

68 A VIEW OF NAPOLEON'S CHARACTER

On meeting Napoleon most people had the same reaction. They were fascinated, yet uneasy. One person who strongly experienced this reaction was Madame Germaine de Staël, the daughter of Jacques Necker—the former finance minister of Louis XVI. In the excerpt below from The French Revolution, edited by Philip Dawson, Madame de Staël describes Napoleon's character as she saw it. As you read the excerpt, consider how Napoleon's character might have contributed to his rise to power.

Bonaparte made himself remarkable by his character and capacity as much as by his actions. . . . In [the] style [of the proclamations he issued in Italy] there reigned a spirit of moderation and dignity, which formed a contrast with the revolutionary bitterness of the civil leaders of France. He was said to be much attached to his wife, whose character was full of gentleness; people took delight in ascribing to him all the generous qualities which give a pleasing relief to extraordinary talents. Besides, the nation was so weary of oppressors who borrowed the name of liberty, and of oppressed persons who regretted the loss of arbitrary power, that admiration knew not what to attach itself to, and Bonaparte seemed to unite all that was fitted to take it captive.

It was with this sentiment, at least, that I saw him for the first time at Paris [in 1797]. I could not find the words to reply to him. . . . But, when I was a little recovered from the confusion of admiration, a strongly marked sentiment of fear followed. Bonaparte, at that time, had no power; . . . so that the fear which he inspired was caused only by the singular effect of his person on almost all who approached him. I had

1. Why, when she first met Napoleon, did Madame de Staël feel that the fear he generated was purely a product of his personality?
2. What do you think Madame de Staël meant when she said that Napoleon's successes depended as much on the qualities he lacked as much as on those he possessed?
3. How might Napoleon's character have helped him in his rise to power?

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seen men highly worthy of esteem; I had likewise seen monsters of ferocity: there was nothing in the effect which Bonaparte produced on me, that could bring back to my recollection either the one or the other. I soon perceived, in the different opportunities which I had of meeting him during his stay at Paris, that his character could not be defined by the words we commonly use; he was neither good, nor violent, nor gentle, nor cruel, after the manner of individuals of whom we have knowledge. Such a being had no fellow. His cast of character, his understanding, his language, were stamped with the impress of an unknown nature. . . .

Far from recovering my confidence by seeing Bonaparte more frequently, he intimidated me more and more. I had a confused feeling that no emotion could influence him. . . . He never believed in exalted sentiments either in individuals or in nations: he considered the expression of these sentiments as hypocrisy. . . .

He regarded a human being as an action or a thing, not as a fellow creature. He did not hate any more than he loved; for him nothing existed but himself; all other creatures were cyphers. He was an able chess-player, and the human race was the opponent to whom he proposed to give check-mate. His successes depended as much on the qualities which he lacked as on the talents which he possessed. Neither pity, nor religion, nor attachment to any idea whatsoever, could [deflect] him from his principal direction. He was for his self-interest what the just man should be for virtue; if the end had been good, his perseverance would have been noble.

Every time that I heard him speak, I was struck with his superior [qualities. . . . His conversation] indicated a fine perception of circumstances, such as the sportsman has of the game which he pursues; sometimes he related the events of his life in a very interesting manner; he had even somewhat of the Italian imagination in narratives which allowed of gaiety. Yet nothing could triumph over my invincible aversion for what I perceived in him. I felt in his soul a cold sharp-edged sword, which froze the wound that it inflicted; I perceived in his understanding a profound irony, from which nothing great or beautiful, not even his own glory, could escape; for he despised the nation whose votes he wanted, and no spark of generous enthusiasm was mingled with his desire to astonish the human race.