Chapter 1

Why Remember Napoleon?

In This Chapter

- Recognizing Napoleon's importance in his lifetime
- Realizing Napoleon's lingering influence

> *He was a man with amazing abilities and a dangerous ambition; by his talents the finest man to have appeared since Caesar, whom in our eyes he would appear to have surpassed.*
>
> *Stendhal,* A Life of Napoleon

More books have been written about Napoleon than about anyone else in history — more than about Christ, Mohammad, Alexander the Great, or Julius Caesar. The last estimate for the number of books written on Napoleon was over 300,000. We're talking separate *titles* here, not just copies!

There are Napoleonic societies all over the world, and he is routinely featured on television shows and in movies. I am convinced that there are more representations of Napoleon in the decorative arts (engravings, miniatures, bronze and porcelain statues, snuffboxes, and so on) than anyone else — see Figure 1-1 for just one example.

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Figure 1-1: A rare period engraving of Napoleon as Emperor of the French.

And yet, it seems the world can't quite make up its collective mind about who Napoleon really was and why he mattered. To some, he was a promoter of the great values represented by the American and French Revolutions. To others, he was little more than a power-hungry conqueror. But everyone seems to agree that Napoleon was important. As the quote from the 19th-century French writer Stendhal indicates, he is remembered as being both brilliant and a little dangerous, much like the two men to whom he is often compared, Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.

In this chapter, I touch on why Napoleon was important while he lived and why he is seen as important today. Obviously, answering those questions is the point of this entire book, and I get into much more detail in subsequent chapters. But before I dive into the details (which I find pretty fascinating and think you will, too), I want to whet your appetite.

A Legend in His Own Time

Napoleon was without question the most important person of his age. At the peak of his career, he stood like a colossus astride all of Europe. For a short time, he controlled most of western and central Europe. But his importance was not just in his conquests.

Napoleon's importance can be seen in terms of what he did for France, for Europe, and for the rest of the world. Although he was in power for only around 15 years, his influence extended far beyond what might have been expected for a reign that short.

Speaking of short

Okay, folks, it's time to put the short jokes to rest, once and for all. Lots of people, probably including you, think of Napoleon as that short fellow with a *Napoleonic complex,* the term given to people who feel they have to make up for their lack of height. Well, the evidence is in, and it suggests that Napoleon was actually about 5'6" or 5'7", which, as it happens, was about the average height for Frenchmen in those days. So there!

And, while we're at it, he didn't run around with his hand inside his shirt, either. He wasn't dealing with a stomachache or pains from cancer, and he wasn't (as one Starbucks ad would have it) holding a demitasse of coffee under his coat. That was a popular pose of the 18th and 19th centuries when sitting for a portrait; I've even seen George Washington portrayed that way!

Changing France's institutions

Few leaders in French history (or in the history of any other country, for that matter) had as much influence on their nation as Napoleon did. As you discover later in the book, Napoleon completely reorganized his nation's economic, legal, and educational institutions. He brought a level of unity to the nation that it had never experienced before, and he did so largely by centralizing French institutions. In education, for example, he centralized the curriculum and teacher selection process, giving more power to the education bureaucrats in Paris. But he also reorganized, expanded, and greatly improved educational opportunities for French citizens, changing the education system from an elite-oriented institution to one that produced well-educated and productive middle-class citizens (see Chapter 19).

Napoleon did the same for France's economy, forming the Bank of France and restructuring France's finances and budget process, as well as her tax structure (see Chapter 19). While he was at it, he improved France's infrastructure and promoted religious equality (see Chapters 19 and 23, respectively).



His most famous domestic work was his rewriting of the civil code into a document that would eventually become known as the *Code Napoléon.* Napoleon believed that his legal code was his greatest legacy, and I discuss it in Chapter 19.

Influencing Europe and beyond

Napoleon was able to conquer and control much of Europe just long enough to institute some of the reforms that he had implemented in France. He extended the *Code Napoléon,* in part or in whole, to most of western and some of central Europe. He swept away much of the old feudal order that had dominated Europe for so long and put in its place governments based on equality and the other progressive ideals of the French Revolution (which I discuss in Chapter 3).

When Napoleon fell from power (see Chapter 15), some of that feudal order returned for a while. But as the old saying goes, "How are you going to keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen the big city?" Once introduced to progressive liberalism, the people of Europe would not long tolerate the old order.



Napoleon's ability to take his progressive ideas to Europe depended largely on the success of his army, and that success depended largely on Napoleon ushering in what we might call *modern warfare.* No, he didn't have tanks and

planes, but he did reorganize the French army to make it more effective. And he also used tactics that completely bamboozled his opponents. As I show in Chapter 17 (as well as in Chapters 9 and 10), Napoleon is often called the *master of war* for good reason. His tactics are still taught in the world's finest military academies.

Napoleon reorganized France's and Europe's social, political, economic, and military systems. Is that enough to make him the most important person of his day? I think so, and I suspect that you'll agree after you read more of this book.

Respecting Napoleon's Legacy

Napoleon was considered extraordinary during his lifetime, and his reputation has only grown in the years since his death in 1821. Here are a few reasons why:

- As I note in the previous section, he is seen as the father of modern warfare, and in Parts II and III of this book, you get a good idea why.
- Napoleon is often described as the father of the European Union because of the various steps toward greater unity that took place while he was in power.
- His sale of the Louisiana territory to the United States is credited as a major contribution to the U.S. rise as a world power.
- Napoleon's rewriting of the civil code, known as the *Code Napoléon,* has survived in France and in numerous other countries that were influenced by France. (I discuss this code in Chapter 19.)



Napoleon literally changed the face of Europe. His name was used in the cause of revolutions throughout Europe during the 19th century. As I explain in Chapter 6, the unification of Italy had its beginnings with Napoleon's actions there as early as 1796. The modern state of Germany owes much to his actions as well, as I discuss in Chapter 22. His support of Polish independence (see Chapter 22) is still fondly remembered by modern Poles; a large equestrian statue of one of Napoleon's marshals, Prince Joseph Poniatowski, stands at the entrance to the Namiestnikowski Palace that is now used as the Polish president's house.

But we remember Napoleon for much more than his accomplishments. We remember him for his brilliance. He was a genius with a breadth of intellect that has seldom been measured. He could, for example, dictate four different letters to four different secretaries at the same time, rotating a paragraph at a time through each of them, without being reminded where he had left off.

We remember him not only for what he took to countries he came to dominate, but for what he brought back. For example, his soldiers discovered the Rosetta Stone in Egypt, which helped bring about modern Egyptology (see Chapter 7).

Napoleon also captures our imagination from the very nature of his story. His life is a classic rags-to-riches tale; he went from obscurity in Corsica to dominance of a continent. Throw into the mix at least two captivating love stories and a healthy measure of pathos, and you have the makings of all those books and movies.

Napoleon was perhaps the last great man of action. He was constantly on the go, sleeping very little, wolfing down his meals. He was determined to do as much as possible in the small amount of time he knew he would have. As it turned out, he had even less time than he imagined, but he accomplished an amazing amount anyway.

I am not alone, of course, in my estimation of Napoleon as one of the most extraordinary men in history. The German philosopher Johann Goethe wrote that Napoleon was "always enlightened by reason, always clear and decisive, and gifted at every moment with enough energy to translate into action whatever he recognized as being advantageous or necessary. . . . He was in a permanent state of enlightenment, which is why his fate was more brilliant than the world has ever seen or is likely to see after him." Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, Napoleon's sometimes friend, sometimes enemy, said that Napoleon's career was "the most extraordinary that has occurred for one thousand years."

A Napoleonic Primer

Before we dive into the good stuff, I want to clarify a few terms that you'll see in later chapters or in other books about Napoleon. First, some historical terms you may want to be familiar with:

- **Bourbon Dynasty:** No, I'm not referring to the drink. This was the line of kings of France that began with the 16th-century rule of Henry IV (who ruled 1589–1610) and included Louis XIV (1643–1715), Louis XV (1715–1774), Louis XVI (he of French Revolution fame, 1774–1792), Louis XVIII (1814–1824, minus a few months for the Hundred Days, Napoleon's brief return to power in 1815), Charles X (1824–1830), and Louis Philippe (1830–1848).

  The Bourbons also ruled Spain for hundreds of years. In fact, the current king of Spain, Juan Carlos (1975–present), is a Bourbon.

- **Hapsburg Dynasty:** This dynasty, centered on Austria, was a major competitor to the Bourbon dynasty. It ruled the Holy Roman Empire from 1273 until its final destruction after World War I in 1918. Francis I of Austria, who you meet in this book, was a member of the Hapsburg Dynasty. (He was also called Francis II of the Holy Roman Empire until he abdicated that title in 1806.) Francis was the father of Marie Louise, Napoleon's second wife.
- **Napoleonic Wars:** This term, used to describe wars fought under Napoleon's command, seems to lay blame for these conflicts squarely at Napoleon's feet. In fact, most of the wars fought by Napoleon were really extensions of those started during the French Revolution (see Chapter 3). The old political regimes in Europe feared that the progressive ideas of the Revolution, and later of Napoleon, would spread to their people. (They were right, of course.)

  As a result, the old regimes of Europe formed a number of coalitions, or alliances, against first Revolutionary and then Napoleonic France. Thus, these wars are often called the War of the First Coalition, the War of the Second Coalition, and so on. On the Cheat Sheet at the beginning of this book, I explain who took part in each coalition.
- **French Empire:** French Empire generally means the period from 1804–1815, when Napoleon was Emperor of the French. However, it also is sometimes used to denote a style of furniture and other decorative arts of that period.
- **First Empire and Second Empire:** These terms are usually associated with decorative art styles, or they're used to delineate the period of an artifact. *First Empire* refers to the period when Napoleon I was emperor, generally 1804 to 1815. *Second Empire* is the period of Napoleon III, 1851 to 1870.
- **Napoleon I and Napoleon III:** When Napoleon became Emperor of the French (see Chapter 20), his title was Napoleon I because he was the first person named Napoleon to ever be king or emperor in that country. Later in the century, his nephew, Louis Napoleon, was also crowned emperor, becoming Napoleon III.

  Wait a minute, couldn't the French even count? Where's Napoleon II? Napoleon had a son, and in 1815, when Napoleon was forced to abdicate his throne (see Chapter 15), his supporters briefly declared the son Napoleon II. (Before that time, and since then, Napoleon's son is usually referred to as *The King of Rome.*) Napoleon's son never really became France's emperor, but in deference to his memory, Louis Napoleon took the title of Napoleon III.

Next, some military and political titles you'll run across:

- **General:** This is the highest military rank in the army. The type of general denoted the level of command. Thus a *general of brigade* (brigadier general) commanded a brigade. A *general of division* commanded — you guessed it — a division.
- **Marshal:** This term describes a handful of men (26, to be exact) who were granted the title of Marshal of the Empire. The title often brought with it the command of a major military unit, but it was not strictly a military title; it also came with civilian titles of nobility and great wealth. The symbol of the *Marshalate* (as they were collectively known) was the marshal's baton. Marshals were hand-picked by Napoleon himself, based on their military abilities, political considerations, and personal relationships.
- **Consul:** After Napoleon gained power in 1799, a new constitution established a three-member executive committee to run the country, replacing the inept and corrupt Directory. Each of these three men was called a Consul, and Napoleon was made First Consul, a position that in reality gave him almost all of the executive power. He retained this position until he was crowned emperor on December 2, 1804.
- **Consulate:** This term denotes the period from 1799–1804 when France was governed by three Consuls, with Napoleon serving as First Consul. The term also is used to describe a particular style of decorative arts popular during that period.