@REALNAPOLEONBONAPARTE

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Napoleon Bonaparte was the most famous man of the 19th century. At the peak of his power, he personally controlled more of the European continent than anyone since the great emperors of Rome.

Today, most people see him as an ambitious little man with an outsized ego. Others see him as a forerunner of the great aggressor of the twentieth century, Adolph Hitler.

This portrait is as flawed as it is unfair.

Napoleon Bonaparte was born on the 15th of August, 1769 on the Mediterranean island of Corsica. Ironically, the island, long connected to the city-state of Genoa, Italy, only became part of France the year before he was born. But for this twist of fate, Napoleon would never have been a French citizen, let alone its emperor. His parents sent him to the mainland at the age of nine where he studied to be a soldier. His facility in mathematics, organization, and map-reading marked him for future success.

The French Revolution, with its overworked guillotine, provided a unique opportunity for advancement—that is, for anyone who could keep his head (literally).

Napoleon did. He became a general by the age of twenty-four. At the age of twenty-six, he achieved a series of stunning victories in Italy against an Austrian army that had come to destroy the revolution and return the French royal family, the Bourbons, to the throne. These victories made him a national hero.

As shrewd a politician as he was a general, by the first month of the new century, at the tender age of 30, Napoleon was the undisputed leader of France. He crowned himself emperor on December 2, 1804, turning the French Republic into the French Empire with a Bonaparte line of succession. Napoleon's establishment of a French empire only increased the fears of the royal houses of Europe and of France's historical enemy, Britain.

As a result, in September 1805, Austria invaded Bavaria, a French ally, and Russia joined the attack. Napoleon and his *Grande Armée* roundly defeated them at the Battle of Austerlitz.

The Prussians were the next to test Napoleon, declaring war on him in 1806. The Austrians tried again in 1809. Napoleon didn't start any of these wars, but he won them all.

When Russia broke an uneasy peace in 1812, Napoleon decided to invade. But this proved his undoing. His catastrophic winter retreat from Moscow cost him more than half a million

casualties. The end came in June 1815 at the Battle of Waterloo, where the combined European armies, led by the Duke of Wellington, decisively defeated Napoleon's forces. The battle could have gone either way. Wellington himself described it as "the nearest-run thing you ever saw in your life."

In all, Napoleon won 46 of the 60 battles he fought, drawing seven and losing seven. His record clearly marks him as one of the greatest military commanders of all time. Yet, while Napoleon is best remembered for his military exploits, it's his political reforms—both inside and outside of France—that had the most lasting effect.

In France, he established the *Code Napoleon*, a distillation of 42 competing and often contradictory legal codes into a single body of French law. He modernized the French educational system and created the Sorbonne, which became one of the great universities of Europe. He promoted a building boom in Paris, a city whose architecture continues to enchant us. The bridges he built across the Seine and the sewer system he constructed beneath the city still function today.

To Europe, Napoleon brought the best fruits of the French Revolution: concepts of equality and meritocracy. He liberated the Jews from the ghettos to which they had been confined for centuries, leading to an explosion of artistic, scientific and economic innovation from this long-oppressed minority.

It's hard to assess Napoleon because he was responsible for all these good things while also being responsible for much that was bad. But we can say this with certainty: To compare him to the murderous, oppressive dictators of the 20th century like Hitler and Stalin, or their tin-pot versions like Saddam Hussein or Colonel Gaddafi, is a gross injustice.

Napoleon was *sui generis*—unique unto himself—and proof positive that one man, given the right circumstances, can change history.

I'm Andrew Roberts for Prager University.