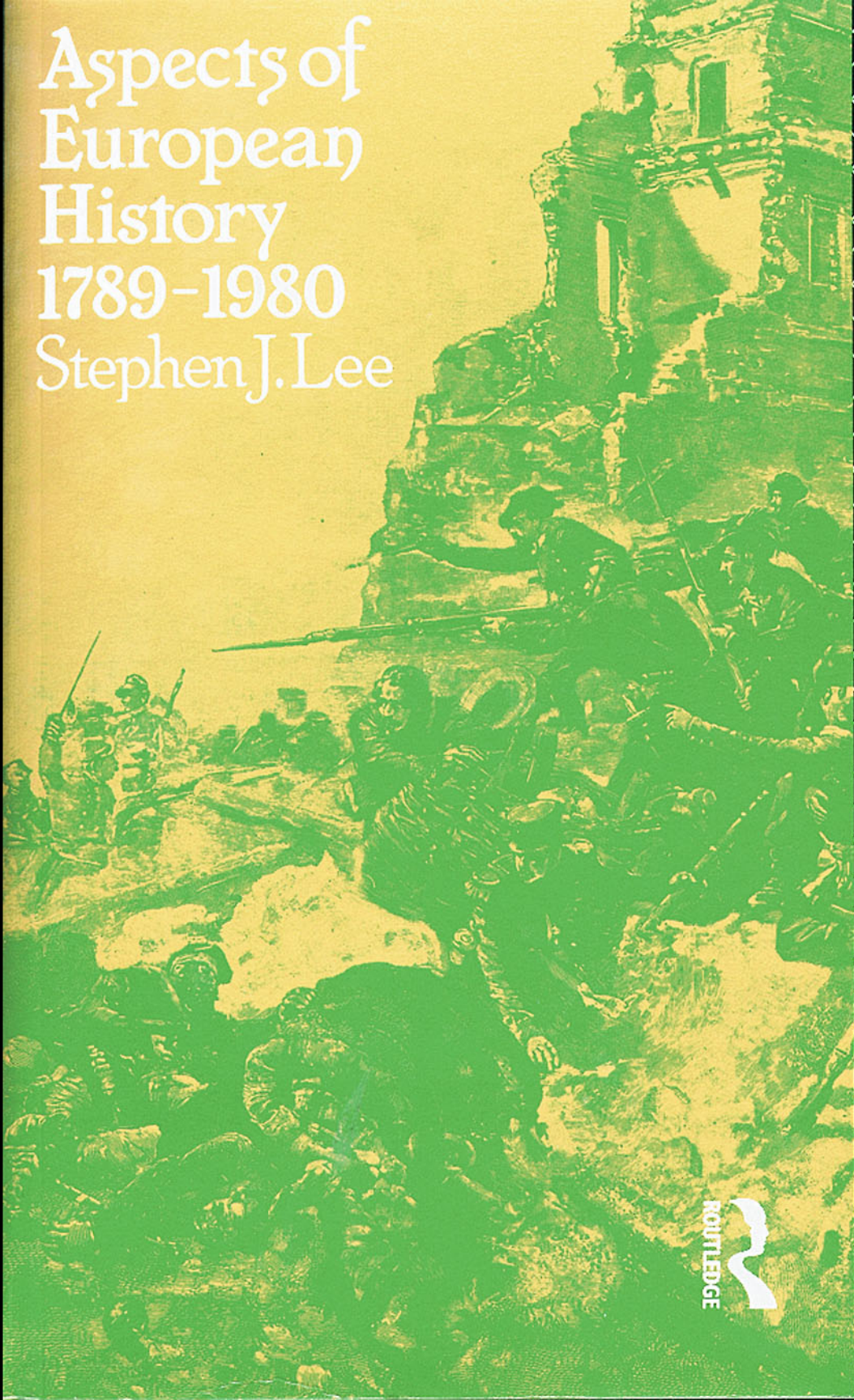


Aspects of European History 1789-1980

Stephen J. Lee



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ASPECTS OF EUROPEAN HISTORY

1789–1980

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STEPHEN J. LEE

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Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	ix
1 The Origins of the French Revolution	1
2 The Course of the French Revolution	7
3 The Reforms of Napoleon I	12
4 The Fall of Napoleon I	18
5 The Concert of Europe 1815–48	25
6 Metternich and the Austrian Empire 1815–48	30
7 The Revolutions of 1848–9	36
8 The Impact of the Crimean War on European Diplomacy	44
9 Cavour, Garibaldi and the Unification of Italy	49
10 The Unification of Germany	56
11 The Reforms of Alexander II	63
12 The Collapse of the Second French Empire	68
13 Bismarck and the German Political Parties 1871–90	75
14 The Survival of the Third French Republic 1870–1914	83
15 German Foreign Policy 1871–1914	90
16 The Outbreak of the First World War	97
17 The Collapse of Austria-Hungary and the Problems of the Successor States	104
18 The Last Years of Tsarist Russia	110
19 The Bolshevik Seizure and Retention of Power 1917–24	116
20 Two Views of the Terms of the Treaty of Versailles	123
21 Mussolini	128
22 The Great Depression	133
23 Hitler's Rise to Power and the Nazi Revolution	139

24	German Foreign Policy 1918–39	148
25	Soviet Foreign Policy 1918–41	154
26	The League of Nations	161
27	The Spanish Civil War	169
28	The Contradictions of the Third French Republic 1918–40	173
29	The Soviet Economy 1917–80	180
30	The Defeat of Nazi Germany	186
31	The Cold War to 1980	191
32	Economic and Political Integration in Western Europe 1945–80	199
33	Nationalism	208
34	Marxism and its Manifestations to 1980	215
35	Imperialism	224
36	Decolonization	230
	<i>Notes</i>	236
	<i>Bibliography</i>	250

List of illustrations

MAPS

The peoples of the Habsburg monarchy 1815–1908	33
Europe 1815–48	40
The unification of Italy	52
The unification of Germany	60
Europe in the First World War	98
Austria-Hungary and the successor states	107
Military and economic alignments in Europe in 1973	193
Colonization	226
Decolonization	234

FIGURE

1 European integration: membership of various organizations by 1973	203
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Introduction

This book is a sequel to *Aspects of European History 1494–1789*. It is based on an interpretative approach to some of the topics most commonly encountered in modern European history and is designed to be used in addition to specialist works and standard textbooks. The main intention is to stimulate thought and to assist in the preparation of essays and seminar papers by encouraging the student to develop an angle or an argument, whether in agreement with the chapters or in opposition to them. It is also hoped that the topics and the approach to them will be of interest to the general reader who seeks to understand the background to some of the problems of the modern world.

This volume contains a larger number of contemporary quotations than the first and, in some chapters, more direct reference to recent views of and major controversies among historians.

The chapters suggest a variety of methods by which a theme or argument may be presented.

- 1 Chapters 6, 9 and 21 stress the ideas, policies and problems of individual statesmen.
- 2 Chapters 20 and 31 examine an issue from two opposite viewpoints; in Chapter 20 the arguments are separated, in Chapter 31 they are integrated.
- 3 Chapters 4 and 12 present one viewpoint only and use only carefully selected factual material.
- 4 Some chapters use the analogy of ‘forces’ (‘internal’ and ‘external’, ‘centrifugal’ and ‘centripetal’); examples are Chapters 1 and 17. Others, like Chapters 4, 18 and 28, emphasize ‘contradictions’ and ‘paradoxes’.
- 5 Comparisons and contrasts are sometimes drawn; Chapter 9, for example, deals with the ideas and policies of two statesmen.
- 6 Chapters 33, 34, 35 and 36 provide a survey of four major themes affecting Europe as a whole and other parts of the world.

All the chapters are designed for extensive note-taking. They were built up step by step and the sections and paragraphs of each chapter are each intended to represent a stage in the argument. It should, therefore, be possible to break all the chapters down into their constituent parts. It is hoped that this will ease the task of essay preparation and examination revision.

Because of the problem of compressing such a wide period into a book of this size, the coverage, as in Volume 1, is for the most part political. There is, however, an attempt in many chapters to include economic, social and intellectual trends. Chapters 22, 29 and 32 deal specifically with economic history. Finally, the period since 1945 is dealt with more generally. It is so complex and eventful that detailed analysis would require an entire volume.

The Origins of the French Revolution

The purpose of this opening chapter is to provide a synthesis of some of the more important interpretations of the outbreak of the French Revolution.

The 1770s and 1780s brought with them a serious economic depression. This seemed the worse because it followed a long period of mounting prosperity and it caused a sense of resentment and bitterness as all classes faced a decline in their status. The fabric of society was now threatened with rupture by the exertion of two internal forces. These had existed for much of the eighteenth century but were now greatly accentuated by the economic crisis. The first force was the hostility between the Second Estate (aristocracy) and the Third Estate (bourgeoisie, peasantry and urban proletariat) as they pulled further apart from each other. The second force was the simultaneous attempt of both Estates to pull away from the policies of the monarchy and the implications of absolutism. For a while the Estates formed an unnatural alliance against the central power of the monarchy, and so the second force was the stronger. The king, finding himself in serious difficulties, yielded to the combined demands of the different classes, and agreed to summon the Estates General. Now that the central authority seemed to have collapsed, the original antagonism between the Estates reasserted itself so violently that the first force tore through the fabric of the *ancien régime*. The influence of the nobility was now overwhelmed by successive waves of the Third Estate as the bourgeoisie, peasantry and proletariat each pressed for the achievement of their aspirations.

* * *

It is a common assumption that revolution is caused by misery; Marx certainly believed that worsening conditions create a situation favourable to revolution. In the mid-nineteenth century, however, Alexis de Tocqueville advanced the theory that the French Revolution broke out when conditions were improving. He observed: 'It is not always by going from bad to worse that a country falls into a revolution.' Moreover: 'the state of things destroyed by a revolution is almost always somewhat better than that which immediately precedes it.'¹ In 1962, J.C.Davies used a slightly different approach, but complemented de Tocqueville's view. He suggested that 'revolutions are most likely to occur when a prolonged period of objective economic and social development is followed by a short period of sharp reversal'.² This seems to be borne out by the general economic trends of the eighteenth century.

Between 1741 and 1746 France experienced a high overall economic growth rate. Large sections of the bourgeoisie benefited from the threefold increase in trade and the fivefold increase of overseas trade, together with the revived prosperity of ports like Dunkirk, Le Havre, La Rochelle, Bordeaux, Nantes and Marseilles. The increase in prices (estimated at 65 per cent between 1741 and 1765) drove up the value of farm produce and greatly improved the living conditions of the tenant farmers. Although famines did occur, for example in 1725, 1740, 1759 and 1766–8, there was nothing in the 1780s to compare

with the catastrophic levels of starvation during the years 1693–4 and 1709–10. In the general upsurge of prosperity, the French bourgeoisie and peasantry seemed distinctly better off than their counterparts in Central and Eastern Europe.

When it came, during the 1770s and 1780s, the slump had a profound effect. France experienced a recession similar to that suffered by other countries; this was probably no more than a temporary dip in a lengthy economic cycle, possibly precipitated by a shortage of bullion from the New World. French industry and commerce were, however, badly affected because of the inadequate nature of French credit facilities. Production therefore declined, unemployment increased and the recession soon spread to agriculture. To make matters worse, there was a severe drought in 1785, and in the following years the peasants were unable to afford the usual quantity of seed, the inevitable result being short yields. The 1788 harvest was ruined by an abnormally wet summer and the position was even worse in 1789. The degree of starvation was lower than it had been at various stages during the reign of Louis XIV, but the suddenness of the decline in the fortunes of each class in the 1770s and 1780s had a far more dangerous psychological impact. The bourgeoisie and the peasantry, in particular, saw the gap between their aspirations and their achievements growing ever wider, while the nobility struggled desperately to hold what they had. The result was deep resentment and growing bitterness, both of them more inflammable revolutionary material than suffering by itself. The social classes looked with increasing suspicion at each other and at the régime itself, trying desperately to recapture their former share of the national wealth and to continue their previous quest for material advancement.

* * *

The eighteenth century had seen a gradual deterioration in relations between the Second and Third Estates. Each had improved its position economically compared to its own past, but each came to regard the other as a serious threat to its security and well-being. This resentment greatly increased after 1776.

The nobility managed to reassert its influence over the administration and local government by the alliance between the *noblesse d'épée* and the *noblesse de robe*, while positions of authority within the Church had, in the words of Talleyrand, become the preserve 'presque exclusif de la classe noble'.³ On the other hand, the nobility feared the ambitions of the wealthy sections of the bourgeoisie and resisted fiercely any attempts by the latter to break the monopoly of the *noblesse de robe* over the administrative offices and the *parlements*. The bourgeoisie regarded their ultimate aim as passage into the Second Estate through the traditional method of ennoblement. Increasingly, however, this form of upward mobility was blocked and with it any chance of gaining political power. Two future leaders of the Revolution showed the effects that disillusionment with this state of affairs could produce. Carnot's radical views followed his unsuccessful attempts to gain ennoblement, while Danton claimed that 'The Old Régime drove us to [revolution] by giving us a good education, without opening any opportunity for our talents'.⁴ The peasantry, although lacking the education and economic power of the bourgeoisie, had their own aspirations which were challenged by the rural nobility. Seigneurial rights and dues were extracted to the full, and the peasantry had to suffer the inconveniences and hardships produced by the *banalité du moulin*, *banalité du four*, *banalité du pressoir*, *droit de chasse* and *droit de bauvin*. And, according to one of the *cahiers* of the peasantry in 1789, 'the contempt of the nobility for the commonality is

beyond belief'.⁵ The nobility therefore came to be regarded as a parasitic element, enjoying seigniorial privileges without carrying out the functions which had once accompanied them.

The rift between the Second and Third Estates widened during the 1770s and 1780s. Under the impact of the recession, the peasantry found the seigniorial dues particularly onerous, while the nobility increasingly tightened up their exactions in order to solve their own difficulties. The burden of the depression was therefore passed downwards to the section of society least able to bear it. The bourgeois complaint about the nobility was more indirect but nevertheless significant for the future. They accused the nobility of resisting any rationalization of the economic and financial structure and of perpetuating anachronistic institutions at a time when reform was most urgently needed.

Yet tensions between the social classes did not result in immediate conflict. For a while they were partially restrained by a temporary and basically artificial coalition against a common target, the absolute power of the monarch.

* * *

The motives of each class in establishing this common front against the central government differed widely, but each had a fixed idea that the régime in its present form could no longer serve its interests or guarantee it from exploitation. The government had, therefore, to be modified. Precisely how remained a matter of vague speculation until the monarchy actually collapsed under the combined pressure.

The nobility feared absolutism more profoundly in the 1770s and 1780s than ever before. The banning of the *parlements* seemed to be an attack on the most cherished power of the nobility, gained after a long struggle since 1715, namely the questioning of royal legislation. When the *parlements* were restored in 1774 the nobility returned to the offensive, only to be confronted by the appalling spectre of a reforming monarch who, to make matters worse, was served by ministers who openly expressed reservations about the existing fiscal system and the exemptions from taxation. Louis XVI seemed a greater menace than Louis XV because he appeared to be more willing to embark upon an extensive remodelling programme which would reduce the social status of the nobility in a way never even considered before. The nobility therefore used every device available; they fought the reform programme in the *parlements*, in the Court and in the Assembly of Notables. As the financial crisis worsened after 1787, they demanded the convocation of the Estates General. This was merely an appeal to an early precedent, one which the nobility knew the monarch could not ignore. The Estates General would naturally confirm the powers of the nobility, since on the traditional method of voting the First and Second Estates would outnumber the Third.

The bourgeoisie saw matters differently but went along with the tactics of the nobility. To them, the Estates General offered the prospect of fundamental constitutional reform, which would enable the bourgeoisie to exert more control over the political institutions and to redesign the economic structure. After the brief experiments of the Regency with *laissez-faire*, France had seen the return of the mercantilist policies of Colbert from 1726 onwards, and the restoration of the oppressive guild system and internal customs barriers. Then, during the reign of Louis XVI, government policy seemed to lose all sense of overall direction. At the very depth of the economic depression the government seemed prepared to unleash the market forces of Great Britain; by the free trade treaty of 1786 it exposed the struggling French industries to *laissez-faire* at the very time that protection

was most needed. If the chaotic economic and fiscal system were to be reorganized, the bourgeoisie would have to play an active role. This could no longer be done by hoping for a special relationship with the monarchy as had existed in the reign of Louis XIV; the nobility had long since blocked the access to political positions. The solution, therefore, had to be found in representative institutions—in a parliamentary monarchy. Much as the bourgeoisie resented the nobility, they therefore resented the latter's demands for the calling of the Estates General.

The peasantry regarded the meeting of the Estates General as a panacea. It would be the means whereby the unequal distribution of taxation would be remedied. The *taille*, *capitation*, *vingtieme*, *gabelle* and *aides* would be reassessed or possibly replaced by a graduated land or income tax. The institution of monarchy still commanded respect, but it was felt increasingly that its powers should be limited. The peasantry suspected that the government had been making profits from fluctuations in the price of grain; this and other grievances could now be articulated openly, with greater hope of redress.

In expressing its opposition to the policies of the régime each class made use of the ideas of the leading French *philosophes*. It is often assumed that Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau exerted direct influence on the growth of revolutionary feeling and thereby precipitated the events of 1789. In reality, the growth of dissent was not actually stimulated by the *philosophes*; rather, dissent was expressed with the help of quotations taken liberally from their writings. The Paris *parlement*, for example, used Montesquieu's theories of the balance of power. Sometimes the phrases used closely resembled the American constitution which, in turn, borrowed from the *philosophes*. The *parlement* of Rennes, for example, declared in 1788: 'That man is born free, that originally men are equal, these are truths that have no need of proof',⁶ an obvious mixture of Jefferson and Rousseau. The *cahiers* of each social group in 1789 contained examples of an unusually lucid statement of general grievances. It appears, therefore, that Montesquieu and Rousseau had more influence on the expression of opposition than on its actual formation.

* * *

Such a distinction would have offered little comfort to Louis XVI. During his reign the monarchy not only reached its lowest ebb for two centuries; it eventually proved incapable of presiding over the normal process of government. The main problem was that the monarchy could no longer maintain a careful balance between the divergent social forces for the simple reason that it had no consistent basis of support. Louis XIV had promoted the image of absolutism by elevating the monarchy into a lofty position of isolation. But he had taken care to maintain the support of the bourgeoisie in order to counter the hostility which his policies often invoked from the nobility. After 1851 Napoleon III was to depend on the backing of the peasantry to counterbalance the opposition of the workers. The French monarchy could survive only if it was able to rely upon a politically significant section of the population, or to pursue the more difficult policy of 'divide and rule'.

The vulnerability of Louis XVI was all the greater because of the financial crisis which lasted throughout his reign, and which proved that he could not maintain his authority without the goodwill, or at least indifference, of his subjects. Intolerable strains had been imposed on the financial structure by the Seven Years' War and the War of American Independence, and he was forced to consider changes in the methods and

assessment of taxation. The situation was not without precedent: Louis XIV had had to agree to the introduction of the *dixième* and *capitation* during the War of the League of Augsburg (1688–97) and the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14). But Louis XVI had to deal only with a relatively docile nobility, and with an impoverished and not yet articulate peasantry. Louis XIV encountered much more widespread opposition, and in particular a concerted demand, from 1787, for the convocation of the Estates General. In finally giving way in 1788, he acknowledged the collapse of absolutism and the existence of a political vacuum at the centre.

* * *

Freed from the necessity of having to co-operate against the régime, the Second and Third Estates now expressed their fears of each other more openly, and the crisis became revolution.

The nobility showed their determination to maintain the traditional voting procedures once the Estates General had convened. This brought out into the open their differences with the Third Estate, which proceeded to reconstitute itself as the National Assembly. This was the first sign of institutional revolution, as it was an open defiance of the authority and procedure of a traditional body. From this stage onwards, as G.Lefebvre argues, the momentum was increased by the participation of all the conflicting, rival, disparate elements within the Third Estate. The bourgeoisie appeared to have accepted the new political situation of July 1789 as permanent. The peasantry, however, hastened the destruction of feudal and seigniorial rights in August by a series of riots in the provinces. The artisans and proletariat of Paris pushed the Revolution into the more violent phase of 1791–4, providing solid support for the sweeping changes made by the National Convention.

It is often stated that the Revolution broke out in 1787 as a result of the pressure exerted by the Paris *parlement*. It is possible, however, to put this a different way. For a revolution to begin, a certain momentum is needed. In the nineteenth century, France possessed a large repository of revolutionary experience which exerted the vital push on several occasions (1830, 1848, 1871). During the 1780s there was no such knowledge or leadership; but the nobility, from their position of strength, and as part of their reactionary stance, delivered the first blow. The momentum of this act of political defiance was enough to encourage the different sections of the Third Estate to bring about the destruction of the *ancien régime*, and with it the Second Estate. This seems to confirm the view put forward by Montaigne as far back as 1580 that ‘Those who give the first shock to a state are the first overwhelmed in its ruin’.

* * *

Recent research, particularly by R.R.Palmer and J.Godechot, has placed France in a more general context of revolutionary change which also affected Geneva (1768 and 1792), Ireland (1778 and 1798), the Netherlands (1784–7), Poland (1788–92), the Austrian Netherlands (1787–90) and Hungary (1790), as well as the North American colonies (from 1775). There certainly appear to have been major common problems affecting Europe as a whole. One was a rapid growth of population (100 million to 200 million between 1700 and 1800). Another was a sharp depression in the 1770s and 1780s, following a long period of economic growth. The overall result was increased competition for existing land resources, a huge rise in unemployment, and serious financial problems which confronted virtually every government in Europe and forced a

re-examination of the traditional forms of revenue. Given the inability of most governments to deal with a major recession, it is hardly surprising that unrest should have been so widespread.

The majority of the revolutions, however, ended in failure. Palmer emphasizes the importance of a strong bourgeoisie (lacking in Poland and Hungary) and of close co-operation between the different social classes. In Poland and Hungary the huge peasantry remained largely indifferent, while in the Netherlands they backed the forces of counter-revolution. Ultimately, the country which possessed the largest bourgeoisie and the most extensive dissatisfaction within each class was the most likely to experience fundamental change. That is why, despite the widespread incidence of unrest in the late eighteenth century, it was France which underwent the most violent upheaval and experienced the most advanced political, social and economic reforms.

The Course of the French Revolution

The opening years of the French Revolution (1789–92) can be regarded as a period of rapid social and institutional change during which the whole structure of the *ancien régime* was dismantled. This was, however, also the ‘moderate’ phase, as leaders of the National and Constituent Assemblies endeavoured to control the radicals, and to create a ‘balanced’ constitution.

The speed with which the changes occurred during the year 1789 was the result of a pendulum reaction between the king’s government and the people of Paris. Louis XVI attempted to win back some of the ground he had lost to the recently formed National Assembly by dismissing his most progressive minister, Necker, and reconstituting his government. This provoked demonstrations and riots which culminated, on 14 June, in the fall of the Bastille—an event which symbolized the bankruptcy of royal authority. The king, nevertheless, tried to maintain his powers by rejecting some of the reforming legislation of the National Assembly. The result was the March of the Women (5 October) and the forcible removal of the king from Versailles, the seat of royal power since the 1680s, to Paris. Here the city’s populace could exert more continuous and direct pressure on both the king and the National Assembly. Popular participation spread to other areas; as R.R.Palmer states, ‘Plain people took part in continuing revolutionary activity at the bottom, while the Constituent Assembly and its successors governed at the top’.¹

If events in and around Paris resembled the action of a pendulum, the relationship between the capital and the provinces could be described as ‘tidal’. Rural unrest and the threat of peasant revolt put considerable pressure on Versailles and Paris to introduce legislation to alter the social structure. Hence the Constituent Assembly abolished feudalism, ended personal obligations and the tithe, formulated the Declaration of the Rights of Man and, in November, put up most of the Church lands for sale. The reverse flow, meanwhile, brought the influence of Paris to the rest of France, resulting in the dismissal of *intendants*, the suspension of *parlements* and the removal of other institutions of the *ancien régime*.

Every effort, however, was made to control the direction of this hectic activity. The 1791 Constitution, for example, reflected the desire for political balance and social harmony. One of its principles was decentralization, which allowed the newly formed *départements* considerable autonomy. Another was the separation, at the centre, of the legislature (in the form of the Constituent Assembly) from the executive (or the king and his ministers). This was in line with the widely accepted theories of Montesquieu and with the proven, if brief, experience of the United States. As a further safeguard against radicalism, the Assembly restricted the franchise to ‘active’ citizens, who numbered about 4.3 million taxpayers and property owners. The overall intention, therefore, was to reform, but also to hold back; Mirabeau, for example, called himself ‘a partisan of order, but not of the old order’.

How long could this harmony and balance be maintained? The 1791 Constitution opened up, in the words of J. Roberts, a ‘Pandora’s box’,² from which emerged unforeseen conflicts and complications. Between 1791 and 1792 all prospects of consensus disappeared and France split between Right and Left.

The Right was, of course, based on the king, who had become increasingly disillusioned with the restraints on his authority. He strongly opposed the Assembly’s legislation concerning émigrés and non-juring clergy and, in his powerlessness to prevent it, complained: ‘What remains to the king other than a vague semblance of royalty?’³ The Left, meanwhile, had begun to press for a republic, arguing that, as long as France was a monarchy, the legislature and executive would be antagonistic as well as separate. Some deputies were also extremely concerned about the limits placed on reforming legislation; Marat, for example, found his blood ‘boiling at the sight of so many decrees...which derogate from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and which are mortal to liberty’.⁴ Others, like Robespierre, condemned the limited franchise and ‘the monstrous distinction’ which makes a citizen ‘active or passive’.⁵ The conflict between Right and Left was aggravated by the changeover, in 1791, from the Constituent to the Legislative Assembly. A ‘self-denying ordinance’ ensured that the Legislative Assembly contained none of the deputies of the Constituent, thereby ending the continuity of personnel which had contributed to the political stability of the period 1789–91. Of the new members, 250 were Feuillants, or staunch loyalists, and the rest were radicals, comprising the Girondins and the more extreme Montagnards, of whom the Jacobins were the core. The Feuillants were soon to be pushed aside and the radicals eventually fought among themselves to capture and redirect the Revolution.

* * *

During its second phase (1792–4) the Revolution became more violent and doctrinaire. The Swiss historian Burckhardt commented that, as the Revolution accelerated, the representatives of the previous stages were cut down as ‘moderates’; hence ‘*La révolution dévore ses enfants*’.

The catalyst for this change was the war. Most sections of the Assembly were enthusiastic about the prospect of taking on France’s neighbours; the Feuillants assumed that a national struggle could only strengthen the authority of the king, while the Girondins reasoned that a ‘people’s war’ would destroy the monarchy altogether. Events proved the Girondins correct as, in the words of D.I. Wright, the war ‘revolutionized the revolution’.⁶ A wave of terror was caused by the impending Prussian invasion, and the search for internal enemies resulted in the notorious massacres of September 1792. In the same month, the right-wing Feuillants were virtually eliminated in the elections for the new National Convention, and power was now shared between 165 Girondins and 145 Montagnards. The Girondins pressed for the indictment of the king, arguing that he was now a rallying point for counter-revolutionaries and that, while he remained on the throne, Austria and Russia would be unlikely to relax their efforts to restore him to his former power. Hence, as a result of the war, a republic was proclaimed on 25 September 1792, and Louis XVI was executed the following January.

By 1793 the Girondins had accomplished their basic aims—a people’s war and a people’s republic. It was now time to call a halt and consolidate. After all, asked Brissot, one of the Girondin leaders: ‘What more could they [the people] want?’⁷ In effect, the Girondins now came to regard themselves as conservatives and they bitterly opposed the

attempts of the Left, or Montagnards, to increase the momentum of the Revolution. Brissot and Louvet feared that the Montagnards would open up the National Convention to the influence of the Paris 'mob'; the Girondins would be helpless against this type of popular pressure since their own support came from the *départements* of south-western France. Above all, the Girondins were appalled by the prospects of a Montagnard dictatorship, directed by the tightly-knit Jacobin clubs of Paris. Unfortunately, they lacked the strength to resist the Montagnards or apply a brake to the Revolution. As a party, they were far less cohesive than the Montagnards and they lacked popular support where it really mattered—in the capital. Hence, by June 1793, their position was hopeless. The leading Girondin deputies were dragged from the Convention by a crowd of 20,000 Montagnard supporters and were subsequently tried and executed.

The Montagnards now had the field to themselves, and introduced the phase of the Revolution usually referred to as the 'Terror' (1793–4). This was undoubtedly the most complex period, and it threw up a series of contradictions. For example, the Montagnards made much use of the demonstrations of the *sans-culottes*, particularly the Paris tradesmen, shopkeepers, artisans and wine merchants. And yet they gradually narrowed the actual power-base of their régime by giving all executive powers to a few committees of the Convention. They showed that they were committed to democracy by extending the franchise and removing the distinction between 'active' and 'passive' citizenship. And yet the men who ruled France through the Committees of Public Safety and General Security were less accountable to the electorate than at any other period in the Revolution. There was also an ideological paradox. The Jacobin leaders, especially Marat and Robespierre, explicitly upheld liberty as a key doctrine of the Revolution. But it was the type of liberty which existed only collectively and not in an individual sense. According to Robespierre the will of the people as a whole was 'the natural bulwark of liberty'.⁸ Individuals, therefore, could find their freedom only by conforming to the 'general interest'. Robespierre was clearly influenced by the famous argument in Rousseau's *Social Contract* that dissidents, in their very act of disagreeing with the 'general will', were enslaving themselves and that 'it may be necessary to compel a man to be free'.⁹

The principle that freedom could be achieved through compulsion was applied during the course of 1794 by the Committees and the Revolutionary Tribunal. The result was the Terror, a revolutionary device which was justified by the Jacobins provided that the motives were 'pure'. Robespierre, for example, argued that 'virtue' without 'terror' was 'impotent', and Marat urged that 'liberty must be established by violence'.¹⁰ This violence, previously the spontaneous demonstration of mob frustration, was now institutionalized and became the monopoly of the government; hence the guillotine of the Tribunal replaced the butchers' knives of the *sans-culottes*. Terror, however, came to feed upon itself and was used by the Robespierrists to eliminate rival Jacobin factions. The Hébertists, for example, were executed in March 1794, and the Dantonists a month later. Robespierre narrowed the base of power so much that eventually he regarded himself as the personification of the Republic. For this reason, Robespierre has been the subject of greater controversy than any other revolutionary figure.¹¹ The traditional view is that the Terror perverted the aims of the Revolution and allowed Robespierre to set up a particularly odious dictatorship. To use the analogy of several historians, the French Revolution was a fever, the crisis of which was the Terror; before the patient, or France,

could recover, Robespierre had to be cast off. Two French historians have adopted a more positive view of Robespierre: Lefebvre called him ‘the resolute and faithful representative of that revolutionary mentality’,¹² while Mathiez considered him ‘the incarnation of Revolutionary France in its most noble, most generous and most sincere aspects’.¹³

It is also possible to depict the Terror as a period of constructive achievement. The measures taken by the Convention to mobilize the nation and to control the supply of food did more than anything else to turn the tide of the war and therefore to save the Revolution from destruction by foreign armies. Carnot’s *levée en masse* created an entirely new approach to warfare and made possible the victories of Bonaparte a few years later. The Montagnards also reinterpreted the objectives of the first phase of the Revolution. Some of the reforms of the Constituent Assembly were reversed; the best example was the end of decentralization, which had brought two years of administrative chaos. Others however were confirmed and years of administrative chaos. Others however were confirmed and extended; these included the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the sale of Church lands. It is often pointed out, however, that the Convention achieved little outside the context of the war or beyond the modification of previous reforms. Of its main innovations, the attempt to introduce the worship of the Supreme Being was a total failure, and the Revolutionary Calendar lasted less than twenty years. The only long lasting non-military reform which originated specifically in the Convention was the metric system of weights and measures.

* * *

The third period of the Revolution (1794–9) has been extensively reinterpreted. The traditional picture was that the Revolution reached a climax with the overthrow of Robespierre on 9 Thermidor 1794 and that a sharp turn to the right followed, preparing the way for Bonaparte’s takeover in 1799. Historians used to dismiss the period 1795–9 as being outside the scope of the Revolution, thus placing it in limbo between two periods which were considered more important and certainly more interesting. Recent works, however, have restored the Thermidorians and the Directory fully to the context of the Revolution. C.Church, for example, called the Directory ‘a board of executors for the revolutionary settlement’,¹⁴ while 1799, rather than 1794, is now generally taken as the terminal date of the Revolution.

Other assumptions have been challenged as well. There used to be agreement that the *coup d’état* of Thermidor was a right-wing reaction against the radical policies of Robespierre. M.Lyons, however, has argued that some of the plotters, like Tallien, Barras and Fouché, were left-wing Montagnards who considered Robespierre’s ideas too moderate. There was also considerable opposition from the atheists within the Committee of General Security to Robespierre’s introduction of the Cult of the Supreme Being. For a while, the Thermidorians were even joined by Babeuf and other socialists. ‘In a sense, therefore,’ says Lyons, ‘the *coup of 9 Thermidor* was a revolution of the Left.’¹⁵ There was also a wave of panic among the deputies of the Convention that they would be included in the next batch of Robespierre’s victims. The events of 9 Thermidor, therefore, were also a ‘revolution in self-defence against impending proscription’.¹⁵ In one respect, Robespierre had only himself to blame; he had narrowed the base of his authority so far that no attempts were made to save him from his fate. It is ironical that the man who claimed to personify the people of Paris was reviled by them on his way to the guillotine.

Thermidor may have been inspired by the Left, but it was the Right which ultimately benefited. Large numbers of moderates resurfaced in the Convention after the overthrow of Robespierre and proceeded to dismantle the institutions of the Terror which had held them, and the Convention itself, in subjection. They also put the Revolution back on the course originally charted between 1789 and 1791 by the Constituent Assembly while, at the same time, retaining Robespierre's policy of central government control over the *départements*. Determined to prevent, in the future, any other Jacobin groups in the Convention from seizing control of the administration, the Jacobins resolved to reintroduce the strict separation of the legislature and executive and also to reduce the influence of the Paris mob by tightening the suffrage. The result was the Constitution of the Year III (1795) which established, as the executive, a Directory of five, and, as the legislature, a bicameral *corps*, comprising the Council of Five Hundred and the Council of Elders. The domestic record of this new régime was not unimpressive. The severely inflated *assignats*, introduced in 1789, were replaced by a new paper currency, the *mandats territoriaux*, and then by the first coin-based currency since the days of the *ancien régime*. From 1797 there were also extensive fiscal reforms, directed by de Nogaret, the minister of finance. Meanwhile, communications were generally improved and attention given at central and local levels to the reorganization of poor relief.

Whatever its achievements, the Directory proved more vulnerable than any of the other revolutionary régimes to military takeover and the emergence of the cult of personality. The success of Bonaparte's *coup d'état* of Brumaire (1799) showed that the Directory had never itself experienced the sort of stability it had brought to the Revolution. For one thing, the separation of the legislature and executive by the 1795 Constitution had ensured that no deputies elected to the Council of Five Hundred would ever serve on the Directory or as a government minister. Since executive posts were not, therefore, allocated on the basis of majorities in the legislature, there was no incentive to organize political parties. This was a serious deficiency in a constitution which otherwise had many of the hallmarks of a liberal democracy. Indeed, the Directors made the mistake of assuming that parties would undermine the régime. La Revellière Légeaux, for example, argued that it would be preferable 'to die with honour defending the republic and its established government than to...live in the muck of parties'.¹⁶ It was because of this obsession with 'faction' that the Directory virtually threw away its authority. By 1799 Siéyès and Ducos had become so alarmed by the prospect of a Jacobin revival that they intrigued with Bonaparte for a revision of the constitution. The result was a further swing to the Right and the beginning of the period known as the Consulate.

The Reforms of Napoleon I

Napoleon Bonaparte ruled France as First Consul between 1799 and 1804, and as Emperor between 1804 and 1814–15. He has always been one of the more difficult statesmen to identify with a particular era; indeed, his rule showed aspects of three different phases in European history.

For one thing, he has been called the ‘child of the Revolution’. Certainly, he owed his rapid rise from obscurity to political power to the events of the Revolution and to the opportunities which the *ancien régime* could not have provided. His success in the Revolutionary War coincided with the political vulnerability of the Directory, enabling him to seize power by a *coup* which had the tacit support of several ministers. Once installed as First Consul (1799) he proceeded to build on the domestic achievements of the Directory. He stressed that he was the heir to the Revolution, which he had ‘stabilized on the principles which began it’.¹

At the same time, he renounced his own Jacobin connections and cut France off from the doctrinaire period of the Revolution. He rejected the ideology of Rousseau and the attempts made by Robespierre to apply it. In this sense, he considered that his task was ‘to close the Romance of the Revolution’.² He returned for much of his intellectual inspiration to the earlier philosophers of the Enlightenment—writers like Montesquieu and Voltaire. This gave him much in common with the enlightened despots of Russia, Austria and Prussia; he shared their gloomy view of the ‘credulous and criminal’ nature of humanity and their belief that the only way to prevent chaos was the firm and authoritarian enforcement of humane and enlightened policies. Napoleon, therefore, looked back beyond 1779 and some of his measures show the hallmarks of the *ancien régime*. Surveying his career while in exile on St. Helena, he claimed that he had been ‘the natural mediator in this struggle of the past against the Revolution’.³

He was not, however, merely a revolutionary or merely an enlightened despot; nor was he simply a combination of the two. He fused the Revolution and the *ancien régime* in such a way as to produce an entirely new element. This could be described as ‘democratic’ or ‘plebiscitary’ ‘dictatorship’, achieved by the energies of a self-made man, upheld by a broad base of popular support, sustained by all the trappings of the personality cult, and dedicated to military glory. Bonapartism, therefore, has links with the twentieth century as well as the eighteenth.

The rest of this chapter will elaborate on these three characteristics of Bonapartism in a survey of Napoleon’s political, economic and social reforms.

* * *

The Revolution provided the vital background to Napoleon’s political and constitutional changes. It cleared away the obstacles of the *ancien régime*, including the *parlements*, corporations and other vested interests. Napoleon incorporated some of the Revolution’s achievements directly into his system. At local government level he kept the *départements* which had been established in 1790 by the Constituent Assembly, and

continued the centralizing policies of the National Convention and the Directory. He also built on the Directory's Ministry of the Interior, finding the Ministry's Commissioners particularly useful as government agents in the *départements*. This centralization and uniformity of administration were the basis of Napoleon's authority and, because of the groundwork provided by the Revolution, he possessed more effective powers than had belonged to any of the Bourbon monarchs. The security which his position thus attained enabled him to take liberties with the legislature and executive, although he always claimed that he was, in fact, continuing and rationalizing revolutionary practice. The Constitution of the Year VIII (1799) continued the trend, started by the Constitution of 1795, towards legislatures with more than a single chamber. It should be emphasized, however, that Napoleon went further than the later revolutionaries had ever envisaged; he not only established three chambers instead of two, but also ensured that each had precise and strictly limited powers. The executive, by contrast, was narrowed down, but with the same aim in mind: the quest for personal power. It had originally consisted of the various committees of the National Convention, but had been narrowed down in 1795 to five Directors; Napoleon continued the process by entrusting power to three Consuls. But, even when he made himself First Consul for Life, in 1802, and crowned himself in 1804, he stressed that he was still linked to the Revolution, claiming that 'The government of the Republic is confided to an Emperor'.⁴ He was also careful to maintain the appearance of democracy by means of a wide franchise, even if he did elaborate and refine the Directory's formula for making democracy indirect by means of a multiple list system which operated in elections for the legislature.

Napoleon also introduced features which would be more commonly associated with the *ancien régime* and the era of enlightened despotism. He was careful, for example, to avoid any explicit statement of ideology in his constitutions; hence there was no reference to the *liberté, égalité, fraternité* of the Revolution. Like Catherine the Great and Frederick the Great, he considered that a declaration of rights would merely hamstring the authority of the executive. Also, he had a pragmatic approach to constitutional reform which allowed him to use eighteenth-century devices, and hence to blend the Revolution with Bourbon France and Frederickian Prussia. Hence he introduced a senate, adapted the old *conseil d'état* and, in local government, resurrected the *intendant* in the form of the prefect and sub-prefect. Above all, he succeeded in combining the power base which he had inherited from the Revolution with the traditional authority of royalty. Like Louis XIV, he was upheld by the concept of Divine Right. An extract from a catechism used by the French Church after 1804 reads: 'God has established him as our sovereign and has made him the minister of His power and His image on earth'.⁵ He also adopted, in 1807, the title *le Grand*, thus following the example previously set by eighteenth-century rulers like Peter I, Frederick II and Catherine II.

The title 'Emperor' was not entirely a throwback to the *ancien régime*. It had certain connotations which sound familiar to the twentieth century as well. Napoleon's military success enabled him to maintain a dictatorship based on massive popular support but stripped of the party politics which characterize parliamentary democracies. Refusing to be 'a man of a party', he aimed to depoliticize the régime by destroying 'the spirit of faction' which was 'hurling the nation into an abyss'. Mussolini later developed this approach, claiming that he was cutting the 'Gordian knot' which 'enmeshed' Italian politics, and that he was the focal point for his country's 'most vital forces'. Like

Mussolini, Napoleon strengthened his position through the most effective use of the personality cult that Europe had yet seen. He manipulated public opinion by publishing only favourable material and by extensive use of what Hitler later called ‘the Big Lie’. Confident in the image created by a carefully controlled press and by the paintings of David and Géricault, Napoleon was able to appeal directly to the people for their support. To do this he used a device which became particularly popular in the Second Empire (1852–70): the plebiscite. This proved a very effective means of seeking popular support for specific issues rather than for a wider range of policies. In 1804, for example, the establishment of the Empire was approved by a vote of 3.57 million to only 2569. As a result, Napoleon made the claim of the type much used by future dictators: ‘I did not usurp the crown; I found it in the gutter and the French people put it on my head.’

* * *

Napoleon openly acknowledged the influence of the Revolution on his economic policies. He intensified the Directory’s efforts to bring the *départements* under more effective financial supervision by the central government and maintained the *agence des contributions directes*, set up by the Directory to assess taxes throughout France. He extended this principle of centralization by insisting on the appointment of tax collectors by the Paris administration rather than by the *départements*. To reduce the incidence of tax evasion, he undertook a nationwide survey of capital assets and property, a scheme which had been proposed by the National Convention in 1793 but subsequently shelved. The currency was re-established on a metallic base, along the lines put forward in 1797 by the Directory, and credit was given a more systematic outlet in the Bank of France (1800), again an institution envisaged between 1795 and 1799. The reformed currency was valued in accordance with the decimal system, which had been introduced during the Terror but only sporadically enforced before 1799. Napoleon also promoted and encouraged industry by means of fairs and exhibitions, a practice initiated by the Directory. In general, he made full use of the more constructive policies of the Revolution to ensure that there would be no return to the economic chaos and financial maladministration of the Bourbon era.

In some respects, however, Napoleon’s economic thinking was more in tune with eighteenth-century ideas. Although he was popular with the bourgeoisie and relied upon their support, he remained unconverted to the middle-class creed of *laissez-faire* and, like the enlightened despots, preferred the system of mercantilism, with its scope for government intervention. He also retained the eighteenth-century notion that agriculture, rather than industry, was the base of the economy: ‘Agriculture is the soul, the foundation of the kingdom; industry ministers to the comfort and happiness of the population. Foreign trade is the superabundance.’⁶ Furthermore, the basic principles of his Commercial Code (1808) are reminiscent of the Commercial Ordinance (1673) and the Marine Ordinance (1681) of Colbert. Napoleon also restored some of the financial institutions of the *ancien régime*: the chambers of commerce, suspended in 1791, were reinstated; by 1803 there were twenty-two of these, one allocated to each *département*, to assist in the formulation of policy. Perhaps the most obvious return to the practices of the *ancien régime*, however, was Napoleon’s preference for indirect taxation at the expense of direct. He established an Excise Bureau in 1804 and subsequently imposed heavy

duties on beer, alcohol, wine and salt. By 1810 he had reversed the Revolution's emphasis on direct taxes and had, apparently, adopted a series of measures similar to those of eighteenth-century Prussia.

Napoleon's dictatorial powers depended, as we have seen, on his military success and personal prestige. This meant that he had to focus his economic policies on providing for a massive war machine which could guarantee his supremacy in Europe. He established several particularly important precedents for the future. The first was the Grand Empire, an economic entity which would feed the French system with tribute and recruits. The second was the Continental System, established by the Berlin and Milan Decrees (1806 and 1807) to seal Europe off from British commerce. These ideas later influenced the ambitious plan, drawn up by Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg during the First World War, for German domination of the whole continent. Hollweg hoped to create a Greater Germany through the annexation of neighbouring states, and also an extensive trade area and customs union which would exclude Britain and thereby destroy her commercial base. Thirdly, Napoleon established over industry tighter controls than had ever been achieved before. Mussolini was eventually to take these to their logical conclusion in his 'Corporate State'.

* * *

The Revolution had made substantial changes to the social structure. These, by and large, Napoleon retained. The power of the bourgeoisie, always latent during the *ancien régime*, was released by a revolution which, according to A. Soboul, established the general principles of bourgeois society and the liberal state.⁷ Napoleon continued to elicit the support of the bourgeoisie, who saw in the Consulate an improved and more stable version of the Directory. The peasantry also found Napoleon willing to maintain some of the major achievements of the Revolution like the destruction of feudalism and the sale of Church lands; they were therefore content to support a régime which confirmed their possession of small-holdings. The urban workers were less fortunate; Napoleon expressed little concern about harsh working conditions and frequently legislated in favour of employers. But this was not necessarily out of step with the Revolution; his policy was entirely consistent with, for example, the Chapelier laws of June 1791 which had banned combination and strikes. Besides, the revolutionary leaders had always opposed the more radical elements of the working class, as was shown by the summary treatment of Babeuf and his followers.

The Revolution had also outlined a policy and structure for education and a legal code, but had been too preoccupied with the struggle for survival to carry them through. The National Convention had divided the educational structure into primary, secondary and higher levels. These were confirmed by Napoleon and integrated into the Imperial University after 1808. The Constituent Assembly had, in 1791, resolved to draw up 'A code of civil laws common to the whole kingdom'.⁸ The legislation which followed was incomplete, but provided the basic outline for Napoleon's reforms, particularly in the areas of marriage, divorce, property and inheritance. According to J.Godechot, B.Hyslop and D.Dowd, Napoleon's Civil Code 'expressed the great social upheavals of the Revolution and consolidated its great conquests'.⁹

Napoleon was, however, prepared to return to some of the practices of the *ancien régime*, particularly in his re-creation of a French nobility. The *noblesse* had been abolished as a class in June 1790, and even the Directory had introduced laws removing

any remaining nobles from administrative posts. From the foundation of the Empire in 1804, Napoleon moved towards the re-establishment of a social élite. He began to confer hereditary fiefs in 1806 and, in 1808, created a new hereditary aristocracy comprising, in descending order, princes, dukes, counts, barons and knights. To some extent, this was a compromise: it retained the career open to talent which had been made possible by the Revolution while, at the same time, reverting to the enlightened despots' emphasis on 'service nobility'. It could also be argued that Napoleon restored the upward mobility between the bourgeoisie and the *noblesse* which had existed during the reign of Louis XIV but ended in the eighteenth century.

There was also compromise over the legal codes and religion. The Civil Code, for example, stressed equality before the law, but also restored, in almost tyrannical form, the authority of the head of the family. There was also a partial return to eighteenth-century property law. The Revolution had banned primogeniture, intending that a will should benefit all children equally. The Civil Code retained this ban but, as a concession, allowed the testator to dispose of 25 per cent of his property as he wished. Napoleon's attitude to women marked a complete departure from the liberalizing tendencies of the Revolution; he insisted on a complete return to Roman Law, and the subjection of wives to their husbands. He also took a backward step with the Code of Criminal Procedure (1808) which virtually revived the notorious *lettres de cachet* of the *ancien régime*, and the Penal Code (1810) which reintroduced branding.

Napoleon's attitude to religion was very similar to that of the enlightened despots. He considered it useful as a social cement, but wished to avoid the dangers of religious controversy. Hence 'I don't see in religion the mystery of the incarnation, but the mystery of the social order'.⁵ Concerned with upholding the hierarchy which he had established, Napoleon reasoned: 'Society cannot exist without inequality of fortunes, and inequality of fortunes cannot exist without religion. When a man is dying of hunger alongside another who stuffs himself, it is impossible to make him accede to the difference unless there is an authority which says to him, "God wishes it thus"'.⁵ Since religion fulfilled a social function, it had to be carefully directed, which meant that it 'must be in the hands of the government'.¹⁰ The Concordat, formed with the Pope in 1801, ensured government control over the appointment of clergy and minimized papal interference in France. In this respect it also represented the final triumph of Gallicanism in its prolonged conflict, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with Ultramontanism.

Napoleon's own contribution to the French social structure was a more conscious and deliberate moulding of society than had ever been attempted before. He tried to create a pyramid, a hierarchy of classes, each bound by its own interests to the régime, and each aware of its place. The authority of the emperor would permeate all levels by means of the administrative reorganization and the legal changes, while the people would be committed to the régime emotionally through effective propaganda and military success. The secret police, under the efficient direction of Fouché, could be relied upon to eliminate opposition and discourage dissension. Indeed, this was to be a particularly important precedent. As M. Latéy writes, 'the absolute monarchs, who re-established themselves after his fall, learned from Napoleon's techniques and in doing so helped to lay the groundwork of modern totalitarian rule'.¹¹

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Napoleon's achievements represent a synthesis of ideas and influences so complex that they are bound to attract an enormous range of historical interpretation. At one extreme, Napoleon appeared as a manifestation of Revolution, especially in those parts of Europe which had not previously been affected by revolutionary upheaval. At the other, the Napoleonic Empire was seen as a per-version of the revolutionary ideal; Trotsky, for example, later used Bonapartism as a term of abuse to describe the capture of a revolution by military reactionaries.

The Napoleonic era was also bound to throw up contradictions. The most important of these was the struggle of the heir to the Revolution, a monarch who had literally made himself, to coexist with rulers whose powers and prerogatives extended far back into the *ancien régime*. This theme will be explored in the next chapter.