Enlightened Despotism
Enlightened Despotism: Essential Questions

1. What were the general characteristics of Enlightened Despotism?

2. How was Joseph II both enlightened and despotic?

3. How was Frederick the Great both enlightened and despotic?

4. How was Catherine the Great both enlightened and despotic?

5. Which of the enlightened despots appears to be most attuned to the spirit of the Enlightenment?
Journal 36: The typical enlightened despot set out to reform and reconstruct the state in order to make it more rational and more uniform.

—Palmer Chapter 36 • pp. 311-20—

Directions: Using sentences or detailed bulleted notes, identify & explain the evidence Palmer uses to support the thesis listed above.
Enlightened Despotism: Terms

- despot: a ruler with absolute power
- Enlightenment: intellectual period of the 18th century based on the idea that society could be improved by the use of reason
- Enlightened Despotism:
  - grew out of earlier period of absolutism (Louis XIV, Peter the Great, Charles I, etc.)
  - change in attitude: acceleration of old institution of monarchy without the religious buttress (did not justify on grounds of divine right). Enlightened despots sought to justify themselves in the light of reason and secular usefulness.
Characteristics of Enlightened Despotism

- **secular**
  - ✓ claimed no mandate from heaven (no divine right justification)
  - ✓ recognized no responsibility to god or church

- **rational & reformist**
  - ✓ typical enlightened despot set out to reconstruct his/her state by the use of reason
  - ✓ impatient of custom (all referred to as “feudal”)
    - → customary law
    - → traditional rights and privileges of nobles, church, judicial bodies, etc.

- **methods**
  - ✓ uncompromising & abrupt: wanted change and wanted it immediately
  - ✓ contradictory: Enlightened Despots were comfortable with contradiction
    - → selected certain enlightened ideas and denied others as they sought fit for their monarchy and state
    - → could be enlightened in some ways and despotic in others
Maria Theresa—Austria

Enlightened Accomplishments:

• nobles paid heavier taxes
• weakened the influence of the Catholic Church
  ✓ subjected Church to higher taxes
  ✓ nationalized monastic property
  ✓ expelled Jesuits

Despotic Ways:

• banned works of Voltaire & Rousseau
• banned the Papal Index (did not want forbidden books to arouse curiosity in her subjects)
Joseph II—Austria

Enlightened Accomplishments:

• expanded religious toleration
  ✓ granted full toleration to Lutherans, Orthodox Christians & Calvinists
  ✓ improved the lives of Jews
    ➡ freed from Vienna’s ghetto
    ➡ exempted from discriminatory taxes they had been paying
    ➡ lifted the requirement of wearing yellow badge as a sign of inferiority

• freed the serfs
  ✓ abolished obligations to manorial lords
  ✓ deprived nobles of their traditional right to administer justice to peasantry

Joseph II
1760-90
Joseph II—Austria

Enlightened Accomplishments (cont’d):

- believed in popular education & social equality
  - ✓ provided teachers and textbooks for primary schools
  - ✓ more than 25% of school age-children attended school

Despotic Ways:

- practiced mercantilism
  - ✓ high protective tariffs
  - ✓ government closely supervised economic activity
- absolutist in terms of government appointments

Joseph II
1760-90
“Joseph’s removal of a great range of legal disabilities from the Jews is one of the changes for which he was most revered, with Galician Jews for generations seeing Joseph as one of the great figures in their history...Some of these disabilities were so grotesque that it is hard to engage with the idea that they ever existed. Jews could now remove the yellow star from their clothing, move freely around the Monarchy, open their own factories, employ Christian servants, and attend universities and visit theaters. They were also permitted to leave their homes on Sundays and on Christian festivals, bans previously in place on the grounds that as Christ’s murderers it was offensive for them to be seen in public. These changes inaugurated a new and powerful relationship between the Habsburgs and the Jews which ultimately resulted in the greatness of Central Europe’s late-nineteenth-century culture. Joseph’s motives, however, were as usual to do with efficiency—he wished to make Jews into fully productive citizens and he wanted them for his army. There was also the usual sickness that accompanied all Habsburg thinking about Jews. As a Catholic, Joseph believed that the Jews’ adherence to their faith was the result of their legal disabilities. Once they were in the mainstream, took German names and were taught German at school they would cease to be Jews.”

Frederick II (the Great)—Prussia

Enlightened Accomplishments:

- general
  - attentive reader of *philosophes*
  - brought Voltaire to Prussia
  - wrote pamphlet arguing the immorality of Machiavelli’s *The Prince*
  - composed music
- economic
  - after Seven Years’ War gave peasants tools, stock and seed to repair ruined farms
  - encouraged agricultural improvements
    - drained swamps, began crop rotation and introduced iron plow
    - imported new crops: clover, potato, tobacco

Frederick the Great
1740-86
Frederick II (the Great)—Prussia

Enlightened Accomplishments (cont’d):

- **religious**: some religious toleration
  - invited expelled Jesuits to predominately Lutheran Prussia
  - gave Catholic minority virtually full equality
  - boasted that he would build a mosque in Berlin if Muslims wanted to settle in Prussia

- **judicial reforms**
  - freed courts from political pressures
  - ordered a reduction in use of torture
  - set up a system of appellate courts
Frederick II (the Great)—Prussia

Despotic Ways:

- hostile to doctrine of laissez-faire
- levied taxes on Jews and tried to exclude them from the professions and civil service
- did not loosen the bonds of serfdom (although he did abolish it on royal grounds)
- urged education to peasants, but only to become literate enough for his own needs (not enough to be discontented with their lifestyles)
- after Seven Years’ War he forced all bourgeois officers to resign their commissions
- business and professional men were exempt from military service but subject to heavy taxation

Frederick the Great
1740-86
“Frederick was a lover of learning. He was devoted to the idea of academic education. He felt it was a prerequisite of both civilization and prosperity. He associated the philistinism which had separated him in sympathy from his father with the backward condition of much of Prussia. From his first day he had been determined to make his kingdom a shrine of enlightenment and scholarship. Soon after his accession, in 1741, he had persuaded Leonhard Euler, Swiss and greatest mathematician of his day, to come to Berlin from St. Petersburg and accept the post of Professor of Mathematics which he held for twenty-five years. Frederick collected sages as other men collect stamps. To the consternation of many in 1773 he offered asylum to the Jesuits when their order, under papal interdict, was proscribed in some other, including Catholic, countries—in Portugal in 1759, France in 1764, Spain in 1767; he admired Jesuit achievements in the sphere of education, their dedication, established by Ignatius Loyola himself, to learning and enlightenment rather than superstition and narrowness of mind. Voltaire was now in regular communication with him. Diderot, on the other hand—another great rationalist philosopher and rebel against Christian orthodoxy—had referred disobligingly to Frederick in his Encyclopédia and was not welcome in Berlin. And not all Frederick’s enthusiasm was for sceptics—he read [François] Fénelon with great admiration.”

“Frederick the Great’s ‘enlightened’ reforms were, above all, intended to make the Prussian state more powerful, not more just. He made Prussia a more efficient absolutist state. Frederick intended his law code to enhance the reach of the state rather than to make his people equal before the law. When he freed the serfs of the royal domains, it was because he needed them in the army. Nobles (Junkers) dominated most of the plum positions as military officers and high officials. Yet some commoners did in fact rise to important posts, including some army officers, who were subsequently ennobled. Frederick improved the state bureaucracy by introducing an examination system to govern entry. In the courts of justice, candidates had to pass the most difficult examinations, and in Berlin only a third of all judges were nobles.”

Journal 37: Even at the end of her reign, Catherine the Great continued to recognize the standards of the Enlightenment—at least as standards.
Enlightened Accomplishments:

- general
  - ✓ corresponded with Voltaire
  - ✓ invited Diderot to Russia; Catherine eventually bought Diderot’s library

- reforms
  - ✓ codified some laws
  - ✓ restricted use of torture
  - ✓ certain degree of religious toleration for non-Orthodox Christians
  - ✓ attempted to reform education by establishing primary and secondary schools throughout Russia
Catherine II (the Great)—Russia

Despotic Tendencies & Traits:

- further entrenched serfdom after Pugachev’s Rebellion (1773)
  - led by former soldier Emelian Pugachev, who led a violent insurrection in the Urals: most destructive in Russian history
  - Pugachev claimed he was the true tsar, Peter III (Catherine’s deceased husband)
  - massive rebellion of peasants, miners, fishermen and others who burned and looted Russian towns and villages. Priests and landlords were killed.
  - with the help of a famine and the army, rebellion put down. Pugachev was executed.
  - result: Catherine further empowered the landowners over the serfs.
- unfair taxation system (heaviest burden fell on poorest)
- increased autocracy

Catherine the Great
1762-96

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