

COULD NAPOLEON  
HAVE WON THE  
BATTLE OF  
WATERLOO WITH  
A DIFFERENT  
LEADERSHIP STYLE/  
USE OF POWER  
MODES? WHERE/ FOR  
WHAT REASON DID  
HE FAIL?

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In the spring of 1815 Napoleon escaped from exile on Elba, landed at Antibes and marched on Paris, raising an army of supporters as he went. This was the second time he had seized power (the first was in a *coup d'état* 16 years earlier), and it thrilled all of Europe – galvanizing the factious allies into an extraordinary unanimity to control this phoenix-like return.

The recently restored Bourbon King Louis XVIII fled as Napoleon approached, but many officials and generals simply switched sides again. Napoleon moved back into the Tuilleries palace, ripping off the royalist Fleur-de-Lys symbols that had been stitched over the Bonapartist emblems of bees on the carpets. But although he was back on the throne, his grasp

on power was obviously tenuous, and many who had benefitted from his patronage in the past had shown how fickle was their loyalty – and were well aware of the vulnerability of his position. Amazingly, he did nothing to remove the chief schemers, the wily apparatchiks Talleyrand and Fouché, who continued to prepare for the fallout from his inevitable defeat. Napoleon had determinedly silenced political opposition for years, and there were few now willing to commit either way.

Meanwhile the military meritocracy, mostly solid in their allegiance to this greatest of generals, had been decimated by the Russian campaign of 1812/13 and the subsequent invasion of France. Napoleon's newly conscripted army of 1815 comprised puny young conscripts, and not enough horses, another casualty of the snows of Russia.

In the past, Napoleon had the ability – backed up by force – to manipulate divisions between the other crowned heads of Europe. Coincidentally he landed back in France when all the key negotiators were still meeting at the Congress of Vienna, so they lost no time in declaring him an outlaw and organizing their new alliance. Now they were united against him, Napoleon was no longer a leader to be feared.

Napoleon's widespread populism, inspired by his charisma, was nonetheless extraordinary as he crossed France towards Paris in the spring of 1815. Most of the regiments sent to stop him immediately turned from being his opponents to his supporters. Carefully skirting known Royalist strongholds such as Provence, he re-established himself on the throne of France and organized a plebiscite to affirm his popular support, but the situation was too chaotic to collect more than a million and a half votes. If he had a long-term plan, it was still to hand over to his son and create his longed-for dynasty. But it was not to happen.



On 26 February 1815, Napoleon had landed near Antibes with 600 men and marched on Paris. Challenged by pro-government units Napoleon, with his characteristic flair for the dramatic gesture, ripped open his jacket and called their bluff declaring “If any of you will shoot his Emperor, let him shoot him now!” Former Napoleonic marshals including Ney returned to his side, bringing whole regiments – Ney alone brought 6,000 men. On 19th March, the restored Bourbon monarch Louis XVIII fled Paris at Napoleon's approach. By the end of May, Napoleon had formed the Army of the North. By early June, a quarter of a million Frenchmen had declared their allegiance to their former leader, but Napoleon now

faced a coalition of 850,000 on four fronts. Meanwhile, he had to leave 50,000 loyal troops in Paris to keep the Royalists in check.

Napoleon's basic strategy was to divide and conquer by defeating armies separately and preventing them from uniting into an overwhelming force. He was almost to succeed. Given that in the circumstances he was inevitably going to fight, he chose to attack rather than go on the defensive. The time seemed to be ripe – the British and Prussian forces were apparently dispersed; he assumed that the elite British forces who had triumphed in the Peninsular Wars had not yet returned from the 1812 war in America; and that the French-speaking inhabitants of Brussels (then part of the Netherlands, previously part of France) might rise up in support of his French-speaking soldiers. If he could hold off the allied forces, he might be able to force them to negotiate ...

The battle was fought over three days. With the French having pushed their way between the British and the Prussians, by the 16th June Marshal Ney had held the Duke of Wellington's forces at Quatre Bras whilst Napoleon defeated Blucher, the Prussian general, at Ligny. But although beaten, the allied forces could not be crushed, and Marshal Grouchy was sent to follow the Prussians whilst Napoleon pursued the British forces to what was to be the Battlefield of Waterloo, a shallow valley with a strategically important defensive ridge. By the night of the 17th, despite heavy rain, Wellington's and Blucher's armies were encamped half a day's march apart, and both leaders confident in the others' commitment to combine forces. This would prove decisive: Wellington's army held on to the very last of their ability, and Blucher's forces arrived just in time to swing the balance in the allies' favour.

The battle of Waterloo can only be understood as the culmination of the previous two days. Marshal Ney, sent to prevent the British reinforcing the Prussians at Ligny, had kept them occupied but needed a huge French force to do so, thus denying Napoleon the use of the overwhelming force he intended to employ. After their narrow defeat at Ligny the Prussians did not retreat full-pelt eastwards; instead they withdrew northwards, and Marshal Grouchy delayed engaging them in their new positions, allowing most of the army to march to Wellington's aid. Meanwhile Wellington had managed an orderly withdrawal to a defensive position of his own choosing, with the Prussians still within reach. Napoleon and Ney took their time to follow to the allied positions during the 17th, and found the British forces established along the ridge at Waterloo, and in two stoutly fortified farmhouses half way up the hill. With 280 guns against the allies' 150, Napoleon established his forces opposite those of the allies, who were partially hidden behind the ridge so they

could not be fully seen or targeted by the French artillery. Wellington had developed this tactic of establishing defensive positions during the Peninsular Wars, to great effect. Uncharacteristically, Napoleon delayed the first offensive; perhaps he was waiting for the sodden ground to dry out sufficiently for the infantry and cavalry to advance uphill; but unknown to him, it gave the Prussians a few crucial hours to start their 13-mile march to the battlefield. At the start, the two sides were quite evenly matched; both fought determinedly, both made mistakes. Perhaps decisive was Marshal Ney's failure to coordinate the infantry, cavalry and advanced artillery; by the time the Imperial 'old guard' marched into the fray the Prussians had arrived, tied down the elite 'new guard' on one wing of the battlefield, and tipped the balance against the French at the centre. French forces, finally outnumbered, turned and fled.

Napoleon, still nominally in command of a large army, rushed back to Paris to try to gain political support and reinforcements. The French population and units of stragglers seemed ready to fight on, attacking the coalition forces as they advanced on the capital. Marshals Davout, Grouchy and Soult were empowered by the French provisional government but could not hold Paris. On 8th July the Prussians entered the city, forcing the abdication of Napoleon on 15th July. He hesitated, then surrendered to Captain Maitland of his Britannic Majesty's Ship *Bellerophon*, who sailed to Plymouth with his prisoner, a lonely figure pacing a foreign quarterdeck and about to go into a second exile, this time forever.