**“The Greatest will always Fall”**

**Napoleon’s Rise and Fall from the Throne**

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*“Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake.”* A quote from Napoleon Bonaparte, a famous conqueror, who was brought to power by the French Revolution after proving himself to all of France that his power was indomitable. However, as history repeats over and over again, triumph always has tragedy. Napoleon had begun by joining a revolution against the French monarchy, soon overthrowing it, and gaining power and respect of the people of France. Napoleon had many things that led up to him becoming one of the greatest and most fearful conquerors in history, but he fell to the hands and wits of Russia. A question most commonly asked by others is, “How did the Russians defeat Napoleon, and why was their victory so important?” The answer is not complicated, but in order to understand how and why, it is required to go back to the beginning of his reign, and see what brought him up, and what brought him down.

**The Start of his Upbringing**

The rise of Napoleon via the French Revolution led to him becoming one of the greatest conquerors known to man. “He was made second lieutenant of artillery in the regiment of La Fère, a kind of training for young artillery officers. Garrisoned at Valence, Napoleon continued his education, reading much, in particular works on strategy and tactics. He also wrote *Lettres sur la Corse* (“Letters on Corsica”), in which he reveals his feeling for his native island. He went back to Corsica in September 1786 and did not rejoin his regiment until June 1788.”[[1]](#footnote-0) This passage describes Napoleon’s rank as second lieutenant. Being apart of the artillery, his job was to manage artillery, and arrange them in favorable positions to give the best advantage against his enemies in the battlefield. Napoleon, while in Valence, had begun studying strategy and tactics in order to increase his knowledge of the battlefield, such as where to move troops and what formations to use to gain a better advantage in battle. “Since 1792, France’s revolutionary government had been engaged in military conflicts with various European nations. In 1796, Napoleon commanded a French army that defeated the larger armies of Austria, one of his country’s primary rivals, in a series of battles in Italy. In 1797, France and Austria signed the Treaty of Campo Formio, resulting in territorial gains for the French.”[[2]](#footnote-1) After Napoleon’s short leave in Corsica, he returned to military duty, where he fought in battles against Austria, where the numbers were against him, and managed to defeat one of their greatest rivals. This alone set an example as to what Napoleon was capable of, given that he had a army, whether it be experienced or inexperienced.

**A New Plan**

“The following year, the Directory, the five-person group that had governed France since 1795, offered to let Napoleon lead an invasion of England. Napoleon determined that France’s naval forces were not yet ready to go up against the superior British Royal Navy. Instead, he proposed an invasion of Egypt in an effort to wipe out British trade routes with India. Napoleon’s troops scored a victory against Egypt’s military rulers, the Mamluks, at the Battle of the Pyramids in July 1798; soon, however, his forces were stranded after his naval fleet was nearly decimated by the British at the Battle of the Nile in August 1798. In early 1799, Napoleon’s army launched an invasion of Ottoman Empire-ruled Syria, which ended with the failed siege of Acre, located in modern-day Israel. That summer, with the political situation in France marked by uncertainty, the ever-ambitious and cunning Napoleon opted to abandon his army in Egypt and return to France.”[[3]](#footnote-2) This shows how trusted Napoleon was with leading the armies and battle tactics for what they should do. Instead of being a fool, he decided to think logically, and take a strategic battle that would weaken the British. After his victory, the British ended up battling with Napoleon’s army, leading to a loss in significant numbers. Afterwards, Napoleon had tried to use what little of the army he had left to fight against the Ottoman empire, which led in a loss as well. After catching word that the government of France was becoming unstable, he left his army to go back.

**A Conqueror Becomes an Emperor**

“Napoleon's coronation in December 1804 was a particular affront to the Holy Roman Emperor Francis II, [...]Napoleon paid for Pope Pius VII, who had signed the Concordat of Rome, to travel to France for the occasion, believing that his presence would imbue the event with a solemn, religious feeling. Pius agreed to come, hoping to win Napoleon's goodwill towards Rome and the Papal States. However, at the ceremony, Napoleon surprised everyone by not allowing the Pope to crown him. Instead, he placed the crown on his own head, and then crowned Josephine Empress. A few months later, on May 26, 1805, Napoleon crowned himself again-- this time with the iron circlet that symbolized the rule over all of Italy.”[[4]](#footnote-3) Soon after he returned to France, he was appointed as the first consul due to his fame for being a very powerful and intelligent man, while having two other consuls stand beside him. However, these people were merely just helpers of Napoleon, who had all the real power. As time went by, Napoleon had gained more respect, as well as an increasing amount of power. Soon, he was declared as first consul for life, and not too long after, declared as Emperor. Napoleon had asked the Pope if he would crown him, and the Pope accepted it with grace. However, when the time came for Napoleon to be crowned, Napoleon took the crown from the Pope, and placed it on his own head, as well as crowning Josephine as the empress. It was only a year later before Napoleon had placed an iron circlet on his head, which declared him as the ruler of all of Italy. This shows how trusted and loved Napoleon was, having the authority to crown himself without any opposition. Fastforwarding, we enter the proclamation after Austerlitz, and see how proud Napoleon was of his troops. “Soldiers! I am pleased with you. On the day of Austerlitz, you lived up to all my expectations of your bravery and boldness; you have decked your eagles with a glory that shall never die. In less than four hours, an army of one hundred thousand men, commanded by the emperors of Russia and Austria, has either been cut to pieces or dispersed[...] Forty standards, the standards of the Russian imperial guard, one hundred and twenty cannon, twenty generals, more than thirty-thousand prisoners… these are the results of this day of eternal renown. ”[[5]](#footnote-4) Napoleon’s soldiers had done more than won a battle: they had set an example as to how powerful they were, especially under Napoleon’s lead. It took only four hours to decimate the forces opposing them, “An army of one hundred thousand men”. This was nothing to scoff at, as it set the example as to what Napoleon could do to those who dared to go against his rule. However, this battle had its downside. Napoleon had begun to grow cocky and bold, thinking that he was indeed invincible. His army had completed a feat that no ruler of his time could, and that would be the beginning of his downfall.

**The Beginning of the End**

“One is left, then, with one explanation, and one explanation alone: frustrated by the long war in Spain and Portugal, and the failure of the Continental Blockade to bring the British to heel, Napoleon was simply bent on flexing his military muscle and winning fresh glory”[[6]](#footnote-5) It is said in this document that Napoleon started the war with Russia to obtain fresh glory, and to show off his skills as the leader of this army. An assumption could be made that he was trying to prove a point that he was unbeatable, and that nothing could stand in his way from victory. Despite past losses, he is still considered unbeatable, now that he has become emperor, and obtained vast amounts of units, including cavalry. “Of these 169,117 horses purchased 157,353 horses would serve in the Grande Armée. 11,764 horses were directed as remounts and replacements for the troops in Spain and remaining in France as well as replacements for those horses which died at the depots from illness or on the march to Germany. In November to December 1812 a further 9,772 horses were obtained, which come under the purchases for the 1813 campaign, which raise the total number of horses purchased in 1812 to 88,376. In October 1811 the French army as a whole had some 119,832 horses, rising to 145,262 in February 1812 and 217,706 by 5th June 1812.”[[7]](#footnote-6) As shown here (and on a table provided further into the paper), Napoleon had gathered as many horses as possible for his cavalry, which some say was overdoing it. Almost all of these horses would be used in Napoleon’s *Grande Arm*ée, which made him seem as if Russia were a mere roach in front of his army. WIth Napoleon armed and ready, he set out to conquer Russia, and become the one and only emperor of the world.

**The Russians Fall Back**

 “In June of 1812, Napoleon began his fatal Russian campaign, a landmark in the history of the destructive potential of warfare[...] Having gathered nearly half a million soldiers, from France as well as all of the vassal states of Europe, Napoleon entered Russia at the head of the largest army ever seen. The Russians, under Marshal Kutuzov, could not realistically hope to defeat him in a direct confrontation. Instead, they begin a defensive campaign of strategic retreat, devastating the land as they fell back and harassing the flanks of the French. As the summer wore on, Napoleon's massive supply lines were stretched ever thinner, and his force began to decline. By September, without having engaged in a single pitched battle, the French Army had been reduced by more than two thirds from fatigue, hunger, desertion, and raids by Russian forces.”[[8]](#footnote-7) In this text shows how Napoleon had thought he held all the power. Napoleon did not expect the campaign to end in failure, but instead end in a complete success. However, this wasn’t the case. As Napoleon’s troops advanced, the Russian’s retreating, razing everything before leaving their towns so that Napoleon’s army would have little to no gain from the towns. His troops soon began dying off quickly, without ever coming in contact with enemy forces. “Nonetheless, it was clear that unless the Russians engaged the French Army in a major battle, Moscow would be Napoleon's in a matter of weeks. The Tsar insisted upon an engagement, and on September 7, with winter closing in and the French army only 70 miles (110 km) from the city, the two armies met at Borodino Field. By the end of the day, 108,000 men had died--but neither side had gained a decisive victory. Kutuzov realized that any further defense of the city would be senseless, and he withdrew his forces, prompting the citizens of Moscow to began a massive and panicked exodus. When Napoleon's army arrived on September 14, they found a city depopulated and bereft of supplies, a meagre comfort in the face of the oncoming winter. To make matters much, much worse, fires broke out in the city that night, and by the next day the French were lacking shelter as well.”[[9]](#footnote-8) Despite suffering heavy casualties, Napoleon and his army ventured on to Moscow, where they finally came into contact with Russian troops. However, the battle was a mere stalemate, and the Russians retreated, while also making sure to deplete Moscow of all supplies that would prove useful to Napoleon and his army’s survival. “As Napoleon realized the full extent of the disaster in Russia, his vulnerability was exposed to the world, leading his reluctant allies, e.g. Prussia and the Confederation of the Rhine, to quickly abandon him. In December 1812 Napoleon sensed trouble. He left his army in Russia, as he had previously abandoned his army in Egypt, to rush back to Paris, where the conspiracy led by the half-mad General Malet, which threatened to overthrow Napoleon, had spread the news of his death in Russia. In the early months of 1812, Prussia broke from its alliance with Napoleon and joined Russia against him; northern Germany rose against Napoleonic rule; Sweden, ruled by Marshal Bernadotte, reinforced the coalition; Austria broke the French alliance but remained neutral until August; and the French finally evacuated Madrid. All Europe was now united against Napoleon.”[[10]](#footnote-9) Finally, Napoleon had accepted defeat, and began to march home with the remnants of his army. Along the way, he had lost even more from the dangers that encompassed them. Starting off as a strong army, it had then dwindled down to but a sixth of what it was at the beginning.[[11]](#footnote-10) However, Napoleon had received word that he had been presumed dead, and abandoned his army to head straight for France. However, Napoleon was met with a horrifying surprise. All of his allies, who used to fear him, now split apart from his reign and banded together against their ruler.

**When They are Given an Inch, They Take a Mile**

Napoleon had been brought to his knees. His allies had turned against him, and soon he realized there was no hope in regaining his power. “In the night of 5-6 April, after long attempts at negotiations with the allies, Napoleon accepted defeat and wrote out a short text declaring that he had abdicated as follows: ““The Emperor Napoleon, true to his oath, declares that he renounces for himself and his heirs the thrones of France and of Italy, and that there is not personal sacrifice, even that of his life, which he is not ready to perform in the interests of France.” He gave this to Caulaincourt to transmit to the allies explaining that it should not be published until the treaty had established the rules for the abdication.[...] It also noted that “Louis Stanislas Xavier de France, brother of the last King” was “freely” called to the throne of France by the “French People”. The stage was being set for the return of the Bourbon monarchy to France.”[[12]](#footnote-11) It was then that Napoleon had abdicated the throne, admitting defeat to his former allies, and was then exiled to Elba.

**A Surprising Return**

 “On February 26, 1815, Napoleon managed to sneak past his guards and somehow escape from Elba, slip past interception by a British ship, and return to France. Immediately, people and troops began to rally to the returned Emperor. French police forces were sent to arrest him, but upon arriving in his presence, they kneeled before him. Triumphantly, Napoleon returned to Paris on March 20, 1815. Paris welcomed him with celebration, and Louis XVIII, the new king, fled to Belgium. With Louis only just gone, Napoleon moved back into the Tuileries. The period known as the Hundred Days had begun.”[[13]](#footnote-12) After all the effort that the former allies of Napoleon went through, he managed to slip past the guards that kept him on the island, and sailed back to Paris, where he was greeted with honor and respect. King Louis XVIII fled in fear, which left Napoleon in charge once again. However, this was short-lived, as a famous battle would soon occur, which would permanently put an end to Napoleon’s reign.

**The Battle of Waterloo**

 “The Allies prepared to once again mass their forces for another attack on the French Emperor. This would take time, however. Only two Allied armies posed an immediate threat - a British force of 68,000 under the command of the Duke of Wellington and the Prussian Army of 89,000 headed by Field Marshal Blucher - both encamped in the Southern Netherlands. Seizing the moment, Napoleon led his approximately 105,000 troops north with the aim of defeating his enemies individually before they could unite. His efforts were initially successful. In a clash at Ligny on June 16, Napoleon routed the Prussians at a high cost. Napoleon then turned his attention to the British who made a stand at the small town of Waterloo a few miles south of Brussels. The stage was set for one of history's most famous battles.”[[14]](#footnote-13) The Allies were prepared, waiting for Napoleon to hit them with every last drop of power he could muster. He was successful with defeating the Prussian army, and soon turned his gaze towards the British troops who stood in Waterloo, waiting for Napoleon to come. “On the morning of June 18, the two armies faced off against each other. However the incessant rains of the previous days had soaked the ground to a muddy quagmire hampering the movements of men, horses and artillery. This postponed the battle until midday when Napoleon opened up with an artillery barrage. The fighting seesawed back and forth throughout the day with high casualties on both sides. Towards evening Wellington's exhausted troops seemed on the verge of breaking, but the timely arrival of the Prussians reinvigorated their efforts and doomed Napoleon.”[[15]](#footnote-14) Napoleon had the upper-hand against the British troops, and was most likely to succeed. However, the tides turned when the Prussian troops supported the British. With their numbers combined, they rivaled Napoleon’s army, and soon brought him down once again. This time, however, they would make sure he would stay abdicated. “Napoleon fled to Paris where he abdicated for a second time on June 22 and was exiled to the desolate island of St. Helena in the mid-Atlantic.”[[16]](#footnote-15)

**The Overall Summary**

 Napoleon Bonaparte, one of the greatest conquerors in history had come close to world domination. However, with each triumph, there always comes a tragedy. At first, Napoleon was an extremely valuable asset to France, aiding in dismantling the French Revolution, and bringing overall peace to France. However, the Continental system was one of his first mistakes, as it was one that made his allies question him. However, they were too afraid to rebel against Napoleon, for they had believed that he was a man that could never be defeated. The Russians, however, outwitted Napoleon by assuring that his army had little to no resources from the towns and villages they passed. Due to their starvation and weakened capabilities, they retreated, which showed all of Napoleon’s allies that he was indeed defeatable. Banding together, they brought him down from the top of the ladder to the very bottom. Napoleon attempted to regain his power, but was again stopped by his former allies once again, and permanently exiled to the island of St. Helena, where he lived out the rest of his days. The Russians were the most important part in Napoleon’s tragic fall, as they proved to the world that the indomitable conqueror was indeed defeatable. Had the Russians lost, history would have played out differently, for better or for worse. That is how Napoleon had risen to power, and fell down to nothing.

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* **Appendix A**

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*This image shows the amount of horses that Napoleon purchased, as well as where he had purchased them from.*

Russian Campaign Preparations and Logistics, Napoleon Series, April 2013, <https://www.napoleon-series.org/military/battles/1812/Russia/c_1812_logistics.pdf>

**Appendix B **

*This picture shows the route that Napoleon took on his journey to Moscow (The Tan line). When the line begins to thin, that is when Napoleon’s troops begin to diminish, losing numbers due to the harsh cold and starvation. The black line shows Napoleon’s retreat back to France.*

June 24th, 1812 CE: Napoleon Invades Russia, December 16th, 2013, National Geographic Society, <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/thisday/jun24/napoleon-invades-russia/>

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2. *Napoleon Bonaparte,* Napoleon’s Rise to Power, History.com Editors, <https://www.history.com/topics/france/napoleon> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. *Napoleon Bonaparte,* Napoleon’s Rise to Power, History.com Editors, <https://www.history.com/topics/france/napoleon> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. *Napoleon Satires:* *Timeline: Napoleon as First Consul (1799-1804),* Brown University Library Center for Digital Scholarship, <https://library.brown.edu/cds/napoleon/time2.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. PROCLAMATION AFTER AUSTERLITZ, 12 FRIMAIRE, AN XIV(3 DECEMBER, 1805), Napoleon.org, <https://www.napoleon.org/en/history-of-the-two-empires/articles/proclamation-after-austerlitz-12-frimaire-an-xiv-3-december-1805/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. C. J. Esdaile, *Napoleon’s Wars: An International History, 1803-1815*(London: Allen Lane, 2007), pp.56, 57 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. See Appendix A [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Napoleon’s Invasion of Russia, No Date Specified, Geographia.com, <http://www.geographia.com/russia/rushis05.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Ibid pp.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. *Napoleonic Satires*, Timeline: The Russian Campaign and Napoleon's Defeat, Brown University Library Center for Digital Scholarship, <https://library.brown.edu/cds/napoleon/time6.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. See Appendix B [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. 200 YEARS AGO: 1814: THE FRENCH CAMPAIGN, STEP BY STEP: April 1814, No Date Specified, Napoleon.org, <https://www.napoleon.org/en/history-of-the-two-empires/articles/200-years-ago-1814-the-french-campaign-step-by-step/> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Napoleon Bonaparte Summary: Exile and Escape. SparkNotes, No Date Specified, <https://www.sparknotes.com/biography/napoleon/section9/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Captain J.H. Gronow, ‘The Battle of Waterloo, 1815’, Eyewitness to History, 2004, <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/waterloo.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Ibid pp.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Ibid pp.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)