

Napoleon: the
transition from
enlightened despots
to modern dictators
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An absolute monarch or ruler of a people can be what one considers an enlightened despot, or a ruler that makes good laws and promotes human happiness with them. It has been said about the great conqueror and emperor Napoleon Bonaparte that he is the last of the enlightened despots, but others say he is the first of the modern dictators. There is substantial evidence to argue both sides in this dispute, but it is more true to say that Napoleon was the transition between the two. Louis Bergeron, historian, argues that Napoleon was the last of the enlightened despots, while the historian Cobban argues that he was the first of modern dictators. Martyn Lyons believes that he was just the continuation of the French revolution.

Napoleon Bonaparte was he last of the enlightened despots because he preserved the ideals of the despots before him. Napoleon stated “ My policy is to govern men as the great number wish to be governed. That, I think, is the way to recognize the sovereignty of the people.” This principle is a direct principle of enlightened despots, the code of equality. He governed in this manner because he wanted his people to support him when it came time for war. Many policies of Napoleon seem to many of us as Bergeron puts it, “ rigid and oppressive” but in the time those were the exact tactics that Napoleon used to swiftly rise to power. Another strategy Bonaparte used to get the support of the people was nationalism, for the first time in over a decade he made French people proud to be French. After years of civil war he made it an honor to serve under the French flag. All of these strategies come directly from Enlightenment ideals, thus making Napoleon Bonaparte an enlightened despot.

While all those techniques Bonaparte used to rise to power come from the enlightenment, many other ones are signs of being a dictator. An example is his rise to power, swift. Over the course of 11 years Napoleon took over a country, crowned himself emperor, and expanded the French empire to greater limits than ever before. He was allied with all of Europe except for England and Portugal, and major countries such as Spain were directly dependent satellite nations of France. Napoleon was by far the greatest military general of his time, and used this to become a military dictator. He did not acquire these lands by diplomatic relationships, but by force. Bonaparte relied on his fighting men to take over the world and force them into alliances with the nation of France, making him a military dictator. Also the concept he used of satellite nations was a concept of one man having power over huge amounts of land and nations, the concept of a modern totalitarian.

As both sides have their points to argue, it is more correct to say that Napoleon Bonaparte was a transition from enlightened despots to modern dictators. Lyons takes this approach in his analysis of Bonaparte by stating he is the continuation of the French Revolution. Lyons disagrees with Bergeron who believes Napoleon is an enlightened despot, and also disagrees with Cobban who asserts that he is first modern dictator. Lyons believes that Napoleon is only what the French revolution wanted, someone voted in to be followed by the people. Napoleon set up a very fair legal system for his own people as an enlightened despot would do, yet he forced this system, however good it was, onto other nations that he conquered, as a modern dictator would. As you can see he has solid characteristics of both an

enlightened despot and a modern dictator, he is most accurately referred to as the transition between enlightened despots and modern dictators.