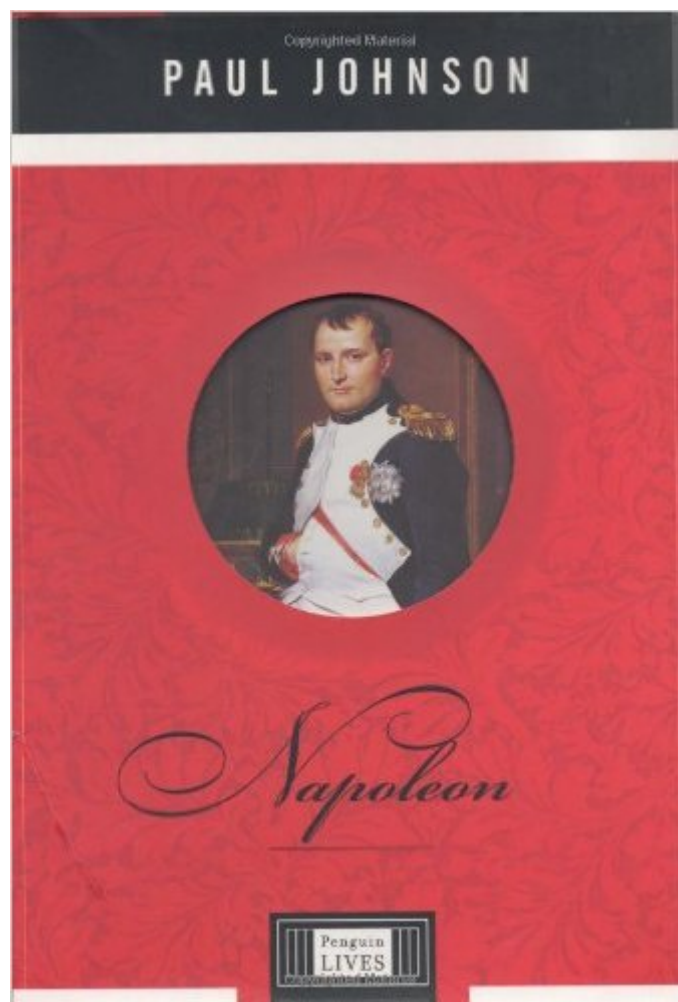


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Napoleon (Penguin Lives)



Synopsis

The very name, Napoleon Bonaparte, still enthralls. Ever since this towering and terrible genius conquered Europe, he has been endlessly debated, compared, and made an icon. In Napoleon, the great dictator's energy and acumen are matched by those of his biographer, Paul Johnson, whose histories have been lauded as "fresh, readable, provocative . . . wise" (Los Angeles Times). Here Johnson profiles "the grandest possible refutation of those who hold that events are governed by forces, classes, economics, and geography rather than the powerful wills of men and women." With masterly eloquence, Napoleon charts Bonaparte's career from the barren island of Corsica and his early training in Paris—he was a bold soldier with an uncanny gift for math, maps, and strategy—through high-profile victories in Italy, military dictatorship, and campaigns across Europe to his end on the forsaken isle of St. Helena. In Napoleon's insatiable hunger for power, Johnson sees a realist unfettered by patriotism or ideology, a brilliant opportunist and propagandist who fulfilled his ambition in the aftermath of the French Revolution. He interprets Napoleon's life in the trajectory of his times, revealing how his complex and violent legacy seeded totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century and sounds an alert to us in the twenty-first.

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Customer Reviews

Johnson does a good job of channeling William Pitt, but a poor job of history in this tendentious, glib, shoddy, but, thankfully, short volume. It is one thing to shy away from hagiography, quite another to omit facts or invent them to create a historical figure that did not exist. From the very first

pages, Johnson proudly displays his biases. He views the French Revolution as an unnecessary "accident", and announces, without any supporting argument save England's example, that the inequalities it addressed would have been solved peacefully in time by history. The scholarship is extremely sloppy, and Johnson continually contradicts himself and gets his facts wrong. Here are but a few examples: He says Napoleon was not an ideologue, then proclaims him the progenitor of "a new brand of ideological dictator" like Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. He says that Napoleon "never seems to have grasped the essence of the English constitution", yet during the young Napoleon's school years, the text on which he made the most notes was a history of the English constitution. He also tried to bring the English jury system into the Code Civil, but was blocked by the Directory. He cites a M. de Remurat as saying that Napoleon "is really ignorant, having read very little, and always hastily." A glance at the reading Napoleon did while in school, the notes he took, and the memoirs he dictated at St. Helena, with their detailed knowledge of history and past political affairs, easily give the lie to this. He writes that Napoleon "did not understand [the sea's] true strategic significance", ignoring Napoleon's continued respect--and envy--of the British Navy, a service he once tried to join.

Johnson simply sees Napoleon as the precursor of the wars and totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. To Johnson Napoleon begat Lenin, Stalin, Hitler Mao, Kim Il Sung, Castro, Peron, Saddam Hussein, Ceausescu, and Gadhafi. In fact Johnson evokes Hitleresque and Stalinesque imagery repeatedly throughout the book. But Johnson doesn't stop with his references to Nazis and other unsavory types in order to cut Napoleon down to size. In Johnson's view Napoleon was a "cultural racist," a rapist (literally), ignorant, with bourgeois tastes. Johnson also criticizes Napoleon's military abilities. Napoleon "made little use of observation balloons; he indeed took no notice of airpower, though it was then much discussed. He ignored steam power, though traction engines and the railroad were just over the horizon... One might have said that military rail was made for Bonaparte's geo-strategy of swift transfer of armies. But he preferred merely to improve the old military road system." Of course we are all familiar with the aerial armies, submarine services, rail-based logistical support and steam-powered tank armies of Napoleon's enemies! The book seems almost to have been written from memory. Mistakes abound--Lucien Bonaparte is repeatedly referred to as the King of Holland, Betsy Balcombe becomes Betsy Briars, the Napoleonic electorate was "smaller than the one that produced the... lower house under the ancien régime," Napoleon's artillery drowned ... Russians by firing "red-hot shot" into frozen ponds, Charles XII was king of Sweden during this period and Wellington's Peninsular army was made up of British troops and "Spanish

auxiliaries.

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