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Why Napoleon merits the title 'the Great'

Instead of making specious comparisons with Hitler, we ought to celebrate the Corsican's astonishing achievements as a general and a ruler, according to Andrew Roberts...

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Baron Antoine-Jean Gros's painting shows Napoleon on the Battle Field of Eylau, 9th February 1807. When asked who was the greatest captain of the age, the Duke of Wellington immediately replied: "In this age, in past ages, in any age, Napoleon". © Bridgeman

What are the criteria that win a ruler that most coveted of soubriquets: 'the Great'? Alexander, Alfred, Charles, Peter, Frederick and Catherine were all huge figures who decisively influenced the history of their times. Yet it's not difficult to think of others who were equally influential, and indeed often rather better human beings (at least by modern standards) who haven't made the cut. Frederick Barbarossa, Henry V, Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, Queen Elizabeth I, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, 'the Sun King' Louis XIV, and so on, probably deserved it too. I believe that foremost among them is Napoleon Bonaparte.

Napoleon was occasionally referred to as 'the Great' in his lifetime. Some public buildings sported the phrase, and it can still be seen on the pedestal of the Vendome Column in Paris. When Louvre director Vivant Denon dedicated his 21-volume work *Description of Egypt in the early 19th century*, the title page said "Napoleon Le Grand". But it never caught on, even as a way of differentiating Napoleon from his distinctly less impressive nephew Emperor Napoleon III.

Yet Napoleon I was the founder of modern France and one of the great conquerors of history. He came to power through a military coup only six years after entering the country as a penniless political refugee, and eventually gave his name to an age. As first consul and later emperor, he almost won hegemony in Europe, but was eventually overwhelmed by a series of coalitions put together to bring him down. Although his conquests ended in defeat and ignominious imprisonment, over the course of his short but eventful life he fought 60 battles and lost only seven. For any general, of any age, this was an extraordinary record.



Napoleon holds the figure of Victory in this plaque marking the French army's clash with Russian empire forces at Eylau. © Bridgeman

Napoleon's capacity for battlefield decision-making was astounding. Having walked the ground of 53 of his 60 battlefields, I was amazed by his genius for topography, his acuity and sense of timing. A general must ultimately be judged by the outcome of the battles, and of Napoleon's 60 battles and sieges he lost only Acre, Aspern-Essling, Leipzig, La Rothière, Lâon, Arcis-sur-Aube and Waterloo. When asked who was the greatest captain of the age, the Duke of Wellington – who, after all, defeated him brilliantly in the only battle they fought – replied without hesitation: "In this age, in past ages, in any age, Napoleon."

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The present tendency to equate Napoleon with Adolf Hitler – the other dictator who wanted to invade Britain but was defeated by a coalition of allies after coming to grief in

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...that our view of Napoleon has been hopelessly compromised by seeing him through the distorting prism of the Second World War. For here was a talented, humorous, emotionally generous and forgiving man with great ideals who emancipated the Jews and had nothing personally in common with Hitler. Their dictatorships were utterly different, as were their invasions of Russia. Far from pursuing Lebensraum and extermination, Napoleon only wanted to fight a short border war in Russia.

In Britain, which had already had its political revolution 140 years earlier and already enjoyed most of the benefits that the revolution brought to France, Napoleon's threat to invade ensured that successive British governments were rightly determined to overthrow him. Their decrying of his imperialism was pure hypocrisy, however, given that Britain herself was busily building a vast empire at the time. Napoleon boasted that he was "of the race that founds empires" (meaning France rather than Corsica). But the desire for territorial expansion was hardly unique to him – in living European memory Louis XIV, Catherine the Great, Frederick the Great, Joseph II of Austria and Gustav III of Sweden had all undertaken it, and across the Atlantic the United States was starting to expand westwards (largely thanks to Napoleon who allowed them to secure the Louisiana Purchase in 1803).



An allegory of the French Revolution featuring a portrait of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose political philosophy greatly influenced the revolutionaries – and the young Napoleon. © Bridgeman

Napoleon's achievements as a lawgiver equalled his military achievements, and far outlasted them. Whereas France had been forced back to its pre-Napoleonic frontiers by the end of 1815, many of his civil reforms stayed in place. The Napoleonic Code forms the basis of much of European law today, while various aspects of it have been adopted by 40 countries on all six inhabited continents. Napoleon's architectural and construction projects (once finished under later reigns), are the glory of Paris, and many of his bridges, reservoirs, canals, sewers and quais along the Seine are still in use.

The Cour des Comptes still oversees France's public accounts, just as the Conseil d'État still vets her laws. Napoleon's Banque de France is the central bank; the Légion d'Honneur is much coveted, just as France's best lycées still deliver first-class education. The 'masses of granite' that Napoleon boasted of throwing down to anchor French



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society are there to this day, so even if he had not been one of the great military geniuses of history, he would still be a giant. **You are currently reading: Why Napoleon merits the title 'the Great'** was complimented on her son's achievements, she replied. "So long as it lasts." It has.

The reason is that Napoleon consciously built upon and protected the best aspects of the French Revolution, while discarding the worst. "We have done with the romance of the revolution," he told an early meeting of his Council of State. "We must now commence its history." Yet for his reforms to work they needed one commodity that Europe's monarchs were determined to deny him. Time. "Chemists have a species of powder out of which they can make marble," he said, "but it must have time to become solid."

Jacques Louis David's famous portrait of the French emperor in his study at the Tuileries, 1812.
"Many of the ideas that underpin our modern world were protected and codified by Napoleon," says Andrew Roberts. © Bridgeman

Because many of the revolution's principles threatened the absolute monarchies of Russia (which was to practise serfdom until 1861), Austria and Prussia – and because the disruption of the balance of power on the continent threatened Britain – they formed seven coalitions over 23 years to crush revolutionary and Napoleonic France.

Yet many of the ideas that underpin our modern world – meritocracy, equality before the law, property rights, religious toleration, modern secular education, sound finances, and so on – were protected, consolidated, codified and geographically extended by Napoleon during his 16 years in power, and could therefore not be reined back by the Bourbons (the French royal house) on their return to power after his fall. He also dispensed with hyper-inflation, the unsustainable revolutionary calendar of 10-day weeks, the absurd theology of the Cult of the Supreme Being (established by Maximilien de Robespierre following the revolution) and the corruption and cronyism of the previous Directory government of France.

Napoleon represented the Enlightenment on horseback. His letters show a charm, humour and capacity for candid self-appraisal. He could lose his temper – volcanically so on occasion – but usually with some cause. Above all, he was no totalitarian: he had no interest in controlling every aspect of his subjects' lives. Of course there were great costs. Like much of the rest of Europe of the day, Napoleon employed censorship and a secret police. The plebiscites he held seemingly to give the French people a political

voice were regularly rigged. And then there was the cost in lives.

The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars cost a total of around 3 million military and 1 million civilian deaths, of whom 1.4 million were French.

Yet although Napoleon is accused of being an inveterate warmonger, the Allies declared war on him far more often than he did on them. The wars had been going on since he was a lieutenant of artillery in 1792, of course, but once he was in power the British declared war on him in 1803, the Austrians invaded his ally Bavaria in 1805, the Prussians declared war on him in 1806 and the Austrians in 1809. The attacks on Portugal and Spain in 1807 and 1808 and Russia in 1812 were indeed initiated by Napoleon, although Russia was planning an attack on him in 1812.

But the two campaigns of 1813, the war of 1814, and also that of 1815, were initiated by his enemies, and he made genuine and on occasion impassioned peace offers before all of them. He made no fewer than four separate and genuine peace offers to Britain between the 1803 collapse of the Treaty of Amiens (which ended war between Britain and France) and 1812. Considering that he had planned to invade Britain between 1803 and 1805, it was understandable that the British government should have relentlessly pursued his destruction; similarly Austria, Prussia and Russia had impeccable motives for wanting to destroy him. But he cannot be fairly accused of being the only, or even the principal warmonger of the age.

Napoleon's personality was far more attractive than those who persist in seeing similarities with Hitler will admit. His intellect places him in the front ranks of monarchs, alongside Marcus Aurelius and Elizabeth I. Goethe himself said that Napoleon was "always enlightened by reason... He was in a permanent state of enlightenment." A child of the Enlightenment who became an exponent of the rationalism of Rousseau and Voltaire as a youth, Napoleon believed that Europeans were on the cusp of the most important scientific and cultural developments since the Renaissance. His correspondence with astronomers, chemists, mathematicians and biologists expressed a respect for their work to be expected from a member of the Institut, the headquarters of the French Enlightenment of which he was so proud to have been elected a member.

Napoleon's success came as much from hard work, profound thinking and forward planning as from any inherent genius. "I'm always working, and I meditate a great deal," he told his minister Pierre Louis Roederer in March 1809. "If I appear always ready to answer for everything and to meet everything, it's because, before entering on an undertaking, I have meditated for a long time, and have foreseen what might happen. It's not genius which reveals to me suddenly, secretly, what I have to say or do in a circumstance unexpected by other people: it is reflection, meditation."

Had Napoleon exhibited a scintilla of Hitler's viciousness, men who kept betraying him such as his minister of police, Joseph Fouché, and his chief diplomat, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, would hardly have died in their beds. The fact that we can count the number of people Napoleon executed for political reasons on the fingers of one hand shows how different he was from a dictator who exterminated millions for both political and racial reasons (though this is not to excuse Napoleon's massacre of 4,400 Turkish prisoners at Jaffa in March 1799, which he ordered out of perceived military necessity. They had broken their parole and their lives were forfeit under the rules of war of the day, but it was still a grossly ruthless act.)

Napoleon's signature. As one of the most "unrelenting micromanagers in history", he put his name to an average of 15 letters a day while in power. © Bridgeman

Napoleon was able to compartmentalise his life to quite a remarkable degree, much more so than most statesmen and great leaders. He could close off one part of his mind to what was going on in the rest of it, likening it to being able to open and close drawers in a cupboard. On the eve of battle, as aides-de-camp were arriving and departing with orders to his marshals and reports from his generals, he could dictate his thoughts on the establishment of a girls' school for the orphans of members of the Légion d'Honneur, and shortly after having captured Moscow he set down the regulations governing the Comédie-Française.

The recent publication of 33,000 of his letters – he averaged 15 a day when in power – shows how no detail about his empire was too minute for his restless, questing energy. The prefect of a department would be instructed to stop taking his young mistress to the opera; an obscure country priest would be reprimanded for giving a bad sermon on his birthday; a corporal told he was drinking too much; a demi-brigade that it could stitch the words "Les Incomparables" in gold onto its standard. He was one of the most unrelenting micromanagers in history, but this obsession with details did not prevent him from radically transforming the physical, legal, political and cultural landscape of Europe.

Napoleon also had a fine sense of humour and was able to make jokes in virtually any situation, even when staring defeat in the face during battle. He was ambitious, of course, but when allied to tremendous talents – extraordinary energy; administrative genius; a huge capacity for statistical data; what appears to be a near-photographic memory; a disciplined, incisive mind capable of compartmentalising ideas; astonishing attention to detail – it would have been surprising, even unnatural, for his ambitions to be small.

“Your heart be in your breeches,” a doctor observes as he examines Napoleon in this 1809 London cartoon. Much of the criticism directed at Napoleon’s militarism was hypocritical, says Andrew Roberts “given that Britain herself was busily building a vast empire”. © Alamy

Much has been written about his religious views, his Corsicanness, his absorption of Rousseau and Voltaire, but it was the years he spent in military schooling that affected him most, and it was from the ethos of the army that he took on most of his beliefs. Thus his enthusiastic acceptance in 1789 of the revolutionary principles of equality before the law, rational government, meritocracy, efficiency and aggressive nationalism all fitted in well with his assumptions about what would work well for the French army. By contrast, social disorder, political and press liberty and parliamentarianism all struck him as at odds with the military ethic. The army schools imbued him with a reverence for social hierarchy, law and order, the reward of merit and courage, and a contempt for self-serving politicians.

Of course Napoleon’s abilities led to some excesses, but even his brother Louis, who he deposed as king of Holland, eventually came to say: “Let us reflect upon the difficulties Napoleon had to overcome, the innumerable enemies, both external as well as internal, he had to combat, the snares of all kinds which were laid for him on every side, the continual tension of his mind, his incessant activity, the extraordinary fatigues he had to encounter, and criticism will soon be absorbed by admiration.”

All too often, biographies of Napoleon adopt the suspiciously easy trope by which his deranged hubris – tied up with what has erroneously become known as ‘the Napoleon Complex’ – inevitably led to his well-deserved nemesis. This clichéd paradigm of ancient Greek drama sometimes comes with the comforting suggestion that such is the fate that overtakes all tyrants sooner or later. My own interpretation is very different from other historians’. What brought Napoleon down was not some deep-seated personality disorder but a combination of unforeseeable circumstances coupled with a handful of significant miscalculations: something altogether more believable, human and fascinating.

Napoleon’s career is a standing rebuke to the determinist analyses of history, which explain events in terms of vast impersonal forces and minimise the part played by great men and women. We should find this uplifting, since, as George Home, a midshipman on board the ship, HMS *Bellerophon*, where Napoleon surrendered to the British, was to put it in his memoirs: “He showed us what one little human creature like ourselves could accomplish in a span so short.” Of course, therefore, he deserves to be called ‘Napoleon the Great’.

Andrew Roberts is a historian who has written a number of acclaimed books including *The Storm of War* (Penguin, 2010).

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