10 Napoleon Quotes in Context

From: <http://shannonselin.com/2014/08/10-napoleon-bonaparte-quotes-context/>

**1. In war, three-quarters turns on personal character and relations; the balance of manpower and materials counts only for the remaining quarter.**

Variant: In war, moral power is to physical as three parts out of four.

These words are from Napoleon’s notes entitled “Observations on Spanish Affairs,” which he wrote on August 27, 1808 at the palace of Saint-Cloud. They were intended for [his brother Joseph](http://shannonselin.com/2014/07/joseph-bonaparte-king-spain-new-jersey/), whom he had recently installed as King of Spain. The Spaniards were opposed to French rule and the war was becoming savage. Napoleon wrote:

We will not discuss here if the line of the Ebro is good…. All these questions are pointless. We will content ourselves with saying that since we have taken the line of the Ebro, the troops can recover and rest, there is at least the advantage that the country is healthier, being more elevated, and we can wait there until the heat has passed. Above all, we must not abandon this line without a specific plan that leaves no uncertainty about subsequent operations. It would be a great misfortune to abandon this line and then later be obliged to retake it.

In war, three-quarters turns on personal character and relations; the balance of manpower and materials counts only for the remaining quarter. (1)

I have Napoleon say a version of this in [Napoleon in America](http://shannonselin.com/book/napoleon-in-america/).

**2. From the sublime to the ridiculous is but a step.**

Variant: There is only one step from the sublime to the ridiculous.



Napoleon retreats from Moscow, by Adolf Northen

Napoleon said this during his retreat from Russia. On December 5, 1812, at Smorgoni, he left the remains of his straggling army under the command of his brother-in-law, [Joachim Murat](http://www.madamegilflurt.com/2014/07/a-salon-guest-caroline-bonaparte-murat.html) (who also soon abandoned the troops), and hurried ahead towards Paris. On December 10, his sleigh reached Warsaw, where he was greeted by France’s ambassador to Poland, the Abbé de Pradt. After a short meeting, Napoleon dismissed de Pradt, instructing him to return after dinner with two Polish politicians – Count Stanislas Potocki and the minister of finance. De Pradt recounts:

We rejoined him about three o’clock, he had just risen from table.

‘How long have I been at Warsaw? Eight days. No, only two hours,’ he said, laughing, without other preparation or preamble. ‘From the sublime to the ridiculous there is but one step. How do you find yourself, Monsieur Stanislas, and you, Sir, the Minister of Finance?’ To the repeated protests of these gentlemen of the satisfaction they felt at seeing him safe and well after so many dangers, [Napoleon said:] ‘Dangers! Not in the least. I live in the midst of agitation: the more I am crossed, the better I am. It is only sluggish kings who grow fat in their palaces: horseback and camps for me. From the sublime to the ridiculous there is but one step.’ It was clear that he saw himself pursued by the hissing of all Europe, which was to him the greatest possible punishment. (2)

**3. You write to me that it is impossible; the word is not French.**

Variant: The word impossible is not French. Also misquoted as: The word impossible is not in my dictionary.

This phrase comes from a letter that Napoleon wrote from Dresden on July 9, 1813, to General Jean Le Marois, the governor of Magdeburg, a French stronghold in Germany. Napoleon was in trouble. He had lost a large chunk of the Grande Armée in the Russian campaign. Russia and Prussia had pushed into Germany. The British had liberated most of Spain. Napoleon’s soldiers were exhausted. Desertion was high. Ammunition and supplies were scarce. After winning the bloody Battle of Bautzen in late May, Napoleon on June 2 agreed to a two-month truce with the Russian-Prussian coalition.

You might think the quote had something to do with an attempt to stir men for battle. Instead it’s about the delivery of fodder. Here’s what Napoleon wrote:

I received your letter of 6th July. You have 240,000 bushels of oats at Magdeburg. ‘That is impossible,’ you write to me: that is not French. I am displeased with your letter. Immediately send two boats filled with oats for the horses of the Guard, who are dying. The oats will be replaced by what is happening in the country, by the next harvest, and, finally, by what is sent by the 32nd division. (3)

**4. What is the throne? A bit of wood gilded and covered with velvet.**

Variants: Four pieces of gilded wood covered with a piece of velvet. This wooden frame covered with velvet.

Napoleon said this to the French Legislative Body on January 1, 1814. After that letter to La Marois, things went from bad to worse. Having won the Battle of Leipzig in October 1813, the Allies were ready to carry the war onto French soil. It was no longer a question of trying to save the Empire. Napoleon needed to save his crown. In December he tried to gain political support by convening the Senate and the Council of State with the Chamber of Deputies in a joint session of the legislature. Two committees were elected to study Allied peace proposals, which aimed at cutting France back to its earlier frontiers. On December 28, the Chamber of Deputies presented its report. It criticized Napoleon for continuing the war and for oppressing the French people. Napoleon responded by haranguing the Deputies thus:

Why did you not make your complaints in secret to me? I would have done you justice. We should wash our dirty linen in private, and not drag it out before the world. You call yourselves representatives of the nation. It is not true; you are only deputies of the departments; a small portion of the State, inferior to the Senate, inferior even to the Council of State. The representatives of the people! I am alone the representative of the people. Twice have twenty-four millions of French called me to the throne – which of you durst undertake such a burden? It had already overwhelmed your Assemblies, and your Conventions, your Vergniards and your Guadets, your Jacobins and your Girondins. They are all dead! What, who are you? Nothing – all authority is in the throne; and what is the throne? This wooden frame covered with velvet? No, I am the throne…. France stands more in need of me than I do of France. (4)



Napoleon Bonaparte on board the Bellerophon in Plymouth Sound, by Sir Charles Locke Eastlake, 1815

**5. Work is the scythe of time.**

After Napoleon was defeated by the allies in 1815, he gave himself up to Britain’s Frederick Maitland, the captain of HMS Bellerophon, which was blockading the French port of Rochefort. Maitland ferried Napoleon and his entourage to Plymouth Sound. Napoleon hoped to be allowed to settle in England. On July 31, however, he learned that the British government intended to exile him to [St. Helena](http://shannonselin.com/2013/11/could-napoleon-have-escaped-from-st-helena/), a remote island in the middle of the South Atlantic. One of Napoleon’s companions, the Count de Las Cases, reported this conversation on board the Bellerophon on August 2, 1815.

I was again sent for by the Emperor; who, after alluding to different subjects, began to speak of St. Helena, asking me what sort of place it could be? Whether it was possible to exist there? And similar questions. ‘But,’ said he, ‘after all, am I quite sure of going there? Is a man dependent on others, when he wishes that his dependence should cease.’ …

‘My friend,’ continued the Emperor, ‘I have sometimes an idea of quitting you, and this would not be very difficult; it is only necessary to create a little mental excitement, and I shall soon have escaped. All will be over, and you can then tranquilly rejoin your families. This is the more easy, since my internal principles do not oppose any bar to it. I am one of those who conceive that the pains of the other world were only imagined as a counterpoise to those inadequate allurements which are offered to us there. God can never have willed such a contradiction to his infinite goodness, especially for an act of this kind; and what is it after all, but wishing to return to him a little sooner?’

I remonstrated warmly against such notions. Poets and philosophers had said that it was a spectacle worthy of the Divinity, to see men struggling with fortune: reverses and constancy had their glory. Such a great and noble character as his could not descend to the level of vulgar minds; he who had governed us with so much glory, who had excited the admiration, and influenced the destinies of the world, could not end like a desperate gamester or disappointed lover. What would then become of all those who looked up to and placed their hopes in him? Would he thus abandon the field to his enemies? … [W]ho, besides, could tell the secrets of time, or dare assert what the future would produce. What might not the mere change of a ministry, death of a Prince, that of a confidant, the slightest burst of passion, or the most trifling dispute bring about?

‘Some of these suggestions have their weight,’ said the Emperor, ‘but what can we do in that desolate place?’ ‘Sire,’ I replied, ‘we will live on the past: there is enough of it to satisfy us. Do we not enjoy the life of Caesar and that of Alexander? We shall possess still more, you will re-peruse yourself, Sire!’ ‘Be it so!’ rejoined Napoleon; ‘we will write our memoirs. Yes, we must be employed; for occupation is the scythe of time. After all, a man ought to fulfil his destines; this is my grand doctrine: let mine also be accomplished.’ Re-assuming this instant an air of ease and even gaiety, he passed on to subjects totally unconnected with our situation. (5)

**6. As to moral courage, I have very rarely met with the two o’clock in the morning kind: I mean unprepared courage.**

Once on St. Helena, Napoleon had a lot of time to talk and several people to record his musings. This quote comes from another conversation with Las Cases, on December 4-5, 1815. Murat and Ney are two of Napoleon’s generals who were executed by the Bourbons in 1815.

‘With respect to physical courage,’ the Emperor said, ‘… it was impossible for Murat and Ney not to be brave, but no man ever possessed less judgment; the former in particular.’ ‘As to moral courage,’ observed he, ‘I have very rarely met with the two o’clock in the morning kind. I mean, unprepared courage, that which is necessary on an unexpected occasion, and which, in spite of the most unforeseen events, leaves full freedom of judgment and decision.’ He did not hesitate to declare that he was himself eminently gifted with this two o’clock in the morning courage, and that, in this respect, he had met but with few persons who were at all equal to him. (6)

**7. The Mohammedan religion is the finest of all.**

Variant: I like the Mohammedan religion best.

Though Napoleon restored the Catholic Church in France, often read the Bible, and had [an uncle who was a cardinal](http://shannonselin.com/2014/03/church-state-napoleons-art-collecting-uncle-cardinal-fesch/), his personal religious beliefs are best described as agnostic. Napoleon often talked about religion, especially when he was on St. Helena. This quote comes from the memoirs of General Gourgaud, who was one of Napoleon’s companions in exile from 1815 to 1818. According to Gourgaud, Napoleon said:

The Mohammedan religion is the finest of all. In Egypt the sheiks greatly embarrassed me by asking what we meant when we said ‘the Son of God.’ If we had three gods, we must be heathen. …

An Italian prince in church one day gave a piece of gold to a Capuchin who was asking alms to buy souls out of purgatory. The monk, enchanted at receiving so large a sum, exclaimed, ‘Ah, Monsignore, I see thirty souls departing from purgatory and entering paradise!’

‘Do you really see them?’

‘Yes, Monsignore.’

‘Then you may give me back my gold piece, for those souls certainly will not return to purgatory.’

That is how men are imposed upon…. Jesus said he was the Son of God, and yet he was descended from David. I like the Mohammedan religion best. It has fewer incredible things in it than ours. The Turks call Christians idolaters. (7)

**8. Women are nothing but machines for producing children.**

This should perhaps be added to the [list of Napoleon misquotes](http://shannonselin.com/2014/07/10-things-napoleon-never-said/). Secondary sources differ on their attributions: some say Napoleon wrote this in a letter to his brother Joseph in 1795; others say he said it to General Gourgaud on St. Helena in 1817. I haven’t been able to find the original phrase in the English versions of either of the relevant volumes. The closest was this remark to General Gourgaud on St. Helena:

His majesty told us that when he came back to Paris after his campaign in Italy, Madame de Stäel did everything she could to propitiate him. She even came to the Rue Chantereine, but was sent away. She wrote him a great many letters, some from Italy, some in Paris. She also asked him to a ball, but he did not go. At a fête given by Talleyrand, she came and sat down beside him and talked to him for two hours; finally, she suddenly asked him, ‘Who was the most superior woman in antiquity, and who is so at the present day?’ He answered, ‘She who has borne the most children.’ (8)

**9. What, then is, generally speaking, the truth of history? A fable agreed upon.**

Variant: History is a set of lies agreed upon.

This is another quote from Napoleon’s time on St. Helena, as recorded by the Count de Las Cases on November 20, 1816.

It must be admitted…it is most difficult to obtain absolute certainties for the purposes of history. Fortunately it is, in general, more a matter of mere curiosity than of real importance. … The truth of history, so much in request, to which every body eagerly appeals, is too often but a word. At the time of the events, during the heat of conflicting passions, it cannot exist; and if, at a later period, all parties are agreed respecting it, it is because those persons who were interested in the events, those who might be able to contradict what is asserted, are no more. What then is, generally speaking, the truth of history? A fable agreed upon. As it has been very ingeniously remarked, there are in these matters, two essential points, very distinct from each other: the positive facts, and the moral intentions. With respect to the positive facts, it would seem that they ought to be incontrovertible; yet you will not find two accounts agreeing together in relating the same fact: some have remained contested points to this day, and will ever remain so. With regard to moral intentions, how shall we judge of them, even admitting the candour of those who relate events? And what will be the case if the narrators be not sincere, or if they should be actuated by interest or passions? I have given an order, but who was able to read my thoughts, my real intentions? Yet every one will take up that order, and measure it according to his own scale, or adapt it to his own plans or system…. And then memoirs are digested, memoranda are written, witticisms and anecdotes are circulated; and of such materials is history composed. (9)

**10. My maxim was, la carrière est ouverte aux talents, without distinction of birth or fortune.**

Variant: My motto has always been a career open to all talents, without distinctions of birth.

On St. Helena, Napoleon consciously strove to define how posterity would remember him. He said this on March 3, 1817 to the British doctor Barry O’Meara, who was sympathetic to him.

In spite of all the libels…I have no fear whatever about my fame. Posterity will do me justice. The truth will be known; and the good which I have done, with the faults which I have committed, will be compared. I am not uneasy for the result. Had I succeeded, I should have died with the reputation of the greatest man that ever existed. As it is, although I have failed, I shall be considered as an extraordinary man: my elevation was unparalleled, because unaccompanied by crime. I have fought fifty pitched battles, almost all of which I have gained. I have framed and carried into effect a code of laws, that will bear my name to the most distant posterity. From nothing I raised myself to be the most powerful monarch in the world. Europe was at my feet. My ambition was great, I admit, but it was of a cold nature…and caused…by events and the opinion of great bodies. I have always been of opinion [sic], that the sovereignty lay in the people. In fact, the imperial government was a kind of republic. Called to the head of it by the voice of the nation, my maxim was, la carrière est ouverte aux talents, (the career is open to talents) without distinction of birth or fortune, and this system of equality is the reason that your oligarchy hate me so much. (10)

10 Things Napoleon Never Said

From: <http://shannonselin.com/2014/07/10-things-napoleon-never-said/>

**1. God always favours the big battalions.**

In 1673 (well before Napoleon’s birth in 1769), French aristocrat and letter writer Madame de Sévigné told a correspondent that Viscount Turenne used to say fortune was for the big battalions. Four years later her cousin, the memoirist Roger de Rabutin wrote, “As a rule God is on the side of the big squadrons against the small ones.” Voltaire and Frederick the Great also repeated this line. Ralph Keyes, in his book [The Quote Verifier: Who Said What, Where and When](http://www.ralphkeyes.com/quote-verifier/), concludes that this alleged Napoleon Bonaparte quote is actually an old saying, especially favoured by the French. (1)

**2. An army travels on its stomach.**

The closest comment made by Napoleon was, “The basic principle that we must follow in directing the armies of the Republic is this: that they must feed themselves on war at the expense of the enemy territory.” (2)

**3. No plan survives contact with the enemy.**

This saying originated with Prussian field marshal Helmuth von Moltke in the mid-19th century. What von Moltke actually wrote was, “[N]o plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force.” (3)

**4. Able was I ere I saw Elba.**

This well-known palindrome first appeared in an American periodical called The Gazette of the Union, Golden Rule and Odd-Fellows’ Family Companion on July 8, 1848, 27 years after Napoleon’s death. According to the article, the editor’s friend, one “J.T.R.” was trying to outdo the palindromes of a “water poet” named Taylor, and came up with the above, as well as “Snug & raw was I ere I saw war & guns.” The paper went on to challenge its readers to “produce lines of equal ingenuity of arrangement with the same amount of sense.” (4) For details of how this quote became attributed to Napoleon, see [The Quote Investigator](http://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/09/15/saw-elba/).

**5. I gave them a whiff of grapeshot.**

Napoleon supposedly said this regarding his dispersal of the mob marching on the National Assembly in Paris on October 5, 1795. The term was actually first used by Thomas Carlyle in The French Revolution (originally published in 1837) describing the use of cannon salvo against crowds. (5)

**6. Never ascribe to malice that which is adequately explained by incompetence.**

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in The Sorrows of Young Werther, first published in 1774, writes “misunderstandings and neglect occasion more mischief in the world than even malice and wickedness. At all events, the two latter are of less frequent occurrence.” (6) Jane West, in her novel The Loyalists (published in 1812), condenses the sentiment to, “Let us not attribute to malice and cruelty what may be referred to less criminal motives.” (7)

**7. A constitution should be short and obscure.**

French politician and historian Pierre Louis Roederer wrote that he drew up two plans of a constitution for the Cisalpine Republic in Italy in 1802: one very short, leaving much to the President’s discretion; the other long and detailed. He told French Foreign Minister Talleyrand to advise Napoleon to adopt the former, as it was “short and–”; Talleyrand cut him off with, “Yes, short and obscure.” (8)

**8. An army of sheep, led by a lion, is better than an army of lions, led by a sheep.**

This quote is attributed to many people, going as far back as Alexander the Great.

**9. England is a nation of shopkeepers.**

Napoleon did say this, but he wasn’t the first to do so. Adam Smith, in The Wealth of Nations (1776), wrote: “To found a great empire for the sole purpose of raising up a people of customers, may at first sight appear a project fit only for a nation of shopkeepers. It is, however, a project altogether unfit for a nation of shopkeepers; but extremely fit for a nation whose government is influenced by shopkeepers.” (9) Napoleon was familiar with Smith’s work. Even earlier, in 1766, Josiah Tucker, Dean of Gloucester, wrote in A Letter from a Merchant in London to his Nephew in North America, “And what is true of a shop-keeper is true of a shop-keeping nation.” (10)



Did Napoleon tell Josephine “Not tonight”? We’ll never know.

**10. Not tonight, Josephine.**

Not being privy to all of his bedroom utterances, we’ll never know whether Napoleon actually said this to his wife. There is, however, no evidence that he did. The phrase originated in the early 20th century. See [The Phrase Finder](http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/260600.html).

10 Interesting Facts about Napoleon

From: <http://shannonselin.com/2014/10/napoleon-bonaparte-facts/>

## 1. ****Napoleon couldn’t carry a tune.****

[Louis-Joseph Marchand](http://shannonselin.com/2014/01/louis-joseph-marchand-napoleons-valet-friend/), Napoleon’s valet from 1814 to 1821, wrote:

[T]he Emperor, should he start to sing, which he sometimes did while thinking of something else…was rarely in tune and would repeat the same words for 15 minutes. (1)

Betsy Balcombe, whom Napoleon befriended when he was in exile on [St. Helena](http://shannonselin.com/2013/11/could-napoleon-have-escaped-from-st-helena/), described how he regaled her with “[Vive Henri Quatre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marche_Henri_IV)”:

He began to hum the air, became abstracted, and, leaving his seat, marched round the room, keeping time to the song he was singing…. In fact Napoleon’s voice was most unmusical, nor do I think he had any ear for music; for neither on this occasion, nor in any of his subsequent attempts at singing, could I ever discover what tune it was he was executing. (2)

##  ****2. Napoleon loved licorice.****

Louis Constant Wairy, Napoleon’s valet from 1800 to 1814, notes that every morning, after Napoleon finished washing, shaving and dressing, “his handkerchief, his snuffbox, and a little shell box filled with licorice flavored with aniseed and cut very fine, were handed to him.” (3)

Betsy Balcombe attributed Napoleon’s rather discoloured teeth to “his constant habit of eating liquorice, of which he always kept a supply in his waistcoat pocket.” (4)

According to Hortense Bertrand, the daughter of [General Henri Bertrand and his wife Fanny](http://shannonselin.com/2013/12/napoleon-arthur-bertrand/), Napoleon carried a mixture of licorice-powder and brown sugar in his pockets as a remedy for indigestion. (5) He also used it as a remedy for colds.

When Napoleon was dying, he wanted to drink only licorice-flavoured water.

He asked me for a small bottle and some licorice, poured a small quantity, and told me to fill it with water, adding that in the future he wished to have no other beverage but that. (6)

## ****3. Napoleon cheated at cards.****

Napoleon hated to lose at cards, chess or any other game, and took pains to avoid doing so. Laure Junot wrote:

It was usually the most laughable thing in the world to see him play at any game whatever: he, whose quick perception and prompt judgment immediately seized on and mastered everything else which came in his way, was, curiously enough, never able to understand the manoeuvres of any game, however simple. Thus, his only resource was to cheat. (7)

French diplomat Louis Antoine Fauvelet de Bourienne, Napoleon’s one-time private secretary, observed:

In general he was not fond of cards; but if he did play, [Vingt-et-un](http://www.sarahmaclean.net/the-rules-of-the-games/) was his favourite game, because it is more rapid than many others, and because, in short, it afforded him an opportunity of cheating. For example, he would ask for a card; if it proved a bad one he would say nothing, but lay it down on the table and wait till the dealer had drawn his. If the dealer produced a good card, then Bonaparte would throw aside his hand, without showing it, and give up his stake. If, on the contrary, the dealer’s card made him exceed twenty-one, Bonaparte also threw his cards aside without showing them, and asked for the payment of his stake. He was much diverted by these little tricks, especially when they were played off undetected; and I confess that even then we were courteous enough to humour him, and wink at his cheating. (8)

[Napoleon’s mother Letizia](http://shannonselin.com/2014/03/napoleons-mother-letizia-bonaparte/) would call him on such stunts, as noted in this description of evenings during [Napoleon’s exile on Elba](http://shannonselin.com/2016/02/how-did-napoleon-escape-from-elba/):

When Napoleon was losing at cards he cheated without scruple, and all submitted with such grace as they could muster, except the stern Corsican lady, who in her decided tone would say, ‘Napoleon, you are cheating.’ To this he would reply: ‘Madame, you are rich, you can afford to lose, but I am poor and must win.’ (9)

The young Betsy Balcombe also challenged Napoleon during a game of [whist](http://www.kristenkoster.com/2012/02/a-regency-primer-on-how-to-play-whist/):

Peeping under his cards as they were dealt to him, he endeavoured whenever he got an important one, to draw off my attention, and then slyly held it up for my sister to see. I soon discovered this, and calling him to order, told him he was cheating, and that if he continued to do so, I would not play. At last he revoked intentionally, and at the end of the game tried to mix the cards together to prevent his being discovered, but I started up, and seizing hold of his hands, I pointed out to him and the others what he had done. He laughed until the tears ran out of his eyes, and declared he had played fair. (10)

## ****4. Napoleon liked snuff.****

This was commented on by many observers, though they differed as to whether Napoleon was a prodigious snuff-taker or simply a sloppy one.

Constant wrote:

It has been said that His Majesty took a great deal of tobacco, and that in order to be able to take it more quickly and frequently, he put it in a waistcoat pocket lined with skin for this purpose; these are so many errors; the Emperor never put tobacco in anything but his snuff-boxes, and though he consumed a great deal, he took but very little. He brought his pinch to his nostrils as if simply to smell it, and then he let it fall. It is true that the place where he had been was often covered with it; but his handkerchiefs, incontrovertible witnesses in such matters, were scarcely soiled…. He often contented himself with putting an open snuff-box under his nose to breathe the odor of the tobacco it contained…. His snuff was raped very large and was usually composed of several kinds of tobacco mixed together. Sometimes he amused himself by feeding it to the gazelles he had at Saint-Cloud. They were very fond if it.” (11)

The Count de Las Cases, one of Napoleon’s companions on St. Helena, said:

The Emperor, it is well known, was in the habit of taking snuff almost every minute: this was a sort of a mania which seized him chiefly during intervals of abstraction. His snuff-box was speedily emptied; but he still continued to thrust his fingers into it, or to raise it to his nose, particularly when he was himself speaking. (12)

##  5. ****Napoleon loved long, hot baths.****

Again, this was something frequently commented on. In Bourienne’s words:

His partiality for the bath he mistook for a necessity. He would usually remain in the bath two hours, during which time I used to read to him extracts from the journals and pamphlets of the day, for he was anxious to hear and know all that was going on. While in the bath, he was continually turning on the warm water, to raise the temperature, so that I was sometimes enveloped in such a dense vapour that I could not see to read, and was obliged to open the door. (13)

##  6. ****Napoleon had beautiful hands.****

Napoleon was proud of his hands, and he took great care of his fingernails. Betsy Balcombe wrote:

His hand was the fattest and prettiest in the word; his knuckles dimpled like those of a baby, his fingers taper and beautifully formed, and his nails perfect. (14)

Napoleon’s valet [Louis Étienne Saint-Denis](http://shannonselin.com/2013/12/louis-etienne-saint-denis-napoleons-french-mameluke/) thought Napoleon’s hands “were of the most perfect model; they resembled the beautiful hands of a woman.” (15) Saint-Denis also noted that Napoleon never wore gloves unless he was going out on horseback, and even then he was more likely to put them in his pocket than on his hands.

Even Germaine de Staël – a notable opponent of Napoleon – commented:

I recollect once being told very gravely by a member of the Institute, a counsellor of state, that Bonaparte’s nails were perfectly well made. Another time a courtier exclaimed, ‘The first consul’s hand is beautiful!’ (16)

## ****7. Napoleon couldn’t stand the smell of paint.****

Napoleon had an acute sense of smell, and one of the things that bothered him was paint. When he learned that [Longwood House](http://shannonselin.com/2015/12/napoleon-longwood-house/), to which he was to move on St. Helena, smelled strongly of paint:

He walked up and down the lawn, gesticulating in the wildest manner. His rage was so great that it almost choked him. He declared that the smell of paint was so obnoxious to him that he would never inhabit a house where it existed. (17)

Las Cases corroborates this story and adds:

In the Imperial palaces, care had been taken never to expose him to it. In his different journeys, the slightest smell of paint frequently rendered it necessary to change the apartments that had been prepared for him; and on board of the Northumberland [the British vessel that took Napoleon to St. Helena] the paint of the ship had made him very ill…. [At Longwood] the smell of the paint was certainly very slight; but it was too much for the Emperor. (18)

## ****8. Napoleon was superstitious.****

Napoleon was superstitious and he did not like people who regarded superstition as a weakness. He used to say that none but fools affected to despise it. (19)

A Corsican through and through, Napoleon believed in omens, demons and the concept of luck. He disliked Fridays and the number 13. He considered December 2 – the day of his coronation in 1804 and of his victory at the Battle of Austerlitz in 1805 – one of his lucky days. Upon the occurrence of remarkable incidents, either good or bad, he habitually crossed himself. [Click here to read more about Napoleon’s superstitions](http://shannonselin.com/2015/11/was-napoleon-superstitious/).

## ****9. Napoleon liked to pinch people.****

Constant writes:

M. de Bourrienne, whose excellent Memoirs I have read with the greatest pleasure, says somewhere that the Emperor in his moments of good humour would pinch his intimates by the tip of the ear; I have my own experience that he pinched the whole of it, and often both ears at once; and that with a master hand. (20)

[H]e squeezed very roughly…he pinched hardest when he was in the best humor. Sometimes, as I was entering his room to dress him, he would rush at me like a madman, and while saluting me with his favorite greeting: ‘Eh bien, monsieur le drôle?’ would pinch both ears at once in a way to make me cry out; it was not even rare for him to add to these soft caresses one or two slaps very well laid on; I was sure then of finding him in a charming humor all the rest of the day, and full of benevolence. Roustan, and even Marshal Berthier, Prince de Neufchâtel, received their own good share of these imperial marks of affection; I have frequently seen them with their cheeks all red and their eyes almost weeping. (21)

Laure Junot adds,

When Bonaparte indulged in raillery he did not use the weapon with a very light hand; and those he loved best often smarted under the blow. Though Junot was a particular favourite of his during the consulate and the first years of the empire, yet he frequently selected him as the object of some coarse joke; and if accompanied by a pinch of the ear, so severe as to draw blood, the favour was complete. (22)

Even the young were not spared. Betsy Balcombe describes how, playing blind man’s bluff,

The Emperor commenced by creeping stealthily up to me, and giving my nose a very sharp twinge; I knew it was he both from the act itself and from his footstep. (23)

Betsy also writes that Napoleon handled [the Montholons’](http://shannonselin.com/2013/12/charles-de-montholon-napoleons-murderer-devoted-bonapartist/) six-week old baby (Lili) “so awkwardly, that we were in a state of terror lest he should let it fall. He occasionally diverted himself by pinching the little creature’s nose and chin, until it cried.” (24)

## ****10. Napoleon never felt his heart beat.****

According to Constant:

A very remarkable peculiarity is that the Emperor never felt his heart beat. He has often said so both to M. Corvisart [Napoleon’s doctor] and to me, and more than once he had us pass our hands over his breast, so that we could make trial of this singular exception; we never felt any pulsation. (25)

What did Napoleon like to Eat and Drink?

## ****A simple eater****

Napoleon Bonaparte was not a gourmand. He tended to eat quickly, rarely spending more than 20 minutes at a meal. He often suffered from indigestion as a result. His second valet, [Louis Étienne Saint-Denis](http://shannonselin.com/2013/12/louis-etienne-saint-denis-napoleons-french-mameluke/), tells us:

The simplest dishes were those which suited him the best…. He preferred a good soup (he liked it very hot) and a good piece of boiled beef to all the complicated and succulent dishes which his cooks could make for him. Boiled or poached eggs, an omelette, a small leg of mutton, a cutlet, a filet of beef, broiled breast of lamb, or a chicken wing, lentils, beans in a salad were the dishes which they habitually served at his breakfasts. There were never more than two dishes on the table for this meal – one of vegetables, preceded by a soup.

The dinner was more elaborate, the table more abundantly served, but he never ate any but the most simply cooked things, whether meat or vegetables. A piece of Parmesan or Roquefort cheese closed his meals. If there happened to be any fruit it was served to him, but if he ate any of it, it was but very little. For instance, he would only take a quarter of a pear or an apple, or a very small bunch of grapes. What he especially liked were fresh almonds. He was so fond of them that he would eat almost the whole plate. He also liked rolled waffles in which a little cream had been put. Two or three lozenges were all the candy that he ate. After his meals, whether breakfast or dinner, they gave him a little coffee, of which he often left a good part. Never any liqueurs. (1)

[Louis-Joseph Marchand](http://shannonselin.com/2014/01/louis-joseph-marchand-napoleons-valet-friend/), Napoleon’s valet from 1814 to 1821, adds:

He preferred the simplest dishes: lentils, white beans, green beans, which he loved but was afraid to eat for fear of finding threads which he said felt like hair, the very thought of which would turn his stomach. He was fond of potatoes prepared any way at all, even boiled or grilled over embers. (2)

## ****Napoleon’s favourite food****

According to Louis Constant Wairy, Napoleon’s valet from 1800 to 1814:

The dish the Emperor liked best was that species of chicken fricassee which has been called poulet à la Marengo on account of this preference of the conqueror of Italy. He also liked to eat beans, lentils, roast breast of mutton, and roast chicken. The simplest dishes were those he preferred; but he was not easy to please in the quality of his bread. (3)

The popular story that [Chicken Marengo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicken_Marengo) was created by Napoleon’s chef Dunand after the Battle of Marengo in Italy in June 1800 is a myth. The dish was probably created by a restaurant chef in honour Napoleon’s victory. (4) Louis Antoine Fauvelet de Bourrienne, Napoleon’s private secretary from 1798 to 1802, writes:

He ate almost every morning some chicken, dressed with oil and onions. This dish was then, I believe, called poulet à la Provençale; but our restaurateurs have since conferred upon it the more ambitious name of poulet à la Marengo. (5)

## ****Napoleon’s favourite drink****

Napoleon was not a big drinker. With his meals he took wine diluted with water. Bourrienne writes:

Bonaparte drank little wine, always either claret [Bordeaux] or Burgundy, and the latter by preference. After breakfast, as well as after dinner, he took a cup of strong coffee. I never saw him take any between his meals, and I cannot imagine what could have given rise to the assertion of his being particularly fond of coffee. When he worked late at night he never ordered coffee, but chocolate, of which he made me take a cup with him. But this only happened when our business was prolonged till two or three in the morning. (6)

When he was in power, Napoleon’s favourite wine was [Chambertin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chambertin). One of Napoleon’s St. Helena companions, Count de Las Cases, tells us:

During fifteen years he constantly drank a particular sort of Burgundy (Chambertin), which he liked and believed to be wholesome for him: he found this wine provided for him throughout Germany, in the remotest part of Spain, everywhere, even at Moscow, &c. (7)

In exile on [St. Helena](http://shannonselin.com/2013/11/could-napoleon-have-escaped-from-st-helena/), Napoleon switched his tipple, as recounted by Saint-Denis.

His drink at St. Helena was claret; in France it had been Chambertin. He rarely drank his half bottle, and always with the addition of as much water as there was wine. There were hardly ever any fine wines. Sometimes, in the daytime, he would drink a glass of champagne, but never without adding at least as much water. (8)

On St. Helena Napoleon also enjoyed a golden dessert wine from South Africa, known as vin de constance or Constantia, which Las Cases procured for him.

[T]he Constantia wine, in particular, had pleased the Emperor. It was reserved for his own use, and he called it by my name. In his last moments, when he rejected everything that was offered to him, and not knowing what to have recourse to, he said – ‘Give me a glass of Las Cases’ wine.’ (9)



What Napoleon’s opponents thought he liked to eat. “The Plumb-pudding in danger, or, State Epicures taking un Petit Souper,” an 1805 caricature by James Gillray showing Napoleon and British prime minister William Pitt carving up the globe.