



34

NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

1769 - 1821

The celebrated French general and emperor, Napoleon I, was born in Ajaccio, Corsica, in 1769. His original name was Napoleone Buonaparte. France had acquired Corsica only some fifteen months before his birth, and in his early years, Napoleon was a Corsican nationalist who considered the French to be oppressors. Nevertheless, Napoleon was sent to military academies in France, and when he graduated in 1785, at the age of sixteen, he became a second lieutenant in the French army.

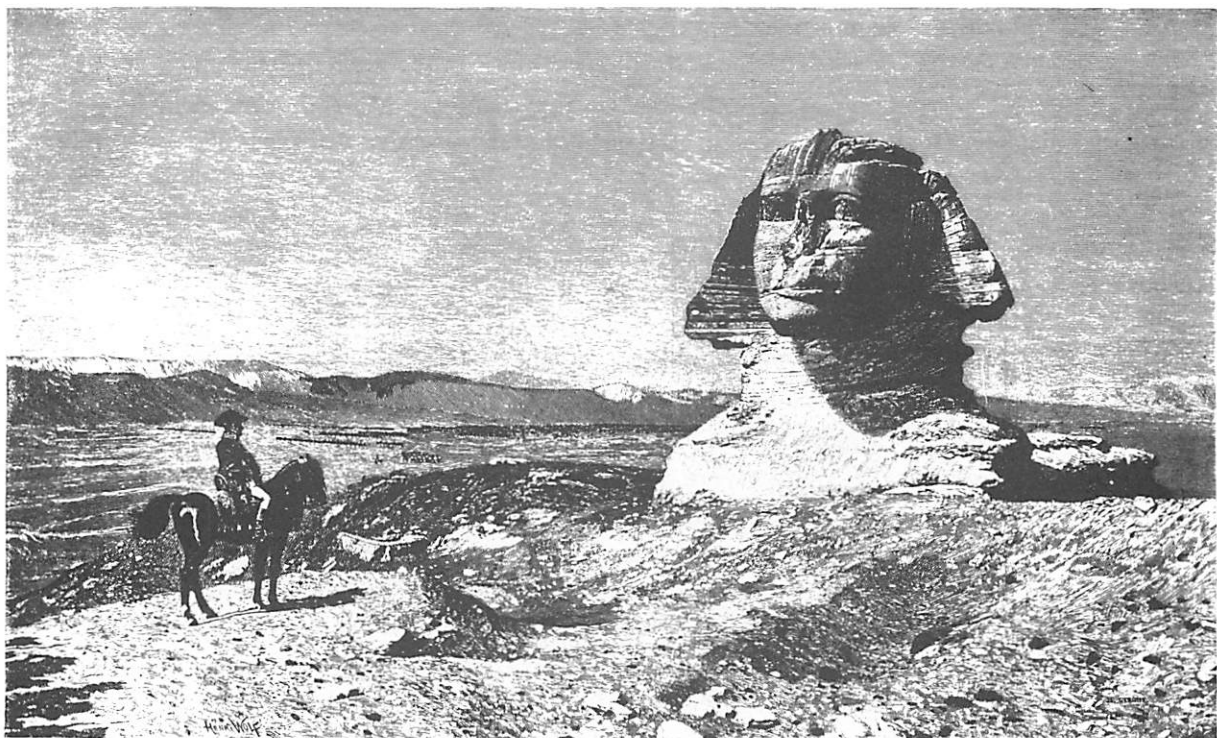
Four years later, the French Revolution erupted, and within a few years, the new French government was involved in wars with several foreign powers. Napoleon's first opportunity to distinguish himself came in 1793, at the siege of Toulon (in which the French recaptured the city from the British), where he was in charge of the artillery. (By this time he had abandoned his Corsican nationalist ideas and considered himself a Frenchman.) His accomplishments at Toulon won him promotion to brigadier general, and in 1796, he was given the command of the French army in Italy. There, in 1796-97, Napoleon achieved a spectacular series of victories. A hero, he then returned to Paris.

In 1798, Napoleon headed a French invasion of Egypt. The campaign was a disaster. On the land, Napoleon's armies were generally successful. But the British navy, under the leadership of Lord Nelson, destroyed the French fleet, and in 1799 Napoleon abandoned his army in Egypt and returned to France.

Back in France, Napoleon found that the public remembered the successes of his Italian campaign rather than the debacle of the Egyptian expedition. Capitalizing on this, a month after his return, Napoleon took part in a *coup d'etat*, together with the Abbé Siéyes and others. The coup resulted in a new government, the Consulate, with Napoleon holding the office of first consul. Although an elaborate constitution was adopted, and was ratified by a popular plebiscite, it was only a mask for the military dictatorship of Napoleon, who had soon gained the ascendancy over the other conspirators.

Napoleon's rise to power was, thus, incredibly rapid. In August 1793, before the siege of Toulon, Napoleon had been a totally unknown twenty-four-year-old minor officer of not-quite French birth. Less than six years later, Napoleon, still only thirty, was the undisputed ruler of France—a position he was to hold for over fourteen years.

During his years in power, Napoleon instituted major revisions in the administration of France and in the French legal system. For example, he reformed the financial structure and the judiciary; he created the Bank of France and the University of



Napoleon before the Sphinx ("L'Oedipe") by J. L. Gerome.

France; and he centralized the French administration. Although each of these changes had a significant, and in some cases enduring, impact on France itself, they had little impact on the rest of the world.

One of Napoleon's reforms, however, was destined to have an impact far beyond the borders of France. That was the creation of the French civil code, the famous *Code Napoleon*. In many ways the code embodied the ideals of the French Revolution. For example, under the code there were no privileges of birth, and all men were equal under the law. At the same time, the code was sufficiently close to the older French laws and customs to be acceptable to the French public and the legal profession. On the whole, the code was moderate, well organized,

and written with commendable brevity and outstanding lucidity. As a result, the code has not only endured in France (the French civil code today is strikingly similar to the original *Code Napoleon*) but has been adopted, with local modifications, in many other countries.

It was always Napoleon's policy to insist that he was the defender of the Revolution. Nevertheless, in 1804 he had himself proclaimed Emperor of France. In addition, Napoleon installed three of his brothers on the thrones of other European states. These actions doubtless aroused the resentment of some French republicans—who considered such behavior a complete betrayal of the ideals of the French Revolution—but Napoleon's only serious difficulties were to result from his foreign wars.

In 1802, at Amiens, Napoleon had signed a peace treaty with England, giving France a respite after more than a decade of almost continuous warfare. However, the following year the peace treaty broke down, and a long series of wars with England and her allies followed. Though Napoleon's armies repeatedly won victories on the land, England could not be conquered unless her navy was defeated. Unfortunately for Napoleon, at the crucial battle of Trafalgar, in 1805, the English navy won an overwhelming victory; thereafter, England's control of the seas was not seriously disputed. Although Napoleon's greatest victory (at Austerlitz, against the armies of Austria and Russia) came only six weeks after Trafalgar, it did not really compensate for the naval disaster.

In 1808, Napoleon foolishly involved France in a long and pointless war on the Iberian peninsula, in which French armies were bogged down for years. Napoleon's decisive blunder, however, was his Russian campaign. In 1807, Napoleon had met with the Czar, and in the Treaty of Tilsit, they had vowed eternal friendship. But the alliance gradually deteriorated, and in June 1812, Napoleon led his *Grande Armée* into Russia.

The results are well known. The Russian army generally avoided fighting pitched battles against Napoleon, and he was able to advance rapidly. By September, he had occupied

Moscow. However, the Russians set fire to the city, and most of it was destroyed. After waiting five weeks in Moscow (in a vain hope that the Russians would sue for peace), Napoleon finally decided to retreat. But by then it was too late. The combination of the Russian army, the Russian winter, and the inadequate supplies of the French army soon turned the retreat into a rout. Less than 10 percent of the *Grande Armée* got out of Russia alive.

Other European countries, such as Austria and Prussia, realized that they now had an opportunity to throw off the French yoke. They joined forces against Napoleon, and at the battle of Leipzig, in October 1813, Napoleon suffered another crushing defeat. The following year he resigned and was banished to Elba, a small island off the Italian coast.

In 1815, he escaped from Elba and returned to France, where he was welcomed and restored to power. But the other European powers promptly declared war, and a hundred days after his restoration, he met his final defeat at Waterloo. After Waterloo, Napoleon was imprisoned by the British on St. Helena, a small island in the south Atlantic. He died there, of cancer, in 1821.

Napoleon's military career presents a surprising paradox. His genius at tactical maneuvering was dazzling, and if he were to be judged only by that, he might perhaps be considered the greatest general of all time. In the field of grand strategy, however, he was prone to making incredibly gross blunders, such as the invasions of Egypt and Russia. His strategic errors were so egregious that Napoleon should not be placed in the first rank of military leaders. Is this unfair second-guessing? I think not. Certainly, one criterion of a general's greatness is his ability to avoid disastrous errors. It is very hard to second-guess the very greatest generals, such as Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, and Tamerlane, whose armies were never defeated. Because Napoleon was defeated in the end, all of his foreign conquests proved ephemeral. After his final defeat, in 1815, France possessed less territory than she had in 1789, at the outbreak of the Revolution.

Napoleon was, of course, an egomaniac, and he has often been compared to Hitler. But there is a crucial difference between the two men. Whereas Hitler was motivated in large part by a hideous ideology, Napoleon was merely an ambitious opportunist, and he had no particular interest in perpetrating horrible massacres. Nothing in Napoleon's regime remotely compares with the Nazi concentration camps.

Napoleon's very great fame makes it easy to overestimate his influence. His *short-term* influence was indeed enormous, probably larger than Alexander the Great's had been, though much less than Hitler's. (It has been estimated that approximately 500,000 French soldiers died during the Napoleonic Wars; however, in comparison, it has been estimated that 8,000,000 Germans died during the Second World War.) By any standard, Napoleon's activities disrupted far fewer of his contemporaries' lives than did Hitler's.

In regard to long-term influence, Napoleon seems more important than Hitler, though less so than Alexander. Napoleon made extensive administrative changes in France, but France comprises less than one-seventieth of the world's population. In any event, such administrative changes should be viewed in proper perspective. They have had far less effect upon the lives of individual Frenchmen than the numerous technological changes of the last two centuries.

It has been said that the Napoleonic era provided time for the changes instituted during the French Revolutionary era to become established, and for the gains made by the French bourgeoisie to be consolidated. By 1815, when the French monarchy was finally re-established, these changes were so well entrenched that a return to the social patterns of the *ancien régime* was unthinkable. The most important changes, however, had been instituted before Napoleon; by 1799, when Napoleon took office, it was probably already too late for any return to the *status quo ante*. However, Napoleon, despite his own monarchical ambitions, did play a role in spreading the ideals of the French Revolution throughout Europe.

Napoleon also had a large, though indirect, effect on the

history of Latin America. His invasion of Spain so weakened the Spanish government that for a period of several years it lost effective control of its colonies in Latin America. It was during this period of *de facto* autonomy that the Latin American independence movements commenced.

Of all Napoleon's actions, however, the one that has perhaps had the most enduring and significant consequences was one that was almost irrelevant to his main plans. In 1803, Napoleon sold a vast tract of land to the United States. He realized that the French possessions in North America might be difficult to protect from British conquest, and besides he was short of cash. The Louisiana Purchase, perhaps the largest peaceful transfer of land in all of history, transformed the United States into a nation of near-continental size. It is difficult to say what the United States would have been like without the Louisiana Purchase; certainly it would have been a vastly different country than it is today. Indeed, it is doubtful whether the United States would have become a great power without the Louisiana Purchase.

Napoleon, of course, was not solely responsible for the Louisiana Purchase. The American government clearly played a role as well. But the French offer was such a bargain that it seems likely that any American government would have accepted it, while the decision of the French government to sell the Louisiana territory came about through the arbitrary judgment of a single individual, Napoleon Bonaparte.

Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo.

