

Reading Essentials and Study Guide



The Enlightenment and Revolutions, 1550–1800

Lesson 3 Enlightened Absolutism and the Balance of Power

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Why do new ideas often spark change? How do new ways of thinking affect the way people respond to their surroundings?

Reading HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

rigid inflexible, unyielding

eventually in the end

Content Vocabulary

enlightened absolutism a system in which rulers tried to govern by Enlightenment principles while maintaining their full royal powers

successor one that follows, especially one who succeeds to a throne or an office

TAKING NOTES: *Describing*

ACTIVITY Use a graphic organizer like the one below to list details that help show the political philosophies of Frederick II, Joseph II, and Catherine II.

Ruler	Details That Show Political Philosophy
Frederick II	
Joseph II	
Catherine II	

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IT MATTERS BECAUSE

Enlightenment ideas influenced the politics of eighteenth-century Europe. Rulers liked to talk about enlightened reforms, but most were more interested in the power and security of their states. The desire to balance power, however, could also lead to war. The Seven Years' War became a worldwide war as fighting occurred in Europe, India, and North America.

Enlightenment and Absolutism

Guiding Question *How were European rulers guided by Enlightenment thought?*

Enlightenment thought influenced European politics in the eighteenth century. The philosophes believed in natural rights for all people. These rights included equality before the law; freedom of religious worship; freedom of speech; freedom of the press; and the rights to assemble, own property, and pursue happiness. Before this time, people in Europe generally did not have these rights. Rulers were all-powerful, and they controlled the lives of the people they ruled. For example, they often chose the religion of their people and excluded religions that they did not approve of. Many philosophes believed countries needed enlightened rulers to establish and protect people's rights. Enlightened rulers must allow religious toleration, freedom of speech and of the press, and the rights of private property. They must help develop the arts, sciences, and education. Above all, enlightened rulers must obey the laws and apply them fairly to all subjects. Only strong monarchs could bring about the enlightened reforms that society needed.

Many historians once assumed that **enlightened absolutism** emerged in the later eighteenth century. Now they question to what degree rulers actually worked to put ideas of the Enlightenment into practice. Enlightened absolutism was a type of monarchy, or rule by kings or queens. In the system of enlightened absolutism, rulers tried to govern by Enlightenment principles while they kept their royal powers. Did Europe's rulers, however, actually follow the advice of the philosophes and become enlightened? To answer this question, we examine three states—Prussia, Austria, and Russia.

In the eighteenth century, Prussia became a major European power under the rule of two kings: Frederick William I and then Frederick II. Frederick William I maintained a highly efficient bureaucracy of civil servants, or group of officials and administrators who run the government.

The bureaucracy followed the values of obedience, honor, and, above all, service to the king. Frederick William believed that subjects should do everything for the king except give up their own salvation, which belongs to God.

Frederick William's major concern was the army. By the end of his reign in 1740, he had doubled the army's size. Prussia was a small state, but it had the fourth-largest army in Europe, after France, Russia, and Austria. The Prussian army was the most important institution in Prussia because of its size and good reputation.

Members of the nobility, who owned large estates with many serfs, were the officers in the Prussian army. These officers had a strong sense of service to the king or state. As Prussian nobles, they believed in duty, obedience, and sacrifice.

Frederick II, known as Frederick the Great, was one of the best educated monarchs of the time. He ruled from 1740 to 1786. He had learned Enlightenment ideas and was also a dedicated ruler. He enlarged the Prussian army by actively bringing the nobility into civil service. Frederick also kept a strict watch over the bureaucracy.

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At first, Frederick II seemed very willing to make reforms. He put an end to the use of torture except in treason and murder cases. He also granted limited freedom of speech and press and increased religious toleration. However, Frederick did not try to change Prussia's serfdom or its **rigid** social structure, or division into classes. He avoided making any additional reforms.

The Austrian Empire had become one of the great European powers by the start of the eighteenth century. Austria was hard to rule, however, because it was a large empire made up of many nationalities, languages, religions, and cultures. Empress Maria Theresa inherited the throne in 1740. She worked to centralize the state, or bring control of it into one place, and to strengthen it. She was not open to the philosophes' calls for reform. However, she did work to improve the condition of the serfs.

Her son, Joseph II, wanted to end anything that did not agree with reason as he understood it. He abolished serfdom and ended the death penalty. He established the principle of equality of all before the law. He also made religious reforms, including religious toleration.

Joseph's reform program was mostly a failure, however. He angered the nobles by freeing the serfs. He angered the Catholic Church with his religious reforms. Even the serfs were unhappy because they could not understand the drastic changes. Joseph himself later said he was a failure in everything he tried to do. His **successors** undid almost all of Joseph II's reforms.

In Russia, Peter the Great was followed by six weak successors. These rulers were often put into power and removed from power by the palace guard. The last of these rulers, Peter III, was murdered by a group of nobles. His German wife emerged as the ruler of all Russians. She ruled Russia as Catherine II from 1762 to 1796. She became known as Catherine the Great.

An intelligent woman, Catherine was familiar with the work of the philosophes and even seemed to favor enlightened reforms. She considered a new law code that would make sure all people were treated equally by the law, but she did not put the plan into action, however.

In the end, Catherine did nothing because she knew her success depended on the support of the Russian nobility. Her policy of favoring the landed nobility led to worse conditions for the Russian peasants.

They **eventually** rebelled. An uneducated Cossack (a Russian warrior), Yemelyan Pugachov, led the peasants. The rebellion spread across southern Russia, but it soon ended. In response, Catherine took strong actions against the peasants. All rural reform ended. Serfdom was expanded into newer parts of the empire.

Catherine proved to be a good successor to Peter the Great in her policies of territorial expansion. Under her rule, Russia defeated the Turks and spread southward to the Black Sea. To the west, Russia gained about 50 percent of Poland's territory. The rest of Poland was split between Prussia and Austria. The Polish state disappeared until after World War I.

Of the rulers under discussion, only Joseph II wanted truly radical changes based on Enlightenment ideas. Both Frederick II and Catherine II liked to talk about enlightened reforms. They even attempted some, but their priority was maintaining the existing system.

In fact, Frederick, Joseph, and Catherine were all enlightened absolutists. Their primary interest was in the power and welfare of their state. After they strengthened their positions as rulers, they did not make changes that helped their subjects. Instead, they used their power to collect more taxes. They used the money to create armies, fight wars, and gain even more power.

The philosophes condemned war as a foolish waste of life and resources. Despite their ideas, the rivalry among states did not change in eighteenth-century Europe, and it led to expensive struggles. States kept trying to outdo each other, and Europe's states were chiefly guided by their rulers' self-interest.

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The eighteenth-century monarchs were concerned with the balance of power. This concept meant that states should have equal power in order to keep any one from dominating the others. Large armies were created to defend a state's security. However, the armies were often used to conquer new lands as well. Frederick II of Prussia said that the main reason for government was to increase territory. This idea led to two major wars in the eighteenth century.



Reading Progress Check

Comparing Describe two similarities between the reigns of Frederick II of Prussia and Catherine the Great of Russia.

The Seven Years' War

Guiding Question *How did changing alliances in Europe lead to the Seven Years' War and how was the war carried out on a global scale?*

Two major wars were fought in Europe in the middle part of the seventeenth century—the War of Austrian Succession (1740–1748) and the Seven Years' War (1756–1763).

In 1740 the first major war started over the successor to the Austrian throne. The Austrian emperor Charles VI had died without a male heir, so his daughter, Maria Theresa, succeeded him. It was not the practice for a woman to rule the empire. King Frederick II of Prussia took advantage of the confusion by invading Austrian Silesia. Silesia was a piece of land that he hoped to add to Prussia. Frederick used this action to show that he did not accept a woman as leader of the empire. France then entered the war against Austria, its traditional enemy. In turn, Maria Theresa allied with Great Britain.

The War of the Austrian Succession was fought in three areas of the world—Europe, Asia, and North America. In Europe, Prussia seized Silesia while France occupied some Austrian territory. In Asia, France took Madras (today called Chennai) in India from the British. In North America, the British captured the French fortress of Louisbourg at the entrance to the St. Lawrence River.

By 1748, all the opponents were exhausted and agreed to the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle. This treaty guaranteed the return of all occupied territories except Silesia to their original owners. Prussia's refusal to return Silesia meant yet another war. Maria Theresa refused to accept the loss of the territory. She rebuilt her army while working to separate Prussia from its chief ally, France. In 1756 she achieved what was soon called a diplomatic revolution.

The War in Europe

French-Austrian rivalry had been a fact of European diplomacy since the late sixteenth century. However, two new rivalries now replaced the old one: the rivalry of Britain and France over colonial empires and the rivalry of Austria and Prussia over Silesia.

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France abandoned Prussia and formed an alliance with Austria. Russia joined the new alliance with France and Austria because Russia saw Prussia as a major threat to Russian goals in central Europe. In turn, Britain allied with Prussia. This diplomatic revolution of 1756 led to another worldwide war. Like the War of Austrian Succession, the Seven Years' War had three major areas of conflict: Europe, India, and North America.

Europe saw the clash of the two major alliances: the British and Prussians against the Austrians, Russians, and French. The excellent army and the military skills of Frederick the Great of Prussia helped him to defeat the Austrian, French, and Russian armies at first. However, his forces were attacked from three different directions, and they were slowly worn down.

Frederick faced disaster. Then Peter III, a new Russian czar who greatly admired Frederick, withdrew Russian troops from the conflict. This withdrawal created a stalemate. This stop in the action, along with the desire for peace, brought an end to the war in Europe in 1763. All occupied territories, except Silesia, were returned to their original owners. Austria officially recognized Prussia's permanent control of Silesia.

The War in India

The struggle between Britain and France was known as the Great War for Empire. It took place in India and North America and had more decisive results than the war in Europe. After the War of the Austrian Succession, the French had returned Madras to Great Britain. However, the British and French continued to fight over territory in India. In the end, the British won because they had greater determination and not because they had better forces. The Treaty of Paris was signed in 1763, and the French withdrew from India and left India to the British.

The War in North America

The greatest conflicts of the Seven Years' War occurred in North America. The French and British colonies in North America were organized differently. The French government administered French North America (Canada and Louisiana) as a large trading area. It was valuable for its fur, leather, fish, and wood. However, few French settlers lived in North America.

British North America, on the other hand, consisted of thirteen prosperous colonies on the eastern coast of what is now the United States. Unlike the French colonies, the British colonies were well populated. In fact, by 1750 more than one million people lived in the British colonies.

The British and French fought over two main areas in North America: the waterways of the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Ohio River Valley. The fortress of Louisbourg and forts that guarded French Quebec protected the waterways of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The other area they fought over was the Ohio River valley, which had few settlers. The French had a number of victories at first. William Pitt the Elder, Britain's prime minister, helped Britain change the course of the war. Pitt was convinced that the French colonial empire would have to be destroyed for Britain to create its own colonial empire.

A series of British victories soon followed. In 1759 British forces under General Wolfe defeated the French under General Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham, outside Quebec. Both generals died in the battle. The British went on to seize Montreal, the Great Lakes area, and the Ohio River valley. The French were forced to make peace. The Treaty of Paris set the terms of peace. The French gave Canada and the lands east of the Mississippi to England. Spain, an ally of the French, gave up Spanish Florida to British control. In return, the French gave their Louisiana territory to the Spanish. By 1763, Great Britain had become the world's greatest colonial power.

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Reading Progress Check

Explaining Explain the involvement of Great Britain and France in the Seven Years' War.
