Napoleon’s Rise & Fall: Illustrated Timeline

Explore this in depth illustrated timeline of Napoleon's rise and fall!

Grade Level: Adult, College, Grades 3-5, Grades 6-8, Grades 9-12
Collection: European Art
Culture/Region: Europe
Subject Area: Fine Arts, History and Social Science, Visual Arts, World Languages
Activity Type: Art in Depth, Special Exhibition

Find the abbreviated pdf of the timeline as it appears at the exit of the Napoleon: Power and Splendor exhibition here: Napoleon's Rise & Fall: Illustrated Timeline (Exhibition Version)

EARLY LIFE

August 15, 1769: Napoleon Bonaparte is born in Corsica, an island in the Mediterranean, a subject of King Louis XV of France.

1778-85: Napoleon attends military school in France, where he excels at math and history. He receives a commission as an officer in the artillery division of the French army.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

July 14, 1789: Parisian mobs storm the Bastille, and the French Revolution begins.

August 1792-January 1793: The French Legislative Assembly abolishes the monarchy and declares France a Republic to be governed by an assembly known as the Convention. The following January, King Louis XVI is guillotined. Thousands of aristocrats, including many French military officers, flee from France.

The Fortress of the Bastille, Jean Francois Rigaud (1742-ca. 1810), colored engraving. Paris, Nusée Carnavalet
September 5, 1793: The Reign of Terror, the most radical period of the French Revolution, begins. At least 300,000 suspects are arrested; 17,000 are executed, and perhaps 10,000 die in prison or without trial.

September–December 1793: Napoleon wins fame by defeating Royalist forces supported by the British navy in the port of Toulon.


August 22–October 5, 1795: The Convention of the French Republic creates a new constitution, establishing the Directory (a five-member committee) as the leaders of the French government. On October 5, in support of the Directory, Napoleon fires into a crowd of Royalists and defeats the anti-Republican forces that threaten the new government.

Bonaparte Fires Grapeshot at the Royalist Insurgents (Oct. 5, 1795), drawing by Yan’ Dargent, engraving by V. Trové, from Histoire de la Révolution, by Adolphe Thiers, 1866 edition

NAPOLEON’S LEGEND BEGINS

March 2–9, 1796: Hailed as a hero for defending the Directory, young general Bonaparte is appointed commander in chief of the French army. Seven days later, he marries Josephine de Beauharnais.

1796–99: Napoleon defeats Austrian forces, and France acquires significant new territory. From 1798 to 1799, he leads the campaign to conquer Egypt,
eventually abandoning his army after a series of failures.

**October–November 1799:** Napoleon engineers the overthrow of the Directory in the coup d'état of 18 Brumaire (November 9). A new government called the Consulate is proposed.

Napoleon Bonaparte in the coup d'état of 18 Brumaire in Saint-Cloud, 1840, François Bouchot (1800–1842), oil on canvas, Château de Versailles

**December 13, 1799:** The Consulate is established with Bonaparte as First Consul. A few months later, he leads the French army in a daring march across the Alps, defeating the Austrian army in the Battle of Marengo (June 14, 1800).

1800–1801: Taking advantage of this period of relative peace, Napoleon takes steps to restore order in France through new policies of reconciliation. Amnesties are granted to many exiled aristocrats, who return to France.

**July 16, 1801:** The Concordat of 1801 is signed by Pope Pius VII and Napoleon. This pact recognizes Catholicism as the religion of the vast majority of the French citizens, reconciling many French Catholics to the Consulate Government and healing one of the deepest wounds of the Revolution.

Napoleon Bonaparte in the coup d'état of 18 Brumaire in Saint-Cloud, 1840, François Bouchot (1800–1842), oil on canvas, Château de Versailles

Napoleon Crossing the Alps, 1800, Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), oil on canvas, Chateau de Malmaison
January 29, 1802: Napoleon sends an army to re-establish control over Saint Domingue, the most valuable of France’s colonies in the West Indies.

August 3, 1802: Bonaparte becomes First Consul for Life.

May 2, 1802: Napoleon passes a law reintroducing the slave trade in all French colonies; he has visions of a French empire in the Americas.

Spring–Summer 1803: With insufficient sea power to overcome the British navy—and in need of money, Napoleon abandons his plan for an empire in American and sells the Louisiana Territory to the United States, doubling its size.

March 21, 1804: Napoleon’s French Civil Code is enacted and extended to all parts of the Empire.

EMPEROR NAPOLEON
May 18–December 2, 1804: The Consulate is transformed into the Empire and Napoleon is declared Emperor of the French. In December, the Coronation of Napoleon and Josephine takes place at Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris. The Imperial Household is officially established.

March–October 1805: After Napoleon is crowned King of Italy (March 17), Austria and Russia join Britain in a new anti-French alliance. Napoleon makes plans to invade England.

October 21, 1805: At the Battle of Trafalgar, the British naval fleet commanded by Admiral Nelson destroys the French navy. Napoleon’s invasion plans are ended.

December 2, 1805: Napoleon defeats the forces of Tsar Alexander I of Russia and Holy Roman Emperor Francis II at the Battle of Austerlitz.
July 7–9, 1807: Napoleon and Tsar Alexander I sign the Treaties of Tilsit, giving Napoleon control of an empire that encompasses most of Europe.

December 15, 1809: As Napoleon's dynastic ambitions grow, he divorces Josephine because of her inability to provide an heir.

1810–11: Napoleon marries Archduchess Marie-Louise of Austria in 1810. Napoleon-François-Charles Joseph Bonaparte, son of Napoleon and Marie-Louise, is born on March 20, 1811. The new heir is given the title King of Rome.
A REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

June 1812: Following Russia’s withdrawal from the Continental System (Napoleon’s policy forbidding European trade with Britain), Napoleon invades Russia.

September 7, 1812: Borodino, the bloodiest battle of the Napoleonic wars, is fought near Moscow. When Moscow falls a week later, the inhabitants set fire to the city.
November 1812: Tsar Alexander I refuses to surrender. The Russian winter and lack of supplies cause the French army to retreat. Napoleon abandons his army and returns to Paris.

The Grande Armée Crossing the Berezhina, 1866, January Sulchodolsky (1797–1875), oil on canvas. National Museum, Poznań

1813–14: At the Battle of Leipzig (October 19, 1813), the combined forces of Russia, Prussia, Austria, and Sweden defeat Napoleon's remaining forces. Napoleon abdicates the throne on April 11, 1814 and is banished to the Mediterranean island of Elba.

February 26, 1815: Napoleon escapes from Elba and takes back the French throne during the period known as the “Hundred Days.”

June 18, 1815: At the Battle of Waterloo, Napoleon's final army is decisively defeated. Four days later, he abdicates for the second time.

October 16, 1815: Napoleon begins his exile on Saint Helena, a remote volcanic island in the south Atlantic. Even though 600-foot cliffs rose on both sides of the port of the only town, two British Navy frigates patrol the island at all times. During most of Napoleon's exile, at least 125 men guard his house during the day with 72 on duty at night.

May 5, 1821: Napoleon dies at the age of 51.