

The British Napoleonic Wars

From 1803 to 1805 Napoleon had only the British to fight; and again France could hope for victory only by landing an army in the British Isles, whereas the British could defeat Napoleon only by forming a Continental coalition against him. Napoleon began to prepare an invasion again, this time with greater conviction and on a larger scale. He gathered nearly 2,000 ships between Brest and Antwerp and concentrated his Grand Army in the camp at Boulogne (1803). Even so, the problem was the same as in 1798: to cross the Channel, the French had to have control of the sea.

Still far inferior to the British navy, the French fleet needed the help of the Spanish, and even then the two fleets together could not hope to defeat more than one of the British squadrons. Spain was induced to declare war on Great Britain in December 1804, and it was decided that French and Spanish squadrons massed in the Antilles should lure a British squadron into these waters and defeat it, thus making the balance roughly equal between the Franco-Spanish navy and the British. A battle in the entrance to the Channel could then be fought with some chance of success.

The plan failed. The French squadron from the Mediterranean, under Admiral Pierre de Villeneuve, found itself alone at the appointed meeting place in the Antilles. Pursued by Nelson and not daring to attack him, it turned back toward Europe and took refuge in Cádiz in July 1805; there the British blockaded it. Accused of cowardice by the angry Napoleon, Villeneuve resolved to run the blockade, with the support of a Spanish squadron; but on October 21, 1805, he was attacked by Nelson off Cape Trafalgar. Nelson was killed in the battle, but the Franco-Spanish fleet was totally destroyed. The British had won a decisive victory, which eliminated the danger of invasion and gave them freedom of movement at sea.

The British had also succeeded in organizing a new anti-French coalition consisting of Austria, Russia, Sweden, and Naples. On July 24, 1805, three months before Trafalgar, Napoleon had ordered the Grand Army from Boulogne to the Danube (thus ruling out an invasion of England even if the French had won at Trafalgar). In the week preceding Trafalgar, the Grand Army won an outstanding victory over the Austrians at Ulm, and on November 13 Napoleon entered Vienna. On December 2, 1805, in his greatest victory, he defeated the combined Austrian and Russian armies in the Battle of Austerlitz. By the Treaty of Pressburg, Austria renounced all influence in Italy and ceded Venetia and Dalmatia to Napoleon, as well as extensive territory in Germany to his protégés Bavaria, Württemberg, and Baden. The French then proceeded to dethrone the Bourbons in the Kingdom of Naples, which was bestowed on Napoleon's brother Joseph. In July 1806 the Confederation of the Rhine was founded—soon to embrace all of western Germany in a union under French protection.

In September 1806 Prussia entered the war against France, and on October 14 the Prussian armies were defeated at Jena and at Auerstädt. The Russians put up a better resistance at Eylau in February 1807 but were routed at Friedland in June. In Warsaw Napoleon fell in love with Countess Marie Walewska, a Polish patriot who hoped that Napoleon would resurrect her country. Napoleon had a son by her.

The Russian emperor Alexander I could have continued the struggle, but he was tired of the alliance with the British. He met Napoleon at Tilsit, in northern Prussia near the Russian frontier. There, on a raft anchored in the middle of the Nemen River, they signed treaties that created the Grand Duchy of Warsaw from the Polish provinces detached from Prussia and, in effect, divided control of Europe between the emperors, Napoleon taking the west and Alexander the east. Alexander even made a vague promise of a land attack against the British possessions in India.

Blockade and the peninsular campaign

As Napoleon could no longer think of invading England, he tried to induce capitulation by stifling the British economy. By closing all of Europe to British merchandise, he hoped to bring about a revolt of the British unemployed that could force the government to sue for peace. He forbade all trade with the British Isles, ordered the confiscation of all goods coming from English factories or from the British colonies, and condemned as fair prize not only every British ship but also every ship that had touched the coasts of England or its colonies.

For the blockade to succeed, it had to be enforced rigorously throughout Europe. But, from the beginning, England's old ally Portugal showed itself reluctant to comply, for the blockade would mean its commercial ruin. Napoleon decided to break down Portuguese opposition by force. Charles IV of Spain let the French troops cross his kingdom, and they occupied Lisbon; but the prolonged presence of Napoleon's soldiers in the north of Spain led to insurrection. When Charles IV abdicated in favour of his son Ferdinand VII, Napoleon, seeing the opportunity to rid Europe of its last Bourbon rulers, summoned the Spanish royal family to Bayonne in April 1808 and obtained the abdication of both Charles and Ferdinand; they were interned in Talleyrand's château. After the bloody suppression of an uprising in Madrid, insurrection spread across the whole country, for the Spaniards would not accept Joseph Bonaparte, king of Naples, as their new king.

Downfall and abdication of Napoleon I

In January 1814 France was being attacked on all its frontiers. The allies cleverly announced that they were fighting not against the French people but against Napoleon alone, since in November 1813 he had rejected the terms offered by the Austrian foreign minister Klemens, Fürst (prince) von Metternich, which would have preserved the natural frontiers of France. The extraordinary strategic feats achieved by the emperor during the first three months of 1814 with the army of young conscripts were not enough; he could neither defeat the allies, with their overwhelming numerical superiority, nor arouse the majority of the French people from their resentful torpor. The Legislative Assembly and the Senate, formerly so docile, were now asking for peace and for civil and political liberties.

By the Treaty of Chaumont of March 1814, Austria, Russia, Prussia, and Great Britain bound themselves together for 20 years, undertook not to negotiate separately, and promised to continue the struggle until Napoleon was overthrown. When the allied armies arrived before Paris on March 30, Napoleon had moved east to attack their rear guard. The Parisian authorities, no longer overawed by the emperor, lost no time in treating with the allies. As president of the provisional government, Talleyrand proclaimed the deposition of the emperor and, without consulting the French people, began to negotiate with Louis XVIII, the brother of the executed Louis XVI. Napoleon had only reached Fontainebleau when he heard that Paris had capitulated. Persuaded that further resistance was useless, he finally abdicated on April 6.

By the Treaty of Fontainebleau, the allies granted him the island of Elba as a sovereign principality, an annual income of two million francs to be provided by France, and a guard of 400 volunteers. Also he retained the title of emperor. After unsuccessfully trying to poison himself, Napoleon spoke his farewell to his "Old Guard," and after a hazardous journey, during which he narrowly escaped assassination, he arrived at Elba on May 4.

Exile on St. Helena of Napoleon I

On October 15, 1815, Napoleon disembarked in St. Helena with those followers who were voluntarily accompanying him into exile: General Henri-Gratien Bertrand, grand marshal of the palace, and his wife; the comte Charles de Montholon, aide-de-camp, and his wife; General Gaspard Gourgaud; Emmanuel Las Cases, the former chamberlain; and several servants. After a short stay at

the house of a wealthy English merchant, they moved to Longwood, originally built for the lieutenant governor.

Napoleon settled down to a life of routine. He got up late, breakfasting about 10:00 AM, but seldom went out. He was free to go anywhere on the island so long as he was accompanied by an English officer, but he soon refused to comply with this condition and so shut himself up in the grounds of Longwood. He wrote and talked much. At first Las Cases acted as his secretary, compiling what was later to be the *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène* (first published in 1823). From 7:00 to 8:00 PM Napoleon had dinner, after which a part of the evening was spent in reading aloud—Napoleon liked to hear the classics. Then they played cards. About midnight Napoleon went to bed. Some of his time was devoted to learning English, and he eventually began reading English newspapers; but he also had a large number of French books sent from Europe, which he read attentively and annotated.

St. Helena had a healthful climate, and Napoleon's food was good, carefully prepared, and plentiful. His inactivity undoubtedly contributed to the deterioration of his health. The man who for 20 years had played so great a role in the world and who had marched north, south, east, and west across Europe could hardly be expected to endure the monotony of existence on a little island, aggravated by the self-imposed life of a recluse. He had also more intimate reasons for unhappiness: Marie-Louise sent no word to him, and he may have learned of her liaison with the Austrian officer appointed to watch over her, Adam, Graf (count) von Neipperg (whom she eventually married in secret without waiting for Napoleon's death). Nor did he have any news of his son, the former king of Rome, who was now living in Vienna with the title of duke of Reichstadt. Though the severity of Sir Hudson Lowe has been much exaggerated, it is certain that this "jailer," who arrived as governor of St. Helena in April 1816, did nothing to make Napoleon's life easier. Napoleon from the start disliked him as the former commander of the Corsican rangers, a band of volunteers composed largely of enemies of the Bonaparte family. Always anxious to carry out his instructions exactly, Lowe came into conflict with Las Cases. He saw Las Cases as Napoleon's confidant and had him arrested and expelled. Thenceforward, relations between the governor and Napoleon were limited strictly to those stipulated by the regulations.

Napoleon showed the first signs of illness at the end of 1817; he seems to have had an ulcer or a cancer of the stomach. The Irish doctor Barry O'Meara, having asked in vain for a change in the conditions under which Napoleon lived, was dismissed; so also was his successor John Stokoe, who was likewise thought to be well-disposed toward Napoleon. The undistinguished Corsican doctor who took their place, Francesco Antommarchi, prescribed a treatment that could do nothing to cure his patient. It is uncertain, however, whether Napoleon's disease was curable at all, even by 21st-century methods. There has been continuing controversy about the cause of his death, but the evidence used by some to support the theory that Napoleon was poisoned is not considered conclusive by many scholars.

From the beginning of 1821, the illness became rapidly worse. From March, Napoleon was confined to bed. In April he dictated his last will:

I wish my ashes to rest on the banks of the Seine, in the midst of that French people which I have loved so much. ...I die before my time, killed by the English oligarchy and its hired assassins.

On May 5 he spoke a few coherent phrases: "My God...the French nation...my son...head of the army." He died at 5:49 PM on that day, not yet 52 years old. His body was dressed in his favourite uniform, that of the Chasseurs de la Garde, covered by the gray overcoat that he had worn at Marengo. The funeral was conducted simply, but with due propriety, in the Rupert Valley, where Napoleon had sometimes walked, beside a stream in which two willows were reflected. The stone covering his tomb bore no name, only the words "Ci-Gît" ("Here Lies").