

Napoleon Bonaparte

Napoleon Bonaparte, also known as Napoleon I, was a French general and emperor who conquered large parts of Europe in the 19th century.

Famed for his tactical brilliance and quick thinking in desperate situations, he went down in European history as one of the foremost military strategists of the time.

This article will be of immense use for candidates preparing for the Civil Services examination.

Early Life of Napoleon Bonaparte

Napoleon Bonaparte was born on August 15, 1768, in Ajaccio, located on the Mediterranean island of Corsica. He was the second of eight children born to Carlo Buonaparte and Letizia Romolino Buonaparte. Despite being part of the Corsican nobility, Napoleon's family were of modest means. In 1767, France had acquired Corsica from the Italian city-state of Genoa, which changed the Italian spelling of 'Buonaparte' to the French 'Bonaparte'

Napoleon attended school in mainland France and graduated from the French military academy in 1785. He was posted as the second lieutenant of an artillery regiment in the French army. When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, Napoleon was on leave in Corsica where he came in contact with the Corsican branch of the Jacobins, one of many pro-democratic parties in France at the time. At the time, the Bonaparte family had gotten into a dispute for their pro-democratic leanings with the monarchy supporting the governor of Corsica. The result was them fleeing Corsica for mainland France in 1793, where Napoleon returned to active military duty

While in France, Napoleon came into contact with Augustine Robespierre, the brother of the infamous Maximilien Robespierre. Maximilien Robespierre would herald the Reign of Terror, a period of anarchy marked by violence against and execution of those considered the enemies of the French revolution.

But when the Robespierre brothers fell from power and were guillotined in July 1794, Napoleon was placed under house arrest for a brief period of time due to his association with them. In 1795, he suppressed a monarchy-backed insurrection against the revolutionary government, being promoted to a major general as a result.

Rise of Napoleon Bonaparte

The French revolutionary government has engaged in a series of wars with other European monarchies since 1792. In a series of battles taking place in Italy during 1796, Napoleon led a

French army to victory over the much better equipped and larger armies of Austria. The Treaty of Campo Formio signed between France and Austria led to territorial gains for France.

The Directory, a five-member group that governed France since the Reign of Terror ended in 1795, directed Napoleon to lead an invasion of Great Britain. Knowing the French Navy was inadequate to deal with the far more superior British Royal Navy, Napoleon instead proposed an expedition to Egypt, then a British Protectorate. Taking Egypt from the British would effectively cut them off from their vital trade with India, causing widespread economic hardship on the British Isle. Landing in Egypt in 1798, the French army won the Battle of the Pyramids in June of that year.

But during the Battle of the Nile in August, the French Navy was nearly wiped out following the engagement with the British Navy. Later, Napoleon would launch an invasion of Syria in 1798. Syria was then a province of the Ottoman Empire. This campaign would be a failure as well

That summer, with the political situation in France marked by uncertainty, the ever-ambitious Napoleon opted to return to France.

Napoleon became a part of the group that overthrew the Directory in 1799. The event was known as the coup of 18 Brumaire.

Now a three-member group called the Consulate ruled France with Napoleon becoming first consul, a position consolidated by his victory over Austria at the Battle of Marengo in June 1800.

Napoleon I, Emperor of France

A constitutional amendment made in 1802 made Napoleon first consul for life. In 1804, he crowned himself, emperor of France, during a lavish ceremony at the Cathedral of Notre Dame

Seeking to restore stability in post-revolutionary France, he centralized the government by introducing reforms in banking and education, supporting science and art. His most significant accomplishment was the creation of the Napoleonic Code, which transformed the French legal system and continues to be the basis of the legal system in France and most of Western Europe to this day

From 1803 to 1815, France was engaged in the Napoleonic Wars, a series of major conflicts with various coalitions of European nations.

In October 1805, the fleet of Napoleon was wiped out during the Battle of Trafalgar, ending any possibility of the French invasion of Britain. However, the Battle of Austerlitz in December of that year cemented his position as one of the most capable generals in European history. A combined army of Austrians and Russians was defeated by the French and the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire that resulted would be a catalyst for the unification of Germany in 1871

Seeking to defeat his British rivals through economic means, Napoleon devised the Continental System in 1806, which blockaded European ports from British Trade. Subsequent victories in 1807 and 1809 against the Russians and Austrians resulted in French territorial gains in central and Eastern Europe

During this time, Napoleon re-established the French aristocracy by handing out titles of nobility to his loyal friends and family as his empire continued to expand across Europe

Fall of Napoleon Bonaparte

In retaliation of Russian withdrawal from the continental system, Napoleon launched an invasion of Russia during the summer of 1812. Instead of fighting a conventional battle, the Russians adopted scorched earth tactics and guerilla warfare to harass the French army. Seeking to capture Moscow before the onset of the brutal Russian winter, Napoleon pressed deeper into Russia despite being ill-prepared for it. By September of that year, both sides had suffered heavy casualties.

The French Army took Moscow only to find it empty with most of the civilians having evacuated further towards the eastern fringes of Russia. Left with no alternative, Napoleon began to beat a hasty retreat towards the west while being continually harassed by the Russian Army. Of the 600,000 troops that began the campaign, only 100,000 made it out of Russia.

Further setbacks for Napoleon awaited him with the defeat of his armies in Spain. Napoleon's forces were again defeated in 1813 during the Battle of Leipzig by a coalition force of Austrian, Prussian, Russian and Swedish troops. He was forced to abdicate his throne when the coalition forces captured Paris. He was exiled to the island of Elba off the coast of Italy while his wife and son were sent to Austria

On February 26, 1815, Napoleon escaped to mainland France, where he was welcomed to Paris by cheering crowds. He began a campaign to reconquer lost French possessions in Europe shortly after.

In 1815, the French army invaded Belgium hoping to defeat a new allied army consisting of Britain and Prussia. On June 16, the Prussians were defeated at the Battle of Ligny. But two days later on June 18, at the Battle of Waterloo near Brussels, the French were crushed by the British with support from the Prussians. The battle permanently ended French ambitions for the control of Europe

On June 22, 1815, Napoleon was once again forced to abdicate.

Final years of Napoleon Bonaparte

In October 1815, Napoleon was exiled to Saint Helena, a remote island in the South Atlantic Ocean. He passed away while there on May 5, 1821. He was 51 at the time. The likely cause of

his demise is said to be stomach cancer, although it was speculated with no sufficient evidence that he was poisoned. Although his last wish was to be buried on the banks of the Seine, he was buried on the island. In 1840 his remains were returned to France and given a state funeral. He was interred in a crypt at the Les Invalides in Paris, among other French military leaders