

1-1-2011

## **Bonaparte Did Not Die of Cancer**

Stacey Bear

Kelly Doyle

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/napoleon>

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Bear, Stacey and Doyle, Kelly. (2011) Bonaparte Did Not Die of Cancer.  
<https://via.library.depaul.edu/napoleon/7>

This Translation is brought to you for free and open access by the French Program at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Napoleon Translations by an authorized administrator of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact [digitalservices@depaul.edu](mailto:digitalservices@depaul.edu).

Stacey Bear & Kelly Doyle  
Prof. Brault  
FCH 324

#### Translators' Introduction

An anonymous author wrote the text, "Bonaparte Did Not Die of Cancer" in 1821. This text was published during King Louis XVIII's reign from 1814 to 1824; a regime that was not favorable toward Napoleon's supporters. However, the author takes a controversial stance and claims that Napoleon did not die of cancer on May 5, 1821, as was his officially stated cause of death, but was poisoned. The author goes into great detail of the anatomical evidence, which according to him supports his theory that Napoleon was in fact poisoned. While a modern reader might find the text to be filled with propaganda and perhaps even exaggerations, it is possible that at the time this would have been seen as medically true and reliable. We hope that the text is read within the context of its era, rather than anachronistically, and have attempted to maintain the author's original meanings in our translation.

BONAPARTE  
DID NOT DIE  
OF CANCER.

.....  
The truth is finally revealed.  
.....

DEDICATED  
TO THE SPIRIT OF NAPOLEON.

---

---

PARIS  
BATAILLE et BOUSQUET Publishers  
at Palais-Royal  
and the Merchants of New Books.

1821.

If one must transmit to posterity the actions and morals of the great man who still concerns us today, so that they may judge him with as much impartiality as possible, I think that it is perhaps more useful to shed light on the alleged cause of death that many of our contemporaries see fit to provide. It is not a question of teaching our descendants about a crime they could not doubt: rather we seek to teach all of Europe about how this remarkable man, unequalled even by the greatest heroes of Antiquity, owes his untimely death to hatred, jealousy, and vengeance. Finally, if I must explain myself more clearly, poison, prepared by the hands of treason, cut short the destiny of he who lived through so many glorious works.

Would one be flattered by the ability to provide a long lasting and impenetrable veil for the truth of an event that still shocks us today? We will set the record straight: the lie exposed itself. Happily, the people of France, under the shield of law, can be enlightened by the torches of reason and truth!

One cannot assume my intentions to be adverse; therefore, one cannot believe me to be inclined to reprehensible objectives. My proposed goal is to show the facts as they seem to exist, and to pay homage to the spirit of a hero who lives no more, and who from now on can do no more for the destiny of France.

Partisanship is not the motive for my present undertaking; interest makes me even less inclined to take on a job that has been delayed for too long. (I have never owed anything to Napoleon; and when the scepter was in his hand I often blamed him.) Truth alone guides me; and the honor associated with completing a duty as sacred as the one that I impose upon myself makes me dare to do and undertake all.

If Napoleon is no longer among the living, his brilliant career did not deserve such an undignified ending. It was necessary to have let him finish his days naturally, and not to have hastened his steps toward the grave. Let the assassins tremble! If divine vengeance does not punish them, that of men will strike them, perhaps earlier than they thought. And you Nero-like Loowe, to whom was entrusted the safekeeping of the illustrious prisoner that you kept in the irons of England, the House of Commons awaits you<sup>1</sup>. Hasten to prepare your defense for when you have to give an account of the exiled, noble one whom you so poorly kept.

Where were you then, Bertrand<sup>2</sup>, when the ill-fated believed to sense the first attacks of a supposed illness? Where were you when he revived his strength and his life by nourishment necessary for him? And you brave French, who so many times have preserved his life at the expense of your own, what had become of you? He was alone; and could he fight alone against the cruel and envious enemies, always ready to devour their prey?

The most characteristic signs of a slow poison are, for me, absolutely certain. The cancer, of which one says he was affected, never tormented him. So, what should we think? Either

---

<sup>1</sup> TR.- Sir Hudson Loowe was the governor of St. Helena at the time of Napoleon's exile and was known for his harsh treatment of Napoleon. For example, after learning of a rescue expedition by Bonapartists in the U.S., he implemented a set of petty rules and confined Napoleon to his residence, the Longwood House. In this sentence, he is compared to the Roman Emperor Nero who was known for his brutality.

<sup>2</sup> TR.- Count Henri-Gatien Bertrand was a general in Napoleon's army. He became close to Napoleon and was extremely devoted to him. Bertrand chose to go into exile on the island of Saint Helena to transcribe Napoleon's memoirs.

maybe Napoleon still breathes, or the cold of death, that ran in his veins, owes its cause only to the venom that was distilled in his drinks or in his food.

As with any thesis, one has to pursue consequences, I must first establish my own, and prove its certainty, after having enunciated it.

Napoleon Bonaparte did not die of stomach cancer; and if he really did, he owes his destruction only to the fatal and venomous action that had been introduced in his system.

Medicine is no longer a relatively backward science that can be swayed by the slightest appearances. It needs a whole series of facts from which comparisons and exact resemblances can be established, before announcing a judgement.

Though medicine cannot yet surmount all the obstacles that illnesses impose upon it, it does not overlook the group of symptoms that characterize such and such illnesses: it knows them all. Consequently, according to reports made anywhere in the world, the information regarding symptoms, which is universal, is so certain on all illnesses that it can discern the improbability or the falseness of an observation.

I will cite here what is most remarkable about the connections that were made about the death of Napoleon Bonaparte and then were shrewdly communicated. I will to show their falseness and prove that if the symptoms of his disease, as reported, are not those resulting of a poison for some, they are much less that of stomach cancer.

It seems plausible that the alleged stomach cancer that caused Bonaparte's death, had a very obvious and well marked beginning. It is what we can see from an article dated March 15th, and recounted in *l'Histoire des trois derniers mois* of this great man's life. Here it is:

"After having eaten lunch in a secluded spot, a short distance from Longwood, situated near a spring from which he often drank, he found himself most unwell. Upon his return to Longwood, he would not lie down; he sat on a couch where he dozed off for a few moments. He ate little for dinner. After the meal, he threw himself onto a small camp bed that he had brought from France, and which he had used during his campaigns. There he remained for several hours, then he arose, received some people to whom he spoke of the discomfort he felt. However, he resisted and did not want to lie down at all until his normal hour."

Pay attention with me to the circumstances and the places in which Bonaparte found himself. He had just had lunch near a place where, according to his custom, his thirst was indubitably quenched during his meal. There is major reason to speculate, according to these consequences, that a poison had been mixed with his food or with the aforementioned spring. Justice, in a case of poisoning, would particularly insist on such evidence.

"The rest of the day," it was reported, "was followed by adverse reactions."

And note that from that day the illness made rapid progress, and that no one had remarked anything before that time.

But that is not all. Can an enlightened doctor recognize, without partiality, a truly cancerous cause with such a clear beginning, and rather, not identify the distinctive action of a slow and destructive agent? If one were to indicate the type of discomfort with which he was seized, could one still attribute it to stomach cancer? As if a cancer, that will only last six weeks, began by a discomfort without being accompanied by other more certain signs!

How is it possible that a stomach cancer arises almost suddenly without a known cause, without precursory symptoms, and reaches, after six weeks, such an intense degree as the

autopsy showed? I will never conceive of it. And I say, it is impossible to prove it through medical observation.

A slow poison begins with dizziness, instantaneous weaknesses, and continues to have an influence until the individual's death, which comes to an end much faster than that of cancer.

"Everything was the same on the 16th; only, he did not go out." The newsmakers give such regular progression for this condition. It is that of a quite particular cancer.

"The 17th was the same. After getting up, he laid down again at noon, and did not leave his house at Longwood. It is there that the progress was made evident. He had his own doctor come, Professor Automarchie<sup>3</sup>. This doctor alone cared for him from the 17th until the 31st. From this time on, he stayed bedridden."

Without mentioning any characteristic symptoms, one always advances the illness to its unfortunate ending. One fears giving too much credit to what is plausible, and one forgets that these precautions only served to bring the truth to light.

In medicine, can one reasonably not be surprised, even without having access to a collection of well-detailed symptoms? Can one not be surprised by the steadily growing progress of the evolution of a carcinogenic illness that is just beginning? And can one not turn into doubt the existence of an illness that doesn't have any relationship with the one that attacked Napoleon?

Stomach cancer does not have an easily characterized beginning. It is intermittent. It makes one feel the need to often restore one's strength, and it renders the stomach incapable of fulfilling its functions: that is to say that the stomach can keep nothing down, neither food nor liquid; it rejects them an instant later. Stomach cancer, usually makes itself apparent particularly by frequent and repeated vomiting, tremors in the epigastric region, hiccups, and the frequent need to vomit. In the painful region, the patient feels hunger pangs and shooting or intermittent pains. Such are the characteristic symptoms, and we haven't yet seen any of these in the accounts that were given to us.

One was careful not to report the least peculiarities that could lead one to assume the criminal nature of the death of this great man: as if the suspicion or the reality of a crime should have any influence on the judgement to bear on such and such innocent individuals!

But rather, haven't they exposed themselves, by a behavior as ridiculous and as inept, to giving rise to the sarcastic remarks of skepticism? Are they not blameworthy of having wanted to strip history of the facts whose authenticity it requires and calls for imperviously? To hide the least useful part of the truth in order to let the most essential parts be perceived, is to have fallen into an error too coarse not to be noticed and corrected.

As we would have ended up by knowing that the source of Napoleon's illness had been in his stomach, they wanted to maintain that. But at the same time, they sought to distort what cannot be distorted: causing the contradictions and mistakes that fill the newspapers and the little works recounting what we speak of today.

Stomach cancer had been the prognostic illness that seemed to fit the best. The lie, and some little accessory signs common to other illnesses, were believed to be sufficient enough to impress those who know nothing of the healing art. But according to the little exposé that I gave

---

<sup>3</sup> TR.- Professor Automarchie was one of the physicians who monitored Napoleon's health during his final days.

of the signs of cancer and the outline that I am going to give on what constitutes slow poisoning, one will hardly be able to be mistaken and the judgement that I bring will be clear and impartial for all who read it.

The beginning of the poisoning, prompt or slow, is instantaneous. The symptoms of these two varieties are the same, except that they are more or less intense depending on the degree of the illness. In slow poisonings, the patient feels general weakness; a faintness overcomes him immediately after the venomous action. He loses his appetite and is listless. The pains he feels are burning, continual, and resemble those that Bonaparte so well expressed himself when speaking of a knife that would have penetrated his stomach, and whose wound's external opening would have closed again on the portion of the instrument still inside.

In this case, the disease makes rather perceptible progress. This progression has a continuous pace and one only fears for the patient's life days before his death.

Let me continue.

If Bonaparte didn't want to take his medicines during the last part of his sickness, it's because he knew the cause of his suffering, and that he believed he could no longer cure himself; because he thought, don't doubt this, that had escaped today, the hand raised to hit him would have sacrificed him the next day.

"A month before his death, he declared that he would not come out of his illness and added that he knew nature better than his doctors." He was not mistaken, and how could he be mistaken on the sensations caused by mortal pains that he had already experienced in his youth?

"They say that his father had died in the same way, of stomach cancer, at the age of thirty-five. All the symptoms announcing his end are the same that had been observed at the death of his father." How fortunate and plausible the demise if it had not been found so incidentally. I believe that this is the first time that I hear of Bonaparte's father dying of stomach cancer. And I am not the only one, of course, who did not know of such an event until this day.<sup>4</sup>

And in any case, imagining that this were true, what would one prove by assuming that the account was fact? That Napoleon was affected by the same illness that destroyed the author of his days, and that he must die of it too. The heredity of sicknesses is not yet certain enough that one cannot call it into question, and that one cannot assure an individual that he will live safe and sound, despite the cancer that would have killed his parents.

They want to prove to us that he knew his disease because he gave an exact description of his suffering. Nice proof of stomach cancer! It would have been better if the symptoms had been detailed exactly as he felt them. We would have been sooner convinced of the real existence of an illness that several doctors were unable to recognize.

What is shocking in all of these reports is that they repeat constantly that he detailed his illness to all of his doctors, and that despite this amount of detail, the nature of this illness was quite unknown to them. As if stomach cancer were not perceptible enough by its very existence, without the observations of the patient who was affected by it! I maintain that, although stomach cancer is incurable, doctors recognize its presence as easily as a surgeon recognizes a fractured limb.

---

<sup>4</sup> Consult the Faculty of Montpellier

Fortunately for the executioners of this illustrious general, the journal he intended for his son will not yet reach us. Otherwise, all of the crowned heads would have been his avengers. Let the generosity of HRH Louis XVIII be lauded here a thousand times, who had so royally and so religiously welcomed the regret and gratitude of our brave General Rapp!<sup>5,6</sup>

It is essential to note here a rare peculiarity one doesn't often observe in medicine: it is a complete weight-loss within the time of six weeks by a rather plump individual and endowed with a vigorous constitution. But note still, concerning this weight-loss, a very clear contradiction; it is that his body, once it was opened up, was, they say, very fatty, and that the exterior of his figure was very handsome.

In order to be certain of what I suggest, one can consult *l'Histoire des trois derniers mois de la vie de Bonaparte*.

“It was on Tuesday May 1st,” they say, “that one thought the illness was dangerous.”

It was time to realize that the stomach cancer had to end badly.

What rapidity in the progress of the illness! What absurdities and contradictions in the facts! Might not everything until now suggest that Bonaparte still lives, or that he did not die as a result of stomach cancer?

“The disease worsens until the 3rd, when they give up hope for his life, and other doctors are called into consultation, who were not allowed to see the patient.”

This last peculiarity only endorses the reality of the crime.

“Finally, having lost consciousness at three in the morning during the night of the 4th to the 5th, the extremities became cold, and he passed away.”

What an end for a stomach cancer! I would have never suspected it, had they not taken the precaution to inform me.

They only speak of the loss of consciousness and of the coldness of the extremities, symptoms of a disease of languor, or rather of a slow poisoning. And they cover up the repeated efforts that he made to vomit, the pains in the epigastric region, the desire to quench thirst with alcoholic beverages, the weak stomach which he complained about incessantly. The nature of the physiognomy in the last moments is not given to us. Finally, no constant infiltration of the extremities is done, and the bloating of the stomach with pain was not reported.

What is more interesting to know is the report of the cadaveric autopsy. I am going to transcribe it and examine it with care.

“At the first viewing, the body, that had very small bones and very small muscles, seemed very fatty (earlier, entitled brochure *l'Histoire des trois derniers mois de la vie de Bonaparte*, it stated that the weight-loss had reduced the body to the point of resembling a skeleton): which was confirmed by the first incision towards the lower abdomen, where the fat was more than an inch and a half thick on the abdomen. By penetrating the ribs and examining the chest cavity, one saw a light adhesion of the left pleura to the right pleura. About three ounces of a reddish

---

<sup>5</sup> TR.- General Rapp was a close friend of Napoleon and a general in his army. After the Battle at Danzig in 1814, Rapp returned to Paris and realigned himself with the Bourbon faction. Louis XVIII welcomed him with honors into his court. Rapp went on to lead Allied forces against Napoleon.

<sup>6</sup> TR.- The original sentence read “recnaissance,” but “reconnaissance” was most likely the intended word. Within the context of the sentence, we've chosen to translate this word as “gratitude.”

fluid were contained in the left cavity, and almost eight in the right cavity. The lungs were very healthy; the pericardium was in its natural state, and contained about one ounce of fluid.

“The heart was of natural size, but covered with a thick layer of fat; one of his kidneys was upside down. (O’meara<sup>7</sup>, would you have used a similar expression in an account of a case of pathological anatomy? No, you would have imitated the generous French Esculape who did not want to place his signature on this tissue of lies and horrors.) The auricles had nothing extraordinary, except that the muscular parts seemed more pale than in their natural state.

“In opening the abdomen, it was observed that the membrane that covers the entrails was extraordinarily fatty (I ask the doctors if such a language is medical); and in examining the stomach, it was observed that the viscera was the seat of a great illness.

“Strong adhesions connected all of the entire upper surface of the stomach, especially towards the pylorus including the concave surface of the left lobe of the liver. Separating them, it was discovered that an ulcer penetrated the covering membrane of the stomach within an inch of the pylorus, and that it was big enough to put the pinky finger through it.

“The inner surface of the stomach presented a cancerous mass, or scirrhus<sup>8</sup> parts changing into cancer. This is what was noticed particularly near the pylorus. The cardiac extremities, minus a small area towards the end of the esophagus, was the only part that appeared healthy. The stomach was full of coffee deposits.

“The convex surface on the side of the liver adhered to the diaphragm, with the exception of the adhesions occasioned by the stomach’s disease, the liver presented nothing unhealthy.

“The rest of the abdominal viscera were in a good state. One found that Napoleon would have died sooner if the liver had not by force penetrated the hole in his stomach: which is what prevented the food from escaping.”

For what we call pathologic anatomy, nothing can be more obscure than this observation. And despite all of these fictitious circumstances that embellished it, one can still show the slow poison’s action only affected the stomach, thickening its membranes, and ulcerating the tissue to varying degrees of depth. They say the organ of digestion was the only one to be attacked. How could it be, in such an advanced state of disorganization, that only one ill internal organ was found, unless poison was the cause of death? How did the liver, to which the stomach was adhered, and the pancreas, both of which neighbor the stomach, remain unaffected by cancer? All of the autopsies support this assertion.

Wouldn’t all of the inferior extremities had to have been infiltrated? They always are in such a profound organic injury. The autopsy showed lots of grain in the tissue, and cancer always leaves doldrums after it.

Such a disorganization, I repeat, cannot exist without the neighboring organs participating in the illness.

Such a disorganization suggests a longterm illness: and nonetheless, we were told, it happened in only six weeks.

---

<sup>7</sup> TR.- Barry Edward O’Meara was an Irish surgeon sent by the British to St. Helena to care for Napoleon. Napoleon suspected him to be a spy, which in the end, he was.

<sup>8</sup> TR.- Scirrhus carcinoma-of, relating to, or being a hard slow-growing malignant tumor having a preponderance of fibrous tissue. Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

Either the disorganization and the cancer are fabricated, or Bonaparte, if he is no longer alive, died by poison.

It is said that Napoleon would have died earlier if the liver had not closed the opening of the stomach; it is this reason that makes me say that the liver had to be diseased.

His hands were white like wax, they repeated with affectation. As if the certainty of a death caused by poison would exclude the whiteness of hands! Let men not be fooled: some poisons kill by aggravating only the stomach, without changing anything else to the form and the exterior colors of the body.

Let's consider Bonaparte's temperament, which proves that he was not prone to cancer.

Bonaparte, by his constitution, was not at all prone to cancer. The entirety of his facial appearance was far from announcing the idiosyncratic carcinoma that one can see on people. All, in contrast with him, in his behavior and in his way of life, his sensations and above all his physical form lead us to fear a liver disease. The passions that moved him announced a bilious man; and if temperament influences diseases, it was in his liver that one had to search for the nature of these diseases.

Nonetheless the autopsy, despite such dispositions, and despite the influence of the climate under which he lived in the past, the liver was found healthy.

It further proves for us that poison ended his days; because had he died at Saint Helena of natural causes, one would have found his liver, I repeat, in a deplorable state.

Because Napoleon was sad, and because cancer often includes sadness among its causes, it does not follow that Napoleon had to have had cancer. This cause alone does not suffice to produce it, above all for an individual who did not have the disposition for a specific sickness. And in fact, had it acted alone to produce cancer, its action would not have been as prompt as in this circumstance.

Alcohol causes cancer. But was Bonaparte even seen to brutally engage in a shameful vice; and many people, despite their decided taste for the same liquors, have they not escaped a sickness as terrible as cancer? It is necessary for me to repeat relentlessly that it could not any more than sadness produce stomach cancer with as much speed as it happened for Bonaparte.

At present, there will be time to come back to what has been said. However, many new details will be given to rectify the facts that we have seen to be false: the die is cast; the dark side of Napoleon's enemies is shown completely; and, for the misfortune of humanity, such a crime does not give us even the hope of placing the palm of our regrets on his tomb.

I finally reach the goal I proposed, happy to have fulfilled my task with the probity and natural disinterestedness of all French people, but I am more happy even to have dared to unseal the eyes of my fellow citizens, in proving clearly that Bonaparte did not die of cancer, and that, if he no longer lives, this is due to a destructive poison that prevented him from living a longer life.<sup>9</sup>

From the Douelet Printers.

---

<sup>9</sup> See O'Meara's Letter, addressed to the editor of the Morning-Chronicle, at the same publishers.