Be aware: two similar questions asked on the AP

“Napoleon I is sometimes called the greatest enlightened despot. Evaluate this assessment in terms of Napoleon I’s policies and accomplishments. Be sure to include a definition of enlightened despotism in your answer.” (1981 - #4)

“Napoleon was a child of the Enlightenment.” Assess the validity of the statement. Use examples referring to specific aspects of the enlightenment and to Napoleon’s policies and attitudes (1992#5)

I. Intro

Napoleon I (Napoleon Bonaparte), sometimes considered the greatest enlightened despot, was the first modern political figure to use the rhetoric of revolution and nationalism, to back it with military force, and to combine those elements into a mighty weapon of imperial expansion in the service of his own power. As an enlightened despot, or ruler with absolute, unlimited power, but following ideas of the enlightenment, such as rationality, religious toleration, and freedoms, Napoleon made several changes to the government of France. Through the changes he made and reforms based on the enlightenment, he ruled, absolutely, as an enlightened despot, becoming the first, and greatest in history. Coming into power on the wings of the Revolution, he established himself as the First Consul. His policies included the Constitution of the Year VIII, making peace domestically and in foreign affairs, agreeing to a concordat with the Roman Catholic Church, and establishing a dynasty, and accomplished abolishment of the Old Regime, nationalism and loyalty of the nation to him, and unification of the lands he gained and controlled under the Napoleonic code.

II. Policies

- Constitution of the Year VIII

  1. Suggested democratic principles, appealed to republican theory and a Council of State, and established the rule of one man, the First Consul, Bonaparte.
  2. Under the Consulate, the revolution ended in France. By then, the Third Estate had achieved most of their goals, the peasants had gained they wanted and destroyed the old feudal privileges, and Bonaparte gave them security.
  3. This marked the beginning of his rule as despot, and the destruction of the old feudal privileges was the start of his enlightened policies, that were inspired by the political and social
reformers who called for change, and new forms of government in France.

- Making peace
  1. In foreign affairs, he made peace with France’s enemies, which justified the public’s confidence in him. Russia had already left the Second Coalition. A campaign in Italy brought another victory over Austria at Marengo in 1800. The Treaty of Luneville early in 1801 took Austria out of the war. Britain was now alone, and in 1802, concluded the Treaty of Amiens, which brought peace to Europe.
  2. Bonaparte used generosity, flattery, and bribery to win over enemies at home. He required only loyalty of the offices of royal legislature.
  3. Through these methods, he rose in power. The peace was a very enlightened policy, because Voltaire, a major enlightened thinker had advocated peace.
  4. He established a highly centralized administration in which prefects responsible to the government in Paris managed all departments, employed secret police, and stamped out the royalist rebellion in the west, and made the rule of Paris effective in Brittany and the Vendee for the first time in years.
  5. Napoleon used and invented opportunities to destroy his enemies.
     - When a plot on his life surfaced in 1804, he used it as an excuse to attack the Jacobins, though it was the work of royalists.
     - In 1804, he violated the sovereignty of the German state of Baden to seize the Bourbon duke of Enghien, who was accused of participation in a royalist plot and shot the duke of Enghien, even though Bonaparte knew him to be innocent.

- Concordat with the Roman Catholic Church
  1. Napoleon made an agreement with Pope Pius VII. The settlement required both the refractory clergy and those who had accepted the revolution to resign, but in return, the church gave up its claims on its confiscated property.
  2. The clergy had to swear an oath of loyalty to the state. The Organic Articles of 1802. Similar laws applied to Protestants and Jews, reducing further the privileged position of the Catholic Church.
  3. The Concordat declared, “Catholicism is the religion of the great majority of French citizens.” This fell far short of what the pope had wanted: religious dominance.
4. Control of religion advocated enlightened thinkers’ ideas, because many thought of religion as irrational, and the cause of fanaticism, which was against the morals and teachings of the rational thinking enlightened thinkers advocated.

- **The Napoleonic Code**
  1. In 1802, he was ratified as consul for life, and granted full power. He thereafter passed the Civil Code of 1804, usually known as the Napoleonic Code.
  2. It safeguarded all forms of property and tried to secure French society against internal changes.
  3. Conservative attitudes toward labor and women during the revolution received full support. Workers had fewer rights than employers, and Men had much control over children and wives.
  4. Primogeniture (passing of inheritance to only the first, usually male, child) remained abolished, and property was distributed among all children, males and females. However, married women could dispose of their property only with the consent of their husbands.
  5. Divorce remained more difficult for women than men.
  6. Before, French law had differed from region to region, but the confusion was ended by the Napoleonic Code.
  7. The Napoleonic code ended the old regime, which was the main goal of enlightened thinkers, who wanted social change, and political reform. With the end of the Old Regime, both the social and political establishments were revolutionized.

- **Establishing a Dynasty**
  1. In 1804, he seized on a bomb attack on his life to make himself emperor, arguing that it would secure the new regime and make further attempts on his life useless.
  2. Became Emperor, and called Napoleon I.
  3. The establishment of a dynasty went against all of the revolutionary, liberal thoughts of the enlightened thinkers, and was paradoxical to France’s original plan of a democratic state, because this was equivalent to the establishment of a monarch, which they had just fought to remove.

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**III. Accomplishments**

- Napoleon ended the Old Regime and feudal trappings throughout Western Europe after conquering most of Europe. He forced the eastern European states to reorganize to resist his armies.
  1. Wherever Napoleon ruled, the Napoleonic Code was imposed, and hereditary social distinctions abolished.
    - Feudal privileges disappeared, and the peasants were freed from serfdom and manorial dues.
    - In towns, guilds and local oligarchies that had been dominant for centuries were dissolved or deprived of their power.
The established churches lost their traditional independence and were made subordinate to the state. Church monopoly of religion was replaced by general toleration.

His army, from the revolution, was immensely loyal to the nation and him. He could conscript citizen soldiers in unprecedented numbers. No single enemy could match his resources.

He made his ruling dominions uniform. Wherever he ruled, the Napoleonic Code was imposed.

Never before had there been a unified German state. And not since the Roman Empire had any state been able to conquer and control a territory this large.

Napoleon spreads the idea of nationalism. After Napoleon humiliated Prussia at Jena in 1806, German intellectuals began to urge resistance to Napoleon on the basis of German nationalism. The French conquest endangered the independence and achievements of all German-speaking people. Many saw France as an example of greatness attained by enlisting the active support of the entire people in the patriotic cause. Several reforms were made by the rulers of the surrounding conquered countries in order to stand up to Napoleon’s strength.

These reforms spread enlightened ideas everywhere, outward from Napoleon, and into the rest of Europe. His rule inspired toleration, rationalism, and nationalism, and was the start of the modern European political and social era. As such a great influence, he is one of the greatest enlightened despots in history.

IV. Conclusion

Napoleon I rose to become an enlightened despot. As one, he implemented social, religious, and political reforms and policies that resulted in the accomplishment of abolishing the old regime, national loyalty to the state and its leader, and the imposition of the Napoleonic Code. He successfully made France dominant as a European power, and glorified himself and his nation. Through his rise and rule, he was able to implement absolute rule, rising far enough to become emperor of France, virtually unchallenged. As such, he made reforms inspired by the enlightenment, and ruled as despot of France, making changes to society, inspired by progressivity and rationality of the Enlightenment.

Bibliography
