

The Rise of Napoleon

As you already know, Napoleon seized power in November 1799. But, who was he? And what had he done?

Napoleon Bonaparte was born on the island of Corsica in 1769. He was the son of a noble. In 1784 Napoleon won a scholarship to the élite military training college in Paris. In 1785, at the age of 16, Napoleon became second lieutenant in the artillery. Napoleon became sympathetic to the Revolution in 1789. In the Battle of Toulon in 1793, Napoleon led a victorious attack on a Royalist fort and was then promoted to Brigadier General. Napoleon gained more attention in 1795 when he put down a pro-royalist coup in Paris. He was promoted to Major General. In 1796, Napoleon married Josephine Beauharnais. He was put in charge of the French army fighting the Austrians in Italy. Between 1796 and 1797, Napoleon re-organised the French army and inspired the dispirited soldiers. They went on to win several great victories over the Austrians and Italians. The Austrians were forced to sign a ceasefire at Leoben in 1797. Between 1798 and 1799 Napoleon's plans to attack the British went badly wrong. His army was ravaged by plague and sickness, and Nelson's British Navy destroyed many of Napoleon's own ships. Still, Napoleon seized Malta and had several victories in Egypt during the expedition. Napoleon returned to Paris in August 1799, after hearing of the military crisis facing France and on November 11th 1799, Napoleon seized control of France in the 'coup d'état' (or Coup de Brumaire). Following the Coup, a new constitution was introduced, and Napoleon was made First Consul of France. Then, on December 2nd, 1804, in the presence of the Pope, Napoleon crowned himself Emperor.

Bonjour mon est ches amis, c'est moi,
Napoleon! Some keywords for you!
ROYALIST - a supporter of the King
NELSON - The British Admiral who
defeated me!
COUP - a takeover of Power
FIRST CONSUL - My title following the
coup
EMPEROR - I crowned myself in 1804

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SOURCE 1. "Frenchmen, without a doubt, you will see in what I did that I am a soldier who supports liberty and am a citizen who is devoted to the republic." - From a translation of the 'official' version of the coup, issued throughout France.

Both Napoleon's appointment as First Consul of France and his coronation were put to the French People in a Referendum (vote). The French People had had enough of the political quarrels in France and now looked for strong leadership in Napoleon. Many observers abroad found it odd that France had agreed to have an Emperor so soon after removing a King. Many people in European Monarchies (such as Austria and Britain) had not supported the Revolution and therefore did not like Napoleon. They were more critical of the new Emperor of France.

Source 2. Another version of the Coup by an English artist. The caption reads: 'The Corsican Crocodile abolishes the Council of Frogs.'



SOURCE 3. Napoleon's Coronation by the French painter David. David was a keen supporter of the Revolution.

SOURCE 4. "He stammered so much... it was clear his place was before soldiers rather than before an assembly." From the memoirs of Bourrienne, Napoleon's secretary. The two later fell out.

Tasks

- 1) Why did some people think it strange that the French people accepted Napoleon as their new Emperor?
- 2) Compare sources 1 and 3. How do Napoleon's words in the 'official' version of the coup contradict the scene pictured in source 3?
- 3) Look at source 2. Does it support or criticise the coup? Explain your answer.
- 4) Identify the people marked A, B and C in source 3. Why might we not trust this painting completely?
- 5) What impression of Napoleon does each of these sources give you?