Enlightened Monarchs: Crash Course European History #19

Crash Course: European History
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Hi, I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History.

So last week we discussed the Enlightenment philosophers who challenged the idea that kings and nobles were qualified to be elites simply because of the families they were born into, but still, monarchs were interested in Enlightenment ideas. Also, they understood they needed to effectively adapt to the Enlightenment as they had adapted to previous changes in theology and philosophy. For instance, Catherine II, or Catherine the Great of Russia corresponded often and enthusiastically with Voltaire, even though he criticized despotic rule, and she also offered to print Diderot's *Encyclopédie* in Russia when France censored it.

We use the term "Enlightened Monarchs" to refer to the rulers who supported and applauded Enlightenment thinkers, but were they in fact enlightened or did they remain absolutist despots? The answer will surprise you, unless you have even a passing familiarity with despots.

First, let's review what the philosophes criticized in the practices of rulers and aristocratic leaders. They singled out torture, censorship, and the arrogance of aristocrats, as well as their capriciousness. Like, kings and nobility could have ordinary people thrown into prison for just about any reason, large or small, and in general, most of the Enlightenment thinkers believed that nobles and the system that supported them were despotic from top to bottom. French theorist Montesquieu, for instance, whom we met in a previous episode, is the author of the satiric *Persian Letters*, also published *The Spirit of Laws*. In it, he discussed customs and types of government as they were influenced by climate and topography and other variables. To him, there was no God-given standard of divine right rule. Instead, Montesquieu focused on three basic types of government: democracies, which he saw as suitable for very small states, monarchies, that ruled mid-sized kingdoms, and despotic states, such as empires, that were governed with an iron hand.

Voltaire and other philosophes elaborated on these theories and many preferred Britain's post-Glorious Revolution-type of law-based monarchy, where courts and a parliament were separate from the monarch's power, and a Bill of Rights ensured certain protections to citizens. All of this, the enshrining of rights, independent courts, parliamentary representation, meant that power was balanced among multiple institutions. Also, the multiplicity of religions in Britain was seen as another assurance. It prevented a despotic religious institution from gaining control of the government.

Now, we've seen from examples like Poland-Lithuania that distributed power and diversity of belief sometimes means internal conflict and political gridlock, that weakens a state, but in Britain, Enlightenment philosophers saw an example of a state that was strong without being despotic. And in part because they had an example to point to, the Enlightenment philosophers were difficult for those in the upper echelons of government and society to ignore.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

King Frederick the Great of Prussia was renowned for his love of refinement and his interest in music and design. Like his friend Voltaire, Frederick the Great collected Chinese porcelain. He also wrote an opera about the Aztec Emperor Montezuma, which praised Montezuma for religious toleration, and seemed to agree with Enlightenment activists who fought against religious bigotry and torture. And Frederick also welcomed religious exiles from less tolerant regimes as a way of building the Prussian population, again a policy in line with the Enlightenment. He called himself a servant of the people. But all that said, Frederick built a massive standing army, increasing the armed forces to 200,000 men from his father's army of 80-ish-thousand, and he also forced the aristocracy to serve the state, either in the army or in the administration of the kingdom. And while, like a good Enlightenment thinker, he lightened the burden of serfs

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working his own estates, he also rewarded loyal aristocrats by increasing their control over the serfs living in their territories, further disenfranchising the most vulnerable of his subjects. These increasingly empowered landed aristocrats, or junkers, to use the German term, that Frederick rewarded, were the very type that Voltaire and other philosophes lambasted in their writings for the aristocrats pride and highhandedness. Frederick even blocked talented commoners from achieving high positions in either the bureaucracy or the army, entrenching aristocratic power still further.

Thanks, Thought Bubble!

At any rate, as a result of the supposedly-Enlightened Frederick the Great's policies, men of aristocratic pedigree in Prussia continued to have a major say in politics and the army into World War I and even beyond.

And then there was another of Voltaire's friends, the aforementioned Catherine the Great of Russia. For someone who disliked absolutism, Voltaire sure was pals with a lot of absolutists. As czar, Catherine sought to standardize codes of laws and regulations, which had an Enlightenment-ish tinge, but it was mostly an attempt to ease the struggle between all the groups that wanted to shape royal policy, like how new monarchs would be selected. The people who fought over these decisions included clans and factions of the royal guard and groups of influential clergy and cliques among commercial traders and ordinary citizens, so Catherine summoned representatives from all these social groups for their input, and she found that each only thought about bettering their own privileges or lot in life. The serfs seemed to have the most need for help, while merchants wanted the right to own serfs and the nobility wanted, of course, more of everything. Ultimately, Catherine failed in getting representatives to think first and foremost of the needs of the empire as a whole. Now, like other Enlightened monarchs, Catherine's policies did aim to be rational, but this was mostly true when it came to consolidating state power, which of course benefited her office,

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so one could argue she was also focused on her interests over those of the empire, but like other Enlightened monarchs, and like Peter the Great before her, Catherine did emphasize education. She even founded schools for girls, who were generally seen as not needing an education. The empress also created the first Russian dictionary and appointed a woman to head the project, she undertook the building of roads and the fostering of trade to bring economic unity to Russia, but like some other Enlightened monarchs, Catherine also boosted the importance of the aristocracy and consolidated their privileges. She professed to want to improve the status of the serf population, again bowing to the philosophes' humanitarian concerns, but she also imposed taxes that affected ordinary people the most.

Most of these monarchs wanted a more streamlined and efficient royal administration, but not necessarily for, like, philosophical reasons. They benefited from well-run armies, and they really benefited from taxes. During this age of ever-improving weaponry and higher costs for larger standing armies, taxes needed to be increased and also collected much more efficiently. In other words, governments needed to operate rationally, not according to the

whims of fate or individuals, but according to the needs of the state.

In 1770, for instance, Hapsburg empress Maria Theresa, who despite that portrait was not twin sisters with Catherine the Great, deployed soldiers to renumber the addresses of urban housing and standardized those addresses across culturally diverse groups, some of whom didn't even speak the same language. The soldiers were told to count the empire's subjects, but also to listen to their individual reports on their health and well-being, and this self-reporting served to unify the empire's wide range of inhabitants by showing them that the state cared enough to count them and ask them about their needs. That might seem minor today, but consider being an 18th-century peasant who rarely, if ever, had meaningful contact with the imperial government.

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Toleration was another Enlightenment ideal that also served to increase the number of useful citizens in an empire. Like when Maria Theresa's successor, Joseph II of Austria, announced the emancipation of the Jews in the Hapsburg Empire during his administration, he decreed that Jews could not use their own language except in religious services, which was a way to try to integrate them into the Imperial workforce, but the decree also said "there must be an end to the prejudice and contempt which some subjects, particularly the unintelligent, have shown towards the Jewish nation." The decree also noted the "deplorable" and even "criminal behavior" toward Jews and called for it to end, as a way of strengthening the empire.

Joseph II was probably the most, like, actually Enlightened of the Enlightened monarchs, and he struck at ancient ideas in a bunch of other ways, like for instance by diminishing the grip of the aristocracy on serfs. He encouraged agricultural experimentation, including the creation of a freer agricultural workforce, so under his reforms, serfs no longer owed personal service to aristocrats whose land they worked, and they could even leave an estate to work as an artisan or in trade. "I have made philosophy the lawmaker of my empire," Joseph claimed, and in some ways that was true, but the aristocracy rebelled and, after Joseph's death, his brother and successor rolled back those Enlightenment reforms.

Around the same time that Joseph was ruling Austria, in the French home of the Enlightenment, rulers like Louis XV were also listening to the voices of change and attempting to follow them, but, you know, without losing power. Then, as now, everyone wanted change so long as it did not affect them negatively. So French rulers tried to reform taxation and streamline government by getting rid of the *parliaments*, which blocked the monarchy's attempts at making taxes a bit more equitable. The *parliaments* registered royal decrees, and their members could sell their jobs to the highest bidder. Royal advisors were like, "I don't understand why those funds

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don't go to the government," and they also questioned whether there even needed to be a bunch of people whose job was to register royal decrees, but the members of the parliaments managed to rouse ordinary people with cries of royal tyranny, so the king eventually backed down. Similarly, another reforming minister lifted tariffs and regulations on the grain market in the name of free trade, but the flow of food was interrupted, which caused a huge outburst from people.

Reform might be good in theory, but when actually enacted, reform often upset social stability and clashed with vested interests. Good news for lots of people was still bad news for some people, then as now.

Last, but not least, we have the Spanish, who with their vast empire were especially eager to streamline government and enhance revenue. To this end, the royal administration enacted policy changes known as the Bourbon Reforms, which made governmental administration more effective, especially when it came to collecting taxes. These reforms also allowed people of Spanish descent born in Spanish colonies to rise a bit higher in the colonial bureaucracy and army, but they were still prevented from reaching the very top echelons, as of course were native people. Also, because the royal administration saw the Catholic church in the colonies as competing for local people's loyalty and siphoning off funds, the administration outlawed the Jesuits, alleged to be at the head of a corrupt and influential pack of theologians who were trying to get people to be loyal to Jesus instead of to the Spanish king.

Alright, the stained glass window is back, which means it's time for the conclusion. So, Enlightenment thought, which was rich and wide-ranging in possibilities for change, was not universally popular, and all of these reforms have their detractors. At times, urban people objected as prices rose or as food became scarce because of changes in trade policies, and in cases where aristocrats were losing command over serfs or having to pay additional taxes,

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like in the Hapsburg monarchy, aristocrats often protested Enlightenment reforms. Still, life was, on average, getting a lot better for aristocrats. As the 18th century progressed, more of them lived in outsized splendor that can still impress us today when we visit the many chateau that remain across Europe from the 17th and 18th centuries. In many cases they had Chinese porcelain and lots of other luxury goods, they had access to expensive labor that provided them with plenty of food and also the chance to make huge monuments to their luxury and privilege, and despite the massive destruction of 20th-century wars, many of those monuments survive today, but little remains of the rising poverty of the 18th century. That growing poverty occurred alongside growing European know-how and productivity, and the poor saw that the rich were getting richer, even as they were often eating bread cut with sawdust. As governments consolidated their administrations and waged an almost unbelievable number of wars, the poor would approach a breaking point, and, beginning in France, they would rebel against the aristocracy. Changes were coming that not even Enlightened monarchs could adapt to.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.

Thanks for watching Crash Course, which is made by all of these nice people and filmed here in the Jaden Smith studios in Indianapolis. Huge thanks as always to our animators at Thought Café. Also, we've got lots of other Crash Course for you, including our video about Candide, so check that out. Thanks again for watching, and don't forget to be awesome.