

“History is a set of lies that people have agreed upon.” - Napoleon Bonaparte

Assignment: Evaluate the accuracy of this statement. Why, in particular, might Napoleon hold this view? Also consider the statement in light of the concept of Point of View and historical analysis. Write a 1/2 - 1 page response citing specific evidence to back your argument. No generic summaries will be accepted - you must give thoughtful, specific examples. Submit your completed response when finished.

For all his faults, Napoleon Bonaparte was indeed a well-learned man. Through his readings of history, and his own experience making history, it is not surprising that he concluded that the victors were the ones responsible for writing the history books in a biased manner. He remarked upon this in his memoirs from St. Helena, released in 1823 two years after his death in 1821, asserting that history is not agreed upon in record as it is being made, but after the fact, once opposing parties have been eliminated. During his time, Napoleon was revered, respected, or reviled, depending on which European was doing the talking. He had achieved many military victories, and during the time that France was the dominant power (and he the dominant ruler), many Europeans in continental Europe did not speak ill of him. His enemies, such as Britain, produced propaganda and political cartoons mocking Napoleon, and it is from these pieces of propaganda that many people have falsely derived that Bonaparte was severely lacking in height. In fact, Napoleon was quite average of height for his time period, standing 5'7", still not a bad measurement by even today's standards. This is just one instance in which conflicting ideas were given during the Napoleonic Wars themselves, and a blatant lie became a generally accepted truth after the war. Now, of course, this applies to an outright lie, but in other cases, history is not just written falsely in an easily disprovable manner, but skewed to make some parties out to be better than or worse than another. Such is the case when it comes to Napoleon's invasion of Russia, which is considered a failure. While it is true that it did not produce the strategic results Bonaparte hoped for, and losses were great, it was actually a military victory. It is just that the military victories at Borodino (the only real significant battle) and Moscow were rather pointless if they did not outright destroy Russian fighting spirit or Russian ability to wage war in the future. Napoleon made mistakes such as these, yes, but it would be remiss to say that he suffered military defeat in the Russian invasion, and it is remiss to say that he was incompetent. It is also a matter of biased history that Napoleon is often made out to be a villain, sometimes compared to future dictators such as Adolf Hitler, which is disingenuous to say the least. Napoleon behaved as any European leader would have, and that would be to expand influence; he just failed to do so through military conquest because he could never ensure that his enemies were completely defeated and subjugated, namely Britain. It is a misconception that Bonaparte is a villain who committed mass atrocities and wanted to rob Europe of all that was good and right. These mistakes or skews are what Napoleon refers to when he says that history is a set of lies agreed upon by people. He had read history, he had seen the skews that scholars put on the Crusades, for example, and he knew that once France had been defeated

utterly by the Coalition, the very same would happen to his name. The victors, the Coalition, agreed on what lies and biases to tell the future generations of when it came to the Napoleonic Wars, and Napoleon realized this as a well-read man and as a general.