Napoleon I and his Empire

Contextualization: The 18th century in Europe brought with it a period of great change, embodied by the French Revolution of 1789. This monumental event, though already widespread and powerful in its influence, was further projected upon Europe by the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte. The history of Europe between 1799 to 1815 largely revolves around the story of Napoleon, who, after becoming an emperor of France in 1804, would not only impose enduring reforms in France, but also lead great conquests that eventually resulted in his domination of the majority of the Continent. Thesis: An enlightened despot is one who embraced the reforms set forth in the Enlightenment and who is dedicated to the rational strengthening of the administration at the cost of other lesser centers of political power. Napoleon Bonaparte, crowned as Emperor Napoleon I, was truly the “greatest enlightened despot” due to the great changes that he imposed and the enduring impact of these changes. Argument: Napoleon Bonaparte, though not a strict adherent to Enlightenment ideals, managed to propagate fundamental principles through his reforms, establishing a lasting influence on the future.

Body 1: Napoleon Bonaparte both confirmed reforms introduced during the French Revolution and introduced his own reforms in the Napoleonic Empire.

- Evidence: In 1800, Napoleon appointed a commission of legal experts to draft a new code of civil law. This Napoleonic Code went into effect in 1804.
- Analysis: The codification of the legal system reaffirmed the revolutionary principle of the equality of all citizens before the law and the abolition of privileges based on birth.
- Evidence: Napoleon established a highly centralized administration that provided France with an efficient and orderly government.
- Analysis: At the expense of the political liberty of his citizens, Napoleon was able to increase the power of his authoritarian regime in order to reign as an absolute monarch.

Body 2: The Napoleonic Wars overturned the existing social and political orders of Europe and replaced them with progressive ideas.

- Evidence: Napoleon was a genius as a military commander, allowing him to defeat his European adversaries and conquer most of Europe.
- Analysis: Napoleon’s enduring achievements in his political and social reforms were spread beyond the borders of France through their institution in conquered lands.
- Evidence: The Congress of Vienna sought to reestablish a conservative order in Europe following the upheaval and war brought about by the French Revolution and Napoleon.
- Analysis: The Revolution and especially the rule of Napoleon had caused such a radical change in Europe that the forces unleashed would leave lasting marks on the Continent.

Conclusion: The rule of Napoleon Bonaparte as Emperor Napoleon I of France can be labeled as the reign of a truly great enlightened despot. Though in reality not embracing all of the ideals of the Enlightenment, the transformation of Europe’s political and social systems by Napoleon would imprint itself into the future, making permanent and prevalent the ideas fundamental to the Revolution and to the Enlightenment. Synthesis: Napoleon Bonaparte set a powerful precedent. His dictatorial rule of Europe was the first time in history that a single person was able to completely alter the history that comes after them. Modern dictators such as Joseph Stalin or Adolf Hitler, albeit vastly different in circumstance, share the common interest of absolute power in order to reform a nation and its peoples. Autocratic and totalitarian rule will always be attributed to such great men as Napoleon Bonaparte, who demonstrated to the world that absolute power can permit absolute change, change that can fundamentally reform the world.