

France under Louis Napoleon

Action point

Make your own notes on the words shown in bold in the text

The jargon

Coup d'état is an armed seizure of power.
Plebiscite is a vote.

Checkpoint 1

Why was it so easy for Napoleon to bring republicanism to an end?

Checkpoint 2

How secure was Napoleon's position following the creation of the liberal empire?

Louis Napoleon, nephew of the great emperor Napoleon I, became president of the Second Republic, following the collapse of the July Monarchy in 1848. Having first got his term of office extended in 1851, he won popular support for his proclamation of the Second Empire in 1852. He then embarked on an ambitious programme of domestic and foreign policy until France's catastrophic defeat by Prussia, which led to his abdication as emperor in 1870.

From president to emperor

Napoleon won the presidential election of December 1848. This was in the main due to the fame of his family name among a largely illiterate and politically unaware population. Most French people were hostile to republicanism anyway, and Napoleon was perceived as the most anti-republican of all the candidates. It quickly became clear that Napoleon was not going to defend republican principles.

In December 1851 he carried out a *coup d'état*, which extended his term of office to 10 years. Crucial in his success:

- Support of the army.
- General support from all sections of society (shown by a plebiscite held just afterwards).

In November 1852 a second plebiscite approved the proclamation of the Second Empire.

From authoritarian to liberal empire

The constitution of 1852 gave Napoleon a huge amount of personal power. This system lasted until 1859 and is known as the **authoritarian empire**. The lower house of parliament met for only three months a year, and only the council of state, dominated by Napoleon, could initiate legislation. No newspaper could be published without government authority. In 1852 he promised that in the long term he would make political concessions. This began in 1859, leading to the creation of the **liberal empire**. Political prisoners were released in 1859, and this was followed over the next 10 years by a series of liberal measures. By 1869 there was limited parliamentary democracy in France, although Napoleon retained considerable powers. How can we explain this transformation?

- Liberal dislike of authoritarian government.
- Growing unpopularity of (increasingly unsuccessful) foreign policy.
- Napoleon always intended liberalization (some historians argue).

Social and economic policy

1852–1870 was a time of great prosperity, due partly to world economic conditions but also to the success of Napoleon's policies.

Key measures:

- Encouragement of free trade.
- Encouragement of private enterprise, including setting up financial institutions that funded major commercial projects.
- Improved communication – rail, road and canal building.
- Urban renewal – especially of Paris.
- Agricultural reform – scientific farming encouraged.
- Workers' dwellings improved, friendly societies formed.

Foreign policy

Napoleon's foreign policy aimed to recreate the glory of his uncle's era. Inevitably, this meant seeking to undermine the main provisions of the (anti-French) Treaty of Vienna of 1815.

Partial success up to 1861:

- **The Crimean War 1854–1856.** Reflecting Napoleon's desire to win Catholic support, France, in alliance with Britain and Turkey, entered into an ultimately successful war against Russia. France now appeared to be a driving force in European affairs. Austria's and Russia's anti-French Holy Alliance, which had existed since 1815, was now broken.
- **Italy 1858–1860s.** Seeking to undermine Austria's role in Central Europe, France aided Piedmont in driving the Austrians from Lombardy in 1859. Napoleon was then overtaken by the events that led to the creation of a unitary Italian state. The resulting decline in the temporal power of the Pope caused much anger among French Catholics.

Failure after 1861:

- **Mexico 1863.** An attempt to revive France's fortunes in the New World. Massive cost in money and manpower, leading to a humiliating French withdrawal in 1866.
- **Wars of German unification 1866–1870.** Napoleon sought to ensure that France was compensated if there was any unification of the German states. This he failed to do following Prussia's defeat of Austria in 1866. Napoleon was then manipulated into war against Prussia, through the superior skills of Bismarck, over the **Hohenzollern candidature**. France's catastrophic defeat at Sedan led to Napoleon's abdication and the end of the Second Empire.

Exam questions

answers: page 101

- 1 'The fate of the Second Empire was sealed before the Franco-Prussian War'. Do you agree? (45 min)
- 2 Why and with what consequences did Napoleon III liberalize the Second Empire after 1870? (45 min)

Checkpoint 3

What criticisms have been made of Napoleon's social and economic policy?

Checkpoint 4

Why was France so isolated by 1870?

Test yourself

Divide a blank sheet of paper in two. List Napoleon's successes and failures. Try to show the links between them. Which of the failures were most important in his downfall?

Examiner's secrets

Q1 requires you to consider the most important reason for Napoleon's downfall.