

# The Enlightenment



It takes courage to oppose ideas that your rulers accept and enforce. But when you passionately believe you are right, it is possible to change the world. That's what a group of European thinkers did in the 1700s.

## MAIN IDEA

Influential thinkers in the 1700s believed human reason was the best way to solve problems.

## WHAT WAS THE ENLIGHTENMENT?

Starting in the late 1600s, Europe was swept by a cultural and intellectual movement that became known as the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason. (**Reason** is the power of the human mind to think and understand in a logical way.) As you've already learned, ancient Greek and Roman philosophers used logic and reason to explain the world around them. This way of thought was rediscovered during the Renaissance and was expanded on during the Scientific Revolution.

Enlightened thinkers were often known as **philosophes** (fee-loh-ZOHFS), the French word for "philosophers." They applied the logical thinking used in science to other areas, especially government and society. The name *Enlightenment* came from the philosophes' belief that the "light" of human reason would shatter the "darkness" of ignorance, superstition, and unfair authority.

At the heart of the Enlightenment was its open-mindedness and focus on what it means to be human. Enlightenment thinkers questioned and often opposed long-established institutions, beliefs, and social order. Philosophes also felt that the justice system was frequently unfair. Many claimed that rulers had too much power and that they kept their subjects uneducated and in poor conditions. By challenging established authority, the philosophes proved their courage as well as their independent thinking.

## IDEAS AND INFLUENCES

The Enlightenment did not have a single set of clearly defined beliefs. Still, most philosophes shared some common ideas. Most important was the idea that human reason, not tradition or religious faith, should guide the actions of individuals and rulers. Philosophes argued that all knowledge should be based on reason. They also believed that civilization was becoming more and more advanced and that human reason could make further improvements.

A third common belief was that the "natural" state for any system was a rational and orderly arrangement, like the systems found in nature. This way of thinking extended to natural laws and **natural rights**, including life, liberty, and property. According to the philosophes, these laws and rights automatically applied to everyone and could be explained through reason.

Liberties such as freedom of speech were especially important to the philosophes. They held that people, regardless of class, have basic human rights. Some philosophes argued that natural rights applied to people who were often thought to be inferior. Slaves, they claimed, should be freed. Female thinkers argued that women should have equal rights with men. Further, the philosophes reasoned that no person has the automatic right to rule others. As a result of these beliefs, the philosophes

**Critical Viewing** This painting depicts a *salon*. What does the image suggest about women's participation in Enlightenment discussions?



*An Evening at Madame Geoffrin*, Anicet-Charles Lemonnier, 1812

opposed rulers who did not respect or protect their subjects' natural rights.

The Enlightenment touched every area of people's lives, including politics, religion, society, science, culture, education, and economics. It influenced the way people were ruled and how they worshipped, interacted, and traded. Writers, poets, and artists all helped spread enlightened ideas east to Russia and west to the Americas. Ultimately, Enlightenment ideas would help shape the world we know today.



*Portrait of the Marquise de Pompadour*, Maurice-Quentin Delatour, 1748–1755

### SALONS

The Enlightenment *salons* were gatherings organized by wealthy women. Salon hostesses would invite thinkers, writers, and artists to discuss their opinions. These lively conversations helped the philosophes refine and spread their ideas. Madame de Pompadour (at left) was one of the best-known hostesses.

## REVIEW & ASSESS

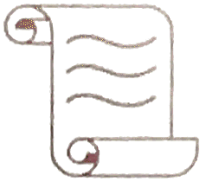
**1. READING CHECK** What was the Enlightenment?

**2. ANALYZE CAUSE AND EFFECT** How did the Scientific Revolution inspire the Enlightenment?

**3. IDENTIFY MAIN IDEAS AND DETAILS** What natural rights did the philosophes and other thinkers believe people had?

# 1.2

## Enlightenment Thinkers



The enlightened thinkers of the 1700s helped develop and promote new ideas

about government that involved both rulers and those they ruled. Thanks to these great minds, we enjoy the freedoms we have today.

### MAIN IDEA

Enlightened ideas gave people a greater voice in government and society.

### POLITICAL THINKERS

In 1690, an Englishman named **John Locke** published *Two Treatises of Government*. Locke asserted that humans were born free and equal with natural rights including life, liberty, and property. He also claimed that a leader could rule only with the consent of the people. As a result, Locke proposed the idea of a **contract**, or agreement, between rulers and the ruled with clearly defined rights and responsibilities for each. People, he believed, had the right to overthrow rulers who broke this contract. This idea would prove hugely influential in North America, France, and Latin America.

Like Locke, a Frenchman known as **Montesquieu** (mohn-tehs-KYOO) believed that liberty was a natural right. In 1748, he expressed his opposition to rule by a single all-powerful individual. Instead, he proposed the separation of government powers into three branches—legislative, judicial, and

executive. Montesquieu believed his plan would limit government power and preserve individual freedom. As you will see later in the chapter, the ideas of these political thinkers helped form the foundations of the United States government.

### SOCIAL THINKERS

During the same period, several European writers were proposing new ideas about humans and society. The popular French writer **Voltaire** used his books and plays to promote enlightened ideas of social reform. He was especially outspoken about limiting the power of the Church and encouraging tolerance of all religions.

The philosophe **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (roo-SOH) believed that all people are born free and good. He stressed government's responsibility to protect both individual rights and society as a whole. He proposed a social contract between individuals and the society in which they live. In the contract, individuals would agree to work toward the good of the country rather than pursuing only their personal interests.

A few philosophes also supported equality for women. In 1792, an English writer and thinker named **Mary Wollstonecraft** published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft argued that because women have the ability to reason, they deserve equal rights to men.

Enlightenment thinkers also influenced economics. At the time, most governments closely controlled and regulated commerce. An enlightened Scottish economist named **Adam Smith** described a freer economy called **laissez-faire** (LEHS-ay FAYR), which is French for “leave it alone.” He argued for a system of **free enterprise**. In this system, people selling and buying products in markets would determine what products were needed and what price should be paid for them. Smith's 1776 book, *The Wealth of Nations*, influenced people's ideas about the economy for the next hundred years.

# 1.3

## Europe's Rulers and the Enlightenment



Being an absolute ruler would be pretty tempting if you were a king or queen. You could keep all the government's wealth and power to yourself. In the 1600s and 1700s, many rulers did just that, but the Enlightenment influenced some kings and queens to try a new path.

### MAIN IDEA

Enlightenment ideas changed the way Europe was ruled.

### THE RISE OF ABSOLUTE MONARCHY

To understand why Enlightenment thinkers argued that people should have rights and freedoms, it is important to know how governments changed over time in Europe. In medieval Europe, influential groups such as the nobility and the Church limited the power of kings and queens. As medieval order broke down, however, monarchs took more power for themselves. By 1600, some ruled as **absolute monarchs**. They had unlimited authority and almost no legal limits. They claimed to rule by **divine right**, meaning that their power came directly from God.

During the 1600s and 1700s, absolute monarchs ruled the European kingdoms of Russia, Austria, and Prussia (part of what

is now Germany). The greatest of all was **Louis XIV** of France. For most of his 72-year reign, Louis ignored all of France's traditional institutions. He excluded the nobles from government and enforced his will through government officials. At Versailles (vair-SY), near Paris, he built a massive palace to show off his power. Louis became known as the Sun King because he chose the sun as his symbol. Indeed, all France revolved around him, like the planets around the sun.

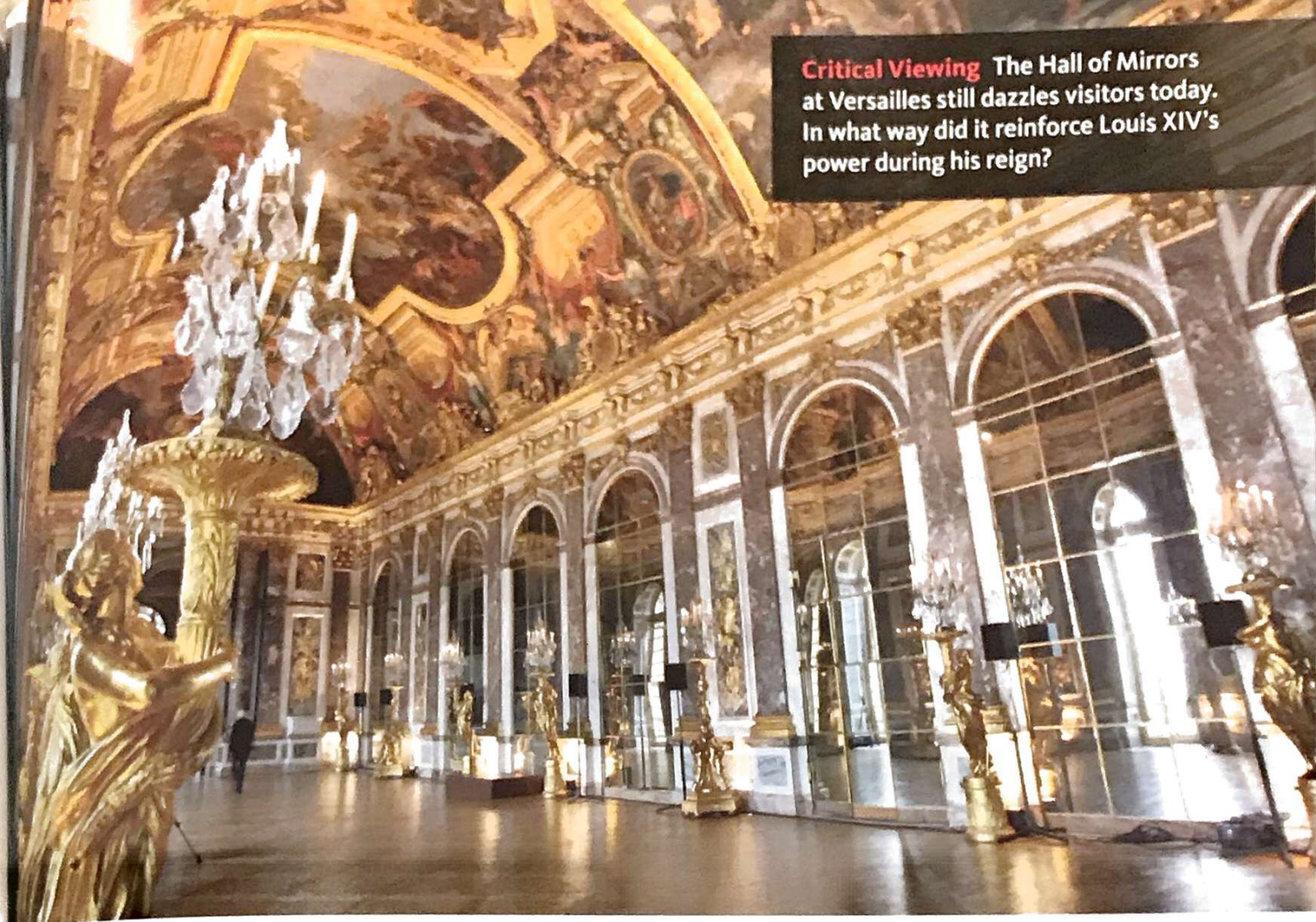
Yet at the same time, a growing middle class was pressing for a voice in the policies that affected them. In England, as you may recall, this trend led to the creation of the Magna Carta and a parliament made up of nobles and elected commoners. Attempts to restore absolute monarchy in England were defeated in England's civil war of 1642 to 1651 and by a revolution in 1688. The subsequent English Bill of Rights of 1689 guaranteed basic rights to English citizens.

### ENLIGHTENED DESPOTS

As the ideas of the Enlightenment spread in the 1700s, some monarchs applied reforms in their countries. Because they never surrendered their complete authority, they became known as **enlightened despots**, absolute monarchs who applied certain Enlightenment ideas. One was **Frederick the Great**, who ruled Prussia from 1740 to 1786. He introduced religious tolerance and legal reforms. He also banned torture and helped peasants improve their farms. However, Frederick refused to change the social hierarchy in Prussia.

**Joseph II** of Austria oversaw enlightened reforms between 1780 and 1790. He introduced religious tolerance, freedom of the press, and various law reforms. Joseph firmly believed in social equality. He promoted elementary education for all children. He abolished serfdom and tried to introduce a new system of taxes on the land that would be more fair to different social classes.

**Critical Viewing** The Hall of Mirrors at Versailles still dazzles visitors today. In what way did it reinforce Louis XIV's power during his reign?



**Catherine the Great** ruled Russia from 1762 to 1796. Although Catherine favored enlightened ideas, she struggled to introduce reforms. She considered freeing the serfs, but changed her mind when she realized she needed the support of serf-owning nobles to keep herself in power. Similarly, when Catherine called together elected representatives from all classes to suggest reforms, the meeting failed because of each group's self-interest. However, Catherine did succeed in expanding education, science, and the arts in Russia.



*Louis XIV King of France, Andry (from a 1701 portrait by Hyacinthe Rigaud), 18th century*

## VERSAILLES

In modern numbers, Louis XIV's Versailles cost more than two billion dollars to build and involved more than 36,000 workers. It was the largest and most luxurious palace in Europe, with 700 rooms and 2,000 windows. Its rich decorations included 6,000 paintings, 2,000 sculptures, and the famous Hall of Mirrors, which was lit by 20,000 candles.

## REVIEW & ASSESS

### 1. READING CHECK

How were absolute monarchs and enlightened despots similar and different?

### 2. MAKE CONNECTIONS

In what ways did the enlightened despots reflect the ideas of the philosophes? In what ways did they fail to reflect those ideas?

### 3. ANALYZE CAUSE AND EFFECT

What effect did the Enlightenment have on monarchs such as Frederick the Great, Joseph II, and Catherine the Great?