

The Napoleon Series

Expectations and Resentment: The Roots of Napoleon Bonaparte's Ambition and Success

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High over the rugged, green mountains of Corsica walked two war-weathered figures: a resolute but restless father, Carlo Bonaparte,¹ and a pregnant mother, Letizia Bonaparte—who carried with her a small baby boy, Joseph. Frustrated, hungry, and tired, the three had just left the coastal town of Porto Vecchio after the French had defeated Corsican rebel forces there.² Rejecting the nationalist leader Pascal Paoli's offer to flee with 300 other followers to England, Carlo switched his loyalty and swore allegiance to the new island ruler, the French monarchy. In turn, he created an enemy in Paoli for his yet-to-be born son, Napoleon. Carlo's apparent betrayal would set the stage for the events that would lead to his second living¹ son's ultimate success—emperor of France and master of Europe.

The actions and legacies of his parents would transform the young impressionable Corsican boy into a formidable man whose desire for power and military victories would change the landscape of Europe. Napoleon's desire to achieve the lofty expectations of his mother and resentment towards his father fueled his ambition to redeem the Bonaparte name, succeeding beyond his parent's wildest imaginations by becoming, arguably, the greatest military leader in history.³

By the ripe age of thirty-five, Napoleon Bonaparte had already won many battles, rising to the pinnacle of both military and political heights in France. As emperor of France, he

inherited the legacy of the revolutionary army, which included a dedicated soldiery, a talented officer corps formed by merit, generals proven in battle, and a flexible tactical system superior to those of his enemies.⁴ These factors may seem to be the reasons for his success, but they do not account for the basic motivations that drove him to control most of the continent. By exploring Napoleon's early life, this paper will give a better understanding of the reasons for his successes.

Born on August 15, 1769 in the capital town of Ajaccio on the Mediterranean island of Corsica, Napoleon lived the first nine years of his life surrounded by family.⁵ A boy of great energy and pride, Napoleon's wild nature thrived under the relative security of his family's inherited wealth and mother's watching eye. He grew to be a happy but wild and aggressive boy. While later exiled in St. Helena, Napoleon described his youthful disposition as "self-willed and obstinate; nothing awed me; nothing disconcerted me. I was quarrelsome, exasperating; I feared no one."⁶ He certainly did not fear his older brother, Joseph,⁷ who received the force of Napoleon's early temper— being "beaten, bitten, [and] scolded."⁸ The infant Napoleon entered the family as the second son and the second child to live; Joseph, being one and two-thirds years older; the third child, Maria Anna (born on July 14, 1771), being nearly two years younger; five other children followed. The younger son's unruly personality matched his competitiveness, or better described as a desire to always win. Joseph recalled one episode when the two boys were in grade school in Ajaccio. While reenacting a battle between the Romans and Carthaginians in class, Napoleon begged his brother to change roles with him in order to be on the winning Roman side.⁹ Joseph, as always, conceded to the stronger willed Napoleon who, on their walk home, would express remorse for his eldest brother's defeat.¹⁰

The two Bonaparte boys not only competed in the classroom and playgrounds, they also vied for their mother's attention and affection in the home.¹¹ Napoleon quickly learned that his position in the Bonaparte household hinged on effort. During her son's childhood, Letizia set standards for ways to gain her love: "you do not win... favorable attention by tricks but by performance and achievement."¹² Napoleon learned that his mother's approval and reciprocal warmth had to be *earned*. Obtaining approval through achievement meant that he would have to overtake his older brother,¹³ being victorious in everything so as to gain the attention of the only person who mattered in his life: Mamma Letizia.

Considered by some to be the most beautiful woman in Corsica, Letizia's outward appearance hide an inner strength and stern demeanor. She played a dominant and ever-present role in Napoleon's early development; she channeled his frantic energy and disciplined his precocious mind. Remembering her influence on him, Napoleon recollected that his "quickness was no avail with Mamma Letizia, who soon repressed [his] bellicose [*sic*] humour."¹⁴ She was both tender and severe, punishing wrongdoing and rewarding good conduct and recognizing with impartiality her son's good and bad actions.¹⁵ For example, historian James Morgan tells a scene when an obstinate Napoleon refused to attend church, thus, disobeying his mother's exacting order.¹⁶ She turned around and calmly slapped him so hard that he rolled down a hill, where "she left

him to pick himself up while she went on her way without looking back.”¹⁷ This form of corporeal punishment was not unusual and taught Napoleon a valuable lesson about obedience to proper authority and that the person with power should demand unflinching respect. More importantly, he learned to pick his fights—a skill he would need and use against the great powers of Western Europe when they waged war on his expansive empire.

By the time Carlo secured his son’s place among the French nobility in 1779,¹⁸ Letizia had left her mark on Napoleon. He admired her as a “superb woman of nobility and courage... a head of a man on the body of a woman.”¹⁹ His glowing appraisal of Letizia’s virtues reflected her elevated status as the source of all his good habits and, by extension, of his rise to power and success.²⁰

Whereas his mother would be remembered with fondness and gratitude, Napoleon’s father, Carlo, would be portrayed as absent, if not wanting. Some historians contended that Napoleon received very little from his father except for his debts, blue gray eyes, and the disease that led them to their deaths.²¹ Nevertheless, such a gross characterization does not capture the importance of Carlo to Napoleon’s eventual ascendancy. The father—careless with his money and pleasure-seeking—had the insight, or guile, to compromise with the French. He gained accession to the French aristocracy for his family and, thereafter, solicited the French state to provide scholarships to his sons for an education appropriate to their ranks in life.²² Accomplishing the latter was no small task. Yet, Carlo recognized that his sons’ futures were outside the Mediterranean and inside the opulent and powerful French society.

As a small child, unaware of these plans for him, Napoleon resented his father’s outward obsequiousness to French authority. His arrival at Brienne-le-Chateau, a French military boarding school, seemed to amplify his anger for his father’s alleged betrayal of Corsica and decision to send him away to a cold foreign land. This resentment manifested itself in his fervent Corsican nationalism, rejection of his father, and idolization of the Corsican hero, Paoli.²³

At nine-years-old, hardly able to speak and write a complete sentence in the French language,²⁴ Napoleon entered the iron gates of one of the most prestigious military academies in all of France. He would be prepared and educated among the sons of nobility.²⁵ Brienne was a typical boarding school and less military. There were 110 pupils of whom fifty were royals scholars. Thus, Napoleon was not the only cadet from a less than affluent background.

Napoleon had a crash course in French at Autun for a few months before entering Brienne, but this preparation was hardly sufficient for the rigorous academic and social demands of the school. However, at Brienne, the hostility that marked the rambunctious boy in Corsica reappeared in the school’s rigid social hierarchy. His classmates ostracized him, making fun of his thick Italian accent, questionable social background, and slight frame. One schoolmate remarked that the little boy from the island was “[cold], reserved, taciturn, almost always alone, replying only in

monosyllables.”²⁶ This description of Napoleon as a socially awkward loner may be an overstatement, but it captures the possible altercations, frustrations, and challenges that an adolescent Napoleon encountered and overcame.

Detesting his father for sending him away from everything he loved in Corsica,²⁷ Napoleon would direct that emotion into excellence. He adapted to this hostile, austere environment by excelling in the study of history and mathematics, which eventually led to the selection of field artillery as his military branch—one that was selective and offered promotion based only on merit, unlike the army or navy.²⁸ Though not happy with his situation, Napoleon learned once again to discipline his boundless energy. The school’s monastic lifestyle, combined with its academic demands and social isolation, enabled him to invest in intellectual pursuits. Having an almost unlimited capacity for work, he would brag later in life that “his mind was like a chest of drawers, that at will he could close or open the drawer of any particular topic.”²⁹ As in Brienne and at the more prestigious *École Militaire* in Paris, he developed a propensity to read voraciously and concentrated on subjects (geography, history, and mathematics) that interested him and served a purpose.³⁰ At only seventeen-years-old, he became a second lieutenant in the French artillery, having graduated forty-second in a class of fifty-nine. This seems like inauspicious beginnings, but Napoleon only stayed in the *École Militaire* for one year instead of the typical two or three years.

Although Carlo lacked his middle son’s talents, he did possess and pass on an innate desire for fame, power, and status. He inspired each family member to have great pride in being a Bonaparte, which “was another reason for Napoleon’s self-assurance... [Carlo] set an example of aggressive, persevering, self-serving intrigue in the invidious French and Corsican cultures.”³¹ For the younger Bonaparte, at Brienne and Paris, he rejected the former culture and elevated the latter.

Even after his graduation from the *École*, Napoleon dedicated most of his energy to Corsican politics. From 1786 to 1793, Napoleon, identifying himself still as a Corsican and *not* French, repeatedly returned to his beloved island in order to support Paoli’s independence movement.³² However, remembering Carlo’s betrayal, Paoli saw this other Bonaparte as a threat and rejected him. Paoli’s vendetta against Carlo forced the entire Bonaparte family to leave their only home.³³

At the end of 1793, during one of the most tumultuous and tenuous periods of the French Revolution, the stage was set for the emergence of a new leader who would personify the revolution.³⁴ By this time, Napoleon had assumed a French identity and responsibility as the head of the family after Carlo’s death. Thanks to his father’s efforts, Napoleon was well positioned to be the right person to seize that moment. Leaving a relatively modest upbringing to attend some of the best preparatory schools in France, he had a resumé that few officers—who remained in the military—could rival. He possessed a mind that none could match. His father’s foresight and ambition prepared and placed Napoleon on the national stage at the right time.

In *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz provides a prescient understanding of the limits of memoirs, stipulating that, “memoirs of the commanders... often treat such matters [like the reasoning for the commanders’ actions] pretty broadly, or, perhaps deliberately, with something less than candor.”³⁵ His point is an important one: it is nearly impossible to capture and be truthful about the motivations and genius of a commander, especially in battle. Time and space confines one’s knowledge of a person. In briefly examining Napoleon’s childhood and development into a soldier, this paper demonstrated the significance of his seemingly dysfunctional relationship with his parents, Carlo and Letizia. His parents disciplined his body, cultivated his genius, and drove his blind ambition, which would impel him to transform the boundaries, peoples, and history of 19th century Europe.

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Endnotes

¹ Handsome and ambitious, Carlo recognized that the future of his family was not with Paoli.

² Phillip Dwyer, *Napoleon: The Path to Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 22.

³ Some astute observer of history may assert that Alexander the Great, who holds an undefeated battle record, may hold the title of the "greatest military leader in history." This argument, however, is outside the scope of my paper. In order to quickly respond to this charge, I would contend that the revolutionary changes in military and *political* affairs made by Napoleon rivaled, if not surpassed, any military figure in history, including Alexander. He created institutions and systems (e.g., the Napoleonic Code) that are the foundations of modern France—which is the model for most democratic republics in Western Europe. For these reasons, I make the claim.

⁴ John A. Lynn, "Nations in Arms," in *The Cambridge History of Warfare*, ed. Geoffrey Parker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 195-97.

⁵ James Morgan, *In the Footsteps of Napoleon: His Life and Its Famous Scenes* (New York: MacMillian Company, 1917), 4. August 15th is coincidentally day of the Feast of the Assumption, the most celebrated day in the religious calendar for the Corsicans. Some suspected that Napoleon altered his birthday to mark the significance of his entrance into the world. Also, if he was born earlier than 1769, he would have been considered Genoese (who ruled before the French).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Harold T. Parker, "The Formation of Napoleon's Personality: An Exploratory Essay," *French History Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1(Spring, 1971), 7. It is interesting to note for some that Joseph wrote his memoirs in Point Breeze, New Jersey.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7. Indicative of care for his ill-actions, this remorse towards family remained a trend throughout his life. It was a trend that would be part of his ultimate failure.

¹¹ When rejected by his mother, Napoleon was consoled by his nurse maid—another transformative figure in his life.

¹² Parker, 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Morgan, 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ R.M. Johnston, *Napoleon: A Short Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1904), 3. In the year 1779, his father succeeded in securing his appointment to a free cadetship at the military school of Brienne.

¹⁹ Andrew Robert, *Napoleon: A Life* (New York: Viking Publishing, 2014), 67. In later life, Napoleon would describe Carlo as a loving father but weak, impecunious, and frivolous.

²⁰ Dwyer, 41.

²¹ Andrew, 67.

²² Christopher J. Herold, *The Age of Napoleon* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985)18.

²³ Ironically, Napoli detested the Bonaparte family.

²⁴ Dwyer, 29.

²⁵ Parker, 11.

²⁶ Dwyer, 30.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁹ Robert B. Holtman, *The Napoleonic Revolution* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 28.

³⁰ Holtman, 28.

³¹ Parker, 10.

³² Herold, 19-22.

³³ Holtman, 29.

³⁴ By this time, Napoleon had assumed a French identity and responsibility as the head of the family after Carlo's death.

³⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, "What is War?" *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976, 75-89; reprint in US Army Command and General Staff College, *H100 Book of Readings*, 50-61, Fort Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC, July 1992), 164.