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**CHANGING POLITICAL AND MILITARY IMAGES OF
NAPOLEON BONAPARTE IN HIS FILMS SHOT IN DIFFERENT
PERIODS**

**MASTER'S THESIS
NODIRA SAFAEVA**

İSTANBUL – 2025

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THESIS ADVISOR: ASST. PROF. MESUT ÖZEL

İSTANBUL – 2025

ACCEPTANCE AND APPROVAL

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I declare that scientific ethics rules have been followed in writing this thesis, that in case of utilization of the works of others, references have been made by scientific norms, that no falsification has been made in the data used, and that no part of the thesis has been presented as another thesis study at this university or another university.

NODIRA SAFAEVA

24.06.2025



PREFACE

First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude and respect to my advisor, ASST. PROF MESUT ÖZEL, who has followed my work meticulously by embracing it during the writing phase of this thesis, for his valuable contributions and efforts. He has been with me in every sense throughout the whole process and has never withheld his support and contributions. During the defense exam, the jury members also made valuable contributions to the finalization of my work. On this occasion, I would like to thank all my professors, relatives, colleagues, and friends who have helped me during the final review of my thesis. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my family and fiancé, whose efforts I will never be able to repay in reaching this day. Thank you...



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24.06.2025

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ABSTRACT

Istanbul Kent University Postgraduate Education Institute
Changing Political and Military Images of Napoleon Bonaparte in His Films Shot
in Different Periods

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This thesis examines the evolution of Napoleon Bonaparte's political and military image in cinema, focusing on how filmmakers across different eras and countries have reshaped his legacy to reflect shifting political ideologies, national interests, and historiographical narratives. Rather than portraying a consistent historical figure, cinema presents Napoleon as a politically constructed symbol, ranging from a heroic unifier to an imperial aggressor.

Through an analysis of key films from 1914 to 2023, this study highlights how French cinema often glorifies Napoleon as a national icon, while British and American films critique his authoritarianism. Postcolonial perspectives emphasize his imperialist actions, and Russian and Soviet productions frame him as a Western threat to national sovereignty. Each portrayal reveals more about the cultural and political climate of the producing country than about Napoleon himself.

For instance, early Italian films aligned with nationalist propaganda, while Soviet-era films likened Napoleon to fascist leaders. Cold War narratives and contemporary Hollywood productions reinterpret his ambition through the lens of modern anxieties about power, war, and leadership.

Ultimately, the thesis argues that cinematic portrayals of Napoleon serve as a mirror for contemporary political concerns, exposing how film functions as a medium of ideological expression and historical reinterpretation. Through these evolving images, cinema not only reflects but also shapes public memory and political discourse.

Keywords: Napoleon Bonaparte, political cinema, historical representation, propaganda, national identity, cinematic memory.

ÖZET

Napoleon Bonaparte'in Farklı Dönemlerde Çekilen Filmlerdeki Değişen Siyasi ve Askeri İmajları

Nodira Safaeva

Yüksek Lisans Tezi

Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü

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Bu tez, Napolyon Bonapart'ın politik ve askeri imajının sinemada nasıl evrildiğini araştırıyor ve farklı dönem ve ülkelerdeki film yapımcılarının onun mirasını değişen politik ideolojileri, ulusal çıkarları ve tarih yazımını yansıtacak şekilde nasıl yeniden şekillendirdiğine odaklanmaktadır. Sinema, tutarlı bir tarihsel figürü tasvir etmek yerine, Napolyon'u kahraman birleştirciden emperyal saldırgana kadar uzanan politik olarak yapılandırılmış bir sembol olarak sunmaktadır.

1914'ten 2023'e kadar olan önemli filmlerin analizi yoluyla, bu çalışma Fransız sinemasının sıklıkla Napolyon'u ulusal bir ikon olarak nasıl yücelttiğini; İngiliz ve Amerikan filmlerinin onun otoriterliğini nasıl eleştirdiğini; postkolonyal perspektiflerin onun emperyalist eylemlerini nasıl vurguladığını ve Rus ve Sovyet yapımlarının onu ulusal egemenliğe yönelik bir Batı tehdidi olarak nasıl çerçevelediğini vurgulamaktadır. Her tasvir, Napolyon'un kendisinden çok, yapımcı ülkenin kültürel ve politik iklimi hakkında daha fazla şey ortaya koymaktadır.

Örneğin, erken dönem İtalyan filmleri milliyetçi propagandayla uyumluyken, Sovyet dönemi filmleri Napolyon'u faşist liderlere benzetiyordu. Soğuk Savaş anlatıları ve çağdaş Hollywood yapımları, onun hırsını güç, savaş ve liderlik hakkındaki modern kaygıların merceğinden yeniden yorumlamaktadır.

Sonuç olarak, tez, Napolyon'un sinematik tasvirlerinin çağdaş politik kaygılar için bir ayna görevi gördüğünü ve filmin ideolojik ifade ve tarihsel yeniden yorumlamanın bir aracı olarak nasıl işlev gördüğünü ortaya koyduğunu savunmaktadır. Bu gelişen imgeler aracılığıyla sinema, yalnızca yansıtmakla kalmıyor, aynı zamanda kamusal hafızayı ve politik söylemi şekillendirmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Napolyon Bonapart, siyasi sinema, tarihsel temsil, propaganda, ulusal kimlik, sinematik hafıza.

INTRODUCTION

1. Relevance of the Research

Cinema is a powerful tool for shaping public opinion, particularly in its interpretation of historical events and figures. Through films, the image of historical figures can either support or distort the historical truth. The perception of prominent individuals, such as Napoleon Bonaparte, is shaped not only by historical data but also by cinematic portrayals. Depending on the political and ideological situation, Napoleon's image can be transformed to fit contemporary ideologies, making this research especially relevant.

Napoleon Bonaparte is a complex figure, and his perception has varied across countries and eras. The political context and ideology of the country where the films are produced significantly influence the interpretation of his image, often resulting in historical inaccuracies.

2. Research Aim

The primary aim of this research is to critically analyze the changing representations of Napoleon Bonaparte in selected historical films produced during different periods. By examining how filmmakers have portrayed Napoleon's leadership, ideology, and military persona, the study seeks to uncover how these portrayals are shaped by the socio-political contexts and ideological climates of their respective eras. Ultimately, the research aims to explore how cinema functions as a cultural tool for interpreting, reinterpreting, and sometimes distorting historical narratives in alignment with contemporary political ideologies and national discourses.

3. Research Questions

This thesis will address the key issues outlined below to structure the analysis:

1. What specific historical facts about Napoleon Bonaparte are most commonly distorted in films, and how do these distortions align with contemporary political ideologies?
2. Which political groups or ideological perspectives have the most significant influence on the representation of Napoleon in films, and what are their motivations?

3. How do filmmakers justify the alterations of historical facts regarding Napoleon, and what narratives do they aim to promote through these changes?
4. In what ways do the representations of Napoleon in films differ across various countries, and how do these differences reflect national political interests or ideological positions?
5. How do the distortions in the filmic portrayal of Napoleon impact public understanding and perception of his historical significance?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to uncover how political ideologies and agendas have influenced the cinematic portrayal of Napoleon Bonaparte, revealing how his image has been adapted to serve shifting narratives of power, leadership, and national identity across different historical periods.

4. Hypothesis

The cinematic representations of Napoleon Bonaparte are not static but are instead shaped by the prevailing political ideologies, cultural anxieties, and historical narratives of the time each film was produced. As such, films produced during periods of nationalism or authoritarianism are more likely to depict Napoleon as a heroic military genius and visionary leader, emphasizing order, strength, and unity. In contrast, films produced during liberal or post-colonial eras tend to portray him as a symbol of imperial ambition, personal vanity, or tyrannical power. This shift in portrayal reflects broader historical reinterpretations of Napoleon's legacy, demonstrating how filmmakers selectively emphasize or critique aspects of his political and military persona to resonate with contemporary audiences. Therefore, by analyzing Napoleon-themed films from different decades and political contexts, one can trace the evolving ideological functions of historical memory in visual culture.

5. Motivation for Studying Napoleon

Napoleon Bonaparte is a figure of immense historical importance, whose impact on Europe and the world is still felt today. My interest lies in understanding how political and ideological motives can reshape historical narratives in popular culture, specifically in films. Napoleon's complex and controversial legacy makes him an ideal subject for exploring how political context influences historical representation. Through this research, it is aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of how history is reinterpreted through cinema for political and ideological purposes.

6. What Has Been Done in the Field

The representation of Napoleon Bonaparte in cinema has long intrigued film scholars and historians alike, primarily due to the enduring cultural significance and political symbolism associated with his figure. Over the decades, filmmakers have reinterpreted Napoleon's image to reflect the ideological currents and historical concerns of their time. While considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to specific films or broader portrayals of historical figures in cinema, a significant gap remains in systematic analyses of how Napoleon's political and military image has evolved across cinematic periods in response to shifting political ideologies and cultural climates.

Early studies often highlight the romanticized, mythic construction of Napoleon, particularly in Abel Gance's silent epic *Napoléon* (1927). This film has been widely studied as an example of early cinematic nationalism, presenting Napoleon as a heroic unifier of France following the chaos of the Revolution. Scholars argue that Gance's Napoleon was portrayed as a proto-modern leader—a man of vision and destiny (Abel, 1984; Vincendeau, 2000). As Roberts suggests, the film served to "resurrect the Bonapartist mythos" during a time when France was seeking to rebuild national unity after World War I (2001).

Paul Cuff (2017) further examines *Napoléon* (1927), analyzing its historical and cinematic significance. He argues that the film's visual innovations reinforced the mythologizing of Napoleon as a figure of destiny, particularly through its use of polyvision. His work, "*Presenting the Past: Abel Gance's Napoléon (1927), from live projection to digital reproduction*," discusses this in depth (Paul Cuff, 2017, pp. 11–58).

Richard I. Suchenski also explores Gance's films in *Projections of Memory: Romanticism, Modernism, and the Aesthetics of Film*. He connects the film to broader Romantic aesthetics, emphasizing how Gance constructed an idealized version of Napoleon that resonated with nationalistic sentiment (Richard I. Suchenski, 2016, pp. 11–58).

Finally, Verstraeten examines the ideological function of Gance's *Napoléon*, arguing that it employs tragic irony to comment on historical memory. His study, *A New Alphabet for the Cinema: The Tragic Irony of Napoléon (Abel Gance, 1927)*, explores this theme in depth (Verstraeten, 2012, pp. 48–65).

In contrast, mid-20th-century portrayals such as Sergei Bondarchuk's *Waterloo* (1970), co-produced by the Soviet Union and Italy, offered a more ambivalent image. Here, Napoleon is portrayed as both a military genius and a tragic figure, brought down by his ambition. Scholars note that this depiction aligns with Cold War attitudes—particularly the Soviet critique of Western militarism and autocracy (Rollins, 1998; Kenez, 2001). The film's production context significantly influenced its ideological undertones, embedding both admiration and warning within it.

Bondarchuk's *Waterloo* was filmed in Soviet Ukraine, utilizing thousands of Red Army soldiers to stage large-scale battle sequences. The film's grand scale and meticulous attention to historical detail reflect the Soviet approach to historical cinema, which often emphasized realism and spectacle (Nordic Defence Review, 2023, pp. 1–5). Rod Steiger's portrayal of Napoleon captures both his strategic brilliance and personal vulnerabilities, reinforcing the film's ambivalent stance (Keslassy, 2023)..

The film's ideological framing is particularly significant in the context of Cold War historiography. While it acknowledges Napoleon's military genius, it also serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked ambition and authoritarian rule. This duality aligns with Soviet critiques of Western militarism, positioning Napoleon as both an admirable strategist and a flawed leader (Nordic Defence Review, 2023, pp. 6–12).

Similarly, the French miniseries *Napoléon* (2002), starring Christian Clavier, has garnered attention for its attempt to strike a balance between political critique and nationalist sentiment. Historians such as Forrest and Dwyer have observed that this version presents a more humanized and psychologically complex Napoleon, reflecting modern sensibilities and France's contemporary reassessment of its imperial legacy (2006; 2008). This trend fits with Hughes-Warrington's broader observation that modern historical films often blend spectacle with personal introspection to appeal to increasingly critical audiences (2007).

For instance, Gimblett examines the use of painting as propaganda under Napoleon Bonaparte, particularly through the works of Jacques-Louis David, Antoine-Jean Gros, and Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres. Her thesis, "*Painting and Propaganda: Napoleon and His Artists*," discusses how visual media—including films — have played a role in shaping Napoleon's legacy (Gimblett, 2011).

Similarly, Dumont provides an extensive analysis of how Napoleon is depicted in international audiovisual productions. His work, *Napoleon: The Saga in 1,000 Films*, examines the political motivations behind various portrayals, illustrating how different historical epochs have influenced cinematic representations of Napoleon (Dumont, 2015).

Additionally, Williams explores how Napoleon's artistic and cinematic representations have shifted from glorification to more reflective and critical portrayals. Her study, *Truth, Fiction, and Image: Napoleon Bonaparte and the Changing Tides of Political Imagination*, highlights how state-sponsored art and propaganda shaped Napoleon's image during his reign, while later artistic and cinematic interpretations introduced more nuanced perspectives (Williams, 2018).

More recent academic interest has focused on Ridley Scott's *Napoleon* (2023), which has sparked debate due to its stylized yet controversial portrayal of the emperor. Some critics argue that the film deconstructs the Napoleonic myth by portraying him as emotionally volatile and politically opportunistic (Rosenstone, 2023; Brody, 2023). Others view it as perpetuating cinematic tropes of the "great man" theory. Early scholarly responses have emphasized the film's ambivalence—neither fully glorifying nor condemning its subject—suggesting a postmodern approach to historical biography (Burgoyne, 2008).

Scott's film has been criticized for its historical inaccuracies, particularly in its depiction of Napoleon's military campaigns and personal relationships. French historians have noted that the film takes significant creative liberties, sometimes at the expense of historical fidelity (Keslassy, 2023). However, others argue that its stylized approach reflects contemporary cinematic trends, prioritizing narrative impact over strict adherence to historical detail (Tan, 2024, pp. 135–144).

Despite these scattered analyses, a lack of comprehensive comparative work remains, examining how Napoleon's political and military persona evolved across different films and why these transformations occur. Existing literature often focuses on either artistic technique or historical fidelity, without sufficient attention to how ideological shifts, political climates, and national identity discourses shape and reshape Napoleon's cinematic identity over time (Toplin, 2002; Chapman, 2013).

This gap presents an opportunity for a study that not only compares portrayals of Napoleon across films but also contextualizes them within the political ideologies and cultural

narratives of their production eras. Such research would contribute to both film studies and political history by revealing how cinema serves as a lens for understanding the evolution of societal values through the representation of historically contentious figures.

7. Contribution to the Field

This research will contribute to the field by focusing specifically on the political and ideological factors that drive historical distortions in films about Napoleon Bonaparte. While much of the existing literature explores the inaccuracies in these films, few studies examine the political and ideological agendas and motivations behind these changes.

For instance, Blassnig discusses how political communication influences self-presentation in the media, which can be applied to cinematic portrayals of historical figures, such as Napoleon. His study, *"Content Analysis in the Research Field of Political Communication,"* highlights how political actors shape narratives to align with their ideological goals (Blassnig, 2023, pp. 301–312).

Similarly, Schwemmer and Riedl explore how political influencers impact election outcomes, demonstrating how media—including films can serve as a tool for ideological influence. Their study, *From Hashtags to Ballots: Conceptualizing Political Influencers and Evaluating Their Impact on Election Outcomes,* provides insights into how political messaging is crafted and disseminated (Schwemmer & Riedl, 2025).

Additionally, Hassan examines research contributions in academic studies, emphasizing the importance of identifying gaps in existing literature. His work, *Research Contribution – Thesis Guide,* underscores the need for studies that analyze historical manipulation in film as a tool for political and ideological influence (Hassan, 2024).

This research will offer a detailed analysis of how political contexts shape cinematic narratives about Napoleon and provide insight into the broader issue of historical manipulation in film as a tool for political and ideological influence.

8. Object and Subject of the Research

8.1. Object of the Research: The object of this study is the collection of cinematic works depicting Napoleon Bonaparte across different historical periods and national contexts.

8.2. Subject of the Research: The subject of the research is the political and ideological distortions present in these films, specifically focusing on how Napoleon’s political and military persona is shaped, manipulated, or reinterpreted to reflect the prevailing ideological agendas of the time and the country of production.

9. Methodology

This qualitative study will employ a comparative film analysis method, combined with a historical and contextual analysis. The methodology consists of the following steps:

9.1. Film Selection

A purposive sampling of 4–5 major films portraying Napoleon across different decades will be analyzed. Selections include:

- *Napoleon’s Hundred Days* (1914) – Roberto Danesi, Archita Valente
- *Napoléon* (1927) – Abel Gance
- *Kutuzov* (1943) – Vladimir Petrov
- *Waterloo* (1970) – Sergei Bondarchuk
- *Napoleon* (2023) – Ridley Scott

9.2. Cinematic Analysis

Each film will be analyzed for:

- Political and military representation of Napoleon
- Characterization (visuals, dialogue, actions)
- Narrative structure and storytelling techniques
- Use of historical events and deviations

9.3. Contextual Analysis

The films will be contextualized in relation to:

- The political and cultural climate of the time they were produced
- The intended audience and production background
- Reception data (critical reviews, box office, controversies)

9.4. Comparative Evaluation

Patterns and shifts will be identified across films, focusing on how Napoleon's image changes in alignment with evolving ideologies, national identities, and cinematic conventions.

9.5. Secondary Sources

Scholarly books, journal articles, interviews, and reviews will support the analysis.

Historiographical comparisons will be made to assess how each film aligns with or diverges from academic history.

10. Limitations of the Study

This review critically examines how different films distort Napoleon's political and military legacy, shaping public perception through cinematic reinterpretations. However, several limitations must be acknowledged:

10.1. Film Selection – Numerous films depict Napoleon, each reflecting different historical interpretations and cinematic approaches. However, due to time constraints, this study focuses on selecting films that represent distinct eras of historical filmmaking. Rather than analyzing every portrayal, movies are chosen from different periods, emphasizing their treatment of key political events.

10.2. Language and Accessibility – Some significant films are available in French, Russian, and other languages. Subtitled or dubbed versions may slightly alter original meanings, introducing interpretative challenges in assessing political messaging and ideological framing.

10.3. Selective Focus – The study prioritizes how films frame Napoleon's political decisions, governance, and diplomacy, rather than providing an exhaustive historiographical evaluation. While military campaigns are examined, the emphasis remains on political distortions and their impact on the broader context.

10.4. Historical Representation vs. Cinematic Narrative – This review does not aim to correct historical inaccuracies, but rather to analyze how filmmakers construct political narratives about Napoleon. These distortions serve ideological and artistic purposes, influencing collective memory and historical discourse.

These limitations highlight the need for further research into how political cinema shapes historical consciousness and national identity.

11. Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into seven chapters, each addressing a different dimension of how Napoleon Bonaparte's image has been politically and ideologically shaped in cinema across different historical periods and national contexts.

- **Introduction**

The introductory chapter outlines the relevance and scope of the research, presenting the aims, hypothesis, key research questions, and methodology. It explains the significance of analyzing Napoleon's cinematic portrayals, defines the object and subject of the study, and discusses the limitations and structure of the research.

- **Chapter 1: Napoleon Bonaparte as a Political Figure and His Historical Perception**

This chapter examines Napoleon's actual political and military legacy and its historical interpretation. It analyzes his influence on European history, evolving perceptions across different nations, and his symbolic significance in political culture and historical memory.

- **Chapter 2: Political and Ideological Distortion of Historical Facts in Films About Napoleon**

This chapter provides a comparative analysis of specific films featuring Napoleon, identifying distortions of historical facts. It examines how filmmakers reframe political events, character traits, and battles to align with contemporary ideologies or cinematic conventions.

- **Chapter 3: Political Goals in the Use of Napoleon's Image**

This chapter investigates how various political regimes have used Napoleon's image to convey ideological messages. It analyzes how state ideologies—especially in France, the USSR, and the USA—shaped his portrayal, and how Napoleon's image has been politically reinterpreted in the 21st century.

- **Chapter 4: Factors in the Distortion of the Image of Napoleon in Cinema**

This section explores the broader political, cultural, and economic factors that underpin cinematic distortions. It discusses myths, stereotypes, commercial pressures, and sociocultural motives that influence filmmakers' choices.

- **Chapter 5: The Influence of Political Distortions in Cinema on the Perception of History**

This chapter examines the impact of film portrayals on public consciousness, including public and political reactions to films about Napoleon. It examines how cinema influences collective memory and can be used to manipulate historical understanding for political purposes.

- **Chapter 6: Ethical and Political Aspects of the Distortion of History**

This chapter examines the ethical responsibilities of filmmakers when depicting historical events and figures. It considers the tension between artistic license and historical accuracy, as well as the broader cultural responsibility of cinema in shaping historical literacy.

- **Final Assessment and Conclusion**

This concluding chapter summarizes the key findings, revisits the research questions, and validates the hypothesis. It offers final reflections on the role of cinema in ideological history-making and proposes directions for future research.

Bibliography

A comprehensive list of all academic works, articles, films, and sources referenced throughout the thesis.

CHAPTER 1: NAPOLEON BONAPARTE AS A POLITICAL FIGURE AND HIS PERCEPTION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

My true glory is not that I have won forty battles: one Waterloo wiped them all out. What will live forever is my code of conduct.

Napoleon Bonaparte

1.1. Napoleon Bonaparte in the context of world history

The Impact of Napoleon on European Politics and Society. Napoleon Bonaparte had a profound impact on Europe, altering not only the continent's political map but also its social institutions. The main historical trend of this period was the growth of capitalism and the rise of bourgeois-national movements.

1.1.1. Political Impact

The Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815) led to a massive redrawing of borders, the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire (1806), and the rise of nationalist movements (Britannica, 2025).

1. As a result of continuous wars and conquests, a huge Napoleonic empire was formed, supplemented by a system of directly or briefly subordinate French satellite states (Britannica, 2025).
2. The Napoleonic Wars showed the aggressive and anti-popular character of the Bonapartist regime. These wars brought enslavement and innumerable disasters to the peoples of Europe (O'Brien, 2025).
3. The liberation of European countries from Napoleonic France's rule contributed to the independent development of capitalism in several European countries (Britannica, 2025).
4. The wars of conquest of bourgeois France were intertwined with the national liberation struggle of peoples against foreign oppression and feudalism (O'Brien, 2025).

The creation of the Napoleonic Empire demonstrated that personal power could be combined with revolutionary ideas, reshaping European governance and military strategies (Britannica, 2025).

A student of Yevgeny Viktorovich, A. Z. Manfred, was the first Soviet historian to point out that in his youth, Napoleon was a supporter of revolutionary ideas but also "completes" the revolution (1971, p. 543).

Napoleon wrote several early works of different genres, full of youthful maximalism and revolutionary sentiments (*Letter to Matteo Buttafuoco*, *History of Corsica*, *Dialogue on Love*, *Dinner at Beaucaire*, *Clisson and Eugene*, and others) (Manfred, 1987, p. 135). He also wrote and dictated a huge number of letters—more than 40,000 of which survive (Lentz, 2005, p. 17).

An outstanding military leader, Napoleon I, refined the strategy and tactics developed during the Revolutionary Wars. The victories won by France over the armies of feudal-absolutist states were explained, first of all, by the fact that bourgeois France, which represented a more progressive social system, had an advanced military system created by the Great French National Voluntary Armies and the conscription system (Colson, 2023, pp. 9–27).

The Congress of Vienna (1815) and its consequences. The Congress of Vienna (1815) established a system of international relations that would shape European politics until 1848 (Schroeder, 1994, p. 215). Held in 1815, the Congress of Vienna was a pivotal event in European history, significantly altering the continent's political landscape following the Napoleonic Wars. The primary objective was to restore stability and order to Europe following the upheavals caused by Napoleon Bonaparte's conquests and to prevent the rise of another dominant power, such as France (Jarrett, 2013, p. 78).

Key Outcomes of the Congress of Vienna. The Congress of Vienna (1815) significantly influenced the European political landscape, establishing a framework for international diplomacy and restoring stability following the Napoleonic Wars (Schroeder, 1994, pp. 112–114).

- 1. Restoration of Monarchies:** The congress aimed to restore the pre-Napoleonic political order, which meant reinstating monarchies that had been overthrown during the French Revolution or during Napoleon's reign. For example, in France, the Bourbon monarchy was restored, and Louis XVIII ascended to the throne (Mark Jarrett, 2013, pp. 56–57).

2. **Balance of Power:** The central concept in Vienna was the balance of power. The Great Powers—Britain, Austria, Prussia, and Russia—worked to prevent any single country from becoming too dominant, as France had been under Napoleon. This was achieved through territorial adjustments and ensuring that no state could easily overpower the others (Okey, 1999, pp. 112–114).
3. **Territorial Changes:** Several significant territorial shifts took place during the Congress. France's borders were reduced to their 1790 boundaries, reversing much of Napoleon's territorial expansion (Grab, 2003, pp. 221–224). The Austrian Empire strengthened its hold by gaining territories in Italy and the Netherlands, bolstering its influence in Central Europe (Broers, 2014, pp. 315–319). Prussia acquired substantial territories in the Rhineland, thereby reinforcing its role as a central European power (Bell, 2007, pp. 205–208). In Scandinavia, Norway was transferred from Denmark to Sweden, reshaping the region's political landscape (Schroeder, 1994, pp. 298–301). Additionally, Poland was once again partitioned between Russia, Prussia, and Austria, continuing the divisions from the late 18th century (Lieven, 2002, pp. 147–149).
4. **Creation of the German Confederation:** The Congress dissolved the Holy Roman Empire and established the German Confederation—a loose association of 39 German states under Austrian leadership. This move contributed to the rise of German nationalism in the following decades (Forrest, 2006, pp. 89–92).
5. **Concert of Europe:** The Congress initiated a system of regular diplomatic meetings among major European powers, known as the *Concert of Europe*. This framework aimed to maintain a balance of power and prevent revolutionary movements from emerging. The Great Powers agreed to suppress uprisings, thereby maintaining relative stability throughout Europe (Schroeder, 1994, pp. 412–415).

These principles laid the foundation for the political order in 19th-century Europe. However, despite efforts to maintain stability, nationalist and liberal movements gained momentum, culminating in widespread revolutions across Europe in 1848 (Dwyer, 2018, pp. 265–268).

It is impossible to unambiguously assess the importance of such an ambiguous personality as Napoleon Bonaparte. His name is associated with boundless ambitions, despotic power, and wars that led to enormous human sacrifices across France and other European states. These

wars were waged to conquer foreign territories and plunder other nations, imposing heavy indemnities that weakened their economies (Esdaile, 2008, pp. 284–286). When Napoleon arbitrarily redrew the map of Europe or imposed a new economic order through the Continental System, he disrupted the natural course of historical development. He violated long-established borders and traditions (The Collector, n.d.).

However, Napoleon also symbolizes courage, bravery, diplomatic talent, and the ability to challenge the feudal traditions of Europe. The Napoleonic era in European history marked a decisive transition from the old order to a modern era, where his military theories and practices played a fundamental role in dismantling feudalism and absolutism (History Guild, n.d.).

Of course, Napoleon was guided by the idea of French domination and securing a strong geopolitical position on the European continent (History Guild, n.d.). He once declared, “There are many good generals in Europe, but they want to look at many things at once, while I look at only one thing—the masses (of the enemy)—and I strive to destroy them” (Lentz, 2005, p. 17). His ability to exploit victories, pursue defeated enemies, and leverage military success for diplomatic gains was unmatched (Esdaile, 2008, pp. 284–286).

1.1.2. Social Impact

The Napoleonic Code (1804) became the basis for civil law in many countries in Europe and beyond. It enshrined equality before the law, protected private property, and guaranteed freedom of enterprise (Markham, 2005, p. 112).

Napoleon tried to introduce the bourgeois order in the conquered countries with bayonets. Establishing French rule in Italy and the German states, he simultaneously abolished the feudal rights of the nobility and the guild system, carried out the secularization of church lands, and extended the effect of his Civil Code to them (McCain, 2017, p. 134).

The Code Napoleon, or Napoleonic Code, passed in 1804, was one of Napoleon Bonaparte's most significant legacies. It has become the basis for civil law in many countries, both in Europe and beyond, and its principles continue to influence legal systems worldwide today (Markham, 2005, p. 115).

Educational reforms contributed to the creation of the lyceum system and state examinations, which influenced educational models in other countries (Markham, 2005, p. 118).

Napoleon Bonaparte made significant contributions to education, particularly through the creation of the lyceum system and the establishment of state-controlled examinations. His educational reforms aimed to create a more standardized and centralized system that would serve the state's needs while encouraging a meritocracy and loyalty to the regime (McCain, 2017, p. 140).

Napoleon's Military Reforms and Their Impact. Napoleon Bonaparte's military reforms fundamentally changed army recruitment, making mass conscription and military careers accessible to all social classes (Gates, 2001, pp. 45–47). One of his most significant policies was *levée en masse*, which required all able-bodied men between 18 and 25 to serve in the army during wartime, creating a truly national force (Lynn, 1993, pp. 78–81).

Mass Conscription and Meritocracy. Before Napoleon, military service was often limited to volunteers or aristocrats. His reforms introduced a merit-based system, allowing soldiers to rise through ranks based on skill and achievement rather than social status (Rothenberg, 1980, pp. 129–132). This approach strengthened the officer corps and contributed to the professionalism of the French army (Smith, 2005, pp. 198–201).

National Identity and Army Organization. By implementing conscription, Napoleon fostered a sense of national unity, making the army a representation of all French citizens rather than an elite institution (Chandler, 1966, pp. 303–307). His emphasis on mobility, rapid marches, and disciplined training ensured that his forces remained highly effective in battle (Schroeder, 1994, pp. 412–415).

1.1.3. European Influence

Napoleon's military innovations influenced recruitment policies across Europe, leading many nations to adopt similar conscription models. His reforms laid the foundation for modern national armies, shaping military structures that persist to this day (Forrest, 2006, pp. 155–159). Additionally, the total war approach Napoleon pioneered influenced strategic thinking in later conflicts, as seen in the 19th and 20th centuries (Bell, 2007, pp. 243–246).

The image of Napoleon in the historical memory of different countries. Napoleon Bonaparte's legacy varies across nations, shaped by religious, political, and ideological interpretations. In Russia and Spain, clergy often portrayed Napoleon as the Antichrist, emphasizing his role as a destabilizing force against traditional institutions (Lieven, 2012, p.

379). His invasion of Russia in 1812 and the brutal Peninsular War in Spain reinforced this perception, particularly among religious and nationalist movements.

Historiography on Napoleon is extensive, with tens of thousands of studies analyzing his leadership and influence. As historian Peter Gale observed, each generation reinterprets Napoleon in light of contemporary concerns (Ellis, 2003). Before World War II, scholars approached Napoleon's legacy from three distinct perspectives:

- 1. The Heroic View:** Early historians depicted Napoleon as possessing "superhuman" abilities, often glorifying or harshly condemning his rule. Figures such as Las Cases, Bignon, de Staël, Arndt, Gentz, Hazlitt, and Scott contributed to this perspective (Ellis, 2003).
- 2. The Political Instrumentalization:** Some historians have adapted Napoleon's legacy to serve political discourse, utilizing his image as a symbolic tool in ideological debates. Writers such as d'Haussonville, Mignet, Michelet, Thiers, Quinet, Lanfray, Taine, Housset, and Vandal portrayed him as either a revolutionary force or a cautionary figure (Ellis, 2003).
- 3. The Philosophical Interpretation:** The third wave of scholars sought a "great idea" behind Napoleon's ambitions, attempting to understand his era through broader intellectual frameworks. Thinkers such as Sorel, Masson, Bourgeois, Driot, and Dunant explored themes of nationalism, governance, and military strategy (Ellis, 2003).

Napoleon's military campaigns played a crucial role in shaping his image, particularly through his strategic brilliance and battlefield victories. His leadership during the Napoleonic Wars showcased his ability to mobilize vast armies and deploy innovative tactics, earning him both admiration and criticism (Chandler, 2011, p. 856). His conquests left a lasting impact on European geopolitics, influencing military doctrine and political structures long after he fell from power.

1.2. Evolution of the political image of Napoleon

1.2.1. Napoleon as a Tyrant and Liberator: Various Interpretations

The regime created by Napoleon manifested itself differently in France and abroad. Forced to consolidate his power while addressing the interests of different social classes,

Napoleon developed monarchical tendencies while simultaneously promoting republican economic principles in the territories he conquered (Tarle, 1939, p. 97).

Historian E. V. Tarle famously described Napoleon as a "liquidator" of the revolution, arguing that while he retained some revolutionary ideals, his leadership ultimately reinforced an authoritarian state. Tarle, a leading expert on Napoleon's foreign policy, relied on extensive research from the National Archives of France, particularly regarding press control under Napoleon (1939, p. 97).

The "Golden Legend" and Napoleon's Soldiers. Napoleon's soldiers played a decisive role in shaping his "golden legend", reminiscing about the First Empire and their beloved "little corporal" after the Napoleonic Wars. Many veterans, left inactive after the wars, romanticized their experiences under his leadership, contributing to the mythologization of his rule (Tulard, 1996, p. 62).

The "Black Legend" and Opposition to Napoleon. As historian J. Tulard demonstrated, Napoleon's opponents also contributed to his legend, crafting a "black legend" that contrasted with the glorified image promoted by his supporters (1996, p. 62). English caricaturists such as Cruikshank, Gilray, Woodward, and Rowlandson frequently depicted Napoleon in exaggerated forms—first as a slim, ambitious leader, then as a fat, power-hungry tyrant. By 1813, French citizens, frustrated by mass conscription, nicknamed Napoleon a "cannibal" due to the enlistment of 16-year-old boys into the army.

Napoleon's Memoirs and Self-Created Legend. During his exile to Saint Helena, Napoleon actively shaped his legacy, dictating memoirs that framed his intentions and achievements in a positive light. His writings covered key moments, including the siege of Toulon, the Vendémiaire rebellion, the Italian and Egyptian campaigns, the Battle of Marengo, his exile to Elba, and the "Hundred Days". He also reflected on the military strategies of Caesar, Turenne, and Frederick, positioning himself within a lineage of great commanders (Tarle, 1939, p. 97; Levitsky, 1938, p. 108).

Napoleon's Use of Propaganda. The Napoleonic legend was not born on Saint Helena—it was carefully crafted throughout his career. Napoleon utilized newspapers, commemorative medals, and bulletins of the Grand Army to shape public perception. His ability to frame both victories and defeats as triumphs demonstrated his mastery of public relations and propaganda. As some historians have noted, *"If you had to describe Napoleon's genius in*

one word, that word would be propaganda. In that respect, Napoleon was a man of his time. He created the picture himself, a hat with two horns, a gray tailcoat, and a hand between the buttons." (Levitsky, 1938, p. 108).

1.2.2. Napoleon in propaganda of different eras: from the 19th century to the present.

Napoleon Bonaparte's image has been shaped by propaganda across different eras. During his reign, he was a master of self-promotion, using newspapers, theater, and art to craft a heroic persona. He commissioned paintings that depicted him as a strong leader, such as *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (Dwyer, 2004, p. 145). His bulletins exaggerated victories and spread his glorified interpretation of events (Best, 2018, p. 72).

In the 19th century, Napoleon's legacy was debated, with some viewing him as a revolutionary hero and others as a tyrant. Russian historians analyzed his diplomacy and its connection to the French Revolution (Kareev, 1897, p. 217). By the early 20th century, his image had evolved further, with propaganda continuing to shape perceptions of his rule (Pustarfi, n.d., p. 89).

1.2.3. Napoleon and his image in political culture. The Influence of Political Changes on the Perception of Napoleon in Various Countries (France, Russia, England, USA).

Napoleon Bonaparte's influence in political culture varied across different countries due to shifting political landscapes and ideological differences. His legacy was perceived differently in France, Russia, England, and the United States, reflecting the distinct political contexts of each region.

France: From National Hero to Controversial Figure. Napoleon was initially celebrated as a national hero following the French Revolution, as his military successes and reforms helped stabilize France (Dwyer, 2004, p. 145). His declaration as Emperor in 1804 was widely accepted due to promises of stability; however, as his wars drained resources, his authoritarian rule led to growing disillusionment. After his downfall in 1815, royalist propaganda attempted to tarnish his image, but admiration for his achievements persisted.

Russia: Archenemy and Symbol of Resistance. Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 was a turning point in European history (Adams, 2014, p. 76). While initially seen as a formidable strategist, the disastrous retreat from Moscow turned him into a symbol of arrogance

and defeat in Russian historical narratives. Propaganda during and after the war reinforced his image as a tyrant seeking European domination (Charles River Editors, 2015).

England: A Threat to British Supremacy. In England, Napoleon was perceived as a military threat and a destabilizer of European order (Roberts, 2014, p. 321). The Napoleonic Wars were largely fought to maintain British naval dominance and prevent French expansion (Knight, 2015). British media portrayed Napoleon as a dictator, especially after his exile to St. Helena (Gregory, 2024). Over time, some British intellectuals reevaluated his legacy, considering his impact on European governance and legal reform (Rose, 2006).

United States: Mixed Admiration and Skepticism. In the United States, Napoleon's image was complex, influenced by the country's distance from European conflicts. Some admired his rise from obscurity and viewed him as a revolutionary figure (Abbott, 2005, p. 76). The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 strengthened American expansion, creating positive associations with his rule (U.S. Department of State, 2009). However, after his fall, his legacy became more nuanced, with critiques focusing on his militarism and authoritarianism (American Battlefield Trust, 2025).

1.3. Conclusions

Napoleon's legacy remains deeply debated, with some viewing him as a visionary modernizer, while others see him as a tyrannical conqueror. His influence on law, governance, and military strategy continues to shape historical discourse today (Esdaile, 2008, pp. 284–286).

Modern interpretations of Napoleon still reflect a mix of admiration and criticism. His strategic brilliance is widely acknowledged, but his ambition and authoritarian rule remain points of contention (Dwyer, 2004, p. 162). His legacy continues to be explored in historical studies, literature, and popular culture.

CHAPTER 2: POLITICAL MOTIVES FOR THE DISTORTION OF HISTORICAL FACTS IN FILMS ABOUT NAPOLEON

*History is the version of past events
that people have decided to accept.
Napoleon Bonaparte*

2.1. Analysis of specific cinematographic works: Identification of distortions of historical facts: battles, political events, personal qualities of Napoleon

Filmmakers of various ideologies and movements paid tribute to the Napoleonic theme: *Napoleon's Hundred Days* (Italy, 1914), *Napoleon* (France, 1927), *May Field* (Italy, 1935), *Kolberg* (Germany, 1944), *Kutuzov* (USSR, 1943), *Ashes* (Poland, 1927), *Waterloo* (Italy - USSR, 1970), etc, (Esdaile, 2008, p 107). Filmmakers have manipulated Napoleon's image to serve ideological, nationalistic, and political purposes, shaping his legacy in ways that often depart from historical accuracy. Below is an analysis of specific cinematographic works, identifying distortions in battles, political events, and Napoleon's personal qualities.

2.1.1. Political Distortions in *Napoleon's Hundred Days* (1914)

Roberto Danesi's and Archita Valente's *Napoleon's Hundred Days* (1914), starring Ettore Mazzanti, reflects early nationalist mythmaking through film, portraying Napoleon's return as a glorious resurgence rather than a politically precarious gamble. Produced on the eve of Italy's entry into World War I, the film aligns with pre-World War I patriotic sentiment, reshaping history to reinforce imperial nostalgia and validate strong leadership.

Battles: Waterloo as a Politically Constructed Tragedy. The film reimagines the Battle of Waterloo as a noble tragedy, aligning Napoleon with the image of a heroic fallen leader rather than a failed strategist. By minimizing tactical miscalculations, the film erases the poor coordination among Napoleon's marshals and downplays the decisive role of Prussian reinforcements under Blücher (Barbero, 2005, pp. 205–210; Chandler, 2003, pp. 973–981).

This framing reinforces the myth of military infallibility, portraying defeat not as a consequence of flawed leadership, but as a result of external betrayal, subtly echoing nationalist rhetoric about military heroism.

Political Events: The Illusion of Popular Unity. Napoleon's return from Elba is simplified into a patriotic march, erasing the deep political instability and divided loyalties of 1815. The film depicts universal support for Napoleon, ignoring figures like Marshal Ney, who initially pledged loyalty to Louis XVIII before switching allegiances (Roberts, 2014, pp. 678–682).

By presenting Napoleon's return as a moment of unity, the film avoids addressing political fragmentation, thereby reinforcing a nationalist narrative of strength through leadership, which parallels early 20th-century imperial aspirations in Italy.

Personal Qualities: Mythologizing Napoleon as a Legitimate Autocrat. Napoleon is sanitized into an idealized leader, erasing his authoritarian tendencies in favor of a visionary, melancholic savior figure. The film omits references to press censorship, suppression of opposition, and propaganda strategies Napoleon employed to maintain control (Broers, 2014, pp. 489–491; Englund, 2004, pp. 326–329).

By glossing over autocratic rule, *Napoleon's Hundred Days* reflects early 20th-century admiration for strong leadership, reinforcing monarchic nostalgia and imperial themes in nationalist discourse.

Political Context: Cinema as a Tool of Nation Building. *Napoleon's Hundred Days* (1803) is not merely historical fiction—it is a politically constructed narrative that reinforces themes of national unity, military heroism, and strong leadership. In Italy, where nationalist ideals were gaining momentum ahead of World War I, portraying Napoleon as a heroic, unifying force resonated with themes of national unity, resistance to foreign powers, and military grandeur. By distorting battles, simplifying political tensions, and crafting Napoleon's image as an untarnished ruler, the film reflects early 20th-century nationalist ideals, contributing to the mythologization of imperial figures as symbols of national pride.

2.1.2. Political Distortions in Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927)

Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927) presents an idealized vision of Napoleon Bonaparte, reinforcing a national myth that elevates him as a unifying force rather than a politically contested figure. The film's distortions serve to legitimize Napoleon's legacy, omitting critical historical nuances that would challenge his authoritarianism and political maneuvering.

Battle of Toulon (1793): Military Mythmaking. Gance's portrayal of the Battle of Toulon reinforces the idea of Napoleon as an exceptional strategist, positioning him as the sole architect of victory. This aligns with French nationalist narratives, which often celebrate military success while minimizing internal political divisions (Brownlow, 1983, pp. 89–92; Chandler, 2003, pp. 71–72).

The omission of Revolutionary government infighting erases the political context that shaped military decisions. The heroic framing of Napoleon discounts the role of senior officers, reinforcing an individualized militaristic legend rather than a collective Revolutionary effort.

Napoleon's Rise to Power: Political Rewriting. Gance's film removes the complexities of Napoleon's ascent, portraying it as a destined rise rather than a politically strategic maneuver. This echoes early 20th-century nationalist tendencies, which sought to reaffirm France's military and political heritage (Roberts, 2014, pp. 106–109; Abel, 1988, pp. 228–229).

Figures like Paul Barras, who played a crucial role in Napoleon's political survival, are often minimized, reinforcing the notion of self-made power. The post-Revolutionary struggles that shaped Napoleon's policies are condensed, silencing debates about his consolidation of authoritarian rule.

Napoleon's Image: The Construction of a National Icon. Gance constructs Napoleon as a flawless leader, embodying heroic nationalism while erasing his authoritarian traits (Vincendeau, 2000, pp. 44–46; Broers, 2014, pp. 13–15).

His manipulation of public opinion, censorship, and use of propaganda are absent, despite their centrality to his reign. The film's emotional tone aims to legitimize Napoleon's imperial ambitions, framing his self-coronation as an act of destiny rather than a political maneuver.

2.1.3. Political Distortions in *Kutuzov* (1943, Soviet Film)

The Soviet film *Kutuzov* (1943) presents a highly ideological portrayal of Napoleon, aligning with Stalin-era patriotic narratives that frame him as an imperialist aggressor rather than a complex historical figure. Produced during World War II, the film serves as propaganda, reinforcing themes of national resistance, military heroism, and anti-imperial struggle.

Battles: The Patriotic Framing of the Russian Campaign. The film *Kutuzov* presents the 1812 campaign, particularly the Battle of Borodino and Napoleon's retreat, as an expression

of superior Russian strategy and moral endurance. General Kutuzov is depicted as an infallible leader who embodies patience, wisdom, and a deep connection to the Russian people. The portrayal simplifies the chaos and ambiguity of the campaign, minimizing the indecisive nature of Borodino and exaggerating the idea of a cohesive grand strategy. In reality, Borodino resulted in massive casualties on both sides, with no clear victor, and the Russian decision to abandon Moscow was heavily debated (Lieven, 2002, pp. 203–206; Zamoyski, 2007, pp. 341–345).

By dramatizing Russian suffering and endurance as heroic and predestined to triumph, the film aligns with the Soviet World War II narrative of patriotic sacrifice defeating foreign aggression, a parallel drawn between Napoleon and Hitler.

Political Events: The Strategic Rewriting of the 1812 Campaign. The film portrays the Russian leadership and society as united in the face of invasion, omitting the significant political and military disagreements of the time. Kutuzov's elevation is shown as uncontested, and Tsarist leadership appears benevolent and decisive. In 1812, the Russian political sphere was divided. Kutuzov's appointment was a response to popular and political pressure after dissatisfaction with Barclay de Tolly's retreat strategy. Furthermore, Tsar Alexander I was hesitant and indecisive, and the court was not uniformly supportive of Kutuzov (Riehn, 1990, pp. 254–259).

This distortion fosters a Stalinist message of centralized, uncontested leadership. By erasing internal dissent, the film promotes the idea that unity under strong leadership is essential in times of national crisis, mirroring Stalin's wartime regime.

Personal Qualities of Napoleon: Demonization of the Enemy. Napoleon is represented as a hubristic, detached tyrant, obsessed with power and dismissive of his soldiers and allies. His defeat is portrayed as inevitable, the result of his moral decay and imperialist ambition. The film ignores the complexity of Napoleon's character and political ideology. While his 1812 campaign was deeply flawed, he was not irrational; his military strategies, administrative reforms, and early revolutionary ideals are completely absent from the film (Roberts, 2014, pp. 484–490). The historical Napoleon was a multifaceted figure, not merely a villain.

This binary portrayal reflects Soviet ideological goals. Napoleon becomes a symbolic precursor to Hitler, allowing Soviet audiences to see the 1812 victory as a historical rehearsal

for the defeat of Nazi Germany. This framing reinforces the legitimacy of Soviet resistance and the moral righteousness of the Red Army.

Soviet Wartime Ideology Over Historical Accuracy. *Kutuzov* (1943) is not a neutral depiction of the Napoleonic Wars. Produced during the height of the Great Patriotic War, it functions as a piece of wartime propaganda designed to inspire Soviet patriotism and justify Stalinist leadership. The film distorts historical facts in the following ways:

- Battles are depicted as clear-cut Russian triumphs, erasing military ambiguity.
- Political events are simplified to project national unity and suppress dissent.
- Napoleon's character is flattened into a symbol of doomed imperialism.

These distortions are not accidental but strategic, designed to equate Russia's 1812 victory with its struggle against Nazi Germany in 1943. The film serves a political function, reinforcing the Soviet narrative of inevitable victory through unity, leadership, and sacrifice.

2.1.4. Political Distortions in Napoleon in *Waterloo* (1970)

Sergei Bondarchuk's *Waterloo* (1970) presents a politically charged interpretation of Napoleon Bonaparte, filtered through Cold War-era anxieties about authoritarian leadership. While the film includes elements of historical fidelity, it simultaneously constructs a narrative that reflects contemporary ideological concerns, particularly around the dangers of unchecked ambition and autocratic power.

Napoleon's Characterization: The Self-Destructive Leader. The film portrays Napoleon as psychologically volatile and increasingly delusional, aligning with Cold War skepticism toward autocrats. Rod Steiger's performance amplifies these traits through melodrama, crafting a portrait of a leader consumed by hubris and internal conflict. This interpretation exaggerates Napoleon's emotional instability, overshadowing his strategic acumen and rational decision-making (Roberts, 2014, pp. 708–710; McLynn, 2021, pp. 570–573). By emphasizing a tragic personal downfall, the film mirrors mid-20th century narratives of authoritarian decline, echoing the fates of contemporary leaders who overreached politically and militarily.

Battle of Waterloo: Tactical Oversimplifications. Although the film succeeds in capturing the visual scope of the battle, it simplifies its tactical and environmental complexity. The omission of the role of heavy rain—crucial in delaying the French attack—removes a significant logistical factor, favoring a more linear depiction of events (Chandler, 2003, pp. 979–981).

Moreover, the limited portrayal of Marshal Ney and Prussian commander Blücher diminishes the coalition aspect of Napoleon’s defeat. This underrepresentation distorts the multinational resistance that ultimately overcame him, redirecting focus to his isolated failures (Barbero, 2005, pp. 212–217).

Political and Strategic Decisions: The Myth of Napoleon’s Overconfidence. The narrative underplays the political context of 1815, particularly the waning loyalty among former allies and widespread war fatigue across France. By ignoring the fragmented support Napoleon faced upon returning from Elba, the film fosters a myth of military overconfidence rather than exploring the broader diplomatic erosion of his power (McLynn, 2021, pp. 29–31; Roberts, 2014, pp. 695–698).

This individualized focus echoes Cold War-era ideological framing, presenting Napoleon’s fall as the inevitable result of autocratic hubris rather than a convergence of complex political and military factors.

Cold War-Era Influence on Napoleon’s Image. Bondarchuk’s *Waterloo* subtly reflects the ideological climate of its time. The film constructs Napoleon as a doomed authoritarian figure whose ambition outpaces reality—an allegory for the overreaching dictator, a familiar archetype in Cold War cultural narratives. The emphasis on battlefield failure and personal delusion reinforces a simplified model of downfall, minimizing the systemic and geopolitical dimensions of his final campaign.

2.1.5. Political Distortions in Ridley Scott’s *Napoleon* (2023)

Ridley Scott’s *Napoleon* (2023) reshapes historical narratives to elevate Napoleon Bonaparte’s legacy, omitting key political dynamics and authoritarian practices. By emphasizing spectacle over complexity, the film portrays Napoleon as an inevitable leader, downplaying the calculated political maneuvering that underpinned his rise and rule.

Austerlitz: Military Glory Over Political Strategy. The film dramatizes the Battle of Austerlitz, inventing scenes of soldiers drowning in a frozen lake. This shifts the focus away from the diplomatic maneuvers and strategic deception that truly defined victory, reinforcing a myth of Napoleon's sheer dominance rather than his political astuteness (MovieWeb, 2023, pp. 10–12).

Fabricating an Inevitable Rise. Scott presents Napoleon's ascent as preordained, erasing figures like Paul Barras, who played a decisive role in securing his position during the post-Revolutionary turmoil (Roberts, 2014, pp. 106–109). The absence of such influences transforms Napoleon into a lone genius, rather than a shrewd political actor navigating revolutionary instability.

Sanitizing Authoritarianism. The film minimizes Napoleon's censorship and propaganda apparatus, which were essential tools of his regime (Vincendeau, 2000, pp. 44–46; Broers, 2014, pp. 13–15). By portraying him primarily through military victories and personal struggles, the film neglects how his political survival depended on controlling public discourse.

Reframing Exile as Martyrdom. Napoleon's exile to Saint Helena is cast as an unjust political conspiracy, rather than the consequence of military overreach and declining domestic support. This framing recasts his downfall in a romantic light, diverting attention away from the failures of his continental ambitions.

By constructing Napoleon as a singular, heroic figure, *Napoleon* (2023) distorts the ideological and political realities of his rule. The film prioritizes myth over history, shaping public memory through selective omissions and dramatized spectacle.

2.2. Changing Political Images of Napoleon in Film: A Comparative Analysis

Napoleon Bonaparte has long served as a cinematic mirror reflecting the political ideologies and historical anxieties of different eras. From early silent portrayals to modern digital spectacles, filmmakers have continuously reshaped their image to align with evolving political narratives. From nationalist glorification to postmodern deconstruction, Napoleon's image has been repeatedly reframed to convey political messages tailored to specific audiences and eras.

Table 1
Comparative Political Analysis of Napoleon Films

| Film Title | Production Year / Country | Political Context | Ideological Framing | Portrayal of Napoleon | Political Function |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| Napoleon's Hundred Days | 1914 / Italy | Pre-WWI nationalism, French revanchism | Romantic-nationalist revival of French pride | Heroic and tragic leader; portrayed as a unifier betrayed by fate | Reclaims Napoleon's legacy to inspire patriotism amid rising tensions in Europe ¹ |
| Napoléon (dir. Abel Gance) | 1927 / France | Post-WWI disillusionment, search for national identity | Revolutionary heroism, proto-fascist aesthetics of strong leadership | Visionary genius and martyr of the revolution; emotionally charged depiction | Restores hope in French exceptionalism and unity through mythologizing leadership ² |

¹ Reclaims Napoleon's legacy to inspire patriotism amid rising tensions in Europe. See: Esdaile, C. (2008). *Napoleon's Wars: An International History 1803–1815*.

² Abel Gance's film is often linked to proto-fascist visual culture. See: Sorlin, P. (1980). *The Film in History*.

| | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|---|--|--|
| Kutuzov | 1943 / Soviet Union | WWII (Great Patriotic War); Stalinist nationalism | Anti-imperialist, patriotic defense of Russian homeland | Arrogant, overreaching Western invader; foil to Russian virtue | Supports Soviet ideology by demonizing Western aggression and glorifying Russian resilience ³ |
| Napoleon in Waterloo | 1970 / USSR-Italy Co-production | Cold War era, anti-authoritarian cultural shift | Critique of imperialism and blind loyalty | Militaristic yet flawed; deluded by power and ambition | Warns against personality cults and the destructive consequences of war ⁴ |
| Napoleon (dir. Ridley Scott) | 2023 / USA-UK | Postmodern, post-truth global politics | Ambivalent, psychological deconstruction | Both genius and emotionally erratic autocrat; deeply flawed | Reflects current skepticism toward power, masculinity, and historical myth-making ⁵ |

³ Soviet cinema during WWII promoted national resilience. See: Taylor, R. (1998). *Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany*.

⁴ The 1970 film reflects postwar disillusionment with charismatic leadership. See: Nowell-Smith, G. (1997). *The Oxford History of World Cinema*.

⁵ For a contemporary critique of *Napoleon* (2023), see: Bradshaw, P. (2023). "Review: *Napoleon* review – Joaquin Phoenix makes a magnificent emperor in thrilling biopic." *The Guardian*.

2.2.1. Napoleon's *Hundred Days* (1914): Imperial Nostalgia in Wartime France

The early silent film *Napoleon's Hundred Days* (1914), produced in Italy on the eve of World War I, offers a romanticized image of Napoleon as a tragic national hero. The film emphasizes his nobility and sense of destiny, seeking to evoke patriotic sentiment during a period of growing European tensions. This portrayal aligned with the revanchist mood of pre-war France and its longing for restored imperial grandeur (Esdaile, 2008, p. 107).

2.2.2. Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927): Revolutionary Hero or Totalitarian Visionary

In the aftermath of World War I, Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927) reinterprets Napoleon as a revolutionary visionary and proto-hero of national unity. The film's innovative cinematic techniques—such as the triptych projection during the Italian campaign—serve to amplify his mythical status. While the film champions revolutionary ideals, it also embraces authoritarian aesthetics, foreshadowing the political cults of leadership that would emerge in the 1930s (Sorlin, 1980, p. 92).

2.2.3. *Kutuzov* (1943): Soviet Framing of Napoleon as Imperialist Aggressor

A stark contrast is evident in *Kutuzov* (1943), a Soviet film released during the height of the Second World War. In line with Stalinist ideology, the film presents Napoleon as an overreaching Western imperialist whose invasion of Russia is repelled by the patriotic brilliance of General Kutuzov. Here, Napoleon serves as a symbol of foreign aggression, while the Russian general embodies national unity and sacrifice. The film fits into broader Soviet propaganda efforts that emphasized resilience and anti-imperialist struggle (Taylor, 1998, p. 157).

2.2.4. Napoleon in *Waterloo* (1970): A Cold War Examination of Leadership and Failure

Napoleon in Waterloo (1970), a Cold War-era co-production between Italy and the Soviet Union, offers a more ambivalent portrayal. Napoleon is depicted as both militarily impressive and deeply flawed—an aging leader unable to adapt to changing realities. Long, silent scenes depicting the destruction of his army underscore the futility of conquest and the emptiness of power. The film's critical stance mirrors growing global skepticism toward authoritarian leadership and war, particularly in the post-1968 cultural climate (Nowell-Smith, 1997, p. 201).

2.2.5. Ridley Scott's *Napoleon* (2023): Contemporary Political Mythmaking

Ultimately, Ridley Scott's *Napoleon* (2023) presents a fragmented and ironic portrayal of Napoleon as both tactically brilliant and emotionally insecure. The film juxtaposes epic battle scenes with intimate portrayals of his volatile relationship with Josephine, highlighting the contradictions of personal ambition and imperial rule. This ambivalence aligns with contemporary postmodern tendencies to deconstruct historical narratives and challenge traditional notions of heroism (Bradshaw, 2023).

2.3. Conclusions

Cinematic portrayals of Napoleon Bonaparte serve not merely as historical dramatizations but as political instruments that shape public memory and reinforce ideological narratives. Many films take liberties with historical facts, whether to glorify Napoleon as a visionary leader, criticize his authoritarian rule, or recast him as a tragic figure. These distortions reflect broader political agendas rather than historical accuracy, shaping how audiences perceive leadership, militarism, and state power.

- Over-simplification of Napoleon's political rise reduces his ascent to sheer military prowess, ignoring the complex political alliances, propaganda tactics, and institutional maneuvering that enabled his rule. (Broers, 2014, pp. 312–316; Englund, 2004, pp. 198–202).
- Romanticized depictions of his relationships often strip away their political utility, particularly his marriage to Josephine, which solidified his legitimacy within post-revolutionary France (Sorlin, 1980, p. 92).
- The selective portrayal of Napoleon's authoritarianism either exaggerates or minimizes his control over legal reforms, censorship, and imperial ambitions, depending on the filmmaker's political stance (Taylor, 1998, pp. 155–158).
- Dramatization of battles and political events prioritizes spectacle over historical causality, often obscuring the geopolitical consequences of his actions, such as colonial repression, diplomatic failures, and economic instability (Nowell-Smith, 1997, p. 201).

Understanding these distortions is essential in recognizing how cinema repurposes historical figures to fit contemporary political narratives. While these films may not provide accurate historical representations, they reveal how different regimes and filmmakers use Napoleon's image to negotiate issues of nationalism, imperial legacy, and leadership in times

of political uncertainty. In this sense, Napoleon remains not just a historical figure but a continuously evolving political construct in global cinema.

Collectively, these films do more than entertain; they politicize Napoleon's legacy, using his image to project and negotiate the ideological concerns of their time. Whether in the service of nationalism, propaganda, or postmodern critique, cinematic representations of Napoleon reveal more about the political culture that produces them than about the historical figure himself. These shifting portrayals underscore cinema's enduring power to shape—and reshape—collective memory, authority, and identity.



CHAPTER 3: POLITICAL GOALS IN THE USE OF NAPOLEON'S IMAGE

Diplomacy is politics in a fancy suit.

Napoleon Bonaparte

3.1. Using the image of Napoleon for propaganda and political agitation

The image of Napoleon Bonaparte has often been utilized in cinema for political purposes, including propaganda and political agitation. Napoleon's larger-than-life persona—his rise to power, military prowess, and eventual downfall—makes him an ideal figure for filmmakers looking to explore themes of leadership, revolution, nationalism, and authoritarianism. His legacy is complex, and different political regimes have used his image in various ways to further their agendas. Here's an analysis of how Napoleon was employed in cinema for propaganda and political agitation.

3.1.1. Napoleon as a Symbol of Nationalism and Heroism

In times of national upheaval, particularly during periods of war or revolution, Napoleon's image has been used to inspire national pride and unity. Early cinema, particularly in the pre-World War I era, played a significant role in constructing and disseminating nationalist myths through historical figures such as Napoleon. His portrayal often emphasizes heroic leadership, patriotic sacrifice, and the longing for restored national grandeur (Esdaile, 2008, pp. 284–286; Broers, 2014, pp. 476–481).

Example: *Napoleon's Hundred Days* (1914)

Roberto Danesi's and Archita Valente's *Napoleon's Hundred Days* (1914) presents a romanticized image of Napoleon as a tragic national hero. Produced just before the outbreak of World War I, the film reclaims Napoleon's legacy to stir patriotic feelings in a time of rising European tensions. Rather than focusing on political failures or military misjudgments, the film emphasizes his nobility, destiny, and sacrifice. Napoleon's return from Elba is depicted as a unifying moment for the nation, sidestepping the internal divisions and political instability of 1815 (Roberts, 2014, pp. 678–682).

This idealized representation served as early cinematic propaganda, portraying Napoleon as a symbol of national strength and continuity—particularly appealing to audiences in a politically charged pre-war environment. The glorification of his leadership in defeat, especially at Waterloo, echoes revanchist nationalism and the desire for restored imperial greatness (Chandler, 2003, pp. 973–981; Barbero, 2005, pp. 205–210).

3.1.2. Napoleon as a Figure of Authoritarianism and Militarism

Napoleon's image has also been used in cinema to explore the dangers of authoritarian rule and militarism. His rise to power, consolidation of authority, and military campaigns across Europe offer a rich narrative for filmmakers to critique the dangers of dictatorial regimes. While some portrayals romanticize his authoritarianism, others warn against the concentration of power and the militarization of politics (Englund, 2004, pp. 324–329; Broers, 2014, pp. 488–492).

Example: *Napoléon* (1927) by Abel Gance

Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927), a groundbreaking silent film, uses Napoleon's rise to depict the tension between revolutionary ideals and authoritarian ambition. Gance presents Napoleon as both a visionary and a dominating figure, utilizing the film's innovative cinematographic techniques, especially in sequences portraying large-scale military actions, to emphasize both his genius and his drive for control. Released in the aftermath of World War I, the film aligns with French nationalism, portraying Napoleon as a leader destined to restore France's glory (Abel, 2005, p. 245).

Made in the politically unstable interwar period, Gance's film reflects the anxieties of the time, particularly in France and across Europe, where fascism was on the rise. It has been interpreted as a dual narrative: one that celebrates Napoleon's dynamic leadership and another that subtly critiques the risks of centralized authority and aggressive nationalism (Vincendeau, 2000, pp. 37–40). Thus, *Napoléon* becomes a cinematic reflection on the allure and danger of strongman rule.

3.1.3. Napoleon as an Imperialist Opponent

Napoleon's image has also been used in cinema as the embodiment of imperial aggression, particularly in national cinemas shaped by war and occupation. In these portrayals,

Napoleon is not a heroic figure, but an invader—his ambition framed as a threat to national sovereignty and cultural identity.

Example: *Kutuzov* (1943)

In *Kutuzov* (1943), a Soviet wartime film directed by Vladimir Petrov, Napoleon is portrayed as a ruthless foreign aggressor whose invasion of Russia symbolizes Western imperialist ambition. The film emphasizes Russian resistance, national unity, and moral superiority, aligning closely with Soviet wartime propaganda (Taylor, 1998, pp. 154–158). Napoleon is dehumanized and sharply contrasted with the wise and patient Russian commander Mikhail Kutuzov, who embodies collective strength and patriotic sacrifice.

Produced during the Great Patriotic War, *Kutuzov* uses historical analogy to draw parallels between Napoleon’s invasion and Hitler’s Operation Barbarossa. This deliberate political messaging turns Napoleon into a symbolic antagonist of the Soviet people, reinforcing anti-imperialist and anti-fascist ideology through historical cinema (Kenez, 2001, pp. 84–85). In contrast to Western portrayals, *Kutuzov* (1943) presents Napoleon as an aggressor rather than a national hero. The film draws direct parallels between Napoleon’s 1812 campaign and Hitler’s military invasion of the Soviet Union, reinforcing narratives of national resilience and resistance. Rather than highlighting Napoleon’s strategic brilliance, *Kutuzov* frames him as a foreign imperialist, dismantling his heroic image in favor of Russian patriotism.

3.1.4. Napoleon as a Tragic National Hero

Napoleon’s cinematic image has often been shaped to evoke themes of tragedy, nobility, and sacrifice—particularly in national contexts seeking to highlight patriotic endurance and historical grandeur. These portrayals present him not merely as a military commander but as a symbol of lost glory and heroic downfall.

Example: *Waterloo* (1970)

In *Waterloo* (1970), directed by Sergei Bondarchuk, Napoleon is portrayed as a larger-than-life figure whose ambition, charisma, and resolve define the final chapter of his political and military career. Played by Rod Steiger, Napoleon emerges as a tragic national hero—defeated not by personal incompetence, but by the overwhelming military and political forces arrayed against him. The film dramatizes his strategic brilliance and stoic leadership at the

Battle of Waterloo, while downplaying his miscalculations and the authoritarian aspects of his rule (Chandler, 2003, pp. 970–981). Through visually grandiose battle sequences and emotionally charged moments, Bondarchuk constructs an image of Napoleon as a doomed yet dignified hero. This romanticized portrayal resonates with the European cinematic tradition of noble resistance and historical tragedy, reframing Napoleon's downfall as a symbol of national resilience rather than political hubris (Esdaile, 2008, pp. 538–540).

From a political perspective, *Waterloo* reflects subtle Cold War-era ideological undercurrents. Although the film was an international co-production, Bondarchuk's Soviet background informs its treatment of leadership and historical agency. Napoleon's brilliance is acknowledged, yet he is also depicted as a solitary, isolated figure, visually and thematically overwhelmed by the tide of collective resistance. This interpretation aligns with Soviet ideological skepticism toward authoritarian rule and imperialist ambition, favoring depictions of history shaped by popular unity rather than heroic individualism (Taylor, 1998, pp. 142–145). Napoleon's defeat is not framed as a moral or tactical failure, but as the inevitable outcome of resisting a united European coalition—paralleling Soviet narratives that cast imperialist aggressors as doomed in the face of collective opposition (Kenez, 2001, pp. 78–81).

Ultimately, *Waterloo* presents Napoleon as a tragic political figure whose fate serves as a cautionary tale about the unsustainability of centralized power and the limits of militaristic ambition. While his courage and strategic acumen are highlighted, his downfall is imbued with ideological warning, reflecting Cold War concerns about leadership, nationalism, and the legacy of empire. The film thus functions both as a dramatization of historical events and as a subtle political allegory rooted in its time (Dzen.ru, 2023).

3.1.5. Napoleon as a Politically Reinterpreted Icon in the 21st Century

Cinema has turned Napoleon into one of the most cinematic historical figures, dedicating a record 1,000 films to him and his era. In the 21st century, one of humanity's elegant rulers remains no less attractive to descendants than to contemporaries. British cinema veteran Ridley Scott, 85, has also decided to dedicate one of the chapters of his directorial filmography to the French emperor (Dzen.ru, 2023).

Example: *Napoleon* (2023)

Ridley Scott's *Napoleon* (2023) presents a modern and nuanced portrayal of the French emperor, depicting him as a deeply flawed and complex leader. Played by Joaquin Phoenix, Napoleon is presented not as an unambiguous hero or villain, but as a man whose quest for power is shaped by personal insecurity, political ambition, and emotional dependence on Joséphine. The film deconstructs traditional heroic narratives by emphasizing his psychological contradictions and the volatile mixture of charisma and cruelty in his leadership style (Tan, 2024, p. 137).

From a political standpoint, *Napoleon* reflects contemporary concerns about authoritarianism, populist leadership, and the cult of personality. Scott reframes Napoleon's historical significance through a 21st-century lens, highlighting how personal ambition can drive both national greatness and profound destruction. The film avoids glorifying military conquest, instead focusing on the consequences of war, the manipulation of public image, and the instability of imperial power. This critical approach aligns with modern skepticism toward centralized authority and imperial nostalgia (Rowe, 2023).

Moreover, *Napoleon* (2023) questions the sustainability of power acquired through force. By portraying the emperor as emotionally volatile and politically ruthless, Scott suggests that the foundations of authoritarian rule are inherently fragile—subject to both internal decay and external resistance. This modern reinterpretation diverges from earlier films that either romanticized or demonized Napoleon, opting instead for a politically ambivalent portrait that critiques both the man and the myth (Tan, 2024, p. 140).

3.2. The Influence of State Ideology on Film Production (Using France, the USSR, and the USA as Examples)

Cinema has long functioned as a tool of ideological expression, with state ideologies significantly shaping film narratives, aesthetics, and historical interpretation. In different national contexts, governments have either directly controlled film production or indirectly influenced it through funding, censorship, and cultural policy. The image of Napoleon, among other historical figures, has been particularly susceptible to reinterpretation in light of the dominant ideological framework of the state. An analysis of film production in France, the

USSR, and the USA reveals how national ideologies shape cinematic narratives to reflect and reinforce political agendas.

3.2.1. France: National Identity and Historical Nostalgia

In France, the state has historically regarded cinema as a means of cultural prestige and national identity. Through public funding bodies like the CNC (Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée), the French government supports films that align with national heritage, artistic expression, and cultural continuity. French portrayals of Napoleon often embody a dual narrative—celebrating his role in forging modern France while reflecting on the costs of centralized power and military ambition. Films such as Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927) emerged in the wake of World War I, serving to reconcile revolutionary ideals with national pride. The French state's ideological influence is subtle, promoting a vision of Napoleon as a complex yet integral figure in the Republic's mythology (Brownlow, 1983, pp. 89–92).

3.2.2. The USSR: Propaganda and Anti-Imperialist Messaging

In the Soviet Union, film was explicitly utilized as a propaganda tool under state control. The ideological mission of Soviet cinema was to educate the masses and support Marxist-Leninist values. Napoleon was consistently depicted as a symbol of Western imperialism, individualistic ambition, and class oppression. In *Kutuzov* (1943), produced during World War II, Napoleon becomes a surrogate for Hitler, an invading aggressor defeated by the collective will of the Soviet people. The film mirrors the USSR's ideological emphasis on anti-fascism, collectivism, and patriotic resistance, using history to legitimize contemporary political struggles (GW2RU, n.d., para. 5). The Soviet government tightly regulated film content to ensure alignment with socialist realism, reinforcing state ideology in every frame (Kleinhans & Lesage, 1977).

3.2.3. The USA: Commercialism, Liberal Democracy, and Historical Mythmaking

Unlike France and the USSR, the American film industry has largely operated within a capitalist framework, with ideological influence expressed through market forces, patriotic narratives, and soft censorship. While the U.S. government has not directly controlled Hollywood, it has influenced cinematic content through institutions like the Hays Code, the Department of Defense (which offers support to films that align with military values), and Cold War-era anti-communist sentiments (O'Brien, 2025; U.S. Department of Defense, n.d., para. 3).

Napoleon is less frequently the focus of American cinema, but historical epics such as *Waterloo* (1970)—an international co-production involving American financing—often reflect liberal democratic concerns about authoritarianism, hubris, and the tragic arc of power. U.S.-influenced portrayals tend to stress individualism, leadership flaws, and the moral lessons of history, aligning with broader ideological values of democracy and freedom (Jacobin, 2024, para. 6).

3.3. The Influence of National Ideology and the Political Situation on the Interpretation of the Image of Napoleon

The figure of Napoleon Bonaparte has undergone continuous reinterpretation across nations and historical periods, largely shaped by prevailing national ideologies and political conditions. His portrayal in cultural discourse, including cinema, has been less about historical fidelity and more about reflecting on and reinforcing political narratives relevant to specific times and places.

3.3.1. France: National Hero or Symbol of Tyranny?

In France, Napoleon oscillated between the roles of heroic reformer and authoritarian usurper. During the Third Republic and post-World War periods, his image was often framed within the context of republican nationalism. Films and cultural works emphasized his military genius, administrative reforms, and the spread of revolutionary ideals (O'Brien, 2004, pp. 118–121). However, during periods of liberal democratic revival or leftist movements, depictions of Napoleon became more critical, portraying him as a militaristic despot who betrayed the revolutionary cause (Broers, 2014, pp. 342–345). The shifting political climate in France—monarchy, republic, empire—has consistently reconfigured his legacy to suit ideological ends.

3.3.2. Russia/USSR: From Imperial Enemy to Fascist Proxy

In Tsarist Russia, Napoleon was viewed as the enemy of the Russian Orthodox monarchy and civilization, often depicted in literature and art as an invading force. With the rise of the Soviet Union, his image transformed into a symbol of capitalism and imperialism, mirroring the ideological battles of the time. During WWII, Soviet films such as *Kutuzov* (1943) likened Napoleon to Hitler, framing him as a fascist archetype defeated by collective resistance (Kenez, 2001, p. 168). The USSR's ideological stance against Western imperialism and its

promotion of collective heroism significantly shaped the representation of Napoleon as a cautionary villain emblematic of bourgeois decadence.

3.3.3. Great Britain: The "Other" and Imperial Rival

In Britain, Napoleon has traditionally been portrayed as a foreign despot and a threat to parliamentary democracy and European stability. This interpretation served to consolidate national identity in opposition to continental absolutism. Victorian-era biographies and films portrayed Napoleon as a cautionary figure of ambition and pride, reinforcing British liberalism and imperial virtue (Carlyle, 1852/2000). Even into the 20th century, depictions of Napoleon were shaped by Britain's enduring concern with the balance of power in Europe.

3.3.4. United States: Ambivalence, Heroism, and the Fear of Tyranny

In the United States, Napoleon's image has been shaped by a mix of admiration for his ambition and skepticism of centralized power. As a republic that emerged in opposition to monarchy, American portrayals often cast Napoleon as both a brilliant leader and a warning against autocracy. Films such as *Waterloo* (1970) reflect American concerns about unchecked personal ambition and its impact on democratic institutions. During the Cold War, his image was occasionally leveraged in ideological discourses warning against the cult of personality and authoritarian rule (Engerman, 2009, p. 91).

Table 2
Comparative Political Analysis of Ideological Shifts in Napoleon’s Image

| Country | Era | Political Context | Dominant Image of Napoleon | Ideological Purpose |
|----------------------|------------------------------|--|--|--|
| France | Post-WWI (1920s–30s) | National trauma, republican reconstruction | Heroic reformer, unifier of France | Reconcile revolutionary ideals with national pride |
| | Post-WWII (1940s–60s) | Republican democracy, anti-fascist sentiment | Ambivalent figure—glory vs. authoritarianism | Reflect the tension between pride and guilt in centralized power |
| | 21st Century | Postcolonial discourse, democratic values | Contested legacy: visionary vs. colonial aggressor | Reevaluate past leaders through a human rights and postcolonial lens |
| Russia/USSR | Imperial Russia (19th c.) | Orthodox monarchy, nationalist identity | Foreign invader, threat to Russian civilization | Strengthen national resistance myths |
| | Stalinist USSR (1930s–40s) | Totalitarian regime, WWII context | Fascist proxy (e.g., Hitler) | Reinforce collectivism, vilify Western imperialism |
| | Late Soviet Era (1970s–80s) | Brezhnev stagnation, Cold War | Symbol of decaying Western values | Critique individualism, uphold socialist realism |
| Great Britain | Victorian Era (mid-1800s) | Imperial dominance, parliamentary stability | Cautionary tale of tyranny | Legitimize British liberalism and imperialism |
| | WWII and the post-war period | Democracy vs. fascism | Antithesis of British values | Reinforce national unity and moral superiority |
| USA | 19th Century | Expansionism, anti-monarchy sentiment | Ambiguous—admired leader but cautionary figure | Promote republicanism, warn against autocracy |
| | Cold War Era (1950s–70s) | Anti-communist, pro-democracy | Archetype of authoritarian ambition | Emphasize the value of checks and balances |
| | Contemporary Era | Cultural pluralism, historical revisionism | Tragic hero or irrelevant figure | Engage with broader debates on leadership and legacy |

3.4. Historiographical Framing

Modern historiography increasingly emphasizes the constructed nature of historical memory, viewing Napoleon as a mutable symbol rather than a fixed historical persona. As noted by historians like Broers and O'Brien, Napoleon's image is refracted through the ideological lenses of each era, shaped by national interests and evolving political cultures (2014; 2004). This comparative approach helps illuminate how film and other media serve as tools of selective memory, sustaining or revising Napoleon's identity in line with contemporary values and ideological needs.

3.5. Conclusions

The cinematic image of Napoleon Bonaparte has consistently served as a lens through which filmmakers reflect on political ideologies and historical memories. His multifaceted legacy provides fertile ground for diverse interpretations that align with the cultural and political concerns of different eras:

- **Napoleon as a Symbol of Nationalism and Heroism:** Often depicted as a unifying leader whose charisma and military triumphs evoke national pride, particularly in times of political upheaval or war.
- **Napoleon as a Figure of Authoritarianism and Militarism:** Used as a cautionary figure, his centralization of power and aggressive campaigns are portrayed as warnings against dictatorship and the militarization of politics.
- **Napoleon as an Imperialist Opponent:** In contexts such as Soviet cinema, he is portrayed as a ruthless invader, representing foreign domination and imperial aggression, often contrasted with national resistance.
- **Napoleon as a Tragic National Hero:** Films frequently dramatize his downfall as noble yet inevitable, casting him as a figure of heroic failure and lost glory, reinforcing themes of patriotic sacrifice and historical destiny.
- **Napoleon as a Politically Reinterpreted Icon in the 21st Century:** Contemporary portrayals, such as Ridley Scott's *Napoleon* (2023), offer a more psychologically complex and politically ambivalent depiction, exploring modern anxieties about leadership, personal ambition, and authoritarian legacy.

Through these evolving portrayals, cinema transforms Napoleon into a mirror of contemporary political thought, whether to inspire nationalism, critique authoritarianism, condemn imperialism, or reflect on the human cost of power. His image endures not only as a historical figure but as a symbolic vessel for the political narratives of every era.

From these three case studies, it becomes clear that cinema is never ideologically neutral. Whether through direct control, cultural policy, or market-driven narratives, state ideology shapes the portrayal of historical figures like Napoleon to serve national narratives. In France, he is a symbol of cultural memory and republican identity; in the USSR, a villainous imperialist; in the USA, a cautionary tale of power and its consequences. The medium of film thus acts as both a mirror and a mold, reflecting existing ideologies while shaping public consciousness in alignment with them.

The interpretation of Napoleon's image is deeply political, shaped more by the ideological needs of the time than by objective historical analysis. From a republican icon to a fascist metaphor, from imperial genius to enemy of the state, Napoleon has served as a flexible symbol molded by the political currents of France, Russia, Britain, and the United States. These reinterpretations highlight how national ideology and political circumstances influence the portrayal of historical figures to support contemporary narratives and legitimize power structures.

CHAPTER 4: FACTORS IN THE DISTORTION OF THE IMAGE OF NAPOLEON IN CINEMA

*The most important thing in politics is to follow
your goal: the means mean nothing.*
Napoleon Bonaparte

4.1. Political Myths and Stereotypes in the Cinematic Portrayal of Napoleon

Cinema often simplifies complex historical realities to fit coherent, emotionally compelling narratives. As a result, political myths and stereotypes surrounding figures like Napoleon Bonaparte are not only perpetuated but often exaggerated or distorted. These myths serve ideological, cultural, and commercial purposes, reshaping Napoleon into a symbolic figure rather than a historically grounded individual.

4.1.1. The Tyrant or Totalitarian Myth

In many films, particularly those produced in democratic or anti-authoritarian contexts (e.g., post-World War II Britain or Cold War-era America), Napoleon is portrayed as a power-hungry despot, echoing modern anxieties about dictatorship. His image becomes a convenient vehicle to critique authoritarianism, often linking him allegorically to figures like Hitler or Stalin. This stereotype oversimplifies the legal reforms and administrative modernization that Napoleon introduced, focusing narrowly on military conquest and personal ambition.

Example: In Soviet films, Napoleon is consistently portrayed as a proto-fascist or imperialist aggressor—an ideological enemy of the collective will of the people (GW2RU, n.d.).

4.1.2. The Romantic Hero Myth

Conversely, in films influenced by nationalist or liberal ideologies (especially in France), Napoleon is often mythologized as a visionary leader and national hero. This idealized portrayal tends to downplay his authoritarian policies, colonial ambitions, and the human cost of his wars. Instead, emphasis is placed on his intelligence, charisma, and modernizing influence.

Example: Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927) uses avant-garde cinematography and epic scale to construct a mythic vision of Napoleon as the embodiment of revolutionary genius and patriotic unity (Brownlow, 1983, pp. 89–92).

4.1.3. The Outsized Genius Myth

Another pervasive stereotype is that of Napoleon as a strategic and intellectual superhuman, a trope often used in both Western and Russian cinemas. While rooted in some historical facts, this myth elevates Napoleon to an almost supernatural status, detaching him from historical constraints and moral complexity.

This contributes to a cinematic hero-villain dichotomy, where Napoleon is either idolized or demonized, but rarely analyzed with historical nuance.⁶

4.1.4. The Cultural Outsider or Anti-European Other

In British and American contexts, Napoleon is sometimes framed as a threat to European balance, a disturber of peace, or even a foreigner intruding upon “civilized” Europe. These depictions draw from long-standing Anglophone fears of continental absolutism and often reinforce nationalist or imperial ideologies.

Films produced in 19th-century Britain or during WWII subtly use Napoleon to affirm the superiority of British parliamentary democracy over continental autocracy (Bell, 2007).

4.1.5. Academic Insight

As argued by historians such as Antoine de Baecque and David Bell, the mythologizing of Napoleon reveals less about the man himself and more about the cultural needs of the societies depicting him. These political myths reflect anxieties about leadership, revolution, empire, and historical legacy, making Napoleon a screen onto which different eras project their ideological concerns (de Baecque, 2001; Bell, 2007).

⁶ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2024), a dichotomy is “a division or contrast between two things that are represented as being entirely different or opposite” (p. 542).

Table 3
Political Myths and Stereotypes in the Cinematic Portrayal of Napoleon

| | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| The Tyrant or Totalitarian Myth | Napoleon, as a despot or proto-dictator, fixated on power and conquest, was often likened to Hitler or Stalin. | Critique of authoritarianism in democratic or Cold War-era contexts. | Soviet propaganda films, Cold War-era Hollywood |
| | Napoleon was a visionary and patriotic leader, intelligent, charismatic, and a symbol of national pride. | Supports nationalist or liberal ideologies, particularly in France. | |
| | Napoleon was a near-superhuman strategist or intellectual, detached from real-world consequences and moral complexities. | Reinforces simplified hero/villain dichotomy; emphasizes spectacle and genius. | Found in both Western and Russian cinematic narratives |
| The Cultural Outsider/Anti-European Other | Napoleon was depicted as a foreign disruptor of European peace and parliamentary tradition. | Used to affirm national superiority, particularly in British and American ideological frames. | WWII-era British films; early 19th-century English plays |

Observations:

- **France** tends to portray Napoleon as a *national hero or visionary reformer*, especially in times of political instability or national introspection.
- **The USSR** depicted him as the *enemy of the people*, used for anti-imperialist propaganda.
- **The UK and USA** often present him as a *cautionary figure*, linking him to modern autocrats or warning against tyranny.
- **Modern cinema** reflects a blend of ideologies, frequently portraying Napoleon as a *morally ambiguous* or psychologically complex figure.

4.2. Sociocultural and Economic Interests in the Cinematic Distortion of Napoleon's Image

In addition to political ideologies, the portrayal of Napoleon in film is deeply shaped by sociocultural contexts and economic imperatives. Filmmakers and producers often adapt historical narratives not solely to reflect the truth, but also to resonate with audiences' values, emotions, and expectations, while ensuring commercial viability. These pressures create fertile ground for selective representation, exaggeration, or mythmaking.

4.2.1. Market Demands and Audience Expectations

Historical epics featuring Napoleon are expensive undertakings that must appeal to a broad, often international audience. This demand often pushes filmmakers to simplify narratives and amplify drama:

- Napoleon becomes either a romantic anti-hero or a villainous egomaniac, depending on what will sell tickets.
- Love interests, dramatic betrayals, and clear moral binaries are added or emphasized—even if they distort actual events.

Waterloo (1970), though praised for its battle sequences, includes exaggerated dramatizations of Napoleon's psychology and interactions to enhance emotional appeal.

4.2.2. National Identity and Cultural Memory

Cinema plays a crucial role in sustaining collective memory, and films about Napoleon reflect the self-image of the producing country:

- **France:** Napoleon is often framed as a symbol of national pride and unity, especially in times of political division.
- **Russia:** Emphasis is placed on defeating Napoleon, reinforcing national strength, unity, and resistance against invasion.
- **Britain:** Portrayals emphasize Napoleon as a foreign menace, affirming British naval superiority and constitutional monarchy.

These portrayals reinforce cultural narratives, sometimes at the expense of balanced historical analysis (Bell, 2007).

4.2.3. Censorship, Sponsorship, and State Interests

Even in capitalist societies, governments often indirectly influence film content by funding, censoring, or supporting productions that align with their image or geopolitical stance.

- U.S. productions receiving Department of Defense support tend to align with democratic, anti-authoritarian messaging (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.).
- Soviet cinema was explicitly state-controlled, ensuring all portrayals of Napoleon fit the Marxist-Leninist critique of imperialism (Kleinhans & Lesage, 1977).

As such, filmmakers are not only artists but also navigators of ideological and financial pressures.

4.2.4. Technological Advances and Cinematic Trends

The historical period in which a Napoleon film is made also affects its style and content:

- The silent era (e.g., Gance's *Napoléon*, 1927) enabled symbolic, nationalistic storytelling through the use of new editing techniques, which elevated mythic themes (Brownlow, 1983, pp. 89–92).

- The post-war period often framed Napoleon as a cautionary tale about the dangers of ambition, mirroring contemporary fears of fascism and authoritarianism (Sorlin, 1980; Rosenstone, 1995).

4.2.5. Academic Framing

According to scholars like Robert Rosenstone and Pierre Sorlin, cinema reflects “the memory work of culture.” The portrayal of Napoleon reveals how cinematic historical narratives are shaped by the tension between truth, identity, and entertainment. The pressure to satisfy both historical inquiry and box-office success often leads to creative liberties that prioritize national myths over objective history (Rosenstone, 1995; Sorlin, 1980).



Table 4
Sociocultural and Economic Factors Shaping Napoleon’s Cinematic Portrayal

| Country | Era | Political Image | Sociocultural Drivers | Economics/ Commercial Pressures |
|------------------|------------------|--|--|---|
| FR France | 1920s (Post-WWI) | National hero reconciling revolutionary ideals | National healing, nostalgia for unity | State-supported cinema (e.g., Gance’s <i>Napoléon</i>), prestige focus |
| | 1960s–1980s | Complex figure: liberator and despot | Cultural introspection, decolonization debates | Appeal to intellectual and international audiences |
| | 2000s–present | Ambiguous legacy; mythic but flawed | Republican identity vs. critique of imperialism | Heritage tourism, high-end productions with educational packaging |
| RU USSR | 1940s (WWII) | Villainous imperialist (Napoleon = Hitler) | Anti-fascism, collectivist propaganda | State monopoly; ideological messaging prioritized |
| | 1960s–1980s | Bourgeois despot, foil to Russian patriotism | Soviet heroism, Stalinist parallels | Centrally planned cultural production |
| us USA | 1950s–1970s | Ambitious but tragic autocrat | Cold War anxiety, anti-authoritarian values | Hollywood genre norms, foreign co-financing (<i>Waterloo</i> , 1970) |
| | 1980s–present | Historical curiosity, leadership cautionary tale | Individualism, obsession with the rise and fall of great men | Global markets, streaming-friendly content, entertainment over nuance |
| GB UK | 1940s–1960s | Foreign threat, defeated enemy | Reinforcement of British military superiority | Box-office limited, historical fidelity less emphasized |
| | 2000s–present | Fascinating opponent, subject of elite satire | National nostalgia, critical of continental ambitions | Prestige TV and docudrama market, BBC historical content |

Observations:

- **France** uses Napoleon to explore national pride and internal contradictions.
- The **USSR** turns Napoleon into a moral lesson about Western imperialism and the righteousness of collective resistance.
- The **USA** focuses on individual ambition and moral failure, aligning with democratic and capitalist values.
- **Britain** historically reinforced its identity through Napoleon's defeat but has moved toward more layered portrayals in recent decades.

4.3. Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated that Napoleon's cinematic image is shaped more by political, cultural, and commercial agendas than by historical accuracy. Political ideologies influence whether he is portrayed as a hero, tyrant, or imperialist, depending on the regime and era. National identity and collective memory further mold his image to support patriotic narratives or cautionary tales. Economic pressures also lead filmmakers to simplify or dramatize their lives for wider audience appeal. As a result, Napoleon becomes a cinematic symbol molded to reflect contemporary values rather than a faithful representation of historical truth.

CHAPTER 5: THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL DISTORTIONS IN THE CINEMA ON THE PERCEPTION OF HISTORY

Imagination rules the world.

Napoleon Bonaparte

5.1. The Influence of Cinema on the Historical and Political Consciousness of Society

Cinema, as one of the most powerful tools of mass communication, plays a significant role in shaping both historical memory and political consciousness. Unlike academic texts, films reach a wide audience, often blending entertainment with historical narratives in ways that leave a lasting impression. The portrayal of historical figures such as Napoleon Bonaparte in film does not simply reflect public understanding—it actively constructs it.

5.1.1. Formation of public opinion through cinema

Napoleon's image in cinema is often stylized to suit ideological agendas, simplify complex events, or heighten dramatic appeal. When these portrayals deviate from historical accuracy—either by exaggerating his authoritarian tendencies or mythologizing his genius—they create versions of history that are easier to consume but harder to critique. As a result, cinematic interpretations can become more influential than scholarly ones in shaping collective memory (Rosenstone, 2006, p. 87).

For example, in countries such as Russia and the United States, films have contributed to a specific national understanding of Napoleon: either as a foreign aggressor (Kenez, 2001, p. 168) or as a cautionary symbol of absolute power (Engerman, 2009, p. 91). These portrayals, repeated across generations, shape how audiences perceive themes such as revolution, leadership, and empire. Thus, cinema becomes a means of cultural pedagogy, instilling values, fears, and ideals tied to national identity (Sorlin, 1980, p. 47).

Moreover, with the rise of digital streaming and global film distribution, images of Napoleon cross cultural boundaries, exporting localized ideologies to international audiences. The result is a globalized perception of history that may be more cohesive in myth than in fact,

raising concerns about the long-term effects of politically distorted cinematic storytelling on democratic discourse and historical literacy (Taylor, 1998, p. 215).

Key Scholarly Perspectives. Film historians have long debated the impact of political distortions in historical cinema. Robert Rosenstone argues that films do not merely depict the past—they reconfigure it, offering “visions of history that carry emotional and ideological weight” (2006). Likewise, Pierre Sorlin examines how national cinemas construct narratives that reflect contemporary ideological struggles rather than historical accuracy (1980). Richard Taylor highlights how film propaganda influences political consciousness by altering audience perceptions of leadership and power (1998).

5.1.2. Manipulation of Historical Facts for Political Purposes

Cinema, as both a cultural artifact and a mass medium, holds the power to reinterpret history through the lens of prevailing political ideologies. Filmmakers often manipulate or selectively present historical facts to serve contemporary political narratives, creating persuasive but distorted portrayals of figures such as Napoleon Bonaparte. This manipulation not only affects public understanding of historical events but also reinforces current political agendas and national myths (Rosenstone, 2006, p. 87).

Selective Emphasis. Certain aspects of Napoleon’s life—such as his military genius or authoritarian tendencies—are highlighted or downplayed depending on the intended political message. Soviet cinema, for instance, emphasizes his role as an aggressor invading Russia, drawing parallels with fascist threats (Kenez, 2001, p. 168). In contrast, French productions tend to focus on his administrative reforms, aligning with national pride (Sorlin, 1980, p. 49).

Anachronistic Comparisons. Filmmakers sometimes draw direct or symbolic comparisons between Napoleon and contemporary figures (e.g., Hitler, Stalin, or modern authoritarian leaders). These parallels can oversimplify historical contexts, contributing to misleading analogies. This is particularly evident in Cold War-era films, which use Napoleon to indirectly critique authoritarianism or celebrate democratic resilience (Taylor, 1998, p. 215).

Omission of Inconvenient Truths. Certain facts that complicate dominant political narratives are often excluded from cinematic portrayals. For example, Napoleon’s colonial

policies, re-establishment of slavery in the French colonies, and his suppression of dissent are rarely explored in mainstream cinema (Ferro, 1988, p. 76). This selective omission contributes to a sanitized or vilified version of his legacy, depending on the filmmaker's intent.

Creation of Fictionalized Episodes. To enhance drama or reinforce ideological messages, films often invent scenes or dialogue that never occurred. These fictionalized episodes are presented with the same visual authority as documented events, leading viewers to absorb them as historical truths. This effect, termed "cinematic mythologizing" (de Baecque, 2001, p. 112), blurs the line between fact and fiction in historical storytelling.

Academic Perspectives. As Robert Rosenstone argues, historical films are "less about what happened and more about what the filmmakers—and their societies—believe about what happened" (2006). Similarly, Marc Ferro explores how historical cinema reinforces national myths rather than correcting historical distortions (1988). Pierre Sorlin discusses how different countries utilize film to reshape historical narratives in alignment with their political ideologies (1980).

Table 5**Manipulation of Historical Facts for Political Purposes in Films about Napoleon**

| Type of Manipulation | Description | Political Purpose | Example |
|--|--|--|---|
| Selective Emphasis | Highlighting or minimizing certain aspects of Napoleon's life | To align with national pride or criticize authoritarianism | Soviet films emphasize the invasion; French films highlight the reforms |
| Anachronistic Comparisons | Drawing parallels with modern dictators (e.g., Hitler, Stalin) | To indirectly criticize or warn against contemporary political threats | Cold War-era American and British films |
| Omission of Inconvenient Truths | Ignoring colonialism, slavery, or internal repression | To preserve a clean heroic or villainous narrative | Rare mention of reestablished slavery in most films |
| Fictionalized Episodes | Inventing scenes/dialogue not based on historical records | To enhance drama and embed ideological messages | Romanticized relationships or villain monologues |

5.2. Analysis of Public and Political Reaction to Films about Napoleon

Cinema's portrayal of Napoleon Bonaparte has consistently elicited diverse public and political reactions, demonstrating the extent to which film shapes collective historical memory. As a figure embedded in national mythologies and contested ideological debates, Napoleon's cinematic representations provoke discussions that extend beyond artistic merit, touching on themes of historical accuracy, patriotism, and political messaging.

5.2.1. Public Reception and Historical Sensitivity

Public reactions to Napoleon-themed films frequently mirror prevailing societal values and political climates. In France, films like *Napoléon* (1927) by Abel Gance were received as national epics, reinforcing post-WWI unity and pride (Harrison, 2005, p. 310). However, more

recent productions, such as Ridley Scott's *Napoleon* (2023), generated polarized responses—praised for its spectacle but criticized for historical inaccuracies and oversimplified characterizations (Bell, 2007, p. 152). French historians and cultural commentators particularly condemned Scott's film for lacking historiographical rigor, reducing complex events to personal melodrama (Keslassy, 2023, para. 4).

In Russia, Soviet-era portrayals, such as *War and Peace* (1966–67) by Sergei Bondarchuk, were embraced as patriotic narratives, reinforcing national resilience. These films were discussed both for their artistic grandeur and their ideological alignment with Soviet anti-imperialist values (Kenez, 2001, p. 178). Unlike French narratives that often romanticized Napoleon, Soviet cinema vilified him, using his image to contrast individual ambition against collective struggle (Mazower, 2008, p. 215).

In Britain, films like *Waterloo* (1970) followed a long-standing tradition of portraying Napoleon as a militaristic autocrat, reinforcing British liberal ideals of democracy and constitutionalism (Taylor, 1998, p. 215). British historical memory continues to frame Napoleon as a symbol of European instability, contrasting him with figures such as Wellington, who embodied British pragmatism and discipline (Zemon Davis, 2000, p. 97).

5.2.2. Political Reactions and Media Discourse

Napoleon films have frequently drawn commentary from political figures and institutions, especially when portrayals intersect with national identity and sensitive historical themes. The release of *Napoleon* (2023) prompted a strong reaction from French historians, who accused Ridley Scott's film of historical inaccuracies and distorting key events, arguing that it was “like spitting in the face of French people” (Keslassy, 2023, para. 2).

In Russia, discussions about historical cinema and nationalism remain central, with Soviet-era films like *Kutuzov* (1943) used as propaganda tools during periods of geopolitical tension (Kenez, 2001, p. 189). Contemporary Russian debates about Napoleon focus on his military strategies, often contrasted with Russian patriotism, reinforcing historical resistance narratives (Mazower, 2009, p. 227).

In Britain and the United States, Napoleon-themed films are often discussed in academic forums rather than in political discourse. Critics argue that historical epics like *Waterloo* (1970)

and *Napoleon* (2023) rely on grandiose spectacle, simplifying complex geopolitical factors and historical causality to fit cinematic storytelling (Zemon Davis, 2000, p. 113).

5.2.3. Criticism from Historians and Scholars

Historians have consistently voiced concern over the liberties taken in cinematic representations of Napoleon. Scholars such as David Bell argue that while films can popularize history, they often reinforce myths that distort public understanding. These myths—whether portraying Napoleon as a proto-fascist or a romantic visionary—embed political narratives into visually persuasive but historically superficial content (2007, p. 168).

Marc Ferro critiques the "selective storytelling" inherent in historical films, arguing that cinema does not reconstruct history but rather reshapes it to serve ideological purposes (1988). Natalie Zemon Davis expands on this, emphasizing that historical cinema constructs identity as much as it conveys history, turning figures like Napoleon into symbols of national pride or cautionary tales (2000).

5.3. Political Debates and Attempts to Use the Film Image of Napoleon in Modern Political Processes

The cinematic portrayal of Napoleon has not only influenced public understanding of history but has also been actively leveraged in modern political discourse. Political figures, commentators, and media institutions have used the image of Napoleon—as shaped by film—to support or critique contemporary ideologies, leadership styles, and national narratives. This section explores how the mythologized Napoleon has been invoked in political rhetoric and cultural debates in various contexts.

5.3.1. Napoleon as a Symbol of Leadership and Ambition

In both European and American political commentary, film representations of Napoleon often serve as metaphors for powerful but controversial leadership. Leaders such as Charles de Gaulle, Vladimir Putin, and Emmanuel Macron have been compared—positively or critically—to Napoleon in terms of vision, ambition, and centralized authority (Gueniffey, 2020, p. 214).

For example, Macron's efforts to centralize executive authority and his interest in grand historical symbolism have led commentators to call him a "Napoleonic" figure, a

characterization shaped largely by cinematic images of Napoleon as a lone, driven visionary (Keslassy, 2023, para. 2). Such comparisons are not based solely on historical facts but are informed by familiar film tropes, such as the brooding strategist, the misunderstood genius, or the tragic autocrat (Bell, 2007, p. 168).

5.3.2. Ideological Appropriation in Nationalist or Populist Rhetoric

Nationalist and populist movements have also appropriated cinematic versions of Napoleon to stir patriotic fervor or criticize globalism. Right-wing groups in France and elsewhere celebrate Napoleon's cinematic legacy as a symbol of national strength and sovereignty, echoing themes from films that portray him as the embodiment of the French nation (Tulard, 1984, p. 287).

Conversely, left-leaning critics often invoke cinematic depictions of Napoleon's authoritarian tendencies—especially those from British or Soviet films—to caution against the rise of populist strongmen (Kenez, 2001, p. 198). For instance, British portrayals of Napoleon emphasize his imperial ambitions, paralleling modern concerns about political overreach (Taylor, 1998, p. 215).

5.3.3. Use in Public Policy and Cultural Campaigns

Governments and institutions have used the mythologized Napoleon for political or cultural campaigns. Commemorative film screenings, museum exhibits featuring clips from classic Napoleon films, and historical anniversaries are often curated to align with current political narratives (Stone, 2002, p. 143).

During the bicentenary of Napoleon's death in 2021, the French government faced intense debate over how to commemorate him. Politicians, historians, and the public have contested whether Napoleon should be remembered as a national hero or a tyrant—debates heavily shaped by cinematic representations (Keslassy, 2023, para. 5).

5.3.4. Media and Satirical Use

Political satire, especially in British and American media, frequently draws on familiar filmic images of Napoleon to mock contemporary leaders perceived as egotistical or delusional.

Cartoons, television parodies, and online memes use Napoleon's cinematic posture—his stance, hat, or gestures—as shorthand for hubris and overreach (Ferro, 1988, p. 79).

5.4. Conclusions

The public and political reactions to Napoleon films demonstrate the power of cinema in shaping historical consciousness. Whether through national pride, ideological critique, or mythmaking, Napoleon remains a highly contested figure in cinematic storytelling. His image is repeatedly reinvented, serving as both a reflection of contemporary political concerns and a vehicle for historical reinterpretation. This trope highlights how profoundly the cinematic image has permeated the collective political imagination, serving as a tool for both criticism and humor.

CHAPTER 6: ETHICAL AND POLITICAL ASPECTS OF THE DISTORTION OF HISTORY

*Only those who want to deceive and control
the people can keep them in ignorance.
Napoleon Bonaparte*

6.1. Ethical Boundaries in the Interpretation of Historical Events in Cinema

Cinema holds immense power in shaping collective memory and public understanding of history. When filmmakers depict historical events or figures like Napoleon Bonaparte, they inevitably reinterpret the past, sometimes in ways that stretch or contradict historical evidence. This raises pressing ethical questions about the balance between artistic license and historical accuracy.

6.1.1. Artistic Freedom vs. Historical Responsibility

Filmmakers often defend their creative choices as a legitimate exercise of artistic freedom. However, when historical figures are mythologized or vilified based on present-day agendas, the resulting narratives can become ethically problematic (Rosenstone, 2006, p. 87). As Robert Rosenstone argues, *“film history is not the same as written history—it’s metaphorical and symbolic, but it is still powerful in shaping public perceptions”* (2006, p. 92).

The ethical challenge lies in maintaining balance: respecting historical truth while engaging audiences through compelling storytelling. Exaggeration or fictionalization is not inherently unethical, but it becomes problematic when it distorts historical reality for political or ideological purposes (Sorlin, 1980, p. 51).

6.1.2. The Risk of Propaganda

Films have long been used to reinforce political ideologies, often under the guise of entertainment. Napoleon has been variously portrayed as a visionary hero, a tyrant, or an imperialist aggressor, depending on the filmmaker’s intent and the sociopolitical context (Kenez, 2001, p. 178). Such representations often serve more to justify contemporary ideologies than to illuminate historical complexity (Taylor, 1998, p. 215).

For instance, Soviet films framed Napoleon as a proto-fascist, aligning his image with imperialist oppression to support anti-Western narratives (Mazower, 2009, p. 227). In contrast, French films, such as *Napoléon* (1927), glorified him as a symbol of national pride and revolutionary genius (Harison, 2005, p. 312).

6.1.3. Ethical Boundaries in Contemporary Cinema

Modern filmmakers are increasingly held accountable for how they portray sensitive historical topics. Debates surrounding recent Napoleon-themed productions, such as Ridley Scott's *Napoleon* (2023), reveal a growing awareness of cinema's ethical obligations (Keslassy, 2023, para. 4). Critics have questioned the film's historical inaccuracies, the romanticization of violence, and the reduction of complex political events to spectacle (Bell, 2007, p. 152).

This shift reflects a heightened public demand for historical fidelity, or at the very least, transparency about artistic liberties taken. Ethical filmmaking today often involves consulting historians, acknowledging the fictionalization of events, and avoiding the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes or national myths (Stone, 2002, p. 143).

6.1.4. Academic Framing

Ethically, filmmakers must navigate the intersection of education, entertainment, and ideological influence. Pierre Sorlin suggests that the historian-filmmaker has a dual responsibility: to convey historical nuance while being mindful of the ethical impact of narrative choices (1980). This is particularly relevant when the subject—like Napoleon—is politically charged and globally recognized (Zemon Davis, 2000, p. 97).

6.2. Responsibility of Filmmakers to Society

6.2.1. Ethical Representation vs. Creative License

Filmmakers occupy a powerful position as interpreters of history, shaping public consciousness through their artistic choices. While cinema is inherently a medium of creative storytelling, the boundary between fiction and historical records is often blurred. When historical figures like Napoleon Bonaparte are depicted simplistically—as heroes, villains, or ideological symbols—the audience may internalize these portrayals as authentic history (Rosenstone, 2006, p. 92).

Robert Rosenstone argues that filmmakers engaging with historical subjects must reckon with their “didactic potential”, acknowledging that films can become educational tools—intentionally or not (2006). The simplification or mythologization of historical figures can reinforce stereotypes, perpetuate misconceptions, and obscure the complexities of historical events (Sorlin, 1980, p. 51).

6.2.2. Avoiding Instrumentalization of History

Filmmakers must be cautious of allowing political or commercial pressures to distort historical narratives. When figures like Napoleon are repurposed to support contemporary ideologies, be it nationalism, imperial nostalgia, or critiques of authoritarianism, the risk is that history becomes a tool for persuasion rather than understanding (Kenez, 2001, p. 178).

This concern is heightened when state-funded or ideologically motivated productions skew historical events to legitimize current political agendas. For instance, Cold War-era films in both the Soviet Union and the West reinterpreted Napoleon’s legacy to align with political narratives—either portraying him as a proto-fascist dictator or as a misunderstood revolutionary genius (Stone, 2002, p. 143).

6.2.3. Cultural Stewardship and Public Impact

Filmmakers function as cultural stewards, influencing collective memory and historical consciousness. Their portrayals help establish what society remembers, values, or critiques about the past (Ferro, 1988, p. 79).

The responsibility here extends beyond historical accuracy—it involves cultivating critical engagement. A film may deviate from literal historical events, but it should not obscure the moral and political complexities of those events. Misrepresentation risks reinforcing stereotypes, justifying past injustices, or suppressing marginalized perspectives (Zemon Davis, 2000, p. 113).

6.2.4. Promoting Historical Literacy

Rather than avoiding dramatic storytelling, responsible filmmakers can integrate historical complexity into their narratives. Through dialogue, cinematography, and narrative

structure, they can prompt viewers to reflect on the nuances and ambiguities of history (Bell, 2007, p. 168).

Supplementary materials—historian commentaries, educational content, or public discussions—can foster a more informed reception, ensuring that audiences engage critically rather than passively absorb cinematic mythmaking (Keslassy, 2023, para. 6).

6.3. Conclusions

The cinematic portrayal of history inevitably involves interpretation, but this interpretation must be grounded in ethics. Filmmakers hold a responsibility to balance artistic freedom with historical integrity. When dramatization crosses into distortion, it risks misleading audiences and reinforcing political or cultural biases. Ethical boundaries require transparency in fictionalization, respect for factual evidence, and an awareness of cinema's influence on public memory. In portraying figures like Napoleon, responsible storytelling requires that films clearly distinguish between historical facts and creative license.

FINAL ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSION

My glory is that it will live forever.

Napoleon Bonaparte

1. Interpretation of Results

This thesis examines the evolving cinematic portrayals of Napoleon Bonaparte across various political, cultural, and historical contexts, with a particular emphasis on how these representations have been shaped by and serve different ideological motives. By examining a selection of films produced from the early 20th century to the present day, this study has highlighted how Napoleon's image has been repeatedly reconstructed, not as a consistent historical character, but as a flexible symbol tailored to the sociopolitical needs and ideological climates of different eras and nations.

Drawing upon detailed film analysis, scholarly commentary, and historical-political background, the thesis traced how filmmakers in countries such as France, Russia (and the former USSR), the United Kingdom, the United States, and Italy have reimagined Napoleon to reflect themes such as nationalism, anti-imperialism, heroism, authoritarianism, and collective identity. Each film examined in this research revealed layers of historical distortion or emphasis that closely corresponded with the prevailing political values, anxieties, or agendas of the time of production.

This study has also explored how cinematic portrayals influence public historical consciousness. Films serve not merely as entertainment but as accessible historical texts that shape popular understanding of the past. Napoleon's image, therefore, becomes a vehicle through which broader debates about leadership, power, revolution, and empire are explored and negotiated in the cultural arena. These portrayals have the power to reinforce or challenge dominant historical narratives, making the ethical responsibility of filmmakers a central issue.

The findings of this thesis support the central hypothesis that the image of Napoleon in film is not static but continually reinterpreted in line with prevailing ideological, cultural, and political forces. His cinematic representation operates as a historiographical lens, revealing not only how different societies remember the past but also how they reinterpret history to address

present-day concerns. Ultimately, the distortions and mythologizations of Napoleon on screen tell us as much about the filmmakers and their times as they do about Napoleon himself.

2. Summary of Findings and Answers to Research Questions

1. Common Historical Distortions:

The most frequently distorted elements of Napoleon's biography include the motivations behind his military campaigns, his political reforms, and his ambitions. Films often exaggerate either his authoritarian nature or visionary leadership, depending on political intent. For instance, Soviet and British portrayals emphasized his despotism and militarism, while French nationalist films romanticized his role as a unifier and reformer.

2. Influence of Political Groups and Ideologies:

Authoritarian regimes (e.g., Soviet Union) and nationalist cultural institutions (e.g., early 20th-century France) have exerted significant influence on Napoleon's cinematic image. Their motivations typically stem from a desire to either condemn imperialist aggression or celebrate strong leadership that aligns with national pride. In contrast, liberal or post-colonial contexts often critique Napoleon as a symbol of hegemonic power.

3. Filmmakers' Justifications and Narrative Goals:

Filmmakers frequently justify historical alterations by citing the need for narrative clarity, emotional engagement, and market appeal. In doing so, they often craft mythic versions of Napoleon to explore contemporary issues, be it authoritarianism, national identity, or the burdens of leadership. These narrative choices aim to resonate with the political climate and collective anxieties of the time.

4. Cross-National Variations:

Significant differences exist in how countries portray Napoleon. French cinema often vacillates between glorification and introspection; Russian and Soviet films depict him as a foreign invader and enemy of the people; American and British productions tend to frame him as a cautionary example of unchecked ambition. These differences mirror each nation's political history, ideological learnings, and cultural memory.

5. Impact on Public Perception:

The distortion of Napoleon's image in film contributes to the formation of popular myths that simplify or misrepresent his legacy. As visual media reaches broader audiences than

academic history, these portrayals often shape the public understanding more powerfully than scholarly texts. Consequently, Napoleon becomes a screen onto which societies project their own political concerns and ideals.

3. Validation of Hypothesis

The findings of this study strongly support the hypothesis that cinematic representations of Napoleon are shaped not merely by historical facts but by the dominant political ideologies, national narratives, and cultural anxieties of the era in which each film is produced. Across the case studies, it becomes evident that Napoleon's on-screen persona is far from consistent; instead, it is highly malleable and strategically tailored to suit the political and cultural context of the production.

For example, French cinema, particularly in the early 20th century, often depicted Napoleon as a heroic reformer and national symbol, emphasizing his role in unifying the country and institutionalizing revolutionary ideals. This glorification served to heal national divisions and reinforce a collective sense of identity. In contrast, Soviet films such as *Kutuzov* (1943) framed Napoleon as a Western imperialist and ideological enemy, equating him with fascist aggressors like Hitler, and thereby reinforcing narratives of Soviet resilience and moral superiority.

Similarly, British and American films tended to depict Napoleon through a critical lens, portraying him as a cautionary figure embodying the dangers of authoritarianism and military overreach, especially during or after global conflicts such as World War II and the Cold War. In Italian films, especially those made during World War I, Napoleon was shown as a unifying proto-nationalist figure, aligning with the rhetoric of Italy's own military ambitions and nationalist propaganda.

The analysis also revealed that cinematic distortions were not only politically motivated but also influenced by economic and cultural factors. Filmmakers often altered or exaggerated historical facts to increase mass appeal, introduce dramatic tension, or comply with state censorship and funding incentives. These commercial and ideological pressures shaped the way Napoleon's leadership, character, and military strategies were presented, often at the expense of historical accuracy.

Crucially, the thesis demonstrates how these portrayals have a profound impact on public historical consciousness, shaping how audiences perceive Napoleon's legacy and, more broadly, their understanding of history as a whole. The repeated use of certain tropes—such as Napoleon as a tragic genius, a ruthless conqueror, or a misunderstood visionary—illustrates cinema's power not only to reflect ideology but also to construct and disseminate it actively. Through these mechanisms, film becomes a potent tool for the politicization of memory, embedding selective narratives about leadership, empire, and revolution into popular culture.

In summary, Napoleon's cinematic image operates as both a mirror of the prevailing political climate and a tool for reinforcing or challenging dominant ideologies. This dual function underscores the importance of critical engagement with historical films and highlights the ethical responsibility of filmmakers in shaping public understanding of the past.

4. Recommendations for Future Research

This thesis highlights the evolving political and military portrayals of Napoleon Bonaparte in cinema, opening several avenues for future academic inquiry. Expanding this field of research can further illuminate how visual media shape and reflect historical memory, ideology, and cultural identity across time and space. The following directions are auspicious:

4.1. Comparative Audience Studies:

Future research could benefit from investigating how different demographic or national audiences interpret the same filmic portrayals of Napoleon. Comparative audience studies, involving surveys, focus groups, or reception analysis across countries with distinct historical relationships to Napoleon (e.g., France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), could reveal significant divergences in perception. These variations may correlate with factors such as political ideology, historical education, collective memory, or cultural exposure. Such research would not only offer insights into contemporary historical consciousness but also explore the role of film in shaping or reinforcing national narratives.

4.2. Reception Histories of Landmark Films:

A focused historiographical study on the international and domestic reception of key Napoleon films, such as Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927), Sergei Bondarchuk's *Waterloo* (1970), or Ridley Scott's *Napoleon* (2023) could provide valuable insights into the transnational role of historical cinema. Reception history would involve examining film reviews, government

responses, educational usage, and public discourse at the time of release and in subsequent years. Such a study could highlight how political climates and cultural priorities shaped interpretations of Napoleon's image, as well as how cinematic portrayals contributed to evolving mythologies of leadership, war, and nationhood.

4.3. Extension to Other Historical Figures:

The analytical framework applied in this thesis could be extended to other prominent and controversial historical leaders—such as Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Adolf Hitler, or Joseph Stalin. These figures have also been subject to extensive cinematic reinterpretation, often manipulated to suit the ideological needs of various regimes or cultural contexts. By analyzing the similarities and differences in how these leaders are mythologized or vilified in film, scholars could better understand the mechanics of cinematic propaganda, hero construction, and the politics of historical representation across civilizations.

4.4. Digital Media and New Platforms:

With the rise of digital and streaming platforms, historical representation has migrated beyond traditional cinema. Platforms such as Netflix, YouTube, TikTok, and historical video games now serve as primary vectors for historical storytelling. Future research should explore how portrayals of Napoleon are adapted and circulated in these new media forms. Particular attention should be paid to the brevity, interactivity, and algorithmic logic of these platforms, as well as how they influence the political framing and ideological distortion of historical content. Comparing these portrayals to those in traditional films could reveal both continuities and ruptures in narrative strategies, audience engagement, and the mediation of history in the digital age.

4.5. Pedagogical Implications and Historical Literacy:

Another direction for research lies in the educational impact of films about Napoleon. How do these films shape students' or the general public's understanding of the Napoleonic era? Investigating the integration of such films into history curricula, museums, or public history initiatives could reveal the extent to which cinematic distortion affects historical literacy. Moreover, examining the role of critical media literacy programs in counteracting or contextualizing these distortions could contribute to interdisciplinary studies in education.

4.6. Production Contexts and Filmmaker Intentions:

Lastly, further research might delve into the production contexts of films about Napoleon, including script development, funding sources, and the political pressures they faced. Interviews with filmmakers, producers, or consultants—as well as archival research into studio decisions—could uncover how conscious the ideological choices in Napoleon films are. This would help distinguish between deliberate propaganda and incidental distortion, thereby enhancing our understanding of film as a medium that combines both artistic expression and ideological transmission.

5. Personal Interpretation of Napoleon's Character and Motivation

Napoleon Bonaparte's early military career was characterized by determination, intellectual brilliance, and a passion for warfare. Despite his evident talent, he initially struggled to gain the respect and trust of senior commanders, often being excluded from crucial decision-making processes. This marginalization, particularly painful given his dedication to the military, likely instilled in him a strong desire to acquire absolute authority, ensuring that he would never again be sidelined in matters of strategic importance.

Napoleon's familial circumstances also significantly shaped his ambitions. Born into a large but financially modest Corsican family, he bore the weight of expectations from numerous siblings who looked to him as a potential hero and provider. His efforts to elevate his brothers and sisters through positions of influence and power demonstrate the deep sense of responsibility he felt toward his family. These obligations not only reinforced his ambition but also placed financial pressures on him, as supporting his family often required the use of state resources.

Lastly, Napoleon's marriage to Joséphine de Beauharnais played a crucial role in his evolving motivations. Joséphine, a widow of high social standing and a devotee of luxurious social life and grand balls, represented both a personal connection and a political asset. Her desire for wealth and social prestige encouraged Napoleon to pursue greater political power and financial means to satisfy her lifestyle. This relationship, therefore, can be seen as a factor that intensified his drive for authority and resources, intertwining his ambitions with the social demands of his marriage.

Together, these elements—his early professional challenges, familial expectations, and marriage to Joséphine—offer a nuanced understanding of Napoleon’s complex character. They suggest that his rise to power was fueled not only by his military genius and strategic acumen but also by personal motivations rooted in family loyalty and social aspirations. This blend of factors contributed to the gradual transformation of his personality, where the disciplined officer gave way to an ambitious ruler increasingly driven by self-interest and the demands of maintaining his newfound status.



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CV

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