“Enlightened Despots”
(Most of Europe was ruled by absolute monarchs)

Frederick II, Prussia
Catherine the Great, Russia
Maria Theresa, Austria and her son Joseph II, Holy Roman Empire
Impact of the Philosophes

- Believed the best form of government was a monarchy in which the ruler respected the people’s rights

- Tried to convince monarchs to rule justly

Voltaire: Dined with & advised Fredrick the Great
Corresponded with Catherine the Great
Some philosophes ended up corresponding with or advising European monarchs.
Enlightened Despots

• Some monarch’s embraced the new ideas and made reforms that reflected the enlightenment ideals
• However, they had no intention of giving up any power
• The changes they made were motivated by two desires:
  – to make their countries stronger
  – to make their own rule more effective
Frederick the Great - Prussia (1740–1786)

- Enlightened Reforms
  - Granted religious freedoms
  - Reduced censorship
  - Improved education
  - Reformed the justice system
  - Abolished the use of torture
  - Promoted agricultural advances (potatoes)
Frederick the Great

- Fredrick believed serfdom was **wrong**

  **BUT**

- did nothing to end it since needed the support of the wealthy landowners

- As a result, he never tried to change the existing social order

- This demonstrates the limitations of his devotion to Enlightenment ideals
Fredrick the Great

- Most important contribution was his attitude toward being king
- Called himself “the first servant of the state”
- His goal was to serve and strengthen his country
- Wanted to transform Prussia into a modern state
Catherine the Great
Russia (1762–1796)

- Took over the government after she had her husband arrested and confined
- Determined to “westernize” Russia
- Introduced Enlightened ideals to the Russian elite
- Backed efforts to modernize industry and agriculture
Catherine the Great

• In 1767, she formed a commission to review Russia’s laws.
• Proposed reforms to the legal code based on the ideas of Montesquieu.
• She recommended allowing religious toleration and abolishing torture and capital punishment.
• The commission accomplished none of her goals.
Catherine the Great

• She did little to improve the lives of the Russian peasants
• Her views about enlightened ideas changed after a massive uprising by serfs in 1773
• After the revolt, she was convinced she needed the support of the nobles to maintain her throne
  – She gave the nobles absolute power over the serfs, who lost all freedom
Catherine the Great

- Greatest contribution was land expansion
- Controlled the northern shore of the Black Sea
- Gained access to the Mediterranean sea through the Ottoman controlled straights
- Expanded westward into Poland
Joseph II
Austria (1765–1790)

- Most radical royal reformer
- Reforms
  - Legal reforms
  - Freedom of the press
  - Freedom of worship
Joseph II

- Most radical reform was the abolition of serfdom
- He ordered all peasants be paid for their labor in cash
- The nobles firmly resisted the change
- After his death, many of his reforms were undone
Changing Relationship Between Ruler and State

Old Idea

• As Louis XIV reportedly said “I am the state.”

• The state and its citizens exist to serve the monarch.

New Idea

• As Fredrick the Great said, a ruler is only “the first servant of the state.”

• The monarch exists to serve the state and support citizen’s welfare.