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A Little History of the World

Illustrated Edition

Written by E. H. Gombrich

Published by Yale University Press

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A LITTLE HISTORY OF THE WORLD

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E. H.
GOMBRICH
A LITTLE
HISTORY
OF THE
WORLD
ILLUSTRATED EDITION

TRANSLATED BY CAROLINE MUSTILL

The Estate of E. H. Gombrich would like to thank, for information and advice: Patrick Boyde, Henry French, Rhodri Hayward, the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, J. B. Trapp and, in particular, Adrian Lyttelton.

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Also stets Dir's angehört

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CHAPTER 35

THE LAST
CONQUEROR

WHAT I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED BEST ABOUT THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD is that it is true. That all the extraordinary things we read were no less real than you and I are today. What is more, what did happen is often far more exciting and amazing than anything we could invent. I am now going to tell you the story of one of the most astonishing of all those adventures, which was nevertheless as real as your life or mine. It took place not so long ago. My own grandfather was alive then, and he would have been about your age.

It begins like this. Near Italy there is an island, mountainous, sunny and poor, called Corsica. On that island there lived a lawyer, together with his wife and their eight children. His name was Buonaparte. At the time when his second son, Napoleon, was born, in 1769, the island had just been sold to France by the Genoese. This did not go down well with the Corsicans and there were many battles with the French governors. The young Napoleon was to become an officer, so his father sent him, at the age of ten, to a military school in France. He was poor – his father could barely support him, and this made him withdrawn and unhappy and he didn't play with his fellow students. 'I sought out a corner of the school,' he was to say later, 'where I could sit and dream to my heart's content. When my companions tried to take over my corner, I defended it with all my might. I already knew instinctively that my will could triumph over the will of others, and that anything I wanted could be mine.'

He learnt a lot and had a wonderful memory. At seventeen he became a second lieutenant in the French army, and it was there that he was given the nickname 'the little corporal', because he was so short. He almost starved. He read widely and missed nothing. When the Revolution broke out three years later in 1789, Corsica wanted to free itself from French rule. Napoleon returned home to fight the French. But he was soon back in Paris, for, as he wrote in a letter at the time, 'Only in Paris can one do anything.' He was right. In Paris he did succeed in doing something. It so happened that one of Napoleon's fellow countrymen was serving as a senior officer in an army sent by the revolutionaries to crush resistance in the provincial town of Toulon. He took the twenty-five-year-old lieutenant with him, and didn't regret it. Napoleon gave such sound advice, on where to place the cannons and where to aim them, that the city was quickly taken. For this he was made a general. But in those troubled times this was no sure sign of a great career. If you were the friend of one party, you were the enemy of another. When the government, which was made up of Robespierre's friends, was overthrown, Napoleon was arrested too. True, he was soon released, but in punishment for his friendship with the Jacobins he lost his command and was dismissed from the army. He was desperately poor and the future looked grim. However, once again, thanks to someone he knew, his name was put forward to the five men of the Paris Directorate, and they gave him the task of crushing a violent demonstration of young noblemen. Napoleon didn't hesitate to fire into the crowd and so dispersed the demonstrators. In recognition, he was reinstated to the rank of general and given command of a small army sent to Italy to spread the ideas of the French Revolution.

It seemed a hopeless task. The army lacked everything. France was destitute and in chaos. In 1796, at the outset of the campaign, General Napoleon (who now signed himself 'Bonaparte', in the French manner) spoke briefly to his troops: 'Soldiers! You are almost naked and ill-fed. The government owes you much and cannot pay you. But I will lead you to the most fertile plain in the world. Rich provinces and great towns will fall into your hands, and in them you will find honour, glory and riches. Soldiers! Do you lack courage and steadfastness?' With these words he inspired his soldiers, and so great was his skill in the face of the far greater strength of his enemies that he won victories everywhere he went. Within a few weeks of the start of the campaign he was able to write in a letter of command

to his troops: 'Soldiers! In fourteen days you have won six victories, captured twenty-one banners and fifty-five pieces of cannon. You have won battles without cannon, crossed rivers without bridges, marched great distances without boots, slept in the open without brandy and often without bread. I rejoice that each of you, upon returning home, will be able to say with pride: I too was of that army that conquered Italy!'

And, true to his words, it wasn't long before his army had conquered the whole of northern Italy and made it a republic along the lines of France or Belgium. Wherever he went, if a beautiful work of art caught his eye, he had it sent to Paris. Then he turned north towards Austria, because the emperor had attacked him in Italy. Messengers from the emperor in Vienna came to meet him in the town of Leoben in Styria. A raised seat had been prepared for the emperor's envoy in the council chamber. 'Take away that chair,' said Napoleon, 'I can never see a throne without feeling the urge to sit on it.' He then demanded that the emperor cede to France all the parts of Germany that lay to the west of the Rhine. After that he returned to Paris. But in Paris there was nothing for him to do. So he put forward a proposal to the government for an adventurous undertaking. France's greatest enemy at this time was Britain, and, thanks to their many colonial possessions in America, Africa, India and Australia, the British had become very powerful. The French couldn't attack Britain directly because their army was too weak and, besides, they didn't have enough good ships. But on the other hand, if Napoleon were to occupy Egypt, he could strike at the sources of Britain's wealth by threatening the route to its colonial possessions in India.

So Napoleon took an army to Egypt. Like Alexander the Great, he wanted to conquer the whole of the Orient. He took scholars with him too, to observe and study the remnants of antiquity. On reaching Egypt he spoke to the Muslim Egyptians as if he were a prophet, like Muhammad. In solemn tones he told them that he could read the innermost secrets of their hearts. His coming, he said, had been prophesied centuries before, and they would find it written in the Koran. 'All efforts to resist me are doomed, for I am destined to succeed in all I undertake.'

And at first events seemed to prove him right. He defeated the Egyptian armies in a great battle beside the pyramids in 1798, and on other occasions too, for no one was better than he at fighting battles on dry land. But at sea the British had the upper hand, and their famous admiral Nelson destroyed the French fleet off



BATTLE OF
THE PYRAMIDS

Aboukir on the Egyptian coast. When plague broke out among his troops and news came that the government in Paris was in disarray, Napoleon abandoned his soldiers and secretly took ship for France. There he received a hero's welcome. Everyone hoped that the famous general would prove as capable at home as he had been in hostile lands. Encouraged by their support, in 1799 he boldly turned his guns on the seat of government in Paris. His grenadiers threw the elected representatives of the people out of the council chambers, and he assumed supreme command. Following the example of ancient Rome, he proclaimed himself consul.

In that role Napoleon held court in splendour in the former residence of the kings of France, and brought back many noblemen from exile. But mostly he worked night and day at establishing order in France. To him, this meant that nothing should happen at any time or in any place unless he wished it. And he succeeded. He established a collection of laws in accordance with the new basic principles and named it after himself: the Napoleonic Code. In a new campaign

in Italy he defeated Austria once again. He was idolised by his soldiers and all of France worshipped him because he had brought the country glory and conquests. They made him consul for life. But this still did not satisfy Napoleon. In 1804 he proclaimed himself emperor. Emperor of the French! The pope himself made the journey to France to crown him. Soon afterwards he had himself proclaimed king of Italy as well. The other countries grew fearful of this mighty newcomer, and Britain, Prussia, Austria, Russia and Sweden formed an alliance against him. Napoleon didn't let this worry him. He wasn't afraid of enemy armies, however large they were. In the winter of 1805 he attacked and inflicted a crushing defeat on an alliance of enemy troops at Austerlitz. Now Napoleon was lord of almost all of Europe. He gave each of his relatives a kingdom – a little souvenir, as it were. His stepson became viceroy of Italy, his elder brother was given Naples, his younger brother Holland, his brother-in-law part of Germany and his sisters duchies in Italy. Which was not bad going for a Corsican lawyer's family who, hardly twenty years before, had been sitting round a table on their distant island, sharing a simple meal.

EMPEROR OF
THE FRENCH!



In Germany, too, all the power was in Napoleon's hands, because the German princes who had turned their backs on the emperor in Vienna long ago had now become allies of the mighty Napoleon. The emperor Francis gave up the title of German emperor, and that was the end of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation which had begun with the coronation of Charlemagne in Rome a thousand years before. The year was 1806. From now on, Francis of Habsburg was merely emperor of Austria.

Next Napoleon attacked the Hohenzollerns, and in a matter of days the Prussian armies had been soundly defeated. In the same year he entered Berlin, and from there he imposed his laws on Europe. First and foremost, he forbade anyone in the whole of Europe to have any business dealings with France's enemies, the British. This was known as the Continental System. Having lost his entire fleet to Admiral Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar the previous year, Napoleon could not invade that powerful country. Instead he planned to bring the British to their knees with an economic blockade. When the other states refused to agree to this, he returned to Germany and attacked the Russians, now allied with the Prussians. And, in 1807, he was able to present his youngest brother with part of Germany as his kingdom.

Now it was Spain's turn. He conquered that country and gave its crown to his brother Joseph, previously king of Naples, and gave Naples to one of his brothers-in-law. But the day came when the inhabitants of all these countries had had enough of being passed around the Bonaparte family as presents. The Spaniards were the first to resist French rule, from 1808 onwards. They didn't fight any battles as such, but the entire population was in a constant state of rebellion which the French soldiers were unable to crush, despite their brutal efforts. The emperor of Austria had also had enough of being bossed around by Napoleon. In 1809 a new war broke out. Napoleon's army was approaching Vienna and had reached the outskirts, at Aspern. There, for the first time in his life, Napoleon experienced defeat, at the hands of the valiant general Archduke Charles. However, only a few days later he soundly defeated the Austrian army at Wagram. He marched into Vienna, installed himself in the imperial palace at Schönbrunn and forced the emperor Francis to give him the hand of his daughter Marie-Louise in marriage. For a member of the imperial house of Habsburg, whose family had reigned from Vienna for more than 500 years, this was no easy thing to do. Napoleon had no princely ancestry. He was just a jumped-up little lieutenant who, through his extraordinary ability and nothing else, was now lord and master of Europe.

In 1810 Marie-Louise gave birth to a son, to whom Napoleon gave the title King of Rome. Napoleon's empire was by now considerably larger than that of



KING OF ROME

Charlemagne, if we include all the kingdoms of his brothers and sisters and generals, which were theirs only in name. If he didn't like their conduct he used to write them insulting letters. For example, to his brother, the king of Westphalia, he wrote: 'I've seen one of your orders of the day to the soldiers that will make you the laughing stock of Germany, Austria and France. Have you no friend to tell you a few home truths? You are a king and the emperor's brother – titles worth nothing on the battlefield. There, you have to be a soldier and nothing but a soldier. Forget your ministers, your ambassadors and your finery. You have to sleep out in the vanguard with your men, sit on your horse, day and night. March in the vanguard, so you know what's going on.' The letter ends: 'And for God's sake have the wit to write and speak correctly!' This was how the emperor treated his brothers, the kings of Europe. But he treated the people even worse. He cared nothing for what they thought or what they felt. To him they were merely a source of money or, better still, soldiers. But as time went on they became less and less willing to obey him. After the Spaniards, the peasants in the Tirol were the next to rebel against the French and Bavarian soldiers. The Tirol was a region that Napoleon had taken away from the emperor of Austria and given to the kingdom of Bavaria. Their rebellion ended only when Napoleon captured their leader, Andreas Hofer, and had him shot.

In Germany, too, the whole population was in a state of great agitation and indignation at the French emperor's wilful brutality. And now that most of the German principalities were under French rule, for the first time in their history they sensed a common destiny: they weren't French, they were Germans. Who cared if the king of Prussia was on good terms with the king of Saxony or not, or if the king of Bavaria had allied himself with Napoleon's brother? The experience shared by all Germans, that of being dominated by foreigners, had given birth to a shared desire: the wish to be free. For the first time in the whole of history, all Germans – students and poets, peasants and noblemen – joined forces against their rulers to liberate themselves. But it wasn't as easy as that. Napoleon was all-powerful. The great German poet Goethe said at the time: 'Shake your chains how you may, the man is too great for you!' And indeed, for a long time no amount of inspiration or heroism could match the might of Napoleon. What finally brought him down was his insatiable ambition. The power he had already never seemed

to be enough: to him it was only the beginning. And now it was Russia's turn. The Russians had defied his command not to trade with the British, and for this they had to be punished!

Napoleon assembled troops from every region of his vast empire until he had an army of some six hundred thousand men – just think of it, more than half a million human beings! One of the largest armies the world had ever seen. And now, in 1812, this army marched on Russia. As the soldiers penetrated deeper and deeper into the heartland, they met with no resistance. When they advanced, the Russians retreated, just as they had done before the troops of Charles XII of Sweden. At last, outside the gates of Moscow, the mighty Russian army stopped. Napoleon attacked and seemed to be victorious – I almost said 'of course', since for him winning battles was the same as solving puzzles, if you are someone who is good at that sort of thing. He would note the enemy's position and knew immediately where to place his own troops in order to evade or attack them. So he marched into Moscow, only to find the city almost empty and most of its inhabitants fled. It was late autumn. Napoleon installed himself in the Kremlin, the ancient imperial castle, and waited to dictate his terms. Then came news that the suburbs of Moscow were burning. In those days most of Moscow's houses were made of wood, and as the fire spread, large parts of the city were engulfed in



NAPOLÉON'S
RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN

flames. The Russians had probably started the fires to put pressure on the French. All efforts to extinguish them were in vain.

Where could six hundred thousand men stay, with Moscow burnt? And how could they be fed? Napoleon had no choice but to retreat. In the meantime, however, winter had arrived and it was bitterly cold. Everything in sight along their route had already been plundered and consumed. The retreat across the endless, frozen wastes of the Russian plains would now become something too terrible to describe. Overcome by cold and starvation, more and more soldiers fell by the wayside. Horses perished in their thousands. The Russian Cossacks rode up and attacked the rear and flanks of the army. The soldiers fought with desperation. Surrounded by Cossacks, and in the midst of a raging snowstorm, they managed to cross the great Berezina River. But little by little their strength ebbed away and they lost hope. Fewer than one in twenty of the soldiers survived this terrible defeat and reached the German frontier in the last stages of sickness and exhaustion. Disguised as a peasant, Napoleon abandoned his troops and hurried back to Paris on a sledge.

His first act was to raise fresh troops, for now that his strength was reduced, there were rebellions everywhere. Yet once again, he succeeded in raising a mighty army, this time made up entirely of young men. These were the last men left in France, whom Napoleon now sent to combat the subject peoples. He marched on Germany. The emperor of Austria sent his chancellor, Metternich, to negotiate a peace treaty. Metternich talked to Napoleon for a whole day: 'And what if this army of boys that you have just raised is mown down?' At these words, Napoleon turned first white, then purple with rage: 'You are no soldier!' he shouted. 'You know nothing of a soldier's heart. I was raised on the battlefield, and a man such as I doesn't give a fig for a million lives!' With this outburst, so Metternich related, Napoleon hurled his hat across the room.

Metternich left the hat where it lay and said calmly: 'Why should I be the only person to hear this, within the privacy of these four walls? Open the doors so that your words may resound from one end of France to the other.' Napoleon rejected the terms of the emperor's peace treaty, telling Metternich he didn't have any choice. If he wished to remain emperor of the French, he would have to fight on and win. In 1813 a battle took place, at Leipzig in Germany, between Napoleon's army and those of his allied enemies. On the first day, Napoleon had

the upper hand. But when, on the second, he was suddenly abandoned by the Bavarian troops who were fighting for him, he lost the battle and was forced to retreat. During this retreat he fought with another large army of Bavarians which was pursuing him, after which he returned to Paris.

He had been right: following his defeat the French deposed him. He was given sovereignty over the little island of Elba, to which he retired. However, the princes and the emperor who had brought about his defeat met in Vienna in 1814 to negotiate with one another, and share out Europe among themselves. It was their opinion that the Enlightenment had been a disaster for Europe. The idea of Liberty, in particular, was responsible for all the disturbances and the countless victims, both of the Revolution and of Napoleon's wars. They wanted to undo the whole Revolution. Metternich in particular was determined that everything should be as it had been before, and that no similar upheaval should ever be allowed to happen again. It was therefore vital, or so he thought, that nothing should be written or printed in Austria without the approval of the government and the emperor.

In France the Revolution was totally extinguished. The brother of Louis XVI came to the throne as Louis XVIII (the title of Louis XVII having been given to the son of Louis XVI, who had died during the Revolution). The new Louis ruled with



CONGRESS OF VIENNA

DUKE OF
WELLINGTON

his court in France with the same pomp and the same lack of judgement as his unhappy brother, just as if the twenty-six years of revolution and empire had never taken place. The French became increasingly discontented. When Napoleon heard about this, he secretly left Elba (in 1815) and landed in France accompanied by a small number of soldiers. Louis sent an army to fight him. But as soon as the soldiers saw Napoleon, they deserted and went over to his side, and were joined by soldiers from other garrisons. After a few days' march, the emperor Napoleon entered Paris in triumph, and King Louis XVIII fled.

The princes, still conferring in Vienna, were furious and declared Napoleon to be the enemy of humanity. Under the command of the English duke of Wellington, an army, largely made up of British and German soldiers, was assembled in Belgium. Napoleon attacked without delay. A savage battle followed in 1815 at a place named Waterloo. Once again, Napoleon seemed at first to be winning. However, one of his generals misunderstood the order he had been given and led his troops in the wrong direction. Towards evening, the commander of the Prussian troops, General Blücher, gathered together

his exhausted men and, with the words 'It looks pretty hopeless, but we mustn't give in', led them back into battle. It was to be Napoleon's last defeat. He fled with his army, was once again deposed and forced to leave France.

He embarked on a British ship, placing himself voluntarily in the hands of his oldest enemies, the only ones he had never beaten. He was counting on their magnanimity, and said that he wished to live as a private citizen under English law. But in all his life Napoleon himself had rarely shown any magnanimity. Instead the British declared him a prisoner of war and sent him to a tiny uninhabited island far out in the Atlantic, known as the Island of St Helena, so that he might never come back again. There he spent the last six years of his life, abandoned and powerless,



dictating the memories of all his deeds and victories, and quarrelling with the English governor, who wouldn't even let him take a walk on his own around the island. And that was the end of the little man with the pale complexion, whose strength of will and clarity of mind were greater than those of any ruler before him. Meanwhile the great powers of the past, those ancient and pious princely houses, once again ruled Europe. And the austere and unyielding Metternich, who would not stoop to pick up Napoleon's hat, guided the destinies of Europe from Vienna through his emissaries as if the Revolution had never taken place.

A SAVAGE BATTLE
FOLLOWED IN 1815
AT A PLACE NAMED
WATERLOO