

# The Era of Napoleon Bonaparte

Napoleon Bonaparte saw himself as the savior of Europe who carried the principles of the French Revolution (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity) to those oppressed by absolutist sovereigns. When exiled at St. Helena just before his death, he claimed that he had created European unity; however Napoleon's idea of "unity" involved conquest by himself. He once commented, "It is said that I am an ambitious man but that is not so; or at least my ambition is so closely bound to my being that they are both one and the same."

Born Napoleon Buonaparte on August 15, 1769, on the Italian island of Corsica, he was the son of Carlo Buonaparte, a flower of Pascale di Paoli, a Corsican patriot who had forced the Genovese to leave Corsica. When the French took Corsica in 1768, the elder Buonaparte stayed in Corsica rather than follow Paoli to England. Napoleon was named for a cousin who had been killed by the French. It is one of history's ironies that, had Carlo followed Paoli to England, Napoleon would have been born British.

In 1770, the French government made the Buonaparte family nobles, and Napoleon was appointed to the royal military school at Brienne, where he entered in 1779. There he was mocked by other students because of his strong Corsican accent and his humble origins. This treatment may have been a factor in instilling in him a determination to succeed at all costs. He was exceptionally bright, and was appointed to the artillery section of the national military in Paris, where he passed his examinations in one year.

When the Revolution broke out, Napoleon returned to Corsica, and organized the National Guard. He also drew up a petition to the National Assembly asking that Corsica become part of France, and its people accorded the rights of French citizens. He was a Jacobin who commanded a volunteer force that fired on rioters supporting the Catholic Church on Easter Sunday. He was also responsible for the siege of the village of Toulon which had been held by the British. Political connections and the fact that he was not directly involved in any of the factional struggles in Paris saved him from the Guillotine during the Reign of Terror. His star continued to rise while the heads of his friends rolled. He put down a royalist uprising on October 6, 1795 with a "whiff of grapeshot." Thereafter he married Josephine de Beauharnais, the lover of a corrupt director and widow of a member of the National Assembly who had been guillotined. In 1796, he was appointed commander of the Army of Italy, and dropped the Italian spelling of his name, changing it to Bonaparte.

Napoleon was soon acting virtually on his own authority. He led 35,000 men on a mission to Egypt where he planned to attack the Ottoman Empire. His men were brutally mistreated, marching across the Egyptian desert in woolen uniforms. When they arrived at an oasis, the only food available were melons, which they ate avariciously and soon contracted diarrhea. Even so, Napoleon had an amazing ability to inspire his men and command their undying loyalty, even though he frequently abandoned them when it suited his purposes. He defeated the Egyptian forces at the Battle of the Nile, and then set up forts to protect himself from the British, who were sure to oppose him. The French Navy was soon engaged by the British commanded by General Horatio Nelson, who defeated him.

While in Egypt, Napoleon brought in scientists and archeologists to study the country and the possibility of digging a canal through the Isthmus of Suez, which would drastically shorten trips to Asia. His expeditions were responsible for unearthing the Sphinx, which had been buried in sand,

but his men also fired their muskets at its face, permanently scarring it. He ordered a fort built near the town of Rosetta, during the construction of which, his men uncovered a stone remnant of an ancient Egyptian tablet. The "Rosetta stone" would later prove the key to the translation of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Following his defeat by Nelson's troops, Napoleon abandoned his army in Egypt and hurried back to France ahead of the news of his defeat, thus preserving his reputation. He learned that members of the legislature were plotting to overthrow the Directory. This movement was led by the abbé Sieyès who felt that the Directory was too weak and that the years of upheaval and uncertainty which had characterized the revolution called for firm rule rather than liberty and popular politics. His motto became, "Confidence from below, authority from above." This motto aptly described Napoleon's ability to use the plebiscite to secure approval of his policies. Sieyès wanted a strong military ruler, and Napoleon fit the bill. On November 9, 1799, the members of the directory were disbanded at the point of bayonets, and Napoleon was declared first consul of the Republic. (He fancied himself a Roman in every sense of the word, thus he took the Roman title of Consul.)

Among the civil reforms which he instituted, Napoleon instituted the Civil Code (the Code Napoleon) in 1804 which guaranteed the equality of all male citizens before the law, and the absolute security of wealth and private property. He was responsible for the establishment of the Bank of France, reconfirmed the peasant's gains in the revolution. At the same time, he strengthened French bureaucracy by establishing a network of prefects, subprefects and mayors whom he appointed.

Napoleon concluded the Concordat of 1801 with Pope Pius VII which healed rifts with the Catholic Church and priests within the country who had split over support of the revolution. Under the terms of the Concordat, the Pope gained for French Catholics the right to practice their religion freely, but Napoleon nominated bishops, paid the clergy, and exerted great influence over the French church, although he himself was not personally interested in Religion. He granted Protestants and Jews the right to practice their religion as they saw fit.

The price of the stability which Napoleon brought to France was his authoritarian rule. Women lost nearly all the gains they had made in the revolution. Under the Code, Women were dependents of either their husbands or fathers, and could not make contracts or have bank accounts in their own names. The plan was to establish a "family monarch" where the father's rule was absolute. Free speech and freedom of the press were abridged. Napoleon constantly reduced the number of newspapers until only four were left in Paris, all of which were propaganda organs for him. Since Napoleon himself was often at war and away from Paris, he left domestic enforcement to one Joseph Fouché who instituted a relentless police state. Spies kept watch on citizens and thousands of people remained under surveillance. Those suspected of subversive activity were arrested and imprisoned without trial.

Napoleon was described by a member of his staff as an "ever restless spirit." He ate rapidly, and worked days on end with little sleep. He dictated more than 80,000 letters in his lifetime. He was a master of fine detail, and seemed to absorb the slightest bit of detail almost instantly; at the same time he ignored matters which did not interest him, which proved disastrous. He believed his wildest dreams of conquest and empire would be realized. He was known to go into terrible rages at times, but could be very lenient and forgiving of those who made mistakes. He was stubborn, and delegated very little authority to others, mistrusting even his closest advisors. His style of leadership bordered tyrannical, as he made up his mind and ignored the advice of others. His mind invariably chose war.

**Napoleon's Wars:** At the time Napoleon came to power, France was still at war with Austria and Great Britain. When offers of peace were rejected, Napoleon defeated the Austrians and gained almost all of Italy as well as German territory on the west bank of the Rhine River, which was incorporated into France. He later concluded a treaty with the British whereby France gained control of Holland and the Naust4rian Netherlands. He was in a position to dismantle the Holy Roman Empire and act as he pleased.

By 1802, France was at peace for the first time in ten years. Unhappy with the title of "First Consul," Napoleon had himself declared "Consul for life" by plebiscite. He declared an amnesty of those who had opposed the revolution, but a plot against his life was discovered, and those accused to be tried and executed quickly despite the lack of conclusive evidence of guilt. His actions angered many in Europe, including Ludwig van Beethoven who crossed out his dedication to Napoleon of his Third Symphony (he "Eroica," meaning "Heroic.") In so doing, Beethoven shouted, "So he is also nothing more than an ordinary man. Now he will trample on the rights of mankind and indulge only his own ambition: from now on he will make himself superior to all others and become a tyrant."

Beethoven didn't miss it by much. The Tribunate, Senate, and people through another plebiscite approved the change from Consulate to Empire, and on December 2, 1804, Napoleon was anointed Emperor of the French by Pope Pius VII. However, when the pope attempted to place the crown on Napoleon's head, he snatched it away and placed it on his own head. The new constitution contained a provision which read, "The government of the republic is entrusted to the emperor." Napoleon thereafter began wearing a red velvet coat that had been fit for Louis XIV.

In May, 1803, Napoleon renewed war with Great Britain. He concentrated his armies at French ports near the English Channel, and prepared for an invasion of Britain. However, when he attempted to bring his fleet around which would be needed to transport soldiers for the invasion, his fleet was destroyed by forces led by Adm. Horatio Nelson at Trafalgar off the coast of Gibraltar. Nelson was killed in the battle, likely because he refused to remove his medals, which made him an easy target for a French marksman. The defeat ended any possibility of an invasion of Britain, and Nelson became a national hero. A statue of him is erected in Trafalgar Square, a prominent London location.

Austria under Francis II, Russia under Alexander I joined with Britain and Sweden in a Third Coalition against Napoleon just before the Battle of Trafalgar. They were no match for Napoleon, who defeated their combined armies at the Battle of Austerlitz. Alexander I pulled back and Austria lost large amounts of territory.

Napoleon boasted to his officers just before the Battle of Austerlitz of his strategy to defeat the coalition. In explaining, he became so excited that he danced; at one point he jumped up on a drum and continued dancing. His military efforts were expensive, however, and he needed funds. As a result, when approached by the American ambassador on behalf of President Thomas Jefferson to sell the port of New Orleans, he instead offered to sell all of France's lands in North America, the Louisiana Purchase, for 70,000,000 francs--\$15,000.00. The sum was a pittance.

Following the war, Napoleon decided to reorganize the German states to his liking. He abolished many of the smaller German states in 1806 as well as the Holy Roman Empire, and established the Confederation of the Rhine, a confederation of German states minus Austria, Prussia, and Saxony, and named himself "protector" of the Confederation. His actions led the Prussians and Russians to declare war against him again, but he defeated them also, such that Alexander I of Russia asked for peace. Alexander and Napoleon met on a raft in the middle of the Niemen River while the

Prussian emperor, Frederick William III was forced to pace the shore and wait. Under the treaty of Tilsit to which both sides agreed, Russia accepted Napoleon's reorganization of western and Eastern Europe, and Prussia lost half of its population. Alexander also promised to enforce Napoleon's continental system, which constituted a blockade of British ports.

Napoleon's Continental System brought him into substantial conflict with the young United States, which would have declared war had not President John Adams threatened to resign. Britain also abused American shipping, and President Thomas Jefferson imposed a disastrous embargo as a result. Later, Britain lost the public relations war, and the U.S. declared War on Britain, the War of 1812.

Napoleon more and more saw himself as the Emperor of Europe, and not merely of France. He introduced many French laws and the metric system to the conquered areas of Europe, abolished serfdom and feudal dues. Yet at the same time, he put the interests of France first, and imposed heavy taxes and levies of men and equipment. As a result, he was soon seen as a conquering tyrant rather than an enlightened liberator. A revolt broke out in Spain in 1808 comprised of Catholics, monarchists and patriots who resented Napoleon's efforts to make Spain a French satellite with himself as king. French armies occupied Madrid, but his foes fled to the hills and waged guerrilla warfare against them.

One of the more lasting effects of opposition to Napoleon was the birth of nationalism. Many people in lands conquered by the French emperor not only resented the occupation of their lands but also began to long for the existence of a territorial state organized around their own nationality. A young German who attempted to assassinate Napoleon was executed, and shouted as he was shot, "Long live Germany." German writers spoke of the idea of Germany, rather than separate states, arguing that the people of the German states shared a common culture based upon language, tradition, and history. This sense of nationalism was a primary factor in the casus belli of World War One.

**The Invasion of Russia:** Napoleon was concerned that he had no legitimate heir, and had his marriage to Josephine annulled. When the Pope refused to grant the annulment, Napoleon had the Bishop of Paris do so, an act for which he was excommunicated. He proposed marriage to the sister of Czar Alexander I, but was turned down, so he married the daughter of the Austrian Emperor Francis I. She had never met Napoleon, and the marriage was by proxy, with his old enemy, Archduke Charles, Francis I's brother standing in.

Napoleon's interest in expanding French influence in the Eastern Mediterranean and his marriage to the Hapsburg princess, plus Alexander I's repudiation of the Continental system virtually assured war with Russia. In 1808, he commented, "Ultimately, the question is always this: who shall have Constantinople?"

IN June, 1812, Napoleon assembled the "Grande Armee," over 600,000 men who invaded Russia, hoping to lure their armies into Battle. Only one third were French, the balance were mercenaries and draftees from French satellites. Rather than fight, however, the Russians simply retreated deeper and deeper inland. Napoleon soon reached Moscow, which had been evacuated, and which had been partially burned by Alexander. Napoleon stayed for five weeks before he decided he must retreat. By this time, the Russian winter had set in, and his supply lines were cut. His retreat was one of the great disasters of history. Starvation, attacks by the Russian Army and the weather cut his army to pieces. (An old expression is that Russia's best soldier is "General Winter.") The weather was so cold that many men lost limbs and even their genitals to frostbite. When his army staggered into Poland and Prussia in December, 370,000 men had died and

another 200,000 had been taken prisoner. Of the Grande Armee of 600,000 men, only 30,000 returned.

Napoleon's invasion of Russia is the subject of Tolstoy's epic (and very long) novel, [War and Peace](#). During World War II, Adolf Hitler planned a similar invasion of Russia, and was warned by his generals of Napoleon's disaster there. Hitler was sure he knew where Napoleon had gone wrong, and ordered the invasion anyway, Operation Barbarossa. In a classic repetition of history, the Germans suffered the same fate, and they began a retreat on December 6, 1941; one day before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The fate of the French and the Germans proves the old expression that one should never get involved in a land war in Asia.

Once again, Napoleon abandoned his army and raced back to Paris to raise another army. A proposal to reduce the size of the French Empire by the Austrians was refused and the Austrians and Prussians, who had made peace with Napoleon, sided with Russia and Great Britain against him. All over Europe, patriots called for a "war of liberation" against his oppression. A Quadruple Alliance was sealed and on April 4, 1814, Napoleon was forced to abdicate after defeat at the Battle of Leipzig. The allies were gracious in victory, and gave Napoleon the island of Elba in the Mediterranean as his own private empire, with his own tiny army. France was required to pay him a yearly income of 2 million francs. They also agreed to restore the Bourbon Dynasty under Louis XVIII. In an attempt to secure his position, Louis agreed to a Constitutional monarchy, and guaranteed the people the freedoms won in the revolution. The allies also agreed to meet in Vienna to work out a general peace agreement.

Louis was old, ugly, and fat. He was crippled by gout, and did not have Napoleon's charisma. Napoleon heard of unrest in France, and managed a daring escape from Elba in February, 1815 and marched toward Paris with a small group of followers. Marshal Ney, who had offered his services to Louis, promised to bring Napoleon back to Paris in a cage, but when he met Napoleon, the latter opened his coat and screamed, "Go ahead, shoot, shoot your emperor!" Overcome with emotion, Ney fell into Napoleon's arms, and his army joined Napoleons. Louis XVIII took the hint and fled to Belgium.

Napoleon hoped to regain his former empire, but lasted for only 100 days. The allies raised a tremendous army of 700,000 men to Napoleon's 200,000 and met him outside Brussels at the town of Waterloo on June 18, 1815. The allies, under the command of Field Marshal Blucher from Prussia and Arthur Wellesley, the duke of Wellington for Britain, devastated his forces. Napoleon was forced to abdicate a second time, and surrendered to British forces. He had hoped to sail to America before he was captured. This time, the allies took no chances. He was shipped to the island of St. Helena, 1000 miles away from the nearest mainland in the middle of the Atlantic. The closest island of any size was Ascension, a British naval base, 600 miles away. Louis returned, and took up the throne again. Napoleon died on May 5, 1821, his last words being "France, army, head of the army, Josephine." The cause of death was a cancerous stomach ulcer, although rumors have persisted to this day that he was poisoned with arsenic. His body was later returned to France, and given a state burial. In the end, Napoleon's final legacy was his myth. From St. Helena, he claimed, "If I had succeeded, I would have been the greatest man known to history."