

Napoleon Bonaparte, early years

Napoleon Bonaparte, the French Caesar, the military leader whose conquests rivaled those of Alexander the Great, is one of the greatest historical figures of the Western civilization. Born on 15 August 1769, in the town of Ajaccio island of Corsica, Napoleon was not even French but a native Corsican whose island was ceded to France in the same year when he was born. Napoleon's father was a fervent supporter of the island's independence movement yet his son would go to become the supreme leader of France and make the country European superpower.

Even in Napoleon's early years it was clear to many around him that he was destined for greatness. His dreams and passions were radically different from those of the young people of his age.

As a young boy growing up on the island of Corsica, Napoleon Buonaparte begged his older brother to switch places with him in a mock combat pitting Romans and Carthaginians. The skinny youngster couldn't stand being on the losing side.¹

While studying in the *Brieene* military college, another side of Napoleon's character was revealed.

In May 1779, the nine-year-old arrived as a scholarship student at the Brieene military college in the Champagne region, speaking a Corsican dialect and bad French. Napoleon escaped his classmates' bullying by

¹ Susan Jaques, *The Caesar of Paris Napoleon Bonaparte, Rome, and the Artistic Obsession that Shaped an Empire* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2020) p.7.

reading, especially biographies of antiquity's great military commanders. His fascination with antiquity continued at the Military Academy in Paris. Napoleon was so well versed in Greek and Roman history that Corsican leader Pasquale Paoli told him: "There is nothing modern in you; you are entirely out of Plutarch."²

As mentioned above, after *Brienne*, Napoleon continued his military studies in *École Militaire* academy. He was the first Corsican to graduate from that famous institution.³

The time spent in those French schools didn't exactly help convert Napoleon from the fervent Corsican nationalist he was to a French supporter so at the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 he obtained permission from the army to return to Corsica. His intention was to fight for the island's independence. Over time though Napoleon became supporter of the revolution and that led to a conflict with the pro-independence forces on the island. Ultimately not only Napoleon but his whole family had to leave Corsica.⁴

Napoleon's pro-republican positions attracted the attention of the brother of Robespierre and the young Corsican was appointed an artillery commander of the republican forces who were sent to capture the city of Toulon. His success there brought another promotion, this time to the position of brigadier general in charge of the artillery of the French army in Italy. Napoleon was only 24 years of age when he became a general.

Bonaparte was not harmed during the Thermidorian Reaction (July 1794) despite his close association with the Robespierres but he had to spend some time under house arrest. After that for a short period of time Napoleon was

² Ibid.

³ , Philip Dwyer, *Napoleon: The Path to Power* (New Haven,CT: Yale University Press, 2008) p.42.

⁴ , Alan Schom, *Napoleon Bonaparte: A Life* (N.Y.: HarperCollins, 1997) p.32.

sidelined and he even considered going to Constantinople to offer his services to the Sultan of the Ottomans.

But when the royalist rebellion in Paris in October 1795 was at the cusp of restoring the monarchy the leaders of the revolution, well aware of Napoleon's military talent turn to him for help. Skillfully using the artillery Bonaparte quickly turned around what was otherwise very precarious situation and quashed the royalists' rebellion.⁵ That success made him the darling of the new revolutionary rulers, the Directorate and his star was rising again. After that Napoleon led a successful campaign against the State of Piedmont and their Habsburg allies. It is interesting to find out that, at least, according to Napoleon, it is not like he struggled at the beginning of his military career to find his way around.

Napoleon himself, late in his life said the following: "I have fought sixty battles and I have learned nothing which I did not know at the beginning. Look at Caesar; he fought the first like the last".⁶ Here in full display is this idea Bonaparte had of himself: "I am of the race of the Caesars, and of the best of their kind, the founders."⁷ After this First Italian campaign Napoleon started to slowly accumulate power until he abolished the Republic and crowned himself an Emperor of the French Empire.

⁵ Vincent Cronin, *Napoleon* (London: HarperCollins, 1994) p.112.

⁶, Frank McLynn, *Napoleon: a Biography* (London: Trafalgar Square, 1998) p.84.

⁷ Jaques, *Napoleon*, p.6.

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