

THE ENLIGHTENED DESPOTS

I. Joseph II of Austria and Reform

Although her husband was emperor, Maria Theresa ruled the Habsburg lands. However, when her son Joseph became Holy Roman Emperor after the death of her husband in 1765, she made her son coregent. Following Maria Theresa's death in 1780, Joseph II reigned in his own right until his death in 1790. The Counter-Reformation's political and religious goals had largely been accomplished by the time Maria Theresa came to the throne, but maintaining Austria's great-power status urgently required broad internal reform and restructuring to strengthen the central authority of the monarchy and curtail the power of the nobility.

Maria Theresa began administrative and economic reforms in 1749, drawing on mercantilist theory and examples provided by Prussian and French reforms. In addition, she undertook reforms in the social, legal, and religious spheres. During the co-regency and after Maria Theresa's death, Joseph continued the reforms along the lines pursued by his mother. But mother and son had sharply different motivations. Maria Theresa was a pious Catholic empress working within the structure of a paternalistic, baroque absolutism and was unsympathetic to the Enlightenment. **Joseph, in contrast, gave the reforms an ideological edge reflecting the utilitarian theories of the Enlightenment.** Because his reforms were more ideologically driven and thus less flexible and pragmatic, they frequently were also less successful and disrupted the stability of the Habsburg Empire.

Although the statist religious policy that evolved in this era became known as Josephism, Joseph's policy was largely an extension of his mother's, whose piety did not exempt the church from reforms designed to strengthen state authority and power. Joseph's utilitarianism, however, contributed to two important divergences from Maria Theresa's policy: **greater religious toleration and suppression of religious institutions and customs deemed contrary to utilitarian principles.** The Edict of Tolerance, issued in 1781, granted Protestants almost equal status with Catholics; other decrees lifted restrictions on Jews and opened up communities, trades, and educational opportunities previously barred to them. The utilitarian principles behind religious toleration, however, also inspired Joseph to dissolve Catholic monasteries that were dedicated solely to contemplative religious life and to suppress various traditional Jewish customs he viewed as detrimental to society and a hinderance to the Germanization of the Jewish population.

The reforms **created an administrative, fiscal, and judicial bureaucracy** directly responsible to the monarch. As the seat of the new centralized institutions, Vienna grew from merely being the sovereign's place of residence to a true political and administrative capital. Hungary, however, was not included in these centralizing administrative reforms. In appreciation for the support Austria had received from the Hungarian nobles during the War of the Austrian Succession, Maria Theresa never extended her reforms to that kingdom.

Although the reforms improved Austrian military preparedness, they fell short of their original goal of enabling Austria to defend its interests in Europe. Hopes of regaining Silesia and partitioning Prussia were abandoned after only limited military success in the Austro-Prussian Seven Years' War (1756-63). Efforts to check Russian expansion yielded mixed results. Unable to prevent Russian and Prussian ambitions against Poland, Austria reluctantly joined them in the **First Partition of Poland in 1772** and gained the province of Galicia. Five years later, Austria intervened between Russia and Turkey to prevent Russian gains at Turkish expense and in the process acquired Bukovina, a territory adjacent to Galicia and Transylvania. Because the new territories were economically backward, their acquisition served mainly to shift the ethnic balance of the Habsburg Empire through the addition of a large Slavic population (Poles and Ruthenians), a sizable Jewish minority (which accounted for 60 percent of the empire's total Jewish population), and a lesser number of Romanians.

The ideological rigidity with which Joseph II carried out his reforms also weakened the Habsburg Dynasty by provoking social unrest and, in Hungary and Belgium rebellion. When Joseph died in 1790, his brother, Leopold II (r. 1790-92), had to reverse many of the reforms and offer new concessions to restore order.

II. Frederick the Great and Reform

Frederick the Great remains one of the most famous German rulers of all time for his military successes and his domestic reforms that made Prussia one of the leading European nations. Frederick II (the Great) was king of Prussia from 1740 to 1786, and he stands as one of the greatest of the Enlightened Despots. He was an absolute ruler, but he lived under the principle that he was the **"first servant of the state."** He consequently did not rule by his own personal whims, but always under the guidance of what was most beneficial for Prussia, and he expected his people to possess the same devotion.

Frederick devoted himself to building Prussia into a strong state and that meant both expansion and reform. When Frederick saw a chance to unify his kingdom geographically by taking over the Austrian province of Silesia, he quickly planned an invasion. This action went against an established treaty, but Frederick argued that agreements between nations became void when it was no longer beneficial to the state for them to exist. During the Seven Years War, Frederick successfully resisted opposition from France, Russia, and Austria despite a much smaller pool of resources. It was his military genius that saved his country and brought Prussia out of the war stronger than she had been before entering it.

As king, Frederick issued a series of domestic reforms that modernized Prussia and built her up from within. He continued the work of his predecessors to consolidate power by giving the territorial princes a place in the **governmental bureaucracy**. He established **universal religious toleration** and granted **freedom of the press**. He established **individual protections against the law** by speeding up the legal process, abolishing torture, and making sentences of death legal only with his personal sanction. Prussian judges were educated and the courts gained a reputation as the most honest in Europe. He established the **first German law code** and enforced **general education rules** across Prussia. Frederick financed the rebuilding of towns through **agricultural reforms** and built thousands of miles of roads. Frederick built Prussia into one of the strongest nations in Europe and left a legacy of absolute devotion to the fatherland that continued to shape German history into the 20th century.

III. Catherine the Great and Reform

Catherine the Great is remembered as one of the greatest reformers of Russia. During her reign, Catherine continued the reforms begun by Peter the Great that ultimately led to the emergence of Russia onto the worldwide stage of politics.

Catherine was a German princess whose original name was Sophie Augusta Fredericka. She was born on April 21, 1729 at Settin, Pomerania to Johanna Elizabeth and the Prince Christian Augustus. On August 21, 1744 Catherine married Peter III, the Grand Duke of Holstein and heir apparent to the Russian throne, in the biggest ceremony ever performed in Europe. Peter III was crowned ruler of Russia in 1761. Peter proved to be a very unpopular and inept sovereign and was murdered in June of 1762 in a coup staged by the Imperial Guards. Catherine was named empress and ruled for more than thirty years.

Catherine proceeded to "Westernize" Russia. However, unlike Peter the Great, Catherine scorned force and instead focused on pursuing individualistic endeavors. Her reforms went even farther after a failed peasant revolt in 1773 led by Yemelian Pugachev threatened Eastern Russia. As a result, Catherine the Great instituted several drastic reforms within the Russian society. First, she established **the Free Economic Society** (1765) to encourage the modernization of agriculture and industry. Second, she encouraged **foreign investment in economically underdeveloped areas**. Third, Catherine **relaxed the censorship law** and **encouraged education** for the nobles and middle class.

During Catherine's reign, Russia also achieved great military success and gained large tracts of land. Following two successful wars against the Ottoman Empire, Russia annexed Crimea, which gave it access to the Black Sea. In addition, Russia's control over Poland and Luxembourg allowed it to annex three separate tracts of land.

By the time of her death on Nov. 17, 1796, Catherine the Great had pushed Russia into the modern era. Moreover, Russia entered the modern era as a dominant player in the world.