

Napoleon Bonaparte

Napoleon's rise to power

Napoleon's career largely resulted from the military innovations he inherited from the French Revolution, such as mass conscription which made possible the use of block tactics in order to attack in column and eliminated the need for supply lines, thus making French armies much more mobile. The Revolution also provided him with young officers who had largely developed these new tactics and were willing and able to successfully implement them on the battlefield. Therefore, the two characteristics of Napoleonic warfare, massed firepower and mobility were already present when he started his career.

Napoleon Bonaparte himself was barely French, his homeland Corsica having just become part of France two years before his birth in 1769. He attended a French military school and, while not a great student, picked things up quickly and finished a three-year program in one year. His Corsican accent and wild appearance set him apart from his classmates. Although sociable, he liked to be alone a lot. At an early age he exhibited the qualities that would earn him and France an empire: remarkable intellect, puritanical self discipline, a virtually inexhaustible energy level, and a willingness to plan things out in such detail as to leave nothing to chance.

At age sixteen, Napoleon became a second lieutenant in the royal artillery, but his non-noble and Corsican origins left him little chance of promotion. All that changed with the French Revolution. In 1789, he went back to Corsica to fight for its independence. After quarrelling with the leader of the revolt, he returned to France and joined the Jacobins. In 1793, the young Bonaparte became a national hero by leading the recapture of the French port of Toulon from the British.

It was in 1795 that Napoleon got his big break when his famous "whiff of grapeshot" mowed down rebels in the streets of Paris and saved the new government, the Directory, from counter-revolution. This event catapulted Napoleon into the command of the Army of Italy. He led this army against the Austrians in a lightning campaign that showed all the hallmarks of Napoleonic generalship: rapid movement, the ability to outnumber the enemy at strategic points with men and massed firepower, and a knack for doing the unexpected to keep his enemy constantly off balance. Napoleon drove with characteristic speed through northern Italy and then into Austria, forcing it to sign the Treaty of Campo Formio. However, this victory and the prospect of renewed French offensives alarmed kings all over Europe who formed the Second Coalition of Britain, Austria, Prussia, and Russia against France.

Napoleon saw Britain as his main enemy, because it funded France's other enemies and also had a powerful navy protecting its coasts. As a result, Napoleon came up with a bold, if ill conceived, plan: conquer Egypt and use it as a stepping-stone to invade British-held India. At first, all went well. Napoleon's fleet eluded the great British admiral, Lord Nelson and landed in Egypt in 1798. Then things fell apart. Lord Nelson found the French fleet and demolished it in the Battle of the Nile, thus stranding the French army in Egypt. Napoleon then got word of political turmoil in France. He thereby abandoned his army (which later surrendered to the British) and slipped across to France. He then took part in a daring plot to overthrow the government. The conspiracy succeeded and Napoleon became First Consul of France in 1799.

Consolidating his power

The government that Napoleon and his allies set up, the Consulate, was a mockery of democracy. People elected delegates who chose other delegates who chose other delegates from whom were appointed legislators who had no power. Napoleon was firmly in charge of France. However, his position was far from secure, because France was still ringed by the Second Coalition.

Napoleon first attacked Austrian forces in northern Italy, which he barely defeated at the Battle of Marengo (1800). This victory allowed Napoleon to return to France in triumph and further consolidate his position there. Peace settled over Europe, at least temporarily.

Having fought his enemies to a standstill and made France the most feared and respected power in Europe, Napoleon could now pursue his next goal: becoming emperor of France. This was a tricky situation, since the French people might not take kindly to getting a new king so soon after getting rid of the old one. Using the title of emperor rather than king would partly ease people's misgiving and also give them a sense of France's imperial superiority over the rest of Europe.

The coronation in 1804 was a splendid affair with even the pope coming to crown Napoleon. In a display of arrogance, Napoleon took the crown from the pope and placed it on his own head. The next day the emperor gave bronze eagles to his regiments as standards reminiscent of the Roman Empire. He even created a new nobility of dukes and counts from his officers in order to make a court that rivaled the splendor of other European courts.

The rest of Europe saw Napoleon's imperial crown as part of a plan to rule all of Europe. This triggered the war of the Third Coalition of Austria, Britain, and Russia against France and Spain (1803-1807). Once again, Napoleon was faced with his old nemesis, Britain, that "nation of shopkeepers" (to quote Adam Smith) whose navy shielded them from his military might. If only the British navy could be removed, Napoleon could slip across the Channel with his army and bring Britain to its knees. His plan for removing the British fleet was to lure it to the West Indies with the combined French and Spanish fleets. This would leave the Channel open for the French to cross. However, the British commander, Nelson, guessed this plan and managed to blockade the French and Spanish fleets in the Spanish port of Cadiz. When they tried to break out, the British crushed them in the Battle of Trafalgar (1805). Britain remained safe as its navy still ruled the waves.

Seeing his failure at sea, Napoleon marched his army eastward where he met the much larger combined armies of Austria and Russia at Austerlitz. Concentrating his forces in the center, he drove through and split the Russian and Austrian armies, winning possibly the most brilliant victory of his career (1805).

Austerlitz gave Napoleon the power to declare the Holy Roman Empire defunct, making him the heir apparent of Rome's imperial grandeur. He also used this opportunity to form the Confederation of the Rhine from the German princes grateful to him for the lands he had given them before. The Confederation consisted of about half of Germany and formed a large buffer zone on France's eastern border. This upset Prussia who had been sitting on the sidelines, but now decided to join the war. However as quickly as Prussia entered the war, its forces were shattered by Napoleon's blitzkrieg (1806).

Finally, there was Russia. After a bloody indecisive battle in the snow at Eylau, Napoleon won a decisive victory at Friedland. Now he could impose his kind of peace on Europe. Negotiations between Napoleon and Czar Alexander I were conducted on a raft in the middle of the Nieman River while Frederick William III of Prussia had to await his fate along the shore. The settlement for Prussia was not kind, taking nearly half of its land and population to help carve out the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, a revived Poland that owed its existence and lasting loyalty to Napoleon. France and Russia recognized each other's spheres of influence, but France certainly emerged as the dominant power in Europe. Besides France, Napoleon directly ruled Belgium, Holland, the West Bank of the Rhine, the Papal States, and Venice. Then there were the states that were nominally free but lived under French law, administration, and usually French rulers who happened to be Napoleon's relatives: the kingdom of Naples, the Kingdom of Italy, Switzerland, the Confederation of the Rhine, the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, and Spain (after 1808). Finally, there were Napoleon's allies who had to follow him in war: Austria, Prussia, and Russia.

The Napoleonic state

While Napoleon is mainly remembered for his military campaigns and conquests, much of his importance lies in his government of France and how it consolidated the gains of the Revolution. For one thing, he kept the Revolution's administrative reform of dividing France into 83 *departements* whose governors he appointed centrally. He centralized the tax system (still

used today) and established the Bank of France to stabilize the economy of France. The Revolution's system of free but mandatory education was kept and expanded with military uniforms and discipline being imposed. Napoleon also consolidated many of the Revolution's social and legal advances into five law codes. His civil code maintained the equality of all men before the law, but reasserted the power of the husband over the wife, thus negating some of the influence women had exerted during the Revolution.

Although not a religious man, Napoleon recognized the attachment of most French people to the Catholic Church and how the Revolution's policies against the Church had caused discontent and revolts. Therefore, in 1801 he made peace with the Church, recognizing it as the religion of the majority of Frenchmen. Napoleon may have consolidated some gains of the Revolution, but he repressed others, for his "police regulations" in many ways amounted to a police state. Such civil rights as freedom of speech and press were now things of the past as 62 of 73 newspapers were repressed, and all plays, posters, and public conversations had to meet strict standards of what Napoleon thought was proper. Napoleonic rule certainly had its darker side.

By 1808, Napoleon was at the pinnacle of power. He controlled most of Europe to some degree or other. France was tightly under control and efficiently run. But forces were converging that would bring the Napoleonic regime crashing down in ruins.

The Continental System and Spanish Ulcer

One power Napoleon could not reach was Britain, whose navy safely sheltered it against any continental invasion. The ill-fated invasion of Egypt and the Battle of Trafalgar both bore this out. But Napoleon was determined to bring Britain to its knees, and this time decided to strike the "nation of shopkeepers" where it would hurt the worst: the wallet. With most of Europe under his control, Napoleon imposed the Continental System to stop all European trade with Britain. Hopefully, this would strangle Britain economically and force it to come to terms. And while it did hurt Britain, it also hurt the rest of Europe wanting to trade for Britain's cheaper industrial goods. By a combination of bribing officials, forging documents to mask the British identity of merchant ships, and outright smuggling, the Continental System leaked like a sieve.

One big leak in the system was Portugal, which refused to join the embargo against Britain. Napoleon decided to plug this leak by taking over Portugal, which he did in several months. However, in order to reach Portugal, French troops had to cross Spain. Therefore, Napoleon decided to replace the Bourbon dynasty ruling Spain with a French regime led by his brother, Joseph, figuring the Spanish people would prefer French rule to that of the corrupt monarchy. However, Napoleon had completely misread the spirit of Spain.

On May 2, 1808, a popular revolt in Madrid and the severe French repression following it triggered a general uprising that spread like wildfire across Spain. What Napoleon had figured to be a simple operation turned into a full-scale war that dragged on for five years.

The Spanish method of fighting was ill suited to Napoleon's style of warfare. Instead of meeting the French in large pitched battles on Napoleon's terms, the Spanish launched hit and run raids to cut enemy communications and supply lines and ambush stragglers and foragers, called *guerilla war*. Such warfare tied down some 360,000 French troops in Spain and Portugal. Even a simple messenger going to France required an escort of several hundred cavalry. This war came to be called the "Spanish Ulcer" since it slowly bled the life out of the French army. Napoleon himself said the invasion of Spain was the worst mistake of his career. In 1813 the last French army in Spain was defeated.

Another shock came to Napoleon in 1809 when Austria, apparently inspired by the Spanish revolt, declared war on France again. Napoleon won the war quickly, but not before Austrian forces, showing their own nationalist spirit, inflicted a sharp defeat on the French. In the ensuing peace, Austria lost still more land and population as the price of daring to fight France. Napoleon divorced his wife, Josephine, and claimed an Austrian princess, Marie Louise, as his bride, hoping she would provide him with a legitimate heir to his throne as well as give him ties to established royalty.

This short war against Austria should have indicated to Napoleon that the tide of revolution was starting to favor France's enemies. Both Austria and Prussia were adopting French innovations such as drafting subjects into their armies, while Prussia went so far as to abolish serfdom. Speeches by such men as Johannes Fichte urged the unification of a strong Germany against France and showed a strong undercurrent of nationalism developing there. However, it was events further east that would be Napoleon's real undoing.

Napoleon's invasion of Russia

Napoleon was determined to crush Russia. Instead of relying on the typical Napoleonic blitzkrieg, he decided to use the weight of numbers, some 600,000 men drawn from all over his empire, to crush his foe. In June 1812, the Grand Army of France entered Russia.

The march going in was rough, with summer heat, flies, and dust plaguing the French and their allies all along. The Russian used a Scorched Earth Policy (burning anything of use before the French before they could get it) that also wore them out. Garrison duty, desertions, and even suicides from despair over the endless march reduced the French army to 125,000 men by September. Finally, the two armies met in Moscow. What ensued was the fiercest, bloodiest, and most horrible day of fighting in the Napoleonic era. After a full day of hammering mercilessly at each other, 40,000 Russians and 20,000 French were lost, including 39 French Generals who were killed or seriously wounded. Even though the Russians eventually retreated, with those sorts of losses, nobody could really claim a victory.

The Russians left Moscow to the French, but little else in the way of food and other supplies. Soon after its occupation, Moscow mysteriously went up in flames, thus denying the French any shelter as well. Napoleon, hoping the Czar would come to terms, waited until October 19 to evacuate Moscow and head home. By then it was too late. The Russian winter was quickly setting in.

By Russian standards it was not such a bad winter, but for an army that had brought mosquito nets for continuing its campaign into India, it was a disaster. Men froze from exposure to the elements and starved as supply lines broke down and the surrounding scorched earth yielded little or no food. Many of the French horses died simply because Napoleon had refused to let them be shod for ice. With each day, the situation became more desperate and the retreat degenerated into a disturbance. Of 600,000 men who invaded Russia, only 55,000 made it back.

The end of the Napoleonic Empire

Napoleon's defeat in Russia was a signal to the rest of Europe to rise up against French rule, and Austria, Prussia, Russia, and Britain formed a new coalition to liberate the continent. Napoleon still had some fight left in him and raised new armies to defend his empire. However, the emperor was not as sharp as he used to be and he wasted men on needless marches and countermarches. The year 1813 saw heavy fighting as the allies pushed the French back across Germany. The remaining French forces quickly retreated across Germany while the rest of Napoleon's empire in Holland, Italy, and Spain threw off the yoke of French rule. In fifteen months of disastrous campaigning, Napoleon had lost one million men.

While Napoleon showed flashes of his old brilliance in hurling one invading army after another back from French soil, it was still too little too late. On April 13, 1814, Napoleon was forced to abdicate. The man who just recently had ruled most of Europe now had to leave France in disguise to save himself from mobs of French people bitter over having suffered so much from his wars.

However, Napoleon was not quite through. The allies had generously given him the tiny Mediterranean island of Elba to rule, even with an army of 900 men. In 1815 he escaped to France, seized control of the government, and fought one last battle against the Anglo-Dutch and Prussian armies near the Belgian village of Waterloo. It was a poorly run battle on Napoleon's part and ended in total defeat for the French. This time Napoleon was exiled to the island of St. Helena off the southern tip of Africa. He died there in 1821.

Based on the reading above, create a timeline of Napoleon's rise to power.

