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Essay One

The late eighteenth century saw severe inequality and unrest in a decaying nation called France. The existing monarchy was slipping more and more out of favor, especially with Marie Antoinette around. Eventually, the people of France had endured enough suffering. In 1789 began the French revolution, an inspiring movement that was passionate about reforming France. The general ideas, seemingly natural to us today, included those such as equal voice for all French people as well as many others outlined in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*. While these ideas were not inherently that complicated, governments cycled in and out of power, failing time and time again to make good on these promises. It was not until a Corsican man by the name of Napoleon Bonaparte entered the scene that change really started taking place. Napoleon was able to do what everyone before him could not: bring the ideas and goals of the French revolution to fruition. He also trampled long and hard all over Europe, spreading these ideas to other nations. However, while he generally did admirable things for the people of France and Europe, he was not really the “child of the revolution” that many may make him out to be.

Retracing footsteps a little, Napoleon definitely did bring the ideas and goals of the revolution to the people of France––for the most part. In 1789, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* declared such ideals as “men are born and remain free and equal in rights,” “the aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man”, and “every citizen has a right to participate personally, or through his representative, in [the law’s] formation.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Where previous governments had failed, Napoleon succeeded about a decade later. He brought about reforms under which everyone had equal punishments, promotions, chances at education, relative tax burdens, and more. The French people were finally achieving all the goals they had sought after for so many years.

That being said, however, not everything that Napoleon did for the French was perfectly aligned with the ideas of the revolution. Though the monarchy was dissolved and an entirely new system was in place, Napoleon was essentially an acting monarch. He was calling all the shots, and this truly became reality when he was voted emperor of the French in 1804. Also, the original French revolution was exactly that: a *French* revolution. Napoleon turned it into total war all over the European continent. Yet, while this conquest no longer really coincided with the original revolution, was it all bad?

The true reasoning behind Napoleon’s European campaigns is commonly debated, but for sure is the fact that they changed many nations permanently. Wherever he went, Napoleon brought with him the ways of France and installed republics and equality in much the same ways as he had back home. This set the stage for a drastically changing political scene in Europe, with Spain being of particular importance. Several years in the future, after Napoleon was exiled and the original Spanish monarchy restored, Spain actually underwent civil war to fight back against the old rule and maintain Napoleon’s system. In these ways, an argument could obviously be made that Napoleon did successfully infect the rest of Europe with the ideas of the revolution.

However, what does seem to be an incorrect title for Napoleon is “a child of the revolution.” Though he did grow up in the correct era, Napoleon was far from this. He did not grow up in France, but rather in Corsica, where he was nobility. He did not suffer the atrocities that inspired the revolution. Instead, he was far removed. Moreover, when he and his troops were trapped by the British in Egypt, rather than remaining with his troops and fighting, he snuck off in an attempt to take advantage of a crumbling French government. And finally, when his troops were dying on the trek back from Russia, Napoleon ran ahead to let everyone know that *he* was still alive and well. While the revolution was by the people and for the people, many of Napoleon’s actions seemingly revolved around only himself. Thus, it seems unfit to call him a child of the revolution.

That being said, though, Napoleon really was not all bad. He may have had ambitions of his own which led to his downfall, but he did bring the people what they had wanted for so long. The French people, as well as many others, got a taste of a very sweet fruit, and they were not prepared to let that go so easily. So, perhaps it could be said that Napoleon was not a child of the revolution, but a father of European political change in the nineteenth century.

1. Perry M. Rogers, Aspects of Western Civilization: Problems and Sources in History, ed. 7 (Pearson Education, Inc., 2011), 101-102. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)