

The French Revolution and Napoleon 1789-1815

THE STORY MATTERS...

The French Revolution was a major turning point in Western history. At its most essential, it was a struggle for representational government, equality of opportunity, and a response to the near collapse of the French economy. As a child of the revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte created a legal code for France that realized some of the dreams of the revolutionaries: economic freedom, legal equality, and religious toleration, at least in part.

Lesson 22-3

The Rise of Napoleon and the Napoleonic Wars

READING HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

Capable liberal

Content Vocabulary

consulate nationalism

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What causes revolution?
- How does revolution change society?

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

Napoleon Bonaparte dominated French and European history from 1799 to 1815. During his reign, Napoleon built and lost an empire and also spread ideas about nationalism throughout much of Europe.

The Rise of Napoleon

GUIDING QUESTION *How did instability in the French government create an opportunity for Napoleon to take power?*

Napoleon Bonaparte's role in the French Revolution is complex. In one sense, he brought it to an end when he came to power in 1799. Yet he was a child of the revolution as well. Without it, he would never have risen to power, and he himself never failed to remind the French that he had preserved the best parts of the revolution during his reign as emperor.

Early Life

Napoleon was born in 1769 in Corsica, an island in the Mediterranean, only a few months after France had annexed the island. His father came from minor nobility in Italy, but the family was not rich. Napoleon was talented, however, and won a scholarship to a famous military school.

When he completed his studies, Napoleon was commissioned as a lieutenant in the French army. Although he became one of the world's greatest generals and a man beloved by his soldiers, there were few signs of his future success at this stage. He spoke with an Italian accent and was not popular with his fellow officers.

Napoleon devoted himself to his goals. He read what French philosophers had to say about reason, and he studied

famous military campaigns. When revolution and war with Europe came about, there were many opportunities for Napoleon to use his knowledge and skills.

Military Successes

Napoleon rose quickly through the ranks. In 1792 he became a captain. Two years later, at age 24, the Committee of Public Safety made him a brigadier general. In 1796 he became commander of the French armies in Italy. There Napoleon won a series of battles with speed, surprise, and decisive action. He also defeated the armies of the Papal States and their Austrian allies. These victories gave France control of northern Italy. Throughout the Italian campaigns, Napoleon's energy and initiative earned him the devotion of his troops. His personal qualities allowed him to win the support of those around him. In 1797 he returned to France as a hero. He was given command of an army in training to invade Britain, but he knew the French could not carry out that invasion. Instead, Napoleon suggested striking indirectly at Britain by taking Egypt.

Egypt lay on the route to India, one of Britain's most important colonies and a major source of its wealth. The British were a great sea power and controlled the Mediterranean. By 1799, the British had defeated the French naval forces supporting Napoleon's army in Egypt. Seeing certain defeat, Napoleon abandoned his army and returned to Paris.

Consul and Emperor

In Paris, Napoleon took part in the *coup d'état* of 1799 that overthrew the Directory and set up a new government, the **consulate**. In theory, it was a republic, but, in fact, Napoleon held absolute power. Napoleon was called first consul, a title borrowed from ancient Rome. He appointed officials, controlled the army, conducted foreign affairs, and influenced the legislature. In 1802 Napoleon was made consul for life. Two years later, he crowned himself Emperor Napoleon I.

Peace with the Church

One of Napoleon's first moves at home was to establish peace with the Catholic Church. In matters of religion, Napoleon was a man of the Enlightenment. He believed in reason and felt that religion was at most a social convenience. However, since most of France was Catholic, it was a good idea to mend relations with the Church.

In 1801 Napoleon came to an agreement with the pope, which recognized Catholicism as the religion of a majority of the French people. In return, the pope would not ask for the return of the church lands seized in the revolution.

With this agreement, the Catholic Church was no longer an enemy of the French government. It also meant that people who had acquired church lands in the revolution became avid supporters of Napoleon.

Codification of the Laws

Napoleon's most famous domestic achievement was to codify the laws. Before the revolution, France had almost 300 different legal systems. During the revolution, efforts were made to prepare a single law code for the nation. However, the work was not completed until Napoleon's reign.

Seven law codes were created, but the most important was the Civil Code, or Napoleonic Code, introduced in 1804. It preserved many of the principles that the revolutionaries had fought for: equality of all citizens before the law; the right of the individual to choose a profession; religious toleration; and the abolition of serfdom and all feudal obligations.

For women and children, the Civil Code was a step back. During the radical stage of the revolution, new laws had made divorce easier and allowed children, even daughters, to inherit property on an equal basis. The Civil Code undid these laws. Women were now "less equal than men." When they married, they lost control over any property they had. They could not testify in court, and it became more difficult for them to begin divorce proceedings. In general, the code treated women like children, who needed protection and who did not have a public role.

A New Bureaucracy

Napoleon also developed a powerful, centralized administrative machine. He focused on developing a bureaucracy of capable officials. Early on, the regime showed that it did not care about rank or birth. Public officials and military officers alike were promoted based on their ability. Opening careers to men of talent was a reform that the middle class had clamored for before the revolution.

Napoleon also created a new aristocracy based on meritorious service to the nation. Between 1808 and 1814, Napoleon created about 3,200 nobles. Nearly 60 percent were military officers, while the rest were civil service or state and local officials. Socially, only 22 percent of this new aristocracy were from noble families of the old regime; about 60 percent were middle class in origin.

Preserver of the Revolution? In his domestic policies, then, Napoleon did keep some major reforms of the French Revolution. Under the Civil Code, all citizens were equal before the law. The concept of opening government careers

to more people was another gain of the revolution that he retained.

On the other hand, Napoleon destroyed some revolutionary ideals. Liberty was replaced by a despotism that grew increasingly arbitrary, in spite of protests by such citizens as the prominent writer Anne-Louise-Germaine de Staël. Napoleon shut down 60 of France's 73 newspapers and banned books, including de Staël's. He insisted that all manuscripts be subjected to government scrutiny before they were published. Even the mail was opened by government police.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Synthesizing How did Napoleon's Civil Code address the problems with the French legal system that were present before the revolution?

Napoleon's Empire

GUIDING QUESTIONS *Why would changes in France cause concern in other European countries? How did Napoleon's military background shape his perspective?*

Napoleon is, of course, known less for his domestic policies than for his military leadership. His conquests began soon after he rose to power.

Building the Empire When Napoleon became consul in 1799, France was at war with a European coalition of Russia, Great Britain, and Austria. Napoleon realized the need for a pause in the war. "The French Revolution is not finished," he said, "so long as the scourge of war lasts I want peace, as much to settle the present French government, as to save the world from chaos." In 1802 a peace treaty was signed, but it did not last long. War with Britain broke out again in 1803. Gradually, Britain was joined by Austria, Russia, Sweden, and Prussia. In a series of battles at Ulm, Austerlitz, Jena, and Eylau from 1805 to 1807, Napoleon's Grand Army defeated the Austrian, Prussian, and Russian armies.

From 1807 to 1812, Napoleon was the master of Europe. His Grand Empire was composed of three major parts: the French Empire, dependent states, and allied states. The French Empire was the inner core of the Grand Empire. It consisted of an enlarged France extending to the Rhine in the east and including the western half of Italy north of Rome.

Dependent states were kingdoms ruled by relatives of Napoleon. Eventually these included Spain, Holland, the kingdom of Italy, the Swiss Republic, the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, and the Confederation of the Rhine—a union of all German states except Austria and Prussia.

Allied states were countries defeated by Napoleon and then forced to join his struggle against Britain. These states included Prussia, Austria, Russia, and Sweden.

Spreading the Principles of the Revolution

Within his empire, Napoleon sought to spread some of the principles of the French Revolution, including legal equality, religious toleration, and economic freedom. In the inner core and dependent states of his Grand Empire, Napoleon tried to destroy the old order. The nobility and the clergy everywhere in these states lost their special privileges. Napoleon decreed equality of opportunity with offices open

to those with ability, equality before the law, and religious toleration. The spread of French revolutionary principles was an important factor in the development of liberal traditions in these countries.

Analyzing PRIMARY SOURCES

“What is the throne? – a bit of wood gilded and covered with velvet-I am the state – I alone am here the representative of the people. Even if I had done wrong you should not have reproached me in public – people wash their dirty linen at home. France has more need of me than I of France.”

– Napoleon, quoted in *The History of Napoleon Buonaparte*

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

How did Napoleon understand his role as leader of the French people??

Napoleon hoped that his Grand Empire would last for centuries, but his empire collapsed almost as rapidly as it was formed. Two major reasons help explain this collapse: Britain’s ability to resist Napoleon and the rise of nationalism.

British Resistance Napoleon was never able to conquer Great Britain because of its sea power, which made it almost invulnerable. Napoleon hoped to invade Britain, but the British defeated the combined French-Spanish fleet at Trafalgar in 1805. This battle ended Napoleon’s plans for invasion.

Napoleon then turned to his Continental System to defeat Britain. The aim of the Continental System was to stop British goods from reaching the European continent to be sold there. By weakening Britain economically, Napoleon would destroy its ability to wage war.

The Continental System also failed. Allied states resented being told by Napoleon that they could not trade with the British. Some began to cheat. Others resisted. Furthermore, new markets in the Middle East and in Latin America gave Britain new outlets for its goods. Indeed, by 1810, British overseas exports were at near-record highs.

Nationalism

A second significant factor in the defeat of Napoleon was **nationalism**. One of the most important forces of the nineteenth century, nationalism is the sense of unique identity of a people based on common language, religion, and national symbols. A new era was born when the French people decided that they were the nation.

Napoleon marched his armies through the German states, Spain, Italy, and Poland, arousing new ideas of nationalism in two ways. First, the conquered peoples became united in their hatred of the invaders, and they banded together to resist their conquerors. Second, the conquered peoples saw the power and strength of national feeling. It was a lesson not lost on them or their rulers.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Evaluating What were the consequences for a country conquered by Napoleon’s Grand Army?

REVIEWING VOCABULARY

consulate	government established in France after the overthrow of the Directory in 1799, with Napoleon as first consul in control of the entire government
nationalism	the unique cultural identity of a people based on common language, religion, and national symbols