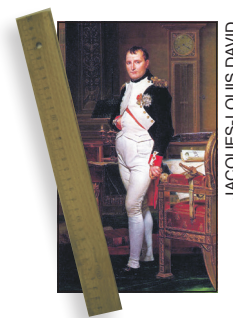


Napoleon the shortie ...

Napoleon Bonaparte was one of the greatest political leaders in history. As the emperor of France in the early 19th century, he conquered most of Europe. Even today, he is considered as a military genius. He is also remembered as being very short. Some historians have even said that the reason why he wanted so much power was to make up for being short. This explanation became so popular that there is even a term for it – the Napoleon Complex.



JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID

FACT OR FALLACY?

It turns out that Napoleon may not have been short after all.

Napoleon Bonaparte's height was recorded as 5 feet 2 inches. We naturally assume that his 5 feet 2 inches is the same as the 5 feet 2 inches we would see on a measuring tape today (that is, 1.57 metres). However, it is not the same measurement. At the time of Napoleon's reign, the French and the British had different systems of measurement that both used the same terms. If Napoleon was 5 foot 2 inches in the French measurement system, he would have been 5 foot 6 inches (1.68 metres) in the British system. This would make him an average-sized man for his time. In which case, it would not be true that Napoleon was short.

Looking for evidence

There is more to this story. One of the sources used for his height was his death record. He was a prisoner of the British when he died. So, some historians say that the death record probably gave his height in British feet and inches, making him rather short. But, other historians were sure that the French system of measurement



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was used. His doctor, who examined him when he died, was French like him.

Paintings are one source for evidence of what people looked like in the past. There were many portraits done of this powerful emperor. However, they may not tell us much. Just like how photographers use Photoshop today, painters of great leaders often tried to make them look as impressive as possible. If a particular leader was short,

the artist might make him look taller in the painting.

Why the truth matters

Historians continue to work at separating correct from incorrect information to get to the truth about Napoleon's height. Although they are not a hundred percent sure, most historians now agree that he was most probably 1.68 metres tall. He was not short.

The "Napoleon Complex" is one reason

Get your numbers right

The misunderstanding about Napoleon's height arose because the same word had different meanings. So, one way to separate facts from fallacies is to check the exact meanings of terms used.

Other kinds of measurements can be as confusing. For example, the Ethiopian calendar is approximately eight years behind the Gregorian calendar, which we use in Singapore. So, if someone is born in the year 2000 by the Ethiopian calendar, she is not 14 years old. She is only six, because it is now 2006 according to the Ethiopian calendar.

To express dates in numbers, most countries put the day before the month. However, Americans put the month first. So, 10 December is written as 10/12 in Singapore, but 12/10 in the United States. When Americans talk about the terrorist attacks of 9/11, they mean September 11, not 9 November.

Many countries call their money "dollars". But, they have different values. If a friend from Hong Kong says she bought a t-shirt for 60 dollars, do you think she got a good deal? If she means 60 *Singapore* dollars, that is pretty expensive. But, if it was 60 *Hong Kong* dollars, that is equal to about 10 Singapore dollars, which is not a bad price.



DANIEL MOYLE

why there has been so much attention given to his height. The claim that there is such a thing as the Napoleon Complex puts down short men. Sometimes, people even call it the "short-man syndrome". This is rude and can be hurtful.

As far as we know, there is no real scientific basis for the Napoleon Complex. We can't say that when short men are aggressive, it is because they feel inferior to taller men. Neither can we

say that short men are more likely to be aggressive than tall men. The only evidence cited for this was Napoleon's height and his personality.

In any case, it is wrong to make claims based on only one person. Worse still, what was believed to be a fact about that one person turned out to be a fallacy. If Napoleon was not short, then the Napoleon Complex is a second fallacy.

– By ALISHA CHERIAN

FACT OR FALLACY is a series about why it is important to check the accuracy of information that is commonly believed to be correct. Separating facts from fallacies helps organise the clutter in our minds. And, that lets us see the world more clearly. These articles are brought to you by *What's Up* in partnership with the Information Literacy & Outreach Department of the National Library Board.



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