

# Napoleon Bonaparte: Hero or Monster?

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## Background: Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821)

Napoleon Bonaparte rose to prominence as an artillery officer, and later general, during the chaotic aftermath of the French Revolution (1789-99). Following a coup d'etat he became ruler of France as First Consul of the French Republic from 1799 to 1804, self-appointed Emperor of the French from 1804 to 1814, and was briefly restored as Emperor in 1815. Ever self-aggrandizing, Napoleon also appointed himself as the King of Italy, Mediator of the Swiss Confederation and Protector of the Confederation of the Rhine.

Over the course of little more than a decade, the armies of France under his command fought almost every other European power and acquired control of most of continental Europe by conquest or alliance. The disastrous invasion of Russia in 1812 marked a turning point in his career and in French fortunes. In the War of the Sixth Coalition (1812-1814), an alliance of Austria, Prussia, Russia, Sweden, the United Kingdom and a number of German States, finally defeated him and drove him into exile on Elba. He staged a comeback known as the Hundred Days but was defeated at Waterloo on June 18 1815 and exiled to St Helena, a British possession in the South Atlantic.

In domestic policy, Napoleon is best known for presiding over the Code Napoléon (or Code civil des Français), a set of laws which replaced the 360 local codes of the Ancien Régime. He also created the French system of lycées - selective secondary schools - to train the future leaders and administrators of France. Other reforms include a tax code, road and sewer systems, the Banque de France (the country's central bank) and the Légion d'Honneur, which is still the highest decoration in France.

## Napoleon: The greatest ever military leader?

### For

Napoleon was a master tactician

Napoleon was a master planner

Napoleon was an inspirational leader of men

He was ruthless when he needed to be

### Against

Napoleon merely followed where others led

Napoleon excelled at war but couldn't manage peace

Napoleon was not the great planner

Napoleon's personal leadership was a weakness

Napoleon's treatment of his enemies was unforgiveable

Napoleon was brutal to his own soldiers

Napoleon is responsible for millions of deaths

### Napoleon was a master tactician

Napoleon was regarded by the military theorist Carl von Clausewitz as a genius in the art of war. He transformed late 18th-century warfare by abandoning the amateur, sporting approach to battles and putting the whole nation on a war footing with conscription and mass production. He marched huge armies rapidly from one place to another, calculating which roads and what speeds the different detachments needed to take; he developed the use of light field guns that could dash from one part of a battlefield to another and focus maximum fire power. He used heavy cavalry to break through military lines and fought battles to destroy the strength of the enemy, not just to win the day. He was adept at espionage and deception and often won battles by concealment of troop deployments. In 1805,

### Napoleon merely followed where others led

Most of the reforms attributed to Napoleon were introduced following the Seven Years War (1756–1763) which effectively ended France's position as a major colonial power in the Americas. After this, military planners of the Ancien Régime standardised and redesigned the artillery to include lighter, more mobile cannons; tactical experiments such as switching infantry from columns for movement into lines for combat were carried out and embodied in a 1788 drill book. It was the pre-revolutionary French general, the Comte de Guibert, who developed the idea of forming an army into autonomous divisions to permit rapid movement and flexible manoeuvre.

### Napoleon excelled at war but couldn't manage

for example, he quartered various army corps of 20,000 men each all over western Europe and brought them together with meticulous timing to encircle the Austrians at Ulm - taking them completely by surprise. Then he dispersed his men before converging rapidly on the Austrians and Russians at Austerlitz - a battle he considered his greatest victory. Wellington, when asked who was the greatest general of the day, answered: "In this age, in past ages, in any age, Napoleon."

### **Napoleon was a master planner**

Biographer Paul Johnson, though no admirer, has paid tribute to Napoleon's military genius. His map-reading skills and mathematical analysis of problems of supply and terrain were unparalleled. He knew how important it was to supply armies effectively, and to ensure they could move as swiftly as possible. This clear vision, together with the sheer size of the armies he put in the field, brought France, in the first decade of the 19th century, military hegemony on the continent.

### **Napoleon was an inspirational leader of men**

Among his troops, Napoleon inspired fierce loyalty bordering on worship. He created elite corps, such as the Imperial Guard, and was skilled at exploiting their revolutionary zeal. While the Duke of Wellington flogged his soldiers and called them 'scum', Napoleon gave his soldiers booty and women and introduced the Légion d'Honneur to recognise bravery. He made the army open to talent - four of his marshals rose from the lowest ranks. He made a point of walking the line of troops before a battle and talking to them of old times, a human touch that helped to raise morale. He shared the dangers of war and did not watch from afar, but led the charge. Wellington said that Napoleon was "worth 40,000 men" on the battlefield.

### **He was ruthless when he needed to be**

His decision to order the poisoning of French soldiers suffering from bubonic plague during the retreat from Egypt was only taken in the certain knowledge that any left behind alive would be tortured and beheaded by the Ottomans. While he did indulge in acts of exemplary cruelty, such as the massacre at Jaffa (1799), he did not decree or desire the wholesale murder of large numbers of innocent people - as Hitler did in the Holocaust.

### **peace**

After Austerlitz, Napoleon was advised by his foreign minister, Talleyrand, to treat the Austrians magnanimously. Instead, he imposed humiliating conditions on Austria, consolidating his control of Italy and breaking up what remained of the Holy Roman Empire. In doing so, he awakened national hatreds which brought about his downfall a decade later. In Spain, argues Charles Esdaile, the author of *Napoleon's Wars*, Napoleon constantly ordered his generals into attack, refusing to allow them to consolidate their hold on the territory they had gained. Consequently, the war became a long, bloody stalemate marked by shocking violence. Wellington later observed: "If you look through his campaigns you will find that his plan was always to try to give a great battle, gain a great victory, patch up a peace...and then hurry back to Paris. This I should say was the great benefit of what we did in Spain." Napoleon's attitude is revealed in his remark about Lord Castlereagh, Britain's representative at the 1815 Congress of Vienna which was convened to settle the map of Europe following Napoleon's defeat: "Castlereagh had the continent at his mercy...And he made peace as if he had been defeated. The imbecile!"

### **Napoleon was not the great planner**

Napoleon's armies travelled light and lived off the land, buying or stealing food from local people and sleeping out in the open. This was easy enough in the rich farmlands and temperate climates of western Europe. However Napoleon signally failed to realise that the same would not apply in Russia, where some half a million French soldiers and hundreds of cavalry horses perished from cold and starvation, and much of the artillery's firepower was abandoned in the Russian snow.

### **Napoleon's personal leadership was a weakness**

His refusal to brook any disagreement produced a cadre of marshals capable of carrying out orders well but incapable of thinking or acting for themselves. This proved disastrous at Waterloo. Wellington may have thought that Napoleon was "worth 40,000 men" on the battlefield, but he could not be everywhere at once.

### **Napoleon's treatment of his enemies was unforgiveable**

In 1799, after the fall of Jaffa, the French took thousands of prisoners who had accepted the word of a French officer that their lives would be spared if they surrendered without fighting. Instead Napoleon ordered that every single person - men, women and children - should be massacred. Because bullets and gunpowder were in short supply, he ordered his men to bayonet or drown the prisoners. Although veterans were disgusted by what they had to do, they dutifully took 4,400 people to a secluded beach where they were all murdered in cold blood.

### **Napoleon was brutal to his own soldiers**

When many of his men fell ill with bubonic plague in Egypt, Napoleon reduced the number of mouths to feed by poisoning those troops who showed no signs of recuperating. While he may have given his men medals and kind words, he led them to slaughter

without turning a hair. After the annihilation of his Grande Armée in Russia in 1812, he told Metternich, the statesman who would dominate Austrian and German politics until the Revolutions of 1848: "A man such as I am does not concern himself much about the lives of a million men." Wellington may have called his soldiers 'scum', but he was sparing of their lives. And he cried after Waterloo.

### **Napoleon is responsible for millions of deaths**

"The military record is unquestioned," writes historian Victor Davis Hanson: "17 years of wars, perhaps six million Europeans dead, France bankrupt, her overseas colonies lost." To this toll must be added anguish, hunger, disease, family breakdown and economic disruption - not just in Europe, but further afield in Africa, India and the Americas.

## **Napoleon: A defender and liberator not an aggressor**

### **For**

Napoleon's wars were wars of survival

The British were to blame

Napoleon was seen by contemporaries as a liberator

Britain also looted cultural artefacts

### **Against**

Napoleon's wars were about loot, not liberation

Napoleon's cheerleaders turned against him

The British did not want war

Many of Napoleon's campaigns were unprovoked and unnecessary

Napoleon was a cultural predator

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### **Napoleon's wars were wars of survival**

Vincent Cronin, a biographer of Napoleon, notes that much of the criticism directed at him assumes he was the cause of conflict, when the reality is that France was the victim of aggression by a series of coalitions which aimed to destroy the ideals of the Revolution. The European wars of the period really began in 1792 when the monarchies of Austria and Prussia, alarmed by the deposition of Louis XVI, declared that the French were "rabid dogs" and should be exterminated. France faced a coalition determined to return the hated Ancien Régime to power. It therefore followed a policy of expansion in an effort to create buffer states. In almost every war Napoleon fought, it was France who was the victim of aggression.

### **The British were to blame**

The root of the conflict was British aggression, argue Robert and Isabelle Tombs, the co-authors of *That Sweet Enemy: The French and the British from the Sun King to the Present*. The commercial and financial interests linked to the City of London supported the "patriotic cause" and colonial aggrandisement in Asia and the Americas, and this made conflict with France, a rival in both regions, inevitable. France even under Louis XIV was essentially on the defensive, determined to resist an aggressive British monopoly of

### **Napoleon's wars were about loot, not liberation**

The context of Napoleon's rise to power was the collapse of France's overseas power and trade and the bankruptcy of its finances. The purpose of his conquests, argue Robert and Isabelle Tombs, was to exploit the wealth, labour and blood of as much of Europe as he could seize for the benefit, not of the Grand Empire, but of France. French armies were quartered on foreign soil at foreign expense, huge indemnities were levied, foreign troops were conscripted and food, drink, clothing and money requisitioned. When, in 1793, the French occupied the tiny Duchy of Zweibrücken, they requisitioned all oats, hay, straw, brandy, leather, weapons, horses, cattle, sheep and harness, copper, lead, iron and church bells; 3,000 pairs of shoes and 500 pairs of boots were demanded immediately and all cloth was requisitioned to be made into uniforms by the inhabitants at their own expense. The booty was taken away in carts, together with 2 million *livres* in cash. Prussia was stripped of wealth equal to over 16 years taxation; the effects were such that, in Berlin, 75% of newborn babies died and the suicide rate rose sharply. Belgium was still paying off the costs of French occupation as late as 1920.

### **Napoleon's cheerleaders turned against him**

While Napoleon was often welcomed as a liberator by

trade - a stand supported by other countries. After the Revolution it was British money that fomented coalitions against France. In 1802, Britain signed the Treaty of Amiens, a "Definitive Treaty of Peace", with Napoleon, but the following year the British refused to honour their pledge to evacuate their naval presence from Malta and resumed hostilities by declaring war.

### **Napoleon was seen by contemporaries as a liberator**

Napoleon overthrew decadent and oppressive dynasties like the Bourbons of Naples and reorganised the former Holy Roman Empire, made up of more than a thousand entities, into a more streamlined forty-state Confederation of the Rhine, paving the way for German and Italian unification. Most people welcomed Napoleon as their "great liberator". The ideals of the French Revolution which Napoleon embodied remain an inspiration everywhere. When, a long time after Waterloo, the liberated peoples of Europe came to frame their constitutions, it was the Bonapartist republican model they looked to, not the models of Napoleon's vanquishers.

### **Britain also looted cultural artefacts**

In taking cultural artefacts, Napoleon was no worse than the British. When the French army in Egypt surrendered, the British took manuscripts and antiquities, including the Rosetta Stone, back to Britain. In Greece, Lord Elgin traded on Turkish gratitude for Britain's part in ousting Napoleon from Egypt to loot the Parthenon marbles.

those who were inspired by French revolutionary ideals, they quickly recognised that he was nothing of the sort. Beethoven famously intended to entitle one of his symphonies after Bonaparte. But in 1804, after hearing that Napoleon had awarded himself the title of Emperor, the composer furiously ripped up the title page and renamed the work *Sinfonia eroica*, because he refused to dedicate one of his pieces to the man he now considered a tyrant.

### **The British did not want war**

British foreign policy, argue Robert and Isabelle Tombs, was not determined by commerce, and British public opinion was overwhelmingly hostile to continental wars. In Asia and America, it was the French who continually took the offensive, and while British money made coalitions against Napoleon possible, Britain did not create them. The French had made no secret of their ambition to export the revolution to the rest of Europe. In response, Prussia and Austria formed a coalition to defeat the revolution and restore the monarchy. In 1803, Britain was forced to resume hostilities because instead of negotiating a lasting settlement, Napoleon took advantage of the interruption in hostilities to facilitate further expansion. He forced through massive territorial revolution in Germany and Italy and, instead of relaxing his grip on Switzerland and Holland as Britain thought he had agreed, imposed new constitutions on both countries, making them French dependencies. The aim was to exclude British influence and increase France's military power. At the same time, he announced his intention to reinvade Egypt and sent a small expedition to India to build alliances with local rulers against Britain. Most historians agree that the blame for the resumption of hostilities in 1803 was Napoleon's. He had a choice. He was not being threatened and could have opted for peace. As it was, he forced Britain into its greatest sustained effort in war, which left it the major global power for more than a century.

### **Many of Napoleon's campaigns were unprovoked and unnecessary**

While battles such as Jena (1806) and Austerlitz might arguably have been fought on the principle of pre-emptive defence, the same is not true of Napoleon's ultimately disastrous campaigns in Spain and Russia. "I wanted to rule the world," Napoleon said in 1815, "Who wouldn't have in my place?"

### **Napoleon was a cultural predator**

In 1796, Napoleon rampaged through Italy levying huge contributions in cash and in hundreds of works of art. Princely families were forced to hand over their collections; many priceless works ended up in the Louvre. The treasure hunt was extended to Egypt where Napoleon was accompanied by 160 scientists and artists to carry out "a veritable conquest in the name of the arts".

## **Napoleon: A true European?**

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## For

Napoleon is the father of European Unity

Napoleon created the first European single market

### **Napoleon is the father of European Unity**

Napoleon claimed that he had "wished to found a European system, a European Code of Laws, a European judiciary", so that "there would be one people in Europe". He removed boundaries, ended discrimination and extended a modern legal code and an administrative system all over western Europe, much of which survived him. In abolishing archaic and oppressive political units, Napoleon paved the way for European integration in the 20th century. Dominique de Villepin, a former French Prime Minister, says history has vindicated Napoleon's vision of a great European family of the future. Had he succeeded, the two European wars of the 20th century would have been unnecessary. When the European Community was conceived, it was not to Whitehall that the founders came for guidance, but to the Quai d'Orsay. The EU is a monument to Napoleon.

### **Napoleon created the first European single market**

Napoleon aimed to counter British mercantilism with a single European market – the "continental system" – based on free trade between continental countries and a single currency, from which the incorrigible British would be excluded. Time has shown that he was right.

## Against

Napoleon's "continental system" was about enriching France

Napoleon's Europe was repressive

Napoleon laid the foundations for 20th century conflict

Napoleon is indeed the father of modern Europe

### **Napoleon's "continental system" was about enriching France**

Napoleon's attempt to protect continental trade by blockading imports from Britain backfired disastrously. All over Germany, Italy and France loans went unpaid and banking houses failed, while British merchants evaded the blockade by widespread smuggling. Faced with the failure of this strategy, Napoleon embarked on Plan B, which was to become the monopoly purveyor of British and colonial goods to the continent with prices at black market levels, with the profits filling his war chest. He did this by awarding licences to French ships and merchants, though not to any ally or satellite. The system became, not so much a plan to enrich the continent and impoverish Britain, as a plan to enrich France at the expense of the rest of the continent.

### **Napoleon's Europe was repressive**

Napoleon's allies in Europe were flunkeys and collaborators who despised popular wishes, silenced opposition and had no clear purpose other than power and riches. As Paul W Schroeder, author of *Napoleon's Foreign Policy: A Criminal Enterprise* argues, the contribution Napoleon made to Europe's future was unintended and negative. He carried power politics to such an extreme that Europe had to find another form of external relations. It did at the Congress of Vienna of 1815, which kept the peace in Europe for some 50 years.

### **Napoleon laid the foundations for 20th century conflict**

Napoleon should have learned from Cardinal Richelieu, France's chief minister under Louis XIII in the 17th century, that the key to retention of French power was to keep the Germans divided. Instead, Napoleon's wars awakened a German nationalism which provided the basis for the unification of Germany in 1871, envenomed Franco-German relations for a century and led to war in 1870, 1914 and 1939. The movement toward national unification in Italy was similarly precipitated by Napoleonic rule. In Russia, the legend of 1812 was used to prop up incompetent Tsars and bloody dictators.

### **Napoleon is indeed the father of modern Europe**

Napoleon's most enduring and baleful legacy is the protectionist dirigisme which underpins and holds back the EU. Napoleon explains the differences between continental Europe and Britain; while they have Napoleonic law and state control over economics, Britain, which he did not conquer, has the common law and the free market.

## Napoleon: A great administrative reformer?

### For

Napoleon's administrative reforms created the modern world

Napoleon laid the basis of a prosperous and united France

Napoleon replaced privilege with meritocracy

### Against

Napoleon replaced the Bourbons with personal rule by himself

Napoleon's reforms stunted French enterprise

The Napoleonic Code was more repressive than liberal

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### Napoleon's administrative reforms created the modern world

Napoleon said: "My true glory is not to have won 40 battles...Waterloo will erase the memory of so many victories...But what will live forever, is my Civil Code." The Napoleonic Code which enshrined the principles of equality, property rights and the rights of the citizen won in 1789, remains the basis of a quarter of the world's legal systems, including many of those in Europe, the Americas and Africa.

### Napoleon laid the basis of a prosperous and united France

Napoleon brought an end to the brutalities of the Revolution and laid the foundations for a strong, efficient, united France. His administrative reforms survive to this day: the Civil Code; the départements; the prefects; the lycées; the Légion d'honneur; the Banque de France; the grandes écoles; the examining magistrates. He aided industry through tariffs and loans. He built or repaired roads, bridges and canals. He restored France's treasury after it had been drained during the Revolution, and took steps to tackle administrative corruption.

### Napoleon replaced privilege with meritocracy

Napoleon disregarded considerations of class and status and promoted his subordinates on talent alone. The Légion d'honneur – which could be awarded to people from any walk of life or class – is a clear example of this.

### Napoleon replaced the Bourbons with personal rule by himself

French historian Roger Caratini accuses Napoleon of exploiting post-revolutionary confusion to stage a *coup d'état*. Though he fought under the banner of equality and democracy, the reality was that he imposed himself as consul, and then emperor, and installed his feckless relations as monarchs in Italy, Spain, Germany and Holland. So much for meritocracy.

### Napoleon's reforms stunted French enterprise

According to Paul Johnson, Napoleon created the precursor of the modern totalitarian state, building on the powerful centralised structures created by the revolution; strengthening legal mechanisms to repress the individual; and efficiently mobilising national resources to suit his purpose and ambitions. As a result he delayed the political, economic and industrial developments that were already starting under the Ancien Régime, and accelerated the long-term decline of France, a country which, at that time, already had the lowest birth rate in the west.

### The Napoleonic Code was more repressive than liberal

The code outlawed collective bargaining and trade unions and introduced a system of labour passports that hampered labour mobility. Women were declared to be inferior to men by law, and children had no rights at all. Of women, Napoleon once remarked "the husband must possess the absolute power and right to say to his wife: Madame, you shall not go out, you shall not go to the theatre, you shall not visit such and such a person: for the children you bear, they shall be mine."

## Napoleon: A man of the enlightenment?

### For

Napoleon brought in religious and racial toleration

Napoleon was an "enlightened" despot

Napoleon was demonised by those he deposed

### Against

Napoleon was as much a racist as Hitler

Napoleon has provided a model for tyrants

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Napoleon brought in religious and racial toleration

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Under a Concordat of 1801, Napoleon healed the revolutionary schism with the Roman Catholic Church, while guaranteeing freedom of religion for Protestants and Jews. He emancipated Jews from laws which restricted them to ghettos, and expanded their rights to property and careers. "I will never accept any proposals that will obligate the Jewish people to leave France, because to me the Jews are the same as any other citizen in our country. It takes weakness to chase them out of the country, but it takes strength to assimilate them," he wrote.

### **Napoleon was an "enlightened" despot**

While he was no democrat and rejected the extreme libertarian notions which had given the Revolution a bad name, the Napoleonic Code enshrined the principles of individual liberty and some dissent was tolerated. Despite the suppression of political freedoms, the empire held only about 2,500 political prisoners – vastly fewer than the Jacobin republic during the French Revolution.

### **Napoleon was demonised by those he deposed**

Napoleon was belittled as cowardly, superstitious, irreligious, sadistic, sexually depraved, incestuous, impotent, dishonest and, above all, small - though in fact he was no smaller than the average Frenchman of the time. By whom? By his enemies, the kings of England, the kings of Prussia, and the Tsars of Russia who were all threatened by French democratic ideas.

In *The Crime of Napoleon*, the French-Caribbean historian Claude Ribbe says Napoleon should be seen as a genocidal dictator. Not only did he reintroduce slavery in the French empire in 1802, a decade after it had been abolished, he imposed racial laws in France which led to the internment of the black population and the forced break-up of inter-racial marriages. The decision to reintroduce slavery led to brutal fighting in France's Caribbean colonies in which thousands died, many after being brutally tortured. French troops used sulphur dioxide gas to suffocate slaves: they were "shot, drowned, fed to dogs or gassed in the holds of slave ships". French Officers spoke proudly of creating "torture islands". By contrast, Britain used its influence to suppress the slave trade. Arguably, Napoleon bears some of the responsibility for the latent racism in French society that many blame for the urban riots of recent years.

### **Napoleon has provided a model for tyrants**

Napoleon was a corrupt tyrant who betrayed key ideals that had been established in the French Revolution and his rise to and consolidation of power made him a full dictator. The cult of Napoleon and his strategy of expansionism has inspired dictators and tyrants the world over. Hitler, Lenin, Stalin and Mao were all touched and encouraged by his example, to say nothing of Peron, Mengistu, Kim Il Sung, Fidel Castro, Nasser and Saddam Hussein.

## **Conclusion**

One of the most modern things about Napoleon, and one which has coloured the debate about his legacy ever since, is that he grasped the importance of image-making. He was, in many ways, the first master of spin. As early as 1796, when he was an obscure 27-year-old general, he created newspapers that glorified and exaggerated his exploits. After seizing power in 1799, he employed teams of writers and historians to laud his military and political expertise. Even on St Helena, he continued that battle. He dictated a sprawling memoir of his life which remains to this day the main source for the view of Napoleon as a misunderstood man of vision and peace.

The overwhelming consensus among historians of today is that Napoleon was a monster and a warmonger, but a monster of genius. Even those who believe that he had a disastrous impact on the history of France and Europe have to admit that, for good or ill, he changed the architecture of Europe and continues to overshadow European politics to the present day. That does not make him a good man, but it surely makes him a great man - a world historical figure.