

Napoleon I Bonaparte

Historic World Leaders, 1994

Born: August 15, 1769 in Ajaccio, France

Died: May 05, 1821 in Saint Helena

Nationality: French

Occupation: Emperor

"To die is nothing, but to live defeated and without glory is to die every day." J. Christopher Herold

French emperor who rose through sheer ambition, drive, and intelligence to the epitome of power, ruled France, conquered much of Europe, created an empire, and forever changed the course of European history.

- 1789 French Revolution began
- 1796 Appointed commander, Army of Italy
- 1799 Overthrow of Directory Government; end of the French Revolution
- 1800 Beginning of Consulate Government
- 1804 End of Consulate Government; Napoleon became emperor of the French
- 1814 Defeated by European coalition of states; exiled to island of Elba
- 1815 Returned to France; The Hundred Days; exiled to island of St. Helena
- 1821 Died on St. Helena
- 1840 Napoleon's body returned to France

Born Napoleone Buonaparte in Ajaccio, Corsica, in 1769; died on the island of St. Helena in 1821; son of Charles (lawyer and prominent Corsican citizen) and Letizia (Ramolino) Buonaparte; married: Josephine de Beauharnais; married: Archduchess Marie Louise of Austria; children: (second marriage) one son. Successor: King Louis XVIII (Bourbon).

Islands figure prominently in the life of Napoleon Bonaparte; he was born on the island of Corsica and died on the remote island of St. Helena in the south Atlantic. His father Charles was a lawyer and prominent Corsican citizen. Napoleon's mother Letizia Ramolino was a strong, beautiful woman who had eight children (five boys and three girls), held her family together after the death of her husband at age 39, and outlived her famous son by 15 years. The fortunes of this tightly knit, traditional Italian family rose along with those of the ambitious Napoleon: his gentle, intellectual brother Joseph was made king of Naples and then king of Spain; Louis married Napoleon's stepdaughter and became king of Holland; the spoiled, self-centered youngest child, Jerome, wed Princess Catherine of Wurtemberg and ruled the kingdom of Westphalia. Among the brothers only Lucien was not granted a royal title; he quarreled with Napoleon in 1802 over his marriage which Napoleon considered a "misalliance." The three sisters--Eliza, Pauline, and Caroline--also benefited from the Napoleonic largesse; Eliza became grand duchess of Tuscany. Caroline, married to Joachim Murat, ruled as queen of Naples, and the lovely, sensuous Pauline eventually married an Italian, Prince Borghese, and led a life of voluptuous dissipation. The mother of this disparate brood was called "Madame Mere" when her son was emperor of the French. Family ties and loyalty remained important to Napoleon.

Napoleon's carefree childhood came to an abrupt end in 1778, when he was nine years old; his father enrolled him in school in Autun, France. The next year, he attended military school at Brienne on a royal scholarship. A scrawny, timid boy, teased by his classmates because of his Italian accent, Napoleon became a "loner." But his mathematical ability earned him a place at the prestigious Ecole Militaire in Paris. A voracious reader, he devoured books on history, famous military campaigns, French literature, and the writings of Plato and Aristotle. In 1785, he received his commission as lieutenant in the French army, assigned to the artillery school in Auxonne (1788-89).

When not in school, Napoleon was often on leave in Corsica, involved with local patriots working for Corsican independence.

Napoleon was in Auxonne when the French Revolution broke out in 1789, The Estate General, a kind of representative body, had been summoned by King Louis XVI to deal with the financially distressed government; the deputies immediately made demands for far-reaching reforms and came into conflict with the entrenched privilege and power of the nobility and with the king. The educated, ambitious bourgeoisie who served as representative of the Third Estate (all commoners in France) refused to discuss new taxes and loans until their grievances were addressed. Calling themselves the National Assembly, the middle-class deputies moved from opposition to rebellion. In the next few months, France would be transformed into a constitutional state, and French subjects into French citizens. One act of the assembly changed Napoleon's attitude towards France; Corsica was made an integral part of France, no longer a crown colony. From this point on, Napoleon was in favor of the Revolution and of the Jacobins who organized public opinion through their national network of political clubs.

The Revolution divided Frenchmen, as did radical reforms affecting the monarchy and the Catholic Church in France. Thousands of nobles emigrated, unable to accept the radical changes, the mob violence, and social upheavals. Many army officers went abroad, and young, able officers like Napoleon were rapidly promoted to fill the void. In April 1792, France declared war on Austria's side. Napoleon was promoted to captain, then two years later made brigadier general, after successfully expelling the British from the port city of Toulon in December 1793. His reputation was bolstered by this well-executed military action, but in July of 1794, his fortunes were in jeopardy when the Jacobins were ousted from power in Paris. Napoleon's close association with some of the Jacobin leaders made him "suspect," and he was imprisoned briefly.

However when the National Convention was threatened by a large Parisian mob in October 1795, they called on Napoleon to defend the government. Firing cannon into the crowd, he saved the convention and once again demonstrated his loyalty to the Revolution. Napoleon was rewarded by the succeeding government, the Directory, and in March 1796, was appointed commander of the Army of Italy.

Napoleon Marries Josephine

Only two days earlier, Napoleon had married the elegant, beautiful Josephine de Beauharnais, widow of a noble guillotined during the bloody period of the Terror. Her two children, Eugene (age 14) and Hortense (age 12), were much loved by their stepfather: they returned his affection and remained loyal to him, even after his fall from power.

A few days after his marriage, Bonaparte left for Italy to lead his ragged, ill-disciplined troops in a series of brilliant victories over the Austrian army. At first, some of the older generals and the "old moustaches" (seasoned veterans) were not impressed by the 27-year-old, diminutive figure in an army greatcoat. But General Bonaparte promised them glory and riches, and he kept his promise. By October 1797, the French had defeated their formidable foe; Napoleon, on his own cognizance, negotiated the Treaty of Campo Formio by which France acquired Belgium and the west bank of the Rhine. In addition, the French created two Italian Republics from the conquered territories. Napoleon returned to Paris in triumph, lionized by salon society and the common people.

But inaction would, Napoleon decided, erode his newly acquired fame. He was pressed to assume command of an army and invade England, but he doubted the feasibility of such a venture at that time and refused the post. Napoleon had his eyes on the Near East and, with the support of Foreign Minister Talleyrand, he was outfitted for campaign in Egypt. The plan was to strike at England by seizing Egypt and cutting trade routes to India, thereby disrupting English commerce. Napoleon, with 35,000 troops and a staff of scientists, artists, and men of letters, sailed from France in May 1798, landed in Egypt in July, and defeated the Mamelukes (vassals of the Ottoman Empire who ruled in Egypt) three weeks later. General Bonaparte set about establishing an administration and

judicial system modeled on the French. On August 1, a British fleet attacked the French flotilla at Aboukir and destroyed it. The French army was now stranded. Undeterred, Napoleon made preparations to strike against the Turks in Syria. Unable to capture Acre, the French raised the siege and retreated when Napoleon learned the British were planning to transport a Turkish army to Egypt. In July 1799, 7000 French mauled the numerically superior Turks, driving them into the sea (the Battle of Aboukir).

But nothing could change the fact that the French army was cut off from receiving reinforcements or supplies. Moreover, news reached Napoleon that France was in danger of being invaded from Italy and Holland by the allied forces of the Second Coalition. He reasoned that France needed his services--and he needed to advance his own career. Without fanfare, he and a few close companions sailed for France, leaving the army under the command of General Kleber. On October 9, Napoleon landed at Frejus in the south of France. The Egyptian venture was not a complete failure; the French savants had laid the foundations for the study of Egyptology and found the Rosetta Stone which provided the key to ancient hieroglyphics. The unfortunate Kleber was murdered in 1801; his successor surrendered the army to the British who returned the troops to France in 1802.

Again, Napoleon returned to France a "hero." *La patrie* (the country) was in danger, both externally and internally. A resurgence of counter-revolution on the political right and of the Jacobins on the left threatened the Directory government, while unemployment and conscription were causing widespread discontent. The Abbe Sieyes, a cautious and wily old revolutionary and one of the five directors began moving to oust the current government, prepare a new constitution, and strengthen the executive power. But first he needed to secure the cooperation of a military man who could assure the army's loyalty. General Bonaparte was thought to be that man; his brother Lucien, president of the Council of 500, would be a key figure in proposed coup. He warned Sieyes, however, that Napoleon would not be easy to control.

On the 18th *Brumaire* (November 9), the deputies of the Councils of Elders and of 500 were warned that a Jacobin plot was afoot, and they were directed to move to St. Cloud, a suburb of Paris. Napoleon was given command of troops in the capital. The next day, he addressed the Council of Elders, and they consented to a constitutional revision. But the Council of 500 was not as easily convinced, and Lucien was forced to call in troops to clear the chamber. A rump meeting of the deputies convened to vote executive power to a temporary triumvirate, including Napoleon, charged with writing a new constitution. The coup of Brumaire was met with stoic acceptance by the mass of Frenchmen; ten years of instability, war, and economic hardship had numbed people's reactions. A strong man was needed to restore confidence, impose order, and ensure the gains of the revolution. Napoleon was just such a man.

The constitution submitted to the French people via a plebiscite was "short and obscure," as Napoleon had directed. The new Consulate government (1800-04) inaugurated a period of efficient, authoritarian rule. As first consul, Napoleon created a government open to talent where former nobles, old regime officials, and Jacobins worked together. This was not a military government, despite the dual role of Napoleon during his regime; he held executive power and commanded the military. When war with Austria recommenced in the spring of 1800, Napoleon led the French forces into northern Italy, defeating the enemy at the Battle of Marengo in June. Peace with Austria was followed in 1802 by the Treaty of Amiens with Britain.

The Little General Becomes Emperor

Meanwhile, domestic affairs occupied Napoleon's attention; a concordat was signed with Pope Pius VII, ending the disunity that had plagued the church in France since the early Revolution. Freedom of religion, civil marriage, and divorce were permitted. The Concordat was in effect in France until 1905. The first consul restored law and order by establishing a strong police force. Censorship was strictly applied. Napoleon founded the Legion of Honor which recognized meritorious service to the state; it is still given as a reward to outstanding individuals. His policies were popular with the majority of Frenchmen and, in 1802, Napoleon was overwhelmingly voted consul for life by plebiscite. The final step in the meteoric rise of this unusual man came in May 1804 when the French voted to

approve Napoleon's creation of an Empire; the little Corsican general was now Napoleon I, Emperor of the French. His coronation took place on December 2, 1804, in Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris in the presence of the pope. Napoleon himself placed the crown on his head, and then crowned his wife. Through his popularity with the French masses, the emperor held power and brought victories, glory, and the most effective government France had ever experienced. He was a reformer, and organizer, administrator, and lawmaker. Equality was stressed at the expense of liberty; legal equality and equality of opportunity were guaranteed, Careers were open to all capable men. The middle classes benefitted from the policy of careers open to talent and from Napoleon's protectionist economic programs. He established the Bank of France which stabilized the national financial system. Everyone was obligated to pay taxes, direct and indirect. The state promoted industry, gave grants to new industries, and prizes for inventions. New roads were built, new crops introduced, and employment bureaus set up.

Napoleon centralized the government of France in ways only dreamed of by former monarchs. All officials in the 83 administrative departments were appointed from Paris; a modern bureaucracy was created which has remained to this day. Local autonomy was obliterated. A national police system was directed by a Minister of Police.

One of the greatest achievements of the regime was the codification of law, the Napoleonic Codes. Laid out in seven codes, it has survived with some revision until the present day. The civil code (1804) regulated aspects of society such as individual liberty, equality before the law and in taxation, freedom from arbitrary arrest, divorce, and religious freedom. Women's rights were severely limited, and they were deemed "less equal than men." In the criminal code, the protection of society was paramount; thus, the prosecution had more rights than the defense. The penal code allowed for execution by the guillotine. The codes were a composite of laws from the old regime, the Revolution, and from tradition.

Another lasting legacy of the Age of Napoleon was the education system which established lycees (roughly high schools) which prepared students for university study. Grandes Ecoles trained men as engineers, teachers, and scholars in science and the humanities. The entire system was under the control of the Imperial University--an administrative body which determined curricula, chose texts, and oversaw examinations. This centralized system exists today. Little attention was given to the education of women, who were "to believe, not to think," Napoleon declared. Under the Empire, the Bibliotheque Nationale was enlarged, the Archives Nationales was (and still is) housed in a former aristocratic mansion in Paris, and the Louvre palace was made into one of the greatest art museums in Europe. Classical style monuments and public works were begun which served as symbols of the power of the regime.

Between 1804 and 1812, Napoleon forged an empire, the largest since Roman times, by war and diplomacy. With the Grande Armee of about 200,000 men, a professional officer corps, and the ranks filled with volunteers and conscripts, Napoleon defeated the mightiest states in Europe. The emperor was an innovator; he never fought two battles using the same methods. He simply engaged the enemy and made decisions as the situation required. His presence on the field of battle was worth 50,000 men, according to the Duke of Wellington; French troops were certain of victory if the "Little Corporal" was with them. Military success allowed Napoleon to crown himself "King of Italy" in 1805. His stepson, Eugene de Beauharnais, was appointed viceroy, and he never disappointed Napoleon.

The English proved to be one of the most implacable enemies of France, and Napoleon was determined to invade and defeat this "nation of shopkeepers." However, he would have to control the channel, which proved to be impossible because of English naval superiority and the destruction of the French fleet at the Battle of Trafalgar in October 1805. But by this time, Napoleon had turned his mighty army against the Austrians and Russians, defeating them at Ulm (October 1805) and at Austerlitz (on December 2, 1805, the anniversary of his coronation as emperor). A month later, he gave the throne of Naples to his brother Joseph; King Joseph initiated enlightened reforms which were beginning to have a beneficial effect when he was made king of Spain in 1808. Holland also received a Bonaparte monarch; Louis and his wife Hortense were accepted by the Dutch as the only alternative to being annexed to France. Napoleon's penchant for organization was particularly evident in the German states. In

1806, he proclaimed himself Protector of the Confederation of the Rhine, and the archaic Holy Roman Empire ceased to exist.

Russian Tsar, French Emperor Make Peace

Prussia grew fearful of Napoleon's future intentions and allied with Russia. The 37-year-old French emperor destroyed the Prussian army under the command of two aged warriors, Prince Hohenlohe and the Duke of Brunswick, at the battles of Jena and Auerstadt. Berlin was occupied and the French army then headed east to confront the Russians. In February 1807, the two powers fought the bloody battle of Eylau in Poland. It was an indecisive contest, but in June, Napoleon's veterans achieved a great victory over the main Russian army at Friedland. Peace was made at Tilsit, on a small island in the middle of a river, by the Tsar of All the Russia (Alexander I) and the Emperor of the French. They talked of creating spheres of influence in Europe and dividing up the ailing Ottoman Empire between France and Russia. As a result of Napoleon's military achievements, the duchy of Warsaw, the Kingdom of Westphalia, the grand duchy of Berg, the state of the Illyrian Provinces (in the Balkans), and the duchy of Tuscany came under French control.

Napoleon appeared unstoppable. He had repeatedly defeated the great powers of Europe, one at a time, had rearranged the map of Europe, and imposed French hegemony (dominance) from the Atlantic to the borders of Russia. His ambition seemed limitless--but he was not omnipotent. If England could not be invaded, Napoleon would defeat her by destroying her economy. He instituted the Continental System by the Berlin Decree, whereby he declared all European ports closed to English goods and ships and to ships carrying British products. It failed in its objective but other events proved to be more troubling to the would-be Master of Europe.

Spain, ostensibly an ally of France, was governed by an incompetent and corrupt government. It was not a threat to France, but it was a major leak in the Continental System and a possible site for a British landing on the continent. Portugal was similarly viewed. Napoleon managed to coerce the Spanish minister Godoy to allow a French army to march through Spain to Portugal; Lisbon was taken in November 1807. More French troops poured into Spain, and Murat entered Madrid in March 1808. By autumn, a French army of 300,000 had been sent to conquer the peninsula. But fighting in Spain was not like the war in Germany and Austria or in Italy. For the first time, guerrilla forces were utilized by an adversary. Moreover, the British under the future duke of Wellington were able to dislodge the French from Portugal. For five years, the Spanish armies lost every battle, yet the French could not win a decisive victory. Spain became Napoleon's "bleeding sore," a struggle of hideous atrocities on both sides. Heartened by Spanish resistance, the Austrians embarked on a new campaign; in a series of four battles in the spring and summer of 1809, Napoleon defeated--but could not destroy--the Austrian army. Russia was making hostile murmurings, and in France, conscription was becoming more difficult. Moreover, the pope had excommunicated Napoleon for taking papal lands in Italy.

Napoleon was also concerned about the perpetuation of his new dynasty. He needed a son, an heir. In December 1809, he reluctantly divorced Josephine, and the following March married the 18-year-old Habsburg archduchess Marie Louise of Austria. A son was born one year later. Unfortunately for the conduct of the Spanish conflict, Napoleon became a "homebody" and remained in Paris. However, he continued to work to extend French control over more areas of Europe. And from the end of 1810, when Tsar Alexander of Russia withdrew support from the Continental System and broke his alliance with France, Napoleon began massive preparations for war. Russia's actions were indicative of widespread discontent in Europe, an increasingly prevalent anti-French sentiment.

Napoleon was determined to force Russian adherence to the Continental System. The campaign must be short and swift; if anything but a decisive victory, the emperor knew his allies would take advantage of his failure and desert him, or worse, rebel against French domination. Even the French might turn against him and threaten his regime.

In June 1812, Napoleon had 611,000 French and allied troops ready to invade Russia. As the Grande Armée approached the Russian frontier, the tsar's army withdrew into the vastness of their country, relying on a "scorched-earth policy" to weaken the advancing enemy. Finally at Borodino, the armies clashed in an indecisive battle. Napoleon entered Moscow on September 14, and that night the city was in flames. But the occupiers lacked food, forage and shelter. Tsar Alexander refused to negotiate, and on October 17, Napoleon gave the order to retreat. Men and horses outfitted for a summer campaign suffered horribly as the Russian winter set in. When the ragged, freezing, starving men reached Vilna (in Poland), only 40,000 remained of the main army. Napoleon left his army and hurried to Paris. News of the Russian disaster spread rapidly, and he feared the reaction of the French who were growing war-weary.

Napoleon had made two serious errors in judgment: fighting a two-front war--in Spain and in Russia--and forcing Europe to abide by the Continental System. In Spain, the French were being worn down and driven toward their own frontier. Napoleon ordered his brother Joseph to concentrate on protecting the southern frontier of France. After the French defeat at Vitoria in June 1812, Joseph fled to France, and Wellington crossed into France in October 1813. The subject states of Europe were encouraged by these events; Napoleon would have to fight to save his throne. In May 1813, the French smashed the Russians and Prussians at Lutzen and Bautzen. The Austrians joined the allies after learning of the French defeat at Vitoria. Badly outnumbered, Napoleon was able to defeat the Austrians at Dresden but at Leipzig (October 1813), his fortunes failed. The seemingly invincible warrior had been beaten. As he led the French army across the Rhine, imperial control in the German state crumbled.

Emperor Abdicates, Is Exiled to Elba

The allies did not intend to destroy Napoleon personally or France as a great power. Austria, for one, feared that crushing France would allow the Russians to become the ascendant power in Europe. The allies offered France its "natural frontiers"--the Alps, the Pyrenees, and the Rhine: a larger France than in prerevolutionary days. Napoleon vacillated until it was too late. The allies formed the Grand Alliance with the goal of invading France and defeating Napoleon. Greatly outnumbered, Napoleon fought the most brilliant campaign of his career. Ever hopeful, and viewing each success as a good sign, Napoleon simply could not triumph over allied numbers and determination. His wife and son fled Paris before it capitulated; he would never see them again. Conceding defeat when his generals refused to fight any longer, the emperor abdicated on April 11, 1814, and was exiled to the island of Elba off the coast of Italy.

Louis XVIII was restored to the throne of his ancestors by the allies who convened a European Congress at Vienna in September 1814. While they labored to redraw the map of Europe and restore some semblance of legitimate authority in the various states, Napoleon risked making a bid to return to power. After landing in southern France, he made his way towards Paris, gathering support as he marched. This brief episode of bravado and unrealistic expectations ended in inglorious defeat at the hands of the allies in the battle of Waterloo (June 1815). Even now, the French government was willing to accept Napoleon's son as his successor, but the allies forced them to accept the colorless Louis XVIII again.

Napoleon surrendered to the English on July 15 and asked for asylum in England. His request denied, the deposed emperor was put aboard a British ship, the *Northumberland*, and three months later reached the island of St. Helena in the south Atlantic (about 1,300 miles from Africa, 2,400 mile from Brazil). The golden eagles, under which the Grande Armée had conquered an empire, were gone, and Napoleon, a lonely "eagle in a cage," died six years later, on May 5, 1821, probably of stomach cancer. "If I had succeeded, I should have been the greatest man known to history," Napoleon reflected near the end of his life. In his will, he said he wished to be buried "on the banks of the Seine, among the French people whom I have loved so much." And in December 1840, his remains were returned to France and buried beneath the grand dome of Les Invalides in Paris. His name has become legendary, and his legacy lives on in France today.

Further Readings

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"Napoleon I Bonaparte." *Historic World Leaders*. Gale, 1994. *World History In Context*. Web. 10 June 2013.

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