

## ENLIGHTENED DESPOTS

**Directions:** Examine the following primary and secondary sources on the Enlightened Despots and answer the guiding questions.

### FREDERICK II:

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.

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.

### **Primary Source:**

*"Rulers should always remind themselves that they are men like the least of their subjects. The sovereign is the foremost judge, general, financier, and minister of his country, not merely for the sake of his prestige. Therefore, he should perform with care the duties connected with these offices. He is merely the principal servant of the State. Hence, he must act with honesty, wisdom, and complete disinterestedness in such a way that he can render an account of his stewardship to the citizens at any moment. Consequently, he is guilty if he wastes the money of the people, the taxes which they have paid, in luxury, pomp and debauchery. He who should improve the morals of the people, be the guardian of the law, and improve their education should not pervert them by his bad example.*

*Princes, sovereigns, and king have not been given supreme authority in order to live in luxurious self-indulgence and debauchery. They have not been elevated by their fellow-men to enable them to strut about and to insult with their pride the simple-mannered, the poor and the suffering. They have not been placed at the head of the State to keep around themselves a crowd of idle loafers whose uselessness drives them towards vice. The sovereign is the representative of his State. He and his people form a single body. Ruler and ruled can be happy only if they are firmly united. The sovereign stands to his people in the same relation in which the head stands to the body. He must use his eyes and his brain for the whole community, and act on its behalf to the common advantage."*

1. According to Frederick, what is his role as a monarch? What reforms did he enact?
2. What examples does he give of a flawed or corrupt leader?
3. Frederick declares himself as the "first servant of the state." What does he mean by this?

### CATHERINE II:

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. Catherine proceeded to "Westernize" Russia. 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.

**Primary Source:**

*"The Sovereign is absolute; for there is no other Authority but that which centers in his single Person*

*33. The Laws ought to be so framed, as to secure the Safety of every Citizen as much as possible. The Equality of the Citizens consists in this; that they should all be subject to the same Laws. This Equality requires Institutions so well adapted, as to prevent the Rich from oppressing those who are not so wealthy as themselves In a State or Assemblage of People that live together in a Community, where there are Laws, Liberty can only consist in doing that which every One ought to do, and not to be constrained to do that which One ought not to do.*

*123. The Usage of Torture is contrary to all the Dictates of Nature and Reason...That Law, therefore, is highly beneficial to the Community where it is established, which ordains that every Man shall be judged by his Peers and Equals. For when the Fate of a Citizen is in Question, all Prejudices arising from the Difference of Rank or Fortune should be stifled; because they ought to have no Influence between the Judges and the Parties accused.*

*194. (1.) No Man ought to be looked upon as guilty, before he has received his judicial Sentence; nor can the Laws deprive him of their Protection, before it is proved that he has forfeited all Right to it.*

*253. And therefore, to shun all Occasions of reducing People to a State of Slavery, except the utmost Necessity should inevitably oblige us to do it:"*

4. What were three reforms that Catherine II passed in Russia during her reign?
5. Where do you see Enlightenment influence in her new law code?
6. What type of government do you think she favors and why?

## **JOSEPH II:**

Following Maria Theresa's death in 1780, Joseph II reigned in his own right until his death in 1790. 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 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.

**Primary Source:**

*"I determined from the very commencement of my reign to adorn my diadem with the love of my people, to act in the administration of affairs according to just, impartial, and liberal principles; consequently, I granted toleration [in 1781], and removed the yoke which had oppressed the protestants for centuries....nobody shall any longer be exposed to hardships on account of his creed; no man shall be compelled in future to profess the religion of the state if it be contrary to his persuasion....*

*Tolerance is an effect of that beneficent increase of knowledge which now enlightens Europe and which is owing to philosophy and the efforts of great men; it is a convincing proof of the improvement of the human mind... and which, fortunately for mankind, has now become the highway of monarchs."*

7. What were some of the reforms passed under Joseph II?
8. Why can he be considered an Enlightened despot?