Rulers of the Age of Enlightenment (Overview)

Effective Government

During the 18th century, Enlightenment thinkers criticized everything, including government and monarchy. Yet most thinkers did not wish to do away with kings or queens. They believed that monarchy was an effective way to build a richer, freer, and more civilized society. As long as the monarch served the people, he or she was fulfilling his or her duty as protector of the public good, which the Enlightenment thinkers referred to as the "social contract." Achieving Enlightenment goals—greater tolerance, less superstition, and more freedom—was most important.

The So-Called Enlightened Despots

Enlightenment thinkers had a limited audience. Superstition and ignorance were still widespread in the 1700s. However, the ideas of the thinkers did reach the educated elite. More important, the rulers of Europe felt their influence. Many monarchs read Baron de Montesquieu, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Denis Diderot, Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, and others. Some rulers corresponded with the thinkers. Those so-called "enlightened despots" ruled with an iron hand. They wanted both an effective government and a prosperous economy, which were goals that the Enlightenment thinkers supported. Europe's rulers also leaned toward Enlightenment reform in their social policies.

Enlightened Reform

The nature and extent of reform varied from state to state and occurred more in the west and north than in the east and south. Serfdom was abolished in parts of Europe, though not in others. Literacy increased, though many people still could not read or write. Tolerance spread, though freedom of religion was not a general right. Throughout Europe, legal codes became more uniform and fairer. What's more, torture and extreme punishment were eliminated in most places. The Enlightenment thinkers supported and influenced those changes.

Limits of Reform

Despite some progress, monarchs were limited in what they could—or would—do. Antagonizing the aristocrats could be dangerous. Gustav III of Sweden, for instance, pushed his reforms too far; the nobles assassinated him. Catherine II of Russia admired the philosophes. She invited Diderot to Russia and corresponded with other French thinkers. She also wrote plays, stories, and memoirs. Although she owned more serfs than any other European monarch, perhaps she wanted to free them; however, she couldn't, for in doing so, she would have provoked the nobility. Instead, after a peasant uprising, she strengthened serfdom.

Joseph II worked doggedly to abolish serfdom and increase religious freedom. Yet his plans met with resentment from nobles and peasants alike. He died believing he had accomplished nothing. And indeed, after Joseph's death, many of his reforms were overturned.

In short, the ideas of the Enlightenment thinkers were not fully realized during the Age of Enlightenment. However, the 18th-century monarchs did help to build a foundation for greater political and social freedom in the future.

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