
Section 5: Frederick the Great and enlightened absolutism

Unit 1 argues that the *philosophes* were usually open-minded about forms of government. Voltaire was particularly eclectic, approving of constitutional monarchy in Britain and royal absolutism in France, provided that the government was enlightened. Near the end of the article 'Philosophe' from the *Encyclopédie*, which forms an appendix to Unit 1, the author cites approvingly a saying of the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius: 'How happy peoples will be when kings are

philosophers or when philosophers are kings!’ (p.63). The author underscores his message by adding: ‘Graft a sovereign on to a philosopher ... and you will have a perfect sovereign.’ In the second half of the eighteenth century several monarchs were influenced to a greater or lesser degree by aspects of the Enlightenment and are often referred to by historians as practitioners of ‘enlightened absolutism’. The main examples are mentioned on p.48 of Unit 1.

In the final section, the video touches very briefly on the many-sided and controversial Frederick the Great of Prussia (Figure V1.5), but exclusively from the viewpoint of his connections with some of the aspects of the Enlightenment mentioned in sections 1 to 4. Absolute ruler of Prussia from 1740 to 1786, Frederick described himself as ‘a king by duty and a *philosophe* by inclination’. The remark was significant. It was not that he was a reluctant ruler: he did not hesitate to ride roughshod over the pacifism of most of the *philosophes* in what he considered the interests of the state, turning Prussia into a militaristic state and sparking off the two great wars of the eighteenth century, 1740–8 and 1756–62. In many other respects, however, he showed himself remarkably enlightened.

Frederick was culturally speaking a Francophile, who wrote copiously on many themes central to the Enlightenment, including literature, history, philosophy, scientific progress and the arts. He corresponded with several *philosophes*, including Condorcet, d’Alembert, and particularly Voltaire. D’Alembert and Voltaire visited him at Sans-Souci. Voltaire stayed there for three years (1750–3). Their relationship was chequered and Voltaire outstayed his welcome, but each admired the other’s attachment to the Enlightenment:

You suppose that I think that the people need the curb of religion in order to be controlled. I assure you these are not my sentiments. On the contrary ... a society could not exist without laws, but it could certainly exist without religion, provided that there is a power which, by punitive sanctions, can compel the masses to obey these laws. This is confirmed by the experience of the savages discovered in the Marianne Islands [the Maldivé Islands], who had not a metaphysical idea in their heads. It is proved still more by the government of China, where deism is the religion of all the leading men in the state ... I see the present work of the *philosophes* as very useful, because men ought to be made to feel ashamed of fanaticism and intolerance, and because it is a service to humanity to fight these cruel and atrocious follies ... To destroy fanaticism is to dry up the most deadly source of division and hatred in European memory, the bloody traces of which are found among all its peoples.

(Frederick II to Voltaire, c.15 December 1766, quoted in Lentin, 1985, p.138)

Figure V1.5 J.H.C. Franke, Frederick the Great, 1764, oil on canvas, Cambridge University Library. Photo: by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

'He talked to me about literature, philosophy, even politics and war and peace. I would need a whole volume to give you an idea of his conversation. All I can tell you ... is that the King impressed me as greater even than he is by reputation' (d'Alembert to Mlle de Lespinasse, 13 June 1763).



EXERCISE What aspects of Frederick's enlightenment emerge from section 5 of the video?

DISCUSSION Aspects of Frederick's enlightenment mentioned include:

- his promotion of mass inoculation against smallpox;
 - his repeal of harsh penalties against infanticide¹ and a more understanding attitude towards unmarried mothers;
 - his respect for classical antiquity, an interest in non-European cultures, and religious toleration and open-mindedness.
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¹ Outside Prussia the crime was punished by public execution. The young Goethe witnessed one such execution in Frankfurt in 1772.

After viewing

You might go through the article ‘Philosophe’, which forms an appendix to Unit 1 (pp.61–3), noting connections with themes raised in sections 1–5 of the video. The article relates directly to section 1, since it was published in the *Encyclopédie*, but your reading should also suggest links with other sections.

References

Diderot, D. (ed.) (1751) *Encyclopédie*, vol.1, Paris.

Gendzier, S.J. (ed. and trans.) (1967) *Denis Diderot’s ‘The Encyclopedia’: Selections*, New York, Harper Torchbooks.

Gibbon, E. (1998) *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: 28 Selected Chapters*, ed. A. Lentin and B. Norman, Ware, Wordsworth Classics.

Lentin, A. (ed.) (1985) *Enlightened Absolutism (1760–1790): A Documentary Sourcebook*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Averro.

Music heard on the video

- 1 Joseph Haydn, Symphony no. 12 in B flat major, Menuetto.
- 2 Johann Sebastian Bach, Brandenburg concerto no. 3 in G, Allegro.
- 3 Joseph Haydn, Symphony no. 12 in B flat major, Finale/Presto.
- 4 KPM Music 315, Andy Clark, World Music 2, Exotic Journeys.
- 5 Johann Sebastian Bach, Brandenburg concerto no. 3 in G, Allegro.

Illustrations shown on the video

Section 1

Pages from the *Encyclopédie*, published 1751–72.

Nicolas Poussin, *Spring* (also called *Adam and Eve in Earthly Paradise*), 1660–4, Louvre, Paris.

Michel Van Loo, *Diderot*, 1767, Louvre, Paris.

J.G. Ziesenis, *Frederick the Great*, c.1760.

After Jean Huber, *Voltaire Writing*, engraving.

After Moreau le Jeune, *Candide and Cunégonde*, originally an illustration in an eighteenth-century edition of Voltaire’s *Candide*, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Section 2

Pages from the *Encyclopédie*.

Section 3

Johann Zoffany, *Charles Towneley and Friends in the Park Street Gallery, Westminster*; exhibited at the Royal Academy 1783, partly repainted c.1793, Towneley Hall Art Gallery and Museum, Burnley.

Nathaniel Dance, *The Second Duke of Northumberland with his Tutor at the Colosseum, Rome*, c.1760 (Duke of Northumberland's collection).

Angelica Kaufmann, *J.J. Winkelmann*, 1764, Kunsthaus, Zurich.

Thomas Jones, *An Excavation of Antique Buildings*, c.1777, Tate Gallery, London.

L. Ducros, *The Arch of Constantine, Rome*, c.1782–9.

The Towneley Collection, British Museum (filmed on location).

Kedleston Hall, Derbyshire (filmed on location).

Section 4

Lord Clive meeting Mr Jafac Nawab of Murhidabad, c.1761–2, National Portrait Gallery, London.

John Mowbray, c.1790, National Portrait Gallery, London.

Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Captain John Foote* (in turban), 1765, National Portrait Gallery, London.

Johann Zoffany, *The Palmer Family*, British Library, London.

Parkinson, *Maoris*, British Library manuscripts, London.

W. Hodges, *View from Point Venue*, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Omai*, c.1775, private collection.

W. Hodges, *Omai*, c.1776, Royal College of Surgeons, London.

Allan Ramsay, *Rousseau*, 1766, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

'Slave man hung', from Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 1806.

'Slave woman hung', from Stedman, *Narrative of Five Years' Expedition*, 1806.

Olaudab Equiano, Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter.

Thomas Gainsborough, *Ignatius Sancho*, 1768, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Section 5

Frederick the Great with tricorn hat, from H. Dollinger, *Friedrich II von Preussen*, Munich, Lister Verlag, 1986. Original in private collection, Breslau.

Frederick inspecting a battalion, from K.O. von Artin, *Friedrich der Grosse*, Freiburg.

P.C. Baquoy after N.A. Monsian, *Voltaire and Frederick at Sans-Souci*, early nineteenth-century engraving, Ullstein Bilderdienst.

Frederick-William I, from A. Palmer, *Frederick the Great*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, Archive für Kunst und Geschichte.

Mother breast-feeding infant, anonymous chalk engraving, Wellcome Foundation.

Drawing of battle scene, from A. Palmer, *Frederick the Great*.

Palace and park of Sans-Souci, Potsdam (filmed on location).