Biography-Early Years

"Napoleon Bonaparte was a French general who became the leader of France and eventually emperor of the French. He lived in a era of enormous change, which spanned the American War of Independence (1775-1783) and the French Revolution (1789-1815)." (Barnes)

Napoleon Bonaparte was born at Ajaccio on the island of Corsica on August 15th, 1769, the second son of a spendthrift lawyer, Carlo Bonaparte, and Letizia Ramolino, a severe matron of noble birth. Corsica had become French territory in the year before Napoleon's birth. His other siblings were Joseph, Lucien, Elisa, Louis, Pauline, Caroline and Jerome. (Lacey)

He went to the mainland of France to learn French at a preparatory school in Autun, and then attended the Military School at Brienne. Thanks to his noble heritage, he received a royal scholarship where he graduated at the age of sixteen as a lieutenant in the artillery, two years before the rest of his class. (Barnes).

Upon graduation, Napoleon was commissioned a lieutenant in the Royal Artillery. Napoleon became an ardent supporter of the new regime after the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789. His first chance at recognition was in 1793 at the French port city of Toulon. He directed the artillery siege of Toulon, a French city that had rebelled against the revolutionary government. For his performance at the victorious operation, he was made brigadier general at the age of twenty-four. (Napoleon I)

Military Career and Rise to Power

Napoleon's career languished in July 1794, when revolutionary leader Maximilien Robespierre was and his supporters were executed. Napoleon was briefly arrested and detained for two weeks. He was later released and given an administrative position. Napoleon worked his way back into command when he was called upon to disperse a royalist uprising in Paris in October 1795. Paul Barras suggested that Napoleon be in charge of the defense of the government now at the Convention. They agreed and Napoleon dispatched Captain Joachim Murat to secure cannon. Napoleon controlled the streets leading to the Convention. He quelled the action by firing guns into the crowd, an event called the "whiff of grapeshot" and dispersed royalist forces. On March 2, 1796, he was given command of the French army then fighting in Italy. (Barnes)

On March 9, 1796, the 26 year-old general married Josephine de Beauharnais. She was born Marie-Joséphe-Rose Tascher de la Pagerie on June 23, 1763. She had been married to Vicomte Alexandre de Beauharnais. He who was executed during the reign of terror. She later married Napoleon Bonaparte in a civil ceremony over the objections of his family. She was 32 at the time. They had no children. (Josephine Bonaparte)
From November 15-17, 1796, Napoleon led his troops in the Battle of Arcoli. The French were victorious over the Austrians. In the Battle of Rivoli, the French were again victorious over the Austrians and came close to the Austrian capital Vienna. He negotiated the Treaty of Campo Formio on Oct. 17, 1797. A French diplomat in Tuscany wrote of the young general: "The campaign was opened, and a series of victories as dazzling as they were unexpected, succeeding each other with surprising quickness, raised the glory of our French soldiers, and that of their great captain who led them daily to fresh triumphs, to the highest." -Miot de Melito, (Barnes) (Lacey).

In 1798, the Directory sent Napoleon to Egypt where he was to remove Britain's influence and eliminate its shortcut to India. On July 21st, 1798, Napoleon led his army to victory at the Battle of the Pyramids. Napoleon now controlled Egypt. On August 1-2, Napoleon suffered a defeat at sea when Rear Admiral Sir Horatio Nelson destroyed his fleet at the Battle of the Nile. The Directory ordered Napoleon's return and he was anxious to return to Europe. During his time in Egypt, the Rosetta Stone was discovered, which laid the foundation of modern Egyptology. (Barnes) (Lacey).

Napoleon returned to a weak French government, which was threatened by discontent and unrest from both the royalists and radical revolutionaries. The allied powers of Europe (Britain, Russia, Austria, Turkey and Portugal) formed a Second Coalition against France and were poised to invade. Napoleon left Egypt and arrived in France on October 9, 1799. Despite his losses, he was hailed as a hero. Top political leaders were plotting to gain control of the government. With their permission, Napoleon engineered a coup d'état on November 9, 1799. The government was overthrown and Napoleon became First Consul (of three), the ruler of France. (Barnes) (Lacey) (Napoleon)

Napoleon was an exceptionally gifted political and military leader. His genius of intellect, his ability to see opportunity and fully exploit it, and his eye for both detail and the larger picture were essential to his success. On the battlefield, he delivered a crushing blow to the Austrians and allied nations that they led the Battle of Marengo on June 14, 1800. The Austrians made a separate peace with France in February 1801. (Barnes) (Napoleon I)

With peace, Napoleon improved the French economy. He negotiated the Concordat (1801), which restored relations with the Roman Catholic Church. Catholicism was recognized as the "religion of the greater majority of Frenchmen," but freedom of religion, divorce and civil marriages were all retained. Land that was confiscated during the Revolution was not returned. He put the nations finances in order, made administrative reforms, guaranteed law and order with a new police force. He organized French laws into the famous Napoleonic Code, one of his most enduring achievements. (Barnes) (Napoleon I)
On February 19th 1801, the Treaty of Lunéville concluded between France and Austria. Great Britian and the rest of Europe followed with the Treaty of Armiens on March 25, 1802. There was finally peace after ten years of continuous warfare. On August 2, 1802, Napoleon is elected Consul for Life by the Plebiscite. (Lacey) (Napoleon I)

With popular support behind him, Napoleon proclaimed himself emperor of the French in May 1804. On December 4 1804, in a coronation ceremony, he placed the imperial crown of his head instead of the pope. Napoleon Bonaparte became Napoleon I, Emperor of of France and Josephine Bonaparte was crowned empress of France at Notre Dame Cathedral in France. (Barnes) (Lacey)

Peace did not last long and in May 1803, France was once again at war with Great Britian. Austria and Russia entered the war on the side of the British. In the summer of 1805, Napoleon was preparing to invade Britain when he discovered the Austrians and Russians were moving against him in central Europe. Without hesitation, he moved his troops, now called the Grande Armée, to meet them. He surprised and defeated the Austrians at Ulm, on October 17, 1805. He forced Austrian general Karl Mack to surrender 27,000 troops with hardly a shot fired. (Napoleon I) (Barnes).

Britian and Russia joined Prussia to form a Fourth Coalition against Napoleon. The French defeated Prussia at the battle of Jean and Auerstädt, both fought on October 14, 1806. He confronted the Russians at the Battle of Eylau on February 7-8, 1807 with an indecisive outcome. Napoleon defeted the Russians at the battle of Friedland on June 14, 1807. He met Tsar Alexander I and formed an alliance. Napoleon settled the Treaty of Tilsit with the Russians. He spent the winter in Poland and fathered a son with his Polish mistress, Marie Walewska. (Barnes) (Napoleon I)

Only the British remained undefeated after 1807 because of their naval invincibility. Napoleon was unable to challenge his hated enemy at sea. Napoleon souught to wage economic was against Great Britian. He enforced the Continental System, which forbade any of the Nations of Europe from trading with the British. (Napoleon I).

Anxious to have a male heir and unable to have an heir with Josepheine, he divorced her and the end of 1809. He sought to marry into one of the most important royal families in Europe. He married Austrian princess Marie-Louise in March 1810. She bore him one son in 1811. (Barnes, Napoleon I)

The height of Napoleon's power was the period from 1810 to 1812, but even then the empire was beginning to show cracks. Napoleon attempted to control Spain by putting his
brother Joseph on the throne. This move was supported by the middle class who felt it would lead to a far more enlightened Spanish government. But the Spanish peasant class rebelled, and a war of liberation ensued. The French forces eventually withdrew to France. (Barnes)

**Fall from Power**

By 1812, Napoleon's Continental System was in shambles. He undertook the Russian invasion to enforce his will on the czar. The campaign proved to be his undoing. On June 24, 1812, Napoleon led an army of 600,000 men representing twenty nations across the Niemen River into Russia. He penetrated deep into Russia, winning victories over the Russian armies on the field but he reached Moscow without forcing the czar to surrender. The Russians burned Moscow rather than let the French shelter there. When winter set in, Napoleon was forced to retreat. The campaign was a disaster and Napoleon lost 90 percent of his army. The Russians continued their pursuit into Saxony in 1813 and a growing coalition of forces defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Leipzig on October 16-19, 1813. (Barnes) (Napoleon I)

In 1814, he was forced to defend France from the invading forces of the Sixth Coalition. He led a brilliant campaign but his Marshalls were less successful. At that point, his marshals refused to fight anymore and he was forced to abdicate the throne on April 11, 1814. He was exiled from France as emperor of Elba, a tiny island off the coast of Italy. (Barnes)

The monarchy was restored with King Louis XVIII and he set about working the details of peace. Napoleon secretly left Elba and returned to France in March 1815. The army rallied to his side and people came out to acclaim him. He came back to reclaim his throne. He pleaded for peace with the European leaders to seek war no more. His old enemies were unconvinced and mobilized several armies against him. After some success at Ligny and Quatre Bras in Belgium, he was decisively defeated at the battle of Waterloo on June 18, 1815. The period of his return, the hundred days were over. (Barnes) (Napoleon I)

Napoleon abdicated a second time. The British gained custody of Napoleon and exiled him to St. Helena, a remote island in the Atlantic Ocean. He suffered alone and wrote his memoirs. He died on May 5, 1821. (Barnes) (Napoleon I).
Works Cited