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*Man of the hour:* Joaquin Phoenix plays the French leader Napoleon Bonaparte.

**Is history a story of great men? Ridley Scott's new film *Napoleon* tells the story of one man's rise and fall. But some think we should find stories about more ordinary people.**

## What's happening?

The air is filled with the banging of drums and the smell of gunfire. *Napoleon*, a film starring Joaquin Phoenix as the French leader, is in cinemas now.

French reviewers have asked how realistic the film really is. **Director** Ridley Scott told them to "get a life". But outside France many love the film.

## Find out more

It tells an incredible story. Napoleon Bonaparte was born in 1769. He became a soldier during the **French Revolution** and **Emperor of France**.

It took four countries working together to beat him. But even then he came back. He was defeated for good at the Battle of Waterloo.

Napoleon's life has inspired paintings, books, films, cartoons and video games.

Twenty years after Napoleon's death, Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle wrote: "The history of the world is but the biography of great men."

This is now known as Great Man theory. We read books about **Alexander the Great**, look at **Michelangelo's** paintings and watch actor after actor play **Winston Churchill**.

Yet some disagree with this idea.

The Great Men theory is **sexist**. It only focuses on men and White Europeans. And it ignores the lives and work of ordinary people. History should be about everyone, not a lucky few.

**Is history a story of great men?**

## Some say

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Yes! History is about people and their actions. The actions of great men did more to change the world than anyone else.

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## Others think

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No! By focusing on great men, we are ignoring what the past was really like for most people — people who were not men, not White Europeans and not rich. History should be about their stories too.

## Some people say

*"History is a gallery of pictures in which there are few originals and many copies."*

**Alexis de Tocqueville (1805 – 1859),  
French philosopher and historian**

*What do you think?*

## Six steps to discovery

### 1. Connect

**How do you feel about this story?** -

Do you enjoy historical films and television?

### 2. Wonder

**What questions do you have?** - For example: How did Napoleon become Emperor of France?

### 3. Investigate

**What are the facts?** - Pick out one thing we know for certain and one thing we cannot say for sure about this story.

### 4. Construct

**What is your point of view?** - You can write a film about one historical figure. Who do you choose and why?

### 5. Express

**What do others believe?** - In groups, come up with a list of things that make a great film.

### 6. Reflect

**What might happen next?** - Choose one person from history and make a factfile about them.

## Glossary

**Director** - A person who is in charge of something, for example running a company or making a film.

**French Revolution** - The overthrow (and subsequent execution) of France's king and aristocratic government in 1789. The revolution became infamous and influential worldwide.

**Emperor of France** - The title of the monarch and supreme ruler of the First and the Second French Empires.

**Alexander the Great** - A king of ancient Macedon who is renowned as one of the greatest military leaders in history. He conquered a vast empire stretching from Greece to modern-day Pakistan.

**Michelangelo** - An Italian Renaissance sculptor, painter, architect and poet. He lived from 1475 to 1564.

**Winston Churchill** - The British prime minister during World War Two, and later from 1951 to 1955.

**Sexist** - Showing prejudice or discriminating against women and girls.