

# Napoleon's downfall



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Napoleon built his grip on France and Europe in his greed for power from the consistent use of highly tactical military force against the nations that opposed him. For a long period, this military strategy worked effectively. Napoleon was able to crush the Prussians and the Austrians and even brought Russian to the negotiation table.

However, his resistance to changing his militant ways meant that the dominance was unsustainable since his opponents were learning and adapting to his methods. Napoleon also faced a significant problem in the form of the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom's navy protected the nation from Napoleon, and the UK could continuously fund his enemies from Austria to Portugal. Napoleon's downfall was seemingly a result of a combination of problems. It turns out Napoleon's shortcomings and downfall had nothing to do with his height. Napoleon's fall from power in 1814 was the consequence of a combination of reasons that all resulted from a chain reaction primarily caused by Napoleon's own failure in his engagement in major military campaigns. The disastrous campaign against Russia was a prime example of his military failures. Napoleon led his army to Russia in 1812 aiming to invade the country following its default of the Erfurt and Tilsit treaties of 1808 and choosing to again open trade with the United Kingdom (Herold). This campaign involved one of Napoleon's most significant mistake in the military context. Typically, Napoleon could invade new territories successfully using his unified and robust army. However, during this invasion of Russia, Napoleon decided to split his army to fight on two fronts (Neillands).

Napoleon gathered the most massive army ever seen in Europe in a reaction to Russia's rejection of the Continental System that had an adverse impact on its economy. Napoleon had established and instituted the Continental System as a way of preventing European nations from trading with Britain aiming at strangling its opponent's economy. This grand army consisted approximately 600, 000 soldiers that also included troops from allied states and vassals. The army invaded Russia in 1812 causing the retreat of the Russian forces and, consequently, the systematic devastation of Russia's lands (Herold). However, when the grand army eventually captured Moscow, it stood at a mere fifth of its initial strength. Napoleon had decided to cross the Berezina River in the later stages of November despite an initial decision to retreat. His army was, however, unable to handle the cold. Their policy of devastating the lands through slash and burn also left the large army reliant on foraging for food in the local areas. They faced a significant insufficiency of food. Ultimately, starvation combined with Russia's extreme cold worked to defeat Napoleon's army with less than 100, 000 soldiers being able to return compared to the 600, 000 strong that started the invasion (Herold). Napoleon's failure in Russia hastened his downfall since it contributed to a significant decline in his authority and control both internally and in the international context. The catastrophic failure in Russia led to several changes in how Napoleon operated and led his army and how his opponents perceived his army and its strength. For one, this failure resulted in a shift of attitude in Napoleon (Jones). He no longer wanted to delegate. The French were now experiencing a shortfall in soldiers further weakening Napoleon's army. In contrast, the rest of the nations were getting stronger by forming alliances opposed to Napoleon's invasions. These alliances also included

former allies who deserted Napoleon. Prussia, for instance, was the first to abandon and went on to ally with Russia. Sweden and Great Britain subsequently joined the alliance further strengthening the forces against Napoleon. After the inclusion of Austria, the War of Liberation started with the four collaborators agreeing to unify in the bid to defeat France. The Battle of Nations led by this united force caused France's final defeat in 1813 (Riley).

Following another devastating defeat, Napoleon resulted in retreating to Paris where his political shortcomings came to the fore as well, influencing a continuation of his fall from power and undermining his former supremacy. Napoleon let his ego and pride come in the way of making logical political decisions that would save face while also preserving France's position globally. After his military defeat at the Battle, the four allied nations proposed a peace option with Napoleon that included France returning to her natural boundaries within the Alps and the Rhine. Napoleon, misguided by ego, rejected the offer causing the allies to push further in their advance. The visit to Paris by Prince Schwarzenberg of Austria who was sent as the coalition's representative revealed the shortcomings in Napoleon's character that also contributed to his downfall. While Napoleon had previously portrayed the image of a commanding character, the defeat had converted him to an individual who was afraid of being stripped of the respect and reputation he had previously enjoyed. Nonetheless, Prince Schwarzenberg found that Napoleon still demonstrated his stubbornness and reluctance to make concessions (Riley). Napoleon's ego and pride, as well as an inherent toughness and love for glory and exaltation, prevented him from perceiving

the possible benefits of making a deal with his opponents. He thought that making concessions would be received joyously at first but result in a loss of confidence in him in the long term. The unwillingness to make concessions for peace at this crucial stage of his life as a leader is generally attributed to an innate gambling instinct. This instinct influenced his rejection of the idea that Destiny might abandon him and occasion a loss in battle. Indeed, even when he had already faced this defeat, he still held on desperately to the belief that he was still able to defeat his enemies in battle despite the current failures. Historians perceive the notion that fear might have also influenced his misguided decisions as foreign to his strong character. Accordingly, fear has been seldom considered as a cause of Napoleon's downfall.