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Napoleon Bonaparte

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1769 - 1821

Napoleon Bonaparte

The French period

The history of the Netherlands can never truly be separated from developments outside the country. This certainly applies to the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the French exerted decisive influence on Dutch politics and the “little corporal” Napoleon Bonaparte was France’s leader. Napoleon was a military man who overthrew the French government in 1799 and afterwards took control not only of France but also of all the territories conquered by French armies. Subsequently, as a general, he led his troops in battle against the Emperor of Austria, the Tsar of Russia and the King of England.

From 1806, Emperor Napoleon ruled almost the whole of Europe as an “enlightened despot”.

The Dutch Republic had already fallen to French troops in 1795 with the aid of Dutch patriots. Until 1806, the Batavian

Republic, as the Netherlands was then known, remained officially independent of France but in actuality little took place without the approval of the French.

In 1806, Napoleon appointed his brother Louis as King of Holland, and the Netherlands became a kingdom. This laid the foundations for the later monarchy.

In 1810 Napoleon deposed his brother and the Netherlands was absorbed into the French Empire. Three years later, Napoleon was defeated and banished to Elba; the Netherlands regained its independence.

Napoleon clearly played a leading role in the history of Europe at this time.

One of his major achievements was that he modernised administration procedures and justice systems in the areas he controlled. He also implemented new weights (the kilogramme) and measurements (the metre). In addition, the registry of births,

deaths and marriages was introduced whereby everyone had to adopt a surname.

The Dutch response to these modernisations was divided. For example, some believed that the *Code Napoleon*, the French civil code, was an enormous improvement compared to their own local laws. The new civil code created a rule of law under which everyone was equal, and in which the dispensation of justice was public. Its opponents felt that Napoleon had not taken into consideration the greatly varying local customs and arrangements. The introduction of conscription met with just as much resistance, especially when the demand for soldiers for the seemingly never-ending wars continued to grow.

After the fall of Napoleon no one thought about reversing the Napoleonic innovations. The *Code Napoleon* therefore remained in force, just like many more of Napoleon's innovations.



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Sub-topics

Primary education sector

The French Revolution

From Little Corporal to Emperor and Ruler of the World
Napoleon in Russia, Egypt and the Battle of Austerlitz
'I am your rabbit' (how Louis Napoleon made himself popular in the Netherlands)

Secondary education sector

The Dutch patriots and the fall of the Republic
Louis Napoleon as King of the Netherlands
The consequences of the Continental System for the Netherlands
The Battle of Waterloo
The map of Europe after the Congress of Vienna

Past and Present

The Palace on the Dam: royal palace and/or town hall?
A French practice in the Netherlands: the population register

In the Treasure Chest

Replica of a document from the registry of births, deaths and marriages

References

Places to Go

Amsterdam in the steps of Louis Napoleon: Palace on the Dam, Trippenhuis
Haarlem: The provincial government houses of the province of North Holland

Books for young people

Staton Rabin, *Betsy en Napoleon* (12+)

Background literature

Judith Amsenga and Geertje Dekker, 'Wat nu?'
De Franse Tijd in Nederland, 1795-1813
(Verloren Verleden 23), Hilversum 2004
H.M. Beliën et al. (ed.) *Nederlanders van het eerste uur: Het ontstaan van het moderne Nederland 1780-1830*, Amsterdam 1996

Websites

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