

**AGE OF  
ENLIGHTENMENT:  
AUSTRIA: REFORMS  
UNDER JOSEPH II**



# AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT: AUSTRIA: REFORMS UNDER JOSEPH II

## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Enlightened Despotism in the Hapsburg Lands under the reign of Joseph II, in particular the decision to abolish serfdom, the legalizing of different religious denominations, and how the emperor strove to unite his divided, multinational empire under an equal system of laws.

## Subjects

English / Language Arts, European History, World History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Schonbrunn Palace, Vienna
- Hofburg Palace, Vienna
- Josefsplatz, Vienna
- Imperial Crypt, Vienna

## Essential Questions

- Who was Joseph II of Austria?
- What reforms did Joseph II undertake during his reign?
- Were the reforms instituted by Joseph II long lasting?

## Academic Summary

The word "toleration," as I understand it, means only that I would employ any persons, without distinction of religion, in purely temporal matters, allow them to own property, practice trades, be citizens, if they were qualified and if this would be of advantage to the State and its industry. Those who, unfortunately, adhere to a false faith, are far further from being converted if they remain in their own country than if they migrate into another, in which they can hear and see the convincing truths of the Catholic faith. Similarly, the undisturbed practice of their religion makes them far better subjects and causes them to avoid irreligion, which is a far greater danger to our Catholics than if one lets them see others practice their religion unimpeded. If the Protestants do not generally adopt this method in their States, this is because their governments lack the clarity and perceptiveness of ours, and because it is harder for Republicans to undertake such changes. Finally, if I had the leisure that a letter does not allow, I should be able to prove that, as I see the question, I could stand on my view before the awful judgment seat which will pronounce on my eternal destiny. Certainly no one would then turn Lutheran or Calvinist; there would be fewer unbelievers in all religions, the State would profit greatly thereby, and I cannot believe that all this together would make me appear guilty in the eyes of God. To me, at least, this would seem hardly compatible either with His all power, or with the office which He has conferred on me, in making me the servant of fifteen million human beings.

*Joseph II to Maria Theresa (letter), 20 Jul 1777*

In politics, difference of religions in a State is an evil only insofar as there exist fanaticism, disunity, and party spirit. It disappears automatically when one treats members of all sects with perfect equality and leaves the rest to Him Who alone rules hearts.

*Joseph II to Maria Theresa (letter), 19 Jun 1777*

Being convinced, on the one hand, that all violence to conscience is harmful, and, on the other, of the great benefit accruing to religion and to the State from a true Christian tolerance, We have found Ourselves moved to grant to the adherents of the Lutheran and Calvinist religions, and also to the non-Uniat Greek religion, everywhere, the appropriate private practice of their faith, regardless of whether it had been previously customary or introduced, or not. The Catholic religion alone shall continue to enjoy the prerogative of the public practice of its faith, but members of the two Protestant religions and the existing non-Uniat Greek shall be permitted the private practice thereof in any place where the number of persons, as defined below, and the resources of the inhabitants make it practicable, and where the said non-Catholics do not already enjoy the right of practicing it publicly.

*Patent of Toleration issued by Emperor Joseph II, 1781*

In the early morning hours of 20 February 1790, after a lengthy and debilitating illness,

Joseph II, Holy Roman emperor and ruler of all Hapsburg lands, died in his bed at age 49. That same morning, the enlightenment in Austria died as well. Although the new emperor, Leopold II, would pay lip service to many of his brother's ideas, most of the concrete reforms would be abolished. Within a few years of Joseph II's death, Napoleon of France would march into the Hapsburg lands in triumph, only to be beaten back in the name of stability and order. Finally, Europe's largest Catholic empire would again come to dominate the scene under the conservative policies of a prince named Metternich. Browsing the pages of Hapsburg history, it is easy to dismiss the enlightened reforms made under Joseph II as simply a passing phase. Nothing could be further from the truth. During his years as sovereign, first as co-regent with his mother (1765 - 1780), and later as sole ruler (1780 - 1790), Joseph instituted sweeping changes which would forever alter the Hapsburg dominions. He succeeded in modernizing Austria's domestic and foreign policies. In light of the reforms achieved in France, Joseph's edicts perhaps seem trivial and conservative, but at the time they were revolutionary. A child of the enlightenment, Joseph strove to rid his land of backwards absolutist policies. His policies rid the Hapsburg lands of serfdom, broke the power of the Catholic Church by forging the government to legally recognize other religious denominations, and strove to unite his divided, multinational empire under an equal system of laws.

A child of the age of enlightenment, Joseph believed in secularism, equal justice and the idea that a monarch had responsibilities to the people. He also felt that his subjects owed allegiance to him. His death signaled the end of an era in European history, one in which monarchs ruled over their subjects with unquestioned power. In the wake of the French Revolution and Napoleon, many of the reforms in Austria would be rolled back by future sovereigns. Today, it is easy for historians to regard Joseph with curiosity, and to simply dismiss his reforms in passing. This attitude does not do him justice, as in his time Joseph stood as a crowning example of the enlightenment at work.

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Enlightened Despotism in the Hapsburg Lands under the reign of Joseph II, in particular the decision to abolish serfdom, the legalizing of different religious denominations, and how the emperor strove to unite his divided, multinational empire under an equal system of laws.

## **Objectives**

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the basic ideas and theories behind Enlightened Despotism.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how Joseph II used Enlightenment ideas to modernize and reform the Austrian Empire in the 18th century.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the specific reforms instituted by Emperor Joseph II in the Austrian Empire, namely how and why he ended serfdom, why he issued an edict of toleration legalizing different Christian denominations (later extended to Judaism as well), and finally how the emperor strove to unite his fragile multi-national empire under a common system of laws.

## Procedure

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Is it possible to have absolutism mixed with the “social contract”? What if the government works for the good of men? Who is to decide? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Brief overview of Maria Theresa, Joseph II and reforms in Austria. (20 min)
- Video – The Western Tradition: The Enlightenment (30 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Joseph II and his reforms in Austria, taking notes as appropriate. (15 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework the night before class to prepare for class discussion.
- Group Activity – Discussion: How and why did Joseph II use ideas from the Age of Enlightenment to modernize and reform the Austrian Empire, particularly by abolishing serfdom, instituting religious toleration, and reforming the legal system? How were these reforms linked to ideas behind the “social contract”? (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail how Joseph II used ideas from the Age of Enlightenment to modernize and reform the Austrian Empire, particularly by abolishing serfdom, instituting religious toleration, and reforming the legal system?

## Extension

### On tour: Imperial Crypt in the Capuchin Church

While on tour, students will visit the Imperial Crypt in the Capuchin Church near the Hofburg Palace. Inside, students can see for themselves the final resting place for almost all members of the Hapsburg family (one of the most important royal houses in European History), including Enlightenment rulers Maria Theresa and Joseph II. The crypt was first used in 1633 and now contains the bones of 145 members of the family, including 12 emperors and 18 empresses. There is also a memorial to the two most famous Hapsburgs of the last 100 years, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie, who were shot and killed by a Serbian nationalist while riding in an open car through the streets of Sarajevo in 1914 (they are buried in Artstetten Castle – it belongs to Sophie’s family). The Imperial Crypt is still being used for members of the Hapsburg family. The latest member, Otto von Hapsburg, eldest son of the last emperor was buried there in 2011. As of late 2013, there are almost 100 members of the Hapsburg family in Europe, including several children born in the 21st century.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=3637](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=3637)  
Letters between Maris Theresa and Joseph II on the subject of religious toleration, 1777 – primary sources
- [germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=3643](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=3643)  
Emperor Joseph II's Toleration Patent for the Lands of the Austrian Empire, 1781 – primary source where the emperor granted protestant denominations the “appropriate private practice of their faith.”
- [germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image\\_s.cfm?image\\_id=2915](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image_s.cfm?image_id=2915)  
Satirical Depiction of the Dissolution of the Monasteries as Decreed by Joseph II (image – primary source)
- [germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=3648](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=3648)  
Joseph II's Edict of Toleration for the Jews of Lower Austria, 02 Jan 1782 – primary source
- [www.crvp.org/book/Series07/VII-14/chapter-5.ht](http://www.crvp.org/book/Series07/VII-14/chapter-5.ht)  
“Reform Absolutism of Joseph II in the Austrian Monarchy in 1781” – secondary source essay by Ronald Calinger. Chapter 5 of Democracy: in the Throes of Liberalism and Totalitarianism, 2004.
- [www.oocities.org/athens/troy/1344/austria.html](http://www.oocities.org/athens/troy/1344/austria.html)  
Changes in Osterreich: Joseph II (academic paper)
- [www.nndb.com/people/636/000101333/](http://www.nndb.com/people/636/000101333/)  
Joseph II (website)
- [www.methacton.org/cms/lib/PA01000176/Centricity/Domain/905/Joseph%20II%20PPT.ppt](http://www.methacton.org/cms/lib/PA01000176/Centricity/Domain/905/Joseph%20II%20PPT.ppt)  
Joseph II PowerPoint – from Methacton High School (PA)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2 minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA – highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jj7KBQdxY8Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jj7KBQdxY8Y)  
The Western Tradition 34 the Enlightenment (video) – from “the Western Tradition” video series. Produced by Eugene Weber, UCLA professor and European expert.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBvZAPQVIro](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBvZAPQVIro)  
Enlightened Absolutism (video) – this 15 minute video lecture by Tom Richey, history teacher from Seneca High School (SC), is appropriate for all classes.

### Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph\\_II\\_of\\_Austria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_II_of_Austria)  
Joseph II of Austria – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enlightened\\_absolutism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enlightened_absolutism)  
Enlightened Absolutism – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josephinism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josephinism)

Josephinism – Wikipedia article on Joseph II's major reforms in the Hapsburg lands

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habsburg\\_Monarchy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habsburg_Monarchy)  
Habsburg Monarchy – Wikipedia article
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/austria/country\\_profile](https://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/austria/country_profile)  
On the Road: Austria (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/austria/vienna](https://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/austria/vienna)  
On the Road: Vienna – from Passports Educational Travel

### **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/england-and-the-enlightenment-john-locke](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-enlightenment-john-locke)  
England and the Enlightenment – John Locke
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/malthus-essay-on-population](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/malthus-essay-on-population)  
Enlightenment Britain – Thomas Malthus: Essay on Population
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/age-of-enlightenment-rousseau](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/age-of-enlightenment-rousseau)  
Enlightenment France – Rousseau and the Social Contract
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/voltaire-candide](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/voltaire-candide)  
Enlightenment France – Voltaire: Candide
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/french-revolution-bourgeois-phase](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/french-revolution-bourgeois-phase)  
French Revolution – Bourgeois Phase 1789-1792

### **Key Terms**

- Austrian empire
- Enlightenment
- Hapsburg family
- Joseph II
- Philosophe
- Philosophy
- Reform
- Social Contract

