



The Franco-Haitian Revolution

Almost all of the immense body of scholarship on the French revolution is so focused on a national France that the revolution in the colonies all but disappears. Yet when the revolution began in 1789, Saint Domingue—producer of half the western world's sugar and coffee—was of enormous importance to the French economy and its propertied elite. Revolution rapidly became a question of empire.

Nation and Revolution in Imperial Europe

Scholars today regard the French revolution not as the work of a collective actor—be it the “bourgeoisie” or the “popular classes”—but as a dynamic process, pushed on by the interaction of multiple actors with different interests and desires. A strong monarchy had developed state institutions and patrimonial ties to elites across France, more intensively than in much of eighteenth-century Europe. But aristocrats chafed at royal power, non-noble property owners at the privileges of the aristocracy, and peasants at the dues and services they owed to landowners. The older, hierarchical, patriarchal conception of French society and the sponsorship of royal and aristocratic patrons corresponded less and less with the increasing self-confidence of urban professionals or of elite women who saw themselves as consumers and active participants in spaces of sociability (such as cafés, salons, and political meetings). Magazines, newspapers, books, and scandal sheets proliferated and spread ideas of Enlightenment thinkers among the literate population

and those to whom these texts were read aloud. As the context for political debate widened, the concept of “citizen” came to the fore.

The French old regime had gone further than other European states to distinguish a body of citizens from “foreigners,” but its administrators conceived of the citizen as a subject of state sovereignty, not its source. The political activists of the late eighteenth century developed a different vision. They drew on older ideas of the politically engaged citizen, citing precedents from Greek cities, the Roman republic, and Renaissance city-states. As in the past, the politicized ideal of citizenship was not all-inclusive, for it implied the ability and the will to be active in civic affairs. At certain moments, the Parisian “crowd” propelled political leaders in radical directions; at others it was elite reformers who pushed ideas to their limits.

The revolutionary moment in France was precipitated not only by internal changes in political consciousness and organization but also by the stresses of interempire conflict. France lost the war of 1756–63 and with it its Canadian colonies and all but a few outposts of its south Asian ones, but kept the horrifically lucrative sugar islands, notably Saint Domingue. Winners and losers were left with enormous debts, and if Britain could try to extract more from its colonies—with consequences its leaders did not predict—France had to turn inward.

As demands for more taxes went down the French hierarchy, resistance pushed upward. Vulnerable and needing cooperation, Louis XVI in 1789 called a consultative meeting of the Estates General, something that increasingly powerful kings had dispensed with since 1614. The representatives of the three “estates” into which French society was organized—clergy, nobility, and commoners—refused the old terms under which the Estates General had met and turned the meeting into a National Constituent Assembly. Here the claim was heard that the people, not the king, were sovereign.

On July 14, 1789, a crowd stormed and destroyed the Bastille, while in rural areas many peasants refused to pay dues to landowners and sacked manors. The assembly was becoming the *de facto* government; it abolished the nobility and reformed the system of rural dues. In August, it passed the Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which declared, “The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. No body or individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from the nation.” It stressed equality before law and representative government. But what was the French nation?

The revolution soon ran into the non-national nature of European politics. Austria (where Queen Marie Antoinette was from) and Prussia threatened to invade France in 1791. This threat galvanized people’s sense of “*la patrie en danger*” and led to efforts to assemble a voluntary army of citizens. But the national idea was not sufficiently strong. By 1793, compulsion was

added to the spirit of citizenship in recruiting soldiers; systematic conscription followed. Threats from abroad and radicalization of the revolutionary regime at home (including the execution of the king and queen) were part of a volatile mix that gave rise to waves of terror and counterterror and then to a more conservative turn. Meanwhile, France had been declared a nation and a republic, and the constitution and a plethora of revolutionary writings enshrined an ideology of republicanism that has been both invoked and violated ever since. Power resided in the people through their elected representatives; the state was one and indivisible; liberty, equality, and fraternity were its core principles.

This was a bold assertion of a new kind of sovereignty, but the boundaries of equal citizenry were contested from the start. Women were considered citizens, but not “active” ones—they did not get the vote until 1944. Whether the republican ideal implied social and economic, as well as political, equivalence was debated. Many property owners feared that too much political participation by the propertyless would threaten not only their own interests but social order. Fear of chaos was the cover behind which a more authoritarian government crept into post-revolutionary politics; in 1797 the new executive authority, the Directory, refused to accept defeat in an election. Tension escalated until a palace coup in 1799 brought in General Napoleon Bonaparte. In a startling reversal of revolutionary vocabulary, he declared himself emperor in 1804.

Citizenship and the Politics of Difference in the French Empire

Let us now look at what is usually left out of the story. One cannot draw a sharp line around European France. Neither Enlightenment philosophy nor revolutionary practice provided a clear idea of who constituted the French people or what the relationship of European France to France overseas should be. Some political thinkers, insisting that they were applying reason to society, developed classifications of human populations that explained why African and Asian peoples could not participate in civic life. Others refused to recognize particularity among people and assumed that their own ideas of the universal should apply to all. Still others used their enlightened reason to provide a more nuanced view of human difference.

For Denis Diderot, espousing universal values implied recognizing the integrity of different cultures. From his perspective, European assertions of the right to colonize others were illegitimate—a sign of the moral bankruptcy of European states. The Abbé Grégoire opposed colonization as currently practiced. He detested slavery, but not converting and “civilizing” other people. In 1788, leading Enlightenment figures founded the *Société des Amis des Noirs* to plead the cause of slaves in the French empire. While

they did not agree on the significance of cultural difference, these theorists and activists embraced the fundamental equality of all humans and denied that people in the colonies could be enslaved or exploited at will. Most abolitionists favored gradual emancipation, weaning the imperial economy from its degrading practices without entailing social upheaval.

But the metropole's intellectuals were not the only parties interested in the relationship of colonies to the revolution. White planters in Saint Domingue translated citizenship doctrine into claims for a measure of self-rule. Their delegations to Paris lobbied for colonial assemblies to have the power to regulate matters of property and social status within the colony, insisting that colonies that mixed slaves and free, African and European, could not be ruled by the same principles that governed European France. But the revolutionary assemblies in Paris also heard from *gens de couleur*, property-owning, slave-owning inhabitants of Caribbean islands, usually born of French fathers and enslaved or ex-slave mothers. In Saint Domingue, they were a substantial group, owning one-third of the colony's plantations and a quarter of the slaves—and many of them did not lack for money, education, or connections to Paris. Citizenship, they insisted, should not be restricted by color. The Paris assemblies temporized.

Everyone involved, including the Paris revolutionaries, had to rethink positions when slaves entered the fray in August 1791. Two-thirds of the slaves of Saint Domingue were African born, and the revolt emerged from networks shaped by African religious affinities as well as knowledge of events in Paris. Rebels burned plantations and assassinated planters across an entire region of the island. The Saint Domingue revolution soon turned into multiple, simultaneous struggles: between royalists and patriots, between whites and *gens de couleur*, between slaves and slave owners. Subsets of each category sometimes allied with others, often switching allegiances. Political action was not defined by membership in a social category.

The revolutionary state feared losing a valuable colony to royalist counterrevolution or to the rival empires of England or Spain. The *gens de couleur* now seemed to leaders of the French Republic to be a necessary ally. In March 1792, the government in Paris agreed to declare all free people to be French citizens with equal political rights. In 1794, one of their number, Jean-Baptiste Belley, took a seat in the French National Constituent Assembly as a delegate from Saint Domingue. The door to imperial citizenship was now ajar.

It opened further as the French government found it could not control the multisided conflict without enlisting slave support. In 1793, the republican commissioner in Saint Domingue decided to free the slaves and declare them citizens. Paris—where the revolutionary dynamic had also entered a more radical phase—ratified his edict and the next year extended it to other

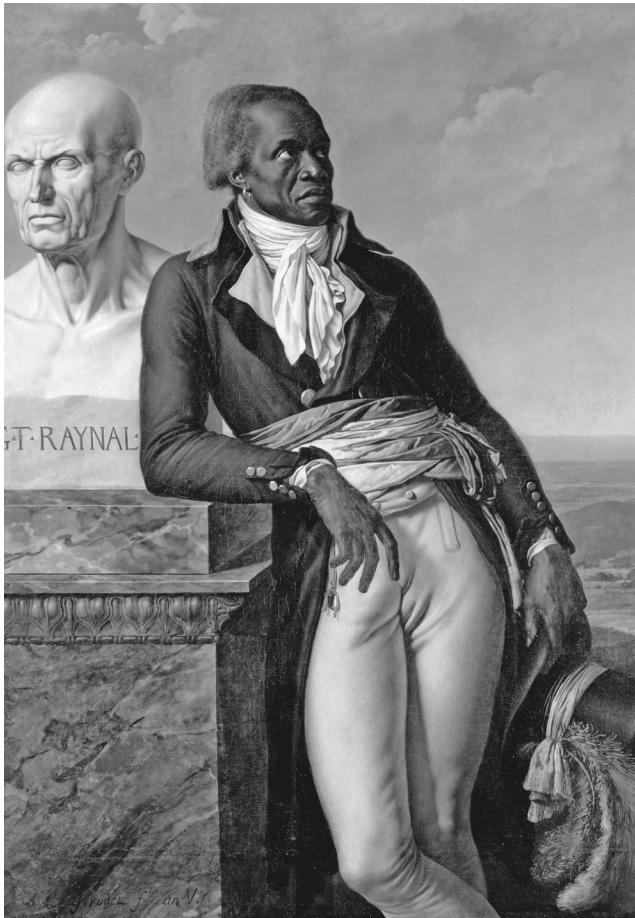


Figure 8.1

Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belley, by Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy Trioson, 1797. A man of color, elected to represent Saint Domingue in the French legislature, Belley leans on the bust of the Abbé Raynal, a leading (white) advocate of the rights of slaves, while looking toward a distant future. Musée National du Chateau de Versailles. Bridgeman Art Library, GettyImages.

colonies. The 1795 constitution declared the colonies an “integral part” of France. France became, for a time, an empire of citizens.

That slaves were needed to fortify the military was hardly new in the history of empires—Islamic empires and others had used this tactic. And slave-fighters had been deployed earlier in imperial competitions in the Caribbean. But the practicalities now corresponded to a principle that was indeed new—citizenship. Unlike the personal dependence of the fighting slave upon the master, the participation of the ex-slaves of Saint Domingue in the French military was linked to their new status.

The Saint Domingue revolution was thus a movement for freedom within empire before it was a movement against empire. The most revered leader of slaves, Toussaint L’Ouverture, embodied the ambiguities of the situation. A literate and skilled freed slave, he joined the slave revolt early on and rapidly rose to leadership. He contemplated for a time allying with the Spanish, but when France, not Spain, moved toward abolishing slavery, he went over to the French side, becoming an officer of the republic and by

1797 the de facto ruler of French Saint Domingue, fighting against royalists and rival empires and in defense of ex-slaves' newly claimed liberty. In 1801, still proclaiming his loyalty to France, Toussaint wrote a new constitution for Saint Domingue.

Neither French leaders nor Toussaint wanted to see sugar production end and they did not have an alternative to the watchful eyes of landowners and officials, at least, they thought, until ex-slaves had acquired the self-discipline of the "free" worker. Not all ex-slaves agreed; there were revolts within the revolution over issues of labor and of autonomy, as well as a daily struggle as ex-slaves sought control over their working lives and insisted that the state regard them—in officials' records of names, marriages, and deaths, for instance—in the same way as white citizens.

If the actions of Saint Domingue's people forced the Paris revolutionaries to keep rethinking what they meant by citizenship, the dynamics of empire in Europe had an enormous effect on the colonies. When Napoleon came to power he reversed the stumbling moves toward inclusive, empire-wide citizenship. In the overseas empire, Napoleon was a thoroughgoing restorationist, reflecting his personal connections to old regime settlers in the Caribbean (including but not limited to the slave-owning family of his first wife, Josephine). He wanted not only to restore the pre-revolutionary special status of colonies but to reinstate slavery as well. In 1802, he sent an army to Saint Domingue to do just that. He dissembled about his purpose enough to induce Toussaint, still acting within the framework of imperial citizenship, to surrender. Toussaint was sent off to prison in France, where he soon died. It was the Napoleonic version of empire—not a national or republican one—that ended Toussaint's vision of emancipation within France.

Other generals of slave origin continued the fight. The ex-slave armies combined with the devastation of yellow fever on Napoleon's army proved too much for the great emperor. In 1803, he gave up. The next year, the victors proclaimed the Republic of Haiti.

A struggle for freedom and citizenship within a revolutionary empire thus ended up with Haiti taking itself out of the empire. France's other sugar colonies, Guadeloupe and Martinique, where rebellions had been contained, had to endure forty-four more years of slavery until another revolutionary situation in European France, combined with another round of revolts in the plantation colonies, definitively turned the remaining slaves of the French empire into citizens.

Haiti's independence posed a new problem to the world's empires. Was Haiti in the vanguard of emancipation and decolonization? Or was it a symbol of the dangers of losing control over African slaves? Not only France but other imperial states had strong reasons to keep Haiti a pariah and not

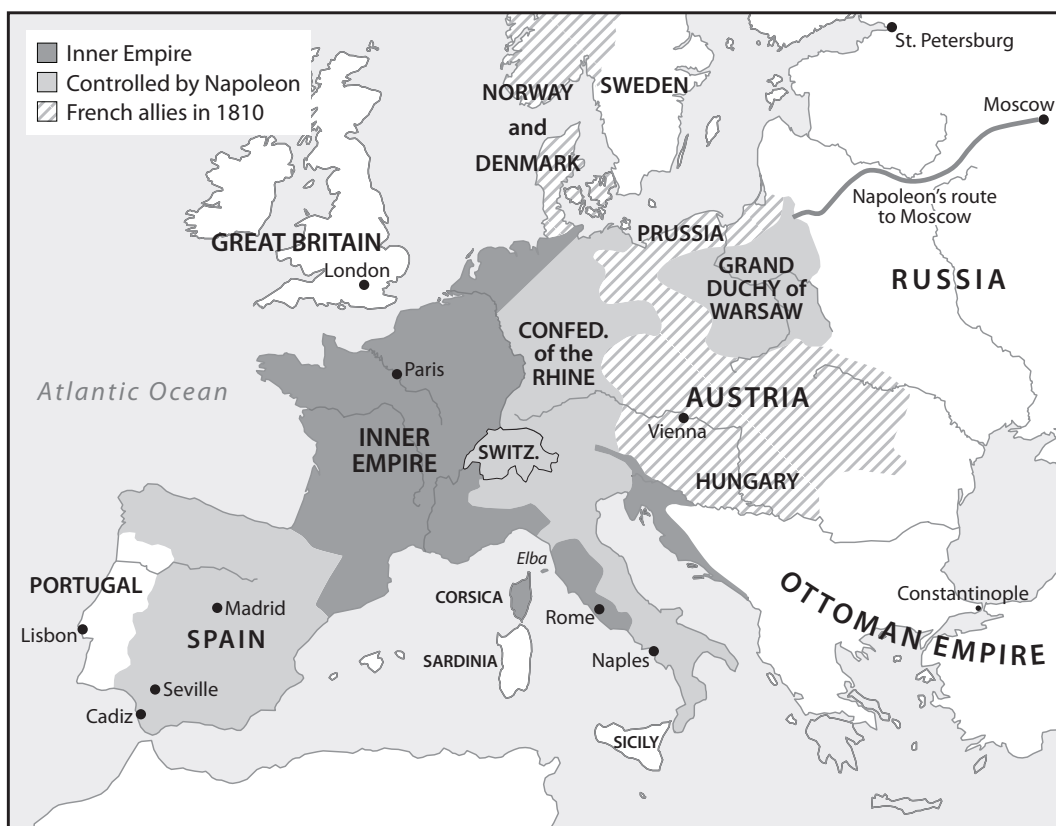
a vanguard. Only in 1825 did France give Haiti conditional recognition as a sovereign state, and then only after Haiti agreed to pay compensation for France's supposed losses. Full recognition finally came in 1838. The United States recognized Haiti in 1862, in the midst of its own civil war.

When in 1938, C.L.R. James, born in what had been the British slave colony of Trinidad, wrote his famous history of the Saint Domingue revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, he tried to put Haiti back in the vanguard of liberation and use its example to argue for the end of colonialism around the world. In 1946, an African political leader elected to serve in the French legislature in Paris, Léopold Senghor, invoked the moment 150 years earlier when France recognized the citizenship of black slaves. He was trying to persuade other deputies to return to the promise of revolutionary France and make all subjects in the colonies into citizens, with the same rights as those of European France. The Franco-Haitian revolution of 1789–1804 brought before the world questions about the relationship of citizenship and freedom—within and beyond empires—issues that are still debated today.

Napoleon **End required reading**

Napoleon now lies in his opulent tomb in Paris, a few kilometers from the Arc de Triomphe, his monument to himself and the glorious battles by which he conquered most of Europe. The French nation, as it has come to be, has appropriated the Napoleonic legend for itself. But Napoleon's history sits uneasily within a retrospective assertion of a French nation-state. Napoleon's conquests—at their peak embracing about 40 percent of Europe's population—are well-known, so let us concentrate on two questions: Did his empire represent a new, post-revolutionary notion of empire politics, less aristocratic and hierarchical, more centralized and bureaucratic? How French was the French empire under Napoleon?

The case for a new kind of empire rests on Napoleon's apparent interest in turning the rationalism of the Enlightenment into a logically planned, integrated, centralized system of administration, staffed by people chosen for competence and allegiance to the state, irrespective of social status. Science—including geography, cartography, statistics, and ethnography—would guide state officials and shape the population's conceptions of itself. The state's role in defining and superintending society through a single legal regime was embodied in the Napoleonic code. The code was more systematic than Justinian's compendium of the sixth century (chapter 3); it set out both public and private law, to be applied in a uniform and disinterested—and above all predictable—manner by judicial institutions. Taxation was high, but thanks



Map 8.2
Napoleonic
empire in
Europe.

to the systematic registration of land, its basis was transparent. A direct relation of citizen to sovereign was to replace the entrenched privileges of nobles and clergy, the arbitrary corruption of pre-revolutionary monarchy, and deference to local elites and local traditions. Napoleon abolished the one symbolic rival—long since voided of power—to his claims to overarching imperial authority in Europe: the Holy Roman Empire. Napoleon was of course a dictator and not a democrat, but in this argument, his imperial regime embodies the ideals of a French citizenry united behind its leader and rationalized bureaucracy—two products of revolution and Enlightenment, extended across Europe onto Russia's lands.

The case for reversion to an older mode of empire, on the other hand, starts with the symbolism of state power that Napoleon invoked, none more striking than his taking the title of emperor, his public display of thrones and robes and crowns, and his prevailing upon the pope to conduct the coronation—even with the twist Napoleon gave the ceremony by taking the crown from the pope's hands and placing it on his own head. All of this deliberately and obviously echoed the coronation of Charlemagne one thousand years earlier, just as Napoleon's triumphal arches claimed the heritage of Rome.

The revolution's break with aristocratic government was compromised in two more fundamental ways. First was Napoleon's allocation of noble titles and *dotations* (property given to people who served the regime, heritable in the male line) to many of his generals and leading supporters, including a considerable number of people who had held titles under the old regime as well as to elites in some conquered territories, creating (or re-creating) what one scholar calls an "imperial nobility." Second was his use in conquered areas of another classic strategy of emperors: ruling different places differently. If that meant in some contexts—northern Italy, for example—incorporating new territory into the basic administrative structure of France and imposing standardized laws and practices of bureaucracy, it meant in others—the



Figure 8.2
Napoleon on his imperial throne,
Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres,
1806. Musée de l'Armée, Paris.
Bridgeman Art Library, GettyImages.

Duchy of Warsaw, for instance—co-opting rather than displacing the local aristocracy. Such strategies went against the notions of equality that the revolution had promoted. And the Napoleonic code was a patriarchal one, reinforcing male authority within the households of citizens.

An imperial perspective lets us avoid the false dichotomy between continuity and change. Napoleon faced challenges common to all empires, balancing the need to co-opt defeated kings and princes against systematic top-down authority, finding a workable strategy somewhere between creating a homogenized elite and ruling each part of the empire separately. Other emperors across the world had tried to use officials distanced in one way or another from the society they were administering; the Chinese had pioneered a carefully recruited and educated bureaucracy long before the Enlightenment. Napoleon assimilated new ideas of government into classic imperial strategies.

Michael Broers argues that Napoleon conceived of an “inner empire”—present-day France except for the Vendée, the Netherlands, countries around the Rhine, Switzerland, much of northern Italy—in which a civilizing, centralizing, bureaucratizing model of rule was most strictly imposed. Then came an “outer empire” in which local aristocracies played a much stronger role and the Napoleonic reforms—particularly in regard to the privileges of nobles—were attenuated. Napoleon installed his relatives (brothers Joseph in Naples and Spain, Louis in the Netherlands, Jerome in Westphalia, brother-in-law Joachim Murat in Berg) as monarchs. In the Confederation of the Rhine, sixteen princes were nominally in charge of specific territories, loosely consolidated and interlaced with Napoleon’s own officials. He was in effect federating smaller kingdoms or duchies into larger units, all under the umbrella of the Napoleonic empire.

The multiple channels of authority—of which prefects, on the Roman model, were the main but not the only means of passing information up and orders down—served a structure in which the emperor was, as in the past, the king of kings. Among Napoleon’s potential allies, submonarchs, or enemies were the Habsburgs—with their own claims to empire. The Habsburg rulers sometimes fought Napoleon, sometimes—recognizing his superior power—allied with him. A Habsburg princess became Napoleon’s empress after he divorced Josephine. Habsburg claims to imperial status became hollow with Napoleon’s military dominance. But for the Austrian elite, Napoleon was an emperor one could live with or under, preferable to other empires on their flanks, Ottoman and Russian.

The crux of the Napoleonic machine was the sustenance of the army. The revolutionary ideal—a citizen army serving the nation—had been compromised even before Napoleon assumed power. People fought for their country because they had to. Napoleon (like Peter I in Russia a cen-

tury earlier) systematized conscription. Doing so entailed the penetration of state power—military and administrative—to the village level, for it was from rural areas that most conscripts had to come. In addition to an administration under a prefect in each territorial division, Napoleon posted his gendarmerie, a militarized police force.

Conscription was applied not just to the pre-Napoleonic boundaries of France but to conquered territories as well. Resistance to conscription was higher in the mountainous villages of central France than in non-French-speaking areas such as the Rhine, parts of Italy, and Westphalia. By and large, the apparatus of state wore down defiance, producing an army that was more imperial than French. Only a third of the immense army that attacked Russia in 1812 was from “France.”

This brings us to the second question: how French was the empire? The language of administration was French, and many—but not all—of the prefects and military authorities installed in non-French-speaking areas were from France. Gradually local elites were recruited into the roles defined by French occupants of these positions. Some authors speak of a French “cultural imperialism” imposed on places like Italy, where Napoleonic officials thought people backward and in need of civilizing influences—the French law code, competent civil servants, and a scientific attitude—to be wielded against priests and reactionary aristocrats. Yet much of “France” was being “civilized” at the same time as regions that spoke Italian or German. Parts of western France, the Vendée, were ruled lightly because the region was considered obstreperous and dangerous, while Poland was also ruled lightly—in order to co-opt its nobility.

Elites in some conquered territories found good reason to follow a course taken in many empires going back to Rome—contingent accommodation. The rationalizing side of Napoleonic administration appealed for a time at least to certain liberal, commercially minded people, who embraced its anti-aristocratic, anticlerical side. But Napoleon strongly identified stable social order with landownership—although not with royalists and feudal lords—and landed elites had their reasons to prefer peace under Napoleon to war against him. Many liberals who had welcomed Napoleon became disillusioned with his system; some resisted French rule on national grounds. Spain comes perhaps the closest to widespread guerilla warfare against an invader, but even there, mobilization was directed in part against Spanish elites who were oppressing peasants. The fighters in different provinces of Spain could not act together in a sustained and coherent fashion, and parts of the “Spanish” campaign against Napoleon were led by British generals.

Napoleon’s empire is sometimes seen as continental rather than overseas—but only because his overseas ventures did not succeed. Napoleon’s only major defeat by what became a national liberation movement oc-

curred at the hands of Saint Domingue's ragtag armies of slaves, ex-slaves, and free people of color, with help from France's imperial enemies, American merchants, and tropical microbes. Napoleon's other, earlier, overseas venture, the conquest of Egypt in 1798, proved short-lived. British intervention helped restore this territory to the Ottoman empire. In Egypt, Napoleon had sought both to push his imperial genealogy back to the pharaohs and to bring science and rational rule to a part of the "backward" Ottoman empire. He had also hoped to build on Saint Domingue and Louisiana to forge an imperial expanse across the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico. In neither Egypt nor Saint Domingue was the outcome his to determine. In 1803 Napoleon was reputed to say, "Damn sugar, damn coffee, damn colonies!" as he sold off Louisiana to the United States for cash to finance his other imperial dreams.

Overextension is a conventional and unsatisfying explanation for Napoleon's defeats; in the history of empires no clear line separates overextension from extension. Napoleon tried to harness the resources of central Europe—with considerable success—but Russia could bring to bear those of Siberia and Ukraine, while Britain had overseas territories, as well as the world's premier navy. Napoleon succumbed not to the welling up of national sentiment against the reactionary power of empire but to other empires, notably the British and the Russian. As Napoleon's army lost its grip after the debacle of his invasion of Russia in 1812, components of his conquest reconstituted themselves as politically viable entities—around monarchic and dynastic figures—in somewhat different forms than before. Politics like Baden and Bavaria had absorbed smaller units around them under Napoleonic overrule and emerged as stronger, more consolidated entities afterward. When the king of Prussia tried to organize the fight against Napoleon in 1813 he appealed not to "Germans" but to "Brandenburgers, Prussians, Silesians, Pomeranians, Lithuanians."

The components of the empire that had come closest to integration into France (northern Italy, the Rhine, the low countries) experienced the most profound effects of Napoleon's empire, including increased professionalization of governing elites. Napoleon's defeat allowed for a degree of federation among polities he had subdued and that reconstituted themselves as allies against him. Elites across Europe who had for a time been swayed by Napoleon's project of regularized administration and legal codification would influence the later course of politics. Post-Napoleonic Europe remained dominated by a small number of strong players: Russia, Austria, Prussia, Great Britain, and—as before—France. The peace negotiated at Vienna in 1815 reinforced this monarchical consolidation. The major winners kept their emperors; France, some twenty-five years after its revolution, went back to having a king.

Napoleon's conquests, his governments, and his defeats had profound effects on the building of states. But state and nation did not coincide in Napoleon's empire, and fighting Napoleon did not bring state and nation together among his enemies. Napoleon was not the last ruler who came close to incorporating the European continent into a vast empire, and although late nineteenth-century empire-builders looked overseas, their actions were still part of the competition between a small number of empire-states centered in Europe. France, after episodes of monarchy, revolution, and a new republic (1848–52), came under a regime that called itself the Second Empire and was headed by a man who called himself Napoleon III (nephew of the original). The Second Empire endured until 1870, and like the first its end came through the actions of another empire, in this case the newly unified German Reich. The rise and fall of both Napoleons left in place a Europe of empire-states, mixing variously the voice of citizens with the power of monarchs, combining contiguous and distant territories and culturally diverse populations (chapter 11).

Capitalism and Revolution in the British Empire

We saw in chapter 6 that “Britain” emerged not as a coherent project of a single people but out of varied initiatives, state and private, that were gradually tied together: composite monarchy in the British isles, and piracy, chartered companies, trading enclaves, plantation colonies, and colonies of settlement overseas. A “fiscal-military” state, linked to strong banking institutions, provided the revenue for a navy that could protect settlements and trade routes and channel a major portion of the world's commerce through British ships and British ports. England had its share of internecine conflict, but the success of Parliament, representing largely landed gentry and aristocracy, in limiting royal power made it possible for the Crown's empire-building to complement rather than contradict the interests of magnates. With the consolidation of government by the “King in Parliament” after the civil war of 1688 and under the pressure of a long series of wars against France—to counter Louis XIV's efforts to dominate Europe and possibly impose Catholic kings on England—Britain developed a government capable of managing diverse ventures abroad and social and economic change at home.

England, Empire, and the Development of a Capitalist Economy

The eighteenth century was for the British empire revolutionary in more ways than one. The nexus of plantation slavery overseas and agricultural and industrial development at home was tightened up during the extraordinary

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