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A Soldier's Thoughts on Napoleon's Grave
Alexandre Goujon¹, Former Horse Artillery Captain, National Order of the Legion
of Honor²
Fourth Edition.
Paris, Chez les Marchands de Nouveautés, July 1821.

Translated by Emily Hughes and Leah Johnson
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Translators' Introduction

Napoleon Bonaparte died at the age of 52 on St. Helena, to which he had been exiled in 1815, an island in the Atlantic Ocean 2,000 km away from any major landmass. Despite rumors that he may have been poisoned, both the autopsy at the time of his death and later studies found that he died of gastric cancer due to poor treatment and diet.³

He had previously been exiled to Elba, an island in the Mediterranean from which he escaped to France to govern again for a period known as the Hundred Days. This period ended when Napoleon lost to the allied forces in the Battle of Waterloo on June 18, 1815. The Bourbon Monarchy returned to power after his defeat and exiled him to St. Helena. They had no intention of giving him a proper burial at the St. Denis Cathedral with the other French Kings at the time of his death.⁴

Napoleon used his period of exile to shape and refine his legacy, and with the help of *Mémorial de Saint Helène* by Count Emmanuel De Las Cases, he was able to paint himself as a savior, punished cruelly by England, whose government feared he would succeed in liberating all of Europe.⁵ As De Las Cases writes in *Mémorial*, “How can the monarchs of Europe permit the sacred character of sovereignty to be violated in my person? Do they not see that they are, with their own hands, working their own

¹ Alexandre Goujon (1776? -1823). There are no records of his membership in the Legion of Honor, but it is possible that his records were destroyed in a fire at the site of the Musée de la Légion d'honneur in 1871. Minjollet, Christine., (musee@legiond'honneur.fr), 20 Oct 2009. RE: informations sur un membre de la Légion d'honneur. Email to Leah Johnson (leahj89@gmail.com). -TR

² The “Légion d'honneur” or “Ordre national de la Légion d'honneur” is a French order established by Napoleon on May 19, 1802. He established the legion so he could recognize soldiers for merit and not nobility since the orders of chivalry had been abolished during the French Revolution. -TR

³ Goudarzi, Sarah. “Mystery of Napoleon’s death said solved”. *MSNBC*. 15 Nov 2009. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/16656433/ns/technology_and_science-science>.

⁴ “Napoleon I” *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Nov 2009. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/402943/Napoleon-I>>.

⁵ Lentz, Thierry. *Napoleon*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc, 2005.

destruction at St. Helena?”⁶

Pensée d'un Soldat sur la sépulture de Napoléon was written by a horse artillery captain and member of the Legion of Honor, Alexandre Goujon, as a reaction to Napoleon's death far away from his country, wife, and son, without honor or proper burial. The dramatic and incendiary voice the author uses puts it among the many propagandist writings surrounding Napoleon's rule. Goujon frequently compares Napoleon and his situation to historical and biblical figures, much like the propagandist newspapers Napoleon oversaw during his rule. *Pensée d'un Soldat sur la sépulture de Napoléon* (1821) came before *Mémorial de Saint Hélène* (1823) and is thus from a period of Napoleon propaganda that is less well-known.⁷

How I pity the banished Napoleon, dying in a faraway land!... Unfaithful in his time of misfortune, his friends in his time of prosperity have now forgotten all but his name, and the flatterers who intoxicated him with power mix their ungrateful blasphemies with the cries of his enemies!...Perhaps in the very moment when a slow and painful agony exhausted the remains of his life, his wife and his son let themselves hope to see him again!

How I pity the child of the outcast! He will never kneel before his father's blessing!... In vain, his piety will crown with cypress⁸ a deserted tomb! How I pity him! If he has the blood of a true son, he will be the most unfortunate of men. He will envy the savage who parades the bones of his brothers through the forests of the New World⁹. In the moment of a separation whose end human courage dares neither to hope for nor to expect, it is at least a comfort to receive the last farewells of a friend leaving on an eternal voyage: it is a consolation to bring your grief to his tomb...It is a sacred duty to visit often his final resting place!...Who could smell the flower that grows on the coffin of one so well-loved, or on the body of the son with whom the hopes and the consolations of old age are buried, and not be moved!

Let us respect these pious sentiments. Only the wicked fear the memory of those who are no longer with us. But for the good-at-heart, funeral rites have always been sacred. Alexander crowned Achilles' tomb¹⁰ and gave magnificent funerals for Darius¹¹. All hatreds and rivalries disappear before the grave. Caesar proved his greatness by shedding tears over Pompeii's urn¹²!.....

⁶ “Napoleon exiled to St. Helena, 1815”. *EyeWitness History*. 15 Nov 2009. <www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/napoleon.htm>.

⁷ Lentz, Thierry. *Napoleon*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc, 2005.

⁸ “Cypress tree symbolism includes understanding the role of sacrifice and is associated with the god of the underworld, Hades” (Karlsen, Kathleen. “The Symbolism of Trees”. Nov 8, 2009. www.livinartsonline.com/infoforests.htm). –TR

⁹ Napoleon was exiled in 1815 and died in 1821 at St. Helena, an extremely isolated island in the South Atlantic Ocean. The French may have been making a comparison between the New World and this remote island. –TR

¹⁰ Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) greatly admired Achilles and is said to have crowned his tomb while passing through Troy. –TR

¹¹ In 330 BC, Alexander the Great gave his predecessor a full regal funeral. –TR

¹² Caesar's campaign against and civil war with Pompey ended when Pompey fled to Egypt and was killed shortly afterwards. According to Plutarch, Caesar then traveled to Egypt and was presented with Pompey's head. It is said that he burst into tears of grief

If Napoleon had fallen in the fields of Waterloo, Henri IV's grandson would likely have imitated the generosity of the heroes of antiquity. But after having shaped the destiny of Europe, after having seen all kings call him brother, Napoleon has just died on a rock at the edge of the world, leaving us unable to give him a proper burial—he who crowned others!... Who could hold back tears over such great misfortune, for which it seems Bossuet¹³ has translated this beautiful passage by Salvian¹⁴:

*Do you see this great king? Do you see him alone, abandoned, so fallen in the minds of his family, that he becomes an object of contempt to some, and, what is more unbearable to great pride, an object of pity to others? Not knowing which of these two things ought to upset him more, or what Ziba¹⁵ fed him, or why Shimei¹⁶ had the insolence to curse him.*¹⁷

Ah! Now that death must dispel all the fears that such a great name inspired, what Frenchman would not be outraged to know that Napoleon's remains are buried in foreign soil? Does not France, who had palaces for unfortunate, dethroned kings, have a corner of the earth to give to the one she once called Emperor?

If this title of Emperor irritates you or offends you, do you no longer remember General Bonaparte?... Have you forgotten Arcole¹⁸ and the Pyramids¹⁹?... Does France owe nothing to the consul who, with a firm hand, reestablished the order that feeble hands had been unable to maintain, "who called to the aid of society all there was of virtue and light."²⁰ He heightened national glory, he made up for the disgraces of the old monarchy... Without him, the sword of Francis I would not have left Madrid²¹, and the veterans of Louis XV would not have fixed their eyes on the sword of Rosbach's victor²². Was it not Napoleon who had altars consecrated at Saint-Denis to our kings of old²³?

(Hall, James. Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art. Oxford: Westview Press, 2007.) –TR

¹³ (1627-1724), French Bishop, theologian, and court preacher to Louis XIV of France. –TR

¹⁴ Christian writer during the 5th century, born probably some time between 400 and 405. –TR

¹⁵ French: Siba. From the Bible passage 2 Samuel 16: 1-4. In this fable, King David meets Ziba, the steward of Mephibosheth, and adversary of the king, and finds him waiting with plenty of food and drink for the King and all his men. Because of Ziba's hospitality and because Mephibosheth had recently proved unfaithful to him, King David grants Mephibosheth's entire estate to Ziba. –TR

¹⁶ French: Sémeï. From the Bible passage 2 Samuel 16: 5-14. He is mentioned as one of David's tormentors during his flight before Absalom, and as imploring and winning David's forgiveness when the latter returned. –TR

¹⁷ Original footnote by Goujon: Oraison funèbre de la Reine d'Angleterre. (Funeral oration of the Queen of England.)

¹⁸ The Battle of Arcole in Italy (November 1796) –TR

¹⁹ The Battle of the Pyramids in Egypt (July 21, 1798). –TR

²⁰ Original footnote by Goujon: Séance du 5 Juillet 1821. Discours de M. Delalot. (Meeting on July 5, 1821. Speech by Mr. Delalot, presumably Charles François Louis Delalot, a French politician). –TR

²¹ Francis I (1494 – 1547), France's first Renaissance monarch, was held captive in Madrid in 1526. In the Treaty of Madrid signed on 14 January 1526, Francis I was forced to make major concessions to Charles V. –TR

²² Battle of Rossbach (1710-1774). Louis XV lost this battle. –TR

²³ Napoleon reopened the Basilica of St. Denis, located near Paris, in 1806 and allowed the remains of King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette to stay in their mass graves. The restored Bourbons ordered a search for their bodies while Napoleon was in exile. On January 21, 1815, their remains were found, brought to St. Denis, and buried in the crypt. –TR

He surely made mistakes, but because he achieved kingdom, must he have been a perfect king? Is Saint Louis²⁴ exempt from blame?.... Did Louis the Great²⁵ go to the grave a faultless man?.....

What a vast subject for meditation! What a great lesson for kings!...These thoughts cannot be put into words, and human pride is crushed before this new example of the vicissitudes in fortune! But I will say no more. He now faces posterity; it is up to him to plead his case to the last judgment.... Let us consider what his manes²⁶ demand!

If he had died abdicating, would you have prevented the brave few who remained faithful to him from digging him a grave? What you would have permitted out of warrior piety, you ought not to refuse today out of national honor. A simple stone in his memory will suffice, provided that this stone rests on French soil: Ah! If all those who kneeled before him, if all those who benefited from his good deeds, all those who asked for his favor, were forced to bring their offering to his coffin.....what an immense procession that would be! How many pontiffs, emperors, kings, princes, and world leaders would flock there from all corners of the world! They would have soon erected something bigger than the pyramids.

Yet he asks nothing of you!...in the days of his prosperity, driven no doubt by an unyielding fate, he ordered his monument to be built....Thus, standing on his triumphant column, holding Victory in his hand, he seemed to be in command of all of Europe! The statue is gone, but providence seems to have intentionally spared the pedestal. Yes, Napoleon, the Place Vendôme Column²⁷ is the only monument worthy of housing your ashes!.....

I followed the flags of this great captain; I paid him my debt. Who would dare criticize a veteran claiming a grave for his general?

I leave it to those who flattered Napoleon to insult his legacy. I leave it to prosperity to hold his place in history; and I say while trembling before the fate of this incredible genius: as a citizen I criticize him, as a Frenchman I respect him, as a man I feel sorry for him, as a soldier I mourn him!....

²⁴ Louis IX of France (1214-1270). The only monarch to be declared a saint by the Catholic Church. –TR

²⁵ Louis XIV of France (1638-1715). Popularly known as the “Sun King”. –TR

²⁶ The venerated or appeased spirit of a dead person. –TR

²⁷ The Colonne Vendôme is a column in Place Vendôme, Paris, sculpted by Pierre-Nolasque Bergeret in 1806. On top of the column is a statue of Napoleon, bareheaded, crowned with laurels and holding a sword in his right hand and a globe surmounted with a statue of Victory in his left hand. –TR