

---

## **The Story of Napoleon Bonaparte**



***“Such work as mine is not done twice in a century....I have saved the Revolution as it lay dying. I have cleansed it of its crimes, and have held it up to the people shining with fame. I have inspired France and Europe with new ideas that will never be forgotten.”***

NAPOLEON, quoted in Napoleon at St. Helena.

How did a young Corsican from a minor noble family, whose native language was not even French, become supreme ruler of one of the most important countries in Europe?

Born in 1769 in Ajaccio, Corsica just as the island was passing from the hands of the Republic of Genoa to those of France. He attended a French military school for impoverished sons of nobility. Unlike many French nobles, Napoleon supported the Revolution.



From 1792 to 1794, the French armies struggled to save the Republic from its foreign and internal enemies. In 1794 the tide turned, enabling France to go on the offensive and to carry war to its neighbors rather than desperately fight to save itself. However war was expensive and the Directory government from 1795 to 1799 encouraged its generals to exact tribute from the local populations they “liberated” in order to pay for the maintenance of the French army. While fighting far from home, the generals acted more and more on their own, paying their armies out of local treasures and overseeing the administration of conquered territories.

Like the other generals Napoleon Bonaparte benefited from this system but he was still different due to his talent for seizing every military opportunity. In 1796 he took a poorly equipped army of 40,000 men and swept the Austrian armies out of their possessions in Italy. With thanks to a combination of skill, luck and patronage he was given command of the Italian campaign in 1796 (at the young age of 27).

When he returned to Paris in 1797 bearing the treaty that he himself had negotiated with the Austrians, giving the French control over much of Italy, Belgium, and the Rhineland, the French welcomed him as a hero. His taste of power and glory in Italy inspired him with great ambitions for the future.

His unexpected success in Italy in 1796-1797 made him an instant legend, both among the French people at home and among his soldiers in the Army of Italy. Yet from the very start of his ascent, overreaching ambition proved to be a potentially fatal flaw.

When Napoleon returned from Italy in 1797, the Directory government wanted to send him off to invade England (mainly to send him out of town!). Napoleon convinced them that an invasion of Egypt would suit their purposes better, for it would open the route to India where Great Britain had earlier expelled the French and established an important empire. Egypt had historical importance, “We must go to the Orient...it is

there that great glory had always been gained.” His search for glory nearly ended his career.

In July of 1798 he invaded Egypt under the pretense that he was reasserting the Ottoman sultan’s authority there against the local Mameluke rulers. In the Battle of the Pyramids, outside of Cairo, he defeated the Mameluke cavalry. He was so confident of his success that he brought with him scores of scientists, engineers, and archaeologists to study the treasures and riches of the Orient.

On August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1798 the British Admiral Horatio Nelson trapped the French fleet in Aboukir Bay (off the Egyptian coast) and captured or destroyed all but four of the French ships. He was now cut off from France and the British still ruled the Mediterranean.

Napoleon tried to respect the Islamic religion but his occupation created resentment and revolt. Early in 1799 he marched his troops into Syria but was forced to retreat to Egypt by an outbreak of the plague and the difficulty of supplying his army. His clever stream of propaganda kept the French at home ignorant of his troubles.

In October of 1799 Napoleon managed to escape from the British stranglehold and return to France. His return was at a critical moment in the political affairs of the Republic. Leading members of the government secretly sought a constitutional overhaul and they need the general to make their plot work. Napoleon forced his way into a meeting of the deputies (who had previously outlawed him as a would-be dictator). On November 9, 1799 Napoleon and his brother Lucien, rallied some troops waiting outside the meeting and broke up the session by armed force. Napoleon was then named First Consul. The plotters in the legislature expected to control the young general (he was not old enough to hold office under the Constitution of 1795), but soon they found themselves outmaneuvered. A sudden seizure of power like Napoleon’s is known as a coup-from the French phrase **coup d’état** (blow of state).

Napoleon steadily gained support from the new regime by promising a regime of law and order and by making peace with the pope and the Catholic Church. Some conflicts over religion continued, but the pope had granted Napoleon more or less everything he wanted in exchange for bringing France back into the Catholic fold. Napoleon reaffirmed the principal of religious tolerance for the Protestants, who were organized in a number of consistories under state control.

At the time of Napoleon’s coup, France was still at war. In 1799, British diplomats assembled the **Second Coalition of anti-French powers** – Britain, Austria and Russia- with the goal of driving Napoleon from power. Once again Napoleon rode from Paris at the head of his troops. In 1800 a **plebiscite** – vote of the people, approved the fourth Constitution in eight years. The result of this vote gave all real power to Napoleon.

Napoleon created order and stability within France. He kept many of the changes that came with the Revolution. He supported laws that would both strengthen the central government and achieve some of the goals of the Revolution such as a stable economy and more equality in taxation.

### Creations under Napoleon in 1800

- Created an efficient tax-collecting system
- Established a national bank
- Dismissed corrupt government officials
- Created the **lycées** – government run public schools – for children of ordinary citizens and the wealthy
- Used the lycées to train people for public office.

The clergy and the peasants wanted to restore the position of the church in France. Napoleon signed a **concordat** – agreement – with Pope Pius VII creating a new relationship between church and state. The government recognized the influence of the church but rejected church control in national affairs. Specifically the French government would appoint bishops but in turn the bishops would appoint parish priests. The concordat gained Napoleon the support of the organized church as well as the majority of the French people.

In 1801 Napoleon came to terms with Austria and then in 1802 he made peace with Britain, Spain and the Dutch Republic, ending a decade of nearly non-stop war. However Napoleon was not content just being the master of France. He wanted to control the rest of Europe and reassert French power in the New World. He envisioned that his western empire would include Louisiana, Florida, French Guiana and the French West Indies. He knew that the key to this area was the sugar producing French colony Saint Domingue on the island of Hispaniola. This peace gave Napoleon the chance to send an army to Saint Domingue to reestablish slavery in the colonies and capture **Toussaint L'Overture**. Even though his army captures Toussaint and sent him to die in a French prison, Napoleon's army succumbed to yellow fever. In addition the former slaves rebelled, broke all ties with France and created the country we call today Haiti. Upon his return to France in 1802 Napoleon declared himself Consul for Life.

When the expedition to Saint Domingue was unsuccessful and the U.S. government showing interest in buying the port of New Orleans, Napoleon recognized that he could make some money and cut his losses in the Americas. He offered to sell all of the Louisiana Territory and in 1803 President Jefferson's administration agreed to buy the lands for \$ 15 million. Napoleon was delighted as not only could he gain money but he would also further punish his British enemies.

By the end of 1802 the Republic of France ceased to exist and the new authoritarian state was taking place. Elections no longer served any purpose. Napoleon created a **Legion of Honor** to reward military and bureaucratic service to his state. Napoleon forced censorship upon the country; newspapers were suppressed, unruly theaters closed and critical authors were sent into exile . Finally Napoleon's goal was achieved; On December 2, 1804 he crowned himself Emperor – with the pope watching!

The new Emperor created the **Napoleonic Code**:-

- All the sales of property since 1789 were now confirmed
- Equality under the law was now guaranteed
- A more paternalistic legal system was installed – husbands and fathers gained near complete control over their wives and children, employers wielded great authority over their employees
- Careers were based on merit not birth
- What remained of feudalism was now abolished

Emperor Napoleon I increasingly emulated the court of the old regime he toppled. He hoped to take his place among the legitimate monarchs of Europe. He even married a member of the Habsburg family to establish his credentials. He was popular amongst the French people but neither the state nor this popular support survived defeat in war.

Napoleon gave up on his ambitions in the New World and focused again on controlling Europe. He had already annexed Austria, Netherlands and part of Italy to France. He had even created a puppet government in Switzerland. Fearful of Napoleon's ambitions the British persuaded Russia, Austria and Sweden to join a **Third Coalition** against France. Napoleon once again led his troops from France and in a series of battles crushed his enemies. This led to Austria, Prussia and Russia signing peace treaties with Napoleon whose proud and patriotic army had allowed him to create the largest European Empire since the Romans. The only major enemy left to conquer was the British and their power lay in their navy. In 1805 Napoleon tried to remove that threat.

In the war against the third coalition Napoleon only lost one war – that was the **Battle of Trafalgar** – against the British navy. Once again, the same leader who defeated him in Egypt – Admiral Horatio Nelson – defeated Napoleon off the Straits of Gibraltar - the southern coast of Spain- in 1805. Nelson was mortally wounded during the battle but the defeat had two major results for the French:

1. It assured supremacy of the British navy for the next hundred years
2. The defeat forced Napoleon to give up his plans to invade Britain.

Between 1805 and 1810 Napoleon reached the height of his power in Europe.

1805-Napoleon made himself King of Italy

1806-Brother Joseph as King of Naples

1806-Brother Louis as King of Netherlands.

1806-Brother Joseph moved to King of Spain

1805-French state paid salaries of Protestant pastors

1806-French Jews organized into a system of government-supervised consistories. Jewish assimilation to French ways encouraged.

1807-Brother Jerome as King of Westphalia

## Napoleons three mistakes that cost him his empire.

1. In 1806 because he could not invade he tried to isolate Great Britain commercially through an **embargo** and **blockade** of goods called the “**continental system.**” The move failed because France could not provide the same manufactured goods as Britain for even somewhat similar prices. France could not compete with the rapidly industrializing British. To make the embargo more encompassing Napoleon invaded Portugal and then occupied Spain in 1808. In return the British created a blockade of their own. They diverted neutral ships bound for the European continent to British ports. Here they were searched and taxed. Because they had a stronger navy the British could make their blockade work when the French was failing. American ships were amongst those stopped by the British navy. Angered, the U.S. Congress declared war on the British in 1812. The War of 1812 ended in a tie, however it was only a minor inconvenience to Britain in its struggle with Napoleon.

2. The Spanish rebelled with financial and military support from Britain and they tied down Napoleon’s armies by **guerilla warfare**. By 1813 British, Portuguese and Spanish troops had driven out the French. During the **Peninsular War** as it became to be called, the French Empire was greatly weakened. Napoleon, in the end, lost about 300,000 men! The **nationalism** shown by the Spanish people against their French conquerors soon spread across countries in Europe. Like the Spanish guerrillas, Germans and Italians and other conquered peoples turned against the French.

3. In 1812 Napoleon’s thirst for power led to his most disastrous mistake of all. Even though Alexander I had become Napoleon’s ally, the Russian czar refused to stop selling grain to Britain. In addition the French and Russian rulers had different ideas about who should control Poland. Because of the breakdown of their alliance Napoleon, with 500,000 troops decided to invade Russia.

In June 1812 Napoleon and his Grand Army – mostly of non-French soldiers who showed very little loyalty to the Emperor entered Russia. Alexander pulled back his troops, refusing to be lured into an unequal battle. As the Russians retreated towards Moscow they practiced a **scorched-earth policy**. They burnt all of their grain fields and killed their livestock so as to leave nothing for the enemy to eat as it occupied the Russian lands. Desperate soldieries deserted the French army in search of scraps of food.

On September 7, 1812 the two armies finally clashed at the Battle of Borodino. Napoleon won a narrow victory which allowed him to enter Moscow. Rather than surrender Russia’s “holy city” to the French, Alexander had the city torched. Napoleon stayed in Moscow for five weeks expected the czar to make him a peace offer, but no offer came. By then it was the middle of October, too late to advance farther into Russia and perhaps too late to retreat. Napoleon ordered his starving troops to turn back. As the snows began to fall in early November, Russian raiders mercifully attacked Napoleon’s ragged army. Finally, in the middle of December, the last survivors straggled out of Russia. In the end Napoleon’s grand Army of 500,000 only had 10,000 survivors.

Napoleon’s enemies were quick to take advantage. Britain, Prussia, Russia and Sweden joined forces against him in the **Fourth Coalition**. Napoleon had hoped to marry into the Austrian royal family but Austria joined the coalition. All of the main

powers of Europe were now at war with France. In only a few months Napoleon raised another army but it was inexperienced. It was defeated at the Battle of Leipzig in October 1813. Napoleon's empire quickly crumbled. By January of 1814 the Austrian, Prussian and Russian armies were pushing towards Paris. In March the Russian czar and the Prussian king paraded through the streets of Paris. Napoleon wanted to fight on but his generals refused.

In April 1814 the defeated emperor gave up his throne and accepted the terms of surrender created by Alexander I. Napoleon was given a small pension and exiled to Elba, an island off the coast of Italy. Unfortunately at the age of 45 Napoleon was not ready to retire! As Napoleon arrived in Elba a new king was crowned in France. Louis XVIII was the brother of Louis XVI (his son and heir had died in prison). However he was unpopular with the people, especially the peasants as he began to undo the land reforms created by the Revolution.

Napoleon escaped from Elba and on March 1, 1815 landed in France to liberate France. Thousands rallied behind him and his army swelled with volunteers as he neared Paris. Within days Napoleon was again emperor and the king fled to the French coast. In response the European allies quickly raised their armies. At the Battle of Waterloo (in Belgium) a major battle was fought. On June 18, 1815 the fighting began and two days later Napoleon's exhausted troops were defeated by the British Duke of Wellington and his Prussian allies.

This defeat ended Napoleon's last bid for power (known as the Hundred Days). Taking no chances the British shipped Napoleon to St. Helena, a remote island in the South Atlantic. There, in lonely exile for six years he died. Shortly before his death, he attempted to justify all he had done during his life.

Napoleon Bonaparte was a legend even before he died. In addition his death did nothing to diminish his stature in history. Although Napoleon himself did not write memoirs, he provided ample material for those close to him to do so.

Without doubt Napoleon was a military genius and a brilliant administrator. Yet all of his victories must be compared to the great losses of life that took place. Of his many achievements only his law code and some of the government reforms are in force today. Ironically they were not won on a battlefield. In the end Napoleon's defeat opened the door for the freed European countries to establish a new order.

\*\*\*\*\*