Napoleon’s changes to French Society

In 1802, Napoleon created the Legion of Honour to reward people who had served him well. Most of the people who won the award were from the army, but 4,000 were civilians who had worked for the government. The Legion of Honour did not come with any money, but it was an important medal that people were proud to have.

Napoleon created titles for his 18 best generals, calling them Marshals, and giving them large areas of land. He also gave titles such as ‘Prince’, and ‘Baron’ to loyal followers, especially people in his family. In 1808, for example, he made his brother Joseph the King of Spain. Around 3,500 titles were given to people.

Although Napoleon claimed that he wanted people to get jobs based on their ability, he did not allow equal education. Secondary schools were only open to the sons of rich people, and girls were not allows to attend school. Napoleon thought that too much education would make women dislike the idea that they should just get married and have children. In school, the lessons in history, French and geography aimed to train people for the army, and to make people loyal to Napoleon.

Napoleon knew that control of what was written in newspapers (censorship) was important to keeping control of the country. Between 1800 and 1801, Napoleon cut the number of newspapers in Paris from 73 to 4. Books, plays and architecture were encouraged, as long as they honoured Napoleon’s achievements. In 1809 work began on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, which celebrated Napoleon’s military victories.

Before Napoleon came to power, French law was complicated. Napoleon simplified everything by creating one set of very clear laws called the Code Napoleon. It kept a lot of the changes that had been made during the French Revolution (eg. it abolished feudalism in France). However, the Code Napoleon focused on men, and women did not gain rights. A wife or disobedient child could be sent to prison by the husband, and divorce became difficult and expensive. Slavery was re-introduced in France’s colonies (slavery had been abolished after the French Revolution).