

How far did napoleon  
maintain the aims of  
the french revolution  
till 1815



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Liberty, property, equality, fraternity, uniformity, utility, popular sovereignty; these are just some words that best describe the aims and principles of the French Revolution.

Did Napoleon Bonaparte I, Emperor of France, hinder, maintain, or in fact 'further' the aims of the revolution? , this is a question in which many historians argue about and can come to no definitive answer. First of all, in an economic sense, Napoleon definitely followed some of the earlier revolutionary principles in his reform of the nation. Napoleon introduced limits on grain exports (due to poor harvests) in 1811 and placed price limits on bread and grain in 1812, much like the revolutionary governments such as 'The Assembly' and 'The Convention'. Napoleon also strengthened France's finances with a currency reform, helping to stabilise the currency itself. France's finances were further helped by Napoleons introduction of the Bank of France in 1803 along with the goods and money France got from plundering nations which were defeated by France. During Napoleons rule as Emperor, France were financially 'better-off' than it ever was under King Louis XVI, The Assembly, Convention or the Directory, this no-doubt helped the poorer people of France.

But, it can be said that France was no longer very well off by the end of Napoleon's regime and quite unstable. However, there were also reforms under Napoleon which 'went against' revolutionary principles. Indirect taxes were raised by a much higher proportion than taxes such as the 'land tax' (which would affect the more wealthy men). Taxation became unequal which made it harder on the poorer peasants and workers.

For example taxes on tobacco, playing cards and alcohol rose by 50% from 1804 to 1814. Ironically the revolution was started by anger over high taxes under the Ancien Regime. What must be most alarming however was the (re)introduction of a salt tax in 1806, resembling the Ancien Regime's gabelle, which the revolutionaries previously banned in 1789. Also a monopoly on tobacco was re-established, like in the Ancien Regime. These reforms certainly didn't maintain the revolutionary aims. The right to rebellion and insurrection was also challenged by Napoleon in banning people to join unions.

On the whole, economically it can be said that Napoleon did much to maintain the revolutionary aims, however on some occasions these aims were not met. Much like Robespierre, Napoleon drastically reformed society and its structures in France. Napoleon totally transformed the educational system and structures in France; he founded the Imperial University (a ministry of education in this time) in 1808, and the curriculum was determined by the state and Napoleon achieving uniformity (an aim of the French revolution that was never truly achieved). The new educational system was largely based on equality and the idea of 'merit and utility' (mainly at a primary level however). Lycees (the highest and last stage of secondary education in France) and state scholarships were available to students on merit allowing a boy born into family without noble stature to gain a good education. However females were not afforded a great education and were taught very different things than the males (for example: to respect and obey their husbands).

Also, most of France's 'upper' education (secondary) was restricted to sons of Notables and Napoleons educational policies favoured those from property owning classes and the military elite. A large proportion of what schools taught was 'propaganda' about respecting Napoleon and being a 'good' citizen, and in 1806 Napoleon standardized the church catechism and forced schools to teach it, calling on the people of France to listen to their leader and treat him as they would treat God. This type of 'dictatorship of divine right' and the will to rid France of it was the major cause of the French Revolution in the first place. Napoleons decision to agree upon the concordat with the Catholic Church in 1801 is a controversial event due to what some might say was 'going against the hard work of the revolution to dechristianize France'. This is in some ways true, however it must be noted that the Concordat was made on France's terms; the church lands were not restored, Napoleon retained the right to appoint bishops and the clergy were still responsible to the state (and still under oath) and Napoleon allowed for equal rights for Protestants and Jews, these definitely maintain the revolutionary aims.

It is argued that Napoleon only the Concordat to help provide stability and direction to the nation, rather than 're-christianizing' France. Also, the majority of the people wanted Catholicism to be recognized as the religion of the people. However, it can be argued that the idea of dechristianization was not a true revolutionary aim, but an objective of a small faction of the revolutionaries, the Sans-Culottes. The concordat did increase the power and influence of the Pope (Pius VII) and the clergy, something which the likes of Robespierre and The Convention tried hard to decrease. On the whole, the

Concordat with the church didn't do too much to harm the revolutionary aims. Napoleon's thoughts and ideas were clear when on his coronation in 1804 held in the Notre Dame Cathedral in which the Pope attended, Napoleon himself, and not the Pope placed his crown upon his head and on Empress Josephine.

This is very much 'in line' with Robespierre's ideas that he was 'Godly' or chosen by God. Napoleons thoughts and claims on the revolutionary theory of being rewarded and receiving opportunities based purely on merit (and not birth) were well heard. Napoleon did much for this principle (for which Napoleon so heavily benefited from). For example; he established the Legion of Honour to reward loyalty and was open to all who served the state, as well as honours for other members of society. However, as it turned out the majority of the recipients were of 'noble birth' and most received these honours for remaining loyal and honest to Napoleon.

Although Napoleon talked about equal opportunities, the rich and wealthy could abuse their rights. Notables could, for instance, buy hereditary rights and rich men could avoid conscription by paying a poorer substitute to serve. Opportunities were in fact very limited for improving status lower down the social hierarchy and entry to government posts was largely dependent on income. In this sense, Napoleon 'talked up' the rights to equal opportunities in France, although there were more (equal rights) than under the Ancien Regime. In terms of Politics and how France changed politically, Napoleon managed to maintain the aims of the French Revolution, as well as abuse them some of the time. The creation of the Napoleonic code (Civil Code) of

1804, in which Napoleon took a great interest in, created a law for the whole of France that incorporated the aims and principles of the French Revolution.

Uniformity was achieved as Napoleon was able to combine all the overlapping systems of law into one. This code brought equality before the law and included; the abolition of feudal dues and serfdom where they still existed, a guarantee of civil rights and also confirmed legal title to the biens nationaux (which was a result of revolutionary government). George Rude commented that; " Napoleon took greater pride in this achievement than in all his 40 battles", Napoleon truly wanted a truly revolutionary France, and managed to set up a revolutionary civil code. However, this code was based on ' Roman Law' and the emphasis was on male rights. Napoleon was ' unenlightened' in reference to rights of woman (although common in the time).

This code allowed for woman as well as disobedient children to be sent to prison by the husband/father. The reintroduction of slavery was also allowed for, going against the ideas of freedom of oppression, equality and liberty. Also, a ' livret' was required for men for employment, this allowed for their ' every move' and work to be recorded. Napoleon abandoned the original French revolutionary document, ' The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen' , although this was only intended for the transition between absolute and constitutional monarchy, Napoleon also did a great deal in ' exporting' the revolution and its ideas on liberty and equality to Europe, and took his ' code' on his conquests.

I believe that Napoleon honestly wanted to liberate people everywhere and provide them with national unity (e. g. after defeating Italy, Napoleon placed democratic systems and introduced revolutionary laws and ideas to the country, this was common in what he did for other countries that France had control over). A major aim of the French Revolution (especially in 1789) was to allow liberty of opinion, freedom from tyranny and oppression and political equality. Napoleon failed to maintain most of these aims, for example freedom of speech was strictly restricted, no-one was permitted to criticize the Emperor.

Napoleon introduced a ' secret police', spies and prefects, these censored media and reported on individuals who were disloyal to Napoleon. Under Napoleon, the number of Parisian journals was cut from 73 (in 1800) to only 4 (at the end of 1801). Also the use of propaganda was strife and the eloquent painter, Jacques Louis David very often portrayed Napoleon as ' Godly' and a brilliant man of the people. This forceful use of propaganda, spies and police resembled the policies Robespierre used; some might see this as a negative (as Robespierre was considered a tyrant), however Robespierre and his Jacobin government were very much part of the revolution and thus, on this occasion Napoleon might be considered as ' carrying on' the trends of the revolution. Another way in which Napoleon maintained the aims of the revolution was by maintaining a ' large core' of the personnel from previous revolutionary governments such as The Directory, from which half of the members of the Council of State had served under.

He also kept the Communes and Departments, however the prefects were put in charge of these. Napoleon kept continuity from The Revolution.

Napoleon has been criticised for 'dictating' France and going against the idea of freedom from tyranny (after King Louis XVI), he put immense power upon himself; Napoleon (and his government) now appointed judges and had the right to deny criminals trials (which was very much like the previously outlawed 'lettres de cachet'). Napoleon bragged about national sovereignty, however it was essentially he who made the decisions, alot like France was under the Ancien Regime, this can be seen in the people of France being called 'subjects' not 'citizens' anymore.

This is in direct contrast with the revolutionary principles of 'popular sovereignty', with the final authority being with the French people. However it must be said, as Napoleon did say; was that he only took control of France to help 'further' the nation and The Revolution. He saw himself 'as The Revolution'. Napoleon was neither the 'heir to the Revolution' like he said, nor the destroyer of it.

He maintained the revolutions aims on many occasions such as his written Civil Code and the implementation of employment by merit, not birth. But he also hindered the revolutionary aims at times, such as the use of propaganda and the 'crackdown' on freedom of speech, or negative speech rather. What many ask is did Napoleon cause 10 years of conflict, struggle and great human effort and accomplishment to be in vein? Did France just turn 360? nd thus were right back where they started? I do not believe so, Napoleon was 'of the revolution' and although his ambitions of personal glory and power somewhat lead to Revolutionary France taking a step <https://assignbuster.com/how-far-did-napoleon-maintain-the-aims-of-the-french-revolution-till-1815/>



backwards, Napoleon truly wanted France to become truly revolutionary and ' free' (as did Robespierre). Napoleon managed to stabilize The Revolution when it looked likely to ' topple' into royalism or absolute anarchy, Napoleon managed to maintain ' enough' of the aims of the French Revolution ' most' of the time for the Revolution to survive.