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The French Revolution and Napoleon, 1789–1815

Lesson 3 The Rise of Napoleon and the Napoleonic Wars

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What causes revolution? How does revolution change society?

Reading HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

capable having or showing ability

liberal broad-minded; associated with ideals of the individual, especially economic freedom and greater participation in government
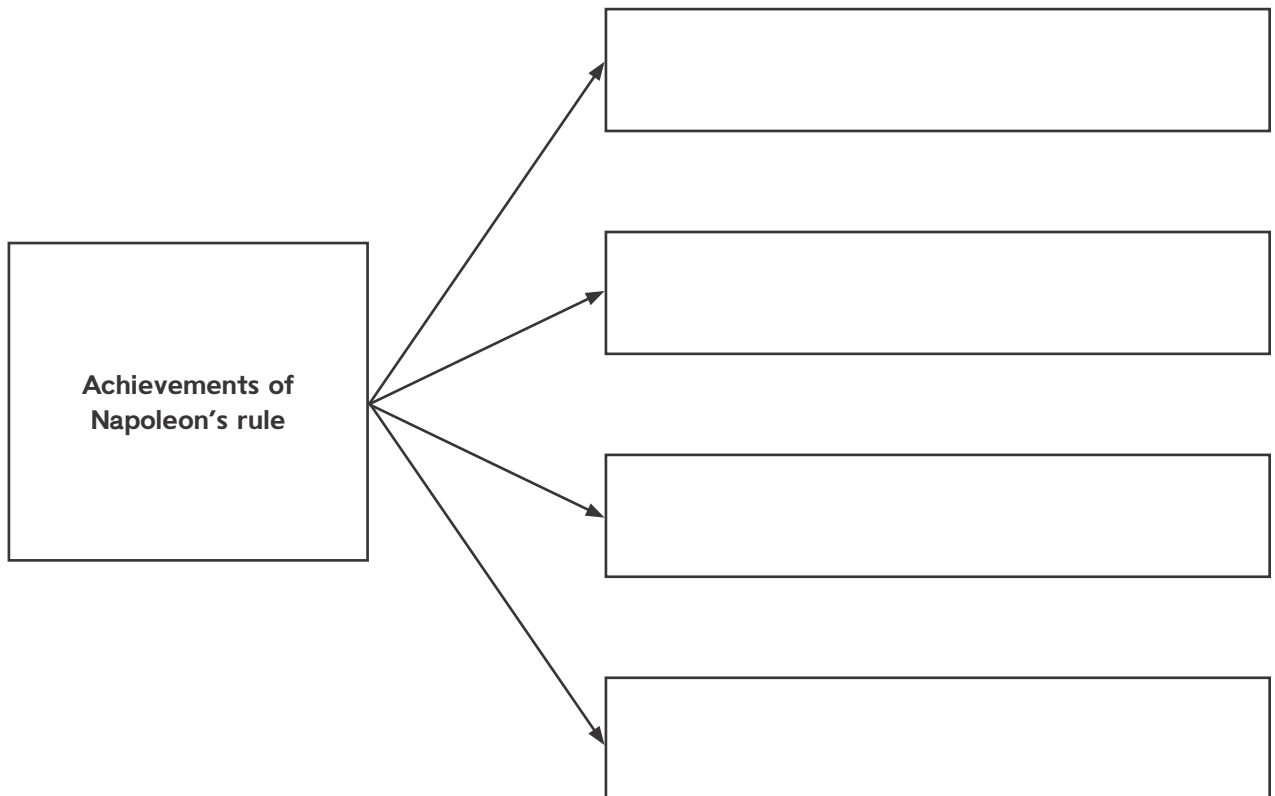
Content Vocabulary

consulate government established in France after the overthrow of the Directory in 1799

nationalism the unique cultural identity of a people based on common language, religion, and national symbols

TAKING NOTES: *Differentiating*

ACTIVITY As you read, create a diagram like the one below to list achievements of Napoleon's rule.

Achievements of Napoleon's rule

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IT MATTERS BECAUSE

Napoleon Bonaparte dominated French and European history from 1799 to 1815. During his reign, Napoleon built and lost an empire. He also spread ideas about nationalism throughout much of Europe.

The Rise of Napoleon

Guiding Question *How did instability in the French government create an opportunity for Napoleon to take power?*

Napoleon Bonaparte's role in the French Revolution is complex. In one way, he brought it to an end when he came to power in 1799. On the other hand, he was a child of the revolution as well. Without the revolution, he would have never risen to power. He himself continued to remind the French that he had kept the best parts of the revolution during his reign as emperor.

Early Life

Napoleon was born in 1769 in Corsica, an island in the Mediterranean. Just a few months before, France had taken control of the island. Napoleon's father came from minor nobility in Italy, but the family was not rich. Napoleon was talented, however, and he won a scholarship to a famous military school in France.

When he completed his studies, Napoleon was made a lieutenant in the French army. He later became one of the world's greatest generals and a leader whom his soldiers loved. However, there were few signs of his future success at this time. Napoleon spoke with an Italian accent, and he was not popular with his fellow officers.

Napoleon devoted himself to his goals. He read what French philosophers had to say about reason and he studied famous military campaigns. There were many opportunities for Napoleon to use his knowledge and skills when revolution began and war with Europe followed.

Military Successes

Napoleon rose quickly through the ranks of the military. In 1792 he became a captain. Two years later, when he was 24, the Committee of Public Safety made him a brigadier general. In 1796 he became commander of the French armies in Italy. Napoleon won a series of battles there through speed, surprise, and determined action. Napoleon defeated the armies of the Papal States and their Austrian allies. These victories gave France control of northern Italy. Throughout the Italian campaigns, Napoleon's energy and initiative earned him the devotion of his troops. His personal qualities allowed him to win the support of those around him. In 1797 he returned to France as a hero. He was given command of an army that was training to invade Britain. However, Napoleon knew that the French were not able to complete that plan. Instead, Napoleon suggested that the French fight the British indirectly. He wanted to take Egypt from Britain.

Egypt was on the way to India. India was a major source of British wealth and one of Britain's most important colonies. However, Napoleon was not able to take Egypt. The British were a great sea power, and they controlled the Mediterranean. By 1799, the British had defeated the French naval forces that were supporting Napoleon's army in Egypt. Napoleon knew he could not win without the ships, so he abandoned his army and returned to Paris.

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Consul and Emperor

The Directory was in power when Napoleon returned to France. Back in Paris, in 1799, he took part in a coup d'état that overthrew the Directory and established a new government. The new government was called the **consulate**. It was a republic in name only because Napoleon held absolute power. He was called first consul, which was a title borrowed from ancient Rome. Napoleon appointed officials, controlled the army, conducted foreign affairs, and influenced the legislature. In 1802 Napoleon was named consul for life. Two years later, he crowned himself Emperor Napoleon I.

Peace with the Church

One of Napoleon's first actions at home was to create peace with the Catholic Church. Napoleon himself believed in Enlightenment ideas and in the use of reason. He felt that religion was at most a social practice. However, most of the French people were Catholic, and so he thought it was a good idea to repair relations with the Church.

In 1801 Napoleon and the pope reached an agreement. Catholicism was recognized as the religion of a majority of the French people. In return, the pope would not ask for return of the Church lands that were taken at the time of the revolution.

This agreement meant the Catholic Church was no longer an enemy of the French government. It also meant that people who had acquired Church lands during the revolution became strong supporters of Napoleon.

Codification of the Laws

Napoleon's most famous domestic achievement was to codify the laws. France had almost 300 different legal systems before the revolution. Efforts were made to prepare a single law code for the entire nation during the revolution. However, the work was not completed until Napoleon's reign.

Seven law codes were actually created, but the most important was the Civil Code, or Napoleonic Code. This code was introduced in 1804. It kept many of the principles that the revolutionaries had fought for. These principles included equality for all citizens before the law, the right of the individual to choose a profession, and religious tolerance. It also ended serfdom and all feudal obligations.

The Civil Code was a step back for women and children. During the revolution, new laws had made divorce easier. They also allowed sons and daughters to inherit property equally. The Civil Code, however, removed these laws. Women were no longer equal to men. Women lost control over any property they had when they married. They could not testify in court, and it became more difficult for women to divorce their husbands. In general, the code treated women like children. It did not allow women to have a public role.

A New Bureaucracy

Napoleon also created a strong, centralized bureaucracy, or group of people who run the government from day to day. Napoleon made sure that public officials were chosen only because they were **capable**, or had good skills and ability. Napoleon's government showed early on that rank or birth was not important. Public officials and military officers were promoted because of their abilities. The opening of careers to men of talent was a reform that the middle class had demanded before the revolution.

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Napoleon created a new aristocracy, or upper class, who were chosen because of their service to the nation. Between 1808 and 1814 Napoleon created about 3,200 nobles. Nearly 60 percent of them were military officers, while the rest were civil service or state and local officials. Only 22 percent of this new group of aristocracy was from noble families of the old regime, and about 60 percent were from the middle class.

Preserver of the Revolution?

In his domestic policies, Napoleon did keep some of the major reforms of the French Revolution. Under the Civil Code, all citizens were equal before the law. The idea of opening government careers to more people was another gain of the revolution that Napoleon kept.

On the other hand, Napoleon also destroyed some revolutionary principles. Despotism replaced liberty. Napoleon controlled the government, and his decisions became arbitrary, that is, less and less based on a clear set of principles and more and more based on his personal feeling or will at the moment. Citizens such as the well-known writer Anne-Louise-Germaine de Staël protested some of his actions. For example, Napoleon closed down 60 of France's 73 newspapers, and he banned some books, including de Staël's books. He insisted that the government review all manuscripts before they were published. Even the mail was opened by government police.

☑️ **Reading Progress Check**

Synthesizing How did Napoleon's Civil Code address the problems with the French legal system that were present before the revolution?

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Napoleon's Empire

Guiding Questions *Why would changes in France cause concern in other European countries? How did Napoleon's military background shape his perspective?*

Napoleon is known more for his military leadership than for his domestic policies. His conquests began soon after he rose to power.

Building the Empire

France was at war with a European coalition when Napoleon became consul in 1799. This coalition included Russia, Great Britain, and Austria. Napoleon realized the need for a pause in the war. He claimed he wanted peace so that he could organize his new government and save the world from disorder. He achieved a peace treaty in 1802, but peace did not last long. War with Britain started again in 1803. Gradually, Britain was joined by Austria, Russia, Sweden, and Prussia. Napoleon's Grand Army defeated the Austrian, Russian, and Prussian armies in a series of battles at Ulm, Austerlitz, Jena, and Eylau from 1805 to 1807.

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Napoleon was the master of Europe from 1807 to 1812. His Grand Empire was made up of three major parts: the French Empire, dependent states, and allied states. The French Empire consisted of a France with much larger borders, which extended to the Rhine in the east and included the western half of Italy north of Rome.

Dependent states were kingdoms ruled by Napoleon's relatives. Eventually these included Spain, Holland, the kingdom of Italy, the Swiss Republic, and the Grand Duchy of Warsaw. It also included the Confederation of the Rhine, which was a union of all the German states except Austria and Prussia.

Allied states were countries defeated by Napoleon, and they included Prussia, Austria, Russia, and Sweden. These states were forced to join his struggle against Britain.

Spreading the Principles of the Revolution

Napoleon wanted to spread some of the principles of the French Revolution within his empire. These principles included legal equality, religious toleration, and economic freedom. Napoleon tried to destroy the old ways in France and in the dependent states of his Grand Empire. The nobility and the clergy in these states lost their special privileges. Napoleon decreed that government offices, or jobs, be open to all people with ability. This spread of French revolutionary principles was an important factor in the development of **liberal** traditions in these countries. (Liberal traditions included basic freedoms such as freedom of speech and religion and economic freedom.)

Like Hitler 130 years later, Napoleon hoped that his empire would last for centuries, but his empire collapsed almost as rapidly as it was created. Two major reasons help explain the collapse: Britain's resistance and the rise of nationalism.

British Resistance

Napoleon was not able to conquer Great Britain. Its sea power made it almost invulnerable. Napoleon wanted to invade Britain, but the British defeated the combined French-Spanish fleet at Trafalgar in 1805. This battle ended Napoleon's plans for an invasion of Britain.

Napoleon then created his Continental System to defeat Britain. The aim of Continental System was to stop British goods from reaching the European continent. That meant that countries were not allowed to trade with Great Britain. If British goods could not be sold in Europe, the British economy would fail. As a result, Britain would lose its ability to fight the war against Napoleon.

However, the Continental System failed. Allied states did not like being told by Napoleon that they could not trade with the British. Some began to cheat, and others refused to obey. In addition, new markets in the Middle East and in Latin America gave Britain other places to sell its goods. In fact, by 1810, the amount of British exports to countries overseas were at near all-time highs.

Nationalism

Nationalism was another reason for Napoleon's defeat. Nationalism occurs when a group of people in a nation feel they have a special identity. This identity is based on people's common language, religion, and national symbols. This movement was one of the most important forces of the nineteenth century. A new era started when the French people felt the spirit of **nationalism** and they decided they were the nation.

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Napoleon marched his armies through the German states, Spain, Italy, and Poland. This action spread new ideas of nationalism in two ways. First, the conquered peoples became united in their hatred of the invaders, and they banded together to resist them. Second, the conquered peoples saw the power and strength of national feeling from the example of the French. It was a lesson for them and for their rulers.

☑ **Reading Progress Check**

Evaluating What were the consequences for a country conquered by Napoleon's Grand Army?

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