



## From the Annals of the World History

### Napoleon Bonaparte

-- 15 August 1769 - 5th May 1821



One of the greatest military commanders and a risk taking gambler; a workaholic genius and an impatient short term planner; a vicious cynic who forgave his closest betrayers; a misogynist who could enthrall men; Napoleon Bonaparte was all of these and more, the twice-emperor of France whose military endeavors and sheer personality dominated Europe in person for a decade, and in thought for a century.

#### Birth in Corsica

Napoleon was born in Ajaccio, Corsica, on August 15<sup>th</sup> 1769 to Carlo Bonaparte, a lawyer and political opportunist, and his wife, Marie-Letizia. The Bonaparte's were a wealthy family from the Corsican nobility, although when compared to the great aristocracies of France Napoleon's kin were poor and pretentious. A combination of Carlo's social climbing, Letizia's adultery with the Comte de Marbeuf - Corsica's French military governor - and Napoleon's own ability enabled him to enter the military academy at Brienne in 1779. He moved to the Parisian École Royale Militaire in 1784 and graduated a year later as a second lieutenant in the artillery. Spurred on by his father's death in February 1785, the future emperor had completed in one year a course that often took three.

#### Early Career: The Corsican Misadventure

Despite being posted on the French mainland, Napoleon was able to spend much of the next eight years in Corsica thanks to his ferocious letter writing and rule bending, as well as the effects of the French Revolution and sheer good luck. There he played an active part in political and military matters, initially supporting the Corsican rebel Pasquale Paoli, a former patron of Carlo Bonaparte. Military promotion also followed, but Napoleon became opposed to Paoli and when civil war erupted in 1793 the Bonapartes fled to France, where they adopted the French version of their name: Bonaparte. Historians have frequently used the Corsican affair as a microcosm of Napoleon's career.

#### Early Career: Fluctuating Success

The French Revolution had decimated the republic's officer class and favoured individuals could achieve swift promotion, but Napoleon's fortunes rose and fell as one set of patrons came and went. By December 1793 Bonaparte was the hero of Toulon, a General and favourite of Augustin Robespierre; shortly after the wheel of revolution turned and Napoleon was arrested for treason. Tremendous political 'flexibility' saved him and the patronage of Vicomte Paul de Baras, soon to be one of France's three 'Directors', followed.

Napoleon became a hero again in 1795, defending the government from angry counter-revolutionary forces; Baras rewarded Napoleon by promoting him to high military office, a position with access to the political spine of France. Bonaparte swiftly grew into one of the country's most respected military authorities - largely by never keeping his opinions to himself - and he married Josephine de Beauharnais. Commentators have considered this an unusual match ever since.

#### Napoleon and the Army of Italy

In 1796 France attacked Austria. Napoleon was given command of the Army of Italy - the post he wanted - whereupon he welded a young, starving and disgruntled army into a force which won victory after victory against, theoretically stronger, Austrian opponents. Aside from the Battle of Arcole, where Napoleon was lucky rather than clever, the campaign is legitimately legendary. Napoleon returned to France in 1797 as the nation's brightest star, having fully emerged from the need for a patron. Ever a great self-publicist, he maintained the profile of a political independent, thanks partly to the newspapers he now ran.



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### **Failure in the Middle East, Power in France**

In May 1798 Napoleon left for a campaign in Egypt and Syria, prompted by his desire for fresh victories, the French need to threaten Britain's empire in India and the Directory's concerns that their famous general might seize power. The Egyptian campaign was a military failure (although it had a great cultural impact) and a change of government in France caused Bonaparte to leave - some might say abandon - his army and return in the August of 1799.

### **First Consul**

The transfer of power might not have been smooth - owing much to luck and apathy - but Napoleon's great political skill was clear; by February 1800 he was established as the First Consul, a practical dictatorship with a constitution wrapped firmly around him. However, France was still at war with her fellows in Europe and Napoleon set out to beat them. He did so within a year, although the key triumph - the Battle of Marengo, fought in June 1800 - was won by the French General Desaix.

### **From Reformer to Emperor**

After concluding treaties that left Europe at peace Bonaparte began working on France, reforming the economy, legal system (the famous and enduring Code Napoleon), church, military, education and government. He studied and commented on minute details, often while travelling with the army and the reforms continued for most of his rule. Bonaparte exhibited an undeniable skill as both legislator and statesman - a study of these achievements could rival those of his campaigns for size and depth - but many have argued that this talent was deeply flawed and even fervent supporters admit that Napoleon made mistakes. The Consul's popularity remained high - helped by his mastery of propaganda, but also genuine national support - and he was elected Consul for life by the French people in 1802 and Emperor of France in 1804, a title which Bonaparte worked hard to maintain and glorify.

### **A Return to War**

Nevertheless, Europe was not at peace for long. Napoleon's fame, ambitions and character were based on conquest, making it almost inevitable that his reorganized Grande Armée would fight further wars. However, other European countries also sought conflict, for not only did they distrust and fear Bonaparte; they also retained their hostility towards revolutionary France. If either side has sought peace, the battles would still have continued.

For the next eight years Napoleon dominated Europe, fighting and defeating a range of alliances involving combinations of Austria, Britain, Russia and Prussia. Sometimes his victories were crushing - such as Austerlitz in 1805, often cited as the greatest military victory ever - and on other occasions he was either very lucky, fought almost to a standstill, or both: Wagram stands as an example of the latter. Bonaparte forged new states in Europe, including the German Confederation - built from the ruins of the Holy Roman Empire - and the Duchy of Warsaw, whilst also installing his family and favorites in positions of great power: Murat became King of Naples and Bernadotte King of Sweden, the latter in spite of his frequent treachery and failure. The reforms continued and Bonaparte had an ever-increasing effect on culture and technology, becoming a patron of both the arts and sciences while stimulating creative responses across Europe.

### **Napoleon's Failings**

Napoleon also made mistakes and suffered setbacks. The French navy was kept firmly in check by their British equivalent and the Emperor's attempt to tame Britain through economics - the Continental System - harmed France and her supposed allies greatly. Bonaparte's interference in Spain caused even larger problems, as the Spanish refused to accept Napoleon's brother Joseph as ruler, instead fighting a vicious guerilla war against the French invaders.

The Spanish 'ulcer' highlights another problem of Bonaparte's reign: he couldn't be everywhere within his empire at once, and the forces he sent to pacify Spain failed, as they often did elsewhere. Meanwhile, British forces gained a foothold in Portugal, slowly fighting their way across the peninsula and drawing ever more troops and resources from France itself. Nevertheless, these were Napoleon's glory days, and on March 11<sup>th</sup> 1810 he married his second wife, Marie-Louise: his only legitimate child - Napoleon II - was born just over a year later, on March 20<sup>th</sup> 1811.

### **1812: Napoleon's Disaster in Russia**

The Napoleonic Empire may have shown signs of decline by 1811, including a downturn in diplomatic fortunes and continuing failure in Spain, but such matters were overshadowed by what happened next. In 1812 Napoleon went to war with Russia, assembling a force of over 400,000 soldiers, accompanied by the same number of followers and support. Such an army was almost impossible to feed or adequately control and the Russians repeatedly retreated, destroying the local resources and separating Bonaparte from his supplies.

The Emperor continually dithered, eventually reaching Moscow on September 8<sup>th</sup> after the Battle of Borodino, a bludgeoning conflict where over 80,000 soldiers died. However, the Russians refused to surrender, instead torching Moscow and forcing Napoleon into a long retreat back to friendly territory. The Grande Armée was assailed by starvation, extremes of weather and terrifying Russian partisans throughout,

and by the end of 1812 only 10,000 soldiers were able to fight. Many of the rest had died in horrible conditions, with the camp's followers faring even worse.

In the final half of 1812 Napoleon had destroyed most of his army, suffered a humiliating retreat, made an enemy of Russia, obliterated France's stock of horses and shattered his reputation. A coup had been attempted in his absence and his enemies in Europe were re-invigorated, forming a grand alliance intent on removing him. As vast numbers of enemy soldiers advanced across Europe towards France, over-turning the states Bonaparte had created; the Emperor raised, equipped and fielded a new army. This was a remarkable achievement but the combined forces of Russia, Prussia, Austria and others just used a simple plan, retreating from the emperor himself and advancing again when he moved to face the next threat.

### **1813-1814 and Abdication**

Throughout 1813 and into 1814 the pressure grew on Napoleon; not only were his enemies grinding his forces down and approaching Paris, but the British had fought out of Spain and into France, the Grande Armée's Marshalls were underperforming and Bonaparte had lost the French public's support. Nevertheless, for the first half of 1814 Napoleon exhibited the military genius of his youth, but it was a war he couldn't win alone. On March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1814, Paris surrendered to allied forces without a fight and, facing massive betrayal and impossible military odds, Napoleon abdicated as Emperor of France; he was exiled to the Island of Elba.

### **The 100 Days and Exile**

Undoubtedly bored and aware of the continuing discontent in France; Napoleon made a sensational return to power in 1815. Travelling to France in secret, he attracted vast support and reclaimed his Imperial throne, as well as re-organizing the army and government. This was anathema to his enemies and after a series of initial engagements Bonaparte was narrowly defeated in one of history's greatest battles: Waterloo.

This final adventure had occurred in less than 100 days, closing with Napoleon's second abdication on June 25<sup>th</sup> 1815, whereupon British forces forced him into further exile. Housed on St. Helena, a small rocky island well away from Europe, Napoleon's health and character fluctuated; he died within six years, on May 5<sup>th</sup> 1821, aged 51. The causes of his death have been debated ever since, and conspiracy theories involving poison are rife.

Simple narratives of Napoleon's life can fill whole books, let alone detailed discussions of his achievements and historians remain divided over the Emperor: was he a cruel tyrant or an enlightened despot? Was he a tortured genius or a blunderer with luck on his side? These discussions are unlikely to be resolved, thanks partly to the weight of source material - making it unlikely that a historian could truly master everything - and Napoleon himself.

He is, and remains, so fascinating precisely because he was such a massive blend of contradictions - itself prohibiting conclusions - and because of the massive effect he had on Europe: no one should forget that he helped first perpetuate, and then actively create, a state of European wide-warfare that lasted for twenty years. Few individuals have ever had such a huge effect on the world, on economics, politics, technology, culture and society, making Bonaparte's life more fantastic than any believable fiction.