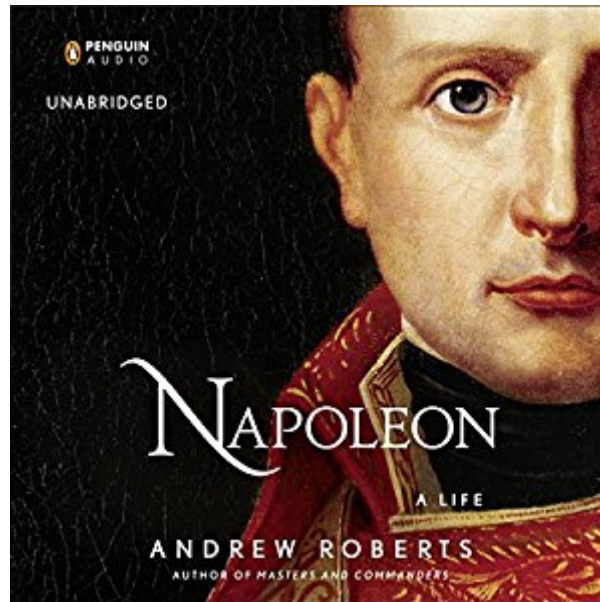




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Napoleon: A Life



Synopsis

The definitive biography of the great soldier-statesman by the New York Times best-selling author of *The Storm of War*. Austerlitz, Borodino, Waterloo: His battles are among the greatest in history, but Napoleon Bonaparte was far more than a military genius and astute leader of men. Like George Washington and his own hero Julius Caesar, he was one of the greatest soldier-statesmen of all times. Andrew Roberts's *Napoleon* is the first one-volume biography to take advantage of the recent publication of Napoleon's thirty-three thousand letters, which radically transform our understanding of his character and motivation. At last we see him as he was: protean multitasker, decisive, surprisingly willing to forgive his enemies and his errant wife Josephine. Like Churchill, he understood the strategic importance of telling his own story, and his memoirs, dictated from exile on St. Helena, became the single best-selling book of the 19th century. An award-winning historian, Roberts traveled to 53 of Napoleon's 60 battle sites, discovered crucial new documents in archives, and even made the long trip by boat to St. Helena. He is as acute in his understanding of politics as he is of military history. Here at last is a biography worthy of its subject: magisterial, insightful, beautifully written, by one of our foremost historians.

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Customer Reviews

This is not only the first one-volume history of Napoleon but also THE book on Napoleon to read if you are new to his life-history or looking for a fresh take. Thanks to the recent release of his private letters (33,000+) and a fellowship at the Napoleonic Institute, Roberts has a far wider and deeper

look into this infamous leader than any other author has had before. I sometimes find one-volume efforts unwieldy, but Roberts has been providing this style of high-quality history reading ever since "The Storm of War" and "Masters and Commanders", and this book simply follows suit! To say it simply, he knows the material and shares it well. I wouldn't call myself an expert of western history, really an amateur aficionado at best, even though I've read a lot about world politics of the time including biographies of the personalities and memoirs by the participants. This book sets a great foundation for Kissinger's "A World Restored", which picks up after the fall of Napoleon. For far too long, Napoleon has been subjected to over-sized myths and slanderous libel. Roberts' thesis is that Napoleon was not at all some kind of proto-Hitler dictator but rather the last and greatest leader of the Enlightenment who had many admirable qualities. A surprisingly sympathetic view from a Brit! Of course he had an ugly side (responsibility for wars that killed 4-6 million isn't easily forgotten or forgiven) but I was impressed to learn of his involvement in the regeneration of post-Revolution France, patronage to the arts, and establishment of equality under the Napoleon Code. From his upbringing in the obscure (yet lovely) town of Ajaccio, Corsica, only recently purchased by Louis XV from the Genoese, Napoleon never lost the sense that he was not-exactly-French. Napoleon led his life with remarkable order and discipline and his dream to lead benefited France almost by accident. Politically, his impact on his country and Europe was clearly profound, but militarily he was out of this world! Roberts' captures his revolutionary touch of warfare, military supplies, logistics, and the use of artillery and tactics, especially in such battles as Austerlitz in 1805 and Friedland in 1807. The one area that I found flaw in the book was in Roberts' retelling of Napoleon's strategic failings. One of his key arguments that the catastrophic invasion of Russia in 1812 was beyond his control, really overlooks what Napoleon overlooked - which is that he underestimated not just the skill of their generals (ie. Barclay de Tolly) and fighting quality of their troops, but also the determination of the tsar. And although Roberts concedes that "Napoleon's understanding of naval affairs was dismal," his brief mention of losing Trafalgar in 1805 really understates the issue. The Battle of Trafalgar was pivotal in determining world trade systems and killed French hopes of invading England while boosting British economy so that even by 1815 France had barely reached Britain's level of industrialism in 1780. In short, I recommend this book whole-heartedly as a one-volume history of Napoleon which reassesses his rule from a distance of time. Hopefully you don't mind that I came to this opinion by reading a review copy of the book and instead found this review helpful!

In 1841, Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle penned *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History*. One of the first histories to bring forth the "Great Man" tradition of history--the view that

certain individuals are driving forces of history, and simply knowing about such individuals would give one a good command of the history of that era, Andrew Roberts, an English historian, joined this small but notable rank of Anglosphere historians to laud Napoleon as such a figure. What makes this work even more incredible, all things considered, is that an English historian would write and publish a biography of Napoleon that is certainly apologetic and positive on the eve of the bicentennial of the over mythologized Battle of Waterloo where British Nationalists have long wanted to assert that this event, rather than the terrible campaigns of 1813-1814 where Britain played a minimal role, as the Gotterdammerung of Napoleon's life and empire. Therefore, the biography written by Andrew Roberts stands drastically apart from the majority of scholarship in the last 40 years of Anglosphere scholarship that has undeniably attempted, with vigor, sometimes very eruditely, and at other times poorly--to destroy the "great man" historiographical tradition and with it, any attempt to view Napoleon as "Great" in the same tradition of the other "Great" leaders in world history. From Charles Esdaile (2008) who attempted to destroy the credibility of the Great Man historiographical tradition, to Philip Dwyer (2008 and 2011) whose two-volume work on Napoleon attempted to cast him as a myth-maker and brutal battlefield butcher, to Alan Schom (1997) whose biographical work was described as a "hatchet job" on the French emperor, to Owen Connolly (1987) whose work *Blundering to Glory: Napoleon's Military Campaigns* cast Napoleon as an otherwise incompetent battle-planner whose real genius was his ability to improvise in the heat of battle that won him fame and glory on the battlefield, the list goes on of Anglo-American historians who apparently have an axe to grind with Napoleon. While Connolly's work is, perhaps, somewhat pro-Napoleon in an awkward way, the majority of Anglosphere scholarship has constantly attempted to tear down Napoleon's status--but Andrew Roberts eruditely attempts to dispel and overturn these constant attacks against one of the modern period's last great rulers and generals. Rather than cast Napoleon as an "Anti-Christ," butcher on the battlefield, or a bloodthirsty ego-maniac, Roberts casts Napoleon in the same vein that Napoleon saw himself as, one of the great individuals of history: a general, husband, emperor, and lawgiver. Upon the eve of the twin battles of Jena and Auerstedt, in which Napoleon's forces would utterly devastate the Prussian armies and lead to the emperor's swift capture of Berlin, forcing a Russian intervention, the German philosopher George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel wrote of his encounter with "The World Soul" (speaking of Napoleon) whom sent shockwaves through Hegel's body. As the tradition story goes, Hegel even altered aspects of his great work *Phenomenology of Spirit* (one of the most important works of modern Western philosophy) after this encounter with the Frenchman who could only ever be admired by his onlookers (pp. 415-418). Napoleon, likewise, as Roberts' shows throughout his work, thought of

himself as a great "World Soul" pushing the progress of humanity forward. Rather than an usurper and tyrant, as Anglo-American scholars have often depicted Napoleon for us, Napoleon himself saw himself as the embodiment of French Enlightenment philosophy. Any student of the French political philosophers would naturally agree, the Enlightenment philosophes were extremely elitist and saw institutional absolutism as the only avenue for the progress of humanity since the normal peasant was a brutish animal by their very nature. In this same tradition, Napoleon truly did see himself as the pinnacle of the Enlightened absolutist political tradition, and paradoxically for many, saw himself as the protector of the French republican tradition despite becoming an emperor. Contrary to Anglo-American scholarship, Napoleon isn't a pseudo-republican despot, but the very epitome of Enlightenment republicanism, or better, Enlightened Absolutism. After all, this is why Andrew Roberts says of Napoleon, "[He] was the Enlightenment on horseback." Roberts', while certainly presenting a positive case for Napoleon, is not short of his criticism of the French emperor. Roberts highlights some of the battlefield brutality that Napoleon was capable of committing. He has no apologetic defense for Napoleon's invasion of Russia and the fallout that ensued, Roberts equally makes clear that many Europeans, but especially Frenchmen, died in Napoleon's gambit to wrangle Europe under his boot. Yet, at the same time, Roberts doesn't shorthand Napoleon's battlefield brilliance, his ability to inspire friends and foes alike, but more importantly, does not attempt to destroy Napoleon's Legal reforms: the Napoleonic Code. Napoleon, as a Law Giver, is perhaps the most successful legislator or administrator of any figure in Europe in the last 200 years. Napoleon's institutions that embodied meritocracy, religious tolerance and pluralism, and a legal structure that certainly curbed the influence of favoritism in politics due to one's noble birth rank have remained, at least structurally, the mainframe of modern European law ever since Napoleon's ride across Europe. His armies may have failed to conquer Europe, but his legislation, in bitter irony, conquered his conquerors. Roberts' chapter on the Napoleonic Code is where his work shines most brightly, even if it is a short chapter--for Napoleon himself saw his civil code as his greatest accomplishment nearing his deathbed (p. 270). Upon reading Roberts' book, while it seems impossible that a figure as towering as Napoleon can ever have "the definitive one-volume biography," Andrew Roberts comes as close as it can get. One is left only to awe at Napoleon's meteoric rise to power, his battlefield ability, his own egoism, his political ability as lawgiver and administrator (which is where Napoleon has been most successful, now, almost 200 years after his death, his legal reforms still have more widespread influence than his armies ever died), and at the same time, one can see the propaganda machine and battlefield brutality hard at work. Roberts has written a biography of Napoleon not casting him as "Great" in the sense that Americans view the deified trio of Presidents:

Washington, Lincoln, or FDR, but "great" in the historiographical sense--no other figure from 1796-1815 held the world in his hand, and moved almost 20 years of European history with a single breath, or had the rest of a continent trembling in their boots and reacting to his every move.

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