

Enlightened Despots

The philosophes tried to convince many European monarchs to rule justly. Some monarchs embraced these new ideas and made reforms that reflected the Enlightenment's way of thinking. They became known as **Enlightened Despots – the French word despot meaning Absolute Ruler.**

An enlightened despot supported the philosophes' ideas BUT they also had no intention of giving up any power.

An example of these differences can be seen with the two statements made by Louis XIV of France and Frederick the Great of Prussia.

Louis XIV – "I am the state"

Frederick the Great – "I am the first servant of the state"

Any changes an Enlightened Despot made were motivated by two desires:-

1. They wanted to make their countries stronger
2. They wanted their own rule to be more effective

Frederick the Great – Frederick II - King of Prussia from 1740 to 1786



Frederick was a follower and friend of Voltaire. He granted many religious freedoms, reduced censorship and improved education. He also reformed the justice system and abolished the use of torture.

However, his changes only went so far. He believed that serfdom was wrong but did nothing to end it. He needed the support of his wealthy landowners (the Junkers) and if he removed serfdom then he would lose their support. Frederick never changes any of the social order problems that existed within his country.

Maria Theresa of Austria – Queen of Austria from 1740-1780



She established paid bureaucracy of civil servants for her government. She attempted to ease the burdens of serfdom for her peasants. She did pass a unique law establishing a tariff union for various parts of the empire. Sadly she died at the age of 40 but her work was carried on.

Joseph II of Austria



He was the son of Maria Theresa and ruled Austria from 1780 to 1790. He was the most radical royal reformer. He made legal reforms and gave his people freedom of the press. He also supported freedom of worship – for Protestants, Orthodox Christians and Jews. His most radical reform was to abolish serfdom. His decree ordered that peasants be paid in cash for their manual labor. Joseph's ideas were protested by the wealthy landowners of Austria. Not surprisingly, after he died, serfdom was reinstated within Austria.

Catherine the Great – Catherine II of Russia from 1762-1796



Catherine II was well educated and exchanged many letters with Voltaire. She ruled with absolute authority but also took steps to modernize and reform Russia. She reformed some of the laws by using the ideas of Montesquieu and Beccaria. She made many recommendations to her courts and nobles to allow religious toleration, abolish torture and capital punishment. However none of these “recommendations” were put into place. Catherine eventually put into place limited reforms, but she did very little to improve the life of a Russian peasant.

A peasant uprising in 1773 changed Catherine’s enlightenment ideas. With great brutality her army crushed the rebellion. She was now convinced that her source of power was with the nobles. She transferred her absolute power over to them. As a result, Russian serfs lost their last traces of freedom. The nobles ensured that peasants would have little or no rights in Russia.

Catherine expanded Russian territory during the Enlightenment. Previously, Peter the Great had fought for years to capture a port on the Baltic Sea. Catherine continued his plan. She fought two wars against the Ottoman Turks, her armies’ finally winning control of the northern shore of the Black Sea. Her victory also allowed Russian ships to freely pass through the straits from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea without any Ottoman interference.

Catherine also expanded westward, into Poland, where the king was weak and independent nobles held most of the power. Then the three countries of Russia, Prussia and Austria began exerting their power over the feebly run Poland. In 1772 the three countries divided up Poland – The First Partition of Poland. There were further partitions in 1793 and 1795, each country grabbed a piece of any lands that were left. This meant that the country of Poland disappeared off the map of Europe, It was not to reappear until World War I had ended, when it once again became an independent country.

By the end of her reign, Catherine the Great had enlarged her Russian empire. Russia was now becoming an international power.