

Democratic Thought and “Enlightened Despots”

Enlightened Despots

Because of the writings of Locke, Montesquieu, and others, we may have the impression that the Enlightenment led quickly to the creation of liberal societies having rules about justice and equality similar to those modern democracies have. All of the ideas of Enlightenment thinkers, however, were not necessarily liberal, and in fact some of the ideas were supported by those who had a conservative outlook and a desire to maintain the status quo. A number of European leaders styled themselves as “enlightened” and attempted to implement some of these ideas in their regimes. Catherine the Great, Joseph II of Austria, and Frederick II are among the rulers who attempted to bring the benefits of Enlightenment to their rule. Some of their commitments were short-lived, as when Catherine took away reforms after the serfs rebelled. The Enlightenment’s most lasting influences can be seen in the governments of Western Europe and North America.

Directions: Read through the primary sources provided on Enlightened Despots. Fill in the graphic organizer at the end.

Joseph II

Joseph II ruled Austria from 1780 to 1790. Future Holy Roman emperor Joseph II was born in Vienna, Austria. He became co-regent with his mother, Maria Theresa, in 1765, and sole ruler in 1780. During his time in power, Joseph issued decrees that promoted equality and education, but the speed and scope of his reforms led to problems for him and his empire. When Maria Theresa died in 1780, Joseph became the absolute ruler of the Habsburg domains and enacted many reforms that his mother had refused to consider. He was influenced by the Enlightenment ideals of equality and freedom, and he made numerous reforms during his rule. During his reign, Joseph put forth an average of 690 decrees a year. (Maria Theresa had made fewer than 100 each year.) Joseph's reforms included abolishing serfdom, ending press censorship and limiting the power of the Catholic Church. He outlawed torture, abolished the death penalty, and allowed freedom of both religion and the press.

I determined from the very **commencement** of my reign to **adorn** my **diadem** (crown) with the love of my people, to act in the administration of affairs according to just, **impartial**, and liberal principles; consequently, I granted toleration [in 1781], and removed the **yoke** which had oppressed the Protestants for centuries.

Fanaticism shall in future be known in my states only by the **contempt** I have for it; nobody shall any longer be exposed to hardships on account of his **creed**; no man shall be **compelled** in future to profess the religion of the state if it be *contrary* to his persuasion. ...

Tolerance is an effect of the increase of knowledge which now enlightens Europe and which is owing to philosophy and the efforts of great men; it is a convincing proof of the improvement of the human mind, which has boldly reopened a road ... which, fortunately for mankind, has now become the highway of monarchs.

Frederick the Great

Frederick II ruled Prussia (roughly present-day Germany and Poland). He called himself the first servant of the state. He studied with Voltaire for three years beginning in 1749. Voltaire is credited with giving him the name Frederick the Great. Under his rule there was more religious toleration and greater freedom of the press. He also outlawed torture. This excerpt is from a book he wrote in 1752.

Rise of the Great Powers

Politics is the science of always using the most convenient means in accord with one's own interests. In order to act in **conformity** with one's interests, one must know what these interests are, and in order to gain this knowledge, one must study their history and application. ... One must attempt ... to know the ... people which one wants to govern in order to know if one must treat them **leniently** or severely. ...

[The Prussian nobility] has sacrificed its life and goods for the service of the state; its loyalty and merit have earned it the protection of all its rulers, and it is one of the duties [of the ruler] to aid those noble families which have become **impoverished** in order to keep them in possession of their lands. ...

A well-conducted government must have an underlying concept ... that it could be likened to a system of philosophy. All actions taken must be well-reasoned, and all financial, political, and military matters must flow towards one goal, which is the strengthening of the state and the furthering of its power. ... A **sovereign** is not elevated to his high position; supreme power has not been confined to him in order that he may live in lazy luxury, enriching himself by the labor of the people, being happy while everyone else suffers. The sovereign is the first servant of the state. He is well-paid ... but one demands that he work efficiently for the good of the state, and that he ... pay personal attention to the most important problems. ...

You can see, without doubt, how important it is that the King of Prussia govern personally. ... All parts of the government are ... linked with each other. Finance, politics, and military affairs are inseparable; ... a Prince who governs personally, who has formed his [own] political system, will not be handicapped when occasions arise where he has to act swiftly. ...

Catholics, Lutherans, ... Jews, and other Christian sects live in this state, and live together in peace. If the sovereign ... declares himself for one religion or another ... heated **disputes ensue** and, in the end, the religion **persecuted** will leave the fatherland, and millions of subjects will enrich our neighbors.

It is of no concern in politics whether the ruler has a religion or whether he has none. All religions ... are founded on **superstitious** systems. ... It is impossible for a man of good sense

... not to see their error; but these prejudices ... were made for men, and one must know enough to respect the public and not to outrage its faith, whatever religion be involved.

Source: "Frederick II, Political Testament," in Dennis Sherman, ed., *Western Civilization: Sources, Images, and Interpretations*, Vol. II (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), 41-2.

Catherine the Great

Catherine II, known as Catherine the Great, ruled Russia from 1762 to 1796, after disposing of her ineffectual husband, Peter III, was one of the most successful European monarchs. She followed Peter the Great in seeing Russia as European Power. Among her achievements, she added some 200 000 square miles to the territory of the Russian empire. In 1767 Catherine summoned an assembly to draft a new code of laws for Russia and gave detailed instructions to the members about the principles they should apply. The code drips with "enlightened language". She believed in Enlightenment ideas and set guidelines based on the theories of Montesquieu. She opened hospitals and schools, including one for girls, and supported the arts. When serfs (farmers who were not allowed to leave the estate on which they worked) rebelled, she took away the reforms and gave the nobles absolute power over the serfs.

Proposals for a New Law Code

11. Every other Form of Government whatsoever [other than monarchy] would not only have been **prejudicial** to Russia, but would even have proved its entire Ruin.
12. Another Reason is: That it is better to be subject to the Laws under one Master, than to be **subservient** to many.
13. What is the true End of Monarchy? Not to deprive People of their natural Liberty; but to correct their Actions, in order to attain the supreme Good.
14. The Form of Government, therefore, which best attains this End, and at the same Time sets less Bounds than others to natural **Liberty**, is that which coincides with the Views and Purposes of rational Creatures, and answers the End, upon which we ought to fix a steadfast Eye in the Regulations of **civil Polity**.
15. The Intention and the End of Monarchy, is the Glory of the Citizens, of the State, and of the Sovereign.
16. But, from this Glory, a Sense of Liberty arises in a People governed by a Monarch; which may produce in these States as much Energy in transacting the most important Affairs, and may contribute as much to the Happiness of the Subjects, as even Liberty itself. ...
33. The Laws ought to be so framed, as to secure the Safety of every Citizen as much as possible.
34. The Equality of the Citizens consists in this, that they should all be subject to the same Laws.
35. This Equality requires Institutions so well adapted, as to prevent the Rich from oppressing those who are not so wealthy as themselves, and converting all the Charges and Employments entrusted to them as **Magistrates** only, to their own private **Emolument**. ...
37. In a State or **Assemblage** of People that live together in a Community, where there are Laws, Liberty can only consist in doing that which every One ought to do, and not to be **constrained** to do that which One ought not to do.
38. A Man ought to form in his own Mind an exact and clear Idea of what Liberty is. Liberty is the Right of doing whatsoever the Laws allow: And if any one Citizen could do what the Laws forbid, there would be no more Liberty; because others would have an equal Power of doing the same.

Analyzing Primary Source Graphic Organizer

	<i>Joseph II</i>	<i>Catherine the Great</i>	<i>Fredrick the Great</i>
Author, location, and date			
What type of document is this?			
What is the purpose of this document?			

<p>Which words or phrases in the document show that the individual was an enlightened despot?</p>			
<p>Which Enlightenment thinker(s) is (are) represented in the ideas of the document?</p>			

