

Q:- Describe the Continental System of Napoleon Bonaparte. Why did it fail!

Ans:- Continental System is the name of the economic warfare, which Napoleon started against England in 1806. According to Napoleon “England was a nation of Shopkeepers”. If her trade with the European continent is stopped, her industries will be ruined and she will have to make peace with France.

The Continental System can also be described as a battle between Land power and Sea power. By 1806, Napoleon had become the dominant power in Europe, while after the battle of Trafalgar 1805, England had become the Master of the seas. Historians Grant & Temperley have called the Continental System as “The battle between the Elephant and the Whale”.

1806 The Berlin Decree- In November 1806, by the Berlin Decree Napoleon issued the following orders-

1. All the European countries which consider Napoleon as their friend should boycott trade with England.
2. No person in Europe should send any letter or parcel to any person in England.
3. Any English man found in any European country should be arrested.

1807- Warsaw and Milan Decree – To further strengthen the Continental system, Napoleon issued two more Decrees in 1807 from Warsaw and Milan. By these Decrees, Napoleon ordered that even if England’s goods were found in the ships of neutral countries, those ships would be seized by the France.

1810- Paris or Fontainebleau Decree- By this decree, Napoleon ordered that if England’s goods are found in any country of Europe, they should be publicly burned.

The reply of England-Order in Council- The reply to the Continental System of Napoleon, England also issued Order in Council, by which England declared that country of Europe which does not trade with England or whose ships carry France’s goods will be seized by the English Navy. In this way, England stopped the foreign trade of Napoleon and his friends, because the England was the master of the seas, she was successful in enforcing her Orders in council.

The Results of the Continental System-

- a. As a result of the stoppage of the foreign trade of European countries by England. There was a famine of things of daily necessity which were imported from outside in Europe especially tea, coffee and sugar. The people of Europe had to suffer great difficulties-Especially the people of Russia had to suffer great hardship.
- b. Even France and Napoleon had to suffer great hardship. Napoleon secretly imported 50,000 over-coats for his army from England.
- c. As a result of the Continental System, Napoleon had to fight many wars against those countries, which refused to boycott England’s trade.

1807-War with Portugal - The King of Portugal was a friend of England and he refused to boycott trade with England. In November 1807, Napoleon made a treaty with Spain by

which Spain allowed France army to attack Portugal through its territory. Portugal was defeated and occupied by Napoleon.

War with Pope – 1808-1809 – Pope also refused to accept the Continental System and declared himself neutral. In 1809, Napoleon occupied Rome and arrested the Pope. It had serious results and all the Roman Catholics in Europe became the enemies of Napoleon.

1810 – Annexation of Holland by France – Napoleon's brother Louis Bonaparte was the king of Holland. When the people of Holland faced great difficulty, Louis gave up the Continental System and started trade with England. Napoleon removed Louis Bonaparte and Holland was included in France.

War with Russia – 1812- The people of Russia experienced great difficulty due to the Continental System of Napoleon. In Dec. 1812, Czar Alexander of Russia gave up the Continental System and started trade with England. Napoleon started preparations for attack on Russia. In June 1812, Napoleon attacked Russia with a huge army of 6 Lakh men. He was able to reach Moscow, but due to winter, he had to return back. While returning from Moscow, most of his army was destroyed due to hunger and cold. Only 20,000 persons returned from Russia.

Causes of the Failure of the Continental System –

1. It was an impossible scheme and Napoleon could not pursue the European countries to boycott trades with England.
2. England was all-powerful on the seas and she successfully stopped all foreign trade of Napoleon and his friends.
3. The countries of Europe were dependent for many articles of daily necessity like sugar, coffee, tea on foreign countries. With the stoppage of foreign trade, there was a famine of these things in Europe. Especially Russian people experienced great difficulty and Czar of Russia started trade with England in Dec 1810. This resulted in Napoleon's attack on Russia in 1812.

Thus the Continental System of Napoleon Bonaparte was one of the main causes of his downfall.