

BACKGROUND

Information

- 1 Alexandre Dumas, author of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, did not consider this work one of his historical novels, but it is usually understood as being one today. Any reader of the work, however, must have a basic understanding of French history during the period of the story because political events force some of the action in the novel.
- 2 The novel opens on February 24, 1815. This was an uncertain time in French history and politics, and that uncertainty is reflected in the novel—fears of plots and conspiracies were everywhere, and old loyalties could prove advantageous or fatal.
- 3 The uncertain political situation in the novel reflects the end of the French monarchy, its replacement by Napoleon, a strong-willed general, his overthrow and the restoration of the monarchy, Napoleon's return for the brief period known as the Hundred Days, and the restoration, once again, of the monarchy.
- 4 Before the novel began, France was ruled by Louis XVI, who was a member of the noble Bourbon family that had ruled since 1589. Over-taxed and virtually bankrupt, France struggled to maintain its glittering reputation, but the nobles refused to give up privilege. Hunger and discontent spread among the people, and military disasters further weakened the government. The French Revolution began in 1789, with the king becoming a figurehead and then a fugitive. He (and his queen, Marie Antoinette) were arrested in 1792 and executed in 1793. Their son, called the Dauphin or the heir to the throne, was given the title of king by his uncle, but remained in prison until his death in 1795. After the death of Louis XVI, France was ruled as a republic, but the government was unstable and poorly financed; many political executions took place, and great uncertainty cloaked the nation.
- 5 In 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte, who had led French armies to success in Italy (where he converted a ragtag assemblage into a proud and conquering army) and Egypt, returned to France and overturned the weak central government. From then until the restoration of the Bourbon king, Louis XVIII (who appears in *The Count of Monte Cristo*), Napoleon ruled France with the support of his followers, the Bonapartists. Napoleon moved quickly to centralize power, stabilize the economy, publish a new code of laws, and make taxation and administration major concerns of the central government. Becoming increasingly autocratic, Napoleon moved from being consul to consul-for-life to emperor.

Directions: After watching the video clip about **Napoleon Bonaparte**, answer the following questions.

1. Name some of foundational training Napoleon experienced that helped him rise up in rank quickly.

2. Name some of Napoleon's successes. Name some of his failures.

3. What made Napoleon such a brilliant military leader?

4. Where was Napoleon exiled? How long did it take him to escape? In true Napoleon fashion, what did he do once he gained his freedom?
