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Perspectives on Napoleon

Self-Made Myth

Bonaparte was not only a warrior; he was also a shrewd propagandist. During his first campaign in Italy, he carefully crafted reports from the battlefield, designed to increase his glory while masking the ruthlessness with which he plundered the country.

> TULARD: *He created his own newspapers* — France and the Army of Italy, *and* The Newspaper of the Army of Italy, *which exalt his victories. Bonaparte himself actually writes some articles. He himself wrote: "Bonaparte flies like lightning and strikes like a thunderbolt."*

> JOURQUIN: *He saw that his intelligence, his abilities were more than just military. Not only had he become a great general, but also possibly a future statesman. And everybody realizes it, not only in Italy, but in France too.*

His strategy included commissioning paintings of himself. He brilliantly created a mythical image of himself – an infallible hero, destined by God to rule over France.

> BERTAUD: *He orders a painting after a victory. He dictates the theme, the layout of the characters. He even orders the dimensions of the frame.*

> TULARD: *From the very beginning Napoleon gave himself an image. He created his own history. From his first triumphs, Bonaparte understood that it's not enough to win victories. He uses images to make sure that his victories in Italy are widely publicized in France.*

Although the Egyptian campaign was a military disaster, Napoleon was able to exploit the French people's fascination with the mysterious

country to his advantage. He used the press to keep the campaign, and himself, in people's minds. Street vendors in Paris sold pictures with palm trees, with pyramids, or with a general covered by plumes who harangues his troops and massacres the infidels. Paris theaters produced spectacles about the "Victory of the Pyramids." Paintings of the time show him returning to France, grandly victorious, with a star of destiny shining over his ship. By the time Napoleon returned to France from Egypt in August 1799, he was famous.

His brillant career ended on June 22, 1815 — four days after the Battle of Waterloo, when he abdicated his throne for the second time. With no hope of escape, he put himself at the mercy of Great Britain. He wished, he said, "to reside in a country house near London." The British turned him down. Instead, they sent him back into exile and took no chances that he would ever return.

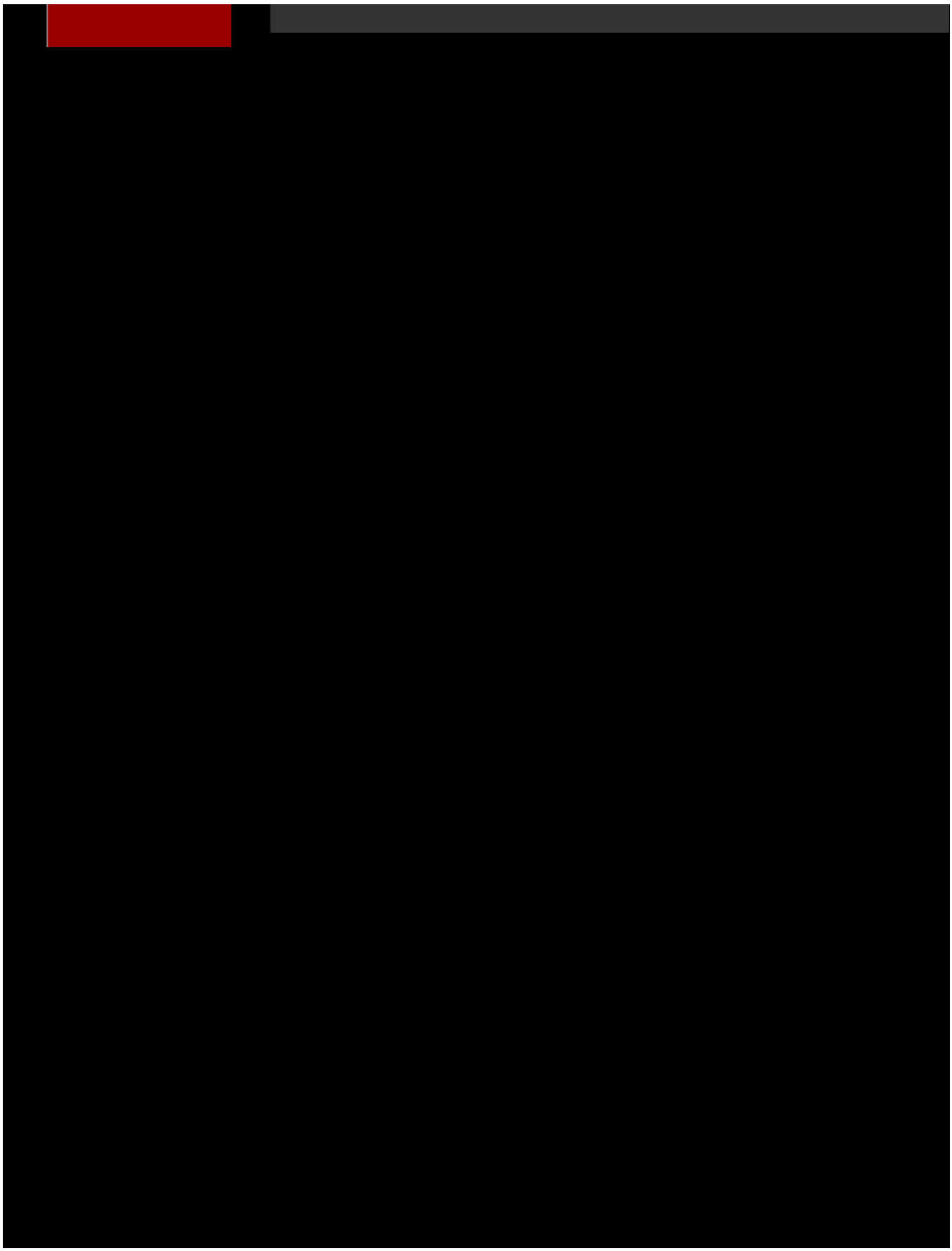
Allowing him a small group of loyal followers, they chose a far-flung outpost of their Empire, a slab of volcanic rock in the South Atlantic Ocean, and one of the most remote places on earth — St. Helena.

> KAUFFMANN: *No one escapes from St. Helena. This far-away island, this isolated piece of rock, beaten by the winds, sinister. When Napoleon sees this fortress for the first time, he understands everything. He knows at this moment this is going to be his grave.*

Once the ruler of nearly all of Europe, Napoleon found himself confined to an island ten miles long and six miles wide. On Elba, he had at least been an Emperor. On St. Helena he was a prisoner, guarded by 2000 soldiers and two ships that circled the island 24 hours a day. His final palace would be a wooden bungalow that had once been a row of cattle stalls.

He was forty-six years-old, with nothing to do for the rest of his life but eat, sleep, and search for a way to occupy his mind. "To die is nothing," he said, "but to live defeated and without glory is to die every day."

Stripped of every vestige of power, on this stifling, windswept island lost in the Atlantic, Napoleon fought the endless boredom of his days. He gardened, read any book or newspaper he could get his hands on, tried re-writing a tragedy of Voltaire's, imposed an exacting imperial etiquette on his retinue, and sparred with the island's English governor, who insisted on calling Napoleon General Bonaparte.

Only one weapon was left him — words. With words, he would launch his last campaign. Day after day, he dictated his memoirs, forging the story of his life into the stuff of legend.

"History is a set of lies that people have agreed upon," Napoleon said. "Even when I am gone, I shall remain in people's minds the star of their rights, my name will be the war cry of their efforts, the motto of their hopes."