

Napoleon bonaparte and the french revolution



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Napoleon, the “ soldier, son of the Revolution”, or so he called himself, staged a coup d’état like nothing ever seen before. France was in a chaotic and conflict-filled time and was in need for an individual who could guide the French people and the state to stability and order. General Napoleon Bonaparte brought France out of uncertainty and remained close to the ideas of the French Revolution by rejoining France to foundation of laws, agreements, security and much more. He gave the French people both individual and collective rights and freedoms that freed them from ties with the Old Regime. Though there was been much debate on the question of whether Napoleon was the conclusion, extension or betrayal of the French Revolution, a definite answer has yet to surface. Answers vary based on the outlook of France during the time. Outsiders often tend to consider Napoleon as a threat, and therefore think that his authoritative reign betrayed the Revolution. Citizens in France, however, saw him as a liberator who freed them from the grip of the Old Regime and created a stable order in France[ii]. Historians who analyze both the French Revolution and the reign of Bonaparte are at conflict with one another to decide if he belonged to the Revolution and enforced its ideals, or contradicted them through his actions. After close examination of his reign of France and analyzing his actions, implementation of policies, agreements and legal codes, and externally promoting Revolution ideas and concepts, it is seen that Bonaparte did not betray the French Revolution after all. Napoleon Bonaparte was rather the extension of the Revolution during his reign as Emperor of France, as he promoted and implemented ideas such as equality, liberty and fraternity, which lead to a reinforcement of revolutionary concepts that allowed individual and collective freedoms and rights to benefit the French society.

Although an absolute answer to answer whether or not Napoleon betrayed the revolution, continued it or concluded it is yet to be affirmed, there is widespread belief that Napoleon was a betrayer of the Revolution, as he had a very authoritative reign. However, an opposing view of the majority belief that Napoleon betrayed the revolution or that his reign concluded it is held by Louis Bergeron, author of *France Under Napoleon*. He argues that France was facing much instability and uncertainty on the outcome of war and unity of the nation, and therefore, needed a strong man like Napoleon, who in return preserved and continued the ideals of the revolution through his enforcement of civil equalities, the destruction of feudalism, and the ruin of the privileged position of the Catholic Church[iii]. Upon close examination of the Napoleonic Code, it is determined that the ideals of the Revolution on the fate of the old nobility are the same rules in the Civil Code, which fixed the conditions for the exercise of property rights and equality rights[iv]. Ideals of the Revolution such as equality and liberty are seen in this primary source, which convey a Napoleon Bonaparte who continued the Revolution. Even through the signing of the Concordat by Pope Pius VII, Napoleon managed to balance the state-church relationship by granting the Roman Catholic Church as the majority church, but still embodied Revolution ideals of equality and liberty by not allowing Catholicism to be the state religion and enforcing a freedom of religion[v]. Through the examination of the Concordat, one can see more Revolution ideals being integrated into French society and promoted by Bonaparte. Though this response is against widespread agreement of Bonaparte's betrayal of the French Revolution, it does provide facts of certain actions made by him to promote the ideals of the French Revolution. This is a disagreement on popular belief but still proved through <https://assignbuster.com/napoleon-bonaparte-and-the-french-revolution/>

examples of property rights, equality rights, and religious freedoms. On the other hand, Thomas Jefferson claims that Napoleon Bonaparte was the destroyer of the French Republic and a pariah to him because of his impracticability to establish a republic and his irrational belief that he is able to run a self-government when in reality, he is a man who lets power deprave him[vi]. This view is quite popular and widespread for observers outside of France. It was only the people of France who saw Napoleon as a strong leader, while others saw him as a fearful authoritative man who cared less for the ideals of the Revolution and more for his personal gains. This view is quite accurate for an observer, as Thomas Jefferson is writing from the point of view of an American man. This affects his perspective on the topic because a bias exists due to the increasing developments in France and military gains by Napoleon, which perceive him as a threat. The disagreement between the views of Bergeron and Jefferson is more about weighing certain actions of Napoleon to stretch more towards a conclusion, extension or betrayal of the French Revolution. For instance, Bergeron believes that Napoleon extended the Revolution due to his strong participation in enforcing civil liberties and equalities for people, however, Jefferson believes that his role in accepting the title of Emperor goes against the ideals of the Revolution, and he is therefore betraying it. Affirming Napoleon's continuation of the French Revolution is Henry Banks, who believes that Bonaparte was the answer to Europe's needs and says that the coup d'état of Brumaire saved France[vii]. Banks disagrees with popular belief on Napoleon's despotic and authoritative ways by disagreeing on the context of which certain events are interpreted. While Jefferson views Napoleon as a despot who is ruling a country through means of authority and

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rejecting the basis of which the Revolution was founded by crowning himself emperor, Banks interprets his same event in a different context. He says that there was a need to reestablish the monarchy and for Napoleon to crown himself Emperor since French people were not fit for a republican or for a representative government, as well as the fact that if he had not done this, the Bourbons would have got power and would have brought the return of the old clergy and nobility with privileges[viii]. Here there is seen a disagreement on the interpretation of Napoleon's decision to accept the title of Emperor, one which is in favor of Napoleon representing the ideals of the Revolution, and the other on him rejecting them.

By solving conflict between the state and the Church and being in favor of religious toleration, and therefore promoting Revolution ideas and concepts, Napoleon Bonaparte proved to be an extension of the French Revolution. The Concordat of 1805 was an agreement between the Pope and Napoleon, which created a harmonious relationship between the two by granting the Church the title of the majority religion, rather than state religion, in France[ix]. By maintaining peace between the two, Bonaparte promoted the idea of religious toleration and freedom domestically in France. He contributed to creating a peaceful social society in France and helped many non-Catholics. Bonaparte used nationalism as a revolutionary force, which was impatient of all traditional practices of Catholics and the Church of Rome and granted Protestants and Jews religious freedom, along with encouraging them to transition into French society and identify themselves as French people[x]. This document, therefore, embodies the idea of equality and freedom. Napoleon did not fail to recognize that Catholicism was the majority

religion in France, however, he did not disregard others either. He allowed them to practice their religion through religious toleration and even promoted the Protestants and Jews to integrate into French culture in return for equality, uniformity and individual freedoms of religion and culture. Bonaparte, then, extended the French Revolution by making peace with the Pope, solving conflict between the state and the Church through the signing of the Concordat of 1801 and supporting religious freedoms.

Napoleon Bonaparte was an extension to the French Revolution, as he domestically promoted Revolution ideas in France. Through the rationalization of the education system in France, he continued to maintain Revolution ideas such as the abolition of privilege and the implementation of jobs and careers based on meritocracy. Under the rule of Napoleon, the education system of France was reformed to meet the standards of a post-revolutionary time period. The Napoleonic reforms of the public education system created institutions, which made the sciences a permanent part of the curriculum[xi]. These institutions helped promote education and learning on a wider scale than previous education systems. He also established lycées, or high schools, in every major town for the training to civil servants and army officers, a school in Paris to train teachers in teaching and the curriculum and a national university to be at the top of this whole system[xii]. The establishment of these institutions reinforced the reforms that were being fought for during the French Revolution, such as the elimination of privilege in order to create a fair and equal society. Similar to the enforcement of merit in the military and government sector, these educational institutions allowed the social ladder to be eliminated and for

individuals, regardless of class or wealth, could have positions of authority. There were the types of reforms that were widely recognized in France, seeing Bonaparte as a man who was extending the Revolution through reinforcing the ideas which people sacrificed their life for in their society. Not only are the institutions set up by Napoleon Bonaparte, embodying the French Revolution ideas and core beliefs, still influential in France, but also the rest of the world. Therefore, Bonaparte was an extension of the French Revolution, and managed this through the domestic reforms he brought to the education system.

Bonaparte also extended the French Revolution domestically within France through the implement of the Code Napoleon, which embodied many Revolution ideas and enforced them as a law to which everyone in France is subject to. This is said to be Napoleon's most significant contribution of France, as he provided them with a legal code, which was founded on two main principles, uniformity and individualism[xiii]. This code promoted various types of rights and freedoms, granting them both for the individual and for the collective, to ensure that everyone is subject to these laws equally. In Book I: Of Persons, of the Civil Code, Napoleon introduced Revolutionary ideas such as freedom of religion and the abolition of feudalism, as well as property rights and other rights and freedoms[xiv]. The introduction and establishment of this civil code lead to a more egalitarian society, which is what the French Revolution wanted. A core, fundamental concept of the Revolution is equality, and through all the reforms made in the Code, Bonaparte is preserving equality and promoting liberty.

Nevertheless, Napoleon did not stop here. He created seven legal codes in

total, including a criminal code, which reinforced many revolutionary ideas such as equality before the law and outlawing arbitrary arrest and imprisonment[xv]. These constitutional changes were made in the presence of Napoleon himself, who personally supervised the meetings and contributed to the writing of the Code. This affirmed all Revolution ideas, such as liberty, fraternity and equality, and created a structure that continues to be followed today by many European countries, including France. Napoleon Bonaparte was a revolutionary leader who extended the French Revolution through legal reforms and the creation a Civil Code that embodies Revolution concepts such as equality and liberty.

Not only did Napoleon Bonaparte domestically extend the ideas of the French Revolution in France, he also continued it externally, on an international scale through promotion and enforcement of the core ideas of the Revolution. In a quest to create a new balance of power in the global sphere, Bonaparte introduced a model for a federation of states, motivated by French Revolution ideals and their extension and implementation internationally. He remodeled the map by creating territorial changes in western and central Europe in order to establish a new balance of power, which included the idea of the federation of states[xvi]. Although many people argue otherwise, this design was not for international global governance under Bonaparte. Rather, it focused on preserving peace and collectivity amongst the nation-states of the world. His aim was to see authoritative political systems such as principalities, oligarchies and aristocracies of Germany, Holland, Switzerland and Italy removed[xvii]. All these political systems enforced strict policies and limited equality and

liberty. These concepts, however, are at the core of the French Revolution. Liberty frees individuals from strict imposed authority and grants equalities and freedoms. By removing these strict systems in which there is single-person authoritative rule from an individual who is limiting freedoms and rights, or rule by a group of wealthy citizens who center all the power in their self-interests, Napoleon wanted to see universal liberty and equality. He would do this through his idea of the federation of states. Although this was not implemented, Napoleon did, however, manage to redefine some borders and implement French policies in the countries he conquered. Therefore, through the promotion of the liberty and equality on an international scale by aiming to create a federation of states, Napoleon Bonaparte extended the French Revolution and its ideas externally.

As mentioned above, Napoleon managed to implement French policies on an external scale, in foreign countries that he conquered, which quickened the spread ideas of the French Revolution and lead to its extension under Bonaparte. Through Bonaparte's various military conquests, aspects of France were seen embodied in the conquered countries, which were then under the control of Napoleon Bonaparte. He not only extended the French Revolution in France, but also took it to a higher level through the creation of the Constitution of the Duchy of Warsaw for the Polish state he conquered. Poles counted on Napoleon to promote the Polish cause and help them gain freedoms and rights by reconstituting the Polish state through his entry into the former territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth[xviii]. The plea of the Polish to be granted equalities and to be freed from unfair laws was heard by Napoleon. The new constitution that Napoleon gave the Duchy of

Warsaw demanded that donations be freed of taxes, property taxes be decreased, abolished serfdom and removed the existing class structure which existed between the nobility and peasants[xix]. The abolition of slavery and social classes, as well as tax and property changes, are all ideas which exist in the Code Napoleon which include equality, liberty, and other freedoms and rights. These are the fundamental ideas of the French Revolution that were embedded into the Constitution for the Polish. Therefore, Napoleon Bonaparte externally spread French Revolution ideas that were imposed through the Constitution of the Duchy of the Warsaw and extended the Revolution on an international scale.

By resisting conflict and threats from outsiders, Napoleon extended the French Revolution on an international scale. Britain was France's worst enemy since they had a powerful navy, military, lots of wealth and industry[xx]. When Napoleon Bonaparte took the throne and named himself emperor, he enforced many Revolution ideas in France. This was seen as a threat to Britain, as the increasing stability and order Bonaparte was bringing to France was helping him restore their power and grow stronger. Therefore, Britain wanted to restore the Bourbon dynasty, which would have brought back the old clergy and nobility with their privileges[xxi]. This was the reason the French Revolution had begun in the first place, therefore, allowing this to happen would have betrayed the Revolution. Bonaparte, therefore, resisted threats from Britain and had great victories, such as the War of the Third Coalition in 1805, in order to maintain the ideas of the French Revolution. In a letter from to his brother on April 1, 1815, when exiled onto the island of Elba, Napoleon Bonaparte discussed the unsuitability of a forcible dynasty

such as the Bourbons one on the French people and since they refused to associate with the national feelings and customs, France was forced to abandon them and accept him as a liberator^[xxii]. He, himself, acknowledges that his actions were done for the benefit of the French people. If he had not resisted external threats from Great Britain, the ideas embodied and introduced in the French Revolution would have been removed and the Old Regime would be restored by the Bourbon dynasty. However, Bonaparte stopped the replacement of his new government and title as Emperor by managing conflict with Great Britain and withstanding their threat. Through the resisting of conflict, Napoleon Bonaparte extended the French Revolution by preserving its ideas and protecting them being abolished through a restoration of a Bourbon dynasty with the help from Britain.

By promoting and implementing ideas like liberty, equality and fraternity in French society, Napoleon Bonaparte extended the French Revolution during his governance as Emperor, which then leads to the reinforcement of concepts that were born during the Revolution such as collective and individual rights and freedoms. Reforms to France on both an external and domestic scale were made by Bonaparte in order to preserve the French Revolution. Through his model of the federation of states and remodeling of the map, integrating French policies and laws in foreign countries on an international scale, and resisting threats from outsiders to ensure that there a return to the Bourbon dynasty, Napoleon Bonaparte extended the French Revolution on an international scale. Not only did he extend the Revolution externally, he also made domestic reforms inside France, such as signing the Concordat in order to create peace and good relationships between the state

and church and to allow religious tolerance, giving France a civil code known as the Code Napoleon to promote ideas of individual and collective equality and liberty, and the reforms to the education system which abolished privilege and promoted meritocracy. Although there are many ways to argue that Napoleon was a betrayal, conclusion or extension of the Revolution, it is all a matter of weighing the actions and policies enforced under his reign. There were many mistakes made, as there is always in history, but this does not change the fact that there were reforms made during the Napoleonic era, which extended concepts and ideas such as equality, fraternity and liberty of the French Revolution. Napoleon Bonaparte's reforms to France such as the set up of educational institutions and the Code Napoleon are still seen to influence the world today and will continue to do so through the years. Actions he did and policies he implemented became a stepping-stone for future generations.