

# French revolution in the period 1799 to 1804 essay sample



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

To what extent did Napoleon destroy the ideals of the French Revolution in the period 1799 to 1804? Napoleon Bonaparte came into power after a coup d'état that overthrew the previous government of the Directory. This government had been installed by the French after a long line of radical rulers had instilled in them a desire for moderate, peaceful leaders. Though the Directory did turn out to be a lot less radical than the Jacobins, who had previously ruled under the Convention, they were also largely ineffectual, corrupt, and for most parts, increased the woes of the common man of France. Running parallel to this unsatisfactory government within France was Napoleon, successful in almost all military conquests and foreign wars that he undertook, which made him something of a French national hero. Therefore, Napoleon did not face much opposition when he came into power and established the consulate, and later became the First Consul, which effectively cast the other two consuls, Abbe Sieyes and Roger Ducos, into the background and pushed Napoleon into the spotlight.

He arranged for a plebiscite to garner the views of the people at both these instances, which went in accordance with one of the demands the people had repeatedly voiced, being the need for some sort of representation, and their voice to be heard in the making and ruling of the government. Though it seems that the use of the plebiscite was to ensure the upholding of the French Revolution ideals, this tactic is often seen to have been used by authoritarian leaders to mask their totalitarian tendencies and make an appearance of relying completely on public opinion. Regardless of whether Napoleon established himself as a leader with or without the peoples

support, it cannot be said that they were extremely dissatisfied during his reign.

He introduced a series of policies targeting the economy, constitution, administration, religion, media, education and social structure of France, and each of these changes must be examined in detail in order to understand how, and to what extent, Napoleon debilitated the ideals of 'liberty, fraternity, equality'. Napoleons economic policies are some of his most successful during his reign, and these garnered the most support for his rule. One of the major consternations that enticed the French people into revolt against the monarchy and Louis XVI in 1789 was the economic disparity France was facing. The prices of bread and basic necessities were rising day by day due to the steady inflation the paper money - or assignats - was facing. Napoleon reintroduced the metal coins, or francs, hence stabilizing the value of currency. He divided France into districts that were under prefects who were individually held responsible for tax collection, hence eradicating the previously extremely corrupt system.

Lastly, and probably most importantly, he established the Bank of France to regulate and maintain France's monetary and fiscal policy, and in light of the serious debts France was facing, this was an extremely beneficiary change. Hence, as far as the economic aspect of his rule goes, Napoleon managed to target all the major grievances that previous revolutionary governments, although so vocal about their political aims, had forgotten to address, and since the common man was extremely concerned with the two basic meals a day, the prices of which had soared sky high during the revolutionary period, this necessary change in the system was exactly what France needed at that

<https://assignbuster.com/french-revolution-in-the-period-1799-to-1804-essay-sample/>

time. Napoleons Civil Code - more commonly known as the Napoleonic Code - reasserted the equality of all men before law. However, we see that during Napoleons rule, he did not necessarily allow the freedoms he preached in the Civil Code.

For example, his time is marked by serious censorships against the press, and Napoleon personally controlled all media - plays, publications, pamphlets - to ensure only the information he wanted was given out to the people. Furthermore, his bans and limitations were upheld by his severe secret police, under Joseph Fouché, a former Jacobin, who had survived, and would continue to survive, the wrath of the French Revolution, by a series of cleverly changing alliances. This man was, by means of a vast network, informed on everyone who was anyone in France, and therefore did not always work by the fairest of means. This was one aspect of Napoleons rule that did not bring him a lot of favors, since it completely disrespected the 'liberty' that the people had demanded, not to mention that the Declaration of the Rights of Man, had made freedom of press out to be a 'Basic Right'.

Napoleon was criticized for having introduced no new measure of 'equality' than the French had already established before his rule, and furthermore to have even torn some of these previously established values down. In this Civil Code, Napoleon also talked about family, which he considered a very important connector between the state and the individual, and rendered the wife completely subordinate to the husband. He therefore completely disregarded the scattered cries for equality of the sexes that had surfaced during the revolution. Napoleons preference for the male sex was highlighted not only here, but at many instances during his rule. Not only was he heard

<https://assignbuster.com/french-revolution-in-the-period-1799-to-1804-essay-sample/>

reducing the status of women down to 'machines for making children', he also did not consider them worthy of higher education, saying 'public education does not suit women, as they are not called upon to live in public... marriage is their whole estimation'.

Thus, Napoleons educational reforms, the lycees, a system of secondary education along the lines of Napoleons belief that education should be centralized and state-controlled, were also targeted only at boys, and the best of these were chosen to learn what Napoleon wanted them to learn, in order to be able to serve him in the future like he wanted them to serve. Napoleons religious reforms were such that received the most mixed reception of all his policies. The Concordat he signed with the papacy declared Catholicism as the 'religion of the masses', guaranteeing freedom of religion and also ensuring that the Church gave up all claims to any land they had lost during the Revolution. While this abided by the equality the French desired, specially for the Jews who had been a particularly side-lined people, and were helped specifically by Napoleon, he was seen to have quashed the revolutionary ideal of a complete and severe separation between the Church and the state, and had once again given it the privileged position of being the 'religion of the masses'.

On one hand therefore, people criticized him for giving the Church this sort of recognition - which was basically any recognition at all - and on the other hand, the revolutionaries and others in France who were also devout Catholics seemed to heave a sigh of relief as the hatred for the Church seemed to have toned down. Lastly, Napoleons social reforms disintegrated the previous concept of birth being a measure of status in society. This was <https://assignbuster.com/french-revolution-in-the-period-1799-to-1804-essay-sample/>

something that the Third Estate, or 97% of the French population, had campaigned specially hard for, but what they had demanded was that a system of complete social equality without any form of hierarchy be established. However, what Napoleon knew was that an inequality between people had to exist, and therefore established a new social hierarchy based upon wealth and merit. This is seen quite clearly in his advocacy of meritocracy - though he practiced nepotism on the sidelines - and in his rewards for those who deemed to serve the state.

His system of Legion de Honor, and his awarding of titles such as Marshalate - which were not just empty words, but came with advantages such as honor, pensions, land and the promise of further titles. These were criticized by many as being just baubles, but to this Napoleon replied, and perhaps rightfully and insightfully so, ' It is with such baubles that men are led'. And true to this, these rewards encouraged and enticed the French to work their hardest, and at their full potential to have a chance to win these ' baubles'. Conclusively, one can state that Napoleons rule was one of ' enlightened absolutism'. What he did was often for the betterment of the people, but he imposed these reforms - putting down royalist rebellions, granted amnesty to the émigrés - through authoritarian means. He was a devout follower of the Enlightenment ruler Rousseau, who had laid out in his Social Contract that the government should always act on the ' general will'. What he meant by that, and what Napoleon hence followed, was not what the masses wanted, but was best for the masses.

He was therefore an absolutist but inclusive ruler, and it has been suggested that his aim in coming to power in France was not necessarily to reassert the <https://assignbuster.com/french-revolution-in-the-period-1799-to-1804-essay-sample/>

ideals of the French Revolution, but to make sure that stability and peace was brought back to France, and the previous turbulence was settled. It was at this turbulence that his actions and policies were aimed, and therefore while sometimes they were completely in sync with the ideals of the Revolution, and with Napoleons declaration of ' I am the Revolution', they sometimes rendered France back to the methods of the Old Regime, and in saying that, Napoleons self-induced promotions to Emperor while he proclaimed the equality of all men before law, and disregarded birth as the requirement for status in society seem to clearly illustrate the method of rule Napoleon employed.