

1750-1914

EMPEROR OF FRANCE Born 1769 Died 1821

Napoleon Bonaparte

“Death is nothing, but to live defeated and inglorious is to die daily.”

NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

The future French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte was born in Corsica, a member of a poor Corsican noble family of Italian origin. A wild island of hills and vendettas, Corsica became a part of France in 1768, the year before Napoleon's birth. When he was nine years old Napoleon learned French at school so he could attend the military school at Brienne-le-Château in France, but he always spoke with a strong Italian accent. The family was poor enough to have his school fees paid by the state.

That he was an able man was evident at an early age and, after graduating in 1784, he went on to complete a two-year course at the Royal Military School in Paris in 12 months, proving


notably strong in math, geography, and science. He was commissioned as a sublieutenant of artillery at the age of just 16.

Revolutionary opportunities

On the death of his father in 1795, Napoleon was elected as head of his family despite not being the eldest son. Corsica remained the focus of his life for some years, to the neglect of his army career. It was only after his family left the island in 1799 because of their pro-French views that Napoleon seized his opportunity to France. A superb opportunist, he seized the chance for rapid advancement opened up by the French Revolution (see pp. 302-03). Appointed a lieutenant general by the Jacobins, a prominent political club of

Portrait of Napoleon

Napoleon rarely appeared in public until 1804, and even then he was usually seen in profile. He is shown here in a military uniform, wearing the Order of the Legion of Honour. The portrait of Napoleon was painted by Jacques-Louis David.



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