

## REDESIGNED “Enlightened Absolutism”

### VII. Enlightened Absolutism

**\*During the last third of the century, it seemed to some observers that several European rulers had actually embraced many of the reforms set forth by the *philosophes*. The term used to describe this phenomenon was *enlightened absolutism*. Arguably, these monarchs were not implementing the rational policies of the *philosophes* for humanitarian reasons. Rather they adopted Enlightenment policies favoring the rational economic and social integration of their realms because these policies also increased their military strength and helped centralize their realms. Ironically, then, the “enlightened” monarchs and their advisors used rationality to ultimately further what the *philosophes* considered irrational: militarism**

#### A. Frederick II, the Great of Prussia (r. 1740-1786)

1. attempted to improve the economy
  - a. agriculture
    - 1) drained swamps
    - 2) introduced new crops (potatoes and turnips)
    - 3) lent farmers money (land-mortgage credit Association)
2. religious toleration: allowed Catholics and Jews to settle in his predominately Lutheran country
3. ordered the codification of Prussian law
  - a. his object was to rationalize the existing legal system, making it more efficient, eliminating regional peculiarities, and reducing aristocratic influence
  - b. also saw it as a means of extending and strengthening royal power

#### B. Joseph II of Austria (r. 1765-1790)

**\*Unlike Frederick II and Catherine the Great, Joseph II sincerely wished to improve the lot of his people. Nevertheless, the ultimate result of his well-intentioned efforts was a series of aristocratic and peasant rebellions extending from Hungary to the Austrian Netherlands**

1. attempted to Centralize power
  - a. sought to overcome the pluralism of the Habsburg holdings by imposing central authority in areas of political and social life where his mother had wisely chosen not to exert authority
    - 1) sought to reduce Hungarian autonomy
      - a) new measures:
        1. reorganized local government in Hungary to increase the authority of his own officials
        2. required the use of German in all governmental matters
      - b) met with resistance and forced him to rescind most of his measures in 1790

- 2) sought to bring the various institutions of the Roman Catholic Church under royal control (*Josephinism*)
  - a) forbade direct communication between the bishops of his realms and the pope
  - b) dissolved more than 600 monasteries and confiscated their lands
  - c) dissolved traditional Roman Catholic seminaries
2. Religious toleration
  - a. extended freedom of worship to Lutherans, Calvinists, and the Greek Orthodox
  - b. extended the rights of Jews in his realm
    - 1) Toleration Patent of 1781 – while recognizing Catholicism’s public practice, granted Lutherans, Calvinists, and Greek Orthodox the right to worship privately. In all other ways, all subjects were now equal: “Non-Catholics are in future admitted under dispensation to buy houses and real property, to practice as master craftsmen, to take up academic appointments and posts in public service, and are not to be required to take the oath in any form contrary to their religious tenant.
      - Attempted to adopt a new policy toward Jews, although too limited. It freed Jews from nuisance taxes and allowed them more freedom of movement and job opportunities, but they were still restricted from owning land and worshipping in public. Joseph II encouraged Jews to learn German and work together toward greater assimilation into Austrian society
      - Compare this to rest of Europe where Jews were a despised minority. Many in the east (Ashkenazic) restricted in their movements, forbidden to own land/hold many jobs, forced to pay special taxes, and periodic wrath of public (pogroms).
      - West and Central (Sephardic Jews) expelled from Spain, most who had immigrated to Turkish lands, settled in Amsterdam, Venice, London, Frankfurt – relatively free to participate in banking/commerce since M. Ages. Many worked for rulers, called “court Jews” (especially in central Europe). However, always insecure b/c religion set them apart from the rest of population.
3. Economic Reforms
  - a. abolished internal tariffs
  - b. encouraged improvements of his country’s infrastructure
  - c. gave peasants rights and taxed nobles
    - 1) abolished serfdom
    - 2) gave peasants the right to marry, to engage in skilled work, and to have their children trained in skilled work without the landlord’s permission
    - 3) allowed peasants to appeal from the manorial courts to royal courts
    - 4) encouraged landlords to change land leases so it would be easier for peasants to inherit them or to transfer them to other peasants

**\*On Joseph's death, Leopold II (r. 1790-1792) was forced to repeal many of his brother's most controversial decrees, such as that on taxation.**

C. Catherine the Great of Russia (r. 1762-1796)

**\*When Catherine ascended the throne after the murder of her husband (Peter III), the Russian court was in shambles. Catherine felt that Russia was very backward and that it must make major reforms if it was to remain a great power. She also knew that she needed a wide base of political and social support (especially since she had assumed the throne through a palace coup). Even though she considered herself to be "enlightened," she had no intention of departing from absolutism**

1. Administrative Reform
    - a. gave strong support to the rights of the Nobles (Charter of the Nobility—1785)
      - 1) needed their support and cooperation
      - 2) put most local offices in the hands of nobles rather than creating a royal bureaucracy
  2. Economic Reform
    - a. attempted to suppress internal barriers to trade
    - b. expanded imports (grain, flax, furs, and naval stores)
    - c. favored the expansion of the small Russian urban middle class
  3. Territorial Expansion: continued to the drive for warm-weather ports with the Treaty of Kuchuk-Kainardji (1774)...this gave Russia a direct outlet on the Black Sea (after defeating the Ottoman Empire)
- D. The Partition of Poland
1. used to quell suspicions between Russia, Prussia, and Austria
  2. 1<sup>st</sup> Partition (1772): Russia, Prussia, and Austria
    - a. suggested by Frederick II
    - b. showed that nations without strong, central governments were in trouble
    - c. not particularly "enlightened"
  3. 2<sup>nd</sup> Partition (1793)
    - a. involved Russia and Prussia only
  4. 3<sup>rd</sup> Partition (1795)
    - a. involved all three
    - b. removed Poland from the map of Europe

**\*Toward the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was a conservative backlash from the "enlightened" monarchs. This occurred primarily because the French Revolution frightened traditional monarchies who were concerned about their own stability.**