if Napoleon realized or instead betrayed revolutionary values. I will of course steer clear of such territory.”

In the centuries since Napoleon’s death, the experiences of the French and international working class have shown that not only Bonapartist rule but the capitalist system itself is incompatible with the principles of “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity” proclaimed in 1789. Amid the mounting threats of a coup from the French military, Macron’s speech must be taken as a political warning. The defense of international principles of “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity” requires the international, revolutionary mobilization of the working class, fighting for socialism and workers power.



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