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Adrienne Tam
College of DuPage

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In the Mind of a Legend

by Adrienne Tam

(Honors History 1120)

Napoleon Bonaparte was a legend in France and a threat to nearly every other European power. He used military strategies to win battles and he dominated a huge portion of Europe in the late 1700s and early 1800s. After he joined the French artillery in 1785, he put his battle tactics to action that led to his promotion in the Revolutionary Army. He would live to become the First Consul and then Emperor of France. Napoleon quickly rose to power and stood conquering Europe for nearly 20 years through his carefully planned alliances, brilliant military tactics, and many other accomplishments such as the Napoleonic Code or the *Grande Armée* he confidently led. He was favored among his people and neighboring countries were often afraid of him. His persistence in trying to gain power against many odds eventually backfired. He would suffer a rather painful death.

During his lifetime, he set goals for himself to redeem his personal value. He had the urge to gain control of people who opposed him and looked down on him. As a child, Napoleon constantly sought the attention of his mother and in his later years, he again sought the attention of his first wife, Josephine. Napoleon was always seeking something that would satisfy his insecurity as a person, and this quest for satisfaction became the epic conquest he would lead throughout his whole lifetime. Napoleon Bonaparte often felt inferior to the people around him because of his Corsican background, failure of lasting relationships, and small stature, which drove him to gain superiority through controlling others; his excessive greed for power eventually led to his downfall.

Napoleon Bonaparte was born in Ajaccio, on the island of Corsica in August 15, 1769. His family was forced to flee to France, from Corsica, because of French invaders; this caused him great anger towards the French. Alan Schom, author of *Napoleon Bonaparte*, describes Napoleon's view of the situation, "He was determined to return to liberate occupied Corsica from the arrogant French who were holding his people in "slavery" as he [Napoleon] put it" (Schom 4). The invasion encouraged Napoleon to study harder and grow into a stronger man.

Being only two years younger than his brother, Joseph, Napoleon always wanted his mother's approval and the satisfaction of attention. Harold T. Parker, author of the essay, "The Formation of Napoleon's Personality: An Exploratory Essay," explains Napoleon's relationships with his mother and brother, "The early growth of Napoleon depended on his companionship with Joseph and their interrelations with the mother" (Parker 9). As a child, Napoleon was the quarrelling, troublesome, attention-seeking boy that frequently picked on his brother (Parker 8-9). Napoleon perhaps became aggressive and power-hungry because of his past relationships with his mother and brother and that his father was also aggressive and played a role in encouraging Napoleon to gain his fighting spirit (Parker 9).

His extraordinary mathematical skills led him to become enrolled into the army after a recommendation. It was the middle of the French Revolution at the time, and Napoleon was about to become intertwined with the events. The British attacked the port of Toulon, and after fending off a group of British fleet and proving his outstanding military skills, Napoleon was promoted to Brigadier General in the Revolutionary Army at the age of twenty-four on December 22, 1793 (Schom 22). After Prussia and England left Austria to fight against France alone in 1796, Napoleon began to dominate the Austrians. He retrained his army to become stronger and more disciplined by teaching them his own military strategies which would lead to the victory of several upcoming

battles. The French people began to praise him and respect him as a powerful leader. Timothy Wilson-Smith, author of *Napoleon: Man of War, Man of Peace*, summarizes Napoleon's accomplishments, "He had shown himself to be a remarkably resilient general, a man who won battles that counted, and also a masterly politician..." (Smith 27). He signed a final peace treaty with Austria at Campo Formio at his own accord (Schom 60) and began to feel a strong sense of confidence as a "man of destiny."

He received the nickname "the little corporal" from his soldiers. The authors of *The Age of Napoleon*, Will and Ariel Durant, describe his physical characteristics, "He was absurdly short for a general, being only five feet and six inches in height" (Durant 237) which included a hat. "'The little corporal,' as the troops now affectionately dubbed Napoleon, had accomplished even more for himself" (Schom 60). He took pride in leading his army and often encouraged and rewarded them for their efforts with loot from villages. This gave him great respect from his people which began to give him the power to affect people. "An international reputation as a formidable warlord, and a hero of France, he was easily the nation's most powerful man, apart from the five-member Directory itself" (Schom 60). He gained world recognition because of his remarkable leadership and strategic military skills. He trained weak and tired men into a strong and conquering army. During this time of Napoleon's life, he felt proud of his accomplishments and all of these events leading up to the Austrian peace treaty would trigger the mighty reign of Napoleon Bonaparte I.

Napoleon may have been able to influence his people to appreciate him as a leader, but he had his own reasons for doing so. He was the type of man that wanted power and plenty of it. Frank McLynn, author of *Napoleon: A Biography*, examined Napoleon's mindset, "Napoleon, with his great intellect, must always have had sound reasons for his actions. An examination of the Napoleonic psyche shows that [...] self-destructive psychological impulses usually played some part, and sometimes the major part" (McLynn 67). On the inside, Napoleon was a man who felt vast inferiority among the people that surrounded him. When he first moved to France after the invasion of his home country of Corsica, he was looked down upon by other students. "His pride had begun with self-centeredness natural to all organisms. In his youth it swelled defensively in the clash of individuals and families in Corsica, and then against the class and racial arrogance of students at Brienne" (Durant 242). He most likely felt that he did not belong with most people around him. However, he became motivated to rise above the people who despised him. "But as his successes widened, his power and responsibilities, his pride and self-absorption, grew" (242). His future soon became filled with warfare, obsession of power, and the greediness for the control of people.

He was sensitive and had an even worse temper. "His temper was as short as his stature, and it shortened as his power spread [...] He became impatient with contradiction, tardiness, incompetence, or stupidity" (243). He was always busy with work that he barely had time for himself. Napoleon did not want to deal with the little things like stupidity, which is why his temper was so easily sparked.

Napoleon, as mentioned before, was quite short for a general; but that may not have been the only physical inferiority that he felt. McLynn briefly recounts a possible cause for inferiority in Napoleon, "It is suggested that he suffered from a 'castration complex' or that his 'organ inferiority' [...] led to military overcompensation [...] what we can detect in Napoleon's psyche is some form of sadism or sexuality transmogrified as aggression" (McLynn 278). It is possible that Napoleon may have felt inferior even in his sexual relationships, which caused him to become aggressive. He also had difficulty trying to impregnate his wife, Josephine. McLynn also suggests that Napoleon may have had small genitals, which sparked his aggression, thus causing him to take his anger out through "military overcompensation." In other words, what he lacked in one area, he made up through another (military power). Of course there is no solid proof that he felt this way, but there is a high possibility, because of the way he treated the people around him. "He liked to strike people of both sexes, to slap them, pull their hair, pinch their ears and tweak their noses. Slapping servants across

the face and shoulders with a riding crop was not unusual” (McLynn 279). Apparently, Napoleon was quite physical and aggressive to the people around him. With the high status as Emperor of France since 1804, Napoleon had the power to do practically anything he pleased, because he had the highest power in all of France. Eventually he would dominate almost all of Europe before his tragic downfall and death.

Napoleon’s relationships with people were not always pleasant. His relationship with his wife Josephine was one sided. During his time in the army in Italy, Napoleon wrote passionate letters to Josephine about his longing and desires for her. Much to Napoleon’s dismay, “She not only did not love Bonaparte, she scarcely even cared for him. Put off by his awkward aggressiveness, she was even a little afraid of him” (Parker 18). When Napoleon finally realized she had affairs with other men in Paris, and that he was not loved by her, he was deeply disheartened. “The failure of his first and only serious venture toward intimacy and sexual union with a woman no doubt accentuated his drive for power and accomplishment” (Parker 19). Napoleon sought power to overcome his pathetic failures, thus his personality began to take shape into a power-hungry “beast.”

Napoleon was a “sweet talker” especially when it came to his army, “It [victory] would be hard work, for himself and a million troops, but it would be repaid in glory, for him and them; and if death overtook them on the way it would not be too great a price to pay” (Durant 243). He was able to convince the French people and the armies he commanded, to fight with him for the good of France and that death was not to be feared, because glory would be achieved. “His ruling passion, [was] so hypnotic that for a decade nearly all France accepted it as its guiding star” (243), Durant describes the way the French believed in Napoleon. However, what Napoleon really wanted was to be the “man of destiny” (Schom 60) that would lead his country to victory. He wanted to feel important, and the easiest way, was for him to gain power and command others to follow behind his footsteps. After the publication of the Napoleonic Code in 1804 which gave civil, equal, and educational rights to the French, Napoleon made adjustments to the government system, “To demonstrate to the world, and to the French in particular, that his administration was not to prove another spineless, corrupt Directory but a resolute one-man rule, on February 19, in a symbolic move, he transferred the entire government... in an enormous procession... to the Tuileries” (Schom 293). This decision by Napoleon encouraged his people to believe in him immensely, because it proved that he could change the highest controlling power in France, and that he could be *the* great ruler that the French people have always needed. This also allowed Napoleon to rule France alone when he became Emperor. Thus, practically no one could get in Napoleon’s way as he continued his tyranny.

Now that Napoleon had risen to the highest possible power in France, controlled the *Grande Armée* of hundreds of thousands of soldiers who would die at his call, and felt the importance he persistently sought, it was still not enough. After the betrayal of Alexander I of Russia in 1812, Napoleon was not going to lose face especially not after all the hard work he had accomplished to reach his position. Previously pledging an alliance with Napoleon, author of *The First Total War*, David A. Bell explains Alexander’s betrayal, “by 1812, Tsar Alexander had become a singularly unreliable ally, undermining the Continental System and threatening France’s control over Germany and Poland” (Bell 256); this gave Napoleon a reason to “destroy the Russian army, as he had destroyed the Prussians in 1806,” however Napoleon would have to travel nearly 6500 miles across Europe and the freezing Siberia to fight Alexander (Bell 257). This decision unfortunately resulted in the defeat of Napoleon and his army.

His greed for power to control Russia and defeat Alexander, ultimately led to his downfall. “The final act came with the retreat. Having lost so much of his army in the march to Moscow, Napoleon now sacrificed nearly all the rest” (Bell 260). Napoleon and the rest of his army attempted to head back to Paris, but most died. This failure devastated Napoleon as he abdicated to the island of Elba. After escaping Elba in 1815 and attempting to regain his lost powers during the ‘Hundred

Days,' Napoleon once again fell to his defeat in shame at the Battle of Waterloo.

Ironically, almost everything Napoleon wanted including power, authority, and a sense of importance, he was able to earn, but died with none of it. "On May 9 a considerable procession, escorted the corpse to a grave outside Longwood [St. Helena]... There he remained for nineteen years, until France, loving him again, brought him home" (Durant 769). Napoleon was once again important enough to be cared about again. What brought him satisfaction also brought him death and despair.

Napoleon Bonaparte made several accomplishments throughout his life not only as the Emperor of France but also as a general in warfare. His rise to power was rather quick as he trained in the French military and proved to the people that he had the capability to lead an army as a general. He rose through the ranks and became Emperor of France. Gaining loyalty from many treaties and alliances in battles he won, he became a popular figure among his French people.

Napoleon Bonaparte was different from previous rulers however. "Napoleon, in short, was the first true, great populist of the Revolutionary era: the first who could speak to his audiences in familiar, personal terms and be accepted as a man of the people even while presenting himself as an extraordinary genius" (Bell 206). He wanted his people to appreciate him as ruler and was able to convince people that they were fighting for the good of France. Napoleon distinguished himself as the powerful leader that would lead France to dominate Europe and he nearly succeeded had he been more prepared to face war in the harshest conditions.

However, Napoleon did not live his life full of pride and wonders. He had faced many hardships along the way including poor personal relationships with the people he cared about such as his first wife, Josephine. This led to Napoleon's quest to conquer other people to satisfy his insecurities, "Failing in intimate relationships, he learned to find satisfaction in work and mastery of other human beings. Since outside of work relationships and the army he never really understood other people, he contrived strategies to manipulate them as figures for the purpose of control" (Parker 26). His reasons for seeking power may lie in his past and the fact that he may have been psychologically unstable shows that Napoleon was constantly driven by desire to prove himself worthy to his own conscience as well as everyone around him. Napoleon was an insecure man who felt inferior to others due to his Corsican background, failures in many of his relationships especially with his family and wife, and his small stature, which he persistently sought power to balance out his deficiencies. Controlling an army of hundreds of thousands of men as well as ruling over all of France with the power to create laws and policies as he desired, all fed to his greediness for power. Unfortunately he wanted too much, and his over-confidence was a pathway to his ultimate downfall. Although Napoleon lived on to be a legend in many eyes, and became widely recognized for his major accomplishments in his lifetime that brought about vast changes all across Europe, he desired more than he could have handled and ended up "digging his own grave."

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