

# Maria Theresa

Queen of Hungary and Bohemia, Archduchess of Austria, Roman-German Empress, born 1717; died 1780.

## I. FROM 1717 TO 1745

Maria Theresa was born on 13 May, 1717, the daughter of the German Emperor Charles VI (1711-1740) and his wife Elizabeth von Braunschweig-Wolfenbÿttel. Her elder brother Leopold had died a short time before and the emperor was left without male issue. As early as 1713 he had [promulgated](#) a family law, the Pragmatic Sanction, by virtue of which the possessions of the Hapsburgs were to remain undivided and, in default of a male heir, fall to his eldest daughter. He was constantly negotiating with foreign powers to secure their recognition of this Pragmatic Sanction. Maria Theresa was endowed with brilliant gifts, with beauty, amiability and intelligence, and was universally admired as a girl. On 14 February, 1736, she married Duke Francis Stephen of Lorraine, who by the Peace of Vienna, in 1738, received Tuscany instead of Lorraine. Charles VI died unexpectedly on 20 October, 1740, at the age of 56, and Maria Theresa came into possession of the territories of Austria without having any political training. Her husband was an amiable man, but of mediocre mental endowments and consequently of little assistance to her. Charles, moreover, left the internal affairs of his monarchy, particularly the finances and the army, in a lamentable condition. His family regarded the future with misgiving and perplexity. Maria Theresa was the first to recover her self-possession and to appreciate the problems before her. On the very day of her father's death, she received the homage of Privy Councillors and nobility as Queen of Hungary, Queen of Bohemia, and Archduchess of Austria, and at her first cabinet meeting expressed her determination to uphold to the full every right she had inherited. All admired her firmness, dignity and strength of spirit. Certainly they were few who believed she would succeed.

At Vienna men were familiarizing themselves with the idea "of becoming Bavarian". The Elector Charles Albert of Bavaria, who had never recognized the [Pragmatic Sanction](#), laid claim to Austria as the descendant of a daughter of Emperor Ferdinand I (1556-1564), and referred to a testament of 1547, in which mention was made however not of the failure of "male" but of "legitimate" issue. He secured the support of France, which induced Spain and Saxony also to lay claims to the succession. A greater peril appeared in a quarter where it was least expected: King Frederick II of Prussia laid claim to Silesia. He promised to help Maria Theresa, provided she ceded to him JŠgerndorf, Brieg, Wohlau and Leignitz, to which he pretended to have hereditary claims. Otherwise he would ally himself with France, Bavaria and Saxony and make war on her. He wanted, like a good merchant, to take advantage of the opportunity, and proposed a deal by which Maria Theresa and himself could settle the account between them. For in case of her acceptance

of his proposal, Maria Theresa would have been spared the war arising out of the Austrian succession. Maria Theresa was, however, as convinced of her rights as she was determined to enforce them by action. That Prussia had a right to expect concessions from Austria, since, in 1686, indemnification had been promised her for the Duchies of Silesia, Maria Theresa did not take into account. The king hastily invaded Silesia and dispatched a disagreeable, conceited courtier as his representative. Thus the first Silesian war came about (1740-1742). Frederick II gained a great victory at Mollwitz (10 April, 1741). On 4 June he allied himself with France which now gave its support to the Elector of Bavaria, who aspired to the imperial dignity and won most of the electors to his side. Maria Theresa vainly strove to secure the crown for her spouse Francis Stephen. In her hereditary lands she found her principal support against the threats of her foes. The energetic bearing of the princess roused general enthusiasm. When in Pressburg she appealed to the chivalry of the Hungarians, the nobles cried out that they were ready to give their blood and life for their queen (September, 1741). However, as the Bavarians, French and Saxons were advancing against her, she was compelled to arrange a truce with Prussia in order to avoid danger from that side.

Charles Albert of Bavaria with the French had occupied Passau on 31 July and Linz on 15 September, and had been acknowledged by the Upper Austrian Diet. On 26 November he surprised Prague with Saxon assistance, and had himself crowned King of Bohemia on 7 December. On 24 January, 1742 he was also elected Roman emperor as Charles VII. His success however was short-lived. The queen's forces had already made an entry into his own country. Still, what was most needful was to rid herself of her most dangerous antagonist. Frederick II had broken the truce, had entered Moravia "to pluck the Moravian hens", and won a victory at Chotusitz (17 May, 1742). Maria Theresa concluded the peace of Breslau (6 June, 1742) and ceded to him Silesia except Teschen, Troppau and JŠgerndorf. She now turned against the Bavarians and the French. Bohemia was retaken and Maria Theresa crowned queen (May, 1743). Her ally, King George II of England, marched forward with the "pragmatic army" and defeated the French at Dettingen (27 June, 1743). The emperor became a fugitive in Frankfort. His rival's advantageous position inspired Frederick II with the fear that he might again lose his recent conquests in Silesia. He therefore again allied himself with France and the emperor and broke the peace by invading Bohemia. But as the French failed to send the promised army and Charles VII died on 20 January, 1745, the King of Prussia was compelled to rely upon his own forces and to retreat to Silesia. The Bavarians made peace with Austria and in Dresden (May, 1745) Bavaria, Saxony and Austria agreed to reduce Prussia to its former condition as the Electorate of Brandenburg. The Prussian victories at Hohenfriedberg, Soor-Trautenau and Kesselsdorf (June, September and December, 1745) overthrew the allies, and the second Silesian war had thus to be settled by the Peace of Dresden, where Prussia was confirmed in its possession of Silesia. Meanwhile Maria Theresa's husband, Francis Stephen, was chosen emperor on 4 October, 1745. Prussia acknowledged him. He took the name of Francis I (1745-1765). Thus the high-spirited woman had obtained what it was possible for her to obtain; the imperial dignity remained in her family, and the pragmatic sanction was practically confirmed. War continued to be waged in the Netherlands and Italy, but this conflict was no longer formidable. The conclusion of peace at Aix la Chapelle, in 1748, put an end to the war of the Austrian succession. The relations of the European Powers were not vitally altered. What was important was that Prussia, though not recognized as a great power, had to be tolerated as such.

## II. THE PEACE INTERVAL (1746-1756)

Directly after the Peace of Dresden the empress applied herself to the reform of the administration. In a memorandum dated 1751 she herself says: "Since the Peace of Dresden it has been my sole aim to acquaint myself with the condition and strength of my

states, and then honestly to become acquainted with the abuses existing in them and in the Dicasteriis (courts of justice) where everything was found to be in the utmost confusion". The initiative came from the queen herself. Her assistant was Count Frederick William von Haugwitz. Finances and the army were in sorest need of reorganization. The greatest necessity was the raising of money needed for a standing army of 108,000 men in the hereditary states and in Hungary. For this purpose 14 millions of gulden were required. The diets were to raise them by regular grants for a number of years, and in return would be free from all taxes in kind. The rights of the several diets were thus restricted for the benefit of the country. Against this opposition arose. Maria Theresa, however, came forth energetically in support of the authority of the government and by her personal influence carried out the project. For the present the people of the several countries made grants for a period of ten years, and when these had passed the new conditions had become habitual and become settled. To the credit of the empress it ought not to be forgotten that in the levying of this contribution for the army she did not permit any oppression of the working class. A much more important measure from the point of view of the well-being of the state was the separation of administration and justice. The Austrian and Bohemian court chancelleries, hitherto separate, were combined into a single supreme administrative office. On the other hand, for the administration of the law, the supreme court was established. In 1753 the empress appointed a commission to compile a new civil code. It was only in 1811, however, that it was published. During her reign (1768) the "Constitutio criminalis Theresiana" was also [promulgated](#) for criminal law. Up to that time a heterogeneous procedure prevailed in the different countries. Centralization was also aided by the creation of new district officials who were to carry out the measures of the government in the several countries. As they had often to protect the subjects against the oppression of the lords, the people became much more devoted to the government.

For the promotion of trade and industry a bureau of commerce was established in 1746, but its development was hindered by the internal duties. The oversea trade greatly increased. The army was improved, the Prussian army being taken as a model; in 1752 a military academy, and in 1754 an academy of engineering science were established. The empress also gave her attention to education and especially to the middle and higher schools. The gymnasia received a new curriculum in 1752. The medical faculty of the University of Vienna, after being long neglected, was raised to greater efficiency. The legal faculty also became a strong body. Moreover, the empress founded the academy of the nobles (Theresianum) and the academy for Oriental languages as well as the archives for the imperial family, court and state, which since 1749, had been a model of its kind. In her dealings with Catholicism the empress adopted the principle "cujus regio, ejus religio", and defended unity of faith in the State not only for [Christian](#) and religious, but also for political reasons. The Jews were not regarded by her with favour. After 1751 [Protestants](#) were not permitted to sell their property and emigrate, but all, who declined solemnly to become Catholics, were required to emigrate to Transylvania where the Evangelical worship was permitted. "Transmigration" took the place of "emigration". Later she came to the conclusion that compulsion ought to be avoided, but that those who had gone astray should be led to conversion by argument and careful instruction. At court she was strict in regard to attendance at church, frequent communion, and fasting. She broke up the [Freemason](#) lodges by force in 1743.

### III. THE SEVEN YEARS' WAR (1756-1763)

Maria Theresa would have carried out many more useful measures had she not again turned to foreign politics. But she was irresistibly impelled to punish Prussia and to reconquer Silesia. Her court and state chancellor, Count Kaunitz (since 1753) recognized at times that it was better to come to an agreement with Prussia, but he had not the

courage to oppose the empress's designs. The opportunity of taking revenge on Prussia came when England and France made war on each other in North America and looked about for European allies. In 1755 England received the assurance of aid from Russia. To make Russia's assistance useless and in fact to paralyze her, Frederick the Great made the Westminster Treaty of Neutrality in January, 1756 with England, by which the two Powers bound themselves to prevent their respective allies, namely France and Russia, from attacking the territory of the Confederates. This allowed the old rivals, Austria and France, to combine. Maria Theresa was annoyed that England had joined Prussia, and France was disgusted with Prussia's independent policy, for she had reckoned on Frederick's help. Thus France and Austria made the defensive treaty of Versailles on 1 May, 1756. As to the origin of the Seven Years' War, whether it was an offensive or defensive war on the part of Frederick the Great, this has been the subject of much debate. It must be granted that Austria called upon France to participate actively in a war against Prussia, and in return had offered concessions in the Low Countries. She had also come to a similar agreement with Russia. The new war was an unfortunate undertaking. The prospects of regaining Silesia were not great, and the hope of weakening Prussia was an absolute chimera. Besides, France had no great interest in weakening Prussia, and her active participation was doubtful from the beginning. In Russia the death of the empress and a consequent change of policy was imminent.

Frederick the Great foresaw the intentions of Maria Theresa in good time, and anticipated her before the preparations of his enemy were completed. As the empress made an evasive reply or no reply at all to his enquiries as to her aims he entered Saxony on 28 August, 1756, and Bohemia in September and defeated the Austrians on 1 October, at Lobositz. The attack, which was clearly a breach of the peace, brought about the immediate conclusion of the alliances. Frederick made an alliance with England in January, 1757. France and Austria came to an agreement (on 1 May, 1757) in regard to the partition of Prussia, after Austria had come to an understanding with Russia in January. Frederick had to defend himself on every side. He was on the offensive only in 1757 and 1758. Later he had to confine himself to acting on the defensive. The Seven Years' War was a long struggle in which fortune alternately favoured either side. In contrast with Frederick the Great's victories at Prague (6 May, 1757), at Rossbach (5 November, 1757), at Leuthen (15 December, 1757), at Torgau (3 November, 1760) stand his serious defeats at Kolin (18 June, 1757), at Hochkirch (14 October, 1758), and at Kunersdorf (12 August, 1759). In the West the allies effected very little against the English. In the East on the other hand, Frederick seemed on the point of succumbing (1761). The English did not renew the agreement to subsidize Frederick. His opponents, it is true, were equally exhausted financially, as well as weary and disappointed. The decisive turn of events was brought about by the death of the Russian Empress Elizabeth (1762). Her successor, Peter III, an admirer of Frederick's, made peace with him and even sought his alliance and sent him 20,000 men. When Peter lost his throne and life, the Empress Catharine, it is true, withdrew from the Prussian alliance, but the last successes of Frederick were largely due to the Russians (Burkersdorf, 21 July; Freiberg, 29 October). As France and England concluded peace in Paris on 10 February, 1763, the empress was compelled to do the same. The Peace of Hubertsburg (15 February, 1763) restored to each belligerent the possessions he had held before the war. But apart from the loss in men and treasure, the war injured the policy of the empress and Count Kaunitz by strengthening the position of Prussia as a great power. Frederick the Great had maintained Prussia's power in a severe ordeal.

#### **IV. THE EVENING OF LIFE (1763-1780)**

The empress had still seventeen years to rule. However, this period no longer exclusively bore the impress of her personality. She did not indeed give up the reins, but she could not

make headway against the passionate impulses of her son Joseph II, or entirely carry out her own views. Thus the Theresian period gradually became the "Josephine" period. On 27 March, 1763, Joseph was chosen as Roman king. Francis I, to whom Theresa was really devoted, and to whom she had borne sixteen children (eleven daughters and five sons), died suddenly, fifty-seven years old (1765). Joseph II became emperor (1765-1790), and in Austria co-regent with his mother. To her ambitious son, brimful of projects, the liberal-minded autocrat who with the noblest intentions was able to effect nothing, she could not transmit her political talent. In many respects their views differed, particularly on religious affairs. Joseph had entirely different ideas on the treatment of non-Catholics. Indeed even under Maria Theresa the politico-ecclesiastical policy known as "Josephinism" had its rise, though the empress was a pious woman and attended strictly to her religious duties. Papal Bulls were only to be made public with the consent of the government, and intercourse with Rome was to be conducted through the Foreign Office. Festivals were reduced in number. The jurisdiction of the Church over the laity ceased, as well as the immunity from taxes enjoyed by the clergy. The number of monasteries was restricted. The [Jesuits](#) lost their standing as confessors at the court, as well as the direction of the theological and philosophical faculties at the University of Vienna, and were confined to the lower schools.

The empress maintained a neutral attitude towards the [dissolution of the Jesuit Order](#). Her fortune was devoted to the care of souls and to education. In foreign politics a conflict of views between mother and son arose on the occasion of the first partition of Poland. The empress not only doubted that the acquisition of Polish territory would be an advantage, but she also recoiled from doing wrong to others. At last she yielded to the pressure of her son and Count Kaunitz, but later she often regretted having given her assent. Nor did she approve of the War of the Bavarian Succession, clearly foreseeing that Prussia would interfere. She could not sufficiently thank Providence for the fortunate issue of the affair. In the last ten years of her life she developed an unremitting activity on behalf of the improvement of the primary schools. The excellent Abbot Felbiger, the father of the Catholic primary schools of Germany, was summoned from Silesia. She also tried to improve the condition of the peasantry, and to put an end to the oppression of the landlords. When she sought to abolish the serfdom in Bohemia she encountered unexpected opposition from the emperor, whom the landlords had caused to hesitate.

She was tireless in her care for the welfare and education of her children. When they were at a distance she carried on a busy correspondence with them and gave them wise instruction and advice. Marie Antoinette, the Dauphiness, and afterwards Queen, of France, with her light and thoughtless temperament, her frivolous disregard of dignity, her love of pleasure and her extravagance, caused her much anxiety. Nearest to her heart was her daughter Maria Christina who was happily married to Prince Albert of Saxony-Teschen. Death was made hard for the courageous woman. On 15 October, 1780, she made her will and in it directed, which was characteristic of her, besides generous bequests to the poor, the granting a month's pay to the soldiers. On 8 November she was present at a hunt and appears to have caught a cold in the pouring rain. Night and day she suffered from a racking cough and choking fits, nevertheless she was but little in bed, but busied herself by putting her papers in order, and consoling her children. On the 25th she received Communion; on the 28th extreme unction was given to her, and with her own hand she put certain bequests on paper, among them, again, characteristic of her disposition, 100,000 florins for the funds of the normal schools. during the night of 29 November, 1780, she died, at the age of sixty-three years.

She was the last and beyond doubt the greatest of the Hapsburgs. She is not only, as Sonnenfels described her as early as 1780, the restorer, but rather the foundress of the

Austrian monarchy, which with a skillful hand she built up out of loose parts into a well rivetted whole, while in all essential respects she left the administration radically improved. In her personal character she was a thorough German, always proud of her German descent and nationality, intelligent, affable, cheerful, pleasant, fond of music, and at the same time thoroughly moral and deeply religious. In her character were united, as v. Zwiedineck-SŸdenhorst says, all that was amiable and honourable, all that was worthy and winning, all the strength and gentleness of which the Austrian character is capable. Klopstock was right when he appraised her as "the greatest of her line because she was the most human", and even Frederick the Great recognized her merits when he said: "She has done honour to the throne and to her sex; I have warred with her but I have never been her enemy."