

## **HISTORY**

Subject : History  
(For under graduate student)

Paper No. : Paper-VI  
History of Modern Europe

Unit No. & Title : Unit-1  
Europe between 1780 & 1871

Lecture No. & Title : Lecture-9  
Napoleon and Europe:  
The Road to Decline

### **Script**

### **The Road to Decline**

After 1808, Napoleon increasingly took questionable political and military decisions which ultimately led to his downfall. After the subjugation of Austria, Prussia and Russia Britain remained the only adversary in Europe. After defeating Prussia in the battle of Jena, Napoleon entered Berlin and promulgated the Berlin Decree whereby he declared that the 'British Isles are in a state of blockade'. In fact, he declared an economic war

against Britain as her sea-power was far superior to that of France.

## **Continental Blockade**

The Continental Blockade started as a blockade against the export of British goods to the continent. The Berlin Decree said that no European state was to have trading relations with Britain. No vessel should carry goods to or from Britain and her colonies. It was an attempt to cut off **Britain's export trade. The major aim was to drain Britain's gold reserve by blocking Britain's exports.** Napoleon wrote to his brother saying that he meant to conquer the sea through land. The reference obviously was to the superiority of Britain as a sea-power. At the same time European trade was to be diverted to France.

The British response was two-fold. It came in the form of naval action. British fleet raided Copenhagen and seized the Danish fleet on which Napoleon was to depend. And they promulgated the Orders-in-Council which said that ships obeying the Berlin Decree would be confiscated by

the British navy. To avoid such confrontation one had to take a licence from Britain.

France responded by promulgating two more decrees of Fontainebleau and Milan. By these an elaborate system was put into effect relating to detection and punishment of blockade-running. Neutral ships obeying the Orders-in-council would be treated as English ships and seized.

By the end of 1807 the Blockade was adopted by all the European powers except for Sweden. The consequences of the closure were felt in London. The first six months of 1808 were especially difficult for British economy. During the first three months the value of export fell from £ 9000 to £ 7244. The second three months there was a further fall. There was glut in production and British economy experienced a crisis which was compounded by social disturbances.

Soon, however, a powerful smuggling network emerged in Europe. There was a demand for British goods, particularly as the French industry was not in a position

to take the role of the British industry. The French did not have a navy sufficient to guard the vast European coastland to stop smuggling.

The blockade at this juncture was transformed into **the Continental System**. The blockade against England now virtually became an instrument of economic imperialism by forcing all of Europe to become subservient to the needs of the French economy. The universal character of the blockade produced widespread discontent in Europe. The system caused distress to both the merchants and the consumers. Smuggling thrived. Napoleon was obliged to intervene in Spain and Portugal after 1808 and undertake fresh campaigns in 1809-10. He took the Papal States, imprisoned the Pope, defeated Austria again and extended his control to the Hanseatic towns in the Baltic. New decrees ordered the public burning of contraband goods and this produced great public unrest.

An economic crisis in France obliged Napoleon to relax the system and he began to issue licences. It was an irony that Napoleon's export of wheat to England in 1810

saved England. Even in France the middle classes were alienated. Thus the blockade virtually acted as a boomerang and affected its inventor more than its target. The economic depression of 1810-11 was attributed by the French to the Continental System. The middle class shared his protectionist views but abandoned him when he ceased to gain them profit. The European states were aggrieved that they were made to suffer for the sake of **France's interest.**

### **The Peninsular war**

Napoleon made another blunder by intervening in Spain. He was driven by his ambition, but also by the requirement of the Continental System. It was necessary to bring the Iberian coast **under France's control in order** to stop smuggling of British goods. He needed to end **Britain's influence in Portugal. But to go to Portugal** he had to take the land route through Spain. On the other hand Spain now wanted to make peace with Britain for colonial reasons.

The Spanish king was Charles VI, but the real power was exercised by Godoy, the minister who was ambitious. Napoleon promised to carve a kingdom for him in southern Portugal. But when the French army moved in, the Spanish army rose in support of Ferdinand the successor to the throne. Charles abdicated, but instead of allowing Ferdinand to ascend the throne, Napoleon, driven by dynastic ambition, transferred Joseph from Naples and placed him on the throne of Spain. This produced revulsion and led ultimately to what has been **described as 'a national uprising in Spain'**.

This was a blunder that Napoleon had committed as he ignored the sentiments of the Spanish people. The result was that he was dragged into the interior of Spain and failed to force them to surrender. The Spaniards resorted to guerrilla method and avoided open battle. Napoleon had to spend huge amount of money and spare men for this war while they were needed elsewhere in Europe.

## **The war**

Initially the Spanish forces lost to the French, but in July 1808 two divisions of French army were defeated by the Spaniards at Baylen. The French also failed to penetrate into Portugal. After prolonged and protracted war which continued for four years, the French were defeated at Salamanca (1812) and Vittorio (1813). A large part of the French forces was driven out of Spain. The Spanish misadventure ended in near disaster.

This war made a difference. Napoleon failed to force the enemy to an open war. He was obliged to spend precious resources; while earlier he was always able to collect his resources from the conquered areas. So he faced the **resistance of a 'nation'**.

## **Russian campaign**

With the Moscow campaign started the final slide-down of Napoleon. It came in four stages: the Russian campaign, the war of liberation in Europe, invasion of France by the **fourth coalition and Napoleon's banishment to Elba and**

his return for the hundred days and the final defeat at Waterloo and exile to St. Helena.

The relations between Russia and France had been worsening. Both Napoleon and the Tsar had violated the terms of the treaty of Erfurt. Under pressure, the Tsar opened the Russian ports to neutral ships by a decree. This opened a breach in the blockade. The nobility in Russia was largely anti-Napoleon. The creation of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw by Napoleon alienated the Russians as they feared that this might be the prelude to the revival of an independent state of Poland. The Tsar was secretly preparing for war.

Napoleon felt that the conquest of Russia would enable him to enforce the blockade more fully. As always Napoleon sought war to come out of a serious crisis. He created his Grand Army of 675,000 men. But Russia made an agreement with Turkey and secured promise of support from Bernadotte of Sweden. Still, Russia could muster an army of 160,000 only. Napoleon crossed the Niemen in June, 1812 with an army of 450,000. His



strategy proved abortive. Napoleon was warned by Captain Leclerc **in January, 1812, 'if the emperor sent his army into the Russian interior, it would be annihilated like Charles XII's at Poltova, or force to a hasty retreat.'** Others also spoke of the inadvisability of opening another front while the Spanish war was continuing. Indeed **Napoleon's design of conquering Russia by another blitzkrieg was undone by the Russian policy of 'scorched earth'**. The Russians refused to give battle and retreated into the interior and burnt everything to deny the enemy supplies. Napoleon failed to find an answer to this strategy. As he was dragged into the interior of the country, the severe Russian winter set in to fill his cup of misery.

Napoleon finally engaged Kutusov in the battle of Borodino. Kutusov had 120,000 men and Napoleon 130,000. There were heavy losses on both sides, but Kutusov succeeded in retreating beyond Moscow. Napoleon entered Moscow to find a deserted city. A fire broke out and raged for five days. Napoleon expected the

Tsar to sue for peace, but Alexander was in St. Petersburg, 300 miles away.

**Napoleon's Russian campaign had failed to achieve anything.** Finally, in late October he decided to leave Moscow. By this time winter had set in and the army in retreat experienced heavy snowfall. Inhospitable conditions- severe winter and snowfall, lack of provision and the resistance of the local peasants, break out of disease- marked the retreat and took a heavy toll of the army. More than 300,000 men had perished. The Grand Army lay in shambles. He gained nothing, but incurred a very heavy expenditure. On the other hand, it encouraged European powers to come together. Financial crisis obliged him to impose new taxes and eroded his popularity at home.

The situation was not yet impossible for Napoleon. It was unlikely that Russia would be in a position to attack France; the weakness of Prussia and the caution of Metternich precluded any immediate coalition against France either. But Napoleon refused to negotiate for

peace. It seemed that had had taken leave of his political sense. The only politics he could now think of was another war. His punch line was characteristic of the man: **'I have made a mistake, but I will have the means of putting it right'**.

### **The loss of Germany**

The only means he knew of was further war. But the tide had turned against him. There was a gradual upsurge of discontent against Napoleon in Germany. In February, under pressure from his advisers and the people, the Prussian king signed an alliance with the Tsar and **launched 'the war of liberation'**. Napoleon still managed to draw from an exhausted France an army of 300,000 conscripts of 18/19 years. Another 250,000 remained in Spain. Napoleon hoped to recover lost ground, but, by 1813, it was possibly too late.

Napoleon once more decided on attack and was confident of speedy victory. The operations opened in May. He beat Blucher and Wittgenstein, who commended the Russo-

Prussian forces, but he was unable to destroy the enemy. A Two-month armistice was signed at Pleschwitz.

Napoleon could not hope for a decisive victory, but neither could Prussia and Russia together conquer France. Austria would now be the arbitrator. Metternich offered peace to Napoleon. The terms involved the restitution of conquests to Prussia, but were not to disturb the natural frontiers of France. But, in a meeting with Metternich at Dresden Napoleon summed up his **tragic irony: 'I would die before I ceded one inch of territory. Your sovereigns, born on the throne, can be beaten twenty times and still return to their capitals. I cannot do that because I am an upstart soldier. My domination will not be able to survive from the day I cease to be strong and consequently to be feared.'** Thus a relentless logic led him from war to war. He had to win to be feared, he had to be feared in order to continue on the throne. His refusal resulted in his opponents finally coming together. The agreement of Reichenbach was signed on June 27, 1813 among Austria, Russia and Prussia.

In August, Austria declared war. The allies had mobilised three armies- northern army under Bernadotte; the Silesian army at the centre under Blucher and the Bohemian army in the south under Schwarzenberg. Napoleon planned three offensives as well: in the north, Davout against Berlin; at the centre, Ney against Blucher and Napoleon himself was to advance to Bohemia.

The moment of destiny for Napoleonic France came in October at Leipzig. France was defeated in what has come to be known as the **'battle of nations'**. In November, Napoleon returned to St. Cloud, but the situation was disastrous. Napoleonic Germany was crumbling. The kingdom of Westphalia collapsed; the members of the Confederation of the Rhine were fast disengaging themselves.

### **Invasion of France**

Even before Napoleon left for Germany, the internal situation was bad; it now became worse. There was growing discontent against new taxes and riots broke out in a few towns. Napoleon sought to rally the **'notables'**

and gave more power to the legislative organs. But plainly it was not enough. The level of conscription was staggering and resistance to conscription became organised. Now even the children of the rich were not spared. Even the notables were now alienated. Gradually they looked back to the Constitution of 1791.

The Allies published a manifesto in December in which they disclaimed any intention to make war against France. They were simply against the domination of Europe by Napoleon. The Legislative Body in January, 1814 asked the emperor not to make **'war except to defend the independence of the French people'**.

The campaign of France: Three allied armies crossed the Rhine at the end of 1813. Bernadotte marched on Belgium; Blucher and Schwarzenberg marched on Paris, having come together at Aube. Napoleon could oppose an army of 250,000 men with only about 80,000 recruits. He **left Soult to check Wellington's advance in the south. His** army was also ill-clad, ill-supplied and ill-equipped. Even salaries were in arrears.

Yet Napoleon was still capable of brilliance. He managed to gain a breathing-space by defeating Blucher and by pushing Schwarzenberg back. On March 1, Austria, Russia, Prussia and England signed the treaty of Chaumont whereby they agreed not to remain united till Napoleon was defeated. The Allies started a new offensive. Napoleon did try a bold strategy of dividing the enemy forces, but ultimately failed. The enemy army was near the outskirts of Paris on 29<sup>th</sup> March, but Paris failed to resist. On 31 March, the Tsar and the King of Prussia entered Paris.

On 1 April the Senate voted a provisional government and Talleyrand assumed the Presidency. On 3 April, the Senate announced the fall of Napoleon, who was banished to the island of Elba with a pension of 2 million franc by the allies.

### **The flight of the eagle**

*The return of Napoleon for hundred days and the final defeat-*

France, after the exile of Napoleon, was still not stable. The restored Bourbons were not very popular; there was unemployment and fear of feudal restoration. The France of the white flag and the France of the tricolour were deeply opposed to each other. This provided the context **of Napoleon's remarkable come back.**

Napoleon landed on March 1, 1815. He had a smooth passage to Paris; at Grenoble the soldiers refused to open fire on the emperor and welcomed him. Peasants with lighted torches and the silk weavers of Lyons greeted him. Napoleon re-entered the Tuileries, over which flew the tricolour. He liberalised the empire. Liberal Benjamin Constant was a new adviser along with some old ministers. Additional Acts to the Constitution were promulgated. Tax quotas were lowered; the ministers were made responsible to the Chamber; censorship was abolished. It was put to the plebiscite and approved by 1.5 million people as against 4800 against. But surprising element was abstention; total electorate was 5 million. In some area even a revolutionary feeling seemed to be resurgent. But Napoleon still had contempt for the

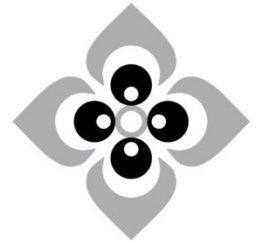


**rabble: 'I do not want to be king of the jacquerie.'** Yet, by the middle of April popular enthusiasm had waned. **Fouche remarked, 'This man-I mean Napoleon- has been cured of nothing and returns as much a despot, as eager for conquest, in fact, as mad as ever...'** His return then was doomed to failure. The administration was not totally reliable. War seemed inevitable. As soon as the news of his return reached Vienna, where the Allies were meeting, the coalition against him was re-formed and a declaration by the Allies banned Napoleon from Europe.

The final moment of reckoning came at Waterloo. The European combination and Wellington delivered the final blow. Napoleon was finally defeated and banished to St. Helena. The adventure was over.

**Frederick Massena sums up the moment: 'In a diseased imagination lies the source of human unhappiness. It makes us wonder across the seas from one fantasy to another, and if its spell leaves us in the end, it is by then too late; the hour strikes and the man dies detesting life'.**

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### **Summary**

Since the late 1700s till the early 1800s, the ideas of the French Revolution, equality, liberty, and fraternity inspired many people. Napoleon Bonaparte emerged as an important figure who re-established order in France. Napoleon was an opportunist leader and a military genius, who initially gained the trust and support of his countrymen. But unfortunately, Napoleon's desire for more and more power destroyed his original goal to support the ideals of the French Revolution. He intended to hurt British economy, by shutting off the continental

markets to British commodities but in the process he hurt French economy more. In the process he also managed to enrage the people of Europe who faced severe hardships as daily necessities became scarce and expensive.

**The British were aware of Napoleon's growing power in Europe, and used their naval force to ensure that Napoleon could not enhance his military by gaining supremacy in sea power. His desire to become the greatest power in Europe paved the way for his downfall. When he invaded Russia, the Russians retreated and let Napoleon's army perish due to the harsh winter there.** The Russian winter depleted his troops and expended valuable resources. On the Spanish front too he angered the Spaniards by interfering in their internal matters and then going on to place his brother as King. The ensuing Peninsular War proved to be disastrous for Napoleon. In the meantime the news of his successive discomfitures encouraged the European powers to come together and to defeat him at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Napoleon

was exiled to St. Helena where he remained till his death at the age of fifty-three.

Napoleon's lust for power proved to be his undoing. His beneficial motives were overshadowed by his transformation into a selfish dictator.

