The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars

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French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte (center) accepts the surrender of General Baron Karl Mack von Leiberich and the Austrian army at Ulm in Bavaria on October 20, 1805. Image from the public domain

The French Revolution transformed France and threatened much of Europe. The French revolutionaries fought a series of wars against the monarchies of Europe, at first to protect and spread their revolution and then to conquer territory. The later years of the French Revolution were dominated by Napoleon Bonaparte. He transformed his military victories into political power, becoming head of the French government and then emperor.

However, more war was to follow. It was perhaps unavoidable. For Napoleon, staying in power depended on military victory. He also tended to solve problems through battle, and the monarchies of Europe looked at France as a dangerous enemy.
Origins

In 1789, the French Revolution overthrew King Louis XVI, ending the aristocracy and setting up a government sort of like a democracy. The monarchies and empires of Europe were totally opposed to the new way of thinking. In 1791, Austria and Prussia asked other European countries to help put the French monarchy back in power. They carefully worded the request in such a way as to prevent war. However, France misinterpreted it and decided to attack first in April 1792.

The French Revolutionary Wars

On November 19, 1792, the National Convention, the new government, promised to help all people everywhere who were looking to regain their liberty and get rid of their kings. It became a new justification for France to go to war.

On December 15, the government decreed that the revolutionary laws of France — including no more kings — were to be brought abroad by the French armies. France also claimed new, larger borders for itself. France decided to oppose, or overthrow, every king to keep itself safe.
In 1793, a group of European empires and kingdoms came together to fight against France. This First Coalition was made up of Austria, Prussia, Spain, Britain and the United Provinces, now the Netherlands. Ultimately, by the time Napoleon was defeated, there would be a total of seven coalitions. The French required every young, unmarried man in France to join the army. A new chapter in warfare had been reached, and army sizes now began to rise greatly.
The rise of Napoleon and the switch in focus
The new French armies had success against the coalition, forcing Prussia, in northwest Germany, to surrender and pushing the others back. In 1796, the government decided that the French army in Italy wasn't doing as well as it should. It was given a new commander, Napoleon Bonaparte.

In a dazzling display of military skill, Napoleon defeated the Austrian Netherlands. He gained the Austrian Netherlands for France, and protected French allies in northern Italy. Napoleon’s army, and the commander himself, gained large amounts of wealth by taking it from conquered kings and queens.

Napoleon then pursued a dream of his: attacking the Middle East and threatening the British control over India. In 1798, he sailed to Egypt with an army. He succeeded in taking Cairo, but failed in trying to take the city of Acre, which is now part of Israel. The British attacked French ships in the Nile River. With the French fleet seriously damaged in the Nile, the French army was trapped; it could not get reinforcements and it could not leave. Napoleon soon left this army to return to France when it looked like a coup would take place back in France that would help him take control of the French government.

In 1799, Napoleon took part in a coup and exploited his success and power to become first consul of France, which was the highest job in the French government. France became the dominant power in Europe, and Napoleon a national hero. In 1804, he crowned himself emperor.
The Napoleonic Wars

By the end of 1812, he had conquered Holland, Belgium, Austria, parts of Italy, Prussia, Poland and Spain.

The 1807 Battle of Eylau, in Russia, marked his first major setback. Napoleon fought the armies of Prussia and Russia and was nearly captured.

By 1812, much of Europe was now either under direct French control or allied to it. Napoleon was almost master of Europe, creating new states such as the German Confederation of the Rhine and making his family members kings and queens.
The disaster in Russia

In 1812, Napoleon gathered what was probably the largest army ever assembled in Europe. It was certainly too big to supply with food, arms and even uniforms. Looking for a quick victory, Napoleon pursued the Russian army deep into Russia, winning the Battle of Borodino and then taking Moscow. But the Russians set Moscow on fire, and Napoleon was forced to retreat through the bitter Russian winter without adequate supplies.

The final years

The European kings knew that Napoleon was weak, and a new Sixth Coalition was organized in 1813, and pushed across Europe. Napoleon was forced back. In 1814, the coalition entered the borders of France. Abandoned by his allies in Paris and many of his generals, Napoleon was forced to surrender. He was exiled to the island of Elba off the coast of Italy.
The 100 Days

Napoleon plotted his return to power. In 1815, he escaped Elba, gathering an army as he marched to Paris. He soon found himself facing another coalition of nations that included Austria, Britain, Prussia and Russia. In the Battle of Waterloo, in present-day Belgium, Napoleon was defeated and forced to leave his throne once more. This time, he was exiled to St. Helena, a remote tropical island in the Atlantic Ocean, and died in 1821 at the age of 51.

Peace

The monarchy was restored in France, and the heads of Europe gathered at the Congress of Vienna to redraw the map of Europe. Europe would not be torn apart like that again until World War I in 1914. Of France's 2 million men as soldiers, up to 900,000 had died in France's wars.
Quiz

1. Which section of the article BEST highlights Napoleon's strength as a military commander?
   (A) “The French Revolutionary Wars”
   (B) “The rise of Napoleon and the switch in focus”
   (C) “The Napoleonic Wars”
   (D) “The 100 Days”

2. Which piece of evidence BEST explains what caused France to engage in many wars across Europe in the late 1700s and early 1800s?
   (A) He transformed his military victories into political power, becoming head of the French government and then emperor.
   (B) On December 15, the government decreed that the revolutionary laws of France — including no more kings — were to be brought abroad by the French armies.
   (C) In 1793, a group of European empires and kingdoms came together to fight against France.
   (D) Napoleon was almost master of Europe, creating new states such as the German Confederation of the Rhine and making his family members kings and queens.

3. What is the MAIN reason why the author included the section “The rise of Napoleon and the switch in focus”?
   (A) to show how Napoleon gained much wealth and fame through his military pursuits
   (B) to show how Napoleon was not invincible and had vulnerabilities as a commander
   (C) to show how Napoleon ascended from a skilled military leader to the emperor of France
   (D) to show how Napoleon performed beyond what was expected of him when given the role of commander
Read the paragraph from the section “The Napoleonic Wars.”

The 1807 Battle of Eylau, in Russia, marked his first major setback. Napoleon fought the armies of Prussia and Russia and was nearly captured.

What is the MOST LIKELY reason why the author included this paragraph in the article?

(A) to expose a weakness in Napoleon and show that he was not invincible as a leader
(B) to illustrate that Napoleon was not only strong but smart since he avoided being captured
(C) to explain how a near defeat almost ended Napoleon's military career and France's power over Europe
(D) to show how a major setback could not even stop Napoleon from gaining control of most of Europe