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-Elysées, 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 General-feldmarschall 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.'*

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

* All quotations from French sources are my own. Though I have tried to be scrupulously objective when translating, *naturellement*.

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.* 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

* That is no joke – the snowball story really is told in French biographies, as is the tale about young Napoleon 'annexing' other pupils' vegetable patches in the school gardens. His whole life is treated by his French admirers as the stuff of heroic legend.

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.* 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.

* Napoleon called his embargo the Blocus Continental, which probably goes some way to explaining the traditional feeling among Brits of being separate from 'the continent'. British 'splendid isolation' comes in part from Napoleon's desire to isolate it.

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 cherubic child is found decorating the walls with the chocolate mousse, 'c'est la Bérézina'.

It's a saying inspired by a great national tragedy that took

place between 25 and 27 November 1812 at the River Berezina, when the frost-bitten, starved remnants of Napoleon's *Grande Armée* made a frantic attempt to squeeze across two hastily improvised bridges and escape from Russia. Out of 80,000 or so men who had managed to tramp 640 kilometres westwards across the frozen steppes from Moscow, only 35,000 made it.

And yet, predictably, Napoleon's French fans hail it as a victory. The historian Jean Tulard, who started writing books about Napoleon in the 1960s and hasn't stopped yet, calls Berezina 'a French victory in difficult conditions . . . Napoleon and a large part of his troops escaped'. The whole thing was, if you like, a sort of Dunkirk.

But surely any comparisons with 1940 are absurd. Admittedly, Dunkirk was a retreat, also 'in difficult conditions', but it was a tactical withdrawal that boosted national morale and prevented an invasion of England by the Nazis. Berezina was a dash for safety by the half-dead survivors of the largest army Europe had ever seen, and ultimately led to Napoleon's first abdication. It was like saving a few family photos from a blazing house. Though to the most fervent Bonapartists, only one photo was important.

And it had all started out so promisingly. In June 1812, with an empire stretching from south-west Spain up to north-eastern Poland, from Holland down to the toe of Italy, Napoleon decided that he was not going to take any nonsense from the 'difficult' Czar who had begun to defy his Blocus Continental. Buying coffee, tea, sugar and cotton (products of the perfidious British Empire), and cheap knives, scissors and machines (the result of Britain's dizzying technological

progress), was a Russian slap in the face to French superiority. Wasn't Napoleon's empire capable of supplying everything that Europe needed? Well, no, it clearly wasn't, and the Russians were rubbing his nose in the fact.

Napoleon therefore launched the grandest military operation Europe had ever seen. Figures vary widely, but most historians agree that more than half a million soldiers began to cross the Polish border into Russia on 24 June 1812. About three-quarters of them were French, the rest coming from right across Napoleon's empire – there were Italians, Belarusians, Austrians, Swiss, Lithuanians, Poles, Danes, Spaniards, Bavarians, Prussians, and even an Irish brigade. Napoleon himself told his memoirist Emmanuel de Las Cases that he had 400,000 men with 240,000 in reserve. Opposing them were around 400,000 Russians, including a large proportion of hastily conscripted, underpaid serfs, bolstered by 80,000 of the scariest soldiers on the continent, the Cossacks.

As the *Grande Armée* set off towards Moscow, the sun glinting brightly on their breastplates and bayonets, Napoleon must have felt sure that victory would soon be his. He knew that the main Russian army was not far off – it was just a matter of catching up and destroying it. In his *Napoléon: l'Immortel de Sainte-Hélène*, the final part of a four-volume biography, the French historian Max Gallo imagines the Emperor bursting with a mixture of pride and impatience as he gazed out over the scene through his looking glass. 'The hills and valleys were full of men, horses and wagons. The weapons were shining beneath the incandescent sky . . . What an army! He [Napoleon] slapped his boots with his

riding whip, strode back and forth humming "Malbrough [*sic*] s'en va-t-en guerre".* Who could resist such power in motion?' This huge French army was accompanied by 30,000 carts carrying two million bottles of brandy and 28 million bottles of wine, mobile *boulangeries* and several tons of wheat, blacksmiths' equipment, ammunition, medicine, and of course officers' picnic sets. There was also a whole column of cattle – a regiment of steak tartare on the hoof. Napoleon himself travelled in a sort of horse-drawn camper van, with a desk and enough room for strategy meetings.

Speed was of the essence, so it was quick march all the way for the footsoldiers. And very soon they began to die – of typhus and dysentery from infected water, of heat exhaustion and, despite all the wheat and beef, of hunger.

The reason for these early and unexpected French casualties was that the Russians had begun to play Napoleon at his own game of tactical warfare. What started out as a genuine attempt to avoid a pitched battle for fear of losing the war evolved into a strategy to draw the French deeper and deeper into Russia, stretching their supply lines and allowing the feared Cossacks to pick off isolated units. Apart from one major battle at Borodino on 7 September (the bloodiest day of the whole Napoleonic Wars, resulting in around 40,000 dead, wounded or captured *on each side*) the Russians avoided

* 'Marlborough goes off to war'. Ironically, Napoleon is depicted humming an old French song, sung to the tune of 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow', about the Duke of Marlborough's campaigns against Louis XIV. Or perhaps it was not ironic – it might have been a way of implying that Napoleon was a greater general than the famous Englishman.

direct confrontation.* The retreating Russian army also practised a tactic that at first confused and then began to exasperate the French. Every town that the *Grande Armée* reached had been systematically emptied of its food supplies and burned to the ground. Napoleon might have contended that an army marches on its stomach, but his rapidly advancing men had no way to replenish their larders.

Napoleon entered Moscow itself in mid-September proclaiming victory and expecting a delegation from the Czar accepting defeat. In the event he found no one except a few Muscovites who had preferred not to abandon their homes. Any remaining sense of victory was dispelled when, at a secret signal, the city was set ablaze. Napoleon recalled his dismay at seeing 'mountains of swirling red flames, like huge ocean waves, exploding up into the sky of fire, then sinking into the sea of flames below'.

The fires burned for a week, destroying 90 per cent of Moscow's buildings.** To the French it was unthinkable –

* The French won at Borodino, and prefer the battle to be called Moskowa – Napoleon gave his Marshal Ney the title 'Prince de la Moskowa' for his gallantry there. But for once, the rule that the victor names the battle doesn't apply, and everyone outside France refers to the Battle of Borodino. Proof, perhaps, of the extent of Napoleon's overall defeat in Russia.

** Incidentally, the governor of Moscow who emptied the city of food and burned it down was a man called Fiodor Rostoptchine. Rich Muscovites were so furious with him that he was forced into exile, eventually ending up in France in 1817 (which by then was under a new, anti-Bonapartist regime). There, Fiodor's daughter Sofia married the nephew of a general who had been with Napoleon at Moscow, and she became one of France's most famous children's writers under the name La Comtesse de Ségur.

they would never have burned their beloved Paris, even to save their country. But of course Czar Alexander didn't really care about Moscow – he was safely installed in his palace 700 kilometres away in St Petersburg.

'If Moscow hadn't been set on fire,' Napoleon later confided to his memoirist Emmanuel de Las Cases, 'Czar Alexander would have been forced to sue for peace.' The obvious problem was that it *had* been set on fire. So, faced with the prospect of living through a Russian winter with nowhere to bivouac except charred ruins, and with meagre supplies for his men and horses, Napoleon had no choice but to start marching back in the opposite direction.

The *Empereur* dictated to Las Cases that 'the march from Moscow cannot be called a retreat, because the army was victorious'. But as soon as he left Moscow in mid-October, the flanks and the rear of his 'victorious' yet back-tracking army began to be harassed by Russians who picked off whole units of demoralised Frenchmen. With no grass and no fodder, the *Grande Armée*'s horses started to die. Those that could still stand were slaughtered and eaten. So the cavalry became infantry, the artillery had to abandon its horse-drawn cannons, and all the remaining supply wagons were left by the roadside. In early November, winter set in with a vengeance, and had a perverse effect: the extreme cold caused all the tin buttons on the *Grande Armée*'s uniforms to crumble into dust. Now the men couldn't even button up their coats to shut out the biting wind.

'If the great freeze hadn't set in two weeks earlier than usual, the army would have made it to Smolensk intact,'

Napoleon told Las Cases. 'We had reason to believe, judging by the temperature records of the previous 20 years, that the thermometer would not drop below freezing in November.' (Like all defeated generals, Napoleon was highly skilled at hindsight and if onlys.)

Of the huge army that had crossed into Russia in June, about 200,000 men died there. Napoleon also suffered the loss of around 180,000 prisoners, as well as almost 200,000 deserters who drifted away during the retreat, some of whom were lucky enough to find an unlikely welcome among the Russians. Only 30,000 men made it back to France. It was, as the French say, 'la Bérézina'.

In short, even if Napoleon liked to remember his over-ambitious excursion into Russia as a *victoire*, the result of the campaign was that three years later, he would fight at Waterloo with an army of new recruits and reservists.

But the most serious consequence for Napoleon himself was even greater – the Russian campaign had proved to his enemies that the great French Emperor was only human after all. He and his *Grande Armée* could be beaten.

V

Arriving back in Paris in a borrowed open carriage (his own had broken an axle after bumping at top speed through Germany), Napoleon was so dirty and unshaven that his servants didn't recognise him until he marched into his wife's bedroom, from which all strange men were banned. Clearly desperate to put a good spin on things, Napoleon's

aides broadcast the news to the people that the Emperor had covered the 1,000 kilometres from Dresden in only four days. In other words, he had broken the world retreating record, *vive l'Empereur*.

True to form, Talleyrand was informing everyone in Paris that this was 'le commencement de la fin' – the beginning of the end. But Napoleon, never happier than when planning troop movements on the grand scale, threw his energies into a frantic reorganisation of his armies. He set about raising a new force of over 200,000 recruits to carry on the fight, even paying for uniforms and equipment with his own private gold supply, which was stored in barrels in the basement of the Tuileries Palace.

Faced with revolts in several of his German puppet states, and the defection of Prussia to the Russian camp, Napoleon knew that it was vital to stay on good terms with Austria. This, he thought, would be easy. After all, in 1810 he had divorced his first wife Josephine and married Marie-Louise, the eldest daughter of Emperor Franz I of Austria. They had a baby son, and to flatter Franz, Napoleon had Marie-Louise write frequent letters home informing the Austrian Emperor that the young prince would one day be crowned King (not Emperor) of France, creating a new Franco-Austrian royal dynasty. Marie-Louise, who was twenty-one years younger than her husband, would be regent of France, and she was already nominally Queen of Italy. Even better, Napoleon would build a new royal palace for his son, a gigantic construction on the hill across the Seine from the Ecole Militaire, a royal residence two-thirds the size of

Versailles just on the edge of Paris. What more could the Austrian Emperor ask of his French son-in-law?

Unfortunately for Napoleon, the Viennese court was under the influence of a dispossessed aristocrat: Clemens Metternich, who was still smarting from the loss of his family's immense landholdings on the Rhine, which had been seized by the French in 1794. Metternich was now Austria's Foreign Minister, and relished his revenge, at first promising peace with Napoleon, only to stab him in the back by signing an anti-French treaty with Russia and Prussia. Meanwhile the British had done the same, and diabolically promised a grant of £666,666 to the Prussian army. The European war that would eventually bring about Napoleon's downfall was now inevitable.

VI

As if all these northern developments weren't depressing enough, there was also bad news from the south: Napoleon's brother Joseph (nominally King of Spain) had been taken by surprise while dallying with a mistress, and almost shot by a British cavalryman. Joseph is a prime example of the unreliable links in Napoleon's chain of command who get blamed by Bonapartist historians for allowing disasters to happen. Now Joseph's army was being chased out of Spain by a relatively little-known English general called Wellington, who would eventually invade Napoleon's France and capture Toulouse and Bordeaux, where he would be hailed as a liberator by citizens tired of war.

Napoleon reacted by continuing to build his army, until by the summer of 1813 he had managed to cajole or force 360,000 Frenchmen into uniform. Even so, he began to suffer his first personal defeats of the wars that bore his name. Over three days from 15 to 18 October 1813, Napoleon and his marshals engaged in several pitched battles with the Russians, Prussians, Austrians and Swedes, most notably at Leipzig in Germany. Outnumbered almost two to one there, the French lost about 45,000 dead and wounded and 26,000 prisoners, and were forced to make a dash for France to save themselves.

French historians often divide campaigns into several battles, thereby giving themselves a longer list of victories (as we will see them do in the days preceding and following Waterloo). Here, though, they do the opposite, referring simply to the 'Bataille de Leipzig', presumably so as to limit the number of defeats.

And Bonapartists are quick to point out that if Leipzig was a defeat, it was not one for Napoleon himself. His enemies avoided confronting him directly, preferring to face up to the sections of his army commanded by his marshals. Every time Napoleon rushed into action, his opponents withdrew. He complained that even Blücher fled instead of fighting: 'There was no way of getting at him. I hardly fired one or two shots.' This was an artilleryman's frustration talking.

Not only this, when the enemy had attacked, they had copied Napoleon's tactics, using cannons to smash holes in infantry and cavalry lines before charging into the breach.

Thanks to the Prussians' two-to-one superiority, this was bound to succeed. In a way, Bonapartists can argue, Leipzig was a victory for Napoleonic tactics. Not that the Emperor himself would have gained much solace from this.

Back in Paris, the treacherous Talleyrand, who once said that 'speech was given to man so that he could disguise his thoughts', was making his own thoughts crystal clear. Napoleon was finished, he told everyone. 'He has nothing more to fight with. He is exhausted. He will crawl under his bed and hide.'

Talleyrand's quips were usually bitchy but accurate. (Another of his favourite sayings was: 'Never speak ill of yourself. Your friends will do it for you.' Which in his case was understandably accurate.) In this case, though, he got it very wrong. Napoleon was not a man to crawl under a bed, even if, like the bunk in his campaign bivouac, it was set up on a comfortable panther-pattern carpet. This was not 1940, when the French would throw down their arms almost as soon as a German set foot on French soil – Napoleon's fight to defend his territory was only just beginning.

VII

To the French, the word 'allies' is a double-edged sword. Triple-edged, even. Of course it calls to mind positive thoughts of the Second World War, in which France ended up as one of the victorious allies. But when used about the Napoleonic Wars, '*alliés*' is more of a dirty word. It refers

to the nations who ganged up on France and eventually ousted Napoleon from power. The scorn the word evokes is all too clear in Jean-Claude Damamme's book on Waterloo, in which he calls the allied nations of Austria, Russia and Prussia 'a pretty trio of former losers'. Of course he couldn't include one of the major allies, Britain, in his insult because the Brits had not been beaten by Napoleon, and never would be.*

Napoleon's own view of the foreigners threatening his homeland, and his crown, in 1814 is clear from a motivational speech he gave to his Old Guard (not that many of them were old, most of the seasoned campaigners having been left behind in the Russian ice). As they prepared to meet the allied invasion, he told them: 'Soldiers, we are going to chase these secondary foreign princes from our territory. We don't want to meddle with the affairs of foreign countries, but woe betide him who meddles in ours.' Here, he seems to be forgetting his own past incursions into Italy, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Poland and Russia, as well as his plans to invade England and India. Nevertheless, the invaders now began to 'meddle in his affairs' with a vengeance.

The so-called Campagne de France of 1814 is one of the short campaigns the French like to split up into individually named battles, because even though Napoleon ultimately lost the campaign, he did pull off a few victories, despite

* The French also refer to the coalition of allies opposing Napoleon as *les coalisés*, which makes them sound rather like a bloodclot.

the fact that his 300,000-odd remaining men were facing a million *alliés*.

At Brienne le Château, for example, 200 kilometres south-east of Paris, Napoleon ousted the Russian and Prussian occupiers from the aforementioned chateau, which must have been a sweet victory for him – Brienne was where he had gone to school when he first left Corsica as a nine-year-old military cadet. The fact that the occupiers pulled out in the night after a battle in which losses were equal on both sides (3,000 each), because they wanted to join up with an even bigger allied army a few kilometres away, is of no consequence. History (French history, anyway) lists Brienne as a Napoleonic victory.

The same goes for another unfamiliar name, la Bataille de Champaubert, fought on 10 February. Here, 90 kilometres north-west of Brienne, around 6,000 French soldiers commanded by Napoleon routed a force of only 4,500 Russians, and captured their general. An almost inconsequential skirmish compared to Napoleon's great victories at Jena, Austerlitz and Wagram, but it merits an avenue Champaubert in Paris, and in the town itself there is a monument dedicated to 'les victoires napoléoniennes du 10 février 1814' – note the plural.

On 12 February, Napoleon again carried off the day, this time at Château-Thierry, though given the low number of casualties ('only' 3,750 out of 50,000 men on the battlefield), by Napoleonic standards it hardly counts as more than a heated argument.

Over the following month, other French victories followed,

at places that are remembered only by the towns concerned (and their tourist offices) – Vauchamps, Mormant, Montereau,* Craonne, Laon. To anyone except a keen Bonapartist, they were all desperate rearguard actions, like a midget slapping the knees of a giant in the boxing ring. All Napoleon was doing was throwing away thousands more young French lives, inflicting bloody but not life-threatening wounds on the allied forces, and infuriating a certain Generalfeldmarschall Blücher, a fierce Prussian septuagenarian with a long memory and a bloodthirsty vengeful streak.

But if you are a Bonapartist historian, and your hero is about to lose his crown and be exiled for the first time, you need every victory you can get, even if no one else has ever heard of it.

VIII

In early 1814, Paris, the capital Napoleon was fighting desperately to defend, was also France's weakest point. His calls for new recruits fell on deaf ears there, or were drowned out by the babble of defeatist talk. While country peasants were rushing into battle armed only with scythes and pitchforks, hardly any Parisian men signed up to repel the invaders. On the contrary, keen to preserve their wealth and property, rich Parisians – and especially the old aristocracy, who had returned to France in droves when Napoleon

* Montereau, 80 kilometres south-east of Paris, is hoping to raise its profile by opening a Parc Napoléon in 2020. See the Epilogue, page 247, for more details.

offered them an amnesty – were doing their best to make peace with the allies. When he called on the city's population to man the barricades, the middle classes packed up their jewels and furniture and headed for the country.

While Napoleon was still in the east trying to harry his opponents into abandoning their advance, Paris signed a capitulation and handed the keys of the city to Czar Alexander, who entered the capital and went to stay with Talleyrand. His Russian troops were greeted with cheers.

Hearing of the surrender, Napoleon headed for his chateau at Fontainebleau, 70 kilometres south of Paris. But even here, he was surrounded by Parisians. They were his marshals and generals, who remembered the ruins of Moscow all too well and didn't want Paris to share the same fate. Marshal François-Joseph Lefebvre apparently told the Emperor, 'It's time to enjoy a rest. We own titles, houses, land – we don't want to get ourselves killed for you.' Hardly the kind of rousing speech Napoleon expected from his soldiers.

As if that weren't bad enough, Marshal Auguste Marmont, the man who was supposed to be mounting the defence of Paris, went over to the Austrians, giving up his 16,000 troops as prisoners. (They, incidentally, shouted 'Vive l'Empereur!' as they surrendered their weapons – though they surrendered them all the same.)

Napoleon's senior officers and former comrades-in-arms implored him to abdicate and end the fighting, and finally he gave in and wrote a letter of resignation, referring to himself, as he often did, in the third person: 'Since the

allied powers have proclaimed that the Emperor Napoleon is the only obstacle to restoring peace in Europe, the Emperor Napoleon, true to his vow, declares that he renounces, for himself and his descendants, his right to the crowns of France and Italy, and that there is no personal sacrifice, even that of his life, that he is not ready to make in the interests of France.'

Napoleon did actually try to make the ultimate sacrifice, swallowing a poison that had been mixed for him during the Russian campaign. However, while he was saying farewell to his advisers, he vomited it all up, and his terrified doctor refused to give him anything stronger. The palace was full of pistols, muskets, bayonets and swords, but the gunpowder had been removed from Napoleon's personal pistols, and in any case he preferred poison, the favourite suicide method used in the tragic plays of France's greatest dramatist, Racine. When his stomach cramps began to subside, Napoleon decided that he was destined to live.

On 20 April, officers from the Russian, Austrian, Prussian and British armies arrived to attend the Emperor's official farewell. Napoleon walked out into the courtyard of the Château de Fontainebleau between two lines of his Old Guard in their tall bearskin hats and blue jackets, to make what was meant to be his final speech to his army:

'Soldiers of my Old Guard, I bid you adieu. For the past 20 years I have found you constantly on the paths of honour and glory . . . With men like you, our cause was not lost, but the war was interminable. There would have been civil war, which would only have brought France more misfortune. I

therefore sacrifice all our interests to those of the homeland. I am leaving. You, my friends, must continue to serve France. Its happiness was always my only consideration.'

As his soldiers wept – even the British officer present was seen to loosen his stiff upper lip – Napoleon kissed a tricolour flag embroidered with the names of his victories and climbed into a carriage that immediately sped away.

In fact he was going to enjoy what Marshal Lefebvre had recently prescribed for him – a rest down on the Med, with the title of King of the island of Elba and a pension of two million francs a year, payable by the French government. Napoleon's wife and son had been more or less kidnapped by his Austrian father-in-law, Franz I, but he hoped that they would be able to meet up once he had proved to Europe that he was content to live as a simple retired soldier and, as he told his troops, 'write about the great things we did together'.

Early retirement on an island off the Tuscan coast at only forty-four, with a fat pension and plenty of time to write a book. What normal person wouldn't be content with that? The problem was that Napoleon wasn't a normal person.

Neither, one might say, are his fans, because they seem to regard even this humiliating exit – rejected by his own generals, with his wife and son snatched away by his in-laws – as a kind of victory. The grand *adieu* (the French consider it so important that it gets elevated to the plural, *adieux*) is re-enacted every year in Fontainebleau, which, like every other town with a connection to Napoleon, dubs itself a

ville impériale. For the 200th anniversary in 2014 there was a week of commemoration culminating in a declamation of the sombre speech in the chateau courtyard. But most people, especially the Napoleon fans, found it difficult to be sombre, as is the case every year, for the simple reason that they know he came back . . .

IX

Elba ought to have been a very pleasant retirement home. The locals were delighted with their new resident, who had suddenly put their unknown island on the map. According to a certain Captain Jobit, on 4 May 1814, when Napoleon disembarked from the British frigate HMS *Undaunted*, he was met with cries of 'Vive l'Empereur!' and 'Vive Napoléon le Grand!' and given a banquet, fireworks and a display of the local ladies' *grande toilette* (which, as anyone who speaks French will know, is not a large lavatory but an outfit of smart clothing).

Napoleon's new subjects didn't mind that he had been unilaterally appointed their *souverain* (sovereign),* especially when he began to help them improve their economy. No doubt recalling his days at the military academy, he got the Elbans to plant Corsican chestnut trees on sloping land to prevent soil erosion, and to grow a variety of vegetables. He also encouraged the islanders to bottle and sell the

* Perhaps the landowners on Elba hadn't read the exact wording of Napoleon's exile agreement, which stipulated that he received 'for the rest of his life, the sovereignty and ownership' of the whole island.

naturally sparkling water from a spring. And, ever the organiser, he had the roads paved and set up a rubbish-collection system so that people would stop filling the streets with rotting refuse. The new sovereign even expanded Elba's borders by annexing a neighbouring unpopulated island and leaving a garrison of troops there. Not that Napoleon had begun to conscript the local men – rather unwisely, the allies had allowed him to take a thousand of his Guards along, so that it felt almost like being out on campaign again. Napoleon even slept on his old camp bed.

It would all have been fun except that he quickly realised his wife and son would never be joining him. In addition, he heard the sad news that his first wife Josephine had died, in tragically ironic circumstances. Apparently she had been giving Czar Alexander a guided tour of her rose garden – which was probably not a euphemism because she was a skilled creator of hybrid roses – when she contracted a chill that developed into pneumonia and what one French historian gruesomely describes as a 'gangrenous throat infection'.

Worse still for Napoleon was the news that France itself was also suffering from a gangrenous infection – its royal family, in the gout-ridden shape of King Louis XVIII, who had been imposed 'by foreign bayonets' and was now in the process of reducing the French army by 100,000 men, and retiring 12,000 officers on half pay.

Some of Napoleon's treacherous generals had been rewarded by Louis with new lands and titles, but they were all suffering the indignity of occupation. The hated Cossacks were camping on the Champs-Elysées, and the new British ambassador,

Wellington, the man who had kicked the French army out of Spain, was becoming famous for his anti-French jibes. At one dinner he was snubbed by a group of Frenchmen and, suspecting that there were ex-soldiers among them, quipped, ''Tis of no matter, I have seen their backs before.' Nothing hurts a French snob like a well-aimed insult. Especially an English insult.

The British and the other occupying forces were enjoying themselves too much. They paraded through Paris with Louis XVIII, their over-inflated puppet, whom even the Russian Czar secretly (or not so secretly) scorned – after a first state banquet with Louis in 1814, Alexander had announced that he had 'just met the most useless* man in Europe'. And much of this chaos was being fomented – organised, even – by the traitor Talleyrand, who, so Napoleon heard via his faithful informers, was now lobbying that the exiled Emperor of France be sent even further away – to the Azores.

By the end of 1814, Napoleon was already thinking that he had been away for long enough. France clearly needed him. He later told one of his marshals, 'I knew that the homeland was unhappy. I came back to free it from the émigrés and the Bourbons' (that is, the returning aristocrats and the exiled royal family).

Patriotism aside, it should also be pointed out that Napoleon was furious with Louis and Talleyrand because they had never paid him a cent of his huge pension. He

* Alexander used the French slang word *nul*, which means totally rubbish in all respects.

was having to finance his lavish lifestyle (he had a hundred servants on the island, as well as his Guards) out of his own money, which was now running low. Soon he would not have enough to pay his soldiers, and without them he would be defenceless against Talleyrand's attempts to kidnap him.

As any Frenchman knows, if you want to claim your pension rights, it is best to go straight to the central office in Paris. He had no choice but to leave Elba.

X

Like everything else in his life, Napoleon planned his escape with military precision. He ordered his grenadiers to start digging new flowerbeds, as if preparing for a long spring on the island. He had a ship, the *Inconstant* ('Unfaithful'), painted in British naval colours. Knowing that the island was infested with Talleyrand's spies disguised as monks, tourists and merchants, he started a rumour that he might be leaving for Naples. He even told his own men to put enough food and wine on the *Inconstant* for a trip to America.

On 26 February 1815, while the British military governor of the island, Colonel Neil Campbell, was away in Italy supposedly seeing a doctor but more probably visiting his mistress, Napoleon boarded the *Inconstant* and set sail for the French mainland with a flotilla of six smaller ships carrying his 1,000 soldiers. He told his men that he would 'retake [his] crown without spilling a single drop of blood'. He must have known that if it did come to a fight, his

thousand-strong bodyguard wouldn't be much use against a million allied invaders.

He had already written the speech he intended to give to the nation:

'People of France, a prince imposed by a temporarily victorious enemy is relying upon a few enemies of the people who have been condemned by all French governments for the last 25 years. During my exile, I have heard your complaints and your wishes. You have been demanding the government of your choice. I have crossed the sea and am here to reclaim my rights, which are also yours.'

And he didn't only mean his pension.

Napoleon's triumphant march north to Paris is the favourite story among pro-Bonaparte historians. They savour every detail. Reading their accounts, you get to know everything Napoleon ate en route (half a roast chicken in the village of Roccavignon near Grasse, for example, and roast duck and olives in Sisteron, in the foothills of the Alps), how little he slept (he would set off every morning at four a.m.), and the flattering speeches he gave in every town he crossed ('my dearest wish was to arrive with the speed of an eagle in this good town of Gap/Grenoble/what's its name again?').

The descriptions of how French soldiers, supposedly in the service of Louis XVIII, defied their officers and joined Napoleon are the stuff of a propaganda film. These are the Bonapartists' fondest memories.

Just outside Grenoble, for example, the returning Emperor was faced by 700 soldiers sent to stop his advance. Obeying

orders, they raised their muskets and pointed them at Napoleon. Telling his musicians to play 'La Marseillaise', the revolutionary song that had been the exit music for Louis XVIII's predecessor in 1789, Napoleon walked alone towards the line of 700 rifles. When he was within easy shooting range, he opened his famous grey overcoat and called out, 'If there is among you one soldier who wants to kill his Emperor, here I am.'

In reply came a volley of 'Vive l'Empereur!' The order to fire was ignored and the men rushed to greet Napoleon. Boney was back.

In Lyon, there was a similar scene of defiance. Louis XVIII's brother Charles came to lead the defence of the city. He inspected the 1,500-strong garrison, who were treated to a patriotic speech by their commanding officer and then ordered to shout 'Vive le Roi!' None obeyed. Charles went out into the ranks and politely asked a dragoon to give the shout. The man bravely stayed mute, and the King's brother leapt straight into his carriage and left for Paris. The monarchy, he realised, was finished (again).

Back in Paris, Napoleon's old friend Marshal Ney was less supportive than the lower ranks. He declared that the fallen Emperor 'deserved to be brought back [to Paris] in an iron cage'.* He told Louis that 'every Frenchman should repel him', and suggested to the King that his troops would be more loyal if Louis himself was seen going into battle.

* This is a famous quotation that ensures Ney a decidedly chilly reception whenever Bonapartist historians are describing his actions at Waterloo, as we shall see in Chapter 3.

Not on a horse, of course (it would have needed an elephant to carry him), but perhaps carried on a litter? No doubt aware that his bulk would make a large target for Napoleon's guns, Louis decided that it was wiser for him to escape back into exile.

This all sounds like a hero's return for Napoleon, but it would be a mistake to ignore the voices of dissent, even among his supporters. One officer, a certain Colonel Le Bédoyère, a veteran of the Russian campaign, brought his soldiers over to Napoleon but warned him, 'No more ambition, Sire, no more despotism. Your Majesty must abandon the system of conquests and extreme power that brought misfortune to France and yourself.'

The newspapers of the time were also largely against Napoleon. Louis XVIII had only recently granted freedom of the press, and the editors didn't want to lose it again to their deposed dictator. The papers embarked on a campaign of disinformation, claiming for example that Napoleon had been stopped at Digne in the French Alps and chased off by local peasants. The problem was that by the time a report was published in the papers, rumours had outrun it. On the day Napoleon was supposedly turned back at Digne, he was already 200 kilometres north of there, in Grenoble.

What is not always pointed out in French history books is that Napoleon chose a Hannibal-like route through the French Alps because he was afraid of meeting hostile crowds in large towns along the south coast, like Toulon, where he had suppressed the pro-royalist revolt in 1793.

In a recent study of private letters written at the time, a

French historian called Aurélien Lignereux revealed that Napoleon was right to be afraid of opposition. Ordinary middle-class French people were reacting to the news of his return with trepidation. They saw it as yet another upheaval, and suspected that war would be around the corner yet again.

But for the moment at least, Napoleon didn't need to bother about the opinion of the common *bourgeois* – he knew that they weren't going to put together an army of umbrella-waving ladies and pen-wielding solicitors to oppose his return. And he knew this because he had stopped a carriage carrying mail from Paris, and had the letters read by his aides. Even 200 years ago, the war of information was a vital part of a politician's life.

XI

When Napoleon arrived in Paris on 20 March 1815, school-children greeted the news by cheering and beating out a celebration drumroll on their desktops. Perhaps they knew that they were safe from conscription, though it probably wasn't a good idea to be too proficient at drumming – Napoleon's armies sent young drummer boys into the front lines, to be shot at just like the adults.

The politicians weren't quite as welcoming as the school-children, and Napoleon discovered that the perfidious English had made their mark during the brief occupation of Paris. France's parliament was now dominated by English-style liberals who told Napoleon that the population would

back him only if he agreed to a new constitution. They demanded that he maintain the British-style two-house parliamentary system set up by Louis XVIII, with a Chambre des Pairs (a house of hereditary peers) and a Chambre des Députés (consisting of MPs elected for five years). He also had to confirm the freedom of the press, and accept criticism of his regime. The old-style emperor-god was a thing of the past.

Unwillingly, Napoleon accepted the concessions demanded of him, though he refused to call this a new constitution, and dubbed the changes the Acte Additionnel, as though it were merely an afterthought to his former regime.

He also had to shrug off the humiliation of disastrous elections, which saw huge abstention rates (especially among the silent *bourgeois* majority), and a wave of liberal, anti-Bonapartist MPs and mayors elected or re-elected (80 per cent of the local officials put in place by Louis XVIII's regime were confirmed in office). Napoleon might have started to wonder why he hadn't remained on Elba as the island's uncontested sovereign. As it was, he contented himself with dismissing parliamentary debates as 'vain chatter'.

There was one consolation, though – he did get his way with his re-investiture. On 1 June, on the Champ de Mars in front of his old Ecole Militaire, Napoleon held a stupendously self-congratulatory ceremony before 400,000 spectators, including 50,000 soldiers. For the occasion he designed himself a new imperial costume – a red tunic, a cape lined with ermine, white trousers and stockings, and a Roman

emperor's crown. His soldiers, though, weren't happy: they wanted to be reunited with their beloved general, not a dandy in fancy dress.

Not that Napoleon was over-keen to get back into military uniform. He knew that the most he could hope for now was to reign unopposed over France. Rekindling the war against the allies would be suicidal. He made a speech admitting as much: 'I have given up my idea of a great Empire that I had only just begun to build. My aim was to organise a federal European system that matched the spirit of the century and favoured the advancement of our civilisation.* My goal now is simply to increase France's prosperity by strengthening public freedom.' Sadly for Napoleon, his old nemesis Talleyrand was not willing to let this happen. Ever the tireless anti-Bonaparte campaigner, when news came through that Napoleon had landed in France, Talleyrand was in Vienna meeting with Metternich, Czar Alexander and Wellington. He immediately began to whip up outrage among the allies, declaring that Napoleon was 'the disturber of world peace'. In no time at all, Russia, Prussia, Austria and Britain had promised to launch their armies against Napoleon, guaranteeing at least 150,000 soldiers each.

Napoleon sent a peace envoy to Metternich, and a placatory letter to England's Prince Regent, but both were ignored. On 7 June he made a speech in Paris, informing

* A federal European system geared to the advancement of French civilisation – 200 years later, via the EU, France is still trying to make Napoleon's wish come true.

his people that 'It is possible that the first duty of a prince will soon call me to lead the children of the nation in a fight for our homeland. The army and I will do our duty.'

Dominique de Villepin, France's Prime Minister from 2005 to 2007, supports Napoleon in this resolve to fight. 'Governing,' he writes in his book *Les Cent Jours* (referring to Napoleon's 100-day return to power in 1815),* 'does not mean endlessly negotiating in the hope of finding a compromise. It means deciding. Governing implies cool-headedness, initiative and responsibility.' It is the usual Bonapartist refrain: Napoleon, they say, desired only peace, but when he recognised the inevitability of war, like the hero he was, he could not shy away from it.

The facts are more banal. Surrounded by enemies both at home and abroad, Napoleon had no choice but to accept the impossible odds if he wanted to hang on to power. The long journey from his first victory against the British fleet in Toulon in 1793 had come to its climax. Almost twenty years of glory, followed by two and a half in which he had lost two whole armies and his throne. He had known total power, self-inflicted disaster, exile, a glorious return, and now he had to fight one last great battle to decide his ultimate fate.

* Incidentally, Villepin was so inspired by Napoleon in his own political career that when he was appointed Prime Minister, he gave himself 'a hundred days to restore confidence' in President Jacques Chirac's right-wing regime. Sadly, Villepin's first measure, a law that gave employers the right to fire workers under the age of twenty-five, provoked a national strike and rioting, and dashed his hopes of running for the presidency.

Napoleon, and Europe itself, was ready for Waterloo.

The improbable thing is that Napoleon thought he could win – although even that is less improbable than the way his admirers still allege that he actually did.