

# Rulers of the Age of Enlightenment (Overview)

## Effective Government

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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 do 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.

"Rulers of the Age of Enlightenment (Overview)." *World History: The Modern Era*. ABC-CLIO, 2012. Web. 3 Dec. 2012.

## Catherine II



For more than 30 years, Catherine II ruled Russia with such energy and flair that she stamped an entire epoch with her name. She is admired as Catherine the Great by most Russians because the country became strong enough under her rule to threaten the other great powers, and her brilliant court was conversant with the most interesting cultural developments in Europe. Her critics point to her unscrupulous methods, undisciplined private life, and lack of compassion for the poor. She identified her own interests with those of the Russian state and worked without respite for its glorification.

Catherine was born a princess on May 2, 1729, but not in Russia. She was named Sophie Freiderike Auguste at her birth in the German principality of Anhalt-Zerbst. Her father, Christian August, served as a general in the Prussian Army, and her mother was Princess Johanna Elizabeth of Holstein-Gottorp. This connection to Holstein brought additional power to the family. Catherine received her formal education from a tutor, who taught her religion, history, and French.

At age 15, Catherine traveled to Russia, where she met the youth whom her parents had arranged for her to marry. Karl Ulrich was the German duke of Holstein-Gottorp, but he was also the grandson of Peter I and was in line to inherit the Russian throne as Grand Duke Peter. Catherine assumed the title Grand Duchess Catherine Alekseyevna and married Peter the following year in 1745. Peter was a difficult man with personality disorders and a fondness for alcohol who brought Catherine a great deal of humiliation during the 18 years of their marriage. Her ambition to remain attached to the future ruler of Russia kept Catherine in the loveless marriage, though she deceived her husband with several lovers.

In January 1762, Empress Elizabeth died, and the throne passed to Peter, who became Peter III. Though he was unfit in many ways to rule an empire, Peter's most alarming drawback at the moment of his ascension was his devotion to Frederick II of Prussia, with whom Russia was at war. Peter made peace with Frederick and also made plans to thwart Catherine's ambitions and have her removed from the court, but Catherine too had plans. Moreover, Catherine had the support of the military and the Streltsy, or royal guard, who helped her to seize power. She also had the support of much of the aristocratic class, who admired her sophisticated nature. When Catherine had herself proclaimed empress in mid-1762, Peter abdicated and retired to his country estate, where he was killed one week later, undoubtedly by Catherine's supporters.

Though she had usurped the throne, Catherine was truly dedicated to the future of Russia and was determined to increase its strength and power. She was also excited by the idea of fomenting a national culture, one that shared the ideals of the Enlightenment but was more than just an imitation of intellectual movements in France. She threw herself into the duties of a ruler, moving on several fronts at once. Though Catherine admired the ideas of such Enlightenment theorists as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Baron de Montesquieu, she knew that the reforms they suggested would be difficult to implement in Russia.

Catherine nevertheless convened a commission in 1767 to compile a new code of laws and provided the delegates with a *Nakaz*, or set of instructions, so voluminous and liberal it surprised many. She had worked on the *Nakaz* for two years, writing much of it but borrowing heavily from Enlightenment authors. She asserted that all subjects should be equal before the law, torture should be abolished, capital punishment used only in extreme circumstances, and religious dissent should be tolerated. She did not advocate dismantling serfdom but did raise questions about its legitimacy. Yet the delegates to the commission, from all walks of life, could not agree among themselves on anything, and the commission eventually dissolved without producing anything.

Frustrated by the obstacles to internal reform, Catherine turned to the arena of foreign affairs to build the prestige of the empire and her place within it. In 1768, war with Russia's traditional enemy, the Ottoman Empire, brought early victories and seemed quite popular. As the fighting dragged on, however, it caused certain hardships that were intensified by the outbreak of a plague in Moscow. It was under these conditions that a rebellion erupted in the Ural Mountains in 1773 and spread popular uprisings across a wide swath of the empire.

The rebellion was led by Emelyan Pugachev, a former leader of the Don Cossacks. It spread swiftly throughout southeast Russia as some 30,000 rebels captured towns and cities, burned the houses of noblemen, and tortured government officials. Pugachev readied his troops to invade Moscow in 1774, but fortunately for Catherine, the war with Turkey was concluded at this time, and she was able to deploy her best troops against the peasant rebels. It did not take long for the veteran force to crush the rebellion, and Pugachev was executed in 1775.

The severity of the rebellion changed Catherine's attitude toward Russia's poor majority, however. Having once believed the condition of serfdom to be inhumane, Catherine now worked to better systematize the bondage of Russia's agricultural laborers. She imposed serfdom where it had not existed previously, as in the Ukraine, and used the forced labor of 95% of the population to help finance her other projects. Ten years later, in 1785, she would issue the Charter of the Nobility that ended the obligations of noblemen toward the government and exempted them from direct taxes and corporal punishment.

Catherine engaged in administrative reforms that made government more efficient and pursued the expansion of the education system. She began elementary schools in some districts, high schools appeared in the major cities, and she organized a college of medicine at the University of Moscow. In the field of health, she encouraged the use of inoculations and quarantines, effective against smallpox. The government also undertook a massive building campaign.

It was after the defeats of Pugachev and the Ottoman Turks that Grigori Potemkin began his career as a political adviser to Catherine, who did not, as a rule, delegate important matters to others. Although she had many lovers—her voracious sexual appetite caused scandalous talk—and on numerous occasions accepted their advice in the political realm, she maintained control. Potemkin, her chief minister from 1774 until 1791, and with whom she had an affair for two years, was the one man among her advisers who exerted great power. Potemkin was an experienced diplomat, and his audacious advice prompted Catherine in her expansion of the empire.

Catherine handled foreign relations realistically and aggressively and had already annexed territory along the Baltic coast and through the partition of Poland even before Potemkin came to power. It was Potemkin, however, who planned the acquisition of the Crimea from the Turks. Catherine wanted to obtain Bessarabia and control the Black Sea, Constantinople, and the Dardenelles Straits. In 1783,

Potemkin arranged the annexation of Crimea from that principality's khan, a crucial acquisition that established Russian power on the Black Sea. Catherine soon established the city of Odessa, which fulfilled the Russian desire for an important warm-water port. Unsatisfied, Catherine was determined to end the Turkish presence in Europe. In 1787, Russia entered into an alliance with Austria and again went to war on the Ottomans. A treaty five years later resulted in the Turks finally withdrawing their troops from between the Bug and Dnieper rivers and confirmed Catherine's complete control of the Crimea.

In 1793, Catherine again sent Russian troops into Poland and in cooperation with Prussia, arranged a second partition. This time, Catherine obtained most of Lithuania and the western Ukraine. A third partition occurred in 1795 after an uprising led by Tadeusz Kosciuszko. The arrangement gave Catherine the rest of Lithuania and the Ukraine, along with Courland, while Prussia and Austria also received substantial territory. Poland was thus eliminated as an independent nation; all told, the partitions resulted in Russia gaining 190,000 square miles.

Catherine's "enlightened absolutism" never encompassed republicanism—indeed, she opposed the French Revolution as too extreme. For the most part, her Enlightenment reforms did not extend beyond society's upper levels, and tensions long present in Russia worsened. To monarchists, Catherine appeared highly successful, gaining territory and forging both a truly national state and a European power. However, the peasants suffered enormously, and the government often functioned chaotically. When Catherine died in St. Petersburg on November 17, 1796, she left behind a nation whose exterior appearance hid huge internal problems.

"Catherine II." *World History: The Modern Era*. ABC-CLIO, 2012. Web. 3 Dec. 2012.

## Frederick II



Frederick II was one of the most influential rulers in German history. Remembered as Frederick the Great, he ruled Prussia as an enlightened despot for nearly five decades, firmly establishing his kingdom as one of the great powers of Europe.

Frederick was born in Berlin on January 24, 1712. He was the son of the Prussian king Frederick William I and Queen Sophia Dorothea. Frederick's father was an absolute monarch who made Prussia a state to be reckoned with in European affairs. He was also a bullying tyrant who frequently abused his family, particularly his son and heir Frederick. Frederick William disliked the arts and courtly life in general and tried to educate his son exclusively in the areas that would aid him in ruling Prussia. However, the younger Frederick had an artistic temperament and rebelled against his father's domineering ways. For example, Frederick became an accomplished musician, but he could only practice when his servants assured him that his father was not nearby. Later in life, Frederick intensified his study of music, science, philosophy, history, and the other arts forbidden by his father.

Frederick's rebelliousness culminated dramatically when he and a beloved male companion tried to run away from Prussia as teenagers. Frederick William caught them and subsequently had Frederick's friend

executed, forcing his son to watch in horror. After this incident, the king kept his son in prison before appointing him to work as a junior administrator in a provincial town. In addition, Frederick was forced to marry Elizabeth Christine of Brunswick-Bevern. The marriage was an affair of state; Frederick never developed any affection for his bride, and the couple had no children. Despite the stormy relationship between father and son, the two were reconciled in the later years of Frederick William's reign. Frederick was then allowed to serve in the Prussian Army and took part in campaigns against the forces of the French king Louis XV.

Frederick became king in 1740 after his father's death. He soon established himself as the absolute ruler of the country. His first major act as king was the invasion of the Habsburg province of Silesia in 1740. He was inspired by the recent death of the Habsburg emperor Charles VI, basing his claim to Silesia on his family's ancient, though tenuous, connection to the territory. His attack shocked the other powers of Europe, particularly because Frederick's father had never precipitated a war and was loath to use his armies in the field. Frederick's army soon won several decisive victories, however, allowing Frederick to add the strategically and economically valuable region to the Prussian kingdom. The Treaty of Dresden, signed in 1745, confirmed Frederick's rights to Silesia, though it left the new Austrian Habsburg empress, Maria Theresa, eager for revenge.

The other great powers of Europe also came to oppose Frederick's evident desire to extend Prussian influence and territory. The Russian czarina, Elizabeth Petrovna, developed a deep personal hatred for Frederick, while the French monarch Louis XV recognized the threat posed by a powerful state rising in the hitherto disunited German lands. Thus, Frederick increasingly faced the possibility that he would be attacked by a coalition of the three most powerful states in Europe. In desperation, he decided to strike first, invading the German state of Saxony and the Habsburg territory of Bohemia in 1756. His attack began the Seven Years' War, which eventually involved all of the great states of Europe.

Frederick's armies won several victories during the early stages of the war. The forces arrayed against Prussia were formidable, however, and Frederick's armies could not hope to defeat them all. Moreover, the demands of the war put tremendous pressure on his treasury and his subjects. By 1762, the situation in Prussia was desperate, with the treasury empty and Frederick contemplating suicide. Then, miraculously from Frederick's point of view, Prussia was saved when Frederick's most bitter adversary, Russia's Elizabeth, suddenly died and was replaced by Peter III, an ardent admirer of the Prussian king. Peter quickly withdrew Russia from the conflict, and the war soon ended, leaving Prussia stronger than ever.

The tremendous devastation wrought by the war left Frederick chastened, and for the rest of his reign, he followed a conservative and defensive foreign policy. He fostered better diplomatic relations with the other continental powers, especially Russia, and was intent on avoiding diplomatic isolation. He remained opposed to Habsburg expansion, however, and even sent troops to thwart Habsburg influence in Bavaria in 1778. The other great foreign policy episode of his reign was the first partition of Poland in 1772, which Frederick helped orchestrate and which brought the territory of West Prussia into his kingdom.

Frederick ruled as an enlightened despot. Like his father, he was convinced that the army was the key to the strength of the Prussian state. He therefore continued his father's support of the state industries that supplied and equipped the army. Furthermore, by imposing onerous taxes on merchants and town dwellers, he raised ample funds with which to recruit foreign mercenaries. He also sought to strengthen Prussia economically. His policy was to foster national economic self reliance. In order to increase agricultural production, for example, the state introduced new crops, brought marsh lands under cultivation, and settled peasants in sparsely populated regions. Though these measures had the desired effect, they brought little benefit to the Prussian peasantry, who continued to bear a heavy tax burden.

Frederick took great pride in his reputation as an enlightened ruler and claimed to serve in the interest of his subjects. The social and legal reforms he implemented, however, were always subordinated to the needs of the army and the state. Though he personally disliked the institution of serfdom, he refrained from outlawing the practice because he feared that it would undermine the authority of the Prussian nobility. He nonetheless abolished judicial torture in 1763, and toward the end of his reign, he was

working to create a codified common law for all of his territories.

Frederick's reputation as a model of enlightened despotism is based in large part on his artistic interests. He was an accomplished flautist and composed his own music. He also wrote extensively about history and politics. His most famous work was *Anti-Machiavelli*, in which he argued, disingenuously, that a monarch should not abandon Christian principles. Frederick also corresponded with many of the leading intellectuals of his era, including, most famously, the French philosopher Voltaire, who briefly lived with the Prussian king in his palace, Sans Souci.

Frederick left his successor, his nephew Frederick William II, a state more powerful than that which he had inherited. During his long reign, he doubled the size of the Prussian Army and almost tripled the revenues of the state. However, Frederick also left a legacy of autocracy that proved dangerous in less capable hands. Frederick died on August 17, 1786 at Potsdam, near Berlin, at the age of 74.

"Frederick II." *World History: The Modern Era*. ABC-CLIO, 2012. Web. 3 Dec. 2012.

## Joseph II



From the time that Joseph II became Holy Roman emperor, he advanced the cause of reform according to Enlightenment ideals with great energy and determination. Yet he was inflexible in ways that obstructed the implementation of his reforms, and his cold adherence to the principles of reason did not always take into account the different needs of the many peoples in his vast multinational empire. Several of his most cherished domestic reforms were undone by his unsuccessful foreign policies. Before his death, he chose his own epitaph: "Here lies a prince whose intentions were pure, but who had the misfortune to see all his plans miscarry."

Joseph was born on March 13, 1741 in Vienna to Maria Theresa, the ruler of the Habsburg lands. She became empress of the Holy Roman Empire when her husband, Francis Stephen of Lorraine, was elected emperor as Francis I. Joseph obtained an extensive education from tutors, studying the classics, ancient history, and religion. At an early age, he developed a keen interest in politics even as he displayed impulsive and often disrespectful behavior that worried his mother.

As a young man, Joseph suffered early tragedies in his personal life. His first wife, Isabel of Parma, whom he loved dearly, died after only three years of marriage. Joseph was heartbroken, claiming to have lost everything, "the wife I have worshipped, the object of all my love." Though his second wife, Maria Josepha of Bavaria, did not inspire the same devotion, her death in 1767 from smallpox was also difficult. Amid these blows, Joseph's father died in 1765, an event that elevated the young man to the position of Holy Roman emperor and coregent with his mother of the Habsburg lands.

In his new position, Joseph inherited a difficult situation. Maria Theresa had been a far more able ruler than her husband Francis and was thus accustomed to wielding the real power of the Habsburg throne. Joseph disagreed with his mother's moderate policies and was frustrated by her continuing rulership. He was far more anxious than she to expand the Austrian empire simply for the sake of expansion and soon

urged her to participate in the partitioning of Poland, a series of aggressive actions that Maria Theresa thought unnecessary. Even before Maria Theresa died in 1780, Joseph involved Austria in several wars, seeking to establish Austrian primacy as the leader of the Germans.

Joseph was also determined, however, to improve the lives of his subjects through the ideas of the philosophes and other Enlightenment thinkers. He described himself as "the incarnation of reason and virtue, selflessly burning himself out in a war against error, vice, traditionalists and the enemies of human progress." Few European rulers worked harder, but not all of Joseph's subjects appreciated his efforts. In accord with the 18th-century admiration for rational government, Joseph divided the Habsburg realm into administrative units designed to equalize the size of each area's population. In so doing, he completely ignored regional traditions and differences. In a similar spirit, he made German the single language of education and government, hoping to strengthen the central government.

In Hungary, the Magyars were appalled by these measures. They were already distrustful of Joseph for refusing to be separately crowned as king of Hungary (as his mother had been) and for removing the Hungarian crown of St. Stephen to Vienna. Magyars did not wish to be Germanized for the sake of imperial unity or anything else, and they directed their resistance at Joseph. Neither did the people of the Austrian Netherlands (present-day Belgium) appreciate Joseph's centralizing zeal.

In 1781, Joseph granted personal liberty to the serfs. This act, which allowed serfs to move, marry, and choose their own professions, was obviously opposed by the nobility. Even though the serfs were still required to pay customary dues and perform certain labor obligations, the nobles found it increasingly difficult to enforce their rights. Joseph had to send in troops to quell peasant disturbances in some cases. Still, he was known as "the peasant emperor" and remained popular with poor farmers. He went on to further enrage the nobility by stipulating that noble and peasant land would be taxed at the same rate.

Maria Theresa had endeavored to gain greater control over the Catholic Church, and Joseph pursued this policy in more strident ways. He suppressed monasteries and limited the authority of bishops. In line with other "enlightened despots," Joseph made marriage a civil (rather than a religious) ceremony and wrested education away from the Church and into the civil realm. Going further than most, Joseph also espoused toleration of other religions. He maintained Catholicism as the official religion, but through the Toleration Patent of 1781, he allowed Protestants to worship privately and ruled against most forms of religious discrimination. To further the ideal of religious toleration, Joseph also emancipated the Jews, who soon contributed great cultural vitality to the empire.

In spite of resistance from the Church and other powerful groups, Joseph traveled throughout his domains to see for himself how his subjects lived and to try to ameliorate their conditions. He furthered notions of equality before the law by changing the legal structure so that punishments would be accorded by the severity of the crime rather than by the class rank of the criminal. He also abolished torture and limited the occasions when the death penalty could be employed. Still, Joseph often moved too quickly and tried to bring change through force rather than persuasion. In short, he believed he knew right and everyone else had to fall in line, regardless of the consequences.

The emperor encountered his greatest resistance in foreign affairs. After traveling to France and to the Russia of Catherine II, he decided to acquire Bavaria in a complex exchange of lands with a Bavarian prince. Frederick II of Prussia blocked this effort, however, at which point Joseph allied with Catherine. An agreement assured Austrian help with Catherine's plans to attack the Ottoman Empire and acquire Constantinople and the Dardanelles Straits. When Catherine launched her attack, however, Joseph's army proved poorly organized. Furthermore, his involvement in a foreign war encouraged rebellious groups, long unhappy with his progressivism, to challenge his rule in the Austrian Netherlands and Hungary. The Netherlands even declared its independence.

Suffering poor health for several years, Joseph died on February 20, 1790 in Vienna. He never embraced republicanism; he never called the assembly, or Diet, into session; and he condemned the French Revolution. Though modern historians have reevaluated the importance of his reforms, Joseph died a disillusioned and lonely man in the midst of considerable disorder. It would be his brother, Leopold II, who

finished the war with the Turks, quashed the rebellions in the Netherlands and Hungary, and made peace with the nobles and Church by abrogating several of Joseph's most progressive measures.

"Joseph II." *World History: The Modern Era*. ABC-CLIO, 2012. Web. 3 Dec. 2012.

## first partition of Poland

The first partition of Poland in 1772 began a process that eventually led to the disappearance of that state from the European scene. Poland was a politically weak state with a weak elected king and a noble legislature that was anarchistic. Its more powerful neighbors had freely intervened in Polish affairs for decades before the partition and used the annexation of Polish territory as a way of keeping the peace between themselves.

Poland in the 18th century was officially known as the "Commonwealth of two nations, the Polish and the Lithuanian," reflecting the union between the grand duchy of Lithuania and the Polish kingdom. Life was dominated by the nobility, or *szlachta*. The nobles owned large amounts of property and enjoyed such rights as immunity from arrest without trial and freedom of speech. The nobility also dominated the Polish peasants, who made up most of the population. Nearly all peasants were serfs, tied to the land. Serfs had no appeal from the decisions of the noble landlords. The nobility also elected the Polish king. A few great families selected the candidates whom they believed they could control. The king was weak because he owed his position to the nobility and also because of the divisive nature of the legislature, or Sejm. The Sejm was composed of the nobility, and each individual member could cast a veto, the *liberum veto*, that would dissolve the legislature. Because legislatures could rarely achieve unanimity to get things done, the nobility formed confederations or armed leagues that often tried to get results by force instead of law.

Early in the 18th century, King Augustus II, ruler of Saxony, was elected king of Poland. He sought to reform Poland using his independent power. Augustus was driven from Poland by Charles XII of Sweden. When Charles was defeated by Peter I of Russia, Augustus returned to Poland. He was dependent on Russian support, however. When Stanislaus I was elected king after Augustus died, Russian troops drove him from office and arranged for the election of Augustus III. Poland no longer made independent decisions in foreign affairs. During the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War, Russian and Austrian troops marched freely through Polish territory. In April 1764, Prussia and Russia signed an accord pledging to keep political conditions as they existed. Later in 1764, Catherine II of Russia arranged for Stanislaus II to be elected king. A former lover of Catherine's, Stanislaus was expected to be dependent on Russian support.

Stanislaus surprised observers by attempting to reform Poland. He established secular schools and tried to decrease the power of the nobles. He alienated the conservative Catholic nobility. The nobles responded with the formation of the Confederation of Bar in 1768. The Confederation was anti-Russian and antimonarchical. Civil war broke out, with Stanislaus' soldiers receiving Russian aid. France and Austria assisted the Bar, and the Ottoman Empire declared war on Russia. By 1772, Russian troops had pushed into Ottoman territory in the Balkans, which threatened to bring Austria into the war.

Frederick II of Prussia wanted to prevent being dragged into a war over Poland, so he proposed that Russia make peace with the Ottomans and withdraw from the Balkans. In return, both Austria and Russia would be compensated with parts of Poland. Prussia would also receive part of Poland for arranging the deal. A treaty to that effect was signed between the three powers on August 5, 1772. The Sejm ratified the treaty under pressure by Russian troops. Poland lost one-third of its territory and half of its population. Russia gained the largest area, in the northeast. Austria took densely populated Little Poland, later known as Galicia. Prussia got the smallest piece, but it connected East Prussia with the rest of Prussia and cut Poland off from the Baltic Sea. Although other powers protested the morality of the act, none were concerned enough to fight against the partition. "first partition of Poland." *World History: The Modern Era*. ABC-CLIO, 2012. Web. 3 Dec. 2012.

## second partition of Poland

The second partition of Poland in 1793 was a result of Poland's attempt to modernize its political and social structure. The neighboring countries that had annexed parts of Poland in 1772 were concerned that a strong Poland might attempt to regain its territory. The terms of the second partition forced the Polish government to return to its medieval and ineffectual system and reduced Poland to a small state unable to defend itself from further aggression.

Before 1772, Poland (which included the grand duchy of Lithuania) was a large state with a medieval form of government. Real power lay in the numerous nobility, who held large tracts of land. Nobles were granted certain rights, like immunity from arrest without trial and freedom of speech. They also comprised the legislature, or Sejm. Each member of the Sejm had the right of *liberum veto*, or an individual veto that would dissolve the legislature. Only those proposals that were supported by all members of the legislature were passed. The nobility also elected the king, who usually had to make promises to the nobles to get elected. The majority of the Polish people were peasant serfs, tied to the land and under the direct control of noble landowners.

In 1768, civil war broke out in Poland over proposed reforms that would strengthen the power of the king. Stanislaus II was assisted by Russian troops, while the conservatives were aided by the Austrians, French, and Turks. When it appeared that war would break out between Austria and Russia, Frederick II of Prussia negotiated for a withdrawal of Russian troops from areas the Austrians considered their sphere of influence. In compensation, Russia, Austria, and Prussia all took parts of Poland. In this first partition of Poland, Poland lost one-third of its land and half of its population. An enforced stability reigned in the remaining Polish territory, under the *de facto* rule of Russia.

Between 1772 and 1788, Poland underwent a revival. New commercial enterprises and cultural efforts revitalized the nation. A Permanent Council of ministries established a more effective central administration and increased the power of the king over the nobility. All reforms had to be approved by the Russian government, however. By 1780, though, the Russian troops occupying Poland were withdrawn, and Russia, Prussia, and Austria became involved in other foreign affairs, including wars against Sweden and the Ottoman Empire.

The Polish Sejm that met in 1788 undertook sweeping reforms. King Stanislaus II wanted to establish a constitutional monarchy, while the more radical reformers wanted a republic presided over by a monarch. Only the die-hard conservatives opposed reform. Through heated debates, the legislature often called on the example of the American Revolution and the theories of the Enlightenment to come to a conclusion. The king feared the Sejm would go too far, but he joined with the reformers to sign a new constitution on May 3, 1791. The Polish Constitution was the first modern written constitution in Europe. It called for a constitutional monarchy and abolished the *liberum veto*. Qualifications for election to the legislature were changed from birth to property, which opened seats to the newly rising middle class. The monarchy also became inherited instead of elected. In sum, the revolutionary May Constitution had the potential to make Poland into a stronger, modern state.

In response, conservative nobles formed the Confederation of Targowica in St. Petersburg and dedicated themselves to overthrowing the May Constitution. Russian empress Catherine II also believed the document went too far and ordered Russian troops to invade Poland in 1792. The outnumbered Polish troops under Josef Poniatowski and Tadeusz Kosciuszko were soon defeated. Stanislaus II and the Sejm were forced to abolish the Constitution of 1791 and return to the traditional government. Leading reformers were forced to emigrate. Catherine, however, wanted to weaken Poland further. She arranged with King Frederick William II of Prussia for each state to take more Polish territory. (The Austrians were occupied fighting the French revolutionaries.) According to the treaty of January 23, 1793, Russia took most of Lithuania and Ukraine, while Prussia occupied Danzig and Great Poland. The second partition was complete and left only a small remnant of the Polish state.

## third partition of Poland

The third partition of Poland in 1795 caused the country to disappear as a separate state in Europe for 123 years. Russia, Prussia, and Austria destroyed the buffer state that had served to keep them apart and established common frontiers that played an important role in World War I.

By 18th-century standards, Poland was a very backward country. Most of the political, economic, and social power was held by the large noble class. The country's king was elected by a legislature composed only of nobles. Most of the people were peasant serfs, tied to the land and repressed by noble landlords. The neighboring powers of Russia, Austria, and Prussia interfered with Poland's domestic affairs. Their troops crossed Polish territory at will during their wars. In 1768, King Stanislaus II sought to reform Poland. He hoped to strengthen the power of the king and modernize his country. The plan was opposed by conservative nobles. Virtual civil war broke out in 1768, with Russia helping the conservatives and Austria backing the king. To prevent war between Austria and Russia, and possibly his own country, Frederick II of Prussia negotiated a treaty for each of the three states to take a part of Poland. Poland lost about one-third of its territory and half of its population. The Polish legislature approved the first partition of Poland under pressure from Russian troops.

When Poland's three powerful neighbors became involved in wars and other foreign commitments, Stanislaus again tried to push through reforms. Beginning in 1788, the legislature debated reforms that resulted in a modern written constitution, the first in Europe. The state was to be set up as a constitutional monarchy, and the power of the nobility was to be reduced. The constitution was signed on May 3, 1791 and became known as the May Constitution. Conservative nobles sought to overthrow the reforms. They formed the Confederation of Targowica in St. Petersburg in 1792 and asked for help from Russia. The Russian government soon ordered troops to invade Poland. The outnumbered Polish Army was soon defeated, and the king ordered the May Constitution to be annulled. To discourage other acts of independence, Russia and Prussia each took more Polish territory in 1793, which marked the second partition of Poland.

Tadeusz Kosciuszko, one of the Polish Army commanders, left Poland in 1793. He had fought in the American Revolution and was a supporter of reform. In 1794, Kosciuszko returned to Poland. He raised the banner of revolution in the remaining Polish territories. He assumed the title of chief, or *naczelnik*, and ignored the existence of the king. The population of Warsaw, inspired by the revolt, rose up and executed many of the leaders of the Targowica movement. Kosciuszko also offered the peasants emancipation from serfdom in return for their support, and thousands flocked to his cause. The Russian Army invaded Polish territory, but Kosciuszko defeated the Russians at the Battle of Raclawice on April 4, 1794. His victory allowed the revolt to spread. Between July 6 and September 6, Kosciuszko defended Warsaw against the besieging Prussian forces. He was finally captured at the Battle of Maciejowice on October 10, when his army was defeated by the much larger Russian forces. In punishment for the revolt, Prussia, Austria, and Russia divided the remaining Polish territories on October 24, 1795.

Watts, Tim. "third partition of Poland." *World History: The Modern Era*. ABC-CLIO, 2012. Web. 3 Dec. 2012.