

My history hero

Emperor Napoleon III (1808–1873)

Chosen by **Tony Boullemier**, *BBC History Magazine* reader

LOUIS NAPOLEON, a nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, was exiled to Switzerland following the battle of Waterloo. After a failed coup against French king Louis-Philippe in 1840, he was jailed for life. He escaped to England six years later but returned to Paris when the king abdicated in 1848. He was elected to the first parliament of the Second Republic and then chosen as its first president. In 1852 a plebiscite confirmed him as emperor but he was toppled when he lost the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. He died in exile at Chislehurst, Kent after a failed operation by Queen Victoria's doctors to remove a bladder stone.

When did you first hear about Napoleon III?

Most English schools ignore French history from 1815 to 1914 so I had only the haziest knowledge until I discovered in my father's attic the diary of my French great-grandmother, Leonie Michel. I read how Leonie's father cured the emperor of skin cancer; how she danced with his son, the prince imperial; and how her brother rescued Napoleon's wife, Empress Eugenie, from the mob when his empire fell. Leonie and her husband survived the Franco-Prussian War, endured the Siege of Paris and



escaped a firing squad before fleeing to England. The diary read like the plot for a novel. So I wrote it.

What kind of person was he?

With waxed moustache, goatee beard, drowsy eyes and a quiet voice, he was inscrutable but charming. His legs were so short he looked at his best sitting on a horse but the ladies still fell for him. His clever political philosophy drew support from all quarters and unlike his uncle, he loved England and made firm friends with Queen Victoria. He lived in England for four periods, conducting countless affairs; serving as a special constable for the Duke of Wellington; and in his final years at Chislehurst, he even developed a liking for cricket.

What made him a hero?

From exile and ignominy, he reached the summit of European power in just four years and for the next 22 years he was one of the world's most benevolent dictators. His friendship with England ended centuries of conflict and we became allies from the Crimean War onwards. It was he who ordered Haussmann to rebuild Paris and he improved health care, promoted industry, commerce, shipbuilding and railways. He encouraged Impressionism by launching the Salon des Refuses, restructured the wine industry, and made French cheeses world famous. He restored all the joie de vivre lost in the years of revolution and gaslit Paris became Europe's capital for pleasure.

What was his finest hour?

His finest period was from 1855 until 1867. In both of these years he staged vast national exhibitions where world leaders flocked to Paris to marvel at France's scientific, industrial and artistic advances. In 1855 his army ended the Crimean War by capturing Sebastopol's Malakoff redoubt and a year later



Napoleon III in 1853. *BBC History Magazine* reader Tony Boullemier found the emperor so inspiring that he made him the subject of a novel

France achieved massive prestige by hosting the peace talks. In 1859 his armies beat the Austrians twice, at Magenta and Solferino.

Is there anything you don't particularly admire about him?

He could treat women shabbily, especially his English mistress Lizzie Howard who funded his electioneering campaigns. He loved her, but when he became emperor and needed an heir, he cast her aside and married Eugenie – a 'suitable' Spanish countess.

If you could meet Napoleon III what would you ask him?

Did he regret marrying Eugenie? Her frigidity led to his countless affairs and through guilt, he allowed her to interfere in foreign policy and become a leading advocate of the disastrous war with Prussia. And in hindsight, could he still have avoided being manoeuvred into that conflict by Bismarck's infamous Ems Telegram, which caused France to declare war on Prussia in 1870? **II**

Tony Boullemier is a Newcastle-born journalist, who used to work for the *Daily Express*. His first novel, *Leonie and the Last Napoleon* (Matador Press), is based on the diary of his French great-grandmother, who knew the imperial family very well

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