

The Ultimate Guide to Enlightened Absolutists for AP Euro History



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Enlightened Absolutism may come across as almost an oxymoronic term, and you wouldn't be too far off assuming this. It was one of those bizarre instances of historical contradiction, where an era that was concerned with freedom and individual liberty crashed into one simultaneously obsessed with despotic rulers concerned with their absolutist political control. Oxymoronic or not, the AP European History Exam loves to test on complicated topics such as this one. But don't worry; we've created this AP Euro review on the Enlightened Absolutism movement to make this seemingly complex topic far simpler.

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It's true that Enlightened Absolutism sits at an odd point in the AP European History curriculum, but this AP Euro review contains everything you'll need to know for your upcoming exam. Not only do we lay out the details that characterized the movement, but we place it in the appropriate historical context.

On top of that, we will be covering all of the key figures that comprised the Enlightened Absolutism movement. And finally, we will finish this AP Euro review off with a detailed explanation of the ways that this term and its associated historical figures will most likely show up on your upcoming AP European History exam.

So, put on your Enlightenment-era thinking caps and think like a despot, so you can dominate over your upcoming AP Euro exam.

What is Enlightened Absolutism?

Before we get into the key figures of Enlightened Absolutism in this AP Euro crash course, let's go over a quick recap of what these people actually believed in.

Enlightened Absolutism is basically the belief in Enlightenment-era rationality and the concern for social problems, but intermixed with the belief in an absolute monarchy or despotism. FYI, it's also been called Enlightened Despotism and Benevolent Absolutism.

What this means is that monarchies were justifying their absolute governing power through 18th and early 19th century concerns about education, health, legal order, individual rights, and tolerance. Rather than finding their authority in religious autocracy, these rulers (particularly in Europe) looked thinkers like Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Hobbes.

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Frederick the Great actually said it rather well in a letter to Voltaire:

Let us admit the truth: the arts and philosophy extend to only the few; the vast mass, the common peoples and the bulk of nobility, remain what nature has made them, that is to say savage beasts.

Now that's quite the statement. But it does accurately represent the ways that Enlightened Absolutists felt about the monarchy (or in this case, about themselves). They often articulated the belief that the common people required a benevolent absolute leader, someone to care for their needs and provide order to a world that was defined by chaos.

But it was also about so much more. These Enlightened Absolutists often encouraged more democratic participation in the states that they were running. They often did this by implementing laws for the benefit of their people, funding education, and even encouraging production of the arts and sciences. The idea was to benefit their subjects, but it was often done so according to the ruler's belief and the ruler's belief alone.

In fact, Frederick the Great was probably the most vocal supporter of the movement itself. But more on that later. First, let's put Enlightened Absolutism into context.

Putting Enlightened Absolutism into Context

Why was this taking place? Doesn't it seem a little odd that monarchs were turning to Enlightenment ideas as a way to justify their authority? You would be right to ask these types of questions. And yes, it was a bit odd. But it also makes a lot of sense in a way too.

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As you may be aware from your other AP Euro studies, absolute monarchies were all the rage before the 18 century. This type of all-encompassing political authority was embodied in kings and queens like James VI of Scotland, Peter I the Great of Russia, and King Louis XIV of France. In fact, King Louis XIV once said, “L’état, c’est moi!” Or, “I am the state!”

This quote embodied the absolute monarchies. They believed in total control, and justified that control in religious terms. They believed they were religiously chosen to rule the people.

In particular, they believed that their power was absolute. It was ordained by God, basically. That meant it could not be challenged and that if the people were suffering, well that must be the will of God then.

But the Enlightenment came along in the 18th century that began to question the role of religion in human relations. Instead, Enlightenment thinkers began to believe in rationalism, the people in a people-oriented government, and a reliance on science rather than religion.

A Quick Review of the Enlightenment

Before we delve too deeply into the most important historical figures of the Enlightened Absolutism movements, let’s go through a quick recap of the Enlightenment itself. You hopefully already know a bit of this from your AP Euro History studies, but it never hurts to have a recap.

The Enlightenment was an 18th century intellectual, political, and social movement that characterized much of European thought across the continent. Everyone was into this, from kings to philosophers to peasants. With the help of revolutionary thinkers like Voltaire, Descartes, Montesquieu, Spinoza, etc., a movement swept through Europe that challenged the religious and monarchical rule on almost every aspect of life.

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This included the religious dominance of morality and ethics, the Church's stance on the natural world, and the absolutist monarchical rule and governance. New ideas about freedom, tolerance, progress and especially liberal governance began to form.

It became so powerful that the ruling elites of Europe began spouting Enlightenment thought even if their power and control oftentimes seemed to contradict what these thinkers were trying to say.

Key Figures in the Enlightened Absolutism Movement

In the 18th century, the question for kings and queens became, how do we justify our rule in the wake of these enlightened ideals? Enlightened Absolutism became the solution. It incorporated the beliefs in liberty, progress, and tolerance into the all-encompassing rule of its despots.

Now, let's go ahead and take a look at a few of the most important figures in the Enlightened Absolutist movement:

Frederick the Great of Prussia

If the Enlightenment Absolutists had a leader, it would have been Frederick the Great. He was the King of Prussia between 1740 and 1786, smack-dab in the middle of the Enlightenment movement in philosophy and science.

Frederick the Great had befriended French philosopher Voltaire and became a lover of French thought and philosophy, in general. He believed in modernizing the Prussian state by improving the lives of his subjects. Ideas like these were expressed in his letters to Voltaire and quickly became a symbol of the Enlightened Absolutist movement.

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During his reign as monarch, he tried to create a sophisticated state bureaucracy that was capable of managing the people's he governed over. He also implemented a number of religious policies that encouraged tolerance and acceptance of religious minorities. On top of this, he allowed for the freedom of the press, encouraged the arts, and favored scientific and philosophical endeavors. All of these things would have brought fear into the previous generations of Prussian monarchs.

Catherine the Great of Russia

Catherin the Great was a contemporary of Frederick the Great, ruling the Russian people until 1762. She has been called “the Great” because she ushered in an era of prosperity for the Russian Empire. Her tenure as monarch was a little shaky, though. Even though she believed whole-heartedly in Enlightened Absolutism, she had a difficult time implementing it in terms of policy. You might have noticed that the sheer size of Russia has made this a theme throughout its history.

Anyway, Catherine made it a priority issue to modernize the cities that bordered the rest of Western Europe, even creating new ones to compete with them. She treated religion indifferently, using church lands to help fund the state. On top of this, she attempted to implement new legal rights to the serf class, even though many landowners refused to comply.

Her most important contributions, however, were in the arts and education. She helped to propel the Russian Enlightenment by encouraging music, painting, and architecture. She also created the first state-funded higher education institution for women in all of Europe. But then again, she was also somewhat indifferent to the plight of the serf class, which resulted in a variety of rebellions throughout her rule.

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Joseph II of Austria

Joseph II, along with Catherine the Great and Frederick the Great, have been deemed the three most influential Enlightenment Absolutist monarchs. So, if you study no one else in this AP European History Review, make sure you pay attention to these three.

Like Catherine, Joseph II believed rather wholeheartedly in the ideals of the Enlightenment but had a hard time implementing those thoughts into practice and policy. He ultimately wanted to make his subjects happy, but only according to his own ideas and beliefs.

He attempted to do this by restructuring much of the state bureaucracies, abolishing most brutal punishments for breaking the law, and made basic education a compulsory requirement for all boys and girls. On top of this, he severely reduced the role of the Catholic Church in everyday affairs. But like his contemporaries, Joseph ran into trouble when older notions of monarchical control challenged his ideas.

Frederick VI of Denmark

Frederick VI was a lesser-known advocate of Enlightened Absolutism. He ruled Denmark from 1808 to 1814—a relatively short reign compared to many of the others. But his policies and much of his ideas were Enlightenment related through and through.

The most important of these was the institution of the democratic Assemblies of the Estate. This state bureaucracy gave ordinary citizens a more active voice in political affairs. On top of this, Frederick was a massive supporter of the sciences, and astronomy in particular.

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King Carlos III of Spain

King Carlos of Spain had the unfortunate luck of inheriting an empire in shambles from 1759 to 1788. But despite the odds being stacked against him (or maybe because of them), he turned to the values of Enlightened Absolutism as a way to garner control in a country that was being thrown into the modern world.

After Spain's Golden Age, the country was having a hard time. It's military was weak and the money was running short. SO, when Carlos III gained control, he turned to some pretty big changes to try and turn things around.

He attempted to distance the Catholic Church from all political affairs, weakening the role of monasteries in everyday life. On top of that, he pushed for education in the sciences, the arts, and in philosophy by encouraging university research. He even managed to stay away from any serious war. All of this helped to earn significant respect from the people that he governed over.

Unfortunately for Carlos II, his reforms did not last too long. While they were in place, they did actually provide for the betterment of the lives and health of the average Spaniard, they his efforts would mostly be eroded following his death. Spain

Napoleon Bonaparte

Napoleon may seem like an odd choice to go along with these others, since he isn't really remembered for his role in the monarchy. But he was actually one of the most important figures in the Enlightened Absolutist movement. His rule as Emperor of France between 1804 and 1814 would be remembered as both despotic, but definitely enlightened at the same time.

What you really need to know for the AP Euro Exam is his Napoleonic Code. These are hugely important to remember for your AP European History course since it influenced almost every corner of the continent.

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When Napoleon expanded his empire, he needed to keep it orderly somehow. So, he created a legal code that covered the entire French Empire and made the laws somewhat similar across regions. Ultimately, he unified a bunch of different bureaucracies, creating a rational legal system based upon Enlightenment values.

Despite the importance of the Napoleonic Code in helping to push for Enlightenment legal systems and bureaucracies across Europe, Napoleon was still a tyrant. He definitely would not relinquish his control throughout Europe without a fight.

Voltaire

Not only was Voltaire a key figure on the Enlightenment, he was also a fan of Enlightenment Absolutism. Being one of the founders of the movement, he was around a little earlier than the other AP European History figures we've covered thus far. He lived from 1694 to 1778.

Like many Enlightenment thinkers, Voltaire believed in the freedom of expression, the freedom of religion, and the separation of church and state. He was known for his sharp satires, which got him into a bit of trouble in France. He was eventually banished to England, where he grew a fondness for the British constitutional monarchy. France was still absolutist at this time.

Because of this, he befriended monarchs themselves, including Frederick the Great. They both commiserated on the importance of a benevolent despot in governmental rule. He even moved into Frederick's palace for a bit of time, since the two of them agreed so much on political rule and power.

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Enlightened Absolutism and the AP European History Exam

So, these are some of the key figures that you are going to need to know for your upcoming AP European History exam. But dates and names aren't good enough to get that 5 on the test. And we aren't going to leave you hanging by ending this AP European History review here. Don't worry; we've got you covered.

You need to ask yourself, what are the patterns here?

There are a few big picture ideas you need to think about for the AP Euro exam. First, what connects all of these people? When looking through these snippets of information, you should be able to glean that most Enlightenment Absolutists had a few things in common. They each wanted to see religion sharply reduced in political affairs and in society writ large. They each wanted to transform their state bureaucracies into modern institutions that were capable of caring for most of the population. They each believed in Enlightenment-era values like the importance of education, the sciences, and philosophical rationalism. This often resulted in the creation of state-funded schools and the formation of new legal systems like the Napoleonic Code.

Second, think of this as a transitional point in history. These leaders and thinkers were around in the middle of absolutism and the liberal revolutions. The peoples of Europe were just starting to think about things like freedom and legal rights at the same time the monarchs were trying to maintain their control. You can see the conflict of these eras just in looking at the profiles of key figures of the Enlightenment Absolutists like we've done in this AP European History Review.

And finally, one thing to consider is the complicated narrative here. It should seem a bit contradictory that an Emperor like Napoleon believed in the Enlightenment. That's because many of these Enlightenment Absolutists had a hard time implementing their policies. In certain instances, like that of Catherine the Great, she simply could not get to everyone in her empire. The serfs suffered far more than any other social group and they themselves used the values and tenets of the Enlightenment to start revolutions against Catherine's rule.

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But what better way to think about an AP Euro test prep than to look at an example of how it might work itself? Let's analyze this Free-Response Question from the [2003 AP European History Exam](#):

“Describe and analyze the influence of the Enlightenment on both elite culture and popular culture in the eighteenth century.”

Although, by reading through this AP European History review on the Enlightenment Absolutism movement, we may not be able to speak to concretely on popular culture, we should at this point have a few ideas about how to prove and answer for this question regarding the elite cultures of Europe. Monarchs and Emperors are inherently elite and by looking at the experiences, policies, and beliefs of individuals like Catherine the Great or Napoleon Bonaparte, we should be able to see an answer forming.

First, we already know that the Enlightenment encouraged the separation of church and state, it encouraged rationalism in the state (particularly through a concrete legal order), it encourage values like the freedom of press, and it highlighted the importance of the sciences and individual thoughts.

From the Napoleonic Code to the compulsory education of young children in Joseph II regime, there are plenty of examples of how and why the Enlightenment penetrated the elitist circles of 18th century Europe.

Let's take a look at another example. This one comes from the [AP European History exam from the year 2004](#):

“Analyze the shifts in the European balance of power in the period between 1763 and 1848.”

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This is a perfect example of how the term Enlightened Absolutism might actually pop up as a sort of tangential topic on the AP European History exam. Like we discussed above, what we've been covering in this AP Euro review was actually a little bit of a transition point in European history. This AP Euro exam question is fundamentally asking about the age of liberal revolutions (i.e., the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, etc.), but by showing those who are grading your exam that like all histories, this one was too on in transition.

You can begin an essay like his with a short but sweet discussion of how Enlightenment Absolutists were the compromise between the absolutist monarchies and the great liberal revolutionaries. The figures that we have discussed in this AP Euro review actually characterize the "shift" perfectly.

So, for your upcoming AP European History exam, make sure that you take a good look at what we've covered in this AP European History Review on the Enlightened Absolutists of the 18th and early 19th centuries. Remember to think about the big picture and the relationship between Enlightenment-era thought and the policies that these key figures implemented.

Do this, and you'll be that much closer to getting a five on your upcoming AP European History exam. Good luck!