



Western Civilization from 1650 to the Present

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TOPIC 5.3. PRIMARY SOURCES: THE ENLIGHTENED DESPOT

ENLIGHTENED DESPOT

One of the most interesting personages to emerge during the Enlightenment was the so-called Enlightened despot—the monarch who ruled according to Enlightenment principles. The rulers generally thought to exemplify Enlightened despotism included Frederick II (a.k.a. the Great) of Prussia, Maria Teresa of Austria, and Catherine II (a.k.a. the Great) of Russia.

Read the following excerpts from Frederick's [Essay on Forms of Government](#), and Catherine's "Proposals for a New Law Code" and "Decree on Serfs" in [Various Documents on Government](#). Then consider some remarks on the [Division of Poland](#) by Frederick, Catherine, Maria Teresa.

What was Enlightened despotism? How did Enlightenment principles inform the ideas and decisions of these monarchs?

Do you think Enlightenment values are compatible with despotic rule? If so, how? If not, how did these rulers accommodate those values with their political aims and the means they used to achieve them?

Adapted from [Humanities in the Western Tradition](#) by Marvin Perry