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# “NAPOLEON LE PETIT”: NAPOLEON III

BY WILLIAM FLEMING



The medalet illustrated above is one of a number of satirical items struck after Napoleon III had lost the battle of Sedan in 1870. This article traces the historical background to the issue of these interesting pieces.

In 1852 Victor Hugo, one of the great figures of French literature, wrote a book titled “Napoleon le Petit” (Napoleon the Little) in which he scathingly attacked the new Emperor of France, Louis-Napoleon or Napoleon III. It was an epithet which stuck and did lasting damage to Napoleon III’s historical reputation. His critics were always able to compare him unfavourably to “Napoleon le Grand” as Napoleon Bonaparte was known. Therefore the title “Napoleon le Petit” was a natural one to use after his disastrous loss in the battle of Sedan. The satirical countermarked coins and the specially struck medalets are interesting numismatic reminders of the important events of 1870 which saw in France the defeat of the monarchy and the establishment of the third Republic in less than 100 years, and in Germany the emergence of a new unity and nationalism.

When Napoleon Bonaparte married the widow Josephine de Beauharnais he acquired two stepchildren, Eugene and Hortense. He married off Hortense to his brother Louis Bonaparte, best known for his period as King of Holland from 1806 to 1810. This union produced three sons, the two eldest died young, leaving Charles Louis Napoleon Bonaparte to carry the family name. He had an eventful life before he became President of France in 1851, including early involvement in revolution in Italy, an unsuccessful coup in 1836, exile in America, another unsuccessful coup in 1840, imprisonment for six years in the fortress of Ham on the northern French frontier, and escape to England where he associated with the higher ranks of London society. He wrote extensively and developed his ideal of government as an efficient and paternal autocracy resting on nationwide assent.

Victor Hugo’s description of the 1840 attempt to overthrow King Louis-Philippe is interesting:

*“On the 6th of August, 1840, he landed at Boulogne, parodying the landing at*

*Cannes (of Napoleon I), with the traditional little hat on his head, bringing a gilt eagle on top of a flag, and a live eagle in a cage, a number of proclamations, sixty lackeys, cooks, and stable boys disguised as French soldiers, with uniforms purchased in the Temple and buttons of the 42nd of the line manufactured in London. He threw money to the people walking in the streets, raised his hat on the point of his sword, and shouted: "Vive l'Empereur;" fired a pistol at an officer, but hit a soldier, breaking three of his teeth — and fled. He is taken, and five hundred thousand francs in gold and banknotes is found on him . . . The Peers condemn him to perpetual imprisonment, and he is sent to Ham."*

After the Revolution of 1848, Louis Napoleon returned to France as an elected member of the Assembly and a supporter of the Republic. His popularity was such that in December 1848 he was elected President by an overwhelming majority, largely on the basis of the name "Napoleon". In December 1851 he overthrew the Assembly and became President on his own terms, within a year changing his title to that of Emperor.

Victor Hugo had retreated overseas when Napoleon came to power, but he continued to use the full might of his pen against him. The depth of his hatred can be gauged from this description of events in "Napoleon le Petit":

*" . . . he hailed the Republic, took his seat as the representative of the people in the Constituent Assembly, and said: 'All my life will be devoted to the consolidation of the Republic,' published a manifesto which may be summarised in two lines: liberty, progress, democracy, amnesty, abolition of decrees of proscription and of banishment; was elected President by five million five hundred thousand votes, swore loyalty solemnly to the Constitution of the 20th of December 1848, and destroyed it on the 2nd of December 1851. In the interval he had crushed the Roman Republic, and*

*restored in 1849 that Papacy which in 1831 he had attempted to overthrow; he had, moreover, taken some part or other in the shady transaction called the 'Lottery of the ingots of gold.' In the weeks preceding the coup d'etat, this money-bag had become transparent, and a hand was perceived in it resembling his. On the 2nd December and the following days, he, the Executive Power, assailed the Legislative Power, arrested the Representatives, drove away the Assembly, expelled the High Court of Justice, suppressed the laws, took twenty-five millions from the Bank, gorged the army with gold, mowed down Paris with grape-shot, and struck terror into France. Since then he has proscribed eighty-four Representatives of the People, robbed the Princes of Orleans of the property of their father, to whom he owed his life, decreed despotism in fifty-eight articles under the title of a constitution, garotted the Republic, turned the sword of France into a gag in the mouth of liberty, jobbed in railway shares, rifled the pockets of the people, regulated the budget by an edict, deported ten thousand democrats to Africa and Cayenne, exiled forty thousand republicans to Belgium, Spain, Switzerland, and England, and brought anguish to every soul and a blush to every brow."*

Small wonder that history has not had a very high opinion of Napoleon III!

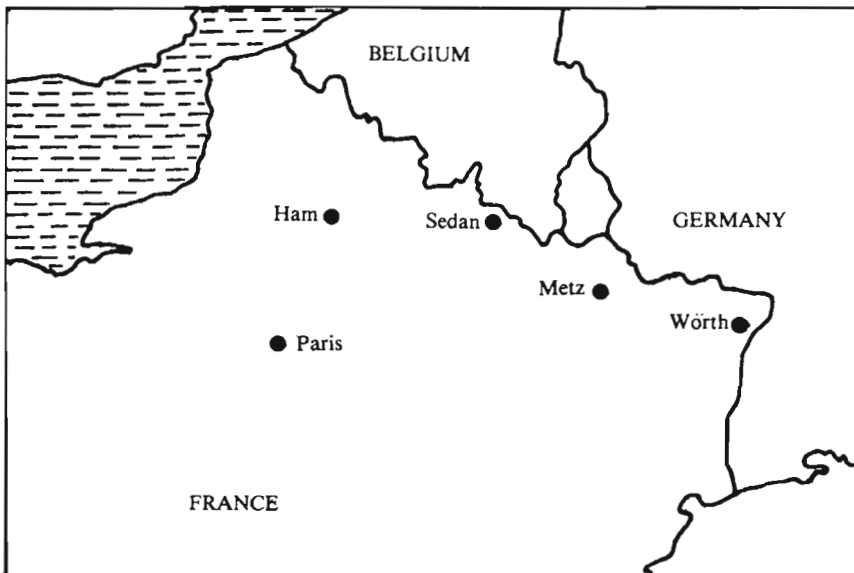
Louis-Napoleon never really overcame the violent way he seized power; ruthless repression of opposition was followed under a facade of "democratic" processes. In 1853 he married Eugenie, a Spanish noblewoman, and ran a glittering court. She is shown with Napoleon on a medal struck in 1855 to commemorate their visit to London. At this time France and England were allies in the Crimean War. There was considerable material progress during the reign of Napoleon III, one lasting effect being the rebuilding of much of Paris with new wide boulevards.

NAPOLEON III AND EUGENIE ON THE CITY OF LONDON MEDAL BY BENJAMIN WYON



By the late 1860s the control of Napoleon was tottering in the face of the threat of an emerging Germany. Under the leadership of Bismarck the Northern states had united with Prussia, although the Southern states were still independent. Spain was without a monarch after the flight of the incompetent Queen Isabella, and Bismarck suggested Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, a distant relative of the King of Prussia, in an attempt to extend Prussian influence. In

the face of vigorous opposition from France, Leopold withdrew his candidature, but the circumstances provided Bismarck with the opportunity he was seeking for a war with France. He believed such a war essential to unite Germany, provided it appeared that France was the aggressor. By deliberately rephrasing a telegram giving details of negotiations between the King of Prussia and the French ambassador he managed to give the impression that Germany had



been insulted. Without any attempt to ascertain the correct situation both sides declared war.

It was generally believed in Europe that France would win the war which followed. However, in the actual fighting France scored no success of any importance, and the course of the war ran almost entirely as Germany wanted it. The German army was scientifically organised and prepared, and was ready long before the French. In the decisive early stages it had a great superiority of numbers, approximately 500,000 against 200,000. Its artillery and geographical knowledge were greatly superior, and the country was united and enthusiastic. France on the other hand was divided. The Emperor Napoleon was nominally in command, but his health was broken and he exerted little real influence. His Generals tended to be indecisive, often being overruled for political reasons.

On August 6, 1870 the German Crown Prince attacked and defeated a French army under MacMahon at Worth. The same day the other major French force under Bazaine was defeated at Spicheren. In the face of these disasters the French commanders wished to retreat to Paris and fight the next battle there, but the government, influenced by the Empress Eugenie, felt this would be politically fatal. So Bazaine was directed to attempt the defence of Metz. But the Germans struck first and the French army was quickly surrounded. Napoleon escaped, but Bazaine was coupé up with 200,000 men. Faced with this terrible catastrophe, MacMahon determined to retreat to Paris with the other army so that the next battle could be fought with the support of the guns of the Paris forts. However, the Empress, fearful of revolution, convinced the government that Metz must be relieved at all costs. So against his own better judgement MacMahon, accompanied by Napoleon, marched in the direction of Metz and reached Sedan (near the Belgian border) on August 30.

There was no hope of reaching Metz, 60 miles away, because German numbers in the area were superior and they had occupied all the bridges. The only real hope was a retreat to Paris, but the French delayed one day too long. On the morning of September 1 the Germans attacked. The French forces were driven back towards the city which was bombarded by constant artillery fire from 400 Prussian guns. There was total chaos inside the city; soldiers were trampled to death trying to get through the gates as they were about to close on the approaching enemy. During the last hours Napoleon III rode among his wavering troops attempting to inspire them, but it was to no avail. At 6.30 in the evening a French General rode out under a flag of truce and gave the Prussian King a note from the French Emperor:

“Since I could not die in the midst of my troops, I can only put my sword in Your Majesty’s hand. I am Your Majesty’s good brother”.

It was this final message of surrender that was parodied on some of the satirical medalets which appeared shortly after:

“Not having the courage to die at the head of my army, I demand a hiding place with the King of Prussia”. It appears round the obverse of the medalet illustrated at the beginning of this article.

The Emperor and 104,000 troops were captured (the number is incorrectly stated as 80,000 on one of the medalets illustrated). News of the disaster was at first disbelieved in Paris. But on September 3 a telegram was received from the Emperor, “The army has been defeated and taken prisoner; I myself am a prisoner”. A revolution of some sort was certain. The Assembly met, but was invaded by insurgents and the National Guard. A Republic was declared; the Second Empire had ended.

The Germans continued to advance, and after a siege of four months Paris fell on January 28, 1871. A wave of enthusiasm



10 CENTIMES OF NAPOLEON III, AND A  
SIMILAR COIN ENGRAVED WITH  
PRUSSIAN HELMET

had swept the south German states and on January 18 Wilhelm I, King of Prussia, had been proclaimed German Emperor. Napoleon III was imprisoned in Germany, but was released in 1871 and settled in England where he died in 1873. Germany was united, France was weakened, both events of great significance in the period which led up to the First World War.

After the siege of Paris engraved coins, usually the large bronze 10 centimes,

started to appear. The bust of Napoleon III was engraved with a German helmet and collar. These were first seen in Alsace-Lorraine and were apparently produced by German soldiers to celebrate the fact that the French Emperor was a German prisoner. The idea was rapidly taken up by Frenchmen opposed to Napoleon as a means of showing their disgust at his defeat. Silver coins also appeared crudely stamped "SEDAN". A One Franc coin counterstamped in this way is illustrated.



Subsequently, well struck medalets appeared, mostly of 32mm diameter, approximately the size of the 10-centime coins. Several different types are illustrated. The exact origin of these is unknown, but they are obviously anti-Royalist in sentiment so were presumably produced for one of the pro-Republican groups. The legends carry the clear implication that Napoleon III was a traitor. All have a bust of Napoleon with a German helmet, some have "SEDAN" on the collar of his German uniform. The legend reads "NAPOLEON III LE MISERABLE, PARJURE & TRAITRE" (Perjurer & Traitor), or "NAPOLEON III



LE MISERABLE, 2 DECEMBRE” (the 2nd of December being the date of his seizure of power in 1851).

The reverse shows the “EMPIRE FRANCAIS” legend of the coinage corrupted to “VAMPIRE DE LA FRANCE”, with an owl instead of an eagle, the owl being the symbol of death. The legend is “SEDAN 2 SEPTBRE. 1870” or “PARIS 2 DEC. 1851-SEDAN 2 SEPT. 1870”. None of the pieces shows any indication of the engraver or the mint.

An interesting contemporary reference appears in the journal of the Liverpool Numismatic Society for 1873; one of the medalets had been displayed at a meeting and an enquiry had been sent to Paris to determine its status. M. Adrien Chabouillet, Keeper of the Department of Medals and Antiquities at the Bibliotheque Nationale, replied in part that they “have not in effect the official character, but one cannot say they are false; they are the products of private initiative.” He said that one of the pieces had been given to the cabinet of medals by an “antiquary”. The slightly

condescending attitude of officialdom can be seen in the remainder of the reply: “As far as I am concerned, pieces of this description are given to preserve as matters of information, inasmuch as they have not the importance of medals struck by the constituted authorities de jure or de facto, and they have no more authority than the thousand and one lithographed and hatched the day after the 4th September, 1870. Your medals would have been official if they had been struck at the mint on account of a private individual, and they would consequently be found in the cabinet of medals in virtue of the law of legal deposit; their absence alone would prove that they had a private character.” The fact that their exact origin was unknown so soon after the event, and given the turbulent nature of the period, it seems unlikely that any more definite information exists.

Modern historians tend to be a little more sympathetic to Napoleon III than those writing shortly after his fall. Perhaps their view was too greatly influenced by the outpourings of Victor Hugo, and maybe even by these satirical medalets.

