

All he surveyed

# Napoleon's journey from sublime to ridiculous

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**Napoleon: A Life.** By Adam Zamoyski. *Basic Books*; 784 pages; \$40. *William Collins*; £30.

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**I**F YOU HAVE ever been confused about exactly what Napoleon was doing in Russia in 1812, you are in good company. He was, too. As his army arrived in Lithuania, en route to Moscow, fury overtook him. “I am already in Wilna,” he said, “and I still don’t know what we are fighting over.”

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A historian writing about Napoleon, as Adam Zamoyski does in this magnificent new biography, faces many challenges, not least the scale of the subject. Napoleon’s stature might have been modest but, for good and ill, his achievements were vast. He unfurled the map of France from Rome to Amsterdam, assembled the staggering 600,000-strong Grande Armée, then watched it become more petite by the day as it was ravaged by frostbite, sickness and one of the worst-ever military disasters.

Then there is the overwhelming mass of literature, including a monumental work published this year by Michael Broers, another distinguished historian. Earlier accounts of Napoleon’s life were less reputable. A comet, say some, streaked across the sky at his birth. At his death Goethe gushingly likened him to a “demi-god”. Others have portrayed him as a violent monster. Humbug, says Mr Zamoyski. Napoleon was neither demon nor deity. He was a man, with great talents and great flaws, often intertwined.

For the commander who caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of troops was also the ruler who forbade corporal punishment in his schools. The brilliant logistician who shod an army, and unrolled the roads that halved travel times across France, also had baffling practical blind spots. In Egypt his men—lacking water bottles—died of thirst. In Russia they were reduced to cutting meat from still-living horses, lest it freeze. A dazzlingly charismatic warrior in the field, at home

Napoleon was considerably less stylish. At court he was gauche and ill at ease; as one visitor noted, he “picked his nose very much”.

As Mr Zamoyski deftly shows, the arc of his life spanned similar contrasts. Napoleon Bonaparte, the Emperor of the French, started out as the sallow-skinned, underwhelming, Italian-speaking Napoleone Buonaparte from Corsica. Sent away to become a military cadet, as a lonely young man he got into a habit of secluding himself for hours, reading improving works and writing dull ones. “Clisson et Eugénie” was a novella about a young man of lofty ideals who becomes a soldier and whose “victories followed one after the other”. Mr Zamoyski (who, unlike his subject, writes beautifully) calls it “a psychoanalyst’s feast”. It is also awful.

And prescient. The victories did follow one after another. Even in a book on the imperial scale of Mr Zamoyski’s, Bonaparte’s rise is a rapid blur. Within a few chapters he moves from lowly bit-part in Corsica, to queller of crowds in Paris, to preening victor in Italy, then on, and on...By the age of 28, he was a nationally feted general. By his mid-30s, he was an emperor who had declared victories from Italy to Egypt.

Note that word “declare”. If Napoleon’s followers sometimes exaggerated his brilliance, that is nothing compared with his own hyperbole. He wrote his dispatches with the florid creativity he had lavished on “Clisson et Eugénie”. The bodies of dead French soldiers vanished; the corpses of enemies piled up. The phrase “to lie like a bulletin” entered common speech.

But not everything could be rewritten. Eventually the French started to grow disgruntled with relentless war. Rumbles of disapproval were heard in Paris. Upon Napoleon’s return from Russia, balls were held in the capital in an attempt to raise spirits. Instead, as soldiers who had lost legs, arms, noses and ears to frostbite stumped about the dance floors, they resulted in scenes of Goya-ish grotesquerie.

“From the sublime to the ridiculous”, Napoleon had announced on the return from that disastrous campaign, “there is but one step.” He was right. Not long afterwards, the former ruler of all France, who once cut a swathe through Europe, was demoted to rule only Elba—reduced to “swishing with his stick at the flowers” as he walked through his garden.

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