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Napoleon: Background and Rise to Power

POINTS TO CONSIDER

The French Revolution was one of the most dramatic events in modern European history. In 1789 the old order, or *ancien régime*, started to collapse. Over the course of the next six years until 1795, the Revolution steadily became more extreme and chaotic, at which point a measure of stability was restored with the setting up the Directory. Of the many important figures to emerge out of the Revolutionary period none equalled the extraordinary career of Napoleon Bonaparte. He not only made a lasting impact on France but, over the course of his reign, altered the map of Europe. This chapter will explore his background through the following sections:

- Synopsis of Napoleon's career 1796–1815
- Background and character
- Napoleon and the early years of the Revolution
- Napoleon and the Directory

Key dates

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|------|--------------|--|
| 1769 | August 15 | Napoleon born in Ajaccio on the island of Corsica |
| 1778 | December 15 | Napoleon left Corsica to be educated in a college in Brienne |
| 1785 | September 1 | Napoleon graduated from the <i>École Militaire</i> as an artillery officer |
| 1789 | July 14 | The storming of the Bastille |
| 1792 | August 10 | French monarchy overthrown |
| 1793 | June 11 | Napoleon and his family fled Corsica |
| | September 16 | Napoleon appointed Commander of Artillery at the siege of Toulon |
| 1795 | October 1–5 | Vendémiaire uprising in Paris |
| 1796 | March 2 | Napoleon appointed Commander of the Army in Italy |
| | March 9 | Napoleon married Josephine de Beauharnais |
| 1798 | April 26 | Napoleon set out for Egypt |

2 | Napoleon, France and Europe

| | | |
|------|---------------|--------------------------------|
| 1799 | November 9–10 | <i>Coup</i> of Brumaire |
| 1821 | May 5 | Death of Napoleon on St Helena |

A new calendar and dating system was adopted by the French Republic in October 1793 to mark what it considered was a new era in human history. Year I started in September 1792 when the Republic came into existence. The second month in the new Revolutionary calendar was Brumaire – the month of fog. On 18–19 Brumaire in year VIII of the Revolution (9–10 November 1799) a *coup d'état* in Paris unexpectedly brought a young General, Napoleon Bonaparte, to power in France. In the event, it also led to his assuming power in most of the rest of Europe over the course of the next 15 years. Who was he and what was he like, this man who was to dominate Europe until 1815, and to live on in legend long after his death?

Before Napoleon became Emperor in 1804 he should be referred to as Bonaparte or General Bonaparte. It was not until 1802 that his full name appeared for the first time in official documents, when it was given as 'Napoleone Bonaparte'. (He had much earlier abandoned the Italian spelling of his surname, Buonaparte.) Soon after 1802, the Italian version of his baptismal name was also dropped, in favour of the French, Napoleon Bonaparte. It was to be a source of conflict with his British gaolers on St Helena that, having been deprived by the allies of his imperial title at the time of his second abdication in 1815, they addressed their prisoner as 'General Bonaparte'. The argument continued even after his death in a very undignified way. The British officials on the island would not agree to the name 'Napoleon' being put on the coffin, and as the French representatives there would accept nothing else, he was buried anonymously. (For the sake of simplicity, Napoleon, the anglicised form of his name, is used throughout this book.)

1 | Synopsis of Napoleon's Career 1796–1815

At the beginning of his ascent to power in the 1790s, Napoleon was still slim and active, although not particularly prepossessing in appearance according to eyewitness accounts. These describe him as untidily, almost shabbily dressed, with lank, greasy shoulder-length hair and a sallow complexion. A rather serious young man, he had little sense of humour and seldom laughed. In 1796 two events of great importance in his life occurred – he married the widowed society beauty, Josephine de Beauharnais, and he was appointed commander of the Army of Italy. It was as a result of his military campaigns in Italy (1796–7) and afterwards in Egypt (1798–9) that in 1799 he came to power in the *coup d'état* of Brumaire, making him **First Consul** and undisputed ruler of France.

← **Key question**
What were the main features of Napoleon's career?

First Consul
The most important of the three consuls who headed the government after 1799.

Key term

Domestic affairs

As *First Consul* (1799–1804) and then as Emperor until 1814, Napoleon's government was highly **centralised** and his authority as sole ruler of France was not effectively disputed. His regime was basically a dictatorship, although, despite the fact that the head of state was also head of the armed forces, it was not a military one. By a mixture of bribery (through the liberal use of gifts of land, titles, official appointments and money to buy support) and a ruthless suppression of freedom of thought, word and deed (through the widespread use of indoctrination, intimidation and propaganda to make opposition difficult), Napoleon maintained himself in power for 14 years.

Key question
What factors contributed to the downfall of the Napoleonic Empire?

Foreign affairs

Napoleon's relations with most of the great powers involved war at some time or other. Apart from the short period of peace in 1802–3 France was almost continuously at war during the Napoleonic period. Indeed, the Peace of Amiens (1802) can be seen as little more than a truce in a long succession of wars, begun during the Revolution and continued under Napoleon. France fought these wars against a succession of European coalition armies. Until 1807, Napoleon led France to a series of brilliant victories on land, extending the borders of France far beyond their '**natural frontiers**' of the Rhine, the Alps and the Pyrenees, into Germany and Italy. At the beginning of 1811 the Empire reached its greatest extent (see the map on page ••), but its collapse was already threatened by the lengthy Spanish conflict begun in 1807 and made certain by Napoleon's ill-judged invasion of Russia in 1812. Even Napoleon's most strenuous efforts failed to save the Empire in the campaign of 1813 and with the fall of Paris to the allies of the Sixth coalition in March 1814 he was forced to abdicate, and was exiled to **Elba**. His return to France the following year during the 'Hundred days' campaign that ended in his defeat at the battle of Waterloo, brought his reign and the Napoleonic era to a close.

Key date
Death of Napoleon on St Helena: 5 May 1821

Key terms
Centralised
Political power dispensed from one central location or through one individual.

Natural frontiers
Natural features, such as rivers, mountains, lakes or the sea.

Elba
A small island off the north-western coast of Italy.

St Helena
A tiny British island in the south Atlantic over 1000 miles off the coast of Africa.

St Helena and after

Exiled again in 1815, this time to **St Helena** (a remote island in the south Atlantic from which escape proved impossible), Napoleon occupied the remaining years of his life in dictating his own version of events to a group of companions on the island. He died, most probably from stomach cancer, on 5 May 1821, shortly before his 52nd birthday. From these records, and from the accumulated propaganda of his years in power, his many followers carefully constructed the Napoleonic legend.

2 | Background and Character

Family background

Napoleon was born on 15 August 1769 in the town of Ajaccio on the island of Corsica and was christened Napoleone di Buonaparte. Although he was born a French citizen, Corsica had only been part of France since 1768. In that year it ceded to France from the Republic of Genoa. The Buonaparte family were minor nobility with a fierce, independent pride in all that was Corsican. Napoleon's father, Carlo Maria Bonaparte (1746–85), had been a passionate nationalist. Carlo was a supporter of the Corsican nationalist leader Pasquale Paoli, and his attempts to gain independence from Genoa. When France became involved in the conflict, Carlo fought against them. Following the final defeat of the Corsican rebels, Carlo decided that further resistance was futile and made his peace with the new ruling power.

Key question

What impact did Napoleon's Corsican background have on his career?

Napoleon born in Ajaccio on the island of Corsica: 15 August 1769

Key date



Some of the key places in Napoleon's life.

Cidevant

List drawn up during the Revolution of former members of the nobility.

Counter-revolutionaries

All who were hostile to the Revolution.

La patrie

The fatherland – with which all passionate revolutionaries closely identified.

Popular sovereignty

A belief that political power rests with the people and their chosen representatives.

Napoleon left Corsica to be educated in a college in Brienne: 15 December 1778

Napoleon graduated from the *École Militaire* as an artillery officer: 1 September 1785

The acceptance by Carlo of an amnesty saw him change sides. There were advantages to be gained for his growing family of five sons and three daughters by attaching himself to the French administration of the island. One of these advantages was the acquisition of the documentary proof of his status as a nobleman, which he needed in order to send Napoleon, his second son, to be educated at the French government's expense at a military academy on the mainland. Fortunately perhaps for Napoleon, the Corsican nobility was considered by most Frenchmen to be much inferior in status to that of France, and his name was never entered in the '*cidevant*' lists at the time of the Revolution. This might have proven difficult for him as following the abolition of the nobility in 1790 many noblemen were suspected of being **counter-revolutionaries**.

Napoleon's education

On 15 December 1778 at the age of nine, the young Napoleon, whose first language was Italian, was sent by his father to study in France. When he returned to Corsica in 1786 after an absence of eight years he met for the first time his younger brothers and sisters. Before starting his studies he was given an intensive course in French to prepare him for any future career. He never lost his Italian accent, and never learnt to write grammatically correct French – this latter fact may have been the reason why he dictated all official documents and correspondence, leaving it to his secretaries to correct the grammar. It is difficult to know how far he ever felt himself to be truly French, however much he spoke of 'France, first and always'. Some historians go so far as to suggest that France for him was never *la patrie* – that he was always, at least emotionally, a Corsican. It is certainly true that he initially thought of the Revolution as an opportunity for the Corsicans to gain freedom from France as they had once dreamed of gaining freedom from Genoa.

During the opening years of the Revolution, Napoleon was strongly influenced by the philosopher Rousseau, who developed a theory of **popular sovereignty** whereby ordinary people would exercise political power. For a while he was obsessed with Rousseau's view '... that this little island will one day astonish Europe'. Much later during his life, when Corsica ceased to dominate his thoughts in the same way, and he came to denounce Rousseau as 'a madman', the Corsican sense of family loyalty remained with him, and would influence many of his subsequent political appointments.

The first formal education Napoleon received in France was at a small preparatory school of 110 students at Brienne. The school was run by monks to a very strict routine. The young Napoleon was not allowed to leave until his education had been completed, a period of six years. Part of the aim of the strict upbringing was to produce boys who were tough and self-reliant. In October 1784, his education at Brienne completed, he left for Paris where he entered the *École Militaire*, to train as an artillery officer. This was one of the few branches of the military where promotion was

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strictly on the basis of merit rather than upbringing. He became the first Corsican to graduate, 42nd out of a class of 58, as a sub-lieutenant of artillery on 1 September 1785.

Napoleon's character and personality

Napoleon's character and personality were very complex and certainly evolved over the course of his career. There are a number of essential features that can be identified:

- As a Corsican whose first language was Italian, he was clearly perceived as an outsider during the years he spent in France being educated. While at school he kept himself very much to himself and could certainly be described as a loner.
- Napoleon's youth was far from normal and it suggests that during these early years he was very adaptable. When confronted with difficult and trying circumstances, he was able to overcome them and flourish.
- With friends, he could be charming and amusing. But he did not always choose to be so, and his rages and his cold displeasure could be terrifying to those around him. He recognised the fact that his mood could change suddenly: 'I am two different men', he once said of himself. The artist Antoine-Jean Gros, who painted him in 1796, described him as cold and severe.
- He was fiercely ambitious and driven to achieve his potential. As the well-known French historian Georges Lefebvre pointed out, the young Napoleon possessed an '... irresistible impulse towards action and domination which is called ambition'. Napoleon himself clearly recognised and fully acknowledged this trait: 'It is said that I am ambitious, but that is an error: or at least, my ambition is so intimately allied to my whole being that it cannot be separated from it.'
- As a native of Corsica, Napoleon placed great emphasis on family loyalty. The **clan system** on the island encouraged the reward and promotion of relatives. This goes some way to explaining Napoleon's tendency as Emperor to appoint close relatives he could trust to powerful positions in government.
- Napoleon possessed enormous energy. He was, for much of his adult life, a workaholic, sometimes working 18 or more hours a day, and was able to exist on very little sleep. As Emperor, he was determined to oversee personally all aspects of the state and would dictate his official communications often to half a dozen secretaries at once. It has been estimated that he 'wrote' more than 80,000 documents during his 15 years in power.
- It is a historical myth that Napoleon was unusually short and that his enormous energy and overweening ambition are explained by a need to compensate for his lack of height. At a time when the standard height for adult enrolment in the French army was 5 feet (approximately 150 cm), reduced by 1813 to 4 feet 9 inches (approximately 142 cm), Napoleon at 5 feet 2 inches (approximately 155 cm) was in fact above average height for a Frenchman.

Key question

What were the essential features of Napoleon's character and personality?

Clan system

A group of people, related in some way, who protect and look after one another.

Key term

- Given that he lived on his nerves Napoleon sometimes became anxious and fearful – especially in crowds, or when called upon to speak in public (which he did very badly). Despite this failing he possessed enormous charisma and inspired fanatical devotion among his closest followers – particularly those soldiers he had commanded.
- From 1807 onwards officials, friends and servants noticed a change in Napoleon, which became more marked after his return from the ill-fated Russian campaign of 1812. Although only 43 in 1812 his previously excellent memory began to decline, he became much more arrogant, more intolerant of others’ points of view and more brutally contemptuous of the rest of the human race: ‘power comes through fear’, he said at this time. He began to put on weight, becoming lethargic and slow, and ageing prematurely into the balding, paunchy figure beloved of cartoonists then and since.

3 | Napoleon and the Early Years of the Revolution 1789–93

Key dates

The storming of the Bastille – usually taken as marking the start of the French Revolution: 14 July 1789

French monarchy overthrown: 10 August 1792

Key terms

Estates-General

Elected representatives from the clergy, nobility and everyone else.

Cockade

A tri-coloured cloth rosette comprising the red and blue of Paris and the white of the uniform of the French guards.

At the age of 16, the newly commissioned Napoleon was posted to the town of Valence in southern France to continue his training as an artillery officer. During this time he studied and read widely, and became particularly interested in history. In 1788 he was sent to Auxonne, one of the best military bases in France, to complete his training. France by this time was in the throes of a deep financial crisis. The King’s inability to deal with it created a political crisis which ultimately developed into a revolution. The summoning of the **Estates-General** in 1789, for the first time since 1614, was an indication of the gravity of the crisis. The storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789 confirmed this. Royal authority by that summer was breaking down across the whole country.

As Louis’ hold over the country was weakening, the power of his opponents was increasing. This would have been visible in Paris and other cities, by the large numbers of people wearing the **cockade**, an early symbol of the Revolution. Louis was reluctantly forced to make significant changes in the way France was governed. The most important of these was conceding an elected law-making Assembly. Many who opposed the Revolution left France and sought the help of Austria and Prussia to regain for the King the powers he had lost. France went to war in 1792 to defend its revolution from foreign interference. The disastrous performance of its army and the threat of defeat led to a political crisis in Paris which resulted in the overthrow of the King on 10 August 1792 and the establishment of the first French Republic.

Key question

What impact did the Revolution have on Napoleon?

Napoleon, Corsica and the Revolution

Napoleon returned to Corsica in September 1789 on leave, to find the island in turmoil. He joined a political club that was actively supporting the Revolution and worked tirelessly to further both its cause and the interests of his family. The return of

Paoli to the island after over 20 years of exile was at first widely acclaimed by the Buonapartes, although they did not share in the distribution of offices and favours which the nationalist leader showered on supporters who had been loyal to him during his lengthy absence. In 1791, shortly before returning to his regiment in France, Napoleon became an active member of the newly formed Patriotic Club, which was affiliated to the **left-wing Jacobin club**. When he returned to Valence his younger brother Louis accompanied him, and Napoleon assumed responsibility for his education. As far as Napoleon's political views and loyalties were concerned he was clearly sympathetic to the ideals of the Jacobin club, becoming secretary of the branch in Valence. It is likely that it was at this time that he became an active republican.

Political events back in Corsica were occupying his mind and he was hoping to travel back there in 1792. With war against Austria looming, the only way he could return to the island was if he transferred to the Corsican National Guard and was elected to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. This he achieved with some effort.

Left wing

A position supporting extreme change to benefit the majority of the population.

Jacobin club

'The Society of the Friends of the Constitution', the most extreme of the political clubs in Paris.

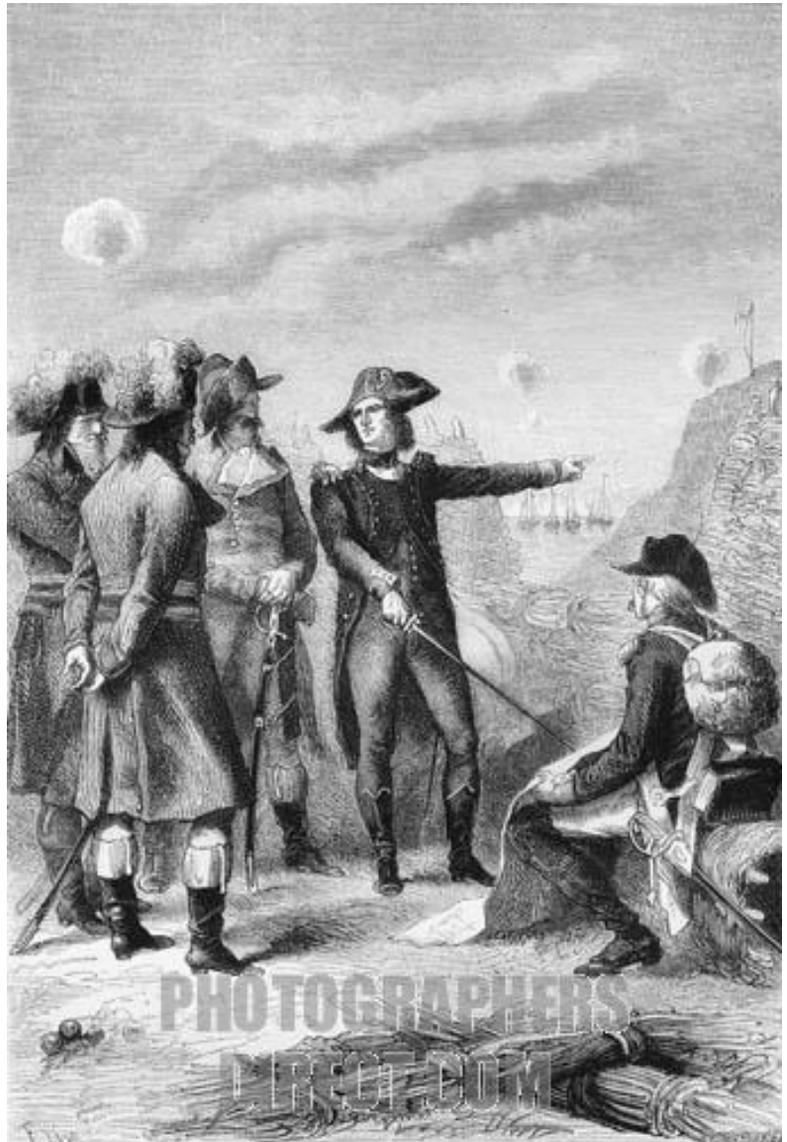


An early portrait of the young Napoleon Bonaparte serving as Lieutenant-Colonel of the first battalion of Corsica during the pre-Consul period.

Very shortly after his appointment, he became embroiled in an incident that threatened to damage his career when a riot in Ajaccio got out of hand and resulted in the National Guard laying siege to the town. Napoleon was accused of abusing his position to favour pro-revolutionary groups. Evidence from an inquiry was sent to Paris for consideration and Napoleon decided to travel to the capital to hear the outcome.

Relations between the Bonaparte family and Paoli had not been easy since Carlo Bonaparte's abandonment of the nationalist cause and subsequent collaboration with the French. Increasing disillusionment with Paoli's policies, particularly his hostility to France, led to a deterioration in relations between him and the Bonaparte clan. Napoleon and his family were forced to flee the island for mainland France on 11 June 1793. With their assets seized, the family were penniless refugees who managed to

Key date
Napoleon and his family fled Corsica for the French mainland: 11 June 1793



Napoleon at the siege of Toulon 1793.

survive through the help of some of Napoleon's political friends, especially Cristoforo Saliceti, one of the Corsican deputies to the National Assembly.

The siege of Toulon 1793

Growing hostility to the Republican government, which was perceived to be increasingly under the influence of the Jacobins, prompted many of the towns and regions outside Paris to reject its authority. The **federal revolt**, as it was known, erupted in a number of areas, particularly in central and southern parts of France. Lyon, Marseilles and Toulon all broke away from the control of the central government. Republican armies were dispatched to restore order. **Representatives on mission** were attached to these armies to supervise their operations. The situation in the great naval base of Toulon was much more serious than in most other areas because counter-revolutionary forces had handed over control of the port to the British, who entered the war on 1 February 1793.

The occupation of Toulon by the British had the potential to undermine the survival of the Republic. Recapturing the port was essential but this was no easy task given that its fortifications were among the most formidable in Europe. The task of recapturing the port was given to General Carteaux, whose forces started to occupy the surrounding area and began a siege. His army, in common with all those of the Republic, had suffered from the mass emigration of officers who were members of the nobility. It is estimated that between 1789 and 1792 as many as 6000 commissioned officers left the country and joined the ranks of the *émigrés*. This provided plenty of opportunities for able and energetic, but not particularly well-born or well-endowed, career-soldiers to advance rapidly up the ladder of promotion in a way undreamed of under the *ancien régime*.

Napoleon's role in the siege of Toulon

Napoleon's involvement in the siege occurred by chance. When the commander of the artillery was wounded, Napoleon was offered his position on 16 September 1793, by one of the representatives on mission in the area, his friend and fellow Corsican, Saliceti. General Carteaux was not consulted regarding the appointment. The lack of suitable officers, Napoleon's availability and his political connections undoubtedly contributed to his appointment. With the rank of major, he used his enormous energy and undoubted skill as an artillery officer to build up the numbers of guns and resources at his disposal. His grasp of the nature of the terrain and how capturing certain key positions could close the port to the British and render the port worthless to them was an indication of his great technical skill as a soldier. Although the plan to capture the key British position defending the port was not his own he was more than willing to accept all the credit for it. The city finally fell on 19 December 1793. Napoleon's role in recapturing the port was crucial. It advanced his career in a number of ways:

Key question

Why was the recapture of Toulon so important?

Federal revolt

The rejection of the authority of the government in Paris in favour of regional authority.

Representatives on mission

Highly placed politicians sent from Paris with the authority of the government to ensure that generals were actively carrying out their orders.

Émigrés

Former members of the aristocracy, royalists and priests who fled France fearing for their safety.

Key question

What role did Napoleon play in the siege of Toulon? What impact did it have on his career?

Napoleon appointed Commander of Artillery at the siege of Toulon:
16 September 1793

Key terms

Key date

- The skill with which he deployed the artillery to such great effect marked his emergence as an important commander.
- His success at Toulon brought him to the attention of a number of powerful men in Paris.
- His role in the siege was rewarded with his promotion to the rank of Brigadier General in addition to his being appointed commander of the artillery of the Army of Italy.

Key question
Who helped
Napoleon's career
during the period
1793–4?

Friends in high places

In addition to his friendship with Saliceti, Napoleon acquired a number of other powerful friends and allies during this period. His military abilities and undoubted commitment to the republican cause marked him out as a soldier whose support was worth cultivating. There were two politicians in particular who supported him at this time. The first was Paul Barras, an influential politician and one of the most powerful representatives on mission in southern France. Napoleon's career was undoubtedly helped by Barras' patronage, and whose former mistress Josephine he would later marry. During this period, Napoleon published many pamphlets which were very sympathetic to the extreme Jacobin government, whose leading figure was Maximilian Robespierre. This brought him to the notice of Augustine Robespierre, Maximilian's brother. In a letter to his brother, Augustine mentioned favourably the young soldier:

I add to the names of patriots I have already mentioned citizen Buonoparte, general in command of artillery, a man of transcendent merit. He is Corsican, and brings me the simple guarantee of a man of that country who resisted the blandishments of Paoli and whose property has been destroyed by that traitor.

Napoleon and the Terror

By the summer of 1794 the authority of the Republic had been restored over most of France and its armies were poised to take the offensive against its external enemies. The system of Revolutionary government (or Jacobin dictatorship as opponents labelled it) that had secured these victories is known as **the Terror**. With republican authority restored, many were questioning the need for the highly centralised and ruthless system that was governing the country. In the *coup d'état* of **Thermidor**, 27–8 July 1794, Robespierre and his closest allies (including his brother) were overthrown and executed. As someone who was closely identified with the Jacobins, Napoleon was arrested and briefly imprisoned. That Napoleon was able to survive the overthrow of the Jacobins says a great deal about his political skills and the shortage of talented soldiers in the republican armies at this time.

In May 1795 Napoleon was ordered to assume command of the artillery, attached to the Army of the West, which was engaged in suppressing the **Vendée rebellion**. He viewed fighting internal rebels as beneath his abilities and refused to take up the post. The consequence of such a flagrant disobeying of orders was his

Key terms

The Terror

A ruthless system of government created by the Jacobins between 1793 and 1794 to defeat the enemies of the Republic.

Coup d'état

Overthrowing a government and seizing power.

Thermidor

One of the months in the new Revolutionary calendar, 9 July–17 August.

Vendée rebellion

Anti-republican revolt covering several departments in western France including the Vendée.

removal from the list of active officers. His whole career appeared in jeopardy and he even contemplated offering his services to the **Ottoman Empire**. That his career was rescued owed a great deal to being in the right place at the right time and the powerful friends he had in high places.

4 | Napoleon and the Directory

With the overthrow of the Jacobins, there was a return to a less extreme system of government. In 1795, a new and more moderate Constitution was adopted. It aimed to secure the position of the *bourgeoisie* over all other groups in the political life of the nation. This was to be achieved in the following ways:

- ensuring that political power was in the hands of the propertied classes who paid high levels of taxes
- heading up the government with an **executive** of five Directors
- having a two-chamber legislature comprising the Councils of Five Hundred and a Council of Ancients.

These arrangements were intended to prevent a dictatorship, as no single person or body had overall control of the state. The new system was characterised by a series of conflicts and disputes. While the Directory, which lasted for four years, was the longest lasting regime of the First Republic, it failed to deal with the deep divisions in French society that were a legacy of the early years of the Revolution. The most significant of these divisions were religious (those for or against the Catholic Church), social (between the poor and the rich middle and upper classes) and political (republicans and royalists).

The Vendémiaire uprising 1795

From the very outset the new regime was faced by opponents on the left and **the right**, who wished to overthrow it. Its response when confronted with opposition was to ignore the will of the people and resort to force. Faced with a royalist uprising in Paris between 1 and 5 October 1795, the Directory was determined to use all methods available to preserve order. The Commander of the Army of the Interior, General Menou, was dismissed because of his reluctance to open fire on the rioters. Barras assumed control of the situation. He appealed for any officers in the city without postings to come to the aid of the government.

Napoleon, who had been removed from the army list, immediately answered the call and Barras made him one of his commanders. Once again he proved to be in the right place at the right time. The decisive incident in the crisis was the killing of a large number of rebels, possibly by **grapeshot**, in the narrow streets near the Church of Saint-Roche. It is generally asserted that Napoleon gave the order to fire on the rebels with devastating effect – possibly 400 were killed. Whether or not he delivered the ‘whiff of grapeshot’ on the rebels is unclear. What is clear is that he took the credit for it, and when his friend Barras was appointed one of the Directors, Napoleon was promoted to

Key question

What was the purpose of the new political structure created in 1795?

Ottoman Empire

A vast declining empire controlling most of North Africa and the Middle East.

Bourgeoisie

The middle classes, for example lawyers, merchants and bankers.

Executive

The decision-making part of the government.

Key terms

Key question

How did the Vendémiaire uprising help to advance Napoleon's career?

Vendémiaire uprising in Paris: 1–5 October 1795

Key date

The right

In the context of the French Revolution, supporters of the monarchy.

Grapeshot

Canisters of small shot that spread widely when fired from cannon.

Key terms



The Vendémiaire Uprising, an engraving by Louis Blanc (1811–82).

Command the Army of the Interior. At the age of 26, without ever commanding a significant force on a battlefield, Napoleon found himself in charge of the largest army in France. His ascent had been nothing short of meteoric, but he was not entirely satisfied with his new role. Napoleon’s eyes were very firmly set on a field command and the one he had in his sight was the Army of Italy.

Key question

How did Napoleon come to command the Army in Italy?

Key dates

Napoleon appointed Commander of the Army in Italy: 2 March 1796

Napoleon married Josephine de Beauharnais: 9 March 1796

Marriage and war 1796

Napoleon was compelled to bide his time to gain command of a fighting army. As commander of the Army of the Interior he was active in suppressing the Jacobin Club, whose politics he now rejected. It was during this time that he met and fell in love with Josephine de Beauharnais, the widow of a republican politician and soldier who had been executed in 1794. She was seven years older than Napoleon and well known in Parisian society. They married on 9 March 1796.

Napoleon’s desire to prove himself on the battlefield was well known to his political masters in the Directory. Despite the fact that his duties were confined to securing the Republic from its internal enemies, this did not stop him from commenting on the campaign that was taking place rather ineffectually in Italy. He was particularly critical of the commander in charge of the campaign, General Scherer. There were three decisive factors that led the Minister of War, Carnot, to appoint Napoleon on 2 March 1796 to Command the Army in Italy, following Scherer’s resignation:

- The support of Napoleon's friend Saliceti, who had been sent to visit the army and report on its position. Saliceti argued convincingly that Napoleon be appointed.
- Napoleon's knowledge of the area obtained from a number of postings and missions following the siege of Toulon.
- Napoleon's confidence that he could reverse the fortunes of what was to all intents and purposes a dispirited army whose morale was at rock-bottom.

When Napoleon arrived to take up his command, he discovered an army made up of both experienced professional soldiers and Revolutionary volunteers. Not only was morale low but the attitude among many was also mutinous. Over the following years Napoleon was able to reverse the fortunes of this army, which says a great deal about his powers of leadership and great abilities as a commander. His position as Command of the Army of Italy laid the foundation of his military reputation and paved the way for his own political ambitions. (For an account of the campaign in Italy see pages ••–••.)

Disillusionment with the Directory

During the next two years, Napoleon's standing rose dramatically as his Italian army won a series of impressive victories. Following a treaty with Austria (see page ••) in 1797, he returned to Paris. His status was in marked contrast to the standing of the Directory, which became increasingly discredited as it resorted to illegal means to cancel election results it did not agree with. During the **coup of Fructidor** in September 1797, Napoleon helped Barras to expel the recently elected right-wing royalist majority. The following year, 1798, the Directors once again resorted to military support and annulled that year's elections because they produced a left-wing Jacobin majority. Napoleon was becoming increasingly suspicious of the motives of the Directors and disillusioned with their approaches to government. In addition, he was concerned that plans to invade Britain appeared to have stalled.

Napoleon proposed an alternative scheme to undermine Britain by disrupting its trade route with India, thereby inflicting damage to its economy. His plan was to take an army to the eastern Mediterranean where the Ottoman Empire had territory in what is now modern-day Egypt and Syria. The Directors backed his campaign, and were probably relieved that such an ambitious and popular general would be out of the country. Napoleon set off for Egypt on 26 April 1798. After initial successes the campaign failed, leading to his abandonment of the army and his return to France in 1799. (For an account of the campaign see pages ••–••.) Back in France, he now become much more directly involved in the politics of the Directory and ultimately helped bring about its overthrow during the **coup of Brumaire**, 9–10 November 1799.

← **Key question**
How did Napoleon's relations with the Directory change?

Coup of Fructidor
Napoleon deployed the army on behalf of Barras to expel newly elected royalists from the Assembly.

Coup of Brumaire
Brought about the overthrow of the Directory.

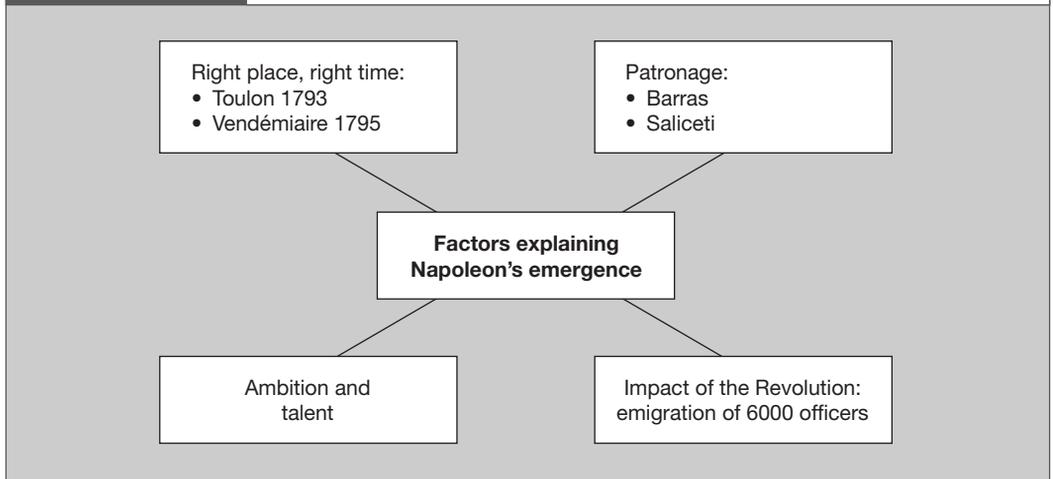
Napoleon set out on a military expedition to Egypt: 26 April 1798

Coup of Brumaire:
9–10 November 1799

Key terms

Key dates

Summary diagram: Napoleon – background and rise to power



Study Guide: AS Question

In the style of OCR

How far do you agree that Napoleon's rise in the years to 1799 was due primarily to the influence of Barras?

Exam tips

The cross-references are intended to take you straight to the material that will help you to answer the question.

The instruction 'How far ...?' tells you how to approach the question – you must weigh up the evidence one way and then the other before coming to an informed judgement. To score high marks, your argument and your judgement must be backed up with evidence (if they are not, your essay will be only a list of assertions).

Barras' importance is to be seen in his active patronage in 1793–4 and especially from 1795 after the Vendémiaire uprising – perhaps most notably in his securing for Napoleon command of the Army of the Interior. Against that, there is a range of evidence that could be used, for example

- Napoleon's other important patrons (page ●●)
- Napoleon's own military ability (especially from Toulon onwards) (page ●●)
- Napoleon's own ambition (political as well as military) (page ●●)
- Napoleon's luck – surviving the *coup* of Thermidor, his disobedience over the Vendée, his failure in Egypt (pages ●●, ●● and ●●).

Avoid a straight 'yes he was/no he wasn't' type of answer. A good answer always looks to identify and explain complexities. You might argue that Barras' help was very important in launching Napoleon, but that in the key period from 1796 he was no longer the core influence, for example Barras did not secure Napoleon command of the Army of Italy. Further, once in Italy, it was Napoleon who made his own name. Napoleon himself had to have the talent – to deliver victory after victory, and to get himself noticed.