

# Was napoleon an heir to the french revolution



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## Contents

Of all the Events of European history, the French Revolution of 1789 is without doubt one of the most important and controversial. Similarly Napoleon Bonaparte has to be amongst the most written on and opinion dividing individuals world history has ever seen. Therefore the question as to weather Napoleon was an heir to the revolution, its saviour, hijacker, or simply consolidator is probably the most frequently asked question regarding the revolution and Napoleon.

In this essay I will be attempting to answer the question of weather Napoleon was an heir to the French Revolution. This will involve me firstly exploring my definition of the term heir, and my views on the explanations and definitions of the French Revolution. Having done this I will then move on to examine the reign of Napoleon. By doing this I hope to prove my view that, whilst Napoleon may be considered an inevitable consequence of the revolution, he was not its heir. In my opinion the word heir describes a person's or events natural successor. Therefore the term heir to the revolution would in my opinion be used to describe the next regime, which came to embody the principles and morals of the revolution. The revolution's heir must be the regime that follows on from were the revolution left France, and presides over, or creates the kind of society the revolutionaries of 1789 intended to. It is my belief that Napoleon and the Napoleonic regime did not either preside over or create this kind of society and as such Napoleon cannot be considered an heir to the French Revolution. In order for this view to be qualified the next aspect we need to look at, is the various definitions and interpretations of the French Revolution. Put simply the French Revolution

was, when in 1789 the old Ancien regime was overthrown, and France went from a monarchy-governed state to a republic. After this, France went through a number of different stages in terms of forms and types of government. The revolutionary government of 1789-1793 was the most immediate, until between 1793-1794, when Robespierre became the most powerful man in France overseeing the era known as the terror. This was followed by the Directory who ruled between the years 1794-1799, and this was the government Napoleon overthrew in the Coup of Brumaire on November 9-10th 1799. Studying the history of these events has gone through many stages and significant changes, especially in the last fifty years or so. For a long time after the revolution, the most dominant form historiography on the subject was the Marxist interpretation. This interpretation went largely unchallenged until the 1950's and the arrival of the first generation revisionists. This was essentially a critique of the Marxist interpretation. This was followed up in the 1960's and 1970's by what is often called second generation revisionism, as historians such as Blanning and Doyle began to look more closely at the Nobility as a social group and found new definitions for the events in the years after 1789 up to when Napoleon took power. The most recent historical study on the subject is known as post revisionism and this tends to place more emphasis on matters such as chance than previous approaches whilst also stressing the importance played by the aspects such as popular culture and the psyche of the days society and influential groups and people. Of these approaches I find the Marxist interpretation most convincing and therefore I will now move on to briefly explore this, in order to portray my definition of the French Revolution. The Ancien regime saw an absolute monarch with complete

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power, running a feudal based society and economy. The Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution states that it was in essence a power struggle between the middle classes or the bourgeoisie and the upper classes, aristocracy and the nobility. This is proven by the view that it was the Third Estate, which began the revolution and this was dominated by the bourgeoisie. It is claimed that they had been motivated by political ideology inspired by the enlightenment and the fact their economic wealth did not reflect their share of power. The declaration of the rights of man on the 24th August 1789 and the abolishing of the feudal system are often pointed out as the most important evidence that the revolution was a bourgeois one, overthrowing the feudal Ancien regime after a power struggle. The degree to, and speed with which French society changed after this has been much debated among historians. Many historians continue to define the revolution as the whole of the period 1789 - 1799. Historians such as Geoffrey Ellis who points out how Napoleon himself declared at the Coup of Brumaire that:

However I believe that the revolution is defined as the result of the power struggle between the old Ancien regime, and the newly emerging bourgeois middle class. The revolution is defined by the events of 1789 and 1789 alone. The founding principles and morals of the revolution were that of the bourgeoisie, and these can best be seen by such documents as the declaration of the rights of man, the decree abolishing the feudal system, the Cashier de Doleances referring to the middle classes, and the actions and constitution of the revolutionary government up until 1793 and the beginning of the terror. Having established my definition of the French Revolution, it is first important not to gloss over without mention to the years

1793 - 1799, before going on to look at the nature of the Napoleonic regime itself. In my view these years can in essence be described as a crisis created by panic and a power vacuum. The execution of King Louis XVI in January 1793 created much panic within and outside France leading to foreign war and numerous insurgencies and political divisions inside France itself. In these years France became almost ungovernable and the terror can be seen purely as a reaction to the threats the new French Republic was facing. The era of the Directory, in my view, is summed up by the fact that, the revolution was under threat from Jacobins, Monarchists, foreign invaders, and the mass of the French population tired of war and political upheaval. Therefore the bourgeoisies tried to create a strong government that could defeat all of these enemies. However such a task soon proved impossible and with the coup of Brumaire in November 1799, France was once again to be ruled by a single authoritarian leader. Having now explained my understanding of the term heir to the revolution, my definition of the French Revolution, and briefly looked at the years before Napoleon came to power, I will now go on to look at the Napoleonic regime and convey my argument as to why I do not believe it is correct to describe Napoleon as an heir to the French Revolution. In order to prove this I will look the Napoleonic regime from two different viewpoints namely, politically and economically. Up until the second half of the twentieth century historical study on Napoleon nearly always came down to historians being either for or against Napoleon. Some believed he was the revolution's saviour, whilst others believed he was its destroyer. However such an approach came to be seen as inadequate and the political and social aspects of the Napoleonic regime began to be put under closer scrutiny in an attempt to better understand its

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nature. Today's historians often look closely at the personality and motivations of Napoleon, subjects which previous generations have offered little on. Looking at Napoleon from a political point of view, there is much evidence to support the view he was not an heir to the revolution. Many recent historical studies on Napoleon, such as Correlli Barnett's 1997 work *Bonaparte*, look closely at Napoleon's character and motivations, and are often (as in this case) very critical of him. Studies such as these convey the view that Napoleon had very little political or ideological motivation in taking power, but was only concerned with gaining glory for France, its people, and himself. I would largely agree with this view and claim there are many pieces of evidence to support it. Firstly is the fact that Napoleon always presented himself as a man above the revolution and the political factions it created. He never allied himself closely with any of the groups involved in French politics between 1789-1799, and one can look at Napoleon from an almost Machiavellian point of view and say that, this was a conscience decision on his part, taken to avoid becoming compromised, and thus allowing him to eventually take power. Indeed looking at the political nature of the Napoleonic regime only supports this view further. On December 2nd 1804 Napoleon crowned himself emperor of France and this reveals two important things. Firstly it meant that Napoleon was now a single authoritarian leader with absolute power. The ethos of democracy, which had been the founding principles of all the revolutionary forms of government since 1789, had been disregarded completely. This was evident from as early as 1800 when Napoleon's reforms of local government reduced the role of the electorate to simply producing a list of candidates for the legislation assembly, from which the government would select the members. After the revolution the

franchise had been extended to almost all male citizens and these action are in direct contradiction to the ideologies of the bourgeois revolutionaries of 1789. In fact I believe its fair to say that all of Napoleon's action during his reign were aimed at him keeping hold of power. As Clive Emsley says in Napoleon:

The second thing this event revealed was how Napoleon saw himself. When the pope went to crown him, Napoleon took the crown away from his hands and placed the crow upon his own head. The message was clear; he was the embodiment of the people and as such their natural leader. Such a belief in more in keeping with the beliefs of previous kings who believed they were ordained by god, than with the ideals of the liberal revolutionary bourgeoisies. The economic nature of the Napoleonic regime is often seen as the strongest area of support for those claiming Napoleon was an heir to the French Revolution. As historians such as Alexander Grab point out Napoleon implemented many economic reforms that both were bourgeois in nature, and did a lot to consolidate the gains the land owning classes made from the revolution. This is proven by the fact the reforms long outlasted the regime, as Grab himself puts it:

Indeed I will accept that the Code Napoleon of 1804 for example did do much to protect property rights and his wider economic policies were probably the for-runner of the European common market, which exists today. However I would still claim that such reforms were only made by Napoleon to keep the bourgeoisies on side. Whilst doing this Napoleon also brought back the Catholic Church into a central position within French society with the Concordat with the Pope in 1802, and he even created a new Nobility in <https://assignbuster.com/was-napoleon-an-heir-to-the-french-revolution/>

1808. It is my view that, as bourgeois and successful as the economic reforms were, they were not created because of any political or moral ideology on Napoleon's part, but should be seen as concessions to those who had brought about the revolution. Napoleon clearly made concessions to both sides, as the above examples illustrate, and as this proves his aim was not to create a democratic capitalist society, I believe he cannot be seen as an heir to the French Revolution. If one were to go on, and look at Napoleon's policy in Europe I believe that the same aims, goals, and methods would be found on the international scene. War was Napoleon's main weapon here, and he used it to expand his and the French's glory, whilst basking in the loyalty his undoubted military skills afforded him from the mass of the French population. In conclusion I believe that the French Revolution was a bourgeoisie one. The nature, instability, and divided nature of the revolutionary government, popular sovereignty under Robespierre, and the directory, were down to the fact that no political culture of difference and debate existed in France in 1789, unlike in countries such as Britain. Therefore the struggle for power between the different factions of the revolutionary bourgeoisie became inevitable. As did, as in almost all revolutions, the eventual arrival of a dictator to restore order and stability. In the case of the French Revolution, Napoleon was that dictator. Whilst he implemented many long lasting, bourgeois in nature reforms, he did not create the kind of society that can be truly seen as the revolution's heir. Perhaps a regime such as Napoleon's was required to stop France from destroying itself, and perhaps, in one way, Napoleon can be seen as an heir of the revolution as he was in many respects the first non-ideologue modern day politician. However it is my view that the real heir to the French



Revolution was the kind of capitalist, democratic nation state France has become today. As D. G. Wright correctly points out:

The debate over Napoleon will be one, which can never be resolved. Some will always see him as the revolutions saviour, whilst others will continue to claim he was the predecessor of men like Hitler and Stalin. The political beliefs of the historian, unfortunately, normally dictate which conclusion they come to as regards Napoleon Bonaparte. In my view though the French Revolution created a new kind of world; the liberal democracies of today's Europe can be considered its true heir. Napoleon was just its inevitable, short-term consequence.