

Napoleon and the Universal Monarchy

PHILIP DWYER

University of Newcastle, New South Wales

Abstract

Although the idea of ‘Universal Monarchy’ has existed since the early middle ages, the term started to be used pejoratively from the sixteenth century onwards. This article looks at the manner in which contemporaries perceived Napoleon’s actions on the international scene, and how they used the term in relation to his foreign policy. Most of Europe’s political elite believed that Napoleon was bent on some sort of ‘universal domination’, and that it was not limited to Europe. That perception was a direct result of an aggressive, expansionist French foreign policy. Napoleon’s intentions, on the other hand, are more ambiguous. While at times he adopted a rhetoric which informed contemporary fears, the practical limits to his foreign policy were such that ‘Universal Monarchy’ could never be anything more than an ephemeral dream.

In a curious book that appeared in 1836 under the title *Napoléon et la conquête du monde – 1812 à 1832 – Histoire de la monarchie universelle* (‘Napoleon and the Conquest of the World – 1812 to 1832 – A History of the Universal Monarchy’), the author, Louis Geoffroy, speculated about what would happen if Napoleon had not been defeated in Russia. In this imaginary world, the emperor not only went on to conquer Europe but also to invade Britain, and to conquer North Africa, Egypt and Syria. He then proceeded to occupy China and Japan, while North America placed itself in his hands. Napoleon was duly crowned ‘universal monarch’ on 20 March 1828, in the presence of all the kings of the world, the ceremony taking place in an enormous cathedral – the cathedral of the universe, three times the size of St Peter’s in Rome – that Napoleon had specially built for the occasion in Paris.

The book was never meant to be more than a piece of fantasy, and yet it raises some interesting questions about just how far Napoleon would have gone in his conquests, whether he would have been content with the defeat of Britain, the ostensible goal driving his continental foreign policy, or whether he might have set his sights on greater things once he had finished with Europe. It is a question with which a long line of historians have chosen to grapple. Essentially, these historians can be divided into three broad categories: those who argue that Napoleon emulated Charlemagne and attempted to resurrect some sort of western

empire; those who argue that the Carolingian motif was the basis for a much grander Roman imperial ideal; and those who argue that Napoleon had even greater ambitions and was striving for world, and not simply European, domination.

In the first category there are historians such as Frédéric Masson, author of a thirteen-volume history of the Bonaparte family, who argues that Napoleon contemplated assuming the title 'Emperor of the West' after the defeat of Austria at Wagram in 1809. Rumours were rife at the time that the Master of the Wardrobe had been asked to bring imperial ornaments and diamonds.¹ If Napoleon renounced the idea it was, as Masson suggests, on account of the fact that he was too embarrassed to ask the pope, with whom he was in conflict, or because he did not want to abandon the title Emperor of the French, something that would have been unacceptable to French public opinion, or because he was waiting for a more favourable opportunity. That Napoleon was emulating Charlemagne, both as an historical role model as well as in the extent of his geographical conquests, is a theme that is commonly accepted.² It is clear that in order to help legitimate the new 'fourth dynasty', Napoleon made use of history, and especially the history of past monarchs, to achieve his purpose.

In the second category there are historians such as Adolphe Thiers, prime minister under the July Monarchy and later one of the founding fathers of the Third Republic. He began the mammoth task of writing a twenty-volume history of the Consulate and the Empire in the 1840s.³ Thiers believed that Napoleon had set his sights on European domination. A similar interpretation can be found in the work of Edouard Driault, who wrote a five-volume history of Napoleon and Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. He contended that Napoleon was emulating the Roman emperors and that this in part explained why much of the French empire mirrored that of the old Roman empire.⁴ At least one Italian historian has adopted the same theme, asserting that Napoleon was 'possessed by Dante's fixed idea: the *Monarchia del mondo* (universal monarchy)'.⁵ According to this view, Napoleon was an emperor in the Italian style, that is, one who extended his empire and was

¹ Frédéric Masson, *Napoléon et sa famille* (13 vols., Paris, 1897), iii, 186–8. See also Félix Olivier-Martin, *L'inconnu, essai sur Napoléon Bonaparte* (Paris, 1952), pp. 75–6.

² Annie Jourdan, *Napoléon. Héros, Imperator, Mécène* (Paris, 1998) [hereafter Jourdan, *Napoléon*], pp. 33–4; Jourdan, 'Napoleon and History', *French History*, x (1996), 334–54; June K. Burton, *Napoleon and Clio: Historical Writing, Teaching and Thinking during the First Empire* (Durham, NC, 1979), pp. 100–6, 113–14.

³ Adolphe Thiers, *Histoire du Consulat et de l'Empire* (20 vols., Paris, 1845–62).

⁴ Edouard Driault, *Napoléon et l'Europe* (5 vols., Paris, 1917–27). See also Jonathon Riley, 'How Good was Napoleon?', *History Today*, lvii (2007), 37; F. H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace: Theory and Practice in the History of Relations between States* (Cambridge, 1963) [hereafter Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace*], pp. 153–4.

⁵ Carlo Sforza, *Contemporary Italy: Its Intellectual and Moral Origin*, trans. Drake de Kay and Denise de Kay (New York, 1944), pp. 39–40.

not limited by the seas. The theme was repeated by other historians, notably Georges Lefebvre in France.⁶

Finally, the assertion that Napoleon was bent on world domination has always been present – the Austrian biographer August Fournier, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, was convinced of it⁷ – but it is now a thread running through the works of contemporary historians. Anthony Pagden, for example, although not a specialist in this particular period of history, nevertheless has argued that Napoleon was trying to replace the defunct Holy Roman Empire with a universal European order united under one sovereign.⁸ One French historian recently gave the claim a fillip when he asserted that coronation gear was found in the French baggage train during the retreat from Moscow and concluded, somewhat speculatively, that Napoleon had moved from the idea of a ‘universal republic’ towards that of a ‘universal empire’ and that, after defeating Russia, he planned to have himself crowned in the Kremlin.⁹ Paul Schroeder, in his seminal work on European foreign policy, has asserted that Napoleon was bent on ‘universal domination’ and that around 1806 the Empire was ‘pictured as more like Rome than Charlemagne’s’.¹⁰ More recently, Charles Esdaile has claimed that Napoleon’s foreign political actions can only suggest an ‘aspiration to universal monarchy’.¹¹ Similarly, Frederick Kagan has considered the Consulate for Life, Napoleon’s nomination as president of the Italian Republic, emperor of France and then king of Italy as part of a ‘coherent plan’ that would ultimately lead to ‘universal monarchy’.¹²

The concept of ‘universal monarchy’ had been in existence for a long time and was not something that was specifically applied to France or Napoleon. In the early modern period, the term was used to describe any power with supranational aspirations.¹³ Sovereigns from Charlemagne (742–814) to Frederick II (1194–1250), to Charles V (1500–58) and Philip

⁶ Georges Lefebvre, *Napoléon* (Paris, 1969), p. 229.

⁷ August Fournier, *Napoleon I. Eine Biographie* (3 vols., Leipzig, 1888) [hereafter Fournier, *Napoleon*], ii. 120–1.

⁸ Anthony Pagden, ‘Introduction’, in *The Idea of Europe: From Antiquity to the European Union*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Washington, D.C., 2002), p. 17.

⁹ André Ratchinski, *Napoléon et Alexandre I. La guerre des idées* (Paris, 2002), pp. 73–4, 291–6. The only other person to argue that Napoleon was set on crowning himself in Moscow – in this instance, Emperor of the West – is Alfred Sudre, *Petites causes et grands effets. Le secret de 1812* (Paris, 1887). Ratchinski bases his assertion on the memoranda by Louis Alexandre Andrault, comte de Langeron, found in the Archives des Affaires Étrangères. There is, however, little or nothing to support this claim. It is more likely that they were Russian ornaments and the insignia of the Russian crown that Napoleon had looted from the Kremlin which he was taking back to France as trophies. See François Roguet, *Mémoires militaires du lieutenant général Comte Roguet* (4 vols., Paris, 1862–5), iv. 497.

¹⁰ Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (Oxford, 1994) [hereafter Schroeder, *Transformation of European Politics*], p. 291.

¹¹ Charles Esdaile, *Napoleon’s Wars: An International History, 1803–1815* (2007) [hereafter Esdaile, *Napoleon’s Wars*], p. 415.

¹² Frederick W. Kagan, *The End of the Old Order: Napoleon and Europe, 1801–1805* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), p. 129.

¹³ Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c.1500–c.1800* (New Haven, CN, 1995) [hereafter Pagden, *Lords of All the World*], p. 43.

II (1527–98), all dreamt of ruling over a universal empire.¹⁴ In the early years of the eighteenth century there was a widespread fear that Louis XIV would succeed in making France the first true ‘universal monarchy’ since Roman times, something, however, that Louis was never able to achieve.¹⁵ Later that same century, the idea was debunked by both Voltaire and Montesquieu who described the aspiration as a ‘preposterous national myth’.¹⁶ The idea, moreover, fell into the background as French influence in Europe diminished in the second half of the eighteenth century. It was then employed as a term by European diplomats to denote great powers which wanted to become the predominant power, usually in reference to the struggle between Austria and France. For example, in 1787 the Prussian secretary of state and foreign minister, Count Ewald von Hertzberg, accused Austria not only of wanting the German crown but, through its alliance with France and Russia, of aspiring to ‘universal monarchy’.¹⁷ In other words, depending on the period, just about every one of the great powers could be and indeed usually was accused of aspiring to ‘universal monarchy’, that is, hegemonic preponderance on the continent of Europe.

In France, the advent of the Revolution and the re-imagining of a new political culture saw a revival of the concept in some circles. As early as 1789, the abbé Sieyès, member of the Estates General and author of the influential ‘What is the Third Estate?’, dwelt on the possibility of creating a kind of federated Europe based on the model of the American republic.¹⁸ The Prussian-born Baron Klotz, better known as Anarchasis Cloots, the self-proclaimed ambassador of the human race, believed in a ‘universal republic’ (*République universelle*) in which the Revolution would be exported to the rest of Europe.¹⁹ In 1800, at the

¹⁴ On its use in the sixteenth century see John Headley, ‘The Demise of Universal Monarchy as a Meaningful Political Idea’, in *Imperium/Empire/Reich: Ein Konzept politischer Herrschaft im deutsch-britischen Vergleich: An Anglo-German Comparison of a Concept of Rule*, ed. Franz Bosbach and Hermann Hiery (Munich, 2000), pp. 41–58. For the eighteenth century, especially from the perspective of the German Enlightenment, see Andreas Klinger, ‘Deutsches Weltbürgertum und französische Universalmonarchie. Napoleon und die Krise des deutschen Kosmopolitismus’, in *Das Jahr 1806 im europäischen Kontext. Balance, Hegemonie und politische Kulturen*, ed. Andreas Klinger, Hans-Werner Hahn and Georg Schmidt (Weimar, 2008) [hereafter Klinger, ‘Deutsches Weltbürgertum’], pp. 205–32. For a brief overview of the concept see Horst Dreitzel, *Monarchiebegriffe in der Fürstengesellschaft: Semantik und Theorie der Einherrschaft in Deutschland von der Reformation bis zum Vormärz* (2 vols., Cologne, 1991), i. 182–93. For a history of the term and its usage in European politics, see Franz Bosbach, ‘The European Debate on Universal Monarchy’, in *Theories of Empire, 1450–1800*, ed. David Armitage (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 81–98; and Pagden, *Lords of All the World*, pp. 29–62.

¹⁵ See for example John Robertson, ‘Union, State and Empire: The Britain of 1707 in its European Setting’, in *An Imperial State at War: Britain from 1689 to 1815*, ed. Lawrence Stone (1994), pp. 228–9.

¹⁶ Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals* (New Haven, CN, 2001), p. 35.

¹⁷ Andreas Theodor Preuss, *Ewald Friedrich Graf von Hertzberg* (Berlin, 1909), p. 123.

¹⁸ Albert Sorel, *L’Europe et la Révolution française* (8 vols., Paris, 1885–1911), i. 325–6.

¹⁹ A view that was not, admittedly, shared by all Jacobins. See Klinger, ‘Deutsches Weltbürgertum’, pp. 212–13; Julien Boudon, *Les Jacobins: une traduction des principes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Paris, 2006), pp. 595–6; Albert Soboul, ‘Anarchasis Cloots, l’Orateur du genre humain’, *Annales*

beginning of the Consulate, the French diplomat Alexandre Maurice Blanc de Lanautte, count d'Hauterive, published a study – *De l'État de la France à la fin de l'an VIII* ('The State of France in the Year 8') – calling for a new European federation under French leadership.²⁰ Hauterive's eternal empire was to be built on commerce, much like the British conception of empire. Certainly, some of Napoleon's rhetoric was in this vein. He spoke of the need for a European Code, a European court of appeal, a common monetary system, weights and measures, the same laws, and so on.²¹

Ever since Napoleon came to the notice of the European public in the early stages of the first Italian campaign, commentators and writers were comparing him with the likes of Alexander, Hannibal and Caesar. With the foundation of the Empire in May 1804, the regime used Charlemagne to justify if not legitimize the transformation of the Republic into a monarchical institution.²² The political use of Charlemagne as historical icon is interesting for what it says about the particular image the regime wished to project to the public. Not only had Charlemagne unified France after a period of political turmoil, but he also unified Europe. The use of Charlemagne was metaphorical, but the analogies continued and were developed at some length during the Empire, especially after the French victories against the Austrians and the Prussians in 1805 and 1806 when Napoleon's troops supposedly declared him to be the Emperor of the West.²³ The theme can, for example, be found in a piece published by the political theorist Louis Bonald, in 1807, two days after the announcement of the victory of Friedland, in the newspaper the *Mercure de France*. In an analysis of the political situation in Europe, Bonald argued that, just as Rome had received a vocation to dominate the world, so too had France.²⁴ It was a notion that filtered down to the populace. There are

historique de la Révolution française, lii (1980), 29–58; and Roland Mortier, *Anacharsis Cloots ou L'utopie foudroyée* (Paris, 1995), pp. 125–37.

²⁰ Alexandre Maurice d'Hauterive, *De l'État de la France à la fin de l'an VIII* (Paris, 1800); Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace*, pp. 186–90; Emma Rothschild, 'Language and Empire, c. 1800', *Historical Research*, lxxviii (2005), 208–21.

²¹ Jacques-Claude Beugnot, *Mémoires du comte Beugnot, ancien ministre (1783–1815)* (2 vols., Paris, 1868), i, 309–10.

²² Jourdan, *Napoléon*, pp. 33–4; H. Gaubert, *Le Sacre de Napoléon* (Paris, 1964), pp. 22–32; Robert Morrissey, 'Charlemagne et la légende impériale', in *L'Empire des Muses. Napoléon, les Arts et les Lettres*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris, 2004), pp. 331–47; Thierry Lentz, 'Napoléon et Charlemagne', in *Napoléon et l'Europe*, ed. Thierry Lentz (Paris, 2005), pp. 11–30.

²³ Philippe de Ségur, *Histoire et Mémoires, par le général comte de Ségur* (7 vols., Paris, 1873) [hereafter Ségur, *Histoire et Mémoires*], iii, 74. Some examples of contemporary works comparing Napoleon to Charlemagne include V.-R. Barbet Du Bertrand, *Les Trois homes illustres, ou Dissertations sur les institutions politiques de César-Auguste, de Charlemagne et de Napoléon Bonaparte* (Paris, 1803); Jean Chas, *Parallèle de Bonaparte le Grand avec Charlemagne* (Paris, 1803); Louis Dubroca, *Les Quatre fondateurs des dynasties françaises: Réflexions philosophiques et critiques sur les couronnes et les couronnemens* (Paris, 1804).

²⁴ 'De l'équilibre politique en Europe', *Mercure de France*, 27 June 1807.

seven plays written during this period that specifically portray Napoleon as the master of the world.²⁵

This type of thinking found an echo, albeit a relatively faint one, in the rest of Europe. Some German intellectuals and the German political elite in particular were impressed by Napoleon's engagement with Europe and hoped that he would assume the succession of Charlemagne's empire.²⁶ There were certainly rumours at the time to that effect.²⁷ In particular, the elector of Mainz, Karl Theodor von Dalberg, sent Napoleon a set of proposals in 1806 urging him to unite France, Germany and Italy.²⁸ Dalberg's nephew, Emmerich, also at first pursued the idea of Napoleon restoring the western Empire by uniting the three countries, although within the space of a year he would come to express concern over Napoleon's 'system of universal despotism'.²⁹ The idea of uniting Germany and western Europe under Napoleon was similarly adopted by Niklas Vogt, a professor of history at the University of Mainz and a close friend of Karl Theodor von Dalberg, who wrote a book in 1808 – *Historische Darstellung des Europäischen Völkerbundes* – in which he postulated the unification of Europe under Napoleon.³⁰ Dalberg is even supposed to have suggested, after the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire, that Napoleon assume the title 'Emperor of Germany'. Napoleon was never really tempted; he believed it was not compatible with the French empire, and that the title 'Roman Emperor' had been devalued by the Habsburg and Wittelsbach dynasties.³¹ There were even some among the Prussians who spoke of universal monarchy, although they were generally Francophile and inclined to see Prussia hitch its star to France rather than to a power

²⁵ Cyril Triolaire, 'Célébrer Napoléon après la République: les héritages commémoratifs révolutionnaires au crible de la fête napoléonienne', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, cccxvi (2006), 89.

²⁶ For a more detailed analysis, see Heinz Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke: Beiträge zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1972), pp. 130–50.

²⁷ André Latreille, *L'Eglise catholique et la Révolution française* (2 vols., Paris, 1950), ii, 118–19.

²⁸ Cited in Peter H. Wilson, 'The Meaning of Empire in Central Europe around 1800', in *The Bee and the Eagle: Napoleonic France and the End of the Holy Roman Empire, 1806*, ed. Alan Forrest and Peter H. Wilson (2009) [hereafter Forrest and Wilson, *The Bee and the Eagle*], p. 33. Dalberg accompanied his suggestion with a pamphlet, *Considérations sur le caractère de l'empereur Charlemagne* (Paris, 1806). See Antje Freyh, *Karl Theodor von Dalberg* (Frankfurt am Main, 1978), pp. 248–55.

²⁹ Dalberg to Edelsheim (19 May 1805), in *Politische Correspondenz Karl Friedrichs von Baden, 1783–1806*, ed. B. Erdmannsdörffer and K. Obser (5 vols., Heidelberg, 1901), v, 248, 663; Arnulf Jürgens, *Emmerich von Dalberg zwischen Deutschland und Frankreich: Seine politische Gestalt und Wirksamkeit 1803–1810* (Stuttgart, 1976), p. 69.

³⁰ For this point and the views of other German intellectuals see Klinger, 'Deutsches Weltbürger-tum', pp. 219–20. On Niklas Vogt, see Steven A. Stargardt, *Niklas Vogt, 1756–1836: A Personality of the Late German Enlightenment and Early Romantic Movement* (New York, 1991), esp. 37–40; Ursula Berg, *Niklas Vogt: 1756–1836: Welt-sicht und politische Ordnungsvorstellungen zwischen Aufklärung und Romantik* (Stuttgart, 1992).

³¹ Thomas Biskup, 'Napoleon's Second Sacre? Iéna and the Ceremonial Translation of Frederick the Great's Insignia in 1807', in Forrest and Wilson, *The Bee and the Eagle*, p. 184. Konrad Maria Färber, *Kaiser und Erzkanzler. Carl von Dalberg und Napoleon am Ende des Alten Reiches* (Regensburg, 1988), p. 76, on the other hand, believes that Napoleon actually toyed with the idea of crowning himself German emperor.

such as Russia or Britain.³² For these men, citizens of the world before their time, the term 'universal monarchy' was an idea, the dream of a supranational imperial state in which all peoples would be united and in which countries would no longer exist.

If many saw the idea of empire and universal monarchy as a positive – indeed, throughout the eighteenth century there was a generally accepted notion that 'universal conquest brought with it universal good'³³ – this was not necessarily the case for everyone in France, or indeed in the rest of Europe. There was, on the contrary, a tendency to perceive in Napoleon a much more nefarious ambition, a desire for 'universal domination'.³⁴ And that is exactly the manner in which 'universal monarchy' was used, that is, to denote the desire on the part of one man or one power for hegemonic preponderance either within Europe or less commonly over the world. It is almost as though it became a term onto which the European political elite projected its anxieties and fears about seeing the balance of power being overturned.³⁵

That is why in Napoleon's time a number of different terms were used interchangeably – 'universal monarchy', 'universal empire', 'universal domination', 'world domination', the empire of Rome or Charlemagne. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, these terms were all an expression of the growing fear, relatively widespread, that Napoleon's victories and his seemingly unlimited ambition would translate into something more than simple hegemony on the European continent. The term was, moreover, almost always used pejoratively (as it generally had been since the sixteenth century).³⁶ In 1802, the Russian ambassador to Paris reported that Napoleon had spoken to him about proclaiming the 'empire of the Gauls'.³⁷ Indeed, Russian statesmen drew a comparison between France and the Roman empire and the wars that led other states to be either annihilated or made into allies or vassal states. 'Europe', warned the Russian chancellor, Vorontsov, in 1803, 'has always been considered a republic or large society in which perhaps three or four [powers] had influence, but never one master.'³⁸

³² Examples are Colonel Massenbach, Heinrich von Bülow and Friedrich Buchholz. On this point see, Brendan Simms, *The Impact of Napoleon: Prussian High Politics, Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Executive, 1797–1806* (Cambridge, 1997) [hereafter Simms, *The Impact of Napoleon*], pp. 273–4; Klinger, 'Deutsches Weltbürgertum', pp. 220–5; Christian von Massenbach, *Historische Denkwürdigkeiten zur Geschichte des Verfalls des preußischen Staates seit dem Jahre 1794* (5 vols., Amsterdam, 1809), i. 20; Pierre-Paul Sagave, 'Un officier prussien admirateur de Napoléon: A. H. D. von Bülow', *Francia: Forschungen zur westeuropäischen Geschichte*, i (1973), 395–401.

³³ Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars*, p. 42.

³⁴ Jean-Antoine Claude Chaptal, *Mes souvenirs sur Napoléon* (Paris, 1893), p. 364.

³⁵ Klinger, 'Deutsches Weltbürgertum', p. 217.

³⁶ Michel Porret, 'Introduction', in Baron de Montesquieu, *Réflexions sur la Monarchie Universelle en Europe* (Geneva, 2000), p. 14.

³⁷ Morkov to Alexander (1/13 Dec. 1802), in *Sbornik Imperatorskogo russkogo istoricheskogo obschestva* (148 vols., Petersburg, 1890) [hereafter *Sbornik*], lxx. 585.

³⁸ Vorontsov to Morkov (29 May/10 June 1803), *Sbornik*, lxxvii. 190; W. H. Zawadzki, 'Prince Adam Czartoryski and Napoleonic France, 1801–1805: A Study in Political Attitudes', *The*

That same year, the Austrian foreign minister, Johann Ludwig von Cobenzl, voiced suspicions that Napoleon was seeking to achieve universal monarchy.³⁹ It is worth pointing out, however, that the view that Napoleon was bent on 'universal domination' or on constructing a 'universal monarchy' really came into its own with the proclamation of the Empire in 1804, and Napoleon's ascension to the Italian throne in 1805, two events that appear to have aroused a good deal of anxiety among Europe's political elite. As a result of the proclamation of the Empire, Napoleon's ambition was considered, 'infinitely vast . . . and incalculable'.⁴⁰ His ideas were not only too vast but they were also 'too deep and too secret'.⁴¹ The Austrian statesman Franz Colloredo was also convinced from that time on that Napoleon aspired to universal monarchy, that he was a new Charlemagne, and that the fate of Europe depended on whether the eastern European powers united in their opposition to him.⁴²

But even before the proclamation of the Empire and the adoption of the title 'King of Rome', Europe's political elite suspected Napoleon of harbouring ambitions to create a universal monarchy. The Prussian king, Frederick William III, referred to Napoleon's 'inordinate ambition' (*ambitions démesurée*), while the Prussian ambassador to Paris, Girolamo Lucchesini, believed that Napoleon was going to 'recreate Charlemagne'.⁴³ The Prussian diplomat Karl August von Hardenberg, writing to Metternich in 1804, thought it was clear that 'fool' Napoleon was 'aiming for world domination; he wishes to accustom us all to regard ourselves as his subjects who must accommodate his every whim'.⁴⁴ Russia's political elite was also under the impression that Napoleon was attempting to create a universal monarchy. They even devised a number of measures to counter the possibility.⁴⁵ Tsar Alexander I's Polish adviser, Prince Adam Czartoryski, believed that the proclamation of the Empire brought Napoleon a step closer to the idea of 'universal domination', and came to the realization that the adoption of the imperial title in 1804 gave Napoleon the possibility of realizing the 'old dream of universal monarchy'.⁴⁶ Napoleon's assumption of the throne of the newly created Kingdom of Italy in May 1805, and his annexation of the Republic of Genoa the following month, was just grist for the mill and

Historical Journal, xviii (1975) [hereafter Zawadzki, 'Czartoryski and Napoleonic France'], 252; Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace*, pp. 153–85.

³⁹ Cobenzl to Colloredo, 26 March 1803, in Auguste Fournier, *Gentz und Cobenzl. Geschichte der österreichischen Diplomatie in den Jahren 1801–1805* (Vienna, 1880), p. 73, n. 3.

⁴⁰ Instructions to Görtz (8 April 1804), in Lothar Kittstein, *Politik im Zeitalter der Revolution. Untersuchungen zur preußischen Staatlichkeit 1792–1807* (Stuttgart, 2003) [hereafter Kittstein, *Politik im Zeitalter der Revolution*], p. 267.

⁴¹ Report by Cobenzl (10 May 1804), in Kittstein, *Politik im Zeitalter der Revolution*, p. 268.

⁴² See, for example, Colloredo to Metternich (10 January 1805), in Wilhelm Oncken, *Oesterreich und Preußen im Befreiungskriege* (2 vols., Berlin, 1876–9), ii. 565–7.

⁴³ Both examples cited in Simms, *The Impact of Napoleon*, p. 97.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

⁴⁵ Zawadzki, 'Czartoryski and Napoleonic France', 246.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 263, 265.

reinforced the belief that Napoleon was aspiring to a 'monarchie universelle'.⁴⁷ It was an impression that grew with every Napoleonic military victory.

Two other developments reinforced the notion that Napoleon's ambition knew no bounds. The first was the annexation of Holland and the Roman States into the Empire in 1810. Rumours about the proclamation of a universal monarchy had been circulating for weeks. When his Master of the Horse, Armand Augustin Louis Caulaincourt, confronted Napoleon on the matter, his response was appropriately enigmatic, 'This business is a dream, and I am wide awake'.⁴⁸ Secondly, when Napoleon invaded Russia in 1812, there were many who expected him, after eventually signing a treaty with Alexander, to go on to Constantinople and India.⁴⁹ Indeed, once he had limped into Moscow at the head of his bedraggled army, rumours of a march on India became rife. 'There is talk of going to India,' wrote Boniface de Castellane on 5 October 1812 and he added: 'We have such confidence that we do not even think about the possibility of the success of such an enterprise, but on the number of months' march necessary and the time it would take letters to come from France'.⁵⁰ The suggestion was, of course, that he would set out from Moscow not only to deal a blow to Britain, but also to conquer the east.

Even when Napoleon had his back to the wall in 1813 and 1814, he still believed, somewhat foolishly under the circumstances, that he could muster 800,000 men to arms. 'The rest being left to his genius', Caulaincourt reminisced, 'he was really convinced that he would recapture the empire of the world'.⁵¹ Indeed, Charles, the king of Sweden, wrote to Napoleon in 1813 asking him to abandon the idea of a 'universal monarchy' and to think seriously about a general European peace.⁵² It was a theme on which contemporary propagandists liked to dwell.⁵³ Moreover, the view that Napoleon was bent on world domination is an accusation that was invariably levelled at him after the fall of the Empire.⁵⁴

If others suspected Napoleon of having designs on the world, the question remains: what were his intentions? Was Napoleon's purpose to found a universal monarchy or was it simply that contemporaries were under the impression, mistaken or otherwise, that he was bent on doing

⁴⁷ Ibid., 274.

⁴⁸ Armand-Louis-Augustin de Caulaincourt, *Mémoires du général de Caulaincourt, duc de Vicence*, ed. Jean Hanoteau (3 vols., Paris, 1933) [hereafter Caulaincourt, *Mémoires*], ii, 315.

⁴⁹ Louis-Florimond Fantin des Odoards, *Journal du général Fantin des Odoards, étapes d'un officier de la Grande Armée, 1800–1830* (Paris, 1895), pp. 321–2.

⁵⁰ Esprit Victor Elisabeth Boniface Castellane, *Journal du maréchal Castellane, 1804–1862* (5 vols., Paris, 1895–97), i, 165.

⁵¹ Caulaincourt, *Mémoires*, ii, 398.

⁵² *Choix de rapports, opinions et discours prononcés à la tribune nationale depuis 1789 jusqu'à ce jour: recueillis dans un ordre chronologique et historique* (23 vols., Paris, 1822), xx, 392 (23 March 1813).

⁵³ See, for example, Coriolis d'Espinouse, *Le tyran, les alliés et le roi* (Paris, 1814), pp. 34–6.

⁵⁴ Eugène Labaume, *Relation circonstanciée de la campagne de Russie* (Paris, 1815), p. 9; Jacques-Barthélemy Salgues, *Mémoire pour servir à l'histoire de France sous le gouvernement de Napoléon Buonaparte et pendant l'absence de la maison de Bourbon (1760–1830)* (9 vols., Paris, 1814–26), v, 176.

just that? This is a difficult question to answer with any degree of certainty. For one thing, there is no existing correspondence of any kind that might help historians decide one way or the other. Nor did Napoleon or his entourage formulate any kind of official policy, but then those megalomaniacal enough to want to rule the world do not usually make official announcements of intent. In any event, proclamations mean little. Care has to be taken in drawing a distinction between what Napoleon reportedly said, and what he did. It is first worth considering, therefore, Napoleon's rhetoric.

There are a number of occasions when Napoleon is supposed to have asserted that his goal was to rule the world. Comte Miot de Mérito reported a conversation between Napoleon and his brother Joseph during the Consulate in which the first consul asserted that they would be masters of the world within two years.⁵⁵ That was in July 1800. There is the noted quip in a letter from Napoleon to Vice-Admiral Latouche-Tréville concerning the plans to invade England in 1804, 'Let us be masters of the straits for six hours and we shall be masters of the world.'⁵⁶ On one occasion, he is supposed to have said to his notorious minister of police, Joseph Fouché, 'I must make all the people of Europe one people, and of Paris the capital of the world.'⁵⁷ Again, he reportedly said to Fouché shortly before leaving for the Russian campaign, 'How can I help it if a surfeit of power draws me towards dictatorship of the world?'⁵⁸ Even if Fouché is to be believed, the statement can be easily dismissed, as with so much of what Napoleon said, as hyperbole. Nevertheless, the rhetoric occurred often enough for those in his entourage to suspect him of wanting either to dominate or unite, depending on one's point of view, all of Europe. He is supposed to have declared to the Austrian General Vincent, on 22 July 1806, that he would not be able to take the title 'Emperor of the West', until he had defeated a fourth coalition.⁵⁹ In 1811, Napoleon is reported to have said to a French diplomat, Dominique Dufour de Pradt, 'In five years, I will be master of the world. Only Russia is left, and I will crush it.'⁶⁰ That same year he is reported to have commented to the Bavarian General Wrede, 'In three years I will be master of the universe.'⁶¹ After his return from Elba, in April 1815, he

⁵⁵ André-François, comte Miot de Mérito, *Mémoires du Comte de Miot de Mérito* (3 vols., Paris, 1873–4) [hereafter Miot de Mérito, *Mémoires*], i. 307.

⁵⁶ *Correspondance de Napoléon I* (32 vols., Paris, 1858–70) [hereafter *Corr.*], ix, no. 7832, Napoleon to Latouche-Tréville (2 July 1804).

⁵⁷ Fouché wrote: 'The idea of destroying the power of England, the sole obstacle to universal monarchy, became his [Napoleon's] fixed obsession' (Joseph Fouché, *Mémoires de Joseph Fouché, duc d'Otrante, ministre de la police générale* (2 vols., Paris, 1824) [hereafter Fouché, *Mémoires*], i. 354, and ii. 114.

⁵⁸ Fouché, *Mémoires*, ii. 114.

⁵⁹ Cited in Marcel Dunan, *Napoléon et l'Allemagne. Le Système continental et les débuts du royaume de Bavière* (Paris, 1942) [hereafter Dunan, *Napoléon et l'Allemagne*], p. 409.

⁶⁰ Dominique Dufour, Baron de Pradt, *Histoire de l'ambassade dans le Grand Duché de Varsovie en 1812* (Paris, 1815), pp. 1, 16–17, 22–4, quote on p. 24.

⁶¹ Cited in Fournier, *Napoleon*, iii. 28.

admitted in a conversation with the political theorist Benjamin Constant that he had 'wanted to rule the world', and that in order to do it he needed 'unlimited power . . . The world begged me to govern it; sovereigns and nations vied with one another in throwing themselves under my sceptre.'⁶² Now *that* is hubris. The idea of a universal monarchy was given further impetus on St Helena. One of the evangelists of the Napoleonic cult, Emmanuel de Las Cases, who perpetuated Napoleon's heroic identity through the publication of the *Memorial of St Helena*, noted Napoleon's utterances throughout his stay on the island. According to the view propagated by Las Cases, Napoleon tamed the Revolution and marched at its head in a struggle to the death against Europe. In the process he became, in some respects, a universal monarch.⁶³

The evidence is admittedly meagre and some of these assertions have to be taken with a large pinch, indeed a handful, of salt. Napoleon was in the habit of waxing lyrical, of exaggerated hyperbole, of sounding out ideas by calculatedly expressing them in front of an audience. Indeed, he may not have taken his own musings on world domination seriously. In fact, he was heard denying that he had any such ambitions, to some extent. In an interview with the papal nuncio to Russia, Monsignor d'Arezzo, that took place in Berlin after Jena in November 1806, he complained of the nuncio at Vienna, who supposedly had reported that Napoleon wanted to make himself Emperor of the West. 'I have never had that idea', replied Napoleon, although he could not help but add, 'I won't say that it will never happen, but I wasn't thinking about it at the time.'⁶⁴ Finally, none of the comments is first hand; all were reported snippets from conversations with Napoleon, and some originating from people who cannot be entirely trusted. Fouché, for example, was intent on portraying himself in a positive, and his former master in a negative, light when he wrote his memoirs revealing conversations many years after they supposedly took place.

These statements are not so much useful for their accuracy, as for the impression they give of what others believed Napoleon's intentions to be or of what he was capable. There is no doubt that Napoleon and the French had hegemonic pretensions on the European continent, but the question which intrigues and is more difficult to answer is whether it went beyond that. There is enough evidence to indicate that Napoleon was pushing the geographical boundaries, seeing how far he could actually go; seeing how much he could emulate Alexander the Great or, at least contemplating, if not pursuing, albeit in a very haphazard fashion, the extension of French power beyond Europe. In Napoleon's mind, he was the tool of destiny; he felt he was driven towards a goal that he did not

⁶² J. Christopher Herold, *The Mind of Napoleon: A Selection from his Written and Spoken Words* (New York, 1955), p. 257.

⁶³ Emmanuel-Auguste-Dieudonné, comte de Las Cases, *Le mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*, ed. Marcel Dunan (2 vols., Paris, 1983), i. 139.

⁶⁴ Emil Dard, *Dans l'entourage de l'Empereur* (Paris, 1940), p. 114.

know, but that it involved changing the face of the world,⁶⁵ and it was only once that task was finished that all would come to an end, as he imagined it, through a fever, a fall from a horse during the hunt, or a cannon ball. Until that time, 'all human effort against me is but nought'.⁶⁶

Historians are well aware, for example, that on a number of occasions Napoleon vaguely considered a march on India, the first of which was wrapped up in the expedition to Egypt in 1798. In 1801, Paul I of Russia had approached him about a joint expedition to India in which French forces under Masséna were to meet Russian forces at Astrakhan.⁶⁷ In 1803, according to the provisions of the Treaty of Amiens, the French territory in India was meant to be handed back. Bonaparte appointed a rabid anglophobe, General Decaen, governor general of the French East Indies, to contact local Indian authorities and to recruit an army there. A small expedition of around of 1,250 men sailed in early March 1803.⁶⁸ When the expedition actually reached Pondicherry, the English refused to give up the city they still occupied, and that was the end of it. Later, plans were formulated to march on Constantinople and India, as well as Persia.⁶⁹ In 1808, India came up once again for consideration, this time through an imaginative plan to conquer the Cape of Good Hope.

Also in 1808, Napoleon sent an exploratory party to Algeria in preparation for a possible invasion. Once the invasion of Spain took place, Napoleon intended to assume control over all of Spain's colonial possessions in the New World. He sent secret agents to the Americas to stir up rebellions against Spain, offered financial and military assistance to the rebels, and even planned to recognize the independence of Venezuela in 1812.⁷⁰ Plans were also vaguely considered to invade Brazil, Havana, Mexico, the Philippines and even the Dutch East Indies, but he never explicitly stated in writing why he wanted to send troops to those countries.⁷¹ It has to be assumed that it was intended as an attempt to foil Britain's trade and to dominate the world's colonial markets.

⁶⁵ Miot de Mérito, *Mémoires*, iii. 241.

⁶⁶ Ségur, *Histoire et Mémoires*, iv. 74.

⁶⁷ Napoleon to Paul I, *Corr.* vii, no. 5417 (27 Feb. 1801); Paul's advance guard crossed the Volga in March 1801, but his assassination brought the project to an end. See W. M. Sloane, 'Napoleon's Plans for a Colonial System', *American Historical Review*, iv (1899) [hereafter Sloane, 'Napoleon's Plans'], 441.

⁶⁸ Sloane, 'Napoleon's Plans', 441–2; Cyril Northcote Parkinson, *War in the Eastern Seas, 1793–1815* (1954), pp. 189–92.

⁶⁹ This was probably nothing more than an attempt to threaten British India in the hope that Britain would be forced to negotiate. *Corr.* iv, no. 3259; xvi, nos. 13736–8, and Napoleon to Alexander, 2 Feb. 1808, pp. 498–9, 586–7; xvii, nos. 13779, 13828, 13835, 13852, 13873, 13937, 13952, 13965, 13998.

⁷⁰ Rafe Blaufarb, 'The Western Question: The Geopolitics of Latin American Independence', *AHR*, cxii (2007), 745. For Napoleon's Latin American ambitions see William Spence Robertson, *France and Latin-American Independence* (Baltimore, MD, 1939), p. 39, and John Rydford, *Foreign Interest in the Independence of New Spain: An Introduction to the War of Independence* (Durham, NC, 1935), pp. 259–64, 295–308.

⁷¹ Olivier Baulny, 'Napoléon et les projets d'attaque du Brésil', *Revue de l'Institut Napoléon*, cxviii (1971), 25–33.

After the Treaty of Tilsit with Russia in 1807, there was some talk of Napoleon and the tsar of Russia, Alexander, partitioning the Ottoman empire.⁷² Charles Esdaile has suggested that Napoleon went to the trouble of preparing for the partition by annexing Tuscany, Etruria, Parma, Lucca, Guastalla, Piacenza, and Piombino, so that he could have complete control over the port towns of the Ligurian, Tyrrhenian and Adriatic Seas.⁷³ That same historian has gone a step further and argued that, rather than being a blow directed at Britain or the remaining Bourbon king on the continent, the invasion of Spain was directed at the Ottoman empire.⁷⁴ Napoleon's intentions seemed determined enough; he ordered Vice-Admiral Denis Decrès to ready the fleet at the Italian port of Taranto so that 28,000–30,000 men could be shipped to Tunis, Algiers or Egypt, but nothing ever came of it.⁷⁵ On the whole, Napoleon's eastern policy was inconsistent, switching between partition and alliance, depending on the current state of play with the other eastern European great powers. It is perhaps a little misleading to conclude from this evidence that, just as Napoleon had wanted to become the successor of Charlemagne, so too did he want to become the successor of Constantine.⁷⁶

Any grandiose plans for extra-European expansion Napoleon may have had were entirely unrealistic as long as Britain controlled the high seas. François Cacault, the French ambassador to Rome, succinctly summed up the limitations to Napoleon's ambition: 'He says he is Charlemagne. His son could be Charlemagne, but he, he is Charles Martel or Pippin the Short (and do not see in this a silly allusion). There is no Charlemagne in Europe with a Great Britain so close to Paris.'⁷⁷ In other words, Napoleon could lay the foundations for a western empire but he could not achieve it so long as his ambitions were thwarted by Great Britain. To put it another way, as long as France did not have a navy that was equal to Britain's, there was little possibility of France remaining the predominant power on the continent. With an effective navy, Napoleon could have defeated Britain, and explored his colonial options more fully. In that short period between the peace of Amiens and the resumption of war in 1803, this is what Napoleon did. A military expedition was sent to Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti) in 1801, while plans were put to him from officers, bureaucrats and private individuals advocating the occupation of Caribbean islands, as well as Mexico, Paraguay and

⁷² On Napoleon's plans to partition the Ottoman Empire, see *Mémoires documents et écrits divers laissés par le Prince de Metternich*, ed. Prince Richard de Metternich (8 vols., Paris, 1881–3), ii. 144–66; Louis Antoine de Bourrienne, *The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte* (1831), i. 208; Paul F. Shupp, *The European Powers and the Near Eastern Question, 1806–1807* (New York, 1931), pp. 542–6.

⁷³ Charles J. Esdaile, 'De-Constructing the French Wars: Napoleon as Anti-Strategist', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, xxxi (2008), 539–40.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 540.

⁷⁵ *Corr.* xvi, nos. 13,737 and 13,738 (12 April 1808).

⁷⁶ Edouard Driault, *La politique orientale de Napoléon* (Paris, 1904), p. 394.

⁷⁷ Cited in Dunan, *Napoléon et l'Allemagne*, p. 409.

Nicaragua.⁷⁸ He even, for a while, toyed with the idea of forming an empire in the southern United States, stretching from Louisiana to Guyana.⁷⁹ When war resumed, however, those dreams were abandoned. Indeed, every time Napoleon launched an overseas enterprise, and on the rare occasions when it got off the ground, it ended in failure. By 1805, Napoleon's attempts to attack Britain by launching a policy of colonial expansion and naval and commercial warfare had clearly failed.⁸⁰

Where does this leave Napoleon's so-called aspirations for universal monarchy? First, contemporary observations about Napoleon's ambition and his desire for 'universal empire', 'universal domination', 'world domination', or whatever they are called, should be taken at their face value. They are a genuine reflection of a European-wide anxiety among the political elite, based on Napoleon's aggressive foreign political expansion. For contemporaries, Napoleon certainly appeared to set himself up as 'Universal Monarch'. For his part Napoleon, as has been demonstrated above, was certainly thinking of extra-European expeditions, but they were always made with the objective of directing a blow at Britain, and hence as an application of the Continental System and the never-ending expansion that came with it. The reality was, however, that since Napoleon did not have the means or the resources to carry these plans through, they could never be anything other than flights of fancy.

To help settle this question of Napoleon's intentions, a tricky one at the best of times, there are two main points that have to be kept in mind. The first is that Napoleon was a schemer, a dreamer who considered a wide range of options before finally committing to the most practical although not always the most 'realistic' plan (think of the Egyptian or Russian expeditions). Napoleon may have had a desire to extend his power and influence to the four corners of the world – and if the utterings of his entourage are taken at face value then he certainly considered the idea – but that does not mean that it was ever more than a possibility he considered, an option that, realistically, he had no serious hope of even attempting as long as the British navy dominated the seas.

The second point to keep in mind is that, as some historians have convincingly maintained, Napoleon's foreign policy was continually renewed and dictated entirely by circumstances and their immediate needs.⁸¹ Napoleon had in fact no coherent imperial foreign-political policy. If, as some historians have insisted, Napoleon conquered for the sake of conquering, there were as a whole no defining goals and no

⁷⁸ Philippe Girard, 'Rêves d'Empire: French Revolutionary Doctrine and Military Interventions in the Southern United States and the Caribbean', *Louisiana History*, iil (2007), 403.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 407–8.

⁸⁰ Schroeder, *Transformation of European Politics*, p. 265.

⁸¹ As does Etienne François, 'Das napoleonische Hegemonialsystem auf dem Kontinent', in *Das Jahr 1806 im europäischen Kontext. Balance, Hegemonie und politische Kulturen*, ed. Andreas Klingner, Hans-Werner Hahn and Georg Schmidt (Weimar, 2008), pp. 73–83.

overriding, consistent or specific long-term strategic objectives.⁸² There were instead the short-term goals of the defeat of immediate enemies, and the implementation of the Continental System through expansion, nothing more. Since each campaign created new enemies, the wars were continuous and could only stop with the defeat of Napoleon. If Napoleon was truly intent on constructing a universal monarchy, as his adversaries accused him of, then he never did so in any systematic way. Otherwise, he would have incorporated most of Germany, including Prussia, defeated in 1806, into the Empire, and he would have either incorporated or partitioned the Habsburg Empire, defeated in three separate wars. Napoleon may have had an aggressive expansionist foreign policy, he may have wanted to dominate and control most of Europe, he may even have fantasized about dominating the world's colonial empires, but he could never become Emperor of the Universe.

⁸² As does Schroeder, *Transformation of European Politics*, pp. xi, 230, 284, 393; and Schroeder, 'Napoleon's Foreign Policy: A Criminal Enterprise', *Journal of Military History*, liv (1990), 147–61.