

Maria Theresa

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Born: May 13, 1717 in Vienna, Austria

Died: 1780 in Vienna, Austria

Nationality: Austrian

Occupation: Empress

Maria Theresa (1717-1780) was Holy Roman empress from 1740 to 1780. Ruling in the most difficult period of Austrian history, she modernized her dominions and saved them from dissolution.

The eldest daughter of the emperor Charles VI, Maria Theresa was born in Vienna on May 13, 1717. Her education did not differ in the main from that given any imperial princess, being both clerical and superficial, even though by the time she was an adolescent it was becoming increasingly probable that Charles would produce no male heir and that one day Maria Theresa would succeed to all his dominions. Charles did not act upon the insistent advice of his most capable adviser, Prince Eugene of Savoy, and marry his daughter off to a prince powerful and influential enough himself to protect her dominions in time of need. Instead he chose to rely upon the fanciful diplomatic guarantees offered by the Pragmatic Sanction. Thus, in 1736 Maria Theresa was permitted to marry for love. Her choice was Duke Francis Stephen of Lorraine. So that France might not object to the prospect of an eventual incorporation of Lorraine into the empire, Francis Stephen was forced to exchange his beloved province for the rather less valuable Tuscany.

In spite of this, and even though the marriage in its first 3 years produced three daughters, Maria Theresa was boundlessly happy. Then suddenly, in October 1740, her father died. At the age of 23, without anything in the way of formal preparation, without the least acquaintance with affairs of state, Maria Theresa had supreme responsibility thrust upon her.

War of the Austrian Succession

Francis Stephen was designated coregent and put in charge of restoring the finances of the empire, a task to which he brought considerable ability but for which he was not to have the requisite time. The treasury was empty, the army had been badly neglected, and as Prince Eugene had warned, Austria's neighbors now engaged in a contest to establish which of them could repudiate most completely the obligations they had subscribed to in the Pragmatic Sanction. Bavaria advanced claims to a considerable portion of the Hapsburg lands and was supported in this venture by France. Spain demanded the empire's Italian territories. Frederick II of Prussia, himself very recently come to the throne of his country, now offered to support Maria Theresa against these importunities if Austria would pay for this service by turning over to Prussia the province of Silesia. When this cynical offer was indignantly rejected in Vienna, Frederick sent his troops into Silesia in December 1740. Bavaria and France soon joined in this attack, thus launching the 8-year War of the Austrian Succession.

At first it seemed as if the young Maria Theresa could quickly be overwhelmed. The elector Charles of Bavaria secured his election as Emperor Charles VII and with German and French troops captured Prague. If his army had achieved a juncture with the Prussians, the Austrians would no longer have been in a position to defend themselves. But Frederick II had not launched his attack on Silesia to introduce a French hegemony in central Europe. He now concluded an armistice with the Austrians, who were, in 1742, able to concentrate their forces against the French and Bavarians, whom they threw out of Bohemia. Frederick came back into the war in 1744, withdrew again the next year, in which, the Bavarian Charles VII having died, Francis Stephen was elected emperor. The war was ended at last in 1748, Austria being forced to acquiesce in the Prussian retention of Silesia and losing also the Italian districts of Parma, Piacenza, and Guastalla to France. The loss of Silesia was very painful indeed, as it was perhaps the richest of all the Hapsburg provinces.

Domestic Reform

Maria Theresa had learned her job under the most difficult conditions during the war. But she had soon found that, among the members of the high court aristocracy, the only class from which, traditionally, important servants of the Crown could be drawn, there was no dearth of able men willing to unite their fate with that of the house of Hapsburg. Although she had never, in the course of the war, found a really satisfactory general, she had recognized the talents of, and placed in responsible positions, a number of able administrators, men such as counts Sinzendorf, Syla-Tarouca, and Kaunitz. Thus, at the end of the war, the basis for a reform of the governmental apparatus already existed.

The actual work of reform, with the explicit end of strengthening Austria so that one day in the not too distant future Silesia might be recovered, was turned over to a Silesian exile, Count Frederick William Haugwitz. The key to Haugwitz's reform program was centralization. Bohemia and Austria were placed under a combined ministry, and the Provincial Estates were, insofar as possible, deprived of their authority or at least circumvented. At the same time industry was encouraged as a producer of wealth that could most readily be tapped by the state. In the provinces to which it was applied, the system produced dramatic results: on the average, the military contributions of the districts in question rose by 150 percent. Unfortunately, the concerted opposition of the nobility in Hungary prevented it from being applied there. Moreover, Haugwitz's position was being continually undermined by his colleague Kaunitz, who himself wished to play the role of Austria's savior.

Foreign Policy

In 1753 Kaunitz was given the title of state chancellor with unrestricted powers in the realm of foreign policy. While serving as Austrian ambassador to France, he had convinced himself that Austria's defeat in the recent war had been due largely to an unfortunate choice of allies. In particular, he thought, the empire had been badly let down by England. He now set about forging a new alliance whose chief aim was to surround Prussia with an insurmountable coalition. Saxony, Sweden, and Russia became Austria's allies. In 1755 Kaunitz's diplomatic efforts were crowned with the conclusion of an alliance with Austria's old enemy France, a circumstance that led to the conclusion of an alliance between Prussia and England. This diplomatic revolution seemed to leave the Prussians at a hopeless disadvantage, but Frederick II was not the man to await his own funeral, and in 1756 he opened hostilities, thus launching what was to become the Seven Years War.

Maria Theresa, although no lover of warfare for its own sake, welcomed the war as the only practical means of at last recovering Silesia. It was not to be. In spite of a much more energetic conduct of the war on the part of Austria, Frederick was for the most part able to fight his enemies one at a time. And when, in 1762, his situation at last appeared desperate, the death of Empress Elisabeth brought about a Russian withdrawal from the war, which now could no longer be won by the allies. In 1763 peace was concluded, and Silesia remained firmly in Prussian hands.

In the course of this second war, Maria Theresa developed the habit of governing autocratically, excluding Francis Stephen from all participation in the affairs of state. In spite of this the marriage was a happy one. From the dynastic point of view, the birth of Archduke Joseph in 1741 had assured the male succession. His birth was followed by numerous others, the imperial couple producing 16 children in all. Then suddenly, in 1765, the Emperor died of a stroke. Maria Theresa was inconsolable. For a time she thought of withdrawing to a cloister and turning the government over to Joseph, who was then 24. It was only with great difficulty that her ministers, with Kaunitz in the lead, managed to dissuade her from this course. And when she did return to public life, it was as a different woman. For the rest of her days she wore only black; she never again appeared at the gay diversions of what had been a very lighthearted court; and if she had all her life been a pious Catholic, her devotion to religion now came to border on both fanaticism and bigotry.

Later Reign

At his father's death Joseph had been appointed coregent. Unlike his father, the archduke meant in fact to share in the governance of the realm. But this Maria Theresa was unwilling to let him do. After many recriminations, a

compromise was arrived at: Joseph was to take charge of army reform and to share with Kaunitz the responsibility of making foreign policy. This arrangement was unfortunate not only because it deprived Joseph of any real influence on the internal affairs of Austria, the sector in which his ideas were most promising, but also because he had no talent whatever either for diplomacy or for warfare.

The 15 years of the coregency were a time of continual struggle between mother and son, but it would be a mistake to construe them as an unrelenting struggle between the forces of progress, as represented by Joseph, and those of reaction, led by Maria Theresa. Although the archduke vigorously defended the principle of religious toleration, anathema to his mother, and once threatened to resign when she proposed to expel some Protestants from Bohemia, on the equally important question of peasant emancipation, Maria Theresa took a stand distinctly more favorable to the peasants than Joseph. In foreign affairs, she opposed Joseph's adventurous attempt to acquire Bavaria, which, as she had feared, led to war with Prussia in 1778; and when Joseph lost his nerve in the midst of the struggle, she took matters into her own hands and negotiated a by no means disadvantageous peace that resulted in the acquisition of the Innviertel.

These last events, incidentally, confirm that after the unsatisfactory conclusion of the Seven Years War the main Austrian objective was no longer a redress of balance against Prussia. If political and social reforms continued, it was in part because reform had become a way of life, in part because Maria Theresa recognized that a more centralized and effective government was an end worth pursuing for itself. Although it is true that throughout the coregency Joseph kept up a clamor for various changes, some of the major reforms of the period can nevertheless be attributed chiefly to the desires of the Empress. This is particularly true of the new penal code of 1768 and of the abolition of judicial torture in 1776. The penal code, although objected to as still unduly harsh, nevertheless had the virtue of standardizing both judicial proceedings and punishments. In spite of her devotion to the Catholic Church, Maria Theresa insisted on defending with great vigor the rights of the state vis-à-vis the Church.

In her reign, neither papal bulls nor the pastoral letters of bishops could circulate in her dominions without her prior permission, and in 1777 Maria Theresa joined a number of other European monarchs in banishing the Society of Jesus from her lands. In the course of 1780 Maria Theresa's health deteriorated rapidly. She died on November 29 of that year, probably of a heart condition.

Further Readings

- The standard work on Maria Theresa is in German. The best biography in English is Robert Pick, *Empress Maria Theresa: The Earlier Years, 1717-1757* (1966). Other biographies are J. Alexander Mahan, *Maria Theresa of Austria* (1932); Constance Lily Morris, *Maria Theresa: The Last Conservative* (1937); and Edward Crankshaw, *Maria Theresa* (1970). George P. Gooch's excellent *Maria Theresa and Other Studies* (1951; repr. 1965) is part biography and part historiography, ending with a survey of European historical novels. For historical background and further information on Maria Theresa see Edith M. Link, *The Emancipation of the Austrian Peasant, 1740-1798* (1949).
- Crankshaw, Edward, *Maria Theresa*, New York: Atheneum, 1986.

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