

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 78: Napoleon

The VSI Podcast Intro 00:07

Welcome back to The Very Short Introductions Podcast. From public health to Buddhist ethics, soft matters to classics, and art history to globalization, we'll showcase a concise and original introduction to a wide range of subjects, for wherever your curiosity may take you. So here is today's very short introduction.

David Bell 00:27

My name is David Bell. I'm a historian of France. I teach European history at Princeton University in the United States. And the title of my VSI is Napoleon Bonaparte. Now, almost everybody, I think, has probably heard of Napoleon Bonaparte; he is one of the most famous characters in all of human history. There's probably been as much written about him as there's been written about almost anybody. But just to refresh people's memory if you're not exactly sure who he was, he was the ruler of France from 1799 till 1814, and then again, briefly, in the year 1815. He crowned himself Emperor of the French in the year 1804. He is known as one of the greatest generals, one of the greatest military geniuses, and one of the greatest conquerors in European history, often seen as the greatest conquerors since Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great, and certainly being in their league.

David Bell 01:19

So he's a character who's simply enormously fascinating for that. He had a torrid personal life as well, a really quite amazing romantic relationship with his first wife, Joséphine de Beauharnais. He, we know an enormous amount about him because he left a huge body of correspondence, and there are many, many people who knew him who wrote very intimate memoirs of his life. So he's somebody who we're very familiar with, in that sense. He's somebody who I was fascinated with since the moment I started to study French history, first in college, and then in graduate school. I wrote a book about the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, which focused, inevitably, very closely on the figure of Napoleon Bonaparte. And after doing that, and really having learned an enormous amount about him, I decided to write a book about him.

David Bell 02:07

Napoleon's life story is, is really quite incredible. When he was in exile, in his final exile, after being defeated by Lord Wellington at the Battle of Waterloo, he said, and I'm quoting, "What a novel my life has been." "What a novel my life has been." And it really was rather novelistic, his life. So he was born in 1769, in the island of Corsica, which had just been annexed by France. He was born into a comfortable family, a family that was the lower rank of the, of the nobility. He went to military school in France, trained as a, as a, as an artillery officer. And then, at the beginning of the French Revolution, when careers were opening up in a, in an enormous way for figures in the French army, he was able to advance very quickly. So he took part in the siege of the city of Toulon, which had been occupied by counterrevolutionaries and by the British Navy. He established a reputation by helping to end the siege of Toulon. He was very quickly named to general. And then in 1796, as the General of the Army of Italy, he actually ended up conquering almost all of northern Italy for France, one of the most successful military campaigns, one of the most astonishing military campaigns in all of French history, in which he really showed himself to be an authentic military genius. Having established this enormous reputation, he went off to conquer Egypt as a, as a colony for France. And then in 1799, he came back to France at a moment when the First French Republic, which had been born in the French Revolution of 1789, was tottering, it was unstable, it was on its last legs. A great number of people in the French government believed that they needed a strong man to take charge. Napoleon was the obvious choice, and in 1799, he took power in a coup, known as the Coup of the 18th Brumaire, Brumaire being one of the months of the French revolutionary calendar.

David Bell 03:58

He then became the, essentially, the absolute ruler of France. He took the title, initially, of First Consul. He reorganized a great deal of French government. He established the modern French law code, which is called, of course, the Napoleonic Code. He reorganized French administration. He won more battles and engaged in more conquests, so that, by 1804, France was already, had expanded to some, to the greatest size that it had reached geographically in all of modern history. In 1804, he then decided to become emperor and he crowned himself in Notre Dame Cathedral; he crowned himself Emperor of the French. And he embarked on this enormous program of military adventure and conquest. Much of this was a duel against Great Britain, which was his principal adversary. He tried to close the European continent to British commerce as a way of defeating Britain. But this

forced him to engage in campaign after campaign and in war against war against other European powers, and to attempt, actually, rather in vain, to essentially subdue the entire European continent. This led to what we can call a classic case of Imperial overstretch.

David Bell 05:06

He invaded Portugal and then invaded Spain, got himself involved in a very nasty, drawn-out, and bloody guerrilla war in the Iberian Peninsula, and then in 1812, in an attempt to bring the Russian Empire into line as an ally, he invaded Russia, his most famous defeat, the Russian campaign of 1812, which ended an utter disaster for him and for his army. He was forced to retreat back out of Russia through Germany, many of his allies turned against him, and although he fought a brilliant campaign trying to hold off the Allied advance, it ultimately failed. The Allies invaded France itself, and Napoleon was defeated and forced to abdicate in the year 1814.

David Bell 05:49

But there was one chapter left in his life, it was an extraordinary chapter. In 1815, he had been exiled to a small island, near Corsica, in the Mediterranean called Elba. He snuck out, essentially in the middle of the night, managed to get on a boat, landed in the south of France, started marching north, to Paris, where a new government, a royal government, under Louis the XVIII, who was the brother of the king who had been executed in the French Revolution, had taken power, but it had been placed there by the Allies. It was unpopular. Napoleon very quickly got a enormous following back in France, marched all the way to Paris, where the new Royal Government had fled, and took back control of the country. but only for a hundred days. This period is called the period of the Hundred Days, really quite an extraordinary period. He attempted to raise a new army, and he ended up fighting his great adversary, Lord Wellington, at the Battle of Waterloo in June of 1815. There he was defeated. It was his final defeat. He was forced again to abdicate, and, this time, was exiled to a small island in the South Atlantic called St. Helena, where he died in 1821.

David Bell 06:54

But, from the very start of his career, he was somebody who exerted an incredible fascination over the western imagination. People were writing about him, people were, the greatest painters of the day were painting him. Already during the Italian campaign of

1796-97, people were writing plays about him, odes to him, poetry, even novels about him from the very earliest days. And after his death, people would look back on his career and say, "This was really one of the most extraordinary lives that has ever been lived." And so they went back. They, almost everybody who, who knew him, ended up writing a memoir about him. We have his correspondence, so we know an enormous amount about him. And all the great writers of the 19th century were, almost all the great Western writers of the 19th century were obsessed with him at one point or another. Tolstoy wrote about him in *War and Peace*. Sir Walter Scott wrote a biography of him. Victor Hugo, who was the son of a Napoleonic general, was utterly obsessed by him and wrote about him in many of his works, including *Les Misérables*, and including some of his greatest poetry. Balzac wrote about him. Stendhal wrote about. Pushkin wrote about him. Lermontov wrote about him. All of this simply contributed to Napoleon's legend, which simply expanded throughout the entire 19th century.

David Bell 08:06

So what is my take on Napoleon Bonaparte? I would say that he is somebody who we have to understand, first and foremost, within the context of the French Revolution. The French Revolution destroyed a very hierarchical monarchy in France. It shook up what had been an incredibly hierarchical society, it created new opportunities for people from relatively obscure backgrounds, such as Napoleon Bonaparte, and it allowed him to rise up to extraordinary positions when he was still extremely young. Remember that he took control of France when he was just 30 years old. It also involved France in a series of wars that I myself have called the first total war. This was a set of wars, which were some of the most intense and bloody that Europe had seen since the Thirty Years' War of the 17th century. They were incredibly intense. And Napoleon thrived in this atmosphere. He was, in a sense, he was the creature of total war, because total war allowed him to show just what he was capable of on the battlefield. So the French Revolution, in that sense, created Napoleon, but he wasn't entirely true to the French Revolution, either. What he took from the French Revolution were its principles of civic equality, that everybody should have the same chances in life, that, that there should not be legal discrimination against people who are not born into the upper classes of society. Napoleon famously said that everybody, that every soldier carried a marshal, field marshal's baton in his kitbag, and every soldier should have the chance to rise up to the rank of field marshal. This was the revolutionary principle of equality.

David Bell 09:39

But at the same time, Napoleon was no friend of another great revolutionary principle, which was liberty. From the moment that he took power in 1799, he took power as a dictator. He shut down freedom of the press, he imprisoned his political opponents. He insisted on ruling, in a sense, as an absolute monarch, an enlightened monarch, perhaps, but an absolute monarch. So in that sense, Napoleon was no, no friend whatsoever of the French Revolution, and of its principles. He did bring some of the principles of the French Revolution into the territories that he conquered. He was no friend to the Church, he was no friend of the Roman Catholic Church, and wherever he went, he tended to destroy the privileges of the Church to allow the church lands to be sold, and to also introduce religious toleration, including for the Jews. But on the other hand, again, wherever he conquered, he established very authoritarian rule.

David Bell 10:28

Today, when we look back at Napoleon, we see him very much as a mixed bag. Certainly, his political record is very much a mixed bag. And I should talk also about one of the most, really, evil things that he did, and there's no other word for it. France in the 18th century had had very wealthy colonies in the Caribbean, particularly Saint-Domingue, which we now know as Haiti, Guadeloupe, Martinique. These had been slave colonies, where very large numbers of enslaved Africans worked essentially to produce sugar, coffee, indigo, and other products for the European market under absolutely brutal and terrible conditions. In Saint-Domingue, Haiti, the average lifespan of, of an enslaved person arriving there was eight years or less. During the French Revolution, there were revolutions in these places as well, the enslaved people rose up and seized freedom for themselves. And then in 1794, the radical government of the French Revolution acquiesced to this seizure of freedom and eliminated slavery, abolished slavery throughout the French Empire.

David Bell 11:26

Napoleon Bonaparte had the idea of essentially reestablishing full French control over these islands and bringing them back into the French economy, being able to harness the enormous profit capacity of these islands. So, particularly in 1801-1802, he sent a massive expedition under his brother-in-law to recapture these islands, to reestablish full control

over Saint-Domingue, Haiti, and one of the things he planned to do was to reestablish slavery. He was not able to do so in Saint-Domingue, where the forces of the enslaved people fought back against him, and established Haiti as an independent republic in 1804. Martinique had been under British control, so slavery had never been abolished there. But in Guadeloupe, Napoleon Bonaparte and his representatives reestablished slavery. Slavery was not finally abolished in the French Empire until the revolution of 1848. So this is a sign of what, the kind of thing that Napoleon Bonaparte can be capable of.

David Bell 12:20

And it should also be recognized that while there was a logic to the campaigns he fought, and he did not simply fight them out of megalomania; he fought them, above all, in order to defeat Great Britain, in order to, and he wanted to do this by trying to close off the European continent to British trade, which in turn, meant being able to essentially put all the countries of the European continent, to a certain extent, under his control. So there was a logic to the campaigns. But even so, to do this, he was willing to fight war after war, battle after battle, not simply for the interests of his own megalomania, for political purpose. But, nonetheless, he sacrificed, in the end, millions of people; literally millions of men died on the battlefield to fight Napoleon's wars. Probably 5 million people, at least, died in Napoleon's wars.

David Bell 13:07

He was not a Hitler or Stalin. He did not kill massive numbers of his own people. In fact, he did not even imprison large numbers of political prisoners, although he did imprison many. His rule tended to be relatively light, certainly compared to that of the great dictators of the 20th century. But on the other hand, there were all the millions of people that he sacrificed to his rule. And that is another thing we have to take into account. So while Napoleon remains, today, a figure of enormous, enormous interest. We look to him and say, "My God, what a single human being could do in his lifetime." We also have to look at this very, very mixed, and often, in some ways, really, rather evil political record, as well, when we're looking back at Napoleon Bonaparte.

David Bell 13:50

Well, thank you very much for listening. I hope that this's whetted your appetite to learn a bit more about Napoleon Bonaparte. You can do so in my Very Short Introduction, and, in

that book, there is a bibliography which will lead you to much more information. You could spend a lifetime reading about Napoleon Bonaparte and never get through probably 10 percent of what has been written about him. So I won't ask you to read everything that has been written on him, but you can certainly find out a great deal and much of it is absolutely fascinating. Thank you again for listening.

The VSI Podcast Outro 14:17

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