



The French Revolution and Napoleon

Charles Hazen

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As one of the seminal social revolutions in human history, the French Revolution holds a unique legacy, especially in the West. The early years of the Revolution were fueled by Enlightenment ideals, seeking the social overthrow of the caste system that gave the royalty and aristocracy decisive advantages over the lower classes. But history remembers the French Revolution in a starkly different way, as the same leaders who sought a more democratic system while out of power devolved into establishing an incredibly repressive tyranny of their own once they acquired it.

When historians are asked to list the most influential people of the last 200 years, a handful of names might vary, but there is no question that the list will include Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), the most successful French leader since Charlemagne and widely acknowledged as one of the greatest generals ever. Indeed, Napoleon was likely the most influential man of the 19th century, leaving an indelible mark on everything from the strategy and tactics of warfare to the Napoleonic Code that drafted laws across the continent. To defeat Napoleon, the Europeans had to form large coalitions multiple times, which helped bring about the entangling alliances that sparked World War I after Europe was rebuilt following Waterloo and the Congress of Vienna. Napoleon's influence on the United States was also palpable. To finance his endeavors, he struck a deal with President Thomas Jefferson that became the Louisiana Purchase, and it was Napoleonic warfare that was used throughout the Civil War, leading to massive casualties because the weaponry of the 1860s was now more advanced than the tactics of 1815.

When Napoleon died at St. Helena, he still engendered fear and distaste among the Europeans, but the man and his legacy continued to be held in awe across the world. In Napoleon's time, emperors and leaders still hoped to become the next Julius Caesar. After the Napoleonic Era, emperors and generals hoped to become the next Napoleon. For the next century, military leaders and even civilians struck Napoleonic poses when having their pictures taken, and phrases like "Napoleonic complex" and "meeting one's Waterloo" are now common phrases in the English lexicon. It would be truly impossible to envision or understand geopolitics in the West over the last two centuries without Napoleon.

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