

# Napoleon Bonaparte

There is no denying the fact that the French Revolution created NAPOLEON BONAPARTE (1769-1821). It was this man who, in 1799, combined a passion for power with his genius for leadership. Although much of what Napoleon accomplished over fifteen years seemed to undermine the principles of 1789, the end result was that many of the achievements of the Revolution were made French realities. Indeed, these realities were also made manifest across Europe.

Napoleon was born August 15, 1769, on the island of Corsica, the son of a petty or low noble. He trained at a military school and so the wars of the French Revolution gave him the opportunity to test his skills. In 1793, when he was only 24 years old, Napoleon's artillery pushed the British out of Toulon. In 1795, he saved the Convention from a Royalist insurrection. In 1796, he was given command of the French Army of Italy. It was during his ITALIAN CAMPAIGNS against the Austrians that Napoleon's talent for military strategy was first demonstrated. He tasted glory -- he could never do without it. He knew he was headed for greatness. He was aware, that he was a "world-historical figure," a "great man," "a hero in history." He later confided that

*In Italy I realized I was a superior being and conceived the ambition of performing great things, which hitherto had filled my thoughts only as a fantastic dream.*

In November 1797, Napoleon was ordered to plan an invasion of England. Aware that France had a weak navy compared to that of England, Napoleon decided to strike the British by attacking British commerce in Egypt and India (which supplied cotton for British mills). He left France with 35,000 men and took Cairo. Napoleon's meager fleet, however, was destroyed at the Battle of the Nile by Nelson's navy. Meanwhile, Napoleon sent glowing reports back to France.

While all this was going on, things were not that peaceful back in France. Political unrest, financial disaster, and war with Europe compelled Napoleon to return. France needed a savior and Napoleon recognized himself as that savior. In October 1799, and without informing his troops in Egypt, Napoleon landed in France. A conspiracy was already underway against the lame five-man Directory. Some politicians realized the need to seize power and establish a strong executive. Perhaps a tyrant was needed.

On November 10, 1799 -- the 18th BRUMAIRE of the Year VIII -- the Directory was overthrown by a *coup d'etat* and Napoleon became a military dictator. The French Revolution had entered yet another stage of its history. The French people welcomed Napoleon -- the bourgeoisie, in particular, expected Napoleon to protect the wealth and influence they had gained as a result of 1789.

A new constitution was drawn up which specified that three Consuls would share power as a sort of triumvirate. Napoleon, of course, was one of these Consuls. His ambition, however, forced him to aspire to much more. In 1802, Napoleon was made first Consul for life with the right to choose his successor. On December 2, 1804, Napoleon crowned himself Emperor of the French. So, by 1804, the fate of both France and Europe depended upon this one man. Well, what sort of a man was he?

Like most men of stature and power, Napoleon's was a complex personality. We naturally think of Alexander, Augustus, Charlemagne, Peter the Great, Hitler and Stalin. His intellectual ability was clearly impressive. He had grandiose ideas. He had a philosophic mind. He could work 18 to 20 hours at a stretch without so much as a break in concentration. He was, as one French historian put it, "a typical man of the 18th century, a rationalist, a philosophe who placed his trust in reason, in knowledge and in methodical effort." But Napoleon was no disembodied brain -- his personality was not pure intellect. He also had a love of action and a boundless ambition. "I live only for posterity," he said, "death is nothing . . . but to live defeated and without glory is to die every day." He was an artist, a poet of action, for whom France, Europe and a mankind were but instruments. He had charisma, he could move men to obedience, to loyalty and to heroic acts. He was also quite arrogant -- he

manipulated people at will. "A man like me," he once said, "troubles himself little about the lives of a million men."

Living in a revolutionary age, Napoleon observed firsthand the precariousness of power. He knew what happened to Louis XVI. He knew that the Girondins had been executed and that Robespierre had fallen victim to the Reign of Terror. Napoleon assumed that he would not make the same mistakes. He knew that he must become both a statesman and a tyrant. He had to consolidate the Revolution and bind together the different social classes of the French nation.

His domestic policy then, is crucial to our overall understanding of Napoleonic France. Here, he was clearly influenced by the Revolution. He was also affected by the ideas of the philosophes. He considered himself "enlightened." There are five areas of domestic policy worth our attention: government, religion, law, education and the economy.

### **Government**

Napoleon provided France with a strong centralized government -- a government he would himself dominate, as an emperor, a Caesar. Previous French monarchs could not overcome political barriers (the remnants of feudalism, an obstinate nobility, local traditions and legal problems). But, when the Revolution basically swept away these remnants, administrative unity could become a reality. This left an opening for a man like Napoleon. So Napoleon created an army of officials -- civil servants and bureaucrats -- an army which reached into every village, town and city. The entire nation was linked together under rational administration. The result was that Napoleon concentrated power and this provided him with taxes and soldiers.

Napoleon also had to shape public opinion -- this was accomplished by crude forms of propaganda, but more importantly by the use of secret agents, arbitrary arrests, and executions. Like all dictators -- we think of Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin -- Napoleon relied on public opinion to prevent hostile criticism. In other words, dissent was nearly impossible. Printers and booksellers swore oaths of allegiance and all newspapers fell under state control. So, by repressing liberty, subverting republicanism and restoring absolutism, Napoleon reversed some of the liberal gains of the Revolution. He favored equality before the law and careers open to talent BUT he believed that political liberty threatened the efficiency of the state with anarchy. He would govern in the interests of the people as an enlightened but absolute ruler. He was Plato's philosopher-king made reality.

## Religion

In terms of religion, Napoleon bordered between deism and atheism. I suppose you could say that Catholicism as a religion of salvation had little meaning to him. But, like Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Marx, Napoleon believed that religion was little more than the cement which held society together. Again, we are reminded of Marx when he remarked that "religion is the opiate of the people." According to Napoleon, religion promoted national unity and prevented class war -- it kept the people meek and mild instead of strong and independent. He made every effort to close the divide between the State and the Church, a divide created by the Revolution. The Temples of Reason (i.e., the churches) and the Cult of the Supreme Being, erected in the early 1790s, were too abstract for Napoleon. How could he expect the French common people to have understood them? So, his desire was to reconcile Church and State. Such a reconciliation would gain for Napoleon even greater approval of his people.

Shrewd, calculating and intelligent, Napoleon knew exactly what he was doing. It was for these reasons that he negotiated an agreement with the Pope. The Concordat of 1801 recognized Catholicism as the favored religion of France -- not the state religion. The clergy would be selected and paid by the State, but consecrated by the Church. So, in terms of religion, Napoleon basically guaranteed one of the rights mentioned in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* -- religious freedom. However, the Church did not regain land confiscated during the Revolution, nor did they have the right to collect the tithe and the French clergy, though consecrated at Rome, remained under state control. Napoleon had achieved another of his aims -- Jews, Protestants and Catholics could freely practice their religion. But the Church was under state control. Although the people seemed to get what they wanted, so too did Napoleon.

## Law

We mentioned that one of the causes of the Revolution was that 18th century France was plagued with numerous and sometimes conflicting codes of law. These codes obstructed national unity and administrative efficiency. Although the National Assembly had made the attempt to rectify the situation, they always had other things on their mind. Napoleon pressed for the completion of the project. So, he instituted the CODE NAPOLEON which incorporated the great principles of 1789: equality before the law, careers open to talent, freedom of religion, protection of private property, abolition of serfdom, and the secularization of the state. The *Code*, however, also had its less-liberal side. Workers were denied collective bargaining, trade unions were outlawed, and a system of labor passports was instituted. Women were declared to be inferior to men by law, and children had no rights at all. Of women, Napoleon once remarked,

*the husband must possess the absolute power and right to say to his wife: Madame, you shall not go out, you shall not go to the theater, you shall not visit such and such a person: for the children you bear, they shall be mine.*

## Education

Like some of the philosophes and the majority of active revolutionaries, Napoleon favored a state system of public education. The curriculum would be secular and schools would be managed under the direction of the state and not the Church. For Napoleon, education would serve a dual role. State

funded education would provide him with capable officials necessary to administer his laws and trained officers to man his army. The young would also be indoctrinated to obedience and authority. Napoleon established the University of France -- a giant board of education that placed education under state control. To this day, little has changed -- education is strictly centralized with curriculum and academic standards set for the entire nation. Women, of course, were excluded. "Marriage is their whole destination," Napoleon once wrote. Women did not need education, all they needed was religion.

## **Economics**

Napoleon's economic policies were designed to strengthen France and increase his popularity. To stimulate the economy and serve the interests of the bourgeoisie, Napoleon aided industry through tariffs and loans. He built or repaired roads, bridges and canals. He established the Bank of France. He kept careers open to men of talent and provided bread at low prices. He stimulated the employment of artisans and did not restore ancient feudal rights.

Napoleon was not a democrat -- nor was he a republican. He was, he liked to think, an enlightened despot, the sort of man Voltaire might have found appealing. He preserved numerous social gains of the Revolution while suppressing political liberty. He admired efficiency and strength and hated feudalism, religious intolerance, and civil inequality. Enlightened despotism meant political stability. He knew his Roman history well -- after 500 years of republicanism, Rome became an empire under Augustus Caesar.

Napoleon's domestic policies gained the popular support he demanded. But it was his military victories that mesmerized the French people. Napoleon realized the grand dream of Louis XIV -- the mastery of Europe. Between 1805 and 1807, Napoleon defeated Austria, Prussia and Russia becoming the virtual ruler of the Continent. He embraced his own "art of war" that stressed rapid offensive attack over defensive positions (similar to the German *Blitzkrieg*). Surprise and speed were essential ingredients. So too were efforts to confuse his opponents: he supplied newspapers with incorrect information, he launched secondary offenses and he sent dense screens of cavalry ahead of his marching columns. He wanted to both surprise and demoralize the enemy. His troops were amazing. They marched fifty miles in 36 hours during one campaign in Italy in 1796. They accomplished 275 miles in 23 days during the Austrian campaign in 1805.

While he made every effort to humiliate and demoralize his enemy, Napoleon also understood the necessity of maintaining the morale of his own troops. So, he shared the dangers of war with his own men. He did not wait on a hill -- rather, he led the charge. An army based on honor, vanity and personal loyalty is difficult to overcome. Alexander, Augustus Caesar and Charlemagne were all aware of this. By 1810, Napoleon dominated nearly all of Europe. Belgium, vast territories of Germany, Holland, Italy, Westphalia and Spain had all been annexed. Napoleon's "Grand Empire" also included Austria, Prussia, Russia, Sweden and Denmark.

While Napoleon and his armies were busy securing their military domination of Europe, Napoleon also set about to extend his reforms within France to other lands. His officials instituted the *Code Napoleon*, organized a corps of civil servants, opened careers to talent, and equalized taxes. Serfdom was abolished as were manorial dues and the courts of nobility. Freedom of religion was permitted, guilds were abolished, uniform systems of weights and measures were established, roads and canals were built, and secular education was promoted.

Why did Napoleon bother? Well, his desire was efficient administration and the support of the conquered peoples (like the ancient Romans, Napoleon gave the people offers they could not refuse). In fact, most people of the conquered nations considered Napoleon to be their "great liberator." But there is another side to the story. Those lands which Napoleon conquered became satellite states

which were exploited for the benefit, not of the Grand Empire, but for France. So, Napoleon had a difficult task on his hands -- how to control such a vast territory of land? However, the real threat came not from the Continent, but from England, France's perpetual enemy. Between 1803 and 1805, Napoleon tried to invade the English but it was not to be. Instead, he instituted the CONTINENTAL SYSTEM which barred all countries under French control to trade with England. However, thanks to smuggling, piracy, and trade with the New World, England was able to thwart Napoleon's plan. Meanwhile, Napoleon had problems with Spain; Germany fought her own wars of liberation; and Napoleon's Russian campaign of 1812 came to be the beginning of the end.

The Napoleonic wars came to an end in March 1814. Napoleon was removed as Emperor to the island of Elba and a Bourbon monarch returned to the French throne. Napoleon made one last ditch effort in 1815 -- his last 100 days, and then he was exiled to St. Helena, a small island hundreds of miles off the west coast of Africa. Napoleon died in 1821.

Napoleon was a real man as well as a legend. It was Napoleon himself who helped to create this legend. He wrote his memoirs while exiled on St. Helena between 1815 and 1821. He tells us his aim was to defend the Revolution and consolidate its gains. He emerges as a champion of equality, a supporter of popular sovereignty, a destroyer of privilege and a lover of peace. According to Napoleon, his vision was to create a United States of Europe. He wanted to free Europe from tyranny, oppression and despotism. As we know full well, this never happened. However, he did help to consolidate many gains of the Revolution. But, such a view ignores the downside of Napoleon -- his repression of liberty, the general subversion of republicanism, and the oppression of conquered peoples.

Historians would agree on two things about Napoleon. First, he was an extraordinary man, a self-made man. His drive, will, military genius and charisma made him a great man, a world historical figure, a man who made history. Machiavelli would have found Napoleon to be his perfect prince. Second, by spreading revolutionary ideals and institutions, Napoleon made it impossible for the restoration of the *ancien regime*. After Napoleon there was no turning back: feudalism was dead, society was secularized, the modern nation state replaced the dynastic state, and the bourgeoisie became the new class of privilege and status.