

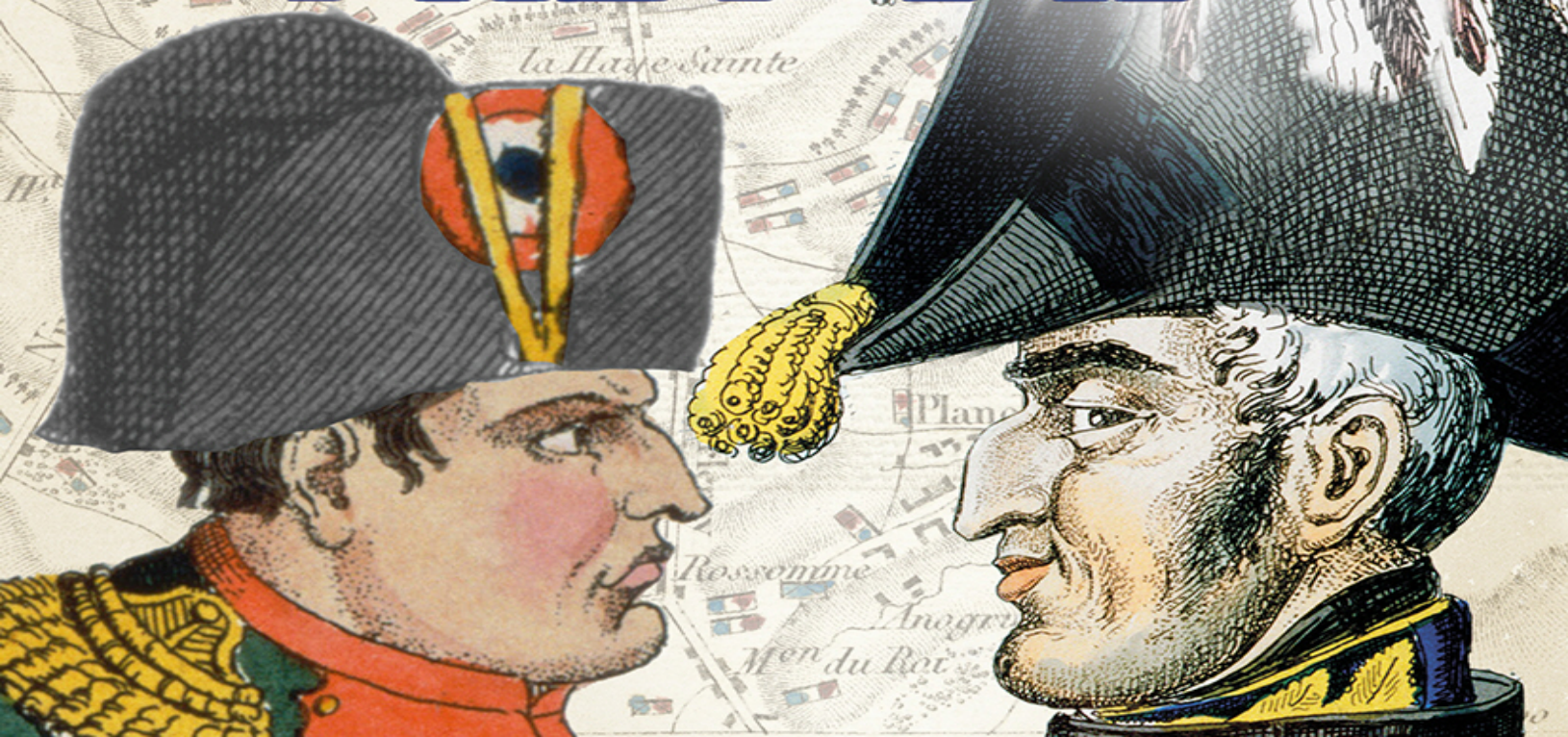
STEPHEN CLARKE

WATERLOO

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
*1000 YEARS OF
ANNOYING THE FRENCH*



**HOW THE
FRENCH WON
WATERLOO
(OR THINK
THEY DID)**



Contents

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Stephen Clarke

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

Introduction

PART ONE

1. Napoleon Was a Peace-Lover

2. At Waterloo, Napoleon Also Had to Fight God and His Own Generals

3. Napoleon Didn't Lose the Battle (Everyone Else Did)

4. 'Merde' to Wellington, the Loser

5. Napoleon Flees ... to Victory

PART TWO

6. Absence Makes the (French) Heart Grow Fonder

7. Constructing the Idol

8. Napoleon's Glorious Afterlife

9. France Won Waterloo, Even if Napoleon Didn't

Epilogue

Picture Section

Appendix 1: Napoleon's verbal salvos

Appendix 2: Contemporary views of Waterloo

Bibliography

Picture Permissions

Index

Copyright

About the Book

Two centuries after the Battle of Waterloo, the French are still in denial.

As soon as the cannons stopped firing on 18 June 1815, French historians began re-writing history. Napoleon had beaten the Duke of Wellington, they say, but then the Prussians jumped into the boxing ring, breaking all the rules of battle. In essence, the French cannot bear the idea that Napoleon, their greatest-ever national hero, was in any way a loser. Especially not against the traditional enemy - *les Anglais*.

Modern France is still a profoundly Napoleonic country, and most of the institutions he created 200 years ago still live on. Napoleon's image in France is at an all-time high - one of his hats recently sold at auction for almost two million euros, and there is even a Napoleon theme park planned to open in 2020.

More than this, though, with the economy in tatters and distrust of politicians rife, the French are in desperate need of heroes - which is why, today more than ever, even non-Bonapartists can't bear the idea that their greatest warrior actually lost at Waterloo . . .

About the Author

Stephen Clarke lives in Paris, where he divides his time between writing and not writing. His first novel, *A YEAR IN THE MERDE*, became a word-of-mouth hit in 2004, and is now published all over the world. Since then he has published four more bestselling *MERDE* novels, as well as *TALK TO THE SNAIL*, an indispensable guide to understanding the French, *PARIS REVEALED*, his insider's guide to his home city, *DIRTY BERTIE*, in which he reveals the glamorous and sometimes shocking details of the future Edward VII's parallel French life, and *1000 YEARS OF ANNOYING THE FRENCH*, in which he investigates what has really been going on since 1066. A *Sunday Times* bestseller in hardcover, *1000 YEARS OF ANNOYING THE FRENCH* went on to become one of the top ten bestselling history books in paperback in 2011.

Also by Stephen Clarke

FICTION

A Brief History of the Future
A Year in the Merde
Merde Actually
Merde Happens
Dial M For Merde
The Merde Factor

NON-FICTION

Talk to the Snail: Ten Commandments for Understanding the
French
Paris Revealed
1000 Years of Annoying the French
Dirty Bertie: An English King Made in France

EBOOK SHORT

Annoying the French Encore!

For further information on Stephen Clarke and his books,
you can visit his website: www.stephenclarkewriter.com
or follow him on Twitter [@SClarkewriter](https://twitter.com/SClarkewriter)

How the French Won Waterloo (or Think They Did)

Stephen Clarke



To everyone who makes my books possible -
with their thoughts, words, deeds and cups of coffee.

'It wasn't Lord Wellington who won; his defence was stubborn, and admirably energetic, but he was pushed back and beaten.'

- Captain Marie Jean Baptiste Lemonnier-Delafosse,
French veteran of Waterloo, in his *Souvenirs Militaires*

'This defeat shines with the aura of victory.'

- France's former Prime Minister Dominique
de Villepin, in a recent book about Napoleon

'John Bull was beat at Waterloo!
They'll swear to that in France.'

- Winthrop Mackworth Praed (1802-39),
British politician and poet

INTRODUCTION



'L'histoire est une suite de mensonges sur lesquels on est d'accord.'

'History is a series of lies about which we agree.'

- Napoleon Bonaparte

EVERYONE KNOWS WHO lost the Battle of Waterloo. It was Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of France. Even the French have to admit that on the evening of 18 June 1815 it was the Corsican with one hand in his waistcoat who fled the battlefield, his *Grande Armée* in tatters and his reign effectively at a humiliating end. Napoleon had gambled everything on one great confrontation with his enemies, and he had lost. The word 'lost', in this case, having its usual meaning of 'not won', 'been defeated, trounced, hammered', etc.

No one seriously disputes this historical fact. Well, *almost* no one ...

Let's look at a few quotations.

'This defeat shines with the aura of victory,' writes France's former Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin in a recent book about Napoleon.

'For the English, Waterloo was a defeat that they won,' claims French historian Jean-Claude Damamme in his study of the battle, published in 1999.

A nineteenth-century French poet called Edouard d'Escola pre-empted this modern doublethink in a poem about Waterloo, prefacing it with a quotation to the effect that 'Defeats are only victories to which fortune has refused to give wings.'

Astonishingly, it is obvious that in some French eyes, where Napoleon is concerned, losing can actually mean winning, or at least not really losing. This despite the fact that after the Battle of Waterloo, Napoleon was ousted from power, forced to flee his country, and then banished into exile on a wind-blown British island for the rest of his life. The only victory parades in France in the summer of 1815 were those by British, Prussian, Austrian and Russian troops as they marched along the Champs-Élysées, past Napoleon's half-built, and rather prematurely named, Arc de Triomphe.

And yet today, visitors to Waterloo, just south of Brussels, might be forgiven for thinking that the result of the battle had been overturned after a stewards' inquiry, and victory handed to the losers. The most spectacular memorial there is the Panorama, a circular building that houses a dramatic 110-metre-long painting of the battle at its height. It is a wonderful picture. You can almost hear the sabres rattling, the cannons firing, the horses snorting, the roars and screams of the fighting men. But there is something very strange about it: Napoleon is in the distance, calmly watching the action, while Wellington seems to be trapped in a corner by a thundering cavalry charge, in imminent danger of having his famous hooked nose hacked off by a French blade. Can this really be the painting that is meant to serve as an official memorial of the battle?

The answer is yes - or rather *oui*, because the painter, Louis Dumoulin, was a Parisian brought in by the Belgians just over a hundred years ago to commemorate the centenary of the most famous historical event that ever took place in their country (apart, perhaps, from the invention of the waffle). This French cavalry charge was the image Dumoulin selected as being representative of the battle as a whole. Napoleon himself could not have chosen a more Bonapartist scene, and yet it was approved by the Belgians. Needless to say, Waterloo is in Wallonie, the

French-speaking half of Belgium, where Napoleon has always been hailed as a liberating hero.

Similarly, in the old Waterloo museum next to the Panorama, visitors hoping to watch a (French-made) film about the battle enter the video room beneath a portrait of a defiant-looking general. No, not one of the victors – it's Napoleon again.

A huge new museum is currently being built at Waterloo in readiness for the bicentenary. It will probably give a more balanced, and historically accurate, view of the battle. But one thing seems certain: the new gift shop will be just like the old one – that is, selling ten times more souvenir statuettes, medals and portraits of Napoleon than of anyone else involved in the battle. French revisionists seem to have taken possession of Waterloo, and Napoleon's image is everywhere. He has been turned into the icon that represents the events of 18 June 1815. He lost, but it doesn't seem to matter.

It is a beautifully French contradiction that provokes two main questions: Who exactly is behind this rewriting of history that has been going on ever since the battle ended? And why do they feel the need to indulge in such outrageous denial?

Luckily for me (and, I hope, for you, dear reader), the answers are fascinatingly complex. But let me give a brief introductory summary before going into much more detail in the book.

First of all, Napoleon has an army of fiercely loyal fans. They have been around since he was Emperor of France, and they are as fanatical today as they ever were. These are the people who dress up in Napoleonic uniform and shout 'Vive l'Empereur!' at battle re-enactments, who give generous grants to Napoleonic research (as long as the thesis flatters Napoleon), and who paid 1.8 million euros for one of his famous black hats when it came up for auction in November 2014.

Among these fans is a belligerent battalion of French historians who refuse to associate Napoleon's name with anything as shameful as defeat. To achieve this feat of historical acrobatics, they will use any argument they can muster: at Waterloo, they contend, Napoleon might have lost to Blücher but he beat Wellington; the British cheated by choosing the battlefield; Napoleon's generals disobeyed him; traitors revealed his plans; the French government prevented him from mustering another army and fighting on; etc., etc. Anything to have Napoleon emerge as a winner of some sort.

In any case, these fan-historians constantly remind us, Napoleon was France's greatest ever champion: he won far more battles than he lost, and during his short reign France was at the peak of its influence in the world, with most of continental Europe under the Napoleonic yoke. To these determined and highly outspoken Bonapartists, Waterloo is nothing more than a minor blemish on Napoleon's glorious record.

And in a way, the whole of modern French history revolves around, or has its roots in, Napoleon. Even historians who see him as a dictator and are relieved that his imperial regime was toppled will readily acknowledge Napoleon's greatness and the undeniable influence he exerts on present-day life in France. After all, most of the laws he drafted are still in place (minus a few of his more sexist clauses); he invented France's education system; and all modern French presidents model themselves on his autocratic style of leadership – they even live and work in his former palace, surrounded by his furniture.

Which brings us to the question of why exactly all these people are in denial about Waterloo, the battle that – like it or not – ended Napoleon's political and military career. Is it a classic emotional blockage, patriotism gone mad, or is there something even more subtly French at play?

Well, yes to all those rhetorical questions; but the central reason seems to be that, ever since 1815, it has been vital for the French national psyche to see Napoleon as a winner. If he is a loser, so is France. And if there is one thing the French as a nation hate, it is losing - especially to *les Anglais*.

This is why even those French people who acknowledge (at least partial) defeat at Waterloo are determined to extract some form of triumph from the debacle: they will say that the outnumbered French troops were defending the nobler cause, that their glorious defiance made them the tragic heroes of the day, and so on. There is no end to the evasive action they will take.

To illustrate all this historical escapology, I have concentrated mainly on French sources - Waterloo veterans, nineteenth-century French novelists and poets who experienced Napoleon's regime, French historians writing from 1815 right up to today, and of course Napoleon himself, who had time while in exile to relive (and rewrite) every second of the battle.

Exploring their original words and impressions has given me a vivid insight into what the French have been saying about their beloved *Empereur* for the last two centuries, and what they're still doing to defend his iconic image.

English-language commentators seem to spend a lot of time reworking the old argument that Waterloo was purely and simply a hard-won Anglo-Prussian victory that got rid of Napoleon and changed the course of European history.

But Napoleon's admirers, past and present, show that the Battle of Waterloo and its 200-year-long aftermath have been a lot more complicated - and a lot more French - than that.

Stephen Clarke, Paris, February 2015

PART ONE

1



NAPOLEON WAS A PEACE-LOVER

‘La paix est le vœu de mon cœur, mais la guerre n’a jamais été contraire à ma gloire.’

‘My heart wishes for peace, but war has never diminished my glory.’

- Napoleon Bonaparte, in a letter to England’s King George III in 1805

I

FIRST, THE CONTEXT. Why exactly did Napoleon Bonaparte confront the Duke of Wellington and Prussia’s Generalfeldmarschall Gebhard Blücher at a crossroads in Belgium on that rainy day of 18 June 1815 – aside from the fact that Belgium was conveniently central for all three?

The main reason is, of course, that Britain and France had been at war virtually non-stop since 1337. The Napoleonic Wars were more or less a continuation of the medieval Hundred Years War, and in 1815, things had come to an ugly head. As the nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet, author of a nineteen-volume *Histoire de France*, put it: ‘The war of wars, the combat of combats, is England against France; all the rest are mere episodes.’[fn1](#)

French Bonapartists insist that Napoleon didn’t want war with Britain. Napoleon himself said so. He was a peace-loving man, much more interested in modernising his own country than firing cannons at his neighbours. All he wanted to do was write new laws, create new schools, and turn

beetroot into sugar (all of which he actually did, as we shall see in a later chapter).

The Prussian ambassador to France – not a man instinctively favourable towards the French – confirmed this as early as 1802. Marquis Girolamo Lucchesini (he was an Italian in the service of Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia) reported to Berlin that Napoleon was talking convincingly of ‘canals to complete or dig, roads to repair or build, ports to clean out, cities to embellish, religious institutions to found, and educational resources to pay for’. According to the Prussian-Italian diplomat, Napoleon wanted to ‘devote money to agriculture, industry, business and arts that would otherwise be absorbed and exhausted by war’. In the circumstances, it was impossible, surely, to imagine a single French franc getting spent on cannons, muskets and cavalry helmets?

A more cynical diplomat might have asked this peace-loving version of Napoleon why, after seizing power in France with a military coup in 1799, he had continued the war against Britain and its allies the Austrians, Italians and Russians, or why he had invaded Italy in 1800, confirmed the annexation of Belgium, and maintained a puppet pro-French regime in Holland.

Napoleon would have replied – with some justification – that he had just been finishing off what was started during the French Revolution, before he even came along. He had simply fought a few battles, discouraged the country’s enemies from invading, consolidated his position as leader of France, and built a platform from which he could oversee his grand peacetime plan for the nation. Put like that, it sounds convincing, and the Prussian ambassador clearly believed it.

So too does modern French historian Jean-Claude Damamme, one of Napoleon’s most fervent defenders. He blames Britain (or ‘England’ as he calls it, like any Frenchman with an anti-British axe to grind) for the

Napoleonic Wars. France, he says, was too dangerous a competitor, 'a threat to the ascendancy that England has always considered a divine right'. With France united behind their glamorous young leader, Monsieur Damamme asserts, it became obvious to the Brits that their only hope of European domination was to eliminate him.

Damamme even accuses the English of being behind the so-called 'attentat de la rue Saint-Nicaise' (the rue Saint-Nicaise attack) when, on Christmas Eve, 1800, a wine barrel packed with explosives was ignited as Napoleon's carriage drove past, demolishing forty-six houses, killing twenty-two people and injuring around a hundred, but leaving Napoleon miraculously unscathed.

The Emperor had been on his way to the theatre with his wife Josephine to see Haydn's *Creation*, and had fallen asleep in the carriage. The explosion not only woke Napoleon up, it also aroused a fierce desire for vengeance. He had a group of 'conspirators' executed despite evidence proving that they were innocent, before begrudgingly accepting that the true guilty parties were royalists who wanted to restore the monarchy. Jean-Claude Damamme, though, blames the British, whom he accuses of stirring up virtually all the anti-Napoleonic unrest on the continent over the next fifteen years, and paying the Belgians, Dutch and Prussians to turn against the French (an accusation that was largely justified, as we will see).

Faced with this endless British troublemaking, Napoleon was, in Bonapartist French eyes, like a kung fu master, meditating peacefully on his prayer mat about progress and democracy while a gang of irritating English boys threw acorns at him, finally forcing him to get up and give them a slap.

This theory is confirmed (again, in French eyes) by King George III's sudden unprovoked blockade of France's ports in May 1803. Despite this English aggression, the French contend that Napoleon continued to push for peace, and

quote an eloquent letter to George III on 2 January 1805, in which Napoleon says that 'my first sentiment is a wish for peace' and that 'reason is powerful enough for us to find a way to reconcile all our differences'.

However, a closer look at the missive - part peace offering, part (self-)love letter - reveals that it is more a case of 'come and have a go if you think you're hard enough'. Napoleon informs the hereditary English King that he (Napoleon) was 'called to the throne of France by providence and by the vote of the Senate, the people and the army' - which surely outweighs a mere accident of birth. Napoleon then declares that 'my heart wishes for peace, but war has never diminished my glory'. He reminds King George and his government that 'I have proved to the world, I think, that I fear none of the uncertainties of war' and that a conflict between Britain and France would be 'pointless, and [a British] victory cannot be assumed'. As for expansionism, Napoleon innocently asks the King of England whether he doesn't think he has enough colonies already - 'more than you can hope to keep'. It is a threat more thinly veiled than one of Josephine's famously transparent dresses.

Napoleon ends his letter by asserting generously that 'the world is big enough for both of our nations to live in'. But King George and his Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger obviously didn't agree, because they never even bothered to reply.

Not that the French Emperor was completely without friends in Britain at the time. James Fox, the leader of the opposition, was a virulent anti-royalist who had supported the French Revolution, and his pacifist group in the British parliament numbered about twenty-five MPs. War with France, Fox said, 'is entirely the fault of our Ministers and not of Bonaparte'. Though, typically for a politician, this support was largely based on self-interest: Fox was hoping that William Pitt's anti-French lobbying would fail, so that

Pitt himself would have to resign. In truth, Fox wasn't that big a Bonaparte fan. He visited Napoleon in 1803 and apparently spent most of their meeting haranguing the Frenchman about freedom of speech and censorship of the press.

Meanwhile, Napoleon had received a warning from the Russian ambassador to London that Britain's aim would 'always be to destroy France and then reign despotically over the whole universe'. (Actually, apart from the 'despotically', most Brits of the time would have agreed wholeheartedly.)

Faced with this belligerence, so the French argument goes, the peace-loving Napoleon had no option but a return to war against France's traditional enemy, Britain. As he expressed it in his memoirs: 'I had more reason than most to make peace, and if I didn't do so, it is obviously because I wasn't able to.'

But for a man who seems to be saying 'bof, OK, let's fight, if you really want to', in 1805 Bonaparte threw himself into war with a startling amount of enthusiasm.

II

In fact, Napoleon loved a good battle. He had been trained as a soldier since childhood, having been sent from his native Corsica to a military academy in mainland France at the age of nine. There, legend has it, he commanded his classmates in a successful snowball fight.^{fn2} At fifteen, he entered Paris's elite Ecole Militaire where, no doubt because of his skill with snowballs, he specialised in artillery warfare. In short, here was a man who had been learning how to fight professionally all his life, and who had chosen to specialise in the branch of war that involves the loudest explosions and the most collateral damage. A Buddhist he was not.

Napoleon first came to prominence in the French army in 1793 by commanding an attack on a British fleet stationed in Toulon, in the south of France, a city that had rebelled against the Revolution. Erecting artillery batteries and accurately bombarding vulnerable sections of the city wall and the British ships, he had effectively retaken Toulon, and been made a general at the tender age of twenty-four. In 1795, he was then instrumental in suppressing a royalist revolt in Paris, blasting the armed crowds surrounding the parliament building with point-blank cannon fire for some forty-five minutes. Then in 1799 he seized power by invading the French parliament with a group of bayonet-waving soldiers. In short, Napoleon's favourite political tools were hot lead and cold steel.

He also felt most at home when on military campaigns. Out in the field with his troops he was in his element, engrossed in logistical problems, which fascinated him. One of his life's greatest works was a total reorganisation and modernisation of the French army, dividing it into self-sufficient units of around 25,000 men, each with its own marshal or general in command of a body of infantry supported by cavalry and, of course, a large contingent of artillery. These units were designed to be fast-moving (it was not uncommon for inexperienced footsoldiers to die of exhaustion during long marches), and during a major campaign they were under orders to stay within 30 kilometres or so (a day's march) of each other, so that Napoleon could bring them into action quickly when an enemy was engaged. The reorganisation went deep, right down to the small sections of half a dozen men who formed teams within their larger battalion. Napoleon was obsessive about detail, and the army was where he expressed this obsession with all his fiery-yet-bureaucratic Franco-Corsican temperament.

At the heart of the action, commanding his hundreds of thousands of loyal men, shaping the destiny of nations with

his carefully aimed cannon fire, Napoleon felt completely at home, not least because his campaign bivouac was more luxurious than the VIP tent at the Glastonbury festival. Here, his gift for planning was at its most ingenious.

An exhibition staged in 2014 in Corsica, 'Le Bivouac de Napoléon', included a picturesque blue-and-white marquee that wouldn't look out of place as the tea tent at a modern royal garden party, and a camp bed equipped with a thick mattress and enveloped in a green silk tasselled curtain. His folding leather chair was a more comfortable version of the kind we see Steven Spielberg sitting in for marathon directing sessions, while the panther-patterned carpet looked like something out of a 1980s pop video.

France's most famous furniture designers, potters, cutlery-makers and metal-workers were commissioned to create monogrammed crockery, a full range of easily folding chairs, desks, tables and footstools, dismountable candlesticks, a mobile brazier and even a folding bidet (which sounds rather dangerous) - all of it made of 'noble' materials like silver, gold-plated bronze, crystal, fine porcelain, silk and walnut. This nomad's palace would travel with Napoleon in a small convoy of carriages so that he could live on the road in luxury for months on end. He was the nineteenth-century equivalent of a rock star on tour.

And like those rock stars, he was determined to export the music of his cannons to as many territories as possible. Between 1804 (when he declared himself Emperor of France, as opposed to a mere 'consul') and 1811, Napoleon battled his way across Europe, annexing Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Poland and most of modern-day Germany.

Incidentally, by taking over several German princedoms and imposing his brother Jérôme as King of Westphalia in 1807, Napoleon accidentally did the world a great favour. The Grimm brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm, had just finished studying law and were about to embark on a legal career,

but when the French occupiers imposed Napoleon's new 'Code' (of which more in Chapter 8) the brothers found it much too rigid compared with ancient German traditions, and decided to devote their lives to collecting folk tales instead. Westphalian law's loss was the world's (and especially Walt Disney's) gain.

Wanting to spread his influence beyond the borders of his empire, Napoleon also imposed an embargo against trading with Britain on countries that he hadn't occupied, like Russia and the whole of Scandinavia.^{fn3} As France's former Prime Minister Dominique Villepin expresses it in one of his history books, Napoleon had 'a dream of France that was bigger than the French'. Put less patriotically, Napoleon wanted all of Europe to bow before him as its emperor, and very nearly succeeded in getting them all on their knees.

III

There was one rival who, despite all Napoleon's protests of peace, he *really* wanted to beat. That was, of course, Britain, whom he (quite rightly) blamed for all the European mischief-making against him. The British proudly and openly invested in beating Napoleon, distributing money and munitions to anyone who was willing to oppose the French. It has been estimated that Britain spent £1.5 billion on fighting Napoleon - an unimaginable fortune in the early 1800s - half of which was borrowed. Britain's anti-Napoleonic debt was so huge that it was only paid off in 1906.

The Brits naturally alleged that this was all for the good of world peace. George Canning, Foreign Secretary between 1807 and 1809, once said that 'Whenever the true balance of the world comes to be adjusted, it is only through us alone that they can look for secure and effectual tranquillity.' (Britain was never known for its humility, least of all in the nineteenth century.) Until then, Mr Canning said,

Britain could justifiably cause trouble wherever it wanted: 'Until there can be a final settlement that shall last, everything should remain as unsettled as possible.' This was a principle that applied especially to France, the traditional enemy.

True to his principles of cannonball diplomacy, Napoleon therefore spent much of 1803, 1804 and 1805 planning a mass invasion of the south coast of England via hot-air balloon, giant barges and even a tunnel. Sadly for him, the scheme sank without trace when Nelson smashed the French fleet at Trafalgar in October 1805 - a victory that cemented Britannia's rule over the waves and ensured that the *Grande Armée's* trip across the Channel would get very choppy indeed.

Napoleon duly changed tack, and decided that the way to hurt Britain was to aim for its soft, sweet underbelly - India, the source of its tea, spices and cheap cotton goods, the pride of its empire. George III had already lost America (with French help), and the loss of India would therefore be a doubly painful blow.

There was something of an Alexander the Great fantasy in Napoleon's plan to march through Turkey and right across north-western Asia. And Napoleon knew that he would need Russia's blessing and logistical help, so in March 1808, the French Emperor wrote to Czar Alexander I outlining his ambitious scheme. 'Everything can be signed before March 15,' Napoleon enthused. 'By May 1 our troops will be in Asia ... The English, threatened in India, expelled from the Middle East, will be crushed beneath the weight of events.'

Predictably, the conquest of Asia didn't go ahead that quickly, and a meeting between Napoleon and the Czar was arranged for September in Erfurt, Germany, which Napoleon had recently seized from the Prussians. He hoped to use the so-called 'Entrevue d'Erfurt' (the word *entrevue* making it sound slightly like a job interview) to dazzle the Russian Czar with his power and vision, and invited along all the

crowned heads of France's puppet European states. Napoleon also took the entire national theatre company, the Comédie Française, with him to perform the greatest works of French literature (most of which were recycled Greek and Roman tragedies, presumably intended to depress Czar Alexander into acquiescence). He even made a tentative offer to cement the alliance by marrying Czar Alexander's sister Catherine.

Napoleon was therefore disappointed to come home from the two-week-long series of talks and theatre evenings with nothing more than a tame Franco-Russian treaty asking Britain to recognise France's claim to Spain and Russia's recent occupation of Finland and Sweden. No Russian wife, and no Russian promise to support an attack on India.

Napoleon couldn't understand why Alexander had been 'difficult' during the talks. What had gone wrong?

Well, predictably, it was a Frenchman who had scuppered Napoleon's grand plan - Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord (Talleyrand for short). He was France's own Minister of Foreign Affairs, and had become disenchanted with Napoleon's habit of dealing with foreign affairs himself - with cannons rather than witticisms, for which Talleyrand was famed.

At Erfurt, Talleyrand held secret talks with Czar Alexander, and apparently lectured the Russian on the folly of allying with Napoleon. 'What are you doing here?' he is said to have asked Alexander. 'It is up to you to save Europe, and you will only do that if you stand up to Napoleon. The people of France are civilised, their sovereign is not. The sovereign of Russia is civilised, his people are not. It is therefore up to the sovereign of Russia to ally with the people of France.'

When Napoleon found out about all this, he convened a meeting of his advisers at which he publicly called Talleyrand 'de la merde dans des bas de soie', or 'shit in silk stockings'. Why he didn't have him executed or at least exiled is a mystery. Other anti-Bonaparte plotters went to

the scaffold on the strength of a whim or a rumour. But Talleyrand miraculously survived five French regimes while heads were falling all around him, and would later play a key role in sealing Napoleon's fate after Waterloo.

For the moment, though, the treacherous Talleyrand had merely demolished Napoleon's great scheme to invade India and humiliate Britain, and had thereby virtually assured the war with Russia that would decimate his Emperor's beloved *Grande Armée*. It was a good start.

Talleyrand's machinations were also typical of the French back-stabbing that, according to Bonapartists, would eventually lead to Napoleon's demise. As we shall see, the higher Napoleon climbed, the greater the danger that a traitor or a coward would bring him crashing down. Partly this was because his most faithful companions were courageous generals who would fall in battle, forcing him to appoint less reliable aides (an excuse frequently used to defend Napoleon against charges of being a bad judge of character). But most of all, Bonapartist historians are keen to stress that Napoleon was a man with a unique greatness that was bound to arouse envy among his contemporaries, even his fellow Frenchmen; that his vision was so all-encompassing that it was impossible for mere mortals to comprehend; and, most importantly, that anything that went wrong was almost certainly someone else's fault. Nothing must be blamed on the great *Empereur*.

IV

Sadly for Napoleon, his defeats have left an indelible trace on the French language. One of these linguistic black marks is the saying (still used today) 'c'est la Bérézina', meaning that a situation is total chaos, and that everything is about to go horribly wrong. In the kitchen before a big French family dinner, if the veal comes out of the oven overcooked, the potatoes aren't ready, the wine is too warm, and a