EPILOGUE: 20 WAYS IN WHICH NAPOLEON LOST POWER AND HOW HIS WAY OF USING POWER TURNED SOUR AND COULD NOT BE SUSTAINED

1. Napoleon as First Consul, with the launch of the *Code Napoleon*, the Concordat and hundreds of economic, social and legal reforms, held out a promise of sustainable development for France – but it needed peace, and Napoleon was a soldier, and he would inevitably keep clashing with the ‘triumvirate’ of Austria, Russia and Prussia. His positives reforms frightened his reactionary neighbours, and he responded with war instead of negotiation, thus justifying his obses­sive grip on power.

2. Napoleon came to confuse and inter-relate the future of France with his own longevity in power – especially after a series of assassina­tion attempts in 1800, whilst he was First Consul. He ordered a crack-down on any suspected political opponents, ordered the assas­sination of a suspected rebel and clamped down on the press. His instincts for self-preservation, egotism and narcissism that had so effectively motivated his radical activism showed a darker side: an autocratic aversion to debate and disagreement.

3. Napoleon’s desire to be adored by the masses drove him to an extraordinary act: to demand they declare their confidence in him by voting in a public plebiscite. Although he fiddled the results for the army (who hadn’t voted as overwhelmingly as he thought they should), he basked in the fantasy that he represented the highest ide­als of the French – over-arching the quibbles of the political class. He was thus elected First Consul for Life in 1802, a step towards proclaiming himself Emperor in 1804, aping the dynastic monar­chies of his enemies.

4. According to Machiavelli, necessary wars need to be fought; but there was a growing feeling that not all of Napoleon’s wars were necessary. His compulsion to fight England – the only country he had not beaten conclusively – was highly personalized. The English press lampooned him, and he took it as a personal vendetta. It fed his paranoia, and he became convinced that Paris was full of spies in the pay of the English, all out to kill him.

5. Napoleon’s ongoing conviction that he must carry on fighting bat­tles to stay in power undermined the ability of his regime to continue for the long-term. Although the continued expansion of the Empire was welcomed by many in France (*la Gloire, l’honneur*) the eco­nomic dislocation of constant war could not be sustained, especially at a time when other countries, Britain in particular, were building capital and investing in the industrial revolution. Success in war cre­ated a temporary sense of triumph, a heady enjoyment of victory which could carry people along on a tide of patriotic fervour, but this distracted them from the lack of attention to necessary social and economic development, and starved the country of the necessary funds.

6. The other crowned heads of Europe could not tolerate Napoleon indefinitely; he could never be a member of their club, and the wars he perpetrated drained their economies. More dangerously, in the early years he actively promoted bourgeois revolutions in the countries he ‘liberated’. He personified the threat of French-style rev­olutions in all their countries, part of the tide of rebellion that had already swept across the American colonies. Napoleon’s France was not just an opponent like any other, it was toxic to the established social order across Europe.

7. Napoleon did try to make peace and said that he longed for a period of stability which could have extended his period of office, but he thought that peace for France could only be achieved if he was acknowledged as its legitimate ruler by Europe’s kings and emper­ors. He spent huge energy and resources to make a fragile peace with Tsar Alexander I at Tilsit, and to become the son-in-law of the Austrian emperor. He expected them both to admit him as their peer, and was surprised when they did not. While all this was going on, and without Napoleon’s appreciation, some of the greatest diplo­matic manipulators (like Metternich) were piecing together a new Europe, made up of new states that used but transcended the old empires and princedoms.

8. Napoleon’s loyalty to his family members amounted to squander­ing his powers of patronage. Appointing them to rule kingdoms across Europe, they often showed themselves to be incompetent or self-seeking, or both. Mostly they were no better than the often-corrupt monarchs they replaced. This was surely an occasion for meritocracy, to create a cadre of new talent inspired by revolu­tionary ideals and dependent on him. But he used his powers of patronage simply to reward his family, because personal loyalty had become the primary virtue.

9. When he rewarded his favourite generals with appointments to lead­ership roles in his over-extended Empire, they too often took this as a kind of pension rather than an appointment to the front-line of the Revolution. It seemed to be the case that the ruling elite became absorbed in preserving their own privileges.

10. Napoleon always struggled to delegate, and seemed to be a poor judge of talent and potential loyalty. His system of patronage often backfired on him and further undermined his efforts to rule a very large operation, forcing him to rely on his own prodigious personal efforts, leading to complete exhaustion. Trusting no one leads to iso­lation, an obsession with control, the perceived need to spy on others and being on guard 24/7.

11. The creation of new countries and borders, such as the Grand Duchy of Warsaw to replace the truncated Poland, the Confederation of the Rhine, the Cisalpine Republic, anticipated the new order of Europe half a century later, but were ahead of their time and on a collision course with the ‘triumvirate’ of Russia, Austria and Prussia. Directly confronting the most powerful usually ends with being knocked back.

12. The birth of Napoleon’s son and heir, the King of Rome, in March 1811 after his marriage to Marie-Louise, Archduchess of Austria, was met with great rejoicing. Had the young man been older when Napoleon finally abdicated, had he not been an Austrian Prince, had Napoleon died in battle, then he might have had a chance to become Napoleon II. But this possibility was hardly even considered – his father’s legitimacy rested too much on force. When he lost at Waterloo, it all tumbled down.

13. The invasion of Russia must be seen as one of the main turning points in Napoleon’s attempts at creating a long-term tenure of lead­ership. How often can a leader lose nearly half a million soldiers and survive? Even though he blamed the calamity on unseasonably bad weather and appeared to survive this reversal politically, he lost a generation of loyal, able and experienced soldiers. When he fought again it was with raw young conscripts, and he struggled to replace the horses and artillery he had lost. It is remarkable that he survived the campaign himself, and that he clung onto political power for another two years is a real testament to his tenacity and grip on French politics.

14. The enormity of the disaster of the retreat from Moscow gave encour­agement and inspiration to Napoleon’s enemies – he was no longer unbeatable. This episode was followed by a string of military defeats that were eventually to lead to his downfall. Once the momentum of success is broken, winning becomes more of a struggle. The effect of a defeat after an almost unbroken string of victories is to admit doubt and insecurity, both of which are hard to overcome in war.

15. In January 1814, anti-French coalition armies entered France, and Paris was captured without a fight by combined enemy forces two months later. This would appear to have been the result of three factors: Napoleon’s declining military prowess with the loss of his army in Russia; the growing confidence and co-ordination amongst the ‘triumvirate’ of Russia, Austria and Prussia; and the reluctance of Parisians to risk their city and their lives in a violent defence. Napoleon was removed from power and exiled to Elba. But he continued to rule there, and plotted a comeback. Maybe he was in denial of his loss: the balance of power had shifted, and France faced a new alignment of forces. Already others in Paris were looking to post-Napoleonic settlements. Only Napoleon and a few loyal friends persisted in the fantasy that the future of France was inseparable from that of ‘General Bonaparte’.

16. The political machinery supporting Napoleon’s power proved inadequate at the crucial moment when occupying forces removed Napoleon’s wife and son from Paris. Had his brother Joseph taken the reigns as intended, there may not have been a vacuum so readily filled by Louis XVIII, a Bourbon family member hastily restored to the French throne. The failure of Napoleon’s network of patron­age at the crucial moment suggests the weakness of this network all along – it could not survive adversity.

17. Some say it was pusillanimity on the part of Napoleon’s ministers that enabled the Bourbon restoration. But key ministers like Talleyrand had long been playing both sides, foreseeing the growing power of the allies and their desire for stability in France. The rapid replace­ment of Napoleon with Louis XVII suited many interests now that Napoleon was marginalized and everyone wanted peace.

18. Exiled on the island of Elba, Napoleon hoped for a come-back, planned for it and, amazingly, pulled it off. But France was reeling under the dislocation of decades of war and desperate for peace. If the populace had wanted Napoleon to stay, they might have fought harder to keep out the Allies when they invaded. But the continuous effort of following a charismatic leader to victory in the field was suddenly too dissonant with the reality. When the charismatic leader was no longer there in person, the drive for victory evaporated with the belief in its possibility.

19. Napoleon could still make a great show of personal charisma and opportunism, and indeed was able to raise an army and force Louis XVIII to flee from Paris, but the strength of the Allies and the loss of the French army in Russia undermined Napoleon’s ability to keep fighting, and fighting was the only way he knew to get his Empire back.

20. Napoleon really only got the message that he had lost everything when he was forced to abdicate for the second time to the much more distant and inhospitable island of St Helena; but there he focused on rewriting history, convincing himself that he could have carried on, if only – the loss of power can be an almost impossible burden to bear for one who lived so devotedly by it.