

The Fall of Napoleon

The Continental System and the Peninsular Wars

In addition to military endeavors against Britain, Napoleon also waged economic war, attempting to enforce a Europe-wide commercial boycott of Britain called the "Continental System". This system was used to forbid trade with Great Britain on the part of France, and her allies. Napoleon expected that the unfavorable trade balance would destroy England's credit, break the Bank of England, and ruin English industry. Although this action hurt the British economy, it also damaged the French economy and was not a decisive factor.

Portugal did not comply with this Continental System and in 1807 Napoleon sought Spain's support for an invasion of Portugal. When Spain refused, Napoleon invaded Spain as well. After mixed results were produced by his generals, Napoleon himself took command and defeated the Spanish army, retook Madrid and then outmaneuvering a British army sent to support the Spanish and drove it to the coast. Though not forcing a full withdrawal of the British Army from Spain and led to the Peninsular War which saw the constant defeat of French Marshals, at the hands of The Duke of Wellington and the eventual invasion of the south of France in 1814. Napoleon installed one of his marshals and brother-in-law, Joachim Murat, as the King of Naples, and his brother Joseph Bonaparte, as King of Spain.

The Spanish, inspired by nationalism and the Roman Catholic Church, and angry over atrocities committed by French troops, rose in revolt. At the same time, Austria unexpectedly broke its alliance with France and Napoleon was forced to assume command of forces on the Danube and German fronts. A bloody draw ensued near Vienna, which was the closest Napoleon ever came to a defeat in a battle with more or less equal numbers on each side. After a two month interval, the principal French and Austrian armies engaged again near Vienna resulting in a French victory. But even with these French victories, France would soon be defeated because of its invasion of Russia in 1812. This weakened the army significantly and France was removed from the Iberian Peninsula in 1814.

1. What was the Continental System?
2. What was the Peninsular War? Who won?

Invasion of Russia

The Russo-French alliance, by 1811 brought increasing tensions between the two nations. Alexander I and Napoleon had a friendly personal relationship since their first meeting in 1807, but their alliance had been shaky. The first sign that the alliance was deteriorating was the easing of the application of the Continental System in Russia, angering Napoleon.

On 22 June 1812, Napoleon's invasion of Russia commenced. The Russians avoided a decisive engagement which Napoleon longed for, preferring to retreat ever deeper into the heart of Russia. A brief attempt at resistance was offered, but the Russians were defeated in a series of battles. The Russians then repeatedly avoided battle with the French. The Russians during their strategic retreat used the scorched earth tactic. They burned crops and slaughtered livestock so the French would have nothing to eat. Along with the hunger, the French also had to face the harsh Russian winter. At Borodino on 7 September 1812 - the only major engagement fought in Russia - Napoleon could muster no more than 135,000 troops, and he lost at least 30,000 of them to gain a narrow victory almost 600 miles deep in hostile territory. The sequels were his uncontested and self-defeating occupation of Moscow and his humiliating retreat, which began on 19 October. Although Napoleon was far from defeated, the Russian

army had accepted, and withstood, the major battle the French hoped would be decisive. After the battle, the Russian army withdrew, and retreated past Moscow.

The Russians retreated and Napoleon was able to enter Moscow, assuming that the fall of Moscow would end the war and that Alexander I would negotiate peace. However, on orders of the city's military governor and commander-in-chief, Moscow was ordered burned. Within the month, fearing loss of control back in France, Napoleon left Moscow.

The French suffered greatly in the course of a ruinous retreat; the Army had begun as over 650,000 frontline troops, but in the end fewer than 40,000 escaped. In total French losses in the campaign were 570,000 against about 400,000 Russian casualties and several hundred thousand civilian deaths.

Heartened by Napoleon's losses in Russia, Prussia soon rejoined the Coalition that now included Russia, the United Kingdom, Spain, and Portugal. Napoleon assumed command in Germany and soon inflicted a series of defeats on the Allies. Despite these initial successes, however, the numbers continued to mount against Napoleon and Austria joined the Coalition. Eventually the French army was pinned down by a force twice its size. Some of the German states switched sides in the midst of the battle, further undermining the French position.

After this Napoleon withdrew in an orderly fashion back into France, but his army was now reduced to less than 100,000 against more than half a million Allied troops. The French were now surrounded and vastly outnumbered. The French armies could only delay an inevitable defeat.

1. Why did Napoleon invade Russia?
2. What are the reasons Napoleon and the French army lose the war?

Exile in Elba, Waterloo and his Death

Paris was occupied on 31 March 1814. Napoleon abdicated on 6 April, but the Allies, demanded unconditional surrender and Napoleon abdicated again on 11 April. In the Treaty of Fontainebleau the victors exiled him to Elba, a small island in the Mediterranean 20 km off the coast of Italy.

In France, the royalists had restored King Louis XVIII to power. But Napoleon escaped from Elba on 26 February 1815 and returned to the mainland in March 1815. King Louis XVIII sent the Fifth Regiment, who had served under Napoleon in Russia, to meet him on 7 March 1815. Napoleon approached the regiment alone, dismounted his horse and, when he was within earshot, shouted "Soldiers of the Fifth, you recognize me. If any man would shoot his emperor, he may do so now". Following a brief silence, the soldiers shouted "Vive L'Empereur!" and marched with Napoleon to Paris. He arrived on 20 March, quickly raising a regular army of 140,000 and a volunteer force of around 200,000 and governed for a Hundred Days.

Napoleon's final defeat came at the hands of the Duke of Wellington at the Battle of Waterloo in present-day Belgium on 18 June 1815. Off the port of Rochefort, after unsuccessfully attempting to escape to the United States, Napoleon made his formal surrender on 15 July 1815. Napoleon was imprisoned and then exiled by the British to the island of Saint Helena in the South Atlantic Ocean. Whilst there, with a small cadre of followers, he dictated his memoirs and criticized his captors. Sick for much of his time on Saint Helena, Napoleon died on 5 May 1821.

1. What happened to Napoleon during the years 1815 to 1821?

The Final Battle at Waterloo

In 1815, Napoleon made a triumphant return to power in France—but his triumph did not last long. The alliance of Britain, Russia, Prussia, Austria, and Sweden strongly opposed Napoleon’s return and prepared for battle. On June 18, 1815, Napoleon and his army met the forces of the alliance near the village of Waterloo in Belgium. British soldiers under the command of Lord Wellington held their ground against the French attack; at the end of the long battle, the British joined the Prussians to defeat Napoleon. The following selection is a description of the end of the battle by a British army captain.

“I shall never forget the scene which the field of battle presented about seven in the evening. I felt weary and worn out, less from fatigue than anxiety. Our division, which had stood upwards of 5,000 men at the commencement of the battle, had gradually dwindled down into a solitary line of skirmishers. The 27th regiment were lying literally dead, in square, a few yards behind us. My horse had received another shot through the leg, and one through the flap of the saddle, which lodged in his body, sending him a step beyond the pension list. The smoke still hung so thick about us that we could see nothing. I walked a little way to each flank to endeavor to get a glimpse of what was going on; but nothing met my eye except the mangled remains of men and horses, and I was obliged to return to my post as wise as I went. I had never yet heard of a battle in which everybody was killed; but this seemed likely to be an exception, as all were going by turns . .

Presently a cheer which we knew to be British commenced far to the right, and made everyone prick up his ears; it was Lord Wellington’s long-wished-for orders to advance. It gradually approached, growing louder as it grew near. We took it up by instinct, charged through the hedge down upon the old knoll, sending our adversaries flying at the point of the bayonet. Lord Wellington galloped up to us at the instant, and our men began to cheer him; but he called out, “No cheering, my lads, but forward, and complete our victory!” This movement had carried us clear of the smoke; and to people who had been so many hours enveloped in darkness, in the midst of destruction, and naturally anxious about the result of the day, the scene which now met the eye conveyed a feeling of more exquisite gratification than can be conceived. It was a fine summer evening just before sunset. The French were flying in one confused mass. British lines were seen in close pursuit, and in admirable order, as far as the eye could reach to the right, while the plain to the left was filled with Prussians. The enemy made one last attempt at a stand on the rising ground to our right of La Belle Alliance; but a charge from General Adam’s Brigade again threw them into a state of confusion, which was now inextricable, and their ruin was complete. Artillery, baggage, and everything belonging to them, fell into our hands. After pursuing them until dark, we halted about two miles beyond the field of battle, leaving the Prussians to follow up the victory.”

Source: Excerpt from *Adventures in the Rifle Brigade* by Captain John Kincaid (London: Henry Frowde, Hodder, and Stoughton, 1900).

1. How does this British captain describe the Battle of Waterloo?
2. What did this battle mean for the French?