

# RESCUING NAPOLEON FROM ST. HELENA

By Emilio Ocampo, FINS

Napoleon spent the last five years of his life as a prisoner in the island of St. Helena, in the middle of the South Atlantic. During most of this time he was confined at Longwood, his prison residence. Perhaps at no other time in his life he was so closely watched. "The least stir of Napoleon [at St. Helena] is watched like that of a volcano," reported a London newspaper in mid 1818, three years into his captivity.<sup>1</sup> In addition to all the reports regularly filed by his captors, all of Napoleon's

closest companions during this period left copious memoirs. But despite them (or maybe because of them), we still ignore what really happened at Longwood.

According to a widely held notion Napoleon accepted his retirement with resignation and spent the years in captivity building his legend. But plenty of evidence suggests that this is not the case. Napoleon's political ambition was not subdued by his captivity. And his determined followers never abandoned hopes of setting him free. I have written a book trying narrow the

scope of our ignorance on this subject and other researchers may find in some unexplored archives more documents that may shed light on this important period of Napoleon's life. In the end however, we may never know the whole truth.

"At such a distance and in such a place, all intrigue would be impossible, and being withdrawn so far from the European world, he would very soon be forgotten," Lord Liverpool confidently told his fellow cabinet ministers.<sup>2</sup>

Napoleon would be imprisoned at St. Helena, in the middle of the South Atlantic. The

forty-six square mile island was five thousand miles away from Europe, twelve hundred miles off the coast of Africa and eighteen hundred miles from northeastern Brazil. It was considered the Royal Navy almost guaranteed the impossibility of an escape or a rescue attempt. Nevertheless, Lord Liverpool's prediction turned out to be wrong.



*The fall of the one all-powerful sovereign provided plenty of fodder for contemporary political caricaturists, who took pleasure in taking shots at Napoleon and portraying the island as a rat infested hell hole. In this German caricature, Napoleon drills an army of rat soldiers on St Helena*

<sup>1</sup> The Examiner, London, 19 July 1818.

<sup>2</sup> Liverpool to Castlereagh, July 21, 1815, Castlereagh, *Memoirs*, 10: 415.



*Google Earth image of St Helena*

Most contemporary historians have not given the plans to rescue Napoleon much consideration when writing about his years at St. Helena. Generally they mention them in passing as amusing anecdotes or dismiss them outright. But this neglect is contradicted by the official documents of England, Spain, France and Austria, the powers most interested in keeping Napoleon locked up. The French and Spanish Bourbons feared the most the possibility of Napoleon's liberation. The former because it would threaten their stability, the latter because, as we shall see, it could threaten its most valuable possessions: the South American colonies. As to the British government, initially it viewed any plans to rescue Napoleon as chimerical but with the passage of time it became seriously concerned about such plans and took them very seriously. The United States was not a passive observer. Napoleon's popularity was high in America and many of the expeditions to rescue him from St. Helena were planned from American soil. However, the presence of the former French emperor in the New World could unleash a reaction unfavorable to the long-term territorial interests of the United States.

How all these governments reacted to the possibility of Napoleon's reappearance on the world political scene had far reaching

consequences on both sides of the Atlantic. This by itself is a subject that also deserved the attention of professional historians. But it didn't get it, as the research agenda of Napoleonic scholarship has been markedly Euro centric. Also the scope of most

historical analysis of this period tends to be geographically narrow and therefore historians failed to grasp very interesting linkages between what was happening in Old and the New World.

The British government reached an agreement with the East India Company, which had the rights over the island, to accommodate the illustrious prisoner and his considerable entourage. Only vessels of the Royal Navy or the Company would be allowed to touch port. Lord , Secretary for War and the Colonies, was charged with the safety and custody of the prisoner. Bathurst in turn appointed Lieutenant Colonel Sir Hudson Lowe to be Napoleon's guardian at St. Helena.

Despite the distance and all the precautions to prevent his escape, the world did not forget Napoleon. More importantly, the Bonapartists did not forget their leader and for the next five years and a half they tried several schemes to rescue him from his island prison. The rumors of plans to rescue Napoleon started as soon as the British government announced its decision to imprison him at St. Helena. In fact, this was the main reason why Napoleon's voyage to St. Helena took longer than usual. To approach the island at this time of the year it was generally necessary to sail along the Brazilian coast and

then tack to the east to take advantage of the strong southeasterly winds that prevailed in the South Atlantic. Admiral Cockburn, who was charged with taking the fallen emperor to his new prison, instead sailed close to Africa despite the deadly calms that made this route so unappealing. He made this decision after being warned of the presence of a dangerous privateer in Brazil that, according to rumors, would attempt to snatch his prisoner.<sup>3</sup> It was the *True Blooded Yankee*, an American privateer that had built a fearful reputation during the War of 1812 and that since early 1815 was sailing under the flag of the revolutionary government of Buenos Aires.<sup>4</sup>



*Hudson Lowe, the British Governor of St. Helena*

Rumors about plans to rescue Napoleon from St. Helena were rife until his death in May 1821. One only needs to read the newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic to notice the frequency of these rumors and how they captured the imagination of the public. Some of the rescue plans today seem completely farfetched, for example those involving an aerostat or a submarine. But it was not only rumors. Some of the schemes to liberate Napoleon reached an

<sup>3</sup> Candé-Montholon, *Journal Secret d'Albine de Montholon*, 100.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis W. Bealer, "Los Corsarios de Buenos Aires," *Publicaciones del Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, Universidad de Buenos Aires* 72, (1937), 15-18. Sonntag's original petition is in AGNA S.10-C5-A1-N2. Regarding the *True Blooded Yankee* see Maclay, *History*, 275-276, 356.

advance stage and were taken very seriously by the governments of Europe. However, before we describe in more detail some of these plans we need to make a few important points.

### Escape versus Rescue

First, we need to make an important distinction between escaping and being rescued. After Napoleon left Paris for Rochefort with the intention of immigrating to the United States, his followers proposed several schemes for him to avoid falling in the hands of his enemies. But Napoleon from the start made it very clear that he would not entertain any scheme that would require him to disguise himself or require any physical effort. He was very conscious of his own dignity and he thought that being captured as a common criminal while escaping would be demeaning. "From the sublime to the ridiculous there is only one step," Napoleon once said. To be a prisoner of the English and a political martyr could be sublime, to be captured while escaping bordered on the ridiculous.

Napoleon maintained the same attitude while at St. Helena. He made this very clear at the end of 1815, when he first confronted the possibility of escaping. It is not clear how seriously he considered the scheme and whether he would have actually escaped. What is clear though is that it put Napoleon's life in danger. This episode left a big impression on Napoleon, who imagined the reaction that the news of his death or injury while trying to escape would cause in Europe. It would be an indignity worse than being imprisoned at St. Helena. Even though he was a prisoner, he was still an Emperor. He would never attempt to escape and risk death or capture or "attempt anything where concealment or disguise or bodily exertion were required." If he left St. Helena, he would do it "with his hat on his head and his sword at his side" as befitted his status.<sup>5</sup> This means that either the British government set him free or his followers rescued him by invading the island.

There is some strong evidence that Napoleon considered both alternatives. In his view, a political solution was possible "if the Jacobins

<sup>5</sup> Fox, *The Journal*, 83.

become masters of Europe” or if Princess Charlotte succeeded George III as Queen of England, bypassing her father, the Prince Regent.<sup>6</sup>

### Invading St. Helena?

Regarding an invasion of St. Helena we need to emphasize several related points. First, it wasn’t such a farfetched idea. Invading the island was a daunting enterprise but Napoleon had faced worse odds in his military career. At first sight the island seemed impregnable. Its coast looked like a massive wall of black rock with very few points where an army could land. This is the reason why Admiral Cockburn, who was first charged with guarding Napoleon, felt “quite confident” of being able to ensure “the safe custody” his prisoner.<sup>7</sup> But Cockburn’s confidence was misplaced.

However, since being discovered by the Portuguese in 1502, St. Helena had been invaded several times. In 1673 the Dutch challenged its occupation by the East India Company’s by landing an army on the island’s western side, at the end of Lemon’s Valley. Repulsed, they landed at Bennet’s Point, climbed up Swanley Valley and successfully captured Jamestown. The following year a British expedition led by Sir Robert Munden succeeded in retaking the island. This time the invading forces landed at Prosperous Bay, only a mile away from Longwood Valley, which would be the seat of Napoleon’s residence.<sup>8</sup> It was Colonel Wilks, the acting governor of St. Helena, who warned Cockburn there were at least fourteen points around the island where an army could land.<sup>9</sup> Sir Hudson Lowe later confirmed they were twenty-three.

Second, Napoleon was quite familiar with the logistical and tactical challenges that an invasion of St. Helena involved, as in 1804 he devoted significant time to planning such an invasion. Although the vast distances from the mainland

and the difficulties of landing an army weakened the odds of success, unlike the islands of Malta and Capri, St. Helena did not have a fortress. All that was needed was surprise and overwhelming force, as several previous invasions by Dutch and British forces had proved. Back then Napoleon’s objective had been to use the island as a base to launch raids against East Indiamen returning from Asia. An expedition that included a squadron of four frigates and two brigs escorting two transport vessels carrying 1,600 men left France to accomplish this objective but failed due to the timidity and incompetence of its commander.<sup>10</sup> The successful invasion of Capri in 1804 offered another precedent. With its steep, rocky cliffs and inaccessible coastline, the island resembled St. Helena. And Sir Hudson Lowe had been in charge of Capri’s defense when French troops led by General Lamarque had successfully invaded the island in 1808. Lowe had 2,300 men to defend the island, roughly the same number stationed at St. Helena. Lamarque only had 1,800 men but counted on the element of surprise. Against all odds he succeeded.<sup>11</sup>

Another important point is that Napoleon would not simply accept to be rescued by anybody. There were too many risks involved, treason and the possibility of being entrapped being the most obvious. Poor execution was an equally important consideration. Joseph Bonaparte had successfully escaped to the United States and had a vast fortune at his disposal. As Napoleon’s oldest brother and de facto leader of the Bonapartist faction he would have to be involved in any rescue plans. This meant financing an expedition to St. Helena but not planning or leading it as his military talents were limited (a detail Napoleon never failed to emphasize). Also, if invading St. Helena was an option, Napoleon would have to approve the invasion plan and maybe even design it himself. He only needed to update his own plans of 1804. The invaders would need fast sailing ships and good sailors. It would be easy for Joseph to find

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<sup>6</sup> November 5, 1815, Gourgaud, *Journal*, 1: 72.

<sup>7</sup> Cockburn to Croker, October 22, 1815, BL Mss Add 20199 SHLP, f.43.

<sup>8</sup> T. H. Brooke, *History of the Island of St. Helena* (London: Kingsbury, 1824), 71-72.

<sup>9</sup> Wilks to Cockburn, no date, BL Mss Add 20115 SHLP, f.44.

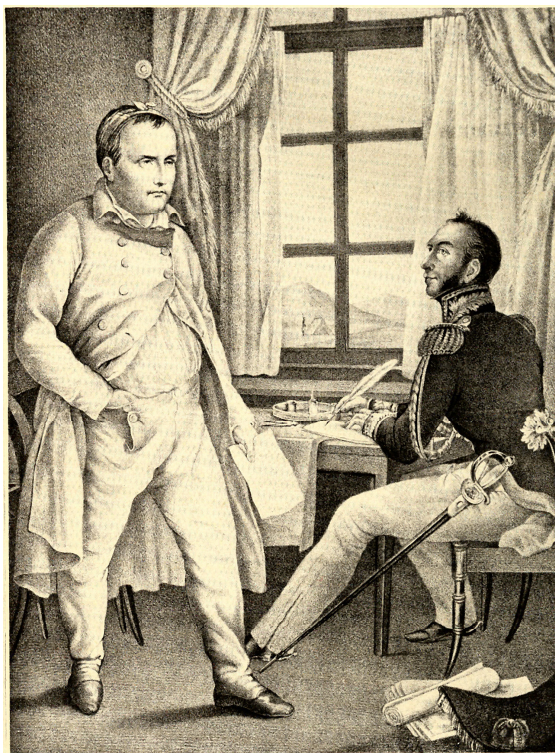
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<sup>10</sup> Napoleon to Decres, September 29, 1804, *Correspondance de Napoléon avec le Ministre de la Marine*, 1: 20. Also in Napoleon, *Correspondance*, 9: 551-555. Donatello Grieco, *Napoleão e o Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Biblioteca do Exercito Editora, 1995), 50-51.

<sup>11</sup> Raoul Brice, *Les Espoirs de Napoleon a Sainte-Helene* (Paris: Payot, 1938), 176-179.



them in the United States. Any rescue expedition would also need a good naval commander. Although there were many able and loyal French officers, it would be easier for an American or British officer to fool the Royal Navy cruisers guarding St. Helena. With the end of the war, there would be plenty of candidates. Perhaps Joseph could convince Lord Thomas Cochrane, who had been treated so shabbily by the British government, or maybe Commodore Stephen Decatur, the American naval hero. Joseph also had to pick a good general to lead the invasion. General Bertrand Clausel, who also immigrated to the United States, was an excellent candidate. Napoleon thought his talents were superior to those of any of his marshals when it came to planning and executing complex military operations.<sup>12</sup>



NAPOLEON DICTATING TO GOURGAUD

From a lithograph after Steuben

### The South American Connection

If we accept the notion that Napoleon seriously considered the possibility of being rescued where would his rescuers take him after

leaving St. Helena? Europe was not an option, given the political situation immediately following Waterloo. The United States was a possibility but a risky one, particularly as following the Treaty of Ghent, the Madison administration was seeking to mend its relationship with England.

This brings us to another strand of research that has been neglected by historians: the linkages between Napoleon's rescue plans and the revolution in the Spanish colonies. Whether true or false, the rumor about *True Blooded Yankee*, the Buenos Aires privateer manned by American sailors, highlighted this connection. This is not simply a coincidence. The plans to rescue Napoleon had a considerable impact on the independence of the Spanish colonies.

Among the powers of Europe, only Napoleonic France had openly supported the independence of these colonies. In fact since invading Spain in 1808, Napoleon had tried to help the South American rebels on several occasions.

Napoleon believed Spanish America offered the Bonaparte dynasty a great opportunity to recover the political power and prestige lost at Waterloo. After he abdicated he told his family that America "was the only place where our children can succeed."<sup>13</sup> He also hinted at his real intentions to his secretary. If the Americans didn't want him, he told him he would go "to Mexico" and put himself at the head of the patriots. And if the Mexicans didn't want him, he would go to Caracas, and "if I do not find myself well received there, I will go to Buenos Aires!" His secretary politely observed that the South American insurgents already had their leaders and would not welcome him with open arms but Napoleon dismissed these concerns.<sup>14</sup>

The truth is that by the end of 1815, when Napoleon arrived in St. Helena, the insurrection against Spain had failed everywhere except in Buenos Aires. With the exception of Port-au-Prince in Haiti, no other major port south of New

<sup>12</sup> Extracts of Admiral Cockburn's Diary, Edward Creasy, *Dramatic Incidents in the Life of Napoleon Bonaparte* (New York, 1892), 3: 100.

<sup>13</sup> Hortense de Beauharnais, *The Memoirs of Queen Hortense*, edited by Prince Napoleon (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1928), 2: 193.

<sup>14</sup> Pierre Alexander Fleury de Chaboulon, *Memoirs of the Private Life of Napoleon* (London: J. Murray, 1820), 2: 294-296.

Orleans was free from the control of a European power except Buenos Aires. This made this city an ideal base not only for any expedition to rescue Napoleon but also as a beachhead for any campaign to build a new Bonapartist empire in the Spanish colonies. Not surprisingly, over the next few years the city became a haven for exiled Bonapartists, most of them veterans of the Grande Armée who joined the patriot army. And many rumored expeditions to rescue Napoleon had Buenos Aires as their base. It is clear that the best option after rescuing Napoleon was to bring him into one of the newly liberated Spanish colonies after his supporters had seized control of the revolution.

### **A new Bonapartist empire in America?**

We need to remember that after Waterloo, a marshal of the Empire and ten generals of the *Grande Armée* reached American soil. In addition, hundreds of officers and sub-officers also emigrated to North and South America. Under good leadership, they were excellent raw material with which one could easily build a powerful army. There was a clear opportunity to take over the revolution in South America as the patriots lacked officers with experience to lead their armies to victory. There is plenty of evidence supporting the hypothesis that Napoleon wanted Joseph to build a new Bonapartist empire in Spanish America.

Napoleon believed in this plan. In fact when he learned that his brother Joseph was safe in the United States, he said: "If I were in his [Joseph's] place, I would build a great empire in all of Spanish America."<sup>15</sup> He assured one of his companions in captivity that Joseph had all the money he needed to accomplish such an ambitious plan.<sup>16</sup> Napoleon believed Ferdinand VII was a "fool and coward" who would due to his "bigoted misconduct" inevitably lose all of Spain's colonies in America.<sup>17</sup> In his opinion, with an army of five thousand men led by his best generals and the help and support of the patriot leaders, the entire continent could be quickly under Joseph's control. The Spaniards would not

be able to stop him. And in contrast to that bloody war in Spain, where the people had fought against him, in America they would rally in his support and see him as a liberator from Spanish despotism.

To conquer the Spanish colonies Joseph only had to follow a plan proposed to Napoleon by Colonel Aaron Burr in 1810. This plan contemplated seizing the Spanish port of Pensacola in West Florida, the only natural harbor in the Gulf of Mexico that could berth large ships carrying troops and supplies from Europe. Florida would then serve as the launching pad to attack Veracruz, the gateway to Mexico, and eventually the rest of South America.<sup>18</sup> As Burr had pointed out, the invaders would be welcomed by the locals, as it would not be a conquest "but only the taking of them away from the Spanish domination."<sup>19</sup> The next step after occupying Florida was to cut the communications between Mexico and Peru, by taking the fortress of Portobello on the Isthmus of Panama. Once in control of Portobello, Napoleon's generals could sail down the Pacific coast, and following the footsteps of Francisco Pizarro, conquer Peru, the former Incan Empire. Alternatively or in parallel, Peru's conquest could be attempted from Chile. Then Joseph could sell Florida to the United States for \$2 million, as Napoleon had proposed to Madison in 1811.<sup>20</sup> It wasn't such a crazy idea. Madison was still president; the United States still coveted the Floridas and a deal with Joseph could avoid a war with Spain. Joseph in turn could use the proceeds to finance the creation of a new empire in the Spanish colonies. And if Madison didn't agree, Joseph could offer Florida to England in exchange for Napoleon's freedom.

Joseph clearly could not lead such an ambitious enterprise. But he could choose a military leader among Grouchy, Clausel, Brayer, Lallemand, Vandamme or Lefebvre-Desnouettes. All of them reached America safely. We know for a fact that Joseph asked Napoleon for instructions

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<sup>15</sup> January 18, 1816. Montholon, *Récits*, 1: 210.

<sup>16</sup> January 18, 1816, Gourgaud, *Journal*, 1: 102.

<sup>17</sup> Extracts of Admiral Cockburn's Diary, Creasy, *Dramatic Incidents*, 70-71, 95.

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<sup>18</sup> This was the same spot from which Hernan Cortes had started his conquest of Mexico in 1519.

<sup>19</sup> Burr, *Political Correspondence*, 2: 1111.

<sup>20</sup> The transaction had never been closed due to the disastrous campaign in Russia and the end of Bonapartist rule in Spain.

on how to respond to the offers made to him by the patriots of Mexico and other parts of Spanish America to lead the revolution.<sup>21</sup> Napoleon thought Joseph would refuse these offers. "Although possessing the mind, talents, and all the qualities necessary to make a nation happy," his brother loved "his liberty and the enjoyments of social life too much to have any wish to launch into the storms of royalty for a second time." Joseph was not the right man to lead the conquest or liberation of the Spanish colonies, he had a good head but "did not like to work." Besides, he knew nothing about the military profession.<sup>22</sup> "Surely he has a big fortune, maybe 20 million francs,<sup>23</sup>" he told one of his companions at St. Helena. "But he is wrong to mix himself up in a revolution. To succeed it is necessary to be much more wicked than he is, to have better brains and not to be afraid to chop some heads. His personality is too mellow. On the other hand he has a lot of ambition and believes on his own capabilities and resources. A crown is a big temptation and he can count on the French officers who are with him in America. Maybe it is better for England to separate the colonies from Spain. However, a Frenchman ruling there seems too much." Napoleon's wishes were clear. "If I am told that he has succeeded, I would reply that I am very happy," he said. "I have been told he will tempt his fortune, which concerns me." At the beginning of 1817, Napoleon was clearly in South America. After receiving news from Joseph he unfolded his maps of South America on the billiard table and after careful study, he said: "We would be so happy in Buenos Aires!"<sup>24</sup>

Napoleon also told Count Bertrand that doing so would not only be useful to himself but also "to those unfortunate people, by saving them from the calamities of a long civil war." He thought the objective was within reach, as he estimated Joseph could count on at least 15,000 veterans of the Grande Armée. "If he has only a third, even only two thousand, and among them officers of artillery, logistics and cavalry, it would still be enough," he said. "The officers make the

troops; with them, he can aid the Mexicans, who by themselves would be worth nothing."<sup>25</sup>

Napoleon believed that a Bonapartist enclave in America would attract the most talented people in the world, who "would provide a sound refutation to the system that currently rules Europe." He told Las Cases that if he had reached America as he had planned after abdicating the throne, he would have founded the core of "a new homeland." Napoleon joked that in this new American empire Count Las Cases could have ruled over Venezuela.<sup>26</sup> "I would have loved to realize this dream," he said more seriously, "It would have brought me new glory."<sup>27</sup>

Napoleon also recognized that his presence in America "would be of an immense interest to our poor France, it would stop the royal reaction. I would be the nightmare of the King." On the other hand, he knew that it would be better for his son if he remained at St. Helena. "My martyrdom will return him the crown of France."<sup>28</sup>

### The Rationale behind the American Empire

Napoleon had a vested interest in Joseph's success. He believed a Bonapartist empire in the Spanish colonies would be "very advantageous to England, because she would acquire all the commerce of Spanish America," as trading with Bourbon Spain or France would be out of the question. And Joseph "would avail himself of these new means to obtain from the English ministers some change in my position."<sup>29</sup> Napoleon's speculations about the attitude England would take towards Joseph's rule in Spanish America were not far fetched. He strongly believed the British government was chiefly guided by commercial interest. Trade with the Spanish colonies was crucial to the

<sup>21</sup> March 1817, Montholon, *Récits*, 2: 97.

<sup>22</sup> January 30, 1817, *Ibid.*, 2: 63.

<sup>23</sup> Five francs were roughly equivalent to one dollar.

<sup>24</sup> January 30, 1817, Gourgaud, *Journal*, 1: 305.

<sup>25</sup> February 2, 1817, Bertrand, *Cahiers*, 1: 193.

<sup>26</sup> Napoleon's comment was a pun on the similarity of Las Cases' name with that of fray Bartolome de las Casas, a Spanish priest that denounced the treatment of the American natives by the conquistadors and attempted to create an experimental colonial enclave in Venezuela, the province of Orinoco.

<sup>27</sup> May 26, 1816, Las Cases, *Memorial*, 1: 685-686.

<sup>28</sup> May 25, 1816, Montholon, *Récits*, 1: 286.

<sup>29</sup> February 2, 1817, Bertrand, *Cahiers*, 1: 193.

British economy, particularly in the current recession. As long as Spain ruled the colonies, British merchants would never be able to obtain any significant commercial advantages. Napoleon reasoned that it would be much better for England to have Joseph ruling the Spanish colonies than Ferdinand VII. A "nation of shopkeepers" would not oppose a scheme that offered greater commercial prospects.

Napoleon thought the situation in England was unsustainable and would lead to popular unrest and perhaps a revolution. He blamed this state of affairs entirely on the "imbecility" of Lord Castlereagh. "If your ministers had paid attention to the interests of the country instead of intriguing they would have rendered you the most happy and the most flourishing nation in the world," he told Doctor Barry O'Meara. "The Spaniards, like other nations, are jealous of a people all-powerful at sea [England] and will constantly assist to lessen that power; which is most effectually to be done by lessening your commerce."<sup>30</sup> Napoleon believed that having Joseph as King of Mexico "would be of great advantage to England, as you would have all the commerce of Spanish America." In his view, Joseph "would not, and indeed could not, trade with either France or Spain for evident reasons and South America cannot do without importing immense quantities of European goods. By having me in your hands, you could always make advantageous terms with Joseph, who loves me sincerely and would do anything for me."<sup>31</sup> Days later he told his doctor that Castlereagh and Liverpool "would have done better to have left me upon the throne. I would have given the English great commercial advantages which the Bourbons dare not offer."<sup>32</sup>

To summarize, we will never know whether Napoleon seriously considered becoming the ruler of a new Bonapartist empire in America. But we know that in politics he was the ultimate opportunist. If his supporters managed to deliver him an American throne on a silver plate, he would have probably taken it. And if Joseph became king of Mexico it would have equally served his purposes, as it would have given him

enormous leverage with which to negotiate with his captors. The only thing that mattered to Napoleon was power. During the first three years of captivity it seemed as if it would be easier to acquire it in Spanish America. Starting in 1819, Europe again offered him an opportunity.

### **The Political Impact of Napoleon's Liberation**

Until his death on 5 May 1821, Napoleon exerted enormous influence over the political affairs of the Old and the New Worlds. Even if the plans to rescue him had been simply imaginary, the fact is that possibility animated the spirit of his devoted followers. And this created dangerous political crosscurrents throughout Europe.

Beginning in 1819, the political situation in Europe started to change in a dramatic way. Suddenly, England and Austria realized that the fears of the Spanish and French Bourbons concerning Napoleon's safety were not delusional or paranoid. The Austrian government became increasingly concerned as revolutionary stirrings reached Italy. Metternich saw Napoleon's hand behind the uprising in Spain and Naples and the revolutionary movements spreading all over Italy. And even if Napoleon wasn't directly involved, his followers undoubtedly were, and as long as he lived they would hope and fight for his return. Even in Spain, which had steadfastly resisted Bonapartist rule "a great change" had taken place in public opinion and Napoleon was becoming a popular figure.<sup>33</sup>

Luis de Onís, Spanish ambassador in the United States, expressed these fears in most of his diplomatic dispatches to Madrid. For Spain what was at stake was control over a vast American empire. And by the time Napoleon was shipped to St. Helena the revolutionary threat seemed under control. In Onís' view, only Napoleon could give new strength to the rebel cause. Onís

<sup>30</sup> December 8, 1816, *Ibid.*, 1: 260-262.

<sup>31</sup> January 30, 1817, *Ibid.*, 1: 360.

<sup>32</sup> February 23, 1817, *Ibid.*, 1: 422.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Blaquiére, *An Historical Review of the Spanish Revolution* (London, 1822), 120. Regarding the resurgence of Bonapartism in Spain see Irene Castells Olivan and Jordi Roca Vernet, "Napoleón y el mito del Héroe Romántico. Su proyección en España (1815-1831)," *Hispania Nova Revista de Historia Contemporánea* 4 (2004). [http://hispanianova.rediris.es/4/articulos/04\\_001.htm](http://hispanianova.rediris.es/4/articulos/04_001.htm).



learned about expeditions to rescue the fallen emperor as early as February 1816, only four months into his captivity at St. Helena.

Almost from the moment he was appointed France's primer minister, the Duke of Richelieu feared that Napoleon's rescue from St. Helena, which was reportedly being organized in America, could plunge France into a civil war.<sup>34</sup> Richelieu's conviction that a vast Bonapartist conspiracy was afoot was reinforced by a report from his ambassador in the United States suggesting that Joseph, Grouchy and Clausel were on their way to Mexico. Richelieu asked his ambassador in London to alert the British government:

*Given the presumption that an expedition could be launched to release Buonaparte no precaution would be too costly to prevent it. This rock in the middle of the Atlantic is a point on which we always have to keep our sights fixed. It would be nice to say that he has lost all support in France. I would like to believe this, but I will never be foolish enough to test this assumption and I wouldn't want for anything in this world to learn that he is free.*<sup>35</sup>

Richelieu's warning coincided with the publication of a report published in a London newspaper about three expeditions that had "sailed from South America and from the United States for the purpose of carrying off Buonaparte from St. Helena."<sup>36</sup>

Many years after Napoleon's death Lord Bathurst admitted that as long as Napoleon lived "the large body of the discontented in France (and indeed elsewhere) had a rallying point to look to and there could be no doubt that his escape would at any time have been followed by a fearful result."<sup>37</sup>

By the fall of 1820, the political situation in Europe had become so unstable that those who in 1815 had favored Napoleon's execution instead

of his exile felt vindicated. The events in England, France, Spain, Portugal and more particularly in Italy "rendered the safe custody of Napoleon a matter of even more political importance than it had been at any time since his fall" as his escape could have the "most formidable" consequences.<sup>38</sup> At the end of September, Lord Bathurst sent Lowe his most serious warning since sending Napoleon to St. Helena:

*The reports which you have recently made of the conduct of General Buonaparte and of his followers make me suspect that he is beginning to entertain serious thoughts of escaping from St. Helena and the accounts which he will have since received of what is passing in Europe will not fail to encourage this project. The overthrow of the Neapolitan Government, the revolutionary spirit which more or less prevails over all Italy, and the doubtful state of France itself, must excite his attention and clearly show that a crisis is fast approaching, if not already arrived, when his escape would be productive of important consequences. That his partisans are active cannot be doubted; and if he were ever willing to hazard the attempt, he will never allow such an opportunity to escape. You will therefore exert all your attention in watching his proceedings, and call upon the Admiral to use his utmost vigilance, as upon the navy so much must ultimately depend. In what shape and in what manner this attempt will be made, I cannot judge, but I am satisfied this storm will not pass over unnoticed at Longwood. General Buonaparte has money at [his] command, he has partisans in abundance, he has means of communication which your regulations may occasionally intercept but cannot entirely prevent; the times are most favorable for the attempt; and, without thinking that he habitually courts a hazardous enterprise, I cannot persuade myself that he will shrink from one which, if successful, must now promise such important results.*

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<sup>34</sup> French ambassador to Richelieu, Madrid, April 22, 1816, AMAE CPEU, N<sup>o</sup>73, f.20 and Richelieu to Osmond, July 5, 1816, Richelieu, *Lettres*, 46.

<sup>35</sup> Richelieu to Osmond, September 12, 1816, Richelieu, *Lettres*, 62.

<sup>36</sup> *The Anti-Gallican Monitor*, London, September 29, 1816.

<sup>37</sup> Bathurst to Sir Walter Scott, July 2, 1827, Sir Walter Scott's Papers, National Library of Scotland.

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<sup>38</sup> Scott, *Life of Napoleon*, 9: 287.

Bathurst ordered Lowe to review “all the different ways by which Buonaparte may attempt his escape, and the best means therefore of preventing it.”<sup>39</sup> The British government even took a plot to rescue Napoleon with a submarine. Apparently more than six thousand *louis d’or*<sup>40</sup> were spent by some determined Bonapartists on the construction of the submarine.<sup>41</sup>

By the end of 1820 rumors of Napoleon’s escape were rife. At the end of November, *The Times* reported that they produced “a fall of half per cent in French stock.”<sup>42</sup> And as the revolutionary fever spread throughout the continent, concerns about Napoleon’s perfidious influence increased. Metternich realized that Austria’s control over Italy was at stake and invited all the European sovereigns to the city of Troppau to discuss what to do. Metternich believed it was all Napoleon’s fault. During the Hundred Days he had destroyed “the work of fourteen years during which he had exercised his authority” and had “set free the Revolution which he came to France to subdue.”<sup>43</sup>

The meeting at Troppau took place in October. Since France and England refused to participate, only Austria, Russia and Prussia were represented. No decisions were taken with



Lord Bathurst

respect to Spain but Austria, Russia and Prussia signed a treaty by which if any European monarchy was threatened by revolution, they would agree “by peaceful means, or if need be, by arms, to bring back the guilty state into the bosom of the Great Alliance.” It was a big coup for Metternich, who got a free hand to send Austrian troops to quash the rebels in Piedmont and Naples. All parties agreed to meet again in early 1821 at Laibach to discuss a specific action plan for Spain. The message from Troppau was clear: Napoleon was the “the representative of the Revolution” and the one to blame for Europe’s troubles and any revolutionary attempt to disturb the status quo would be crushed with force by Austria and Russia.<sup>44</sup>

### The Measures Taken to Prevent Napoleon’s Liberation

The fears of an escape or rescue attempt, prompted the British government to establish severe restrictions on Napoleon’s movements at St. Helena and his contact with the outside world. Under Admiral Cockburn’s watch, Napoleon’s movements were limited to a perimeter marked by the road leading to Alarm House, a house called Miss Mason’s and to sentry posts on the plains of Longwood and Deadwood.<sup>45</sup> If the prisoner wanted to visit any other part of the island, he had to be escorted by an English officer. Nobody could enter or leave Longwood’s enclosure after sunset. All

<sup>39</sup> Bathurst to Lowe, 30 September 1820, Forsyth, *History of the Captivity*, 3: 250-251.

<sup>40</sup> This was roughly equivalent to 12,000 francs, or approximately £9,000.

<sup>41</sup> Montholon, *Récits*, 2: 434.

<sup>42</sup> *The Times*, London, November 20, 1820.

<sup>43</sup> Metternich to Tsar Alexander, February 15, 1820, Clement von Metternich, *Memoirs of Prince Metternich* (London: R.Bentley, 1880-82), 3: 462.

<sup>44</sup> Dominique Georges Frédéric de Riom de Prolhiac de Fourt de Pradt, *Europe and America in 1821* (London, 1822), 1: 214.

<sup>45</sup> Memorandum of Colonel Wilks, no date, BL Mss Add 20115 SHLP, f.44.

communications had to be screened by the governor or Lord Bathurst. Guns were used to send special messages. During Napoleon's captivity, a cannon was fired to announce dawn and sunset and also to announce the arrival of any ship at Jamestown.<sup>46</sup> A nearby telegraph station, which linked with the island's efficient telegraph system, provided additional security. And as if this was not enough, Admiral Cockburn sent a detachment of marines to Ascension, an island 700 miles northwest of St. Helena that had been regularly used by American privateers during the recent war, to remove the facilities "which the said island might afford to persons desirous of effecting the escape of Napoleon Bonaparte."<sup>47</sup>

Shortly after arriving in St. Helena Admiral Cockburn suspected that a rescue plan was afoot and sent a detachment of marines to Ascension with orders to occupy the island and resist "any sudden attempt of any persons of any station whatsoever to dispossess you" and prevent "any nation desirous of effecting the escape of Napoleon Buonaparte from possessing themselves of that island, thereby to procure shelter for the shipping they might employ on such errand and otherwise to afford them facilities for such undertaking." Cockburn's orders emphasized that "if general Bonaparte or any of the French persons who accompanied him hither, and in the event of him,

or any of them being discovered in any such vessels or boat, to take forcibly if necessary him, or them as the case may be, on board His Majesty's ship for the purpose of them being conveyed back to St. Helena unless they produce a certificate from under my hand."<sup>48</sup> When the

marines disembarked at Ascension they realized that Cockburn's suspicions were not unfounded. A message on the beach said: "May the Emperor Napoleon lives forever!"<sup>49</sup>

And when Sir Hudson Lowe arrived in St. Helena to take over as Napoleon's guardian he imposed even stricter security measures. Lowe had been warned in London that an officer serving in the island's garrison had Jacobin ideas and also that the strong winds prevalent at St. Helena "would very quickly carry a small boat (obtained and easily launched with connivance) over to the Spanish settlement now so much disturbed of South America."<sup>50</sup> Lowe took this warning

seriously. If Napoleon escaped, it would be the end of his career.

At the end of 1816 Lowe intercepted a letter from Count Las Cases to Lucien which caught his attention:

*You will ask me maybe if it is possible to escape from our rock? The military men and the sailors think it is almost impossible; but they also agree that the rigorous measures and the harassments of every kind that we have to endure do not alter*



Admiral Cockburn

<sup>46</sup> Ken Denholm, *From signal gun to satellite: a history of communications on the island of St Helena* (Jamestown, 2001), 8-9.

<sup>47</sup> Secret Orders for St. Helena, ADM 2/1382 f.296.

<sup>48</sup> Cockburn to Roberts, St. Helena, March 14, 1816, NA ADM 1/67.

<sup>49</sup> March 17, 1816, Las Cases, *Memorial*, 1: 470.

<sup>50</sup> Torrens to Lowe, Horse Guards, September 11, 1815, BL Mss Add 20114 SHLP, f.240.

*the probabilities. Having answered that escape is almost impossible, it remains to ask what does the Emperor want? At first we have to consider the insuperable difficulties of attempting an escape, then, where to go? Wouldn't the ocean become a second prison? Aren't all of Europe, Africa, India, and almost all of the Americas closed to him? The Emperor is and remains today positively in the same frame of mind, the same position, and has the same wishes he had at the island of Aix. At that time he wanted to go to America and retire on the shores of the Mississippi or the Ohio or to take asylum in England.*<sup>51</sup>

Although the letter did not seem to have any details of an escape plan, Lowe thought it was not "entirely free from incitement to have it attempted."<sup>52</sup> Other evidence also confirmed the existence of plots to rescue his prisoner. Worried that certain locals were involved, Lowe published edicts all over Jamestown announcing that Parliament had passed a resolution "adjudging capital punishment" to anybody found guilty of assisting in Napoleon's escape.<sup>53</sup> Among the evidence that troubled Lowe was a letter addressed to Count Bertrand that had been intercepted. The letter, which had no date but was postmarked in London, provided Bertrand with detailed instructions for effecting Napoleon's escape. "It will depend on circumstances what port in the United States His Majesty will land at, but he may depend upon the most cordial and fraternal reception," wrote the mysterious correspondent. The Americans adored Napoleon "as a deity" and "to remedy his loss of France they will seize on all South America." Then Spain and Portugal would be invaded, and once this was accomplished, the French Bourbons would fall. "There is not the least doubt but the exalted hero will have greater fleets & army than ever." The strange letter was signed "L. Meu."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Las Cases to Lucien Bonaparte, November 1816, Forsyth, *History of the Captivity*, 1: 476-485.

<sup>52</sup> Lowe to Bathurst, December 3, 1816, BL Mss Add 20117 SHLP, f.97

<sup>53</sup> Proclamation of Sir Hudson Lowe, St. Helena, June 12, 1816, BL Mss Loan 57/42 Bathurst Papers, f.54 and John Barnes, *A tour through the Island of St. Helena* (London: J.M.Richardson, 1817), 206.

<sup>54</sup> BL Mss Add 20204 SHLP, f.9.

Another intercepted letter was addressed directly to Napoleon and advised him to "exert yourself to the utmost to get away before the new regulations take place or else your situation will be most critical. I told Bertrand all about the methods and sent him everything for your use. Be circumspect and everything will go well. God grant you speedy release is the sincere wish of your never failing friend." The whole thing was bizarre.<sup>55</sup> Why would anybody send details of such plans through the Post Office? Also, it is hard to imagine that Napoleon would agree to climb down a cliff using a rope. Was this the plan he had discarded a few days earlier? Was it a joke? Was Napoleon trying to torment his guardian? Whatever it was, it intensified Lowe's paranoia.

It was at this time, mid July, that Lowe received a dispatch from Lord Bathurst warning him about an attempt to rescue Napoleon from Brazil:

*We have information that the crew of the notorious privateer, called the True Blooded Yankee are at Bahia. They are buccaneers of the most enterprising and desperate character. Men of all countries though the great proportion are Americans. The captain is named Sonntag, probably a German. There are some Italians, and they live at the house of an Italian who keeps the café at St. Salvador and this man's wife it is stated resides at St. Helena. All these adventurers are full of schemes as well as wishes to effect the release of Buonaparte; and they seem to be much favored by the American consul at Bahia. The Italian tavern keeper has lately endeavored to get a passage to St. Helena under the pretext of visiting his wife. The [American] consul is shipping presents of oranges for Bonaparte. One of the principal officers of the privateer lives in the consuls' house. In the meantime the crew are kept together and appear to have no employment but in their design to assist Napoleon.*

Bathurst suspected that some of Napoleon's money supported these adventurers, who "talked of fitting out a schooner or two and it was

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<sup>55</sup> Lowe to Cockburn, Plantation House, June 2, 1816, and enclosed letter, BL Mss Add 20115 SHLP, ff.183-185. Lord Rosebery thought these letters were "silly" and blamed Lowe for taking them seriously. Archibald Primrose, Lord Rosebery, *Napoleon: The Last Phase* (London: Harper, 1901), 133.



believed they meant to send one to Tristan da Cunha and keep one cruising at a certain distance from St. Helena as a point to which Napoleon might steer if he could be apprized of their intentions and could contrive to push off in a boat.”<sup>56</sup> A plan very similar to the one described by Fanny Bertrand.

Although the scheme seemed farfetched, Bathurst thought it deserved attention, as there “could not be fitter instruments” for its execution than “these desperate adventurers who are good seamen withal and responsible to no government [for] their actions.” Among other things Bathurst recommended using “the strictest vigilance with regard to vessels,” particularly American schooners, sailing between St. Helena and Brazil. He also ordered Lowe to occupy Tristan da Cunha, an island 1,200

miles to the south of St. Helena which could be used as a base of operations. “If the Americans should have anticipated you in the occupation of Tristan da Cunha, you will feel how doubly necessary the strictest vigilance will become.”<sup>57</sup>

Lowe also advised the British consul in Rio de Janeiro to be especially vigilant of any American adventurers as he had “been made acquainted of some designs that had been formed by a set of desperadoes who were formerly the crew of an American privateer to use some efforts for the liberation of Bonaparte.”<sup>58</sup> Bathurst’s warning prompted Lowe to assess the state of the island’s defenses against a possible invasion. His conclusion was disheartening:

<sup>56</sup> Bunbury to Lowe, London, May 4, 1816, BL Mss Add 20115 SHLP f.109.

<sup>57</sup> Bunbury to Lowe, London, May 4, 1816, BL Mss Add 20115 SHLP f.109.

<sup>58</sup> Lowe to Chamberlain, August 6, 1816, BL Mss Add 20155 SHLP, f.381.

*The general idea that has been presented of this island is, that it is as impregnable a post as Gibraltar, Malta or any other regularly fortified place, but how this term can be applied to an island of twenty-eight miles circumference, within which there is no regular fortress or fort whatever and only sea batteries I am really at a loss to understand except if it is founded on the idea of the inaccessibility of the coast and of the difficulty which may be opposed to boats approaching those parts which are accessible. I have recently visited in minute detail every one of those points. I have been struck as every other*



*Napoleon on St. Helena Island*

*person has been with the extreme difficulty of landing at any part of them and I consider the island to be altogether as strong a post as nature alone ever formed, considering its extent, but there are still various parts where, by particular*

*waiting for a lull of fine weather, and bringing a powerful fire from ships of war and gun boats, or rather men of war's boats armed as such, it would not be impossible for a very active and enterprising enemy to force a landing if there was not a sufficient number of troops at hand to oppose him.*

During his inspection, Lowe found no less than 23 points where an invading force could land. In his view, the best landing spots were James’ Valley, Rupert’s Valley, Lemon Valley, Sandy Bay and Prosperous Bay. He wasn’t concerned about the first four being taken if he had enough troops to defend them but worried about Prosperous Bay, which was dangerously close to Longwood. Lowe thought it was an ideal landing spot for an invasion as it had “no line of defenses, its strength principally consists in the difficulty of ascent from it. It is however by no means impracticable.” Lowe warned that an attack on St. Helena would be “made in a very sudden manner, and by a very powerful armament, such as might possibly sail from some

of the ports of France in the event of any new revolutionary movement in that country."<sup>59</sup>

As paranoid as he was, Lowe couldn't have imagined that soon after giving his assurances to Bathurst, an English captain proposed to take Napoleon to the United States in exchange for a million dollars. Montholon refused to provide any details about this plan to avoid compromising "the political existence of men to which I owe recognition." Both he and Gourgaud thought the plan had good chances of success but Napoleon refused to consider it.<sup>60</sup> He had decided he would only leave the island with "his hat on his head and his sword on his side."

From London he received reports of a rescue plan involving an American privateer who was reportedly "equipping a fast sailing vessel in the Hudson River for the express purpose of facilitating the escape of General Bonaparte."<sup>61</sup> Sightings of a suspicious ship sailing close to St. Helena confirmed Lowe's worst fears. At being sighted, the ship had "hailed down the English colors and hoisted a blue, white and blue flag with a pendant of the same colors." These were the colors of the rebel government of Buenos Aires. At being asked her from where she came "she answered from Buenos Aires and was bound to Gibraltar."<sup>62</sup> Was it one of the privateers that had left Baltimore months earlier under suspicion it would "attempt a coup on St. Helena to rescue Bonaparte"?<sup>63</sup>

All these rumors and reports increased Lowe's suspicions that some scheme was in progress to liberate Napoleon. To prevent it from coming to fruition, Lowe imposed stricter limits on Napoleon's movements. Within these new limits Napoleon was ordered "not to stir off the high road, not to speak to any person he met, nor to enter any house unless in the presence of a British officer who had directions to interfere

whenever he thought proper." With these measures Lowe hoped to stop clandestine communications with his supporters. However, he still believed that the risk of Napoleon escaping was unacceptably high:

*There is still a considerable period of the day (from the time the sentries are withdrawn in the morning until sunset) in which it is by no means difficult for general Bonaparte to effect his escape from the boundaries assigned as his limits... the road to the Alarm House contains a circuit of about eight miles. It is impossible so effectually to watch all their extent by sentries as to prevent his passing unperceived through some part of the line, particularly in rainy and foggy weather. The principal security therefore during the day rests in his being seen or its being ascertained by some other nearly certain means that he is in the house in the morning and at the close of the day.*<sup>64</sup>

As a result of Lowe's restrictions, Napoleon was forced to limit his movements to a very small area. If he moved off these limits "only for a few minutes any of the numerous sentinels posted on it would be fully justified in shooting him for an attempt to escape."<sup>65</sup> Despite these measures, Lowe could hardly sleep. He woke up in the middle of the night and rode to Longwood to make sure his prisoner had not escaped.<sup>66</sup>

With great zeal and energy, Lowe set out to reinforce St. Helena's defenses against a possible invasion. He must have surely remembered his experience at Capri. After a few weeks he assured Bathurst that he had taken every step to prevent the escape of his prisoner and warned that it was only "by an additional number of small cruising vessels" that the risk could be completely eliminated. To prevent someone "coming in close to the shore during the nighttime, sending in a boat, and disappearing before the morning" he considered it essential to place "a small corvette well to windward."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Lowe to Bathurst, July 9, 1816, BL Mss Add 20135 SHLP, ff.26-27.

<sup>60</sup> August 4, 1816, Montholon, *Récits*, 1: 348.

<sup>61</sup> Bathurst to Lowe, July 17, 1816, NA CO 248/2 f.54.

<sup>62</sup> Extract from the log-book of the HMS *Hope*, Henry Elliot Commander, October 12, 1816, BL Mss Add 20116 SHLP, f. 160.

<sup>63</sup> Onís to Cevallos, May 27, 1816, Philadelphia, N<sup>o</sup>72, AHN Estado 5641. Also see Bealer, "Los Corsarios de Buenos Aires," 54.

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<sup>64</sup> Lowe to Bathurst, October 11, 1816, BL Mss Add 20116 SHLP, f.139,

<sup>65</sup> O'Meara, *An Exposition*, 25-26.

<sup>66</sup> Candé-Montholon, *Journal secret d'Albine de Montholon*, 165.

<sup>67</sup> Lowe to Bunbury, July 29, 1816, William Forsyth, *History of the Captivity from the letters and journals of the late Lieut.-Gen. Sir H. Lowe, and official documents not before made public* (London: J. Murray, 1853), 1: 232-233.

According to an English captain who visited the island months later, Lowe's "vigilant arrangements by sea and on land" made it almost impossible for Napoleon "to attempt an escape without being detected." There was not "a seemingly accessible point but that a battery was established there." There were 500 officers and 2,300 soldiers plus 500 cannon stationed at Deadwood, Ladder Hill and Jamestown. Lowe also put sentries at Sandy Bay, High Peak, Lemon Valley, Egg Island and Tag Lake. The telegraph system kept him informed of everything that went on in the island. In addition, three frigates and two men of war, each carrying 20 guns, and six brigs "constantly patrolled the island's coast and surroundings."<sup>68</sup>

So why did the plans to rescue Napoleon fail? Invading St. Helena was a realistic military objective. Money was not an issue. There were plenty of fanatical supporters ready to die to accomplish this objective. Given the available evidence we can only conjecture. Below is a tentative list of plausible reasons that would explain why Napoleon was not set free.

1. Napoleon refused to consider the plans proposed by his supporters
2. Joseph's incompetence and/or lack of leadership
3. Logistical complications
4. Changing political situation on both sides of the Atlantic
5. Treason
6. Active involvement of the major powers

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<sup>68</sup> Barnes, *A tour through the Island of St. Helena*, 172.