Reform from the Throne

How Enlightenment ideas changed, and did not change, absolute rule

MWH.C.3.1.D "Examine rule by enlightened monarchs and how the ideas of the Enlightenment tempered Absolutism (e.g., Joseph II, Frederick the Great, Catherine the Great)."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one Enlightenment-inspired reform and circle one sign that royal or noble power remained in each paragraph. Number the three reform-limit pairs 1, 2, and 3.

When Monarchs Chose Reform

(1) In eighteenth-century Prussia, Frederick II called himself the state's "first servant," but he remained an absolute monarch. He embraced the Enlightenment idea that government should use reason to improve people's lives. He encouraged religious toleration and supported changes to the courts, including limits on judicial torture. Such policies made rule less dependent on a ruler's whim or a single church's authority. Yet Frederick did not give ordinary people a voice in making laws. On noble estates, many peasants still owed labor to landowners. His reforms changed how he governed without ending the power of the king or the nobility.

(2) In the Habsburg lands, Emperor Joseph II tried to push reforms further. In 1781 he issued a Patent of Toleration that expanded worship rights for some Protestant and Orthodox Christians, though it did not grant complete religious equality. He also loosened serfdom rules, giving peasants more freedom to marry and choose work without a lord's permission. These changes reflected Enlightenment arguments for religious toleration and greater personal freedom. Yet peasants still owed labor on many estates. Joseph ordered the changes from above, without letting subjects vote on them. Opposition from nobles hindered enforcement, and some policies were reversed after his death.

(3) In Russia, Catherine II read Enlightenment writers and presented herself as a ruler guided by reason. In 1767 she summoned a commission to consider a new law code. Her written instructions, called the Nakaz, criticized torture and argued that laws should protect society. The commission did not produce the planned code, however. After a major peasant revolt, Catherine strengthened the position of nobles. Her 1785 Charter to the Nobility confirmed their privileges, while many peasants remained tied to estates. Catherine used the language of reform, but she kept final authority and did not free Russia's serfs.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did Frederick change the way he ruled, and what shows that his reforms did not end absolute rule?

2. How did Joseph's policies expand personal freedom while leaving some peasants under the control of landowners?

3. How did the results of Catherine's rule differ from the reform ideas in her Nakaz?

4. Compare Joseph and Catherine: Which ruler gave peasants more personal freedom, and what evidence shows that neither ended absolute rule?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a four-sentence advisory note to an imaginary absolute monarch. Propose an Enlightenment-inspired reform not named in the passage, explain how it would make royal rule less arbitrary while leaving the monarch in office, and predict one obstacle from a group that benefits from the current system.

ANSWER KEY

Reform from the Throne

HIGH SCHOOL · MWH.C.3.1.D

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one Enlightenment-inspired reform and circle one sign that royal or noble power remained in each paragraph. Number the three reform-limit pairs 1, 2, and 3. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did Frederick change the way he ruled, and what shows that his reforms did not end absolute rule?	**He encouraged religious toleration and limited judicial torture, but ordinary people still had no voice in making laws.**
2	How did Joseph's policies expand personal freedom while leaving some peasants under the control of landowners?	**He let peasants marry and choose work without a lord's permission, but many still owed labor on estates.**
3	How did the results of Catherine's rule differ from the reform ideas in her Nakaz?	**The Nakaz criticized torture and called for laws that protected society, but the planned law code was not completed. Catherine later confirmed nobles' privileges and did not free serfs.**
4	Compare Joseph and Catherine: Which ruler gave peasants more personal freedom, and what evidence shows that neither ended absolute rule?	**Joseph gave peasants more freedom to marry and choose work. He imposed reforms without a vote, while Catherine kept final authority and did not free serfs.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Your Majesty, publish the kingdom's annual tax accounts so the public can see how its money is spent. This reform uses reason and openness to help people judge whether taxes serve the common good. You would still make final decisions, but public scrutiny could discourage sudden, unfair tax demands. Courtiers who profit from hidden spending might oppose the change.

Accept other passage-supported examples of reform and continuing royal or noble power. For the advisory note, accept a distinct, plausible reform if the response explains its effect on arbitrary rule, preserves the monarch's office, and identifies a specific source of opposition.