

France Under Napoleon: Napoleon as Enlightened Despot

SOURCE: Bergeron, Louis. *France Under Napoleon*. Copyright 1981 by the Princeton University Press.

As with most charismatic figures, it has been difficult to evaluate Napoleon objectively from a historical perspective. Even before his death, a number of myths were developing about him. Since then much of the debate among scholars has dealt with whether Napoleon should be considered a defender or a destroyer of the Revolution, whether his rise to power reversed the revolutionary tide or consolidated it. In the following selection the French historian Louis Bergeron focuses on the consequences for France of Napoleon's rule.

There is thus no doubt about the interpretation to be given to the historic role of Napoleon Bonaparte. For the rest of the world, indeed, he remained the fearsome propagator of the Revolution, or the admirable instrument of reason governing: the world, of progress of the spirit in its long "discourse with time" (Hegel). But for France? . . . Bonaparte belongs to the Revolution, surely, in matters that seemed irreversible at the time—civil equality, the destruction of feudalism, the ruin of the privileged position of the Catholic Church. As for the rest, the enjoyment of liberties, the form of political institutions, there had been since 1789 so much instability, so many contradictions between grand principles and the practice of governments, so much persistent uncertainty on the outcome of the war and the unity of the nation, that the field lay open for a strong man who, on condition of preserving the essential conquests of the Revolution, would do something new in the matter of government and refuse to be embarrassed by scruples. By anchoring France securely to the shores that the Constituent Assembly had been unveiling to leave, Bonaparte accomplished somewhat late in the day that "revolution from above" of which the old monarchy had been incapable. The political trade-off was a certain number of amputations of the immediate Revolutionary inheritance, a few backward movements, and disconcerting borrowings from the Old Regime. In a sense, the dynamism of Bonaparte and his rigorous administration revived the experiment of enlightened despotism, somewhat belatedly, since in the setting of Western Europe it was already a bit out of date. . . .

It was his political genius, as it is generally agreed to call it, to combine his own clear and strongly held personal ideas and convictions, reinforced by his great individual prestige, with a sure sense of the necessary and the possible in revolutionary France—after ten years of revolution. "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." While implacably suppressing the most actively opposed minorities, he overcame the apathy and the wait-and-see attitude of the majority of the French. In matters of social hierarchy and the administrative system he forced upon the French, who from citizens were soon to become subjects again, a coherent construction which he intended to be permanent, and which reflected his taste for uniformity, symmetry and efficiency, the signs of a rational organization in which a single mind transmitted impulses to the most distant members. What we see as rigid or even oppressive in the survivals of the Napoleonic system were at the time the source of its strength, making of it a model to be envied, and one of unequaled modernity.

1. Why did Bergeron call Napoleon the last of the enlightened despots and a prophet of the modern state?
2. What was beyond Napoleon's control, according to Bergeron?

Napoleon as Preserver of the Revolution

George Rudé

SOURCE: Norman F. Cantor. *Perspectives on the European Past*, vol. II. Reprinted by permission of Macmillan (New York, 1971), pp. 59-60.

In recent years historians have become more reluctant to categorize Napoleon under any one label. Instead, they tend to interpret more judiciously his words and deeds, taking care to note that both were inconsistent and even contradictory at various times. This tendency among historians is exemplified in the following selection by the well-known British social historian George Rude. Rude has emphasized looking at history from the bottom up.

Napoleon himself believed that his work was a kind of crowning of the Revolution, and he was remarkably honest about his friendship with Robespierre's brother. He defended Robespierre from the charge of being bloodthirsty; he respected him as a man of probity. Napoleon would never have imagined that his own career could have flourished as it did without the surgery performed on French society by the Revolution. He was born in Corsica of poor, proud, petty-noble parents, and before the Revolution he could not possibly have risen above the rank of captain in the French army. Also, he had read Rousseau and sympathized with much of the Jacobin philosophy.

Napoleon had two different aspects. He believed in the overthrow of the old aristocracy of privilege; on the other hand, he believed in strong government—and he learned both of these beliefs from the Revolution. He was both an authoritarian and an egalitarian. Yet, admittedly little of this seems to fit the man who created a new aristocracy, who prided himself on being the son-in-law of Francis of Austria, referred to his late "brother" Louis XVI, and aspired to found a new imperial dynasty.

However, if we judge Napoleon on what he actually did and not only on those things that are usually remembered (despotism and foreign conquest), we must concede that his armies "liberalized" the constitutions of many European countries. They overthrew the aristocratic system in Italy and Germany, and even, to some extent, in Poland and Spain. A great many European liberals rallied to Napoleon's banners, particularly where French administration was at its best (as under Napoleon's brother Jerome in Westphalia). Napoleon's armies did bring many of the ideals of the Revolution to Europe: the basic ideas of the overthrow of aristocratic privilege, of a constitution, of the *Code Napoléon* (which was a codification of the laws of the French Revolution). In this sense Napoleon was a revolutionary. He turned his back on revolution to the extent that he was authoritarian and contemptuous of "the little man," but certain important accomplishments of the Revolution—peasant ownership of land free from feudal obligations, expropriation of the possessions of the Church and of the *émigré* nobility—were retained and even extended beyond France's borders. Napoleon was indeed a military despot, but he did not destroy the work of the Revolution; in a sense, in a wider European context, he rounded off its work.

1. What argument did Rudé make that Napoleon was a "Preserver of the Revolution"?
2. How would Louis Bergeron react to Rudé's interpretation of Napoleon?