

The French Revolution and Age of Napoleon

The French Revolution and Age of Napoleon beguiled and fascinated the world. In 25 years the Revolutionaries, and then Napoleon, created a new social order and engendered a new political consciousness that altered how people think of society and government to this day. For Europeans the changes were as significant as anything that had ever previously occurred.

At the outbreak of Revolution in 1789, the Revolutionaries sought to undo the privileges enjoyed by a few to the detriment of the many. Initially they did not intend to overthrow the monarchy, assault the aristocracy, or attack the Church. Yet they soon executed a King and Queen, decapitated aristocrats and perceived counter-revolutionaries, seized the property and wealth of the Church, created a new calendar, initiated festivals for all to mingle freely, reformed education, and attempted to end religious practice.

The ideology of the Revolution, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,” became the Revolution. Its proponents tried to create a democracy, abolished slavery, and accorded civil rights to Jews, women, and other marginalized peoples. Women actually played a prominent part in the Revolution, exercising special influence over matters of religion and economic subsistence.

A political dichotomy emerged between Conservatives and Liberals that persists to this day. Conservatives sought to rely upon God’s divine providence and to honor longstanding traditions and social conventions. Liberals sought to change such traditions and conventions by applying ideological principles to reform conditions existing within society.

Within a few years the Revolution devolved into national terror and international war. By 1793 France was at war with every country in Europe other than Russia, even as it was eliminating its leadership. Ultimately Napoleon took command. He became a hero in his own mind, within the army, and for many in France. He established order, extended his empire across continental Europe, celebrated ancient Roman history and literature, redesigned Paris as an artistically classical city, and created a new code of law. Ultimately defeated, his legacy lives on, as does that of the Revolution.

This course will freshly and objectively assess those legacies while considering the individuals, ideas and events that made the French Revolution and Age of Napoleon such a significant part of our history.

Robert Nolan is an attorney who has a history degree from the University of Scranton, where he has been on the adjunct faculty, a law degree from Harvard, and has previously presented Evergreen Forum courses on America’s Revolutionary War, Civil War, Old West, Vietnam, World War I, Shrouded Pillars of Western Civilization, and Africa.

Thursdays from 1:30–3:30 p.m. starting March 2 through April 20 for 8 sessions

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