Maria Theresa

Maria Theresa (Holy Roman Empire) (Maria Theresa; 1717–1780; ruled 1740–1780), empress of Austria. Many historians regard the eighteenth century as a time when monarchical government represented the most progressive force in economics, politics, and society. Maria Theresa was one of the greatest of these eighteenth-century monarchs, but no one would have anticipated her success when she came to the throne. The Habsburg Monarchy was not a single entity, but a conglomeration of provinces stretching from Belgium in the west to Transylvania in the east and Silesia—now in Poland—in the north to Tuscany in the south with many spaces in between. Many historians agree that, when she ended her reign, these disparate lands had achieved a unity they had never known before.

In the early eighteenth century, many of these provinces had no provision for a female ruler. As it became increasingly apparent that the Habsburg family might be running out of males, in 1713 Maria Theresa's father, Charles VI (ruled 1711–1740), made public an internal family document called the Pragmatic Sanction, which guaranteed the right of succession to female family members. After 1720 Charles worked hard to persuade first his crownlands and then the other European powers to recognize the Pragmatic Sanction so that his elder daughter, Maria Theresa, could inherit the Habsburg patrimony. By the time Charles died in 1740, he seemed to have succeeded.

Within two months of his death, Charles's carefully crafted diplomatic effort to assure his daughter's succession fell apart. In December 1740 the new king of Prussia, Frederick II (later known as "Frederick the Great"), invaded the Austrian province of Silesia, claiming it for his crown. Maria Theresa's advisers, including her husband, Francis Stephen of Lorraine, recommended that she seek an accommodation with Frederick because Austria was in no condition, militarily or financially, to resist. Maria Theresa rejected that advice peremptorily. She vowed to fight to preserve her inheritance and to use every resource to do so. She rallied support from all parts of her realm, inspired her soldiers and officers with stirring words, and set out to crush Frederick, whom she would later refer to as the "monster." Thus began the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–1748), which became a European-wide affair with Prussia, Bavaria, and France fighting on one side against Austria and Britain on the other. It took many twists and turns, finally ending in 1748 with the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen) between Austria and France. The Austro-Prussian war had ended in 1745 with Maria Theresa ceding Silesia to Frederick II.

The Prussian seizure of Silesia was the driving force in Maria Theresa's reign. From the outset, she was determined to right this terrible wrong that Frederick had inflicted upon her, and her reform efforts for the rest of her reign always had that leitmotif running through them. Maria Theresa was not a theorist; she had no compelling vision of what she imagined her possessions should become. Rather, she was practical, authorizing reforms she believed were needed and adjusting their impact to the expected and unexpected results they invariably generated.

The reforms began at the end of the War of the Austrian Succession to answer the fundamental question: how does one raise an army that can defeat the Prussians and provide it with the financial support necessary to do so? To deal with this issue, she adopted the plan of a noble but impoverished refugee from Silesia, Count Friedrich Wilhelm Haugwitz, which called for ending the annual negotiations with the monarchy's estates for human and financial resources and replacing them with negotiations every ten years. The estates would grant the central government an annual revenue for a ten-year period, along with the authority to collect it. With these
funds and by combining many functions of government under the authority of a new central General Directory, Maria Theresa was able to raise a **peacetime** army of 110,000 men to prepare for war with Frederick II.

The opportunity to begin that war came in 1756. In that year Frederick concluded an accord with Britain, thereby pulling this old ally from its association with Austria. Instead of bemoaning the loss, Maria Theresa's master of foreign policy and brilliant adviser for many years to come, Wenzel Anton Kaunitz, arranged an alliance between Austria and its age-old enemy, France, in what has come down in history as the Reversal of Alliances (or the Diplomatic Revolution). The adherence of Russia to the alliance seemed to give it overwhelming power in relation to Prussia. In August Frederick launched a **preemptive strike** against Saxony, and thus began the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), called at times in central Europe the Third Silesian War.

Maria Theresa fought this war with all her heart. This was the war that she hoped would **rectify** the harm that Frederick had inflicted upon her in 1740. But Austria just could not pull off the necessary victories. Haugwitz's reforms had substantially improved the financial condition of the monarchy and the army, but they had been designed for peacetime, not for war. The monarchy had to resort to a number of financial gimmicks to keep the war going, and a number of favorite economic projects had to be abandoned. Austria's allies, France and Russia, were not at their peak in terms of military efficiency, while France especially was sidetracked by its war against Britain in Europe, America, and India. And Frederick was a formidable enemy. A master of the use of interior lines, Frederick kept his many enemies at bay until the war finally came to an end in 1762 when Russia dropped out of the coalition.

The Seven Years' War was the last true conflict Maria Theresa fought against Prussia or any other state. In 1778–1779 the War of the Bavarian Succession, encouraged primarily by her son and co-ruler, Joseph II (ruled 1765–1790), seemed about to become another war for Silesia, but she intervened personally to stop it. Her reforms did not stop, however, nor did their intent to strengthen the Habsburg state. In the post-war period, Maria Theresa's reforms reflected the **prevailing** idea of Enlightened Absolutism, namely that the strength of a state did not rest in the size of its army or the amount of land it controlled but in the health and well-being of its people and the wealth they generated.

This second period of reform caused Maria Theresa some spiritual angst. She was a devout and conservative Roman Catholic who deeply opposed religious pluralism as a threat to the souls of her subjects. She also bore a number of prejudices that came out every now and then, one notable example being her expulsion of the Jews from the city of Prague in 1745 and another her forced emigration of crypto-Protestants either to Transylvania or out of the monarchy altogether. But, in keeping with her reforms, she wanted her church to be of practical benefit to her people and instituted a number of policies to make it that way. She insisted that the church reduce the number of monks, allow taxation of the clergy, create more parishes, and strengthen existing parishes. When the pope abolished the Jesuit Order in 1773, she secured papal permission to convert its property in the monarchy to use by the state in order to establish a system of public education. These policies reflected Maria Theresa's pragmatic desire to improve the lot of her subjects and her **pious** wish to strengthen the role of the church at the parish level. They also hinted at Josephinism, her son and co-ruler's more thorough **endeavor** to use the church's resources for the good of the state.

Other reforms included her efforts to improve the lot of the peasantry. In response to peasant unrest, she alleviated the condition of the serfs on crownlands and imposed restrictions on lords' treatment of their peasants. She advocated the conversion of work dues to rent in order to encourage the peasants to be more productive, which in turn would bring in more revenue to the state and offer a higher quality recruit for the army. Maria Theresa likewise determined to revise the civil and criminal codes of the monarchy. She abolished the use of
torture in 1776, but wide-scale reforms were delayed in part because Joseph II and some of her ministers regarded what she wanted as not liberal and far-reaching enough.

Maria Theresa was famous not only for her successful reforms and her vigorous foreign policy but also as a wife and mother. Reflecting on the lack of Habsburg males as a reason for triggering the Prussian invasion of Silesia, she determined from the outset that the Habsburg family would never again be short of offspring. She was the mother of sixteen children, five boys and eleven girls. She wrote to one of her daughters, "I can never have enough children; in this I am insatiable." She deeply loved her husband, Francis Stephen. An effective ruler in his own province of Tuscany and bearing the title of Holy Roman emperor from 1745, in Vienna his primary political role was to offer advice. When he died in 1765, she went into deep mourning, even pondering giving all her authority to her eldest son, Joseph.

Joseph succeeded to the title of Holy Roman emperor in 1765 and became co-ruler with his mother until her death in 1780. Their relationship was a turbulent one, with Joseph advocating much more extensive reform than Maria Theresa was willing to allow. Their voluminous correspondence is full of references to Maria Theresa's resisting her son's advice and demands, and of Joseph's heading off on inspection trips around the monarchy to work off the tension and stress his mother's resistance caused him.

Maria Theresa's death in 1780 caused considerable grief throughout the monarchy. A tribute came from her lifelong foe, Frederick the Great of Prussia, who wrote when he heard of her passing, "I accepted the death of the empress-queen. She did honor to her throne and to her sex; I fought wars with her, but never was I her enemy." The Pragmatic Sanction created a legal basis for the unity of the Habsburg Monarchy; Maria Theresa established it in fact.

Her title after the death of her husband was:

Maria Theresa, by the Grace of God, Dowager Empress of the Romans, Queen of Hungary, of Bohemia, of Dalmatia, of Croatia, of Slavonia, of Galicia, of Lodomeria, etc; Archduchess of Austria; Duchess of Burgundy, of Styria, of Carinthia and of Carniola; Grand Princess of Transylvania; Margravine of Moravia; Duchess of Brabant, of Limburg, of Luxembourg, of Guelders, of Württemberg, of Upper and Lower Silesia, of Milan, of Mantua, of Parma, of Piacenza, of Guastalla, of Auschwitz and of Zator; Princess of Swabia; Princess of Habsburg, of Flanders, of Tyrol, of Hennegau, of Kyburg, of Gorizia and of Gradisca; Margravine of Burgau, of Upper and Lower Lusatia; Countess of Namur; Lady on the Wendish Mark and of Mechlin; Dowager Duchess of Lorraine and Bar, Dowager Grand Duchess of Tuscany

Bibliography


