Napoleon Bonaparte: Crash Course European History #22

Crash Course: European History
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Hi I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History.

So, the word revolution is a funny one, because it literally means a full turn of 360 degrees. Like, you end a revolution where you started out.

But in history, revolution means radical change, stark departures from the world that was, and the messy, often violent embrace of a new world. The French Revolution was in different ways both kinds of Revolution--in the end, an absolutist government was replaced by an absolutist government. But the change that emerged from the Revolution was real and lasting.

It helped usher in a world where people saw themselves as citizens of a community rather than subjects of a king. And eventually, a rising military star named Napoleon Bonaparte would prove that having your dad be king of France was not the only way to become ruler of France. [Intro] Napoleon grew up poor in Corsica, but he loved reading and managed to secure a scholarship to a military academy. As a kid, he spoke Corsican and Italian and didn't start learning French until he was ten.

And he was bullied for his accented French and for his overall tininess--although despite what you may have heard about Napoleon Complexes, Bonaparte would eventually end up being around five feet seven inches tall, about average for an 18th century man. He entered the army as a second lieutenant in 1785 and began to rise through the ranks throughout the tumultuous years of the French Revolution. By the time he was 24, in 1793, he was a brigadier general working under the Committee for Public Safety, which as you'll recall killed a lot of the public in the name of public safety.

And then in 1798, Napoleon crossed into Egypt with an entire army at his command, aiming to disrupt Britain's access to India. In addition to lots of soldiers, Napoleon brought with him scientists, linguists, and other scholars to advance knowledge and also carry off more Egyptian riches. The Egyptians were impressed by the openness of these scholars, but in general the French completely appalled the local people with their crude ways and drunkenness.

And even as Napoleon flattered the Egyptians by declaring himself a worshiper of Islam, he ultimately stole and desecrated many Egyptian artefacts--although later he also stole and desecrated lots of artefacts from around Europe. He loved a plundered artefact! At any rate, Napoleon ultimately had to return to France in 1799, as his army and navy were defeated by the British and the Egyptians.

And that timing turned out to be perfect: The Directory, which you'll recall, was a five-person committee governing France after the collapse of Robespierre's Committee for Public Safety, was overseeing a still-floundering economy and fighting wars on many fronts. Napoleon helped overthrow the directorate in 1799, and quickly became "First Consul," and then took as his first task mending fences with the Catholic Church. He agreed to the Concordat of 1801, which recognized Catholicism as the primary French religion.

It also validated the sale of Church lands and the state's payment of clergymen's salaries if they swore to uphold the French government. And that was important because it ensured him the support one of France's most important institutions, and you'll recall our discussions about how even dictators need support from within their holdings. But it's also telling that Napoleon would eventually be excommunicated by the Catholic Church for annexing Papal lands for France.

Napoleon was also popular with the people: He offered a solution to decades of instability and economic decline. He won majorities when he had his candidacy for office and other decisions approved by a plebiscite or vote, cast by men over the age of 21. In 1802 he had himself declared Consul for Life and in 1804 Emperor.

Did the center of the world just open up? Is there a bust of somebody who actually believes himself to be the center of the world in there? It is!

It's Napoleon himself. Stan got this in Paris. I can tell, because it says, "Souvenier de Paris." So this bust of Napoleon complete with its armlessness and being cut off at the torso and everything is extremely Roman-ish.

And this was part of how Napoleon justified his dictatorial form of government. He said "no, we're just going back to the Roman Empire...to the good old days of ancient Rome." And dictators do this a lot. From the Russian word Tsar, which comes from the word Caesar, to 20th century dictators, when your leaders start talking about reviving the glory of the Roman Empire, get nervous.

Oh look, its half-French, half-Roman Napoleon. So, during the French Revolution, leaders promoted the ancient Roman idea of virtu—that is, the sacrifice of personal interest for the good of the republic, the whole. Napoleon continued all that Roman imagery but switched it from the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire. you can even see this in his journey from being a Consul to being an Emperor.

He was portrayed in lavish costume and crowned with the laurel leaves of a conquering hero. "Empire" style in furniture arose and women donned slim white dresses, free from corsets and voluminous petticoats, in imitation of Roman statuary. And Napoleon saw himself as a modern Justinian--the famed ancient lawgiver. So to that end, he set out to have the most celebrated jurists under his guidance produce a rational code of laws.

Completed in 1804, the Code Napoléon (aka the Napoleonic Code) standardized the laws of citizenship, family, and property. The Code made rules for financial transfers and mortgages and for other legal transactions concerning property standards across France instead of differing from province to province. And legal standardization facilitated modern economic development.

But the other two sections on family and citizenship stunned many for the way they impoverished and curtailed most of the rights of women. Under the Napoleonic Code, women had no right to their own property once they were married--not even the wages they earned themselves. They could not serve as witnesses in court nor have control over or guardianship of their own children.

They had to live where their husband directed them to live. If they committed adultery, they were sent to jail. But men, in contrast, would only be charged with a crime if they brought a sexual partner into the family home.

I'm not making this up. Lest you think that history is simply a march toward more people having more rights….not always. But by creating laws that specifically targeted the economy, the empire was seen as paving the way for modernization.

And other institutions followed: individual schools were founded for higher education in engineering, science and technology, and for developing a cadre of advanced teachers. Napoleon also sponsored the creation of lycées, or high schools. Countries in Europe and across the globe imitated the French legal and educational systems as they too strove to become modern as well.

This may not seem like a huge deal, but consider how different the world becomes as more people have access to more education:

There are more potential innovators to solve big problems, and more people who can use the tool of writing to share their perspectives with wide audiences, and more teachers to train and educate future generations of professionals and experts. On the other hand, it's worth remembering that half of the population--women--were denied not just most of the new opportunities in France but also many of the rights they'd previously had. So, Napoleon initially succeeded in France because he quelled the political chaos by making himself an emblem of authority and order.

Right out of the dictator playbook. He also created a police state with strict censorship and spies operating in everyday life. And he restored the monarchical system of aristocratic titles and hierarchies, even giving back titles to some of the old aristocracy who could help revive the appearance of ceremonial grandeur.

And so in all those ways, Napoleon was returning to Louis XIV's absolutism, so the revolution did turn all the way around, ending where it started, in that sense. While members of Napoleon's family often became wealthy and titled, his enemies were frequently exiled from France. The most famous of his exiled enemies was Germaine de Staël, the wealthiest woman in Europe and one of the most accomplished.

De Staël never stopped criticizing the dictator, although at first she found him fascinating and even thought she might become his companion. Early on, she probed him for an expression of admiration of her talents by asking what kind of woman he valued most. He responded, "the one with the most children" and pointedly gazed at her chest.

After that, she denounced his brutal nature to whoever would listen, rallying opponents around her. But Napoleon had as many plans for Europe as he had for France and he set out to conquer and colonize all of Europe and the British Isles. He amassed a huge army by drafting young men between the ages of 20 and 24, then he earned their complete devotion by fighting alongside them in at least sixty battles.

As he conquered German and Austrian territory, he brought men from those areas into his armies too. And by 1806, he had ended the Holy Roman Empire after defeating Austria in several battles, most thoroughly at the battle of Austerlitz in 1805. Then he went on to defeat Prussia in 1806 and Russia in 1807 after they declared war on France in succession.

Napoleon then forced or inspired reforms such as the end of serfdom, legislating religious toleration, and creating schools to advance scientific and technological study. And he unified German states excluding Austria in the Confederation of the Rhine. His imposition of the Napoleonic Code, the metric system, and other institutions for standardization helped to unify Europe.

What is the metric system? Stan says it's something that Europeans do, like soccer and ensuring that all citizens have health care. One of the big effects of Napoleon's European ambitions was that it inspired a lot of nationalism among his new subjects, who mostly opposed his dictatorial regimes, in places where one of his brothers usually.

I mean, for one thing, most of these newly conquered lands were run by one of Napoleon's brothers, who'd serve as surrogate monarch, and if you're gonna live in a dictatorship, you wanna at least be dictated by the dictator himself. Not some brother. It's like going to see the matinee of a big Broadway show, and instead of getting the big star, you get some understudy. at any rate, this is important because people began to think of themselves as, for instance, German in part because they didn't want to think of themselves as French.

Napoleon's goal was to colonize the entire continent, and he mostly succeeded, but Spain was still unconquered and thwarting his Continental system when in 1807 Napoleon struck with an army of some 100,000 men. Spanish and Portuguese royals both left their capitals. Napoleon installed yet another brother (Joseph) as king and resistance swelled—with help from the British and Arthur Wellesley, who would later become the Duke of Wellington.

And you can see the effects in art. Jacques-Louis David painted triumphant moments in Napoleon's career, including his self-coronation as emperor. But Spanish painter Francisco Goya depicted Napoleonic rule as a reign of terror.

His "Third of May 1808" shows a French firing squad mowing down peasants and clergy alike. Goya remained a chronicler of Spanish resistance and French barbarism, as tens of thousands of French troops had to occupy the conquered kingdom because of Spanish hatred of the conquerors. Let's go to the Thought Bubble. 1.

Despite ongoing problems, Napoleon became determined to conquer and absorb all of Russia, 2. especially since it had opted out of his Continental System. 3. He built an army of some 600,000 to 700,000 men from across his lands 4. and began his invasion in June of 1812. 5. Having trudged hundreds of miles, troops were exhausted and overcome by the heat, 6. and the Rusians refused to engage in battle. 7.

Instead, they retreated, practicing so-called "scorched earth tactics" by burning and destroying any resource 8. including food and livestock that could be of use to the invaders. 9. Finally at Borodino, the two sides engaged in what was ultimately a costly victory for the French, 10. who lost 30,000 men, while the Russians lost 45,000. 11. But the French were thousands of miles from home territory, and so reinforcing and resupplying their army proved difficult. 12.

Foreign recruits, who were not as loyal to Napoleon, began melting away as winter approached and conditions worsened. 13. The remaining 100,000ish invaders marched on from Borodino, some 70 miles from Moscow, 14. but on reaching their destination, they found the city consumed by fire 15. —shelter and other necessities were once again in short supply. 16. Still Napoleon waited for Tsar Alexander I to surrender and agree to terms. 17.

But when the surrender failed to materialize, 18. Napoleon led his depleted, starving, and frostbitten army westward to Poland. 19. Many had died; many other soldiers had deserted, and more French troops would be killed by the Cossacks as they retreated. 20.

Only 40,000 of Napoleon's soldiers reached Poland alive in 1813. Thanks Thought Bubble. So, the European powers took note of the Emperor's bedraggled forces and formed a coalition that included Russia, Austria, Prussia, and Sweden.

In 1813, their armies, backed by British financing, defeated French forces at Leipzig. This battle was waged because Napoleon refused to accept the allies' terms, which initially allowed him to continue to rule France. In early 1814 he abdicated and headed for exile on Elba, an island in the Mediterranean.

A year later, he escaped, returned to France, gathered an army, and confronted the powers once more, finally surrendering on July 15, 1815 after being defeated at Waterloo. Napoleon was living in exile on the distant island of St. Helena when he died on May 5, 1821--thirty two years to the day after the meeting of the Estates-General that set the French Revolution into motion.

Consider all that had happened in those 32 years, and you'll understand why this period of French history is seen as so important to world history. Decades after his death, Napoleon's remains were lavishly returned to France, placed in the Church of the Dome in the heart of Paris, and eventually re-encased in a grander sarcophagus under the church's golden dome itself. Why?

Remember that under him, French achievements were massive in terms of education, commitment to science, standardization, modernization of the economy and administration, and opening the door to opportunity for ordinary people. Well, ordinary men. French museums were packed with loot from across Europe and Egypt plundered by Napoleon's armies.

In fact, those museums are still packed with that loot. And there were also the unforgettable early military victories and the revival of French cultural glory that led to the imitation of French things throughout the world. Muhammad Ali, ruler of Egypt, who had been part of the effort to drive Napoleon and his forces from the country, would begin programs in direct imitation of Napoleon's.

And t he creation of a truly citizens army, entranced by the heroism of its leader, also endured, while his lightning attacks remained a model to future military innovators. The Napoleonic Code was imitated worldwide. As Napoleon's body was re-entombed in splendor and pomp, one worker expressed France's general worship of the dictator: "I've got the emperor in my guts." For better and for worse, we still have Napoleon in our guts.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.