

The Rise of Napoleon

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After the Reign of Terror and the death of Robespierre, the Directory had taken over France. The Directory was France's executive power between 1795 and 1799. There were five members, or directors. It was effective in its first years, but then corruption and self-service set in. Internal bickering and in-fighting increasingly destabilized the country and, in 1799, two of its members plotted with a young general named Napoleon Bonaparte to overthrow their colleagues. The Coup succeeded and the Directory was dissolved. It was replaced by the Consulate.

Napoleon was a short man about five feet three inches tall. He was born in Corsica and at the age of nine was sent to military school in France. He would succeed through dedication and hard work to become one of the greatest military leaders in world history. He was appointed general by the same Directory that eventually overthrew.

Napoleon had created a plan to rule France and would soon become the First Consul of France. Napoleon wanted to build a grand French Empire, and started this by conquering many countries. One of his most notable wars was against Egypt in 1798-1799. There he found the Rosetta stone which was used to translate hieroglyphics, but he also weakened the French army. After this though, Napoleon set out on a wave of conquests that would make France the most powerful country in Europe.

In 1804, Napoleon crowned himself emperor. Traditionally a pope would crown an emperor. The pope waited at the cathedral to crown Napoleon; however Napoleon arrogantly grabbed the crown from the popes' hands and placed it on his own head. After naming himself emperor, Napoleon wanted to conquer the world. Napoleon's troops conquered Austria, Prussia, Spain, Portugal, and the Kingdoms within Italy. He dissolved the Holy Roman Empire, which was falling apart and reorganized it into a confederacy of German States. He claimed himself to be the new Charlemagne.

1. How did Napoleon come to power?
2. How did Napoleon strengthen France?
3. Why would he claim to be the new Charlemagne?

The Achievements of Napoleon

Napoleon was a great military leader but also a great administrator. He is responsible for numerous achievements during his rule. He helped the economy by controlling prices and by encouraging new industry to spark economic improvement. He created a national banking system and a common currency for the French Empire. He also built roads and canals throughout France.

His economic achievements are important but he also made many social changes as well. The creation of an educational system that was supervised by the government was the first of its kind. And his most notable achievement was the Napoleonic Code. Even though the Napoleonic code was not the first legal code to be established in a European country with a civil legal system, it is considered the first successful codification and strongly influenced the law of many other countries. The Code, with its stress on clearly written and accessible law, was a major step in establishing the rule of law.

1. List all of Napoleon's achievements.

Napoleon Controls the Media

When Napoleon Bonaparte seized power in France in 1799, he quickly attempted to gain control of public opinion. He did this, in part, by censoring newspapers, plays, and books. His aids were ordered to review news sources and literary works to make sure he was cast in a favorable light. Napoleon's secret police enforced his policies. The following excerpts from his correspondence reveal his desire to control public opinion.

To Citizen Ripault, Napoleon's Librarian, July 23, 1801

Citizen Ripault is to see that he is supplied every day with all the papers that come out, except the eleven political papers. He will read them carefully, make an abstract of everything they contain likely to influence public opinion, especially with regard to religion, philosophy, and political opinion. He will send me this abstract daily between five and six o'clock. Once every ten days he will send me an analysis of all the books or pamphlets which have appeared during that period, calling attention to any passages on moral questions. . . . He will take pains to procure copies of all the plays which are produced, and to analyze them for me, with observations of the same character as those mentioned above. This analysis must be made, at the least, within forty-eight hours of the production of the plays. He is to send me every first and sixth day, between five and six o'clock, a list of all the bills, advertisements, etc. which deserve attention, as well as anything that has come to his knowledge, and anything that has been done or said in the various institutes, or important trials, that might be of interest from a political and moral point of view.

To Fouché, June 1, 1805

I would like newspaper editors [to have] enough sense not to publish news harmful to the nation. The attention of the papers ought to be directed toward attacking England—English fashions, English customs, English literature, the English constitution. . . .

Source: First four letters—Excerpt from *Correspondance de Napoleon I* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1854–1869), Volume 7, p. 5647; Volume 10, p. 8821; Volume 11, p. 9243; Volume 12, p. 10209.
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1. How do you think the censoring of newspapers, plays, books, and sermons aided Napoleon?
2. What is this use of censorship similar to in the twentieth century?