



## *The Napoleonic Mediterranean: Enlightenment, Revolution and Empire*

by Michael Broers.

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Review by Ian Germani, University of Regina (ian.germani@uregina.ca).

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Historian Michael Broers (Univ. of Oxford) is a leading authority on the Napoleonic Empire. In this volume, he sets Italy, in particular, within the broader context of the Mediterranean regions of the Empire, including Catalonia and the Illyrian provinces. He takes care to demonstrate the great variations in the historical geography of these regions and the distinct degrees of control wielded by the imperial authorities within them. Given the extended presence of the French in the Kingdom of Italy, by far the richest of these possessions, it might have been expected to assimilate most readily to French institutions. But Broers tells a story of failure, of French cultural arrogance vitiating the good intentions of enlightened and professional imperial officials.

Broers adopts Fernand Braudel's concepts of structure and agency to identify the—chiefly geographic—reasons for French imperial inefficacy during the Napoleonic hegemony. In Spain, Italy, and Illyria, the proximity of sea and mountains had shaped societies in which state power was weak, cities strongly independent, and villages resistant to outside influences. The inability of the Napoleonic state to transform these societies was made starkly apparent by its failure to sustain the economic blockade of Britain and enforce the Continental System, which was meant to direct trade toward France and away from overseas markets. The “unnatural” efforts of French officials to seal coasts and mountain passes were thwarted by centuries-old economic networks and traditions of stalwart defiance. Except for northern and central Italy, where French imperial economic relations were more or less “normal,” the Napoleonic Continental System was merely a short-term disruption of longstanding Mediterranean commercial systems.

The impersonal forces of geography and history were not, however, the only obstacles in the way of the imperial project. More decisive, ultimately, was the contempt of French officials for the very societies they aspired to regenerate. Borrowing from Edward Said, Broers emphasizes that the profound French sense of superiority over colonized *others* alienated them from both elites and commoners, thus frustrating their “civilizing” mission. The imposition of French legal codes and judicial procedures was intended to accomplish that mission. In scrupulously documented case studies, Broers shows that the legal commissioners entrusted with these reforms throughout the Mediterranean region evinced a messianic, civilizing zeal inspired more by Voltaire's ideals of enlightened absolutism than by Montesquieu's relativism.

The commissioners included aristocrats as well as political moderates from the struggles of the French Revolution. In the imperial context, however, they espoused an extreme ideology of regeneration with roots in the Revolution and a radical strain of Enlightenment thought at odds with the more diverse cultures of the colonized elites. For example, Joseph-Marie Degerando had been a moderate Girondist in French revolutionary politics, but, as the imperial commissioner responsible for legal reform in the northern Catalan town of Girona, showed himself to be a radical proponent of the French civilizing mission. Degerando dealt with very different circumstances than his aristocratic counterpart Bernard-François de Chauvelin in Barcelona, but both men believed that only a strict application of

French legal statutes and procedures could cure the corrupt society of Catalonia. Their efforts to educate local lawyers and magistrates in French ways ultimately came to naught owing to the ephemeral nature of French rule. So, too, French officials who hoped to restore law and order in the Illyrian provinces by applying the Napoleonic Code and abolishing seigneurialism could not overcome the hostility of local elites and the general loathing for the imposition of the “blood tax” of military conscription.

The final section of the book, aptly titled “Pride and Prejudice,” concerns the failure of French attempts to enlist local elites in the imperial project. The highest (French) praise for an Italian magistrate in French service was to be called “utterly French at heart” (238). French officials openly expressed their disappointment in imperfectly Gallicized magistrates like Ferdinando Dal Pozzo, who fell short of their exacting standards in reforming the judiciary in Rome. Ironically, Dal Pozzo and other professionals made possible one of the French Empire’s most important European legacies: during the Restoration, he became an influential and respected advocate of Napoleonic jurisprudence and, like collaborators of the French in Germany and the Low Countries, helped develop the legal culture of modern Europe.

Broers saves the most damning evidence against imperial French policy for his final chapter, which documents the disastrous effects of attempts to conscript the sons of Italian aristocrats for military service. The belief of the French officials that the militarization of Italian youth would revitalise Italian society was utterly alien to the values of Italian elites. Coercive conscription and executions of highly born deserters galvanized all classes in their hatred for French rule.

Although more a collection of specialized case studies than a general overview of the Napoleonic Mediterranean, this book clarifies the nature of Napoleonic imperialism. Some readers may dislike its preoccupation with legal institutions, but that approach well captures the perspective of the magistrates and administrators charged with establishing those institutions outside France. Michael Broers has persuasively shown that French imperial officials, however professional, committed, and consistent, were undone by their ideological preconceptions—European imperialism did not have to go overseas to suffer from its own prejudices.