

## Napoleon Becomes Ruler of France

After his triumphs in Italy, Bonaparte led an expedition to Egypt. While he was away, other French commanders suffered serious defeats. Even more important, the Directory proved a very weak government. France's paper money became almost worthless. Business was upset and many people were thrown out of work. Discontent and disorder increased. People spoke of recalling a brother of Louis XVI to become King of France.

Bonaparte took advantage of this situation. Returning to Paris, he quickly seized power. (The sudden overthrow of a government is called a coup d'état.)

### Napoleon's View

*The following version of the coup d'état is the explanation Bonaparte gave the people of France.*

Frenchmen! On my return to France I found division among all the authorities. They agreed only on the single point that the constitution was half destroyed and was unable to protect liberty.

Each party in turn came to me and requested my support. However, I refused to be the man of any party.

The Council of Elders appealed to me. I answered their appeal. They gave me the force necessary to protect them. I was bound by duty to accept the command. I was duty-bound to my fellow citizens, to the soldiers dying in our armies, and to the national glory gained at the cost of so much blood.

I went before the Council of Five Hundred alone, unarmed, my head uncovered. My object was to restore power to the majority of the Council. But twenty murderers rushed upon me and aimed their daggers at my breast. I had left soldiers at the door of the hall. They ran forward and placed themselves between me and the murderers. The soldiers took me out.

At the same moment, cries of "Outlaw him!" were raised against the defender of the law [Bonaparte]. The murderers crowded around the president of the Council [Napoleon's brother Lucien], making threats. With arms in their hands, they ordered him to declare me outlawed. I was informed of this. I ordered him to be rescued from their fury. I brought him out. Immediately afterwards, some soldiers charged the hall and cleared it.

The traitors fled. The majority returned freely and peaceably into the hall. They discussed the matter, then drew up the

resolution which will become the new law of the republic.

### A Different View

*The second account of what happened in the Council of Five Hundred was written years later by a brilliant French writer, Madame Germaine de Stael. She admired Napoleon at first, but later became one of his harshest critics.*

He [Bonaparte] arrived in the Council of Five Hundred with his arms crossed and a very serious air. He was followed by two big soldiers, who protected his small person. The deputies called Jacobins shouted and howled on seeing him enter the room. His brother

Lucien, fortunately for Bonaparte, was then president [of the Council]. Lucien rang the bell in vain to restore order. Cries of "Traitor" and "Usurper" were heard from every side. One of the deputies (a Corsican like Napoleon) approached the general and seized him by the coat collar. It has been said, but without proof, that the deputy had a dagger to kill him. His action frightened Bonaparte. He told the soldiers at his side, "Get me out of here." The soldiers lifted him through the deputies and carried him out of the room.

After Bonaparte left, the deputies who were opposed to him demanded that he be declared an outlaw. It was then that his brother Lucien did Bonaparte a very great service. He refused, despite all the pressure on him, to put this proposal to a vote. If he had agreed, the decree would have passed. No one can tell now what effect this might have had on the soldiers.

Bonaparte soon sent an armed force to take Lucien to safety outside the Council. As soon as he had left, troops entered the room. They chased out the deputies by marching from one end of the room to the other, as if nobody were there. The deputies, pushed against the wall, were forced to flee by the window into the garden. This was the first time since the beginning of the revolution that the civilian government had been made to appear ridiculous by the military.

