Napoleon’s Commitment To The French Revolution

Napoleon Bonaparte’s actions, no matter how cruel and inhumane they may appear, were all committed for the sake of France and its Revolution. The French Revolution took place in May 5, 1789 when the people of France overthrew their monarchy, took control of their own government and determined that every citizen should have the right to liberty, fraternity, and equality. Napoleon Bonaparte, born from a minor noble family in Corsica in 1769, rose to power amidst the chaos of the Revolution, eventually declaring himself Emperor of France in 1804. To know if he betrayed the French Revolution, its ideals must first be defined. ‘Fraternity’ can be seen when the French citizens all have a common goal and unity is established within the nation. For France to achieve ‘equality’, all men must be equal under the law regardless of wealth, religion or birth status. To possess ‘liberty’ is to have the freedom to everything which injures no one else physically, mentally, and verbally, along with freedom of restraint and oppression. Napoleon Bonaparte did not betray the French Revolution; he gave the people of France equality through the new tax reform and the Napoleonic Code, fraternity through how he treated his soldiers along with creating a meritocratic system, and liberty using the Concordat and the management of the press.

Napoleon provided equality through his Napoleonic Code and the new tax reform that he introduced. Before the French Revolution, there were 3 main classes of citizens: the 1st estate, the 2nd estate, and the 3rd estate. The first two estates consisted of the Clergy and the nobility respectively, while the 3rd estate consisted of everyone else. The 3rd estate was the only estate forced to pay taxes despite the other two estates being much wealthier. Due to France already being heavily in debt and only taxing the poorest estate, the people in the 3rd estate struggled to survive as roughly eighty percent of their income was taxed by the government. When Napoleon took over, he created a new tax reform based on the items they bought such as wine, carriages, and playing cards rather than their social class. Regardless of their birth status, everyone in France paid the same taxes with regards to the items that they bought, thus creating a semblance of equality. Furthermore, Napoleon created the Napoleonic Code to change France’s laws regarding human rights to ensure that there were concrete laws fulfilling the ideal of equality. The Code gave men the right to work in any occupation, the right to vote, and, most importantly, for all men to be treated equally under the law. After the execution of King Louis XVI, France’s National Assembly created the constitution ‘The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen’ which stated that all men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Although the Declaration stated that men are equal, it was not considered to be a law that people followed but rather important principles that everyone should live by. Maximilien Robespierre, the leader of the Jacobin party and head of the Committee of Public Safety, violated the Declaration without legal consequences and executed at least 17,000 people justifying that all those he killed were enemies of the Revolution. Napoleon enforced the laws in his Code by carrying out strict punishments, such as life imprisonment or death, for anyone who broke those laws. In the end, Napoleon gave equality by removing tax based on social class and making all men in France equal under the law in spite of their wealth, religion, or birth status.

Similarly, Napoleon demonstrated fraternity by treating all of his soldiers not as subjects but as brothers and establishing a meritocratic system. At the beginning of the Italian Campaign,

Napoleon was first placed in charge of a ‘poor’ army. They did not follow orders, claiming that they did not have enough money to survive. Napoleon fixed this problem by making them feel important and telling them that their hardships of survival would change. Napoleon said to them, “Rich provinces and great cities will be in your power; there you will find honor, glory, and wealth. Soldiers of Italy! Will you be wanting in courage or perseverance?” His speech won over the army and instilled in them the passion to fight for France. Majority of his soldiers came from lower class citizens such as farmers, who spent most of their lives doing forced labour, often struggling to survive. When they heard Napoleon saying their lives could be filled with glory and riches by fighting for France, they were inspired and unified under his command. More importantly, Napoleon introduced a meritocratic system within his army. Before the Revolution, 90% of all officers came from French nobility. It was nearly impossible for commoners to achieve high ranking titles. Whereas with meritocracy, people rose up the ranks based on merit rather than status of birth. There were times when Napoleon “took the Legion of Honor off his own coat and stuck it on the soldier’s uniform” to award a soldier for being the bravest in the army. For a soldier to be awarded by Napoleon himself, their general and motivational figure, would have been a great honor. Additionally, it would have inspired other soldiers to strive for success and recognition, thus uniting the army. Therefore, Napoleon displayed and promoted fraternity by treating his soldiers as brothers and implementing a meritocratic system.

Lastly, Napoleon’s creation of the Concordat gave people the freedom to choose their own religion. During the Great Reign of Terror, Robespierre declared that God would only be referred to as “Supreme Being” and made it illegal to worship him. He stripped away Catholic rights to practice their own religion. However, in 1801, Napoleon created the Concordat, allowing all French citizens to choose their own religion, on the condition that Roman Catholicism was to be recognized as the most dominant religion. People could now choose their own religion without fear of physical, mental, or verbal harm. Similarly, Napoleon silenced 60 of the 73 French newspapers to prevent “the manifestation of ideas which trouble the peace of the state, its interests and good order.” Jean Paul Marat, a radical journalist published his own newspaper, “The Friend of the People” with the goal to attack potential enemies of the Revolution. A majority of the targets were prisoners or people from the clergy. Influenced by the radical party propaganda, crowds would gather in Paris and break into prisons to ruthlessly kill all the prisoners there because they saw them as counter-revolutionaries who pose a threat if Prussians approached Paris and liberated them. People were too afraid to leave their homes for fear that they could be called out in the newspapers and suffer dire consequences. Thousands died during this massacre due to certain radicals such as Marat having access to complete freedom of speech. In summary, Napoleon gave the people liberty, by allowing them to freely choose their own religion without fear of oppression and restricting the newspapers to avoid fabricating information in protection of French citizens.

In conclusion, Napoleon did not betray the ideals of the French Revolution. He displayed equality through the tax reform and the Napoleonic Code, demonstrated fraternity through the treatment of his soldiers and meritocratic system, and showed liberty with the creation of the Concordat, and management of the newspapers. Without the guidance of Napoleon, the ideals of the French Revolution would have never been achieved in full following its darkest point, and the revolutionary ideals of “liberté, égalité, [and] fraternité” would have caused greater problems rather than solutions.

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