**ENLIGHTENED DESPOTISM**

Major thinkers of the Age of Enlightenment are credited for the development of government theories critical to the creation and evolution of the modern civil-society-driven democratic state. Enlightened despotism, also called enlightened absolutism, was among the first ideas resulting from the political ideals of the Enlightenment. The concept was formally described by the German historian Wilhelm Roscher in 1847 and remains controversial among scholars.

Enlightened despots held that royal power emanated not from divine right but from a social contract whereby a despot was entrusted with the power to govern in lieu of any other governments. In effect, the monarchs of enlightened absolutism strengthened their authority by improving the lives of their subjects. This philosophy implied that the sovereign knew the interests of his or her subjects better than they themselves did. The monarch taking responsibility for the subjects precluded their political participation. The difference between a despot and an *enlightened* despot is based on a broad analysis of the degree to which they embraced the Age of Enlightenment. However, historians debate the actual implementation of enlightened despotism. They distinguish between the “enlightenment” of the ruler personally versus that of his or her regime.

Enlightened despotism was also known as enlightened absolutism or benevolent absolutism- a form of absolute monarchy or despotism inspired by the Enlightenment. The monarchs who embraced it followed the participles of rationality. Some of them fostered education and allowed religious tolerance, freedom of speech, and the right to hold private property. They held that royal power emanated not from divine right but from a social contract whereby a despot was entrusted with the power to govern in lieu of any other governments. Some enlightened despots are discussed below:

**Frederick The Great**

Enlightened despotism was defended in an essay by Frederick the Great, who ruled Prussia from 1740 to 1786. He was an enthusiast of French ideas and invited the prominent French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire to live at his palace. The following were his achievements.

* With the help of French experts, Frederick organized a system of indirect taxation, which provided the state with more revenue than direct taxation.
* One of Frederick’s greatest achievements included the control of grain prices, whereby government storehouses would enable the civilian population to survive in needy regions, where the harvest was poor.
* Frederick modernized the Prussian bureaucracy and civil service and pursued religious policies throughout his realm that ranged from tolerance to segregation.
* He was largely non-practicing and tolerated all faiths in his realm, although Protestantism became the favored religion and Catholics were not chosen for higher state positions.
* He protected and encouraged trade by Jewish citizens of the Empire and repeatedly expressed strong anti-Semitic sentiments.
* He also encouraged immigrants of various nationalities and faiths to come to Prussia. Some critics, however, point out his oppressive measures against conquered Polish subjects after some Polish land fell under the control of the Prussian Empire.
* Frederick supported arts, philosophers that he favored, and granted complete freedom of the press and literature.

**Catherine The Great**

Catherine II of Russia was the most renowned and the longest-ruling female leader of Russia, reigning from 1762 until her death in 1796. An admirer of Peter the Great, she continued to modernize Russia along Western European lines but her enlightened despotism manifested itself mostly with her commitment to arts, sciences, and the modernization of Russian education.

* The Hermitage Museum, which now occupies the whole Winter Palace, began as Catherine’s personal collection.
* She wrote comedies, fiction, and memoirs, while cultivating Voltaire, Diderot, and d’Alembert—all French encyclopedists who later cemented her reputation in their writings.Within a few months of her accession in 1762, having heard the French government threatened to stop the publication of the famous French Encyclopédie on account of its irreligious spirit, Catherine proposed to Diderot that he should complete his great work in Russia under her protection.
* The leading European economists of her day became foreign members of the Free Economic Society, established on her suggestion in Saint Petersburg in 1765.
* She recruited Western European scientists.
* She believed a ‘new kind of person’ could be created by instilling Russian children with Western European education.
* She continued to investigate educational theory and practice of other countries and while she introduced some educational reforms, she failed to establish a national school system.
* Catherine established the Smolny Institute for Noble Girls to educate females. At first, the Institute only admitted young girls of the noble elite, but eventually it began to admit girls of the petit-bourgeoisie, as well. The girls who attended the Smolny Institute, Smolyanki, were often accused of being ignorant of anything that went on in the world outside the walls of the Smolny buildings. Within the walls of the Institute, they were taught impeccable French, music, dance, and complete awe of the Monarch.
* Although Catherine refrained from putting most democratic principles into practice, she issued codes addressing some modernization trends, including dividing the country into provinces and districts, limiting the power of nobles, creating a middle estate, and a number of economic reforms.

However, military conscription and economy continued to depend on serfdom, and the increasing demands of the state and private landowners led to increased levels of reliance on serfs.

**Maria Theresa**

Maria Theresa was the only female ruler of the Habsburg dominions and the last of the House of Habsburg.

* She implemented significant reforms to strengthen Austria’s military and bureaucratic efficiency.
* She doubled the state revenue between 1754 and 1764, though her attempt to tax clergy and nobility was only partially successful. Nevertheless, her financial reforms greatly improved the economy.
* In 1760, Maria Theresa created the council of state, which served as a committee of expert advisors. It lacked executive or legislative authority but nevertheless showed the difference between the autocratic form of government.
* In medicine, her decision to have her children inoculated after the smallpox epidemic of 1767 was responsible for changing Austrian physicians’ negative view of vaccination.
* Austria outlawed witch-burning and torture in 1776. It was later reintroduced, but the progressive nature of these reforms remains noted.
* Education was one of the most notable reforms of Maria Theresa’s rule. In a new school system based on that of Prussia, all children of both genders from the ages were required to attend school from the ages of 6 to 12, although the law turned out to be very difficult to execute.

However, Maria Theresa  found it hard to fit into the intellectual sphere of the Enlightenment. For example, she believed that religious unity was necessary for a peaceful public life and explicitly rejected the idea of religious tolerance. She regarded both the Jews and Protestants as dangerous to the state and actively tried to suppress them. As a young monarch who fought two dynastic wars, she believed that her cause should be the cause of her subjects, but in her later years she would believe that their cause must be hers.

**Joseph-II of Austria**

Maria Theresa’s oldest son, Joseph II, Holy Roman Emperor from 1765 to 1790 and ruler of the Habsburg lands from 1780 to 1790, was at ease with Enlightenment ideas.  Joseph was a proponent of enlightened despotism, but his commitment to modernizing reforms engendered significant opposition, which eventually culminated in a failure to fully implement his programs.

* Joseph inspired a complete reform of the legal system, abolished brutal punishments and the death penalty in most instances, and imposed the principle of complete equality of treatment for all offenders.
* He ended censorship of the press and theater.
* In 1781–82, he extended full legal freedom to serfs. The landlords, however, found their economic position threatened and eventually reversed the policy.
* To equalize the incidence of taxation, Joseph ordered an appraisal of all the lands of the empire to impose a single egalitarian tax on land.  However, most of his financial reforms were repealed shortly before or after Joseph’s death in 1790.
* To produce a literate citizenry, elementary education was made compulsory for all boys and girls and higher education on practical lines was offered for a select few. Joseph created scholarships for talented poor students and allowed the establishment of schools for Jews and other religious minorities.
* In 1784, he ordered that the country change its language of instruction from Latin to German, a highly controversial step in a multilingual empire.
* Joseph also attempted to centralize medical care in Vienna through the construction of a single, large hospital, the famous Allgemeines Krankenhaus, which opened in 1784. Centralization, however, worsened sanitation problems, causing epidemics and a 20% death rate in the new hospital, but the city became preeminent in the medical field in the next century.
* Joseph II was one of the first rulers in Central Europe who attempted to abolish serfdom but his plans met with resistance from the landholders.
* His Imperial Patent of 1785 abolished serfdom on some territories of the Empire, but under the pressure of the landlords did not give the peasants ownership of the land or freedom from dues owed to the land-owning nobles. It did give them personal freedom. The final emancipation reforms in the Habsburg Empire were introduced in 1848.
* Joseph’s most unpopular reforms was his attempted modernization of the highly traditional Catholic Church. Calling himself the guardian of Catholicism, Joseph II struck vigorously at papal power. He tried to make the Catholic Church in his empire the tool of the state, independent of Rome. Joseph was very friendly to Freemasonry, as he found it highly compatible with his own Enlightenment philosophy, although he apparently never joined the Lodge himself.
* In 1789, he issued a charter of religious toleration for the Jews of Galicia, a region with a large Yiddish-speaking traditional Jewish population. The charter abolished communal autonomy whereby the Jews controlled their internal affairs. It promoted Germanization and the wearing of non-Jewish clothing.