

Chapter One

The Making of the Man

1769-1796

“Nature, among other talents, has given me a great deal of character.”

“Men of genius are meteors destined to burn in order to enlighten the world.”

“There are two levers for moving men—fear and interest.”

“It was only on the eve of Lodi that I believed myself a superior man, and that the ambition came to me of executing great things which had so far been occupying my thoughts only as a fantastic dream.”

—Napoleon Bonaparte

Knowing and Becoming

How does someone become himself?¹ Each of us is a dynamic, changing, unique matrix of constant genes and shifting circumstances. Everyone develops to varying degrees and in varying ways with time, each according to how one’s character causes one to react to a succession of choices in and constraints over one’s life.

The difference between a choice and a constraint, however, is not always clear. The ability to determine that difference is itself a product of how one’s

nature collides with and interprets experiences, and later reinterprets them. How many of us look back and think with a sigh: “If only I knew then what I know now?” And how different would each of our lives be had we been armed with that knowledge when we most needed it?

Making the best, worst, or, almost universally, some mix of good and bad choices that define oneself over a lifetime is something everyone does. Yet those who actually deeply understand themselves are rare. Doing so requires the learning and application of both will and skill; most people lack the inclination and time to do so. Instead, most people create a persona or mask that they present not just to the world but to themselves. They fervently believe that persona—composed of a handful of genuine characteristics distorted by wishes and fears—is their true self. But it is merely a caricature that shields them from the much more complex, ambiguous, and evolving self that they really are.

Which brings us to Napoleon Bonaparte. As he rose through the ranks of first military and then political power, the choices he made affected the lives of ever more people. In exile on Saint Helena, his dictated memoirs are filled with justifications, celebrations, and regrets for the choices he made.

So, just who was Napoleon? How did he get to be the way he was? How did he change over time? And how did all that affect his diplomacy?

Napoleon Bonaparte was among those individuals who eventually adopted an ever more obsessively clear vision of who he thought he was and what more he might become. He believed that he was a child of “destiny,” that somehow, for unknown and mysterious reasons, he was destined to do great things. That belief animated his reactions to a succession of astonishing opportunities that arose before him throughout most of his life.

Apparently he had inklings of this from an early age. But, as he wrote in his memoirs, it was as a young general, after his victory in the battle of Lodi in 1796, that he shed his lingering uncertainties.² The resulting vision would remain unfazed over the next nineteen years, all the way to Waterloo—no matter how many disasters he eventually inflicted on himself, the rest of Europe, and the world.

Yet like most people, Napoleon knew not his true self but only his persona, which became ever more distorted as he amassed more power and glory. Perhaps we can forgive him for that lapse. After all, he was a very busy man until his forced retirement, and lived in an age innocent of psychoanalysis. Indeed, even the scores of historians who have subsequently tackled the subject of Napoleon have often differed widely in their interpretations.³

So what, then, was the content of Napoleon's character? Countless contemporaries then and scholars since have struggled to answer that question. Napoleon's may well be history's most debatable character. Nonetheless, most observers share some insights. In addition to his belief that he was destined for greatness, Napoleon had an implacable will, insatiable curiosity, boundless energy, unwavering courage in combat, an ability to think and act outside conventional thought and behavior, and a vision for the revolutionary transformation of France and Europe from feudalism into modernity. All those who met him spoke of his overpowering charisma.

In his personal life he could be tender and loving. His early letters to Josephine are among the most romantic and passionate left to history. He never stopped caring for his family, sharing with them whatever favors he had, whether he was a penniless lieutenant or an emperor with entire kingdoms to bestow. He genuinely adored children, and perhaps was at his happiest when having a carefree romp with them. And he was devoted to his friends, unable to hold back tears as one after another died beside him in battle.

Crucial dimensions of his character, however, did change with time—and not for the better. His dazzling political and military victories, and the brutality involved in fighting what was eventually sixty battles, warped him. As his power swelled, he increasingly tended to overestimate his own powers and underestimate those of others, especially his enemies. He increasingly saw himself as being nearly god-like, invincible, indestructible, omnipotent, and omniscient. And those were his more Olympian faults. On a more pedestrian level, he could be pompous, petty, rude, bullying, and cruel.

Formation of Personality and Character: Initial Family Influences

How much do the time and place of one's upbringing affect the rest of one's life? As with all such questions, the answers vary from one individual, time, and place to another. Obviously the odds of someone realizing his or her full, unique potential improve to the degree that the accompanying circumstances are favorable.

Napoleon Bonaparte was born Napoleone Buonaparte on August 15, 1769, at Ajaccio, Corsica. His "destiny" first manifested itself by ensuring that he was a subject of France, which had taken Corsica from the Republic of Genoa a mere nine months earlier, on May 15, 1768. How different would have

been the fate of Napoleone and Europe had Genoa retained the island! He would later change his name's spelling to the familiar French version and his primary language from a Genoan dialect to French.

Each child is an amalgam of the values, ambitions, and attitudes as well as the mingled genes of his or her parents.⁴ Napoleon Bonaparte was the second son of an ambitious lawyer, official, and minor noble named Carlo Maria Buonaparte who struggled to advance himself, his wife, and his eight surviving children under the new regime. Indeed, Carlo was so ambitious that he left the woman he loved and married Letizia, the mother of his future children, who was from the far wealthier Ramolino clan. Carlo was away through most of Napoleon's childhood, and became, for all his children, but especially the youngest, largely the image of a distant, benevolent, amiable father. He was also an energetic and impassioned follower of fortune, nobility, and Pascal Paoli, the Corsican nationalist leader, who went into exile after the French takeover. Carlo never quite realized his dreams for ever-higher status, wealth, and power. Bonaparte later complained that his father "was too fond of pleasure."⁵

By necessity and inclination Letizia was the family's core. As Bonaparte later put it, "her tenderness was severe. . . . Here was the head of a woman with the essence of a man."⁶ She gave birth to eleven children, of whom Joseph (1768), Napoleon (1769), Lucien (1775), Elisa (1777), Louis (1778), Pauline (1780), Caroline (1782), and Jerome (1784) survived into adulthood.

Education

Although Carlo never lived to see his family achieve a worldly success far beyond even his vivid imagination, he got things started. On December 12, 1778, he set forth from Ajaccio with his two oldest sons to have them educated in France. Accompanying them was their uncle (their mother's half-brother) Joseph Fesch, then fifteen and bound for a seminary at Aix-en-Provence; later he would at times play an important role in Bonaparte's policies toward the Church. Joseph and Napoleon Bonaparte underwent five months of preparatory studies at the Oratorian college of Autun; then they parted. The elder, Joseph, was sent to the same seminary in Aix-en-Provence as Joseph Fesch, while Napoleon was enrolled at the royal military school at Brienne, where he studied from May 1779 to October 1784, before entering the *Ecole Militaire* in Paris.

Carlo's decision reversed the usual order of vocation for sons, by which the elder generally joined the army and the younger the church. But from an early age Bonaparte's character appeared most appropriate for a military command. His churning mind, restless energy, and dauntless spirit were clear to those who encountered him.

For a boy who was by nature highly intelligent, introspective, proud, melancholy, and passionate, his school years were filled with frustration and loneliness. He spoke hardly a word of French when he first arrived, and would retain a Corsican accent for most of his life. This, combined with a short, scrawny body and quick anger, provoked teasing and bullying by some of his classmates, which only exaggerated his natural characteristics. Indeed, his early failures at love and career at times filled him with such despair that suicide seemed preferable to a wretched existence.

The atmosphere of the two military schools could not have been more different. Brienne was a provincial school for mostly minor nobles. They were subjected to an austere, stoic, and strict regimen. In contrast, the Ecole Militaire was attended by some of France's leading and richest nobles, who could well afford lifestyles of luxury and decadence; Bonaparte could not compete with their elegance or expenses.

He graduated from the Ecole Militaire as a second lieutenant on October 28, 1785. His "genius" was not then apparent—he graduated number 42 in a class of 58 students. Yet that might not be a good measure of his mind. The authorities were so impressed with his intellect that they let him take the graduation exam after one rather than two years. Three days after graduating he began his first assignment with the La Fere artillery regiment at Valence.

Portrait of Napoleon as a Young Man

So what was Napoleon Bonaparte like as a youth and young man? By his own later admission, he was a rambunctious, shrill, high-strung, and demanding brat, nicknamed the "Rabulioni" (the disturber).⁷ One of his professors at the Ecole Militaire wrote: "He prefers study to any type of amusement, finding pleasure in the reading of good authors . . . quiet, loving solitude, capricious, arrogant, extremely inclined to egotism, speaking little, spirited in his answers, quick and harsh in his replies. Having much pride and boundless ambition, this young man deserves to be encouraged."⁸

In some ways he never grew up emotionally. The demands and rages of his childhood persisted throughout his adulthood to his deathbed. What made him that way? As a second child, he competed for attention with his older brother Joseph, who lacked his decisiveness, drive, intelligence, and vision. Rather than punish him, his parents, and later the military—which would grant him five extended leaves while he was a young officer—indulged his precociousness. So he was used to having his way.

That sense of privilege was offset by the heavy burden of somehow always being an outsider. At the tender age of nine he was sent away to school in a foreign country where he was mocked and bullied for his foreign origins, puny appearance, fierce pride, and quick temper. At the time, he hated France as much as he loved and romanticized his faraway home of Corsica. So, not surprisingly, he was driven to prove himself and win the approval of others. By his mid-twenties, he had transferred his allegiance to France and language to French, but remained an object of scorn to many for his accent, and to most women because he was undersized, ill-kept, awkward, and brusque. Even after taking power, he was mocked as a parvenu by most European aristocrats, especially after he crowned himself emperor. So Bonaparte spent much of his life trying to assert himself and achieve legitimacy in the eyes of others.

Despite all that emotional baggage, Bonaparte could be compassionate, tender, and loving. Louis Bourrienne, his secretary and school friend, revealed some of the conflicting sides of his complex nature: “He had everything required . . . to be a pleasant man, except the wish to do so. He was far too domineering to entice people.” Yet “when removed from the political world, he could be sensitive, good, and capable of showing pity. He liked children very much. . . . He could be genial and even most indulgent so far as human weaknesses were concerned.”⁹

It is said that no man is a hero to his butler. Like all rules, that has its exceptions. Bonaparte remained a hero, however flawed and all too human, to his valet of fourteen years (1800 to 1814), Louis Constant, who has left posterity his entertaining, insightful, and largely accurate memoirs. Constant recalled that in private Bonaparte “was nearly always cheerful, friendly, and chatty with his servants.”¹⁰ He could be rough in displaying his affection with those close to him; he would pinch an ear or pull a nose. Yet at times he could lapse into an introspective, sullen, or melancholy silence as he mulled ideas, resentments, or the paradoxes of life.

From an early age, Bonaparte displayed an abiding care for his family and did whatever he could to advance its fortunes. His letters to his loved ones are

filled with deep concern for their health, happiness, and prosperity, along with constant offers of advice and aid. He rather than Joseph became the family's de facto head when his father died on February 24, 1785. After Bonaparte took over the French government in November 1799, his mingling of family and French fortunes would become ever more central to his diplomacy. Indeed, as will be seen, no one in history practiced nepotism on such a grand and blatant scale.

His first known letter, written when he was fourteen, reveals not only his deep concern for and involvement with his family but also his political savvy and diplomatic skills. In it he was trying to convince his uncle that his brother Joseph was better suited to the priesthood than the army. With keen intelligence, concision, logic, and emotion, he offered a penetrating character study of his brother, mourned for his father who had recently died, and strategized how to advance the family's pecuniary and political interests.¹¹

The Romantic

As for romantic love, the young Bonaparte was at once shy and passionate. Desiree Clary was the object of his first prolonged crush, and, like that for many, it was sweet, flirtatious, awkward, innocent, and tormented. She was only fourteen, ten years his junior, when he began courting her. He was a tender suitor, sensitive and nurturing. In his letters, he continually encouraged her to cultivate herself by spending time with elevated minds, serious books, beautiful music, and exhilarating dance. With her, he shared his deepest hopes and fears.

His love for her appears to have climaxed in June 1795 when he fired off to her at least five letters overflowing with longing and passion. The intensity of his love may have exhausted and frightened her; she was too immature, inexperienced, and overwhelmed to return the power and depth of his feelings. He sensed her waning interest. In one letter he chides her for not writing for eleven days, and in another for wanting to put the sea between them by moving with her family to Genoa. He was so desperate to win her love that he even enlisted Joseph, who had married her older sister Julie, and others to assist his courtship. Desiree's inability to return Bonaparte's love agonized him. To Joseph, he wrote this stunning line: "If my relationship with Desiree doesn't work out . . . I will accept a place in the infantry and I will go to the Rhine to find my death."¹²

Eventually he became philosophical about his inevitable loss of her:

Tender [Desiree], you are young. Your sentiments are going to fade, to shift, and after a while you will find yourself changed. Such is the empire of time. Such is the fatal, infallible effect of absence. . . . Don't think that I can accuse you of injustice. A heart bruised by the storms of passion in a virile age is not worthy of you. It is a moment of life that will never return. . . . He who will be solely abandoned to the delicious sentiments of love must not be your lover The day that you love me no more, promise to tell me. . . . If destiny has linked our destinies as they have our souls, you might become accustomed to the strangeness of my love for you. It is the opposite of that of other men. It begins where others end and ends where others begin. I am nearly twenty-six and command an army with some success and yet it is my love that makes me happy.¹³

Those powerful, passionate feelings were not confined to his love for Desiree. For at least half of his life he was a fervent romantic. As a dreamy, lonely youth, he was inspired by Goethe's novel "Young Werther," along with tales by Rousseau, Ossian, and other romantics. As a young man, he aspired to be a writer, scribbling sonnets, essays, short stories, a play, and even an historical novel, most unpublished in his time. He filled many of his leisure hours as a second lieutenant by seizing his pen and writing a history of Corsica; he never finished it. His writings are far more valuable for what they reveal about him than their expression of style, sentiment, or thought. Bonaparte may well have had Young Werther in mind when he wrote: "Always alone amidst others, I return to dream and immerse myself in a vivid melancholy. In what way do I turn today? Toward death? Since I must die, why shouldn't I kill myself?"¹⁴

He was tormented by existential doubts about how to live or even whether to continue living in such a tumultuous, treacherous, and transient world. To Desiree, he described himself as a young man with "an imagination of fire, a cool head, a strange heart, and melancholy inclinations, someone who can shine among men like a meteor and then disappear. When one scorns life, there is no point in being virtuous."¹⁵

Those feelings deepened with time. On the eve of his first Italian campaign, he penned Josephine these heart-rending lines: "My friend, I feel the need to be consoled. It's only in writing you that . . . I can pour out my sorrow. What is the future? What is the past? What are we. . . . We are born, we live, we die amidst

marvels. Is it surprising that priests, astrologers, and charlatans have profited from this tendency . . . to parade our ideas and direct them to the will of their passions.”¹⁶

He became ever more cynical about human nature, yet remained vulnerable to its dark side: “Amidst the ferocity and immorality of men, one can win successes without having great merits. . . . When one knows men so well that one no longer esteems them and virtue becomes a problem, the soul will find itself burned.”¹⁷

The Role of Circumstances: History and Fate

In such a world, Bonaparte could feel little more than despair. While posted with his regiment at Valence, he participated in an essay contest held by the Academy of Lyon on the question of what is essential for happiness. His “Discourse on Happiness” yields wonderful insights into his personal and political values at that time.

He spoke in Rousseauian terms of how each individual must develop himself through his passions, interests, and seized opportunities. To do so he must reject those political, social, and religious forces that would repress him and force him to conform to their dictates. Self-doubts and worries render that a difficult journey for even the most aware and determined individual. But “it is essential for my existence and especially my happiness.”¹⁸

Yet few people enjoy the luxury of being able to chart their own respective courses in life. Later, on St. Helena, Bonaparte observed: “If, to be free, it were only enough to desire freedom, then all people would be free. But history shows only that few receive the benefits of freedom because few have the energy, courage, or virtue that it takes.”¹⁹

Obviously there is a dynamic between the circumstances and choices of one’s life, with each shaping the other. How truly free are most people to choose their respective paths in life? Any authentic choice can only come when someone completely understands a given situation, and then can and does weigh the possible options. Often a person may not have enough information, or may unconsciously distort the information vital to making a truly free choice.

And then there are the circumstances themselves. Certainly nearly everyone would do everything possible to avoid life’s tragedies and limitations if it were possible. One must make the best of what life offers. But what determines those

circumstances that are so clearly beyond our control? Ultimately, it is impossible to determine whether purely random chance or supernatural forces govern what Bonaparte often lamented as the “dictatorship of the events” that channel each human life.

After he first achieved fame, Bonaparte acted constantly with an eye toward history and his place in it. He tried to write the history of himself and his times as he lived it. He was obsessed with accomplishing as much as he could in what time he had. He looked continually both to the past and the future. He consciously modeled his policies on those of his heroes, such as Alexander for his dream of carving out an oriental empire, Paoli for modernizing France, Charlemagne for uniting Europe, and all of history’s greatest generals for their successful military campaigns.

Yet for a man compelled to launch himself into such whirlwinds of planning and action, whether at war, diplomacy, government, or love, Bonaparte was astonishingly fatalistic. Although he continually struggled to be history’s central actor, he felt more like the marionette of forces far beyond his understanding, let alone control. He certainly believed in something he variously called “destiny” or “my star.” Throughout his life he was heard to remark that “destiny directs all my operations” or that “I feel myself propelled towards some unknown goal.”²⁰ From a young age he sensed that he was destined for great things, and he did whatever he could to make the most of the opportunities that life presented him. And then, at the height of his successes and powers, he believed that destiny turned its back on him; and thereafter, no matter what he did, he would fail.

He expressed the capriciousness of fate in a letter to Talleyrand in October 1797, after he had finally completed a year and a half military and diplomatic campaign to expel the Austrians from Italy. One might expect him to boast of those deeds which proved to be decisive in that epic struggle. Yet success often left him reflective rather than exultant, especially in his younger years. To Talleyrand, he remarked that “from triumph to a plunge is but a step. I saw in all the greatest circumstances that one does nothing to decide great events.”²¹ Fatalists tend to dismiss the importance of their choices and acts to both their successes and their failures. Certainly Bonaparte was not someone who readily admitted his mistakes as he made them. Yet he would spend much of his time on St. Helena lamenting his follies.