

BY EUGENE FINERMAN

THE RISE OF NAPOLEON

“FRANCE HAS MORE NEED OF ME THAN I HAVE NEED OF FRANCE.”
— NAPOLEON BONAPARTE (1769-1821)

NAPOLEON BONAPARTE believed in his greatness. Without that audacious conviction, he would not be the legendary figure in history that he became. He never would have overcome the modest circumstances of his birth. Napoleon was born on Corsica, a Mediterranean island ruled by France but whose impoverished natives were ethnically Italian. In fact, he did not learn French until he was 10, and never lost his Corsican accent. The recipient of a scholarship, he studied at a military academy in Brienne, France. His education there was determined by his social standing. A scholarship boy lacked the aristocratic pedigree required of an officer in the infantry or cavalry. Artillery was considered more menial, so Napoleon was trained for that and received his lieutenant's commission in 1785.

But the caste system that fettered Napoleon's early career was about to be overthrown. France was an 18th-century society constrained by a 14th-century monarchy. Decades of frustration and misrule finally led to a revolution in 1789. The fumbling, obtuse King Louis XVI refused the popular demand for a constitutional monarchy. At the urging of his queen, Marie Antoinette, Louis appealed to his fellow monarchs to rescue him from his own people. In response, a coalition of German states led by Austria invaded France in 1792. Learning of Louis' support of the invasion, France saw no need for a constitutional monarchy—or a breathing king. (King Louis was ultimately executed in 1793.) Then Britain, Spain and Prussia declared war on this revolutionary France.

Fighting against half of Europe, the French army seemed in a poor position to defend the country. In September 1793, Capt. Bonaparte was commanding the artillery at the siege of Toulon, a French port that had been seized by the British navy. Although only a junior officer, Bonaparte





assumed the responsibilities of a general, planning the French attack and then carrying it out. His superiors might have been dismayed by the young man's presumption, but they could not argue with his tactical brilliance and—all the more remarkable for a 5-foot-2 man—his powers of command. The French recaptured Toulon, and Napoleon was the undisputed hero. Since he acted like a general, the government decided that he might as well be one. In three months, Napoleon had risen from captain to brigadier general. He was 24.

Napoleon's next campaign was political, and its stakes were his career. The French government was at war with itself, and the losing factions went to the guillotine. Napoleon had become a general while the Radicals controlled France; so he



In 1812, Napoleon's court painter, Jacques-Louis David, portrayed Bonaparte powerfully despite his famously diminutive stature while he stood in his study at Tuileries Palace.

was associated with that party. When the Radicals fell in July 1794, Napoleon found himself suspended from the army and under arrest. He was soon released from prison, but the new government did not trust him with a command. To re-establish himself, Napoleon applied military tactics to politics: he would win over some key people in Paris, including the most powerful man in the government, Paul Barras, and his lovely socialite mistress, Josephine de Beauharnais.

Perhaps Napoleon only wanted Josephine's ear, but she offered him the rest. Barras did not mind his mistress' infidelity and actually encouraged the marriage of Josephine and Napoleon. She would be getting a husband with a promising future, the Corsican opportunist would be marrying one of the most fashionable women in Paris and—call it a wedding gift—Napoleon received command of an army in March 1796.

France was still at war with Austria and Britain. At the time, Austria and its ruling Habsburg family held a large empire, including Northern Italy and much of Germany. The war had gone in France's favor so far. The invading armies had been driven out and the French armies were advancing to the Rhine. France now planned a campaign to force Austria out of the war. Two armies would cross the Rhine and a third would push through Northern Italy—all heading for Vienna. Napoleon was in command of the Italian invasion with the smallest and worst supplied force of the three armies.

Napoleon had 37,000 men, facing an enemy totaling 50,000. But the Austrians never imagined the speed, tactics and audacity of Bonaparte. Napoleon anticipated the enemy's moves, and he always found and attacked its most vulnerable position. The campaign began in April; in two weeks, the Austrians were in retreat with only half of their army left. Ironically, while Napoleon was conquering Italy, the French offensive across the Rhine had failed. Austria now shifted 100,000 troops from Germany to Italy. The French may have been outnumbered 3-to-1, but Napoleon never gave the Austrians the chance to bring their full numbers to bear. He always outmaneuvered them and attacked, fragmenting the Austrian army and overwhelming it. By April 1797, Napoleon had invaded Austria and was 100 miles from Vienna. With the smallest of France's armies, Napoleon achieved what three armies were expected to do: Austria sued for peace.

Napoleon was the hero of France, but he was restless for more glory. The war with England continued, and Napoleon envisioned a campaign that would undermine the British Empire and establish him as the new Alexander the Great. He would conquer Egypt. The trade and communication between Europe and the Orient passed along the Suez trail. (Yes, there was talk of building a canal.) A French army in Egypt would have a stranglehold on Britain's link to India.

Never lacking confidence, Napoleon expected a glorious military victory, but he also foresaw his campaign as a cultural triumph. He would rediscover Egypt and reintroduce a great civilization long forgotten. So, he assembled several hundred scientists, historians and artists to accompany his expedition. While he conquered, they explored, discovered and illustrated—inspiring a fascination with ancient Egypt



French painter Louis Lejeune captured 'The Battle of the Pyramids' in Egypt, fought on July 21, 1798, now showcased in the Musee du Chateau, Versailles.

that continues to this day.

Napoleon's army landed in Egypt on July 1, 1798, and quickly brushed aside the native forces. But if the French army was invincible, so was the British navy. On Aug. 1, the fleet of Lord Nelson found Napoleon's flotilla anchored near Alexandria; most of the French ships were sunk or captured. Without those ships, the French army was stranded and its supply line severed. The scientists were finding treasures but the soldiers could barely scrounge food. Worse, disease—including the plague—was decimating the army.

With Napoleon's dictated communiqués—press releases—telling the public exactly what he wanted it to believe, the French were convinced that the Egyptian campaign was a complete triumph. However dubious those victories, that was the only good news that the French public heard at the time.

With Napoleon in Egypt, Austria felt emboldened to resume the war. Aided by a Russian army, Austrian forces had recaptured most of Italy and now threatened France itself. Feeling endangered, the French wanted their best general back home to defend them. Since the public demanded it, Napoleon was willing to save France—and flee his hopeless situation in Egypt. (His abandoned army in Egypt finally surrendered to the British in 1801.)

Arriving in France, in October 1799, Napoleon found himself in the center of political intrigues. Barras' corrupt and inefficient government was ready to fall, and the vying factions wanted the support of France's most acclaimed general. He joined a conspiracy to replace the government; however, Napoleon had no genuine interest in replacing one group of infighting bureaucrats with another. If France needed new leadership, he saw himself in that role.

While his fellow conspirators planned one coup, Napoleon staged another. On Nov. 9, 1799, he established himself as the dictator of France. The members of the ousted government protested the coup, but Napoleon had the support of the army and the French public. After years of an erratic, ineffectual republic, France wanted a decisive, charismatic leader.

The scholarship boy from Corsica now ruled France; yet he craved further glory, and war was his means of ascent. For the next 15 years, his ambition would be the history of Europe. Only England defied him; the other powers of Europe—Austria, Prussia and Russia—were vanquished on the battlefield and obliged to come to terms with the Corsican upstart. And those terms were burdensome; he redrew the map of Europe, dissolving German states, coercing Italy from Austria, and forcing Russia to withdraw from Poland. In 1804, he assumed a title befitting his ambition: emperor. He stood in Notre Dame Cathedral and crowned himself: the self-made emperor.

By 1808, continental Europe was under his sway. He had nothing more to gain from wars; but his restless ambition could not accept peace. The brilliant general and audacious gambler seemed to need war. But it never occurred to him that he could lose. In 1808, he invaded Spain, where his army became bogged down in a vicious guerrilla war. Without extricating France from the Spanish fiasco, he invaded Russia in 1812. Of his 500,000-man army, less than a fifth of them survived the Cossacks and the Russian winter.

In the wake of these defeats, Austria, Prussia, Russia and Britain united against him. With his veterans dead in Russia or trapped in Spain, Napoleon could only muster raw recruits against the veteran armies of Europe. Even his genius was no substitute for trained soldiers. By 1814, the allied armies were in France, besieging Paris; and Napoleon was compelled to abdicate.

But even as his empire collapsed, he was convinced that his genius and luck would not fail him. Exiled to the Mediterranean island of Elba, he plotted his return to France and glory. Escaping in 1815, he found the French ready to march again to his command: it was the road to Waterloo. The victors now exiled Napoleon to an island in the North Atlantic, St. Helena. There he would live the last six years of his life, writing his memoirs and embellishing his legend.

In both his rise and downfall, he achieved a name and reputation that remain indelible. ■