

PARIS SOULS

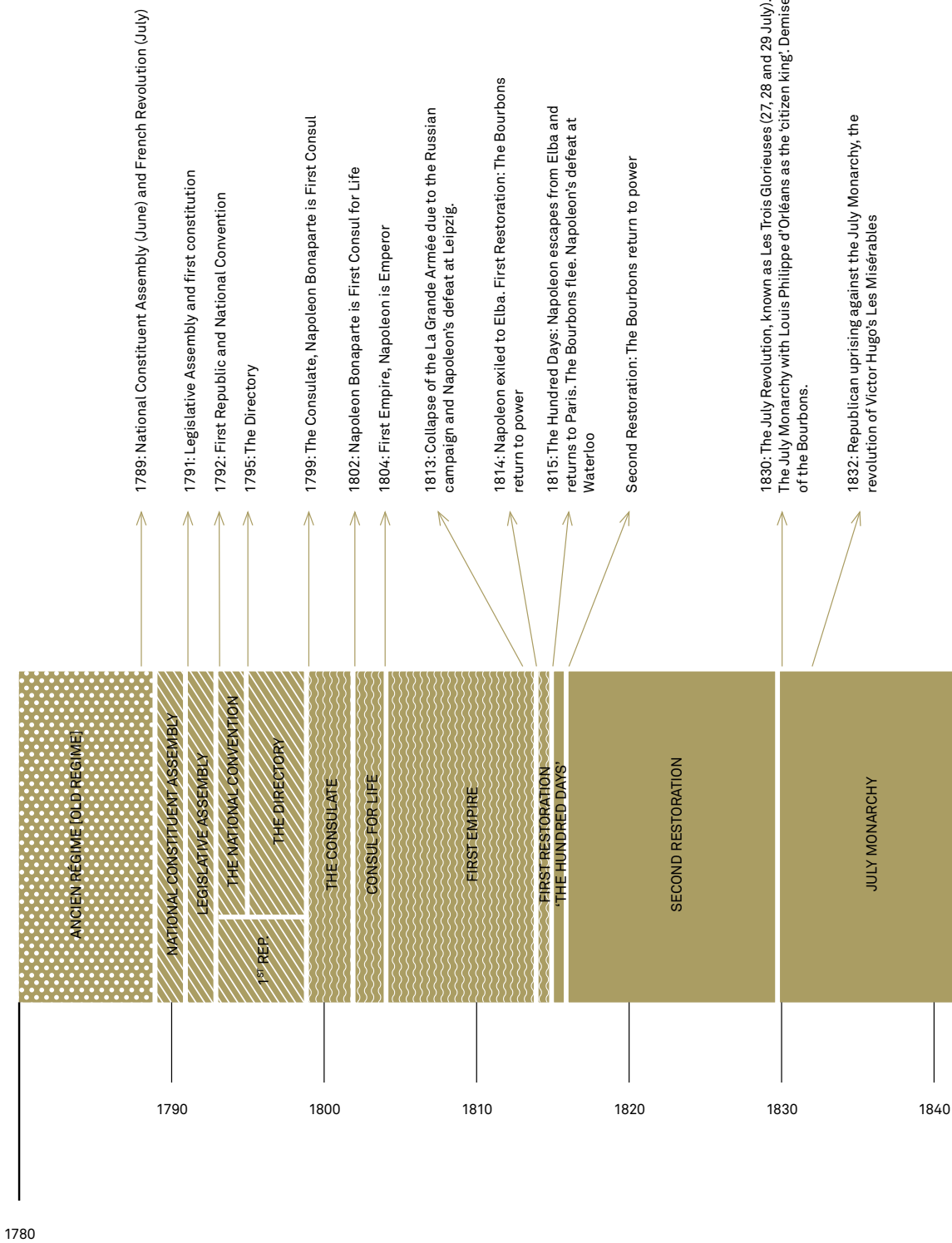
DIRK VELGHE

PARIS
SOULS

Unexpected Stories from the City of Light

HANNIBAL

FROM THE REVOLUTION TO THE PRESENT DAY





This simplified overview does not include all interim forms of government, transitional regimes or provisional governments. Certain historical events that were important for Paris have been added, however, such as the Siege of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War, the Paris Commune, the First and Second World Wars, the Occupation and Liberation, plus the post-war presidents.



FIFTH REPUBLIC

1974: Valéry Giscard d'Estaing

1981: François Mitterrand

1988: François Mitterrand re-elected

1995: Jacques Chirac

2002: Jacques Chirac re-elected (after initially serving for seven years, the term is changed to five-years)

2007: Nicolas Sarkozy

2012: François Hollande

2017: Emmanuel Macron

2022: Emmanuel Macron re-elected

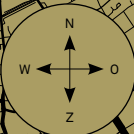
1980

1990

2000

2010

2020



MONCEAU
& BATIGNOLLES

GARE
SAINT-
LAZARE

RIGHT BANK,
WEST

LEFT BANK,
WEST

GARE MONTPARNASSE



GARE DU NORD

GARE DE L'EST

RIGHT BANK,
EAST

GARE
D'AUSTERLITZ

GARE DE LYON

LEFT BANK,
EAST

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FOREWORD

“An idea that is clear and precise even though false, will always have greater power in the world than an idea that is true but complex.”

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE (1805-1859)

This book is about the extraordinary people who have coloured the City of Light and its rich history. A select group – historians and writers – could afford to do this with ink, others with oil paint or a camera, but the vast majority of Parisians were restricted to the only means at their disposal, which largely amounted to blood, sweat and tears. While the privileged few seem to be permanent fixtures in the literature on Paris, it is the lives of the latter group, the unusual suspects, that fascinate me the most. Men and women who nonetheless experienced incredible adventures: a gambler who became France’s first central banker, a forgotten emperor, a nurse at the American Hospital who joined the *Résistance*, a world-famous artist’s model who everyone has seen but no one knows, an assistant curator at the Musée du Jeu de Paume who risked her life for art, the anarchists who set Paris ablaze, the female publisher of *Ulysses* – at the time considered pornographic – or the descendants of Paris’ great executioner dynasties. It is they, and their extraordinary fellow citizens, who populate this book. Even when you do encounter well-known figures such as Ho Chi Minh, Chanel, Arletty, Lenin or Picasso, they will probably surprise you by presenting a different, less polished side.

The quest for the soul of these characters is also a quest for their true selves. This was not always self-evident. On several occasions, I started a story with a fixed idea in my mind, only to dig deeper and find it totally turned on its head when an entirely different truth emerged: for example, in this book, the

woman who was vilified in post-war France as *la hyène de la Gestapo* [the hyena of the Gestapo] undergoes a minor rehabilitation, and a president, a *Grand Homme de la Gauche* [Great man of the Left] falls from his pedestal. This brings us to the myths. The City of Light is rich in these and they are persistent. The French writer and dramaturge Raymond Queneau was forced to contend with them when editing his successful column in the newspaper *L'Intransigeant*. In 'Connaissez-vous Paris?' he asked the readers three questions every day. The answers appeared amongst the classified ads, which were even more eagerly devoured as a result. In order to substantiate his answers thoroughly, Queneau took a deep dive into the Bibliothèque Nationale, at that time still in the Rue de Richelieu. This is what he discovered: "a few visits sufficed to teach me that many books about Paris were copied from one another. That the same untruths, often corrected years before, still cropped up afresh, and that a small amount of *méthode historique* would nevertheless suffice to eliminate them for good". Did Georges-Eugène Haussmann, Prefect of Seine, who is presented in many a book about Paris as a destructive Attila, murder the city's soul? Was the Belle Époque a time of glitter and glamour, light-hearted operettas and uninhibited pleasure? Or did the flip side also reveal exploitation and budding anarchism, nationalist hysteria and anti-semitism, crime and violence? Leading French financiers and industrialists were surprised by the brutality of the occupying forces in 1940, leaving them with no option but to collaborate. Really? All myths. They are often so widespread and stubborn that the facts are not always sufficiently powerful to eliminate them.

Nevertheless, the facts often outstrip the fabrications; and the truth is more fascinating, more brutal or more shocking than the myth. So *une idée certaine* is a completely different kettle of fish to *une certaine idée*. For its inherent doubt and hesitation alone, the latter is still the most apt leitmotif for a quest of this kind.

"The enemy of history is morality", said the great historian of the French Revolution and the Empire, Patrice Gueniffey. In every era people view the facts in a different light. The fashion of the day. The bicentenary of Napoleon Bonaparte's death polarised national opinion in early 2021. At one extreme, the woke movement balked at the idea of commemorating a white, male misogynist who had re-imported slavery. At the other extreme was Eric Zemmour, then a columnist at *Le Figaro* who also hosted a wildly popular talk show on CNews, the French equivalent of Fox News in the United States. Zemmour, who went on to become a presidential candidate in 2022, believed that "Napoleon is the most influential personality in the country's history. So yes, *vive l'Empereur!*" After his day trip to Paris on 23 June 1940, Hitler ordered the destruction of Charles

Mangin's statue, a French general during the First World War. It irritated him. Just as the historical billboards on the Place de la Contrescarpe, such as '*Au Nègre Joyeux*', irritate the contemporary city authorities. These have since been transferred to the Musée Carnavalet. Different times, different morals.

Myth and morality are not the only reasons why seemingly alike citizens are bracketed together as saints or sinners. For the last surviving royalist romantics who believe in the battle-cry and motto of the Kingdom of France – *Montjoie! Saint Denis!* – the two world wars were not the worst things to happen to their country. No, these would be Robespierre and the French Revolution. For the radical republicans, the combatants on the barricades of the Commune are heroes; and the law-abiding, monarchist *Versaillais* that shot them down from on high, cowards. And vice versa.

It is through these will-o'-the-wisps that I have tried to bare the soul of my Parisians, in all their controversies and nuances, both in their trivial day-to-day concerns and in their grand *acte du siècle*, their 'deed of the century', be it an act of goodness or a crime. At the start of the book, a brief overview of France's political history makes it easier for the reader to situate the characters in their time. In these extraordinary histories, however, they do not appear in historical sequence, but are situated in the areas in which they lived and worked, were born and died, and where, for those who wish to get to know them better, their souls still roam. Thanks to the maps, Paris aficionados can meet them face-to-face through the still-visible reminders of their lives.

Dirk Velghe

PART 1

RIGHT BANK, WEST



GARE ST. LAZARE

ST. TRINITE

OPERA GARNIER

STE MARIE MADELEINE

LA BOURSE

BIBLIOTHEQUE NATIONALE

GALERIE NATIONALE DU JEU DE PAUME

PALAIS ROYAL

JARDIN DES TUILERIES

JARDIN DU CARROUSEL

MUSÉE DU LOUVRE

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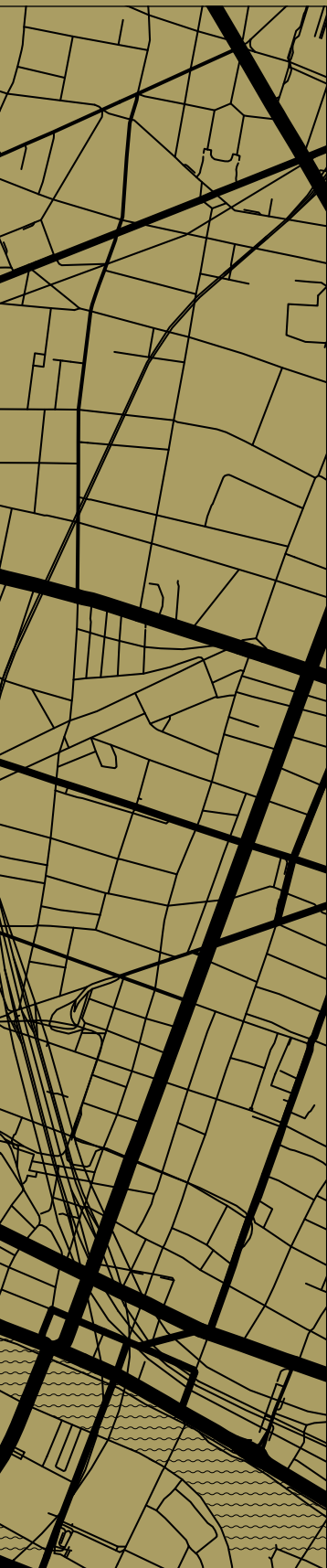
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5

1

6



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Musée du Jeu de Paume,
1 place de la Concorde 75008

2. Chanel versus Wertheimer

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31 rue Cambon 75001

**3. Napoleon III,
the forgotten emperor**

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Place de l'Opéra 75009

4. Arletty's heart

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Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens,
4 rue Monsigny 75002

5. Lenin's yellow jersey

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Bibliothèque de l'Institut national d'histoire
de l'art [INHA], Salle Labrouste,
58 rue de Richelieu 75002

6. John Law's 'shitty shares'

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Église Saint-Roch, 296 rue Saint-Honoré 75001



ROSE VALLAND'S WAR

On All Saints Day 1940, Rose Valland, assistant curator at the Musée du Jeu de Paume, is not bringing chrysanthemums for her deceased relatives. No, the sadness she feels is of a completely different order. 'Her' museum, of all places, has been commandeered by the Nazis as a triage centre from which to despatch their looted art across the Third Reich. For Rose, art is her vocation, and she decides to conduct an important task: to compile an inventory of the stolen works so that – who knows – one day they can be returned to their rightful owners. She soon realises the immense risks involved. The slightest error could be life-threatening.

< Rose Valland with artworks
that she helped recover.



CHANEL VERSUS WERTHEIMER

Rose and jasmine are the dominant notes of the iconic perfume Chanel N°5. But the most successful bottle in the world also contains some not-so-floral accents, such as envy and greed, plus a hint of collaboration. It is a page that is often erased from the biography of the great couturier's fragrance. From her headquarters at 31, Rue Cambon, the 'Iron Lady of Perfume' fights a long-running and malodorous battle against the Jewish entrepreneurial family, the Wertheimers.¹ The majority stakeholders in Les Parfums Chanel since its inception are now the sole owners of the global Chanel empire. However, the Wertheimers came very close to losing their business to Mademoiselle Coco during the Second World War. Courtesy of the Nazis.

< Pierre Wertheimer with his inevitable bowler hat.

THAT DAY AT THE RACES

The Grand Prix de Deauville is always thronged with beautiful people. Crowned heads of state, such as King Alfonso XIII of Spain and the Maharajah of Kapurthala, exotic princes and princesses, the Greek shipowner Zografos, and industrialists such as André Citroën and the brothers Pierre and Paul Wertheimer, all cross paths in the stands or on the new Promenade des Planches, which has been laid to prevent beachgoers from sinking up to their ankles in the sand. Gabrielle Chanel – *Coco* to her friends, *Mademoiselle* to her employees and the public – is also in attendance at this dazzling event in 1923. To her delight, numerous women are wearing her *pièces uniques*. Not to mention her hats, chicer versions of simple straw sun hats that are adorned with flowers or feathers. They are all the rage.

Coco's boutique, which had opened in the fashionable seaside resort in 1914,² cannot keep up with demand in the run-up to *la saison* on the 'Riviera Normandé'. Her *marinière* collection, in particular, is *en vogue* on both *L'Atlantique* and the Côte d'Azur: Chanel's designs – casual white shirts with sailor stripes, wide white trousers and thick blue jumpers – are inspired by the simple cuts and comfortable fabrics more typically associated with lingerie. She also offers knitted scarves against the mild sea breezes, and swimming costumes with plunging backs: daring at a time when corsets still constrict many women's physiques. Coco herself, however, has long since abandoned these suffocating straitjackets and even ran an advertisement in *Les Modes* in 1908 encouraging others to follow suit.³ With great success. Her boutiques in Cannes, Biarritz and Paris – financed by an ex-lover who had died in an accident, Boy Capel – are also thriving. Given the prices, she caters to a particularly well-heeled clientele.

Théophile Bader is one such figure. He is a good friend of Coco's and the owner of the Galeries Lafayette on the Boulevard Haussmann in Paris. Under the cool awning of the champagne tent at the Grand Prix de Deauville, he introduces Coco to Pierre and Paul Wertheimer. The Wertheimers are successful Jewish entrepreneurs and thus ideally placed to help Coco realise her ambitious dreams. In the summer of 1920, with the help of talented 'nose' Ernest Beaux, once a perfumer to the tsar, she creates her own exclusive and exquisite perfume. She simply names it after the number on the bottle that she picks from the two series of samples that Beaux has prepared: bottle number five becomes 'Chanel N°5'.⁴ Although her fragrance is a modest success in her boutiques, her dreams are far, far grander... and that demands capital.

Théophile Bader has prepared the meeting well. The Wertheimers are active in the aviation industry and already own the large French perfume and

cosmetics company, Bourjois. With fire and passion, Chanel explains her ambitions: global success for her baby, N°5. The Wertheimers adore the races: their spirited stallion Epinard had won the Prix Yacowlef with a five-length-lead the previous year.⁵ But they quickly forget the racetrack and are transfixed by the glittering black orbs under the equally dark eyelashes of the petite and gesticulating lady. The words that fall from her lips are as intoxicating as the clip of Sao Paulo's hooves, the winning thoroughbred. The spark has leapt.

FULL GALLOP

The Wertheimers and Coco establish 'Les Parfums Chanel' in 1924. The two brothers finance everything – production, distribution, marketing and sales – and shoulder all the risks. In view of this, they receive 70% of the company shares. Théophile Bader, who brokered the introduction and is providing distribution of the precious bottle through the Galeries Lafayette, receives 20%. Chanel, who has brought both the idea and the formula to the table but nothing in the way of money, receives the remaining 10%.⁶ Chanel N°5 is surrounded by an air of exclusivity and luxury from the outset, underscored by an equally exclusive price. Chanel personally oversees the public relations and does a magnificent job.

She even makes it to Hollywood, where Sam Goldwyn, head of the Metro Goldwyn Mayer studio, invites her to design clothes for his stable of stars, including Gloria Swanson, Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. The American studios roll out the red carpet for *Mademoiselle*, who is paid \$1 million for her services, a fortune at the time, and equivalent to \$75 million in today's terms.⁷ The American media whip themselves into a frenzy over the innovative French couturier and her designs for the Hollywood stars. For her part, Coco has a knack for turning all media attention to one specific name, that of *Mademoiselle* Chanel.

Chanel is simultaneously conquering the Parisian stage. *Le Train Bleu* is causing a furore in the French capital. Jean Cocteau, an artistic jack-of-all-trades, has created the ballet opera for Serge Diaghilev's controversial Ballets Russes, with choreography by Bronislava Nijinska and music by Darius Milhaud. Picasso paints a giant version of his *Deux femmes courant sur la plage* for the set. From the moment it premieres in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1924, *Le Train Bleu* is an unbridled success. How could it be otherwise when so many great names have joined forces? Furthermore, the theme appeals to everyone's imagination. *Le Train Bleu* is the name of the exclusive night train that whisks the wealthy and carefree Parisians from the Gare de Lyon to their villas on the Riviera. It is a dazzling spectacle that transports audiences to a world of sun,



NAPOLEON III, THE FORGOTTEN EMPEROR

“Industry is a machine that runs without a regulator. It does not care what driving force it uses. Like a true Saturn of labour, industry devours its own children and lives only by their deaths.” Such words could easily be attributed to Karl Marx or Friedrich Engels, but surprisingly enough they were written by a rich, thirty-six-year-old prince – Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, nephew of Napoleon – in an essay entitled Extinction du paupérisme [The Extinction of Pauperism]. He wrote the treatise from his prison cell in 1844 while serving a life sentence. At the time, no one viewed this dreamer-adventurer as the comet who, in just six years, would ascend from prisoner to people’s representative, president of the Republic and emperor of the French. But before all this could happen, the man who inspired the Second Empire must escape the heavily guarded Château de Ham.

< Napoleon III, nephew of
Napoleon Bonaparte.

A NEW BONAPARTE

“Allez montez, mon cher ami!” Napoleon tenderly lifts his nephew and straightens the boy’s uniform. Seven-year-old Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte is the son of Louis, the Emperor’s younger brother, and his wife Hortense. She, in turn, is the daughter of Joséphine de Beauharnais, the Emperor’s first great love and his first wife. The year is 1815. After escaping from Elba and reuniting with his army, Napoleon is back in the Palais des Tuileries in Paris. From whence the Bourbon king, Louis XVIII, has fled in disarray upon hearing the shocking news that ‘the Eagle’, as Napoleon is called, is at large. The Emperor is delighted to be reunited with his nephew. Little Louis-Napoleon gazes out of the window. A unit of the Imperial Guard marches past. It is a mere shadow of the Grande Armée but in the Emperor’s mind, victory over the enemy nations, the ancient kingdoms of Europe, is still within reach.

As he embraces the young boy, the Emperor’s heart bleeds. He pines for his own four-year-old son. His second wife, Marie-Louise of Austria, did not follow him into exile on Elba after his defeat in Leipzig but returned, with their child, to her imperial family in Vienna. Napoleon suffered disaster after disaster in 1813 and 1814. His Grande Armée was decimated during the Russian campaign, another 38,000 soldiers were lost at Leipzig, while 20,000 more were taken as prisoners of war. His first great love, the Empress Joséphine, had died, and Marie-Louise and his son are now living under enemy rule. Napoleon might have escaped Elba and returned to Paris, but emperors and monarchs throughout Europe are sharpening their swords in readiness for a final showdown with the Corsican. On 18 June 1815, Napoleon is defeated at Waterloo and exiled to Saint Helena, where he will die six years later. As Louis XVIII is reinstalling himself in the Tuileries upon his return from Ghent, where he had established a government-in-exile, the young Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte is en route to Switzerland with his mother. He will never see his uncle again. Yet the Imperial Guard’s parade is etched upon his memory. Politics runs in the family, and it isn’t long before it whets the appetite of the illustrious Emperor’s young nephew.

At the age of twenty-two, Louis-Napoleon supports a conspiracy by the Carbonari, the secret society planning to install a liberal monarchy in Italy. He also joins the fight against the Papal States in Rome. But as soon as Austria despatches 20,000 soldiers to drive out the victorious revolutionaries, Louis-Napoleon turns tail and beats a hasty retreat to Paris – the city from which the new bourgeois king, Louis-Philippe d’Orléans, has been calling the shots since the July Revolution of 1830 (which is why his reign is referred to as the July Monarchy). Orléans tolerates Louis-Napoleon’s presence in the city on two

conditions: that he is there only briefly, and that he stays incognito. Nevertheless, the Parisians soon get wind of 'a new Bonaparte'. The young powerhouse is promptly exiled.

Louis-Napoleon is intent on causing a stir in the French capital; through a 'march on Paris', for example, just like his eminent uncle. He finds a friend and ally in the Duc de Persigny, his faithful right-hand man during his meteoric rise to the top.¹ But their clumsy plan is derailed in Strasbourg when they, and other assorted adventurers, call for revolution at the barrack gates. "*Soldats! Marchons contre les traîtres du pays!*" [Soldiers! Let us march against the country's traitors!]. The garrison springs into action: but only to arrest the bolshy prince. Persigny escapes. Thanks to the intercessions of Louis-Napoleon's mother, Orléans releases the captive on condition that he heads straight for America and stays away from Paris. The prince pays dutiful visits to Rio de Janeiro and New York. But when he publishes a book from Switzerland a few years later, detailing his 'political action' in Strasbourg, the French government cannot contain its exasperation. Orléans even threatens to attack Switzerland if it does not immediately expel the firebrand. Louis-Napoleon won't let it get that far. Despite accepting voluntary exile in London, he appears to have achieved his goal. In France, and Paris especially, there is renewed talk of 'that new Bonaparte'. Practice makes perfect.

He resumes his plotting the moment he sets foot in the British capital. This time, he will incite a garrison in Boulogne-sur-Mer to attack Orléans. A local general with a sentimental attachment to the Emperor offers his support. Louis-Napoleon sets sail for France on 5 August 1840 – full steam ahead – with an army of sympathetic Bonapartists under his belt, plus the ever-loyal Persigny. The 'Edinburgh Castle', supposedly hired for a cruise, is also carrying 100,000 gold francs. At the barrack gates in Boulogne, Louis-Napoleon reprises his theatrical stunt from Strasbourg. Astonished spectators are handed gold coins as they chant: "*A bas Orléans! Vive l'empereur!*" [Down with Orléans! Long live the Emperor!] But the rabble are chased onto the beach under a hail of gunfire from the Garde Nationale. Shot in the arm, Prince Bonaparte fails to reach his 'war fleet'. Sentenced to life imprisonment, he is hurled into the *cachot* [dungeon]. From *Le Journal des Débats* in Paris to *The Times* in London, the press has a field day. And the French? Louis-Napoleon is yesterday's news. They yearn for the return of their Napoleon's remains from Saint Helena. By the end of that same year, he is solemnly interred in the Cathédrale Saint-Louis-des-Invalides by King Louis-Philippe d'Orléans and his prime minister, Adolphe Thiers.

COLOPHON

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