

CHAPTER
25

Section 4

HISTORYMAKERS **Henri de Saint-Simon**
Social Revolutionary

"[Religion] should guide the community toward the great aim of improving as quickly as possible the conditions of the poorest class."—Saint-Simon, The New Christianity (1825)

Henri de Saint-Simon fought with the French Army during the American Revolution. He spent time in prison during the French Revolution and witnessed the social changes of the Industrial Revolution. From these experiences and his reading, he launched a new school of thought called Christian socialism. He argued that the industrial age required changes in society that should be shaped by business leaders and Christianity.

Born in Paris, Saint-Simon came from an old and distinguished family. He claimed that his roots could be traced back to Charlemagne, the legendary king of the Franks. By the time of Saint-Simon's birth in 1760, though, the family fortunes had declined. Still, they had enough money to educate him.

At age 17, Saint-Simon joined the French army fighting in the American Revolution and became wounded in one battle. Back in France, he joined in the French Revolution—although he denied it later. He then decided to buy land that had belonged to the Catholic Church or to nobles who had fled the country. Grown wealthy from these real estate purchases, he was able to spend the rest of his life studying and writing.

Saint-Simon's work drew on what he had seen in the French Revolution. That event had begun with the high ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity—the fellowship of all people. It had degenerated into a bloodbath that destroyed the republic, which was then replaced by an empire. He argued that beliefs about an ideal society were useless unless a thinker took into account social realities.

Determined to understand these realities, Saint-Simon analyzed European history from the Middle Ages to his time. He said that the growing power of the people had reduced the authority of the nobles. At the same time, the scientific and industrial revolutions had lessened the influence of the Catholic Church. The result, he wrote, was "the ruin of the old system in its parts and as a whole." This old system, though, had not yet been fully replaced.

Saint-Simon had a vision of what the new sys-

tem should be. He relied on the business owners of the new industrial age. These industrialists, he thought, were skilled at running organizations and thus were in the best position to lead society.

Saint-Simon also urged the creation of a government consisting of three parts. First, artists and engineers would propose plans for society. Second, scientists would analyze these plans to see if they were workable and wise. Finally, the third group would include business people who would be charged with making decisions and leading the people. Business leaders would, he thought, take the needs and interests of all people into account. Furthermore, society would follow the laws without any problems, he felt, because those laws would be reasonable and just.

Saint-Simon believed that it was important for society to have a strong element of moral guidance. Late in life, he decided that this force should be Christianity. As part of this moral concern, he believed that industrial leaders had a special responsibility to help poor people.

Though a bold and original thinker, Saint-Simon was not an orderly one. His ideas were scattered and never fully developed. Despite this weakness, he was an important social philosopher. After his death, some reformers called for social changes based on his writing. They wanted the ownership of property to be shared, an end to the inheritance of property, and for women to have the right to vote. Even though the group soon broke apart, Saint-Simon's influence did not completely fade. Other movements, such as Marxism and socialism, drew on his work.

Questions

- 1. Recognizing Facts and Details** What three events shaped the views of Saint-Simon?
- 2. Predicting Outcomes** Do you think Saint-Simon's structure for leading society would work? Why or why not?
- 3. Drawing Conclusions** Do you think Saint-Simon was an idealist or a realist? Explain.