

Napoleon's rise to power



In 1799, a young General from Corsica led a coup that would make him the most powerful man in France. The young man was Napoleon Bonaparte. His actions changed the course of history forever.

A revolution in decline

By the last year of the 18th century, the French Revolution had drifted a long way from the exciting days of 1789. Though the King was dead and France's external enemies mostly defeated, France had largely devolved into a country violence, known afterwards as the **Great Terror**.

Between 1793 and 1794, **Robespierre's** France guillotined and summarily executed thousands of potential political opponents before the orchestrator himself lost his head in July 1794.

The fall of Robespierre ushered in a new, more conservative form of government known as **the Directory**. The Directory purged the former leader's radical supporters – the 'Jacobins' – and resorted to extreme repression to keep the country under Parisian control.

The Directory

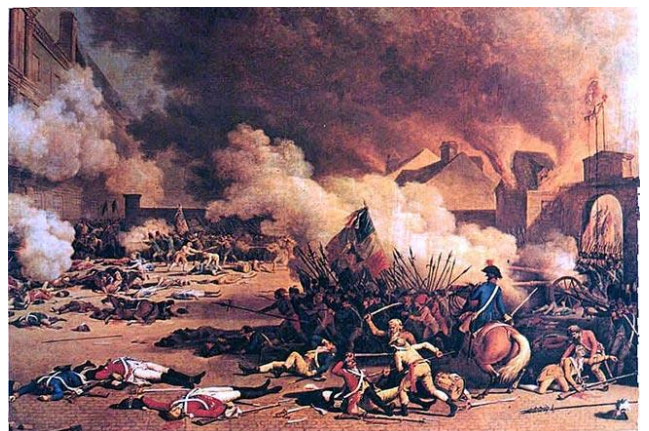
Historians have not been kind to the Directory, calling it unrepresentative and repressive. The Directory was made up of five directors. The voting system at the time denied almost all Frenchmen any real say in who these Directors were. The regime was not a popular one.

It clung onto power over the last years of the 1790s. But when the brilliant young General Napoleon Bonaparte **returned to France in October 1799**, many saw him as a potential saviour.



Maximilien

Robespierre: a leader of the French Revolution and best known for starting the Great Terror. He was an important member of the Jacobin political party and elected as deputy to the National Convention (1792).



Napoleon may only have been thirty at the time of the coup but he was already a famous soldier and regarded by many as the greatest son of the revolution. The chaos generated by the revolution had granted this gifted young man opportunities that would have been denied to him under the old regime.

Military career

Napoleon began his military career as an **artillery officer**. He played an integral role in defeating a British Royalist force at the **Battle of Toulon** in 1793.

Promotions quickly followed. Despite having been imprisoned for his connections to Robespierre, and his descent from a very minor noble family on the remote Italian-speaking island of Corsica, Napoleon was given **command of a ragtag army in Nice** in 1796.



Over the next year, he led this army on a stunning campaign, defeating the Italians and the Austrians and forcing both to sign humiliating peace treaties. His next step was to take his armies to **Egypt** in a roundabout attempt to menace the growing British Empire in India.

The glamour of this campaign, though it was less successful than the first, enhanced the growing fame of the young soldier.

In the Autumn of 1799 he sensed an opportunity and returned to France (leaving his loyal and devoted troops behind to be defeated and captured by the British).

An offer he couldn't refuse

This opportunity came at the hands of Director Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès. Though a member of the government, Sieyès was as bitterly disappointed with it as everyone else and had been planning a coup for some time. But a coup needed popular support.

Sieyès noted the adulation with which Napoleon was greeted when he returned home. He realised that this was the man to legitimise and defend his new regime. Napoleon had other ideas. Far from being Sieyès' puppet, he began planning to seize power for **himself**.

Coup: a sudden violent and unlawful seizure of power from a government.

The uprising

A series of recent uprisings meant thousands of troops were conveniently stationed around Paris. The plan was to use these men to intimidate the upper and lower chambers of the government into resigning and permit a new more centralised regime to replace it.

Sensing that something was wrong, the Directors resigned and **their system collapsed**. But the upper and lower chambers remained defiant.



On **9 November**, with Sieyès occupied in Paris, Napoleon took matters into his own hands. He marched proudly into the upper chamber – **the Council of Ancients** – surrounded by battle-scarred grenadiers.

The Ancients resisted, but a show of military muscle and an effective speech allowed Napoleon to escape unscathed. The lower chamber – the Council of the 500 – proved more difficult.

These men threatened Napoleon, many with daggers in their hands. According to some reports, Napoleon was paralysed with fear and came close to fainting.

Fortunately for Napoleon, his brother **Lucien** was President of the lower chamber. In the midst of the unrest, Lucien drew his sword and pointed it at his brother's heart, roaring to the councillors that if his brother was a traitor he would kill him himself.

This dramatic display gave control of the situation back to Napoleon, who then **forced the 500 to sign a new constitution**.

With thousands of soldiers behind him, Napoleon intimidated Sieyès into changing the new constitution to give one man, "**First Consul**", absolute power. This man, of course, would be Napoleon. With this move, the French Revolution was over.

France had a **new absolute ruler**, and in 1804 he would dispense with the pretence of democracy by declaring himself Emperor.

Timeline of key events: Napoleon's rise to power

Use the article to explain Napoleon's rise to power.

Q: how important was the French Revolution for Napoleon's rise to power?

1793-1794	The Great Terror:
Aug-Dec 1793	Battle of Toulon:
July 1794	
November 1795	The Directory was set up (the French Revolutionary government)
March 1796	Napoleon sent to Nice:
1798	Napoleon in Egypt:
October 1799	
Early November 1799	Sieyes recruits Napoleon to overthrow the Directory.
9-10 November 1799	
14 November 1799	The Directory has officially ended.
December 1799	New Constitution is formalised. Napoleon is elected as First Consul.
1804	

From outsider to emperor

The 2nd of December is a day that will always loom large in the legend of Napoleon Bonaparte. It was on this day that he **crowned himself Emperor** of France, and then, exactly one year later, **crushed his enemies at his most glorious battle; Austerlitz.**

Though the Corsican eventually met his match at Waterloo, he is still regarded as one of the most romantic glamorous and important figures in history. From a bony provincial youth to a Warrior-Emperor ruling from Portugal to Russia, his story is an extraordinary one, and two of its finest and most famous moments happened on this day.



After seizing control of France in 1799 Napoleon had ruled as **First Consul** – which effectively amounted to being a dictator over his adopted nation. Born in Corsica, which had only become a French possession on the year of his birth in 1769, he was – like Stalin the Georgian and Hitler the Austrian – an **outsider.**

Nevertheless, his youth, glamour and almost immaculate record of military success ensured that he was the darling of the French people, and this knowledge caused the young general to consider creating a new office that would serve as a more concrete reminder of his power and prestige.

As in ancient Rome, the word **King** was a dirty one after the Revolution, and again taking inspiration from the Caesars (who he greatly admired), Napoleon began to toy with the idea of crowning himself **Emperor.**

Despite his obvious vanity, he was not a blind power-hungry individual, however, and was aware that after bloody fighting and revolution in order to remove and behead a King... replacing one title of autocrat with another might not be the best idea(!)

He knew that firstly, he would have to test public opinion, and secondly, the ceremony of being crowned Emperor would have to be different and distanced from those of the Bourbon Kings. In 1804 he **held a constitutional referendum** asking the people to approve the new title of Emperor, which came back with **99.93% in favour**.

Constitutional referendum: a vote to a potential change to the constitution.

Slightly **dubious** though this “democratic” vote may have been, it was enough to reassure the First Consul that the people would support him.

The Revolution at its most radical had resulted in a bloody period known as “the Terror,” and the anti-monarchical mood of a decade ago had long-since fizzled out as the revolution produced weak and incompetent leaders. France was **enjoying strong rule** under a figure of huge popularity, and if being lorded over by an “emperor” was the price they had to pay for their new-found success and prosperity, then so be it.

Following in the footsteps of Caesar and Charlemagne

Unlike the 20th century dictators to which Napoleon has often been compared, he was a genuinely **effective ruler** who cared for his people, and many of his reforms, such as the **Bank of France**, stand to this day.

Full of confidence and sure of his own popularity, Napoleon began to plan every stage and symbol of his coronation in meticulous detail. At 9 A.M on 2 December he set out in a great procession to the Notre Dame Cathedral, which he entered in his full Imperial finery of regal red and ermine.

Eager to disassociate himself with the hated Bourbon Kings, however, his Imperial symbol of the bee replaced the royal Fleur-de-Lis on all the regalia.

The **bee** had been a symbol of the ancient Frankish King Childeric, and was a carefully managed attempt to associate Napoleon with the austere military values of France's first monarchs rather than the effete and despised Bourbon dynasty.

In accordance with this, he had a new crown made, based on that of **Charlemagne**, the last master of Europe, a thousand years earlier. In a breathtaking and era-defining moment, Napoleon **carefully took the crown off the Pope, eased the Roman-style laurel leaves off his head, and crowned himself.**

The impact of this moment, at a time where Kings, Lords and even politicians came from aristocratic lineages, cannot be imagined today.

This was the ultimate moment of **the self-made man**, placed on his throne not by divine right but by his own brilliance, and by the love of his people.

Napoleon then crowned his beloved wife Josephine as Empress and left the cathedral as the first Emperor of France, the latest in a line that stretched from Caesar to Charlemagne, and now to this upstart Corsican.

The road to Austerlitz

He would not have long to enjoy his new position however. After a relatively quiet period on the foreign stage the **British broke the Peace of Amiens in**

1803, and over the next two years were **busy creating a coalition of powers arrayed against France.**



The Peace of Amiens: a treaty from 1802 which brought an end to previous hostilities between France and Great Britain.

Anxious to defeat his most bitter enemy, Napoleon began training a powerful army on the Channel, **intending to invade and conquer England**. He never got the chance however, for upon hearing that the Russians were heading to support their Austrian allies in Germany, he led his troops east in a lightning march to defeat his nearest continental enemy before Tsar Alexander's forces arrived.

Marching his army at an astonishing pace and in total secrecy, he was able to surprise General Mack's **Austrian** army in what is known as the Ulm Manoeuvre, and surround his forces so completely that the Austrian was forced to surrender his entire army. Having lost just 2000 men, Napoleon was then able to march on and **take Vienna unobstructed**.

Having suffered this disaster, the Holy Roman Emperor Francis II and Tsar Alexander I of Russia wheeled their huge armies to face Napoleon. He met them at **Austerlitz**, in what is known as the Battle of the Three Emperors. Napoleon's tactics at Austerlitz are rightly regarded to be among the **most masterful** in the history of warfare. Deliberately leaving his right flank looking weak, the Emperor of France **fooled his enemies** into making a full-blooded attack there, not knowing that the excellent Marshal Davout's corps were there to plug the gap.

With the enemy engaged on the French right, their centre was weakened, allowing Napoleon's crack troops to overwhelm it and then mop up the rest of the enemy army from their new commanding tactical position. Simple



#enough tactics, but unbelievably effective as the enemy army of 85,000 men was put to flight.

After Austerlitz, **success followed success**, with the defeat of Prussia in 1806 followed by victory over Russia again the following year. After the Russians sued for peace at the 1807 Treaty of Tilsit, Napoleon really was the master of Europe, ruling over lands far more extensive than Charlemagne ever had.

Napoleon's legacy

Though it would all come tumbling down eventually, Europe's old feudal regimes could never return after Napoleonic rule. The world had changed, and the events of 2 December were pivotal in that change. The French people always loved their Emperor, especially after the Bourbons were restored after his fall. It required yet another revolution to once again oust them from power, and in 1852, a new Emperor was crowned.

He was none other than Napoleon's nephew, a man who owed his popularity and power to his uncle's brilliance rather than any great ability himself. Napoleon III was crowned Emperor of France exactly 48 years after Napoleon I, on 2 December.

Comprehension activity

1. **What two major events in Napoleon's life both occurred on 2 December, and in which years did they take place?**
2. **How did Napoleon first come to power in France before proclaiming himself Emperor?**
3. **Why was the title "King" considered problematic for Napoleon, and what historical influence did he turn to instead?**

4. What mechanism did Napoleon use to gauge public support for becoming Emperor, and what was the result?
5. What ancient symbol did Napoleon use on his coronation regalia to distance himself from the Bourbon monarchy, and why was it significant?
6. Describe the moment in the ceremony when Napoleon crowned himself and explain its historical and symbolic importance.
7. Who did Napoleon crown as Empress, and how did the coronation link his reign to previous European rulers?
8. What was Napoleon's strategic tactic at the Battle of Austerlitz involving the French right flank?