

The Enlightenment and Revolutions 1550-1800

THE STORY MATTERS...

The Scientific Revolution led to the Enlightenment, a major European intellectual movement that applied reason to all human experience. The English mathematician Sir Isaac Newton was a key figure in the Scientific Revolution. His fundamental scientific insight, that the physical world operated according to natural laws discovered through scientific investigation, influenced every area of Enlightenment thought.

Lesson 21-3

Enlightened Absolutism and the Balance of Power

READING HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

rigid eventually

Content Vocabulary

enlightened absolutism successors

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

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

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

Enlightenment ideas had an impact on the politics of eighteenth-century Europe. While they liked to talk about enlightened reforms, most rulers were more interested in the power and stability of their nations. Their desire for balancing power, however, could also lead to war. The Seven Years' War became global as war broke out 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, hold property, and pursue happiness. To establish and preserve these natural rights, most *philosophes* believed that people needed to be governed by enlightened rulers. Enlightened rulers must allow natural rights and nurture the arts, sciences, and education. Above all, they must obey and enforce the laws fairly for all subjects. Only strong monarchs could bring about the enlightened reforms society needed.

Many historians once assumed that a new type of monarchy, **enlightened absolutism**, emerged in the later eighteenth century. In this system, rulers tried to govern by Enlightenment principles while maintaining their royal powers. Did Europe's rulers actually follow the advice of the *philosophes* and become enlightened? To answer this

question, we examine three states – Prussia, Austria, and Russia.

Two able Prussian kings, Frederick William I and Frederick II, made Prussia a major European power in the eighteenth century. Frederick William I maintained a highly efficient bureaucracy of civil service workers.

They observed the supreme values of obedience, honor, and, above all, service to the king. As Frederick William asserted: "One must serve the king with life and limb, ... and surrender everything except salvation. The latter is reserved for God. But everything else must be mine."

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

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

Frederick II, or Frederick the Great, who ruled from 1740 to 1786, was one of the best educated monarchs of the time. He was well versed in Enlightenment ideas and was also a dedicated ruler. He, too, enlarged the Prussian army by actively recruiting the nobility into civil service. Frederick kept a strict watch over the bureaucracy.

For a time, Frederick seemed quite willing to make enlightened reforms. He abolished the use of torture except in treason and murder cases. He also granted limited freedom of speech and press, as well as greater religious toleration. However, Frederick kept Prussia's serfdom and rigid social structure intact and avoided any additional reforms.

The Austrian Empire had become one of the great European states by the start of the eighteenth century. It was hard to rule, however, because it was a sprawling empire composed of many nationalities, languages, religions, and cultures. Empress Maria Theresa, who inherited the throne in

1740, worked to centralize and strengthen the state. While not open to the *philosophes*' calls for reform, she did work to improve the condition of the serfs.

Her son, Joseph II, believed in the need to sweep away anything standing in the path of reason: "I have made Philosophy the lawmaker of my empire." Joseph abolished serfdom and eliminated the death penalty. He established the principle of equality of all before the law and enacted religious reforms, including religious toleration.

Joseph's reform program largely failed, however. He alienated the nobles by freeing the serfs. He alienated the Catholic Church with his religious reforms. Even the serfs were unhappy because they could not understand the drastic changes. Joseph realized his failure when he wrote his own epitaph for his gravestone: "Here lies Joseph II who was unfortunate in all his enterprises." His **successors** undid almost all of Joseph II's reforms.

In Russia, Peter the Great was followed by six weak successors who were often put in power and deposed by the palace guard. A group of nobles murdered the last of these six successors, Peter III. His German wife emerged as ruler of all the Russians.

Catherine II, or Catherine the Great, ruled Russia from 1762 to 1796. She was an intelligent woman who was familiar with the works of the *philosophes* and seemed to favor enlightened reforms. She considered the idea of a new law code that would recognize the principle of equality of all people in the eyes of the law.

In the end, however, Catherine did nothing because she knew that 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 and eventually to rebellion. Led by an illiterate Cossack (a Russian warrior), Yemelyan Pugachov, the rebellion spread across southern Russia but soon collapsed. Catherine took stronger measures against the peasants. Rural reform was halted, and serfdom was expanded into newer parts of the empire.

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

Of the rulers under discussion, only Joseph II sought 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, all three of these enlightened absolutists – Frederick, Joseph, and Catherine – were guided primarily by their interest in the power and welfare of their state. When they did manage to strengthen their position as rulers, they did not undertake enlightened reforms to benefit their subjects. Rather, their power was used to collect more taxes

and thus to create armies, to wage wars, and to gain even more power.

The *philosophes* condemned war as a foolish waste of life and resources. Despite their words, the rivalry among states that led to costly struggles remained unchanged in eighteenth-century Europe. Europe's states were chiefly guided by their rulers' self-interest.

The eighteenth-century monarchs were concerned with the balance of power. This concept meant that states should have equal power in order to prevent anyone from dominating the others. Large armies created to defend a state's security, however, were often used to conquer new lands as well. As Frederick II of Prussia said, "The fundamental rule of governments is the principle of extending their territories." This rule 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?*

The stage was set for the Seven Years' War when, in 1740, a major war broke out over the succession to the Austrian throne. When the Austrian emperor Charles VI died without a male heir, his daughter, Maria Theresa, succeeded him. King Frederick II of Prussia took advantage of the confusion surrounding the succession of a woman to the throne by invading Austrian Silesia, a piece of land that he hoped to add to Prussia. By this action, Frederick refused to recognize the legitimacy of the empress of Austria. France then entered the war against Austria, its traditional enemy. In turn, Maria Theresa allied with Great Britain.

The War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) was fought in three areas of the world. 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 of the St. Lawrence River.

By 1748, all parties were exhausted and agreed to the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle. The treaty guaranteed the return of all occupied territories but Silesia to their original owners. Prussia's refusal to return Silesia meant yet another war, for Maria Theresa refused to accept the loss. She rebuilt her army while working diplomatically to separate Prussia from its chief ally, France. In 1756 Maria Theresa achieved what was soon labeled 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.

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

Europe witnessed the clash of the two major alliances: the British and Prussians against the Austrians, Russians, and French. The superb army and military skill of Frederick the Great of Prussia enabled him at first to defeat the Austrian, French, and Russian armies. Under attack from three different directions, however, his forces were gradually worn down.

Frederick faced disaster until Peter III, a new Russian czar who greatly admired Frederick, withdrew Russian troops from the conflict. This withdrawal created a stalemate and led to the desire for peace. The European war ended in 1763. All occupied territories were returned to their original owners, except Silesia. Austria officially recognized Prussia's permanent control of Silesia.

The War in India

The struggle between Britain and France that took place in the rest of the world had more decisive results. Known as the Great War for Empire, it was fought in India and North America. The French had returned Madras to Britain after the War of the Austrian Succession, but the struggle in India continued. The British ultimately won out, not because they had better forces but because they were more persistent. With the Treaty of Paris in 1763, the French withdrew and left India to the British.

The War in North America

The greatest conflicts of the Seven Years' War took place in North America. On the North American continent, the French and British colonies were set up differently. The French government administered French North America (Canada and Louisiana) as a vast trading area. It was valuable for its fur, leather, fish, and timber, but its colonies were thinly populated.

British North America consisted of thirteen prosperous colonies on the eastern coast of what is now the United States. Unlike the French colonies, the British colonies were more populated, containing more than one million people by 1750.

The British and French fought over two main areas in North America. One consisted of the waterways of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, which were protected by the fortress of Louisbourg and by forts that guarded French Quebec. The other area they fought over was the unsettled Ohio River valley. The French scored a number of victories at first. British fortunes were revived, however, by the efforts of William Pitt the Elder, Britain's prime minister. 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. By the Treaty of Paris, the French transferred Canada and the lands east of the Mississippi to England. Spain, an ally of the French, transferred 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.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

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

REVIEWING 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 takes over a throne, title, estate, or office