

The Fall of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo

Napoleon Bonaparte might have stayed in power a long time in France, but something got in the way. That would be Napoleon's obsession with power. Being never quite satisfied with what he possessed, his ambition led him to try to conquer Russia in 1812. Namely, he set his sights on occupying the capital city of Russia, which was **Moscow**. Things didn't work out at all as planned!

Moscow would effectively mark the beginning of the end of Napoleon's lofty career. You see, much to Napoleon's surprise, when he reached Moscow, he and his troops found it deserted and on fire. The Russians had burned down their own city in a desperate measure to undo Napoleon. Considering the fact that the tsar of Russia once enticed Napoleon to divide the world, this scorching of Moscow worked to demoralize the French emperor. Napoleon said of the Russians burning Moscow:

This is a war of extermination, a terrible strategy which has no precedent in the history of civilization. . . . To burn down their cities! A demon has got into them! What ferocious determination. What a people! What a people!¹

Napoleon occupied the famous Kremlin in Moscow for about five weeks. But with no "people" to conquer in the scorched and abandoned city, Napoleon and his army of 600,000 headed home in snowy conditions as bitter as the Arctic. On the long trek back to France, the French soldiers trudged along, tired, freezing, and starving. Some resorted to eating raw frozen horsemeat. The delirious soldiers were also under constant sniper attack by scattered "Cossacks" (Russian freedom fighters). Five hundred thousand French soldiers — which was five-sixths of the army — died on their way home! An eyewitness wrote this of the long, horrendous journey:

The dull monotonous thud of our footsteps, the crackle of the frozen snow and the feeble moans of the dying, were the only things to break that vast and doleful silence. . . . Sometimes the snow opened up under their feet . . . finally their heads dropped into the snow, reddening it with a livid bloodstain, and their torment was over.²



Five hundred thousand French soldiers died from exposure, starvation, and sniper attacks on the long, freezing journey from Moscow to France. Napoleon himself showed signs of weakness and fatigue, which was good news for his enemies!

Besides the exhaustion of the army, Napoleon himself began to show signs of fatigue and poor health. All the energy he once possessed was gone. Sapped of strength, he was vulnerable. Now, if you had been one of Napoleon's enemies, then news of his diminished army and weakened state would be "good news." This was the case across most of Europe. When leaders learned of Napoleon's dwindling energy, they formed an alliance against him.

In that alliance were the countries of Great Britain, Prussia, Russia, Sweden, and Spain (where Napoleon's brother was losing his throne). Together, these allies agreed to take out "the Little Corporal," as Napoleon was nicknamed by friends and enemies.

First, the British took it upon themselves to rid Spain of all French troops and overthrow Napoleon's brother. This freed Spain from French domination. Then, in the fall of 1813, Napoleon faced his other enemies at the **Battle of the Nations** in Leipzig. It was an extraordinary matchup of talents in Leipzig. You could say it was Napoleon's best — against half the world!

In the end, the conglomerate of allied nations had the upper hand. Napoleon didn't do well and lost thousands of soldiers. He scrambled to build a new army, but his efforts proved futile. Napoleon lost more momentum than he gained. All of Europe seemed to be against him, and Napoleon saw his empire slipping away. Do you wonder how this power-crazed man felt about losing his grip on Europe? It might surprise you. According to letters he wrote, he felt *remorse* for the people of France. Napoleon said:

It is I who have deceived myself; it is I who ought to suffer, it is not France. She has not committed any error; she has poured forth her blood for me; she has not refused me any sacrifice . . .³

The French may have heard Napoleon's heart, but generally speaking, they *had* had enough of him. Though he had promoted "liberty, equality, and brotherhood," he had done so at the expense of French blood. Determined to oust their dictator, the French senate voted to put **Louis XVIII** on the throne of France, and in 1814, Napoleon was forced to abdicate! Napoleon was exiled from France to the rocky island of **Elba**. Located just miles off the coast of Italy, Elba was only 86 square miles in size, with a population of 12,000. Napoleon was deemed the "emperor of Elba"; given a salary to stay put; and denied access to his son.

Do you think this tiny island could contain a man as glory-bound as Napoleon? It couldn't. In less than a year, Napoleon escaped from Elba and marched to Paris. Louis XVIII, with nerves quite shaken, sent **Marshal Michel Ney** to stop the invasion of Napoleon. But Ney, who had once *served* Napoleon, dropped to his knees at the sight of his former master and declared, "My emperor!" Losing Ney to Napoleon, the king of France fled, which meant that Napoleon ruled France again! He was back in the game with Ney and the loyal Imperial Guard by his side.

For one hundred days, Napoleon was in all his glory. Physically, he was in pain from numerous maladies, but emotionally, he was as confident as ever. His philosophy was this: "Conquest has made me what I am, and conquest alone can maintain me."⁴ I think Napoleon really believed it was his destiny to conquer. But during his comeback, the **Congress of Vienna** was in session. It was a meeting of Napoleon's enemies to restore some balance of power to Europe *and* scheme ways to stop Napoleon once and for all. In attendance were the countries that fought in the Battle of the Nations and many more. An attack against Napoleon was planned for June and July in 1815.



In 1814, Napoleon was exiled to the tiny island of Elba, where he was allowed to “rule” with a personal guard of 600 men. He stayed 300 days before marching on Paris to re-establish his empire.

The Final Defeat of Napoleon

Napoleon knew of the attack planned against him and decided to be the first to advance toward his rivals. He invaded Belgium and aimed to take on Austria and Prussia. But in a string of mishaps, Napoleon’s commanders failed him! They got lost, went the wrong way, showed up late, and were confused by their orders. On **June 18, 1815**, at the famous **Battle of Waterloo** in Belgium, the British laid low to dodge the French cannons and attacked the French head-on. They did this over and over under the levelheaded leadership of the **duke of Wellington**. Wellington wasn’t grandiose like Napoleon, but he was persistent. His thundering cavalry shook the French, who were struggling to coordinate their cavalry and infantry.

A British soldier wrote this of the event:

Nothing could equal the splendor and terror of the scene. Charge after charge succeeded in constant succession. The clashing of swords, the clattering of musketry, the hissing of balls, and shouts and clamours produced a sound, jarring and confounding the senses . . .⁵



Shown here is a re-enactment of the one-day Battle of Waterloo, originally fought on June 18, 1815. At Waterloo, Napoleon was both defeated and humiliated.

Under the command of **Gebhard von Blücher**, the Prussians joined the British that afternoon, and Napoleon's troops were heavily outnumbered. Within hours of fighting, the Prussians crippled Napoleon's precious Imperial Guard, and that, my friends, ended the famous one-day Battle of Waterloo. Napoleon *was* defeated! In retreat, he dismounted his horse and walked alongside his men, weeping for those he lost and wishing he too had died.

Of course, Napoleon did *not* die at the Battle of Waterloo. Humiliated, he survived. But since he was able to escape Elba, you can imagine how nervous his enemies were for him to be left alive. They agreed, however, to keep him a prisoner on the windswept island of **Saint Helena**. Barren, desolate, and located off the coast of Africa, Saint Helena was much farther away from France than Elba. It was hoped that *this* island would hold the little man.


It did. Under the strict supervision of a British governor, Napoleon lived the rest of his life on Saint Helena. A story circulates to this day that with time to reflect on matters *other*

than war, Napoleon spoke of the divinity of Jesus Christ. In conversation with a general, he supposedly said:

Jesus Christ is not a man. . . . His birth, and the history of his life; the profundity of his doctrine, which grapples the mightiest difficulties, and which is of those difficulties the most admirable solution; his gospel, his apparition, his empire, his march across the ages and the realms, — every thing is for me a prodigy, a mystery insoluble, which plunges me into reveries which I can not escape; a mystery which is there before my eyes; a mystery which I can neither deny nor explain. Here I see nothing human.⁶

I don't know if this story of Napoleon is entirely accurate or somewhat exaggerated. Debate exists of the account. Regardless, Napoleon lived only six years on Saint Helena. He died in 1821, at age 51. The death certificate states he died of stomach cancer, but some suspect otherwise. Hair samples indicate Napoleon had abnormally high levels of arsenic in his system — “five to 38 times normal amounts.”⁷ At present, the mystery of Napoleon's early death has not been solved. He was first buried at Saint Helena, but in 1840, the French chose to reclaim their notorious former emperor. His body was transported to Paris and buried at the Church of the Dome.

After all we have covered, what do *you* make of Napoleon Bonaparte? Do you think he was cruel? I would say, in part. Do you think he was evil? I'm not convinced. But I do think Napoleon was crazed by power. He truly believed he could unite most of Europe under his care and that Europe would be better for it. He never attained his ultimate goal but said of life, “To have lived without glory, without leaving a trace of one's existence, is not to have lived at all.”⁸ Napoleon definitely left a trace of his existence! And after Waterloo, the futures of many were changed, including the life of my great-great-great-great-grandfather, who, as I mentioned in Lesson 13, made a fresh start in the New World after Napoleon's defeat and shaped the course of *my* family history.



*“To have lived without
glory, without leaving a
trace of one's existence, is
not to have lived at all.”*

—Napoleon Bonaparte

Simón Bolívar: Liberator of South America

What brings a man to lead a revolution? In the case of **Simón Bolívar**, I would say it was *inspiration*. Simón Bolívar, whom some would consider the “George Washington of South America,” was inspired by people, places, and events in history to make a tremendous difference in his part of the world. With passion and persistence, he liberated what are now the countries of **Bolivia**, **Colombia**, **Ecuador**, **Panama**, **Peru**, and **Venezuela** from the powerful grip of Spain.

Before we get into the story, let me redefine the term **Latin America** (sometimes called Spanish America). Latin America refers to Mexico, Central America, and South America. South America is the fourth largest continent and home to the **Amazon River** and the great **Andes** mountains. After the voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492, Spain claimed rule over *almost* all of Latin America — rich in resources and vast in territory. (**Portugal** had in its possession a broad slice of South America, which we’ll look at in another lesson.)

Now to our story. In Lesson 17, you learned that Mexico went through a difficult revolution from 1810 to 1821 to throw off the heavy hand of Spain and declare its independence. Of 12 major countries in South America, two followed Mexico’s example at about the same time. **Paraguay**, a small country in the center of the continent, acquired its freedom in 1811; **Argentina**, the long leg of South America, declared its independence in 1816. Still held by Spain in the early 1800s were several countries in the *northwest region* of South America.⁹ These countries had the same issues with Spain that Mexico did. The criollos and mestizos in these areas were generally mistreated and misrepresented by the rich, upper class that was born in Spain. For your convenience, I have brought back the table from the Mexican War of Independence, updated for our lesson, to give you a visual breakdown of the class structure in nineteenth-century South America.

The Social Classes in Spanish South America, 1800s		
Upper Class	Royalty (viceroys, bishops, treasurers, generals)	Spanish – born in Spain
Middle Class	Criollos (lower positions than royalty)	Spanish – born in South America
Lower Class	Indians and mestizos (workers, farmers, and peasants)	Blend of Indian and Spanish – born in South America

Simón Bolívar, which in Spanish is pronounced Si MAWN Bow LEE var, was born in the colorful city of **Caracas, Venezuela**, located on the tropical Caribbean coast of South America. If you remember the definition of a criollo, it was someone of Spanish descent born in Latin America. This was the identity of Simón Bolívar. His family had at one time immigrated to South America from Spain, but he was born in Venezuela (the home of **Angel Falls**, the highest waterfall in the world). In a proud way, Simón Bolívar grew up seeing his homeland through different eyes than his ancestors did. His parents, by the way, both died when he was young. He was raised by a grandfather and an uncle and inherited a fortune along the way.

With ties to Spain still in his family, Simón Bolívar had the opportunity at age 16 to attend school in Spain. He was very smart and flourished in the study of the classics and the ideas of the Enlightenment. Since we've covered the Enlightenment previously, that should mean something to you. The works of enlightened authors like Voltaire and Rousseau grabbed hold of Simón Bolívar.

Simón Bolívar was also inspired by a tragedy. You see, while in Spain he fell in love. At 19, he married. But, in the first year of their marriage, Simón's bride died of yellow fever. Stricken with grief, Simón vowed never to marry again. He kept that vow for the rest of his life and channeled his energies toward the liberty of his people.

Adding to Simón Bolívar's inspiration was being an eyewitness to the extravagant coronation of Napoleon Bonaparte. Bolívar had mixed feelings about Napoleon. On the one hand, he feared that Napoleon wasn't living up to the ideals of the French Revolution. But on the other hand, he was intrigued by how much influence one man could have on an entire continent! He wondered if he could do the same.

On a trip to Aventine Hill in Italy, Simón Bolívar came to the place where legend says that Romulus and Remus founded the city of Rome. Inspired by the republican ideas of the ancient Romans, Simón Bolívar fell to his knees and vowed to free his homeland from the tyranny of Spain. He was 22 years old at the time of this declaration. He spent the next two years traveling to France and the United States. Do you know what these two places had in common? Both had experienced revolution, which fueled Simon with *more* ideas of liberty.

“To Hesitate Is to Perish!”

In 1807, Simón Bolívar made his way back home to Caracas. It was just one year later, in 1808, when Napoleon dethroned the king of Spain and installed his own brother, Joseph Bonaparte. We covered that with the Mexican War of Independence. Well, just as the upheaval in Spain affected Mexico, so the upheaval in Spain affected Venezuela. It opened the door for Venezuelans to revolt against Spain's leadership. In 1810, the city of Caracas deposed the Spanish viceroy who oversaw their country. In fact, much like July 4, 1776, in the United States, Venezuelans would say that **April 19, 1810**, was the *beginning* of their fight for independence. Simón was 27 years old at this pivotal time in history.

Do you remember in the story of the American Revolution when Patrick Henry stirred the colonists with the famous words, “Give me liberty, or give me death”? Well, a similar thing happened in Venezuela when Simón Bolívar gave his first public speech. With his jet-black



For the cause of Venezuela's liberty from Spain, Simón Bolívar rallied his countrymen with this bold declaration: "Let us lay the cornerstone of American freedom without fear. To hesitate is to perish!"

hair and distinctive long sideburns, he roused the attention of his countrymen when he stood at a national congress and declared, "Let us lay the cornerstone of American freedom without fear. To hesitate is to perish!"¹⁰ Bolívar was not a delegate to this particular congress. But for his boldness, he was soon appointed lieutenant colonel over a growing number of Venezuelan patriots who were ready and willing to die for their freedom.

Unfortunately, though, the brave movement that had just been sparked was squelched by an unexpected natural disaster. In March 1812, a major earthquake struck the city of Caracas, toppling homes and buildings and killing 15,000 to 20,000 people. This tragedy stirred the fears of many Venezuelans who wondered if God was punishing them for declaring independence from Spain. Division grew deeper and deeper between "patriots,"

who wished to fight Spain, and "royalists," who didn't. The division between the patriots and royalists ran deep enough to cause a civil war between them!

After the earthquake, royalists fought to gain leadership of Caracas. Their power endangered the lives of the patriots and their high-ranking leaders. Simón Bolívar and others fled to **New Granada**, which is present-day Colombia. In New Granada, Bolívar regrouped and re-strategized. Fellow patriots promoted him to be their commander in chief.

In July of 1813, Simón Bolívar invaded his own hometown to claim Caracas for the patriots. At the **Battle of Taguanes** (Tahn guh NEES), which involved a brutal massacre of the Spanish, he was victorious. Hailing Bolívar as a true war hero, the Venezuelans paraded him through the streets of Caracas with great fanfare. In full uniform of bright red, white, and navy blue, he rode upon a chariot pulled by a dozen young ladies adorned with flowery garlands. The citizens of Caracas named him **El Libertador** ("the Liberator") and hailed him with bells, trumpets, and cheers. At age 30, he was virtually the new dictator of Caracas.

Now, I realize that the term *dictator* has a negative connotation to it. But in this volatile setting, Bolívar felt it necessary to rule the nation with firmness. You see, while he was celebrating



in Caracas, his troops were still fighting to the death in New Granada. Though some would suffer under the heavy hand of Bolívar, his army seemed to need his strong direction. Grossly outnumbered and poorly supplied, Bolívar's patriots fought at times with nothing more than knives and sticks! To inspire his troops, he wrote in 1815:

The hatred that the Peninsula [Spain] has inspired in us is greater than the ocean between us. It would be easier to have the two continents meet than to reconcile the spirits of the two countries. . . . There is nothing we have not suffered at the hands of that unnatural stepmother — Spain. The veil has been torn asunder. We have already seen the light, and it is not our desire to be thrust back into darkness. The chains have been broken; we have been freed, and now our enemies seek to enslave us anew. For this reason America fights desperately, and seldom has desperation failed to achieve victory.¹¹ (Word in brackets is mine.)

Despite Bolívar's encouragement, in May of 1815, the patriots of Venezuela suffered a great setback when the Spanish royalists gained 11,000 new recruits. Where did Spain find more troops? They found them in Europe. The Spanish found survivors of the Napoleonic wars looking for more fighting. They had come to the right place. There was a lot of fighting going on in South America.

Simón Bolívar did his best to restore hope in his worn and weathered army, but royalists drove him and his officers out of the country. They fled to the island of **Jamaica** in the middle of the Caribbean Sea. From Jamaica, Simón wrote passionate petitions to his people and to other nations, pleading for help in his fight against Spain. Loosely translated, he wrote, "A people that love freedom will in the end be free."¹² One small, brave nation responded to his plea for assistance. It was **Haiti**. On the condition that Bolívar would fight slavery (which he did), they sent 550 men to help him in his cause. That's not very many, but these 550 were tough in spirit to volunteer to take on 10,000 Spanish royalists! (They remind me of the band of 300 Spartans that fought to the death at Thermopylae.)

Continuing to recruit more patriots, Simón Bolívar returned to Venezuela in 1816. For two years he crusaded around the countryside rousing more soldiers to his cause. By January 1818, he had 4,000 warriors, including the 550 from Haiti and Indians indigenous to South America. Lightly armed with only lances, bows, and arrows, Bolívar's mismatched army managed to take out a few Spanish garrisons. But by March, he had lost half of his army in combat! This forced him to retreat — again.

Determined!

Do you think this setback stopped Simón Bolívar? It did not. He was determined not to give up! Bolívar, with charm and eloquence, went on to recruit *more* patriots by appealing to teenage boys and half-healthy men from local hospitals. He also got hold of 6,000 British troops looking for adventure. Adventure is what they got. In 1819, Simón Bolívar (who was well versed in world history) studied the ancient strategy of Hannibal when he crossed the Alps with war elephants in 218 B.C. to try to capture Rome! Now, South America

doesn't have the Alps like Italy, but it does have the treacherous Andes. Inspired by Hannibal, Bolívar decided he would scale the Andes to surprise his enemies on the other side. It was a daring and costly move.

To approach the Andes, Bolívar and his army of 2,400 needed first to cross the flooded plains of **Casanare** (Cass uh NAIRR ee). Wading through swollen rivers and pouring rain, half of the pack animals common to South America, like llamas and alpacas, drowned on the journey. The men who survived the rains were then faced with scaling the mountains, which peaked anywhere between 13,000 and 20,000 feet! At those freez-



Inspired by the story of Hannibal and his elephants crossing the Alps in his attempt to conquer Rome, Simón Bolívar led his troops over the vast and daunting Andes to defeat the Spanish royalists.

ing altitudes, at least a thousand of Bolívar's men froze to death crossing the mountains. Soldiers took turns whipping each other to keep their blood from freezing. Those who survived were, however, greatly rewarded on the other side. At **Boyacá** (Boy yah CAH) in New Granada, the patriots overcame the royalists and managed in time to block one of their most strategic bridges. Within two hours after the patriots captured the bridge, the course of history was changed! Half of the 3,000 Spanish royalists were captured. The rest were killed or fled.

As word spread about the amazing climb of Simón Bolívar and his men over the Andes, many who had been loyal to the royalists changed sides. They joined the patriots and looked to Bolívar as their leader. In December of **1820**, Simón Bolívar was made president of the "**Republic of Colombia**," the formal name of the newly created state of **Gran Colombia**, which included much of modern-day Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, and Venezuela.

Are we done now? Sorry, not yet. There is more to the story! Just four months after Bolívar was made president, fighting with the royals resumed! There was fighting at **Carabobo** (Carre uh BOH boh) in 1821 and at **Bombana** (Bome BONN uh) in 1822. Bolívar lost more than 600 men in the thick woods of Bombana, where they fought by the light of a full moon. Bolívar then met with **José de San Martín**, the liberator of Chile and Argentina. With only Peru in between them, it made sense that the two leaders get together. But the generals could not agree on their next strategy, so San Martín retreated and left Peru in the hands of Bolívar!

Finally, finally, finally, there was a last battle for Simón Bolívar. It was fought in Peru on the marshy plains of **Junín** (WHO neen) in 1824. It required that Bolívar and his men cross 600 miles back over the Andes! Poorly clothed and underfed, the struggling army climbed upward at least 12,000 feet. Always the optimist, Bolívar said to his men, "Soldiers, you are about to finish the greatest undertaking Heaven has confided to men — that of saving

an entire world from slavery!”¹³ The battle at the plains of Junin lasted only 45 minutes. No shots were fired. With lances and swords, Bolívar’s men pushed the Spanish into disorder and retreat. By the end of the year, the War of Independence was over.

In 1825, upper Peru acknowledged Bolívar’s leadership and renamed their country “Bolivia” in his honor. In return, he helped write their constitution. After all the dust had settled, someone else acknowledged Simón Bolívar. On behalf of the family of George Washington, Simón received a gold medallion reading, “The Second Washington of the New World.” Not everyone would agree that Bolívar was as noble a general as George Washington was. (Bolívar had numerous critics!) But Bolívar was appreciative of the comparison between the revolutionary heroes of North and South America.


Despite all that was achieved, there remained great unrest in the Republic of Colombia. After 14 years of struggle, and 696 battles, there failed to be peace within the *inner* circles of the government. Assassination plots increased, and the people of Bolivia went as far as to exile Simón Bolívar from the newly formed country! Bolivia may be the only nation in history to exile its founding father. Rather tragic, isn’t it? But then, revolutions don’t come easy, nor do political upheavals. Few shared the bigger vision that Bolívar had, which was to unite a large part of South America as *one* republic. It never happened. By 1850, South America was fractured into 15 republics!

Simón Bolívar resigned from politics in 1830, bitter and discouraged. Just a short time later, he died of a sudden illness, which was probably tuberculosis. He was only 47. It would be 1942 before Bolívar’s body was moved to Venezuela. To many, it was a late and overdue thank you to “the Liberator,” who devoted his life to the freedom of his homeland.

Lesson 21

1821–1829

The Greek War of Independence

 Looking once again at Athens, the Acropolis, and the Peloponnese, this lesson might feel like a trip back to ancient times. In some ways, the **Greek War of Independence** was a step into the past when modern Greeks rediscovered the ideas of freedom and democracy that made them famous. Inspired by their own ancient history, the Greeks of the nineteenth century fought to be liberated from the **Ottoman Turks**, who had ruled over them for four centuries.

Now, how is it that the Ottoman Turks ever came to rule Greece? If you have been with *The Mystery of History* for a while, you might already know. (See Volume II, Lesson 83.)

The Ottoman Turks, who were predominantly Muslim, began to invade Greece and other parts of the Byzantine Empire in 1326. (The Turks were fleeing the wrath of Genghis Khan!) Christian cities of the Byzantine fell one by one to Islam. Over the next 127 years, only one Christian city stood in the Byzantine Empire. Do you know which city that was? (Come on, some of you know this!) It was **Constantinople**, named for Constantine I.

But, in 1453, a pivotal year in history, Constantinople fell too. The Ottoman Turks made it their city, and eventually named it **Istanbul**. In 1458, the Turks took the city of Athens, the heart, soul, and capital city of Greece. After that, the Byzantine Empire was no more; the Middle Ages faded away; and the Ottoman Turks kept a firm hold on *all* of Greece as well as the surrounding Balkans, Asia Minor, the Holy Lands, *and* Northern Africa.¹⁴ The Ottoman Empire was extensive — and strong!

Though some Greeks enjoyed an affluent lifestyle under the Ottoman Turks, most did not. Among well-educated Greeks, only a few were included in Turkish politics. Among less-educated Greek peasants, few were spared heavy taxation, unless they were willing to convert to Islam. You see, though the Turks generally granted religious freedom, that freedom was tainted with restrictions and was even, at times, nonexistent. In the 1500s, for example, thousands of Greeks were killed or tortured for their Christian faith. The worst era fell under **Selim I**, otherwise known as “Selim the Grim” for his tough and intolerant nature. Under waves of persecution like that, which would come and go over the years, the **Greek Orthodox Church** held fast where it could to maintain the Christian faith. Its members formed *Crypha Scholia*, or “secret schools,” to teach their history and heritage.

From the viewpoint of the Greeks, one of the most offensive practices of the Ottoman Turks was a “child tax,” by which one of every five Greek sons was forcibly taken into the service of the sultan! These children, taken as infants or boys, were indoctrinated into Islam and trained as **Janissaries**, which was an elite corps of Turkish soldiers. (Suleiman the Magnificent incorporated thousands of Janissaries in his wars. See Volume III, Lesson 22 of this series.) This system of gathering children, also known as the *devshirme*, had declined greatly by the 1800s, but the pain and humility of the arrangement left deep scars between the Greeks and the Turks. In the course of time, as many as one million Greeks may have been taken captive by this system. Over the decades, the Greeks naturally revolted here and there against the *devshirme* system, but poorly equipped, they failed; rumblings for freedom were silenced; and life went on in Greece.

Now, all that background was a lot to absorb, but in my opinion, this background information is very important. I think that in order to understand revolutions, which almost always involve bloodshed, you have to understand the motivations behind them. We’ve covered many revolutions already. What were the colonists fighting for in North America when they declared their independence? (Freedom from England.) What did the French want under Louis XVI? (Equal representation.) What did the mestizos and criollos of Latin America desire? (Independence from Spain.) So, here we are at the *Greek War of Independence*. It’s a similar story but with different characters.



In *Grateful Hellas*, by Theodoros Vryzakis, a woman with outstretched arms symbolizes the nation of Greece. She is surrounded by European revolutionaries who rose to defend her in the Greek War of Independence.

The “Association of Friends”

It was after the French Revolution, and the independence of nearby Serbia, that vocal yearnings for freedom grew louder than usual in Greece. Fueling the fire were enthusiastic scholars who updated the Greek classics into a language that modern Greeks could understand.

In studying the works of Plato, Aristotle, and Pericles, the Greeks of the 1800s were deeply stirred. As if in their own little “renaissance,” the Greeks were moved to a new sense of nationalism and *Hellenism*, which is a love for all things Greek. They wondered how Greece had drifted so far from its ancient roots and how Greece could return to a democracy (free of Turkish rule!).

In 1814, three Greek merchants started a secret society for strategizing the independence of Greece. It was called the *Filiki Eteria* (sometimes spelled *Philike Hetairia*), or “Association of Friends.” This secret society met in Odessa, Russia. Why Russia? Well, it was believed by most Greeks that the state-run **Russian Orthodox Church** would be the vessel to free the Greek Orthodox Church from the Ottoman Turks. It’s not that the Russian Orthodox Church had its own army, but it had tremendous political power. So it made perfect sense to the *Filiki Eteria* to organize their fight for independence in Russia.

In 1821, leadership of the *Filiki Eteria* fell to **Alexander Ypsilanti** (Eep see LANN tee), a talented military man who was born in Greece and grew up in Russia. His heritage and upbringing were a perfect fit for the secret society, which had grown to a thousand members. Under Ypsilanti, the *Filiki Eteria* schemed a full assault against the Ottomans, assuming that Russian forces would back them up. Unfortunately, they were wrong about the Russians! Even with the power of the Russian Orthodox Church, they were not yet ready to get involved in a war against the Ottoman Turks. Ypsilanti was defeated in his uprising and detained seven years for the very idea of plotting a revolution! Tragically, he died in poverty in 1828 — never seeing his homeland restored to its former glory. But as a devoted patriot, Ypsilanti requested at his death that his heart be buried in Greece.



Leadership of the *Filiki Eteria* (Association of Friends) fell to Alexander Ypsilanti, who was born in Greece but grew up in Russia. Though talented, Alexander was defeated and detained for leading a revolt against the Ottoman Turks.

There were others inspired by and fighting for the cause of Ypsilanti and the *Filiki Eteria*. On March 25, **1821**, Greek rebels and peasants in the Peloponnese, along with neighboring **Albanians** and **Macedonians**, rose up against the Turks. In fact, Greeks today celebrate March 25 as the official start of their independence and remember heroes and heroines of this uprising by name.



While attending a Greek festival in my neighborhood, I discovered this little boy in full Greek costume! With a red cap, blue vest, fustanella kilt, and tsarouchi shoes with black pom-poms, his outfit was an impressive example of Greek tradition.

For example, they celebrate the role of **Laskarina Bouboulina** (Lah skah REEN uh Boo boo leen uh) a lady sea captain, twice widowed, and the only female member of the *Filiki Eteria*. They remember **Georgios Karaiskakis** (Yay ore HEE ohs Karr rehs cock eez), who gave his life in battle as a leader of the **Armatoloi** (Ar ma toe LEE), a Christian militia that turned against the Turks. And they lift up the name of **Theodoros Kolokotronis** (Thay oh ZTHORRE ohs KOE low koe TRROW nees), an older leader of the **Klephts**, a group of fighting Greek bandits notorious for stealing. (Thus the term *kleptomaniac* refers to someone with a propensity to steal.)

As a side note, the Armatoloi and the Klephts are commonly mistaken for each other because they wore similar outfits, which were actually of Albanian descent. They wore red hats with long tassels, fustanella kilts (which look like white, pleated skirts), white stockings, and tsarouchi shoes (leather clogs with black pom-poms). In honor of these freedom fighters, outfits like these are still worn by special soldiers in Athens and by Greek patriots at festivals and ceremonies.

Another cherished symbol of the Greek revolution is the Greek flag in use today, which is only a slight variation of the 1822 flag. It contains a white cross to represent the Greek Orthodox Church and blue and white stripes to represent waves of the Aegean Sea as well as every syllable in the phrase *Eleftheria i Thanatos*, which means “Liberty or Death.”

Death was, unfortunately, a significant part of the Greek revolution, especially among the masses. As we have seen in other revolts, like the storming of the Bastille in France, the uprising of ordinary citizens and poorly armed peasants sometimes leads to chaos. Without the discipline and structure of an organized army, the Greeks fought “dirty.” Armed with no more than clubs and scythes, the Armatoloi, the Klephts, and other freedom fighters of the Peloponnese battled at random against the Turks.

Just a few weeks into the revolt, Greek peasants and patriots channeled their pent-up fury of four centuries into reckless looting. By May, two months into the revolution, Greek rebels took Athens by force and pushed surviving Muslims to the Acropolis in self-defense. In the small town of **Monemvasia**, Muslims were starved into surrendering — and

slaughtered on top of that! Out of 50,000 Turks living in the Peloponnese, 20,000 perished, including women and children. As for any Jews living in Greece, they were killed indiscriminately by Greeks and Turks alike!

You could say that traditional “rules of warfare” were set aside by *both* parties in the Greek War of Independence. Proving this true was a horrible event that occurred one year into the revolution. In this atrocity, it was the Turks who fought dirty. You see, as might be expected, the sultan of the Ottoman Turks didn’t take well to losing 20,000 Turks on the Peloponnese. In a gruesome counterattack, he launched a full-scale assault in 1822 against the small but prosperous Greek island of **Chios** (KYE oss), which sits off the coast of Turkey. In what has been remembered as the **Massacre of Chios**, about 100,000 Greeks were slain, burned, tortured, or captured by the Turks! Some would call this assault an act of *genocide* because it nearly wiped out an entire population of islanders.

Remembering Ancient Greece

Moving along in our story, between 1822 and 1824, the Ottoman Turks tried three times to stop the rebellion in the Peloponnese. Except for their victory at Chios, the Ottomans were failing. To retaliate, the sultan of the Ottoman Turks ordered the execution of the highest-ranking bishop in the Greek Orthodox Church, who was a well-loved resident of Constantinople. The execution of the bishop, and of many other Christians in Constantinople, created a backlash of sympathy for Greece all across Europe and stirred most Europeans to remember the more glorious days of ancient Greece.

In fact, during the age of Romanticism, the famous poets of England, like **Percy Shelley** and **Lord Byron**, wrote specifically about the quandary of the Greeks. Acknowledging Greek influence in the West, Percy Shelley wrote, “We are all Greeks. Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their roots in Greece. But for Greece . . . we might still have been savages and idolaters.”¹⁵ In a more poetic form, Lord Byron wrote:

The mountains look on Marathon —
And Marathon looks on the sea;
And musing there an hour alone,
I dream’d that Greece might yet be free;
For, standing on the Persians’ grave,
I could not deem myself a slave.

(Excerpt from “The Isles of Greece”)

Lord Byron was in fact so enamored with Greece that he decided to go to there in 1823 and enlist in the Greek army. It was a heroic gesture that inspired other Europeans to lend their support to Greece and give large sums of money toward the fight for freedom. But, unfortunately, Lord Byron didn’t fare well in Greece. Waiting for his orders in 1824, he died unexpectedly of a fever.



The allies of Greece (Russia, France, and Great Britain) scored a stunning victory against Egyptian-Turkish forces at the Battle of Navarino in 1827. This lopsided sea battle marked the beginning of the end of the Greek War of Independence.

Enter the Egyptians and the Allies

Meanwhile, the Greeks of the Peloponnese struggled within their own ranks. Civil war broke out between the Greeks — while the Ottoman Turks were recovering from their losses and slowly gaining strength. The Turks determined to recruit another nation to help them put down the Greek revolution. They turned to Egypt. Ironic, isn't it? I say that because Egypt, just like Greece, is *most* famous for its “ancient” history. But here, in the 1800s, both nations were alive and well — and at war with one another!

Egypt agreed to enter this war with the Turks in exchange for the islands of Crete and Cyprus. Under **Ibrahim Pasha**, the son of the sultan of Egypt, Egyptian forces stormed the Peloponnese in 1825. With the aid of the Turks, they took the city of Athens in 1826 and secured the Acropolis in 1827. It would seem that all that had been accomplished earlier by the Greeks was now undone!

But Greece was not without caring friends and neighbors. Russia finally decided it was time to enter the war. It did so with the help of France and Great Britain; each of these two countries had its own interest in seeing the Greeks gain their liberty. The three nations of

Russia, France, and Great Britain joined together and took the Greek War of Independence to the sea. (Considering the longtime rivalry between England and France, it was an odd arrangement of allies!)

At the **Battle of Navarino**, the allies of Greece were *more* than victorious. On October 20, 1827, they destroyed 75 out of 89 Egyptian-Turkish vessels without losing a single one of their own! The Egyptians and Turks lost more than 8,000 men — the allies lost less than 200. With this defeat, the Turks finally retreated. To finish the conflict, Russia declared a private war against the Turks that lasted two more years.

Now, pay close attention here. There is a heartfelt end to this difficult war story. Do you remember Alexander Ypsilanti, who unofficially started the Greek War of Independence and was imprisoned for the cause? Well, his brother, **Demetrios Ypsilanti** (Dee ME tree ohs Eep see LANN tee), had the honor of *ending* the Greek War of Independence that Alexander started. In **1829**, Demetrios and his army, now an organized band of soldiers, conquered a final Muslim army at the **Battle of Petra**.¹⁶ The link between the Ypsilanti brothers seems to me a touching end to the eight-year struggle that Greece endured for independence.