The era of the French Revolution and Napoleon ended in 1815 but it did not stop being important. For many years to come, people all over Europe continued to feel its effects. In all sorts of ways, it helped to shape their lives, their beliefs and the societies in which they lived. Measure a metre, weigh a kilogram or pour out a litre, and you are using weights and measures invented by the revolutionaries in 1795. Look at the flags of the countries of Europe, and you will see that half are modelled on the tricolour flag of the revolutionaries of 1789. But the most significant legacy of 1789-1815 is to be found in the big ideas unleashed: liberalism, nationalism and revolution.

Liberalism

The French Revolution began, when the Estates General of 1789 declared that it was a 'National Assembly' and set to work to write a constitution, which is a set of rules for how a country should be run. It began by making a 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen'; giving French citizens equal rights and liberties. The idea of giving people liberty and equality through a constitution was one of the important achievements of the revolution. And when Napoleon conquered Europe in the 1800s, constitutions were introduced into the states that came under French control. The ideas of liberty and equality therefore spread throughout Europe. In 1815, however, after they had defeated Napoleon, the old rulers of Europe took back their thrones. Many got rid of his constitutions and went back to ruling their states in the old way. But they could not wipe out people's memories of what it was like to be ruled with a constitution. Millions of Europeans became 'liberals', believing in the ideas of liberty and equality, and wanting a constitution giving them rights. The revolutionaries of the nineteenth century borrowed images as well as ideas from the French Revolution. The most famous of those images was that of 'Liberty'. Liberty was portrayed as a young woman, Marianne, and she appeared in countless pictures, statues and models throughout the French Revolution. She appeared again during the revolutions of 1830. Perhaps the most famous image of Liberty is the Statue of Liberty at the entrance to New York harbour (see above). This 200 tonne, 97m high copper statue was a gift to the United States from the French people to show the friendship between their two republics. It was suggested by a French historian to commemorate the 100th anniversary of American independence.

Nationalism

The second key idea of the French Revolution was that France was a nation, not a kingdom. In other words, France was not the personal property of King Louis XVI: it was a union of all 28 million French-speaking people. The first act of the revolutionaries was to set up a National Assembly to speak for these people. Soon after, they adopted the tricolour flag to represent the nation — the red and blue colours of the people of Paris combined with the king's traditional white. During the Revolutionary wars, the French set up new nations in the lands they had conquered. Italian speaking people were brought together into nations such as the Roman Republic. Later, Poles gained their own nation when Napoleon created the Grand Duchy of Warsaw. Millions of Germans became citizens of new nations when Napoleon forced 300 German rulers to unite into just thirty states. Many European people thus found out what it was like to live in their own nation, and to be ruled according to a constitution.

This came to an end in 1815. Politicians from the countries that defeated Napoleon met in Vienna, capital of Austria, to redraw the map of Europe. At the Congress of Vienna, as this meeting was called, they re-created many of the old states that Napoleon had destroyed.

Revolution

Liberals and nationalists started revolutions in 1820, 1830, and 1848. In the German states, many of the revolutionaries were students. One of them, Heinrich von Gagern, aged nineteen, wrote about their aims in a letter to his father in 1818:

... we want Germany to be considered one land and the German people one people ... We want a constitution for the people that fits in with the spirit of the times ... Above all, we want the princes to understand that they exist for the country and not the country for them.

Heinrich von Gagern, Letters and Speeches, 1815—48

In 1830, revolutions broke out in six countries. In the Netherlands, the Belgian people rose in revolt against the Dutch King William. Their country had been taken over by the Dutch in 1815 and they did not like the way he had governed them since then. Their complaints can be seen in this conversation between King William and one of the revolutionaries who was allowed to speak with him:

'Sire, Belgium demands a free press.'

'But press freedom already exists' [said the King].

'Yes, Sire, in Holland but not in Belgium ... There are other complaints that we have been told to bring to your Majesty's attention. All the big government offices are in Holland ... The High Court of Justice is in Holland ... Jobs in the civil service and the armed forces are reserved for the Dutch who see them as their birthright.

Alexandre Gendebien, Memoires, date unknown
King William, however, refused to listen to such complaints. Dislike of his rule spread throughout the provinces and people armed themselves to fight the Dutch. After much bloodshed, the Belgians drove the Dutch out and proclaimed that Belgium was an independent country.

(see painting opposite by Egide Charles Gustave Wappers, Episode of the Belgian Revolution of 1830, Musée d’Art Ancien, Brussels)

The countries of Europe were shaken by revolutions again in 1848. In the Austrian Empire, for example, Hungarian people rebelled against the Austrian authorities in Budapest. Similar revolutions broke out all over Europe including Poland, France, Italy and Germany.

The Myth of Napoleon

Before his death in exile on the lonely island of St Helena, Napoleon dictated his memoirs and encouraged his friends to write down everything he said. In these writings he built up an account of his life and ideas which made him seem like a great hero and a martyr. When these were published after his death, they helped to create a reputation for him as a great historical figure. In 1840, nearly twenty years after his death, the British government allowed his body to be taken from its grave on St Helena for re-burial in France. When Napoleon's coffin arrived in Paris, 100,000 people lined the streets in freezing weather to pay their respects. He was buried in the Invalides church, and was later transferred to a massive tomb made of precious stone. Since then, more people have visited his tomb than any other tourist attraction in Paris.

What made Napoleon such a legendary figure? We can also find answers by looking at the monuments which were built to honour his memory. The Arch de Triomphe in Paris commemorates 172 battles won by France between 1789 and 1815.

Activities

Explain what is meant by liberalism, nationalism and revolution. Explain why these ideas became so influential in the period after 1815.

Why do you think Napoleon continues to hold such interest for people today? Why do think the French built so many monuments in honour of Napoleon?