Maria Theresa
Empress
1717 - 1780
Maria Theresa Walburga Amalia Christina (13 May 1717 – 29 November 1780) was the only female ruler of the Habsburg dominions and the last of the House of Habsburg. She was the sovereign of Austria, Hungary, Croatia, Bohemia, Mantua, Milan, Lodomeria and Galicia, the Austrian Netherlands and Parma. By marriage, she was Duchess of Lorraine, Grand Duchess of Tuscany and Holy Roman Empress.
She started her 40-year reign when her father, Emperor Charles VI, died in October 1740. Charles VI paved the way for her accession with the Pragmatic Sanction of 1713 and spent his entire reign securing it. Upon the death of her father, Saxony, Prussia, Bavaria and France repudiated the sanction they had recognised during his lifetime.

Prussia proceeded to invade the affluent Habsburg province of Silesia, sparking a nine-year conflict known as the War of the Austrian Succession. Maria Theresa would later unsuccessfully try to reconquer Silesia during the Seven Years' War.
She married Francis Stephen of Lorraine and had sixteen children, including Queen Marie Antoinette of France, Queen Maria Carolina of Naples, Duchess Maria Amalia of Parma and two Holy Roman Emperors, Joseph II and Leopold II. Though she was expected to cede power to Francis and Joseph, both of whom were officially her co-rulers in Austria and Bohemia, Maria Theresa was the absolute sovereign who ruled by the counsel of her advisers. She criticised and disapproved of many of Joseph's actions. Although she is considered to have been intellectually inferior to both Joseph and Leopold, Maria Theresa understood the importance of her public persona and was able to simultaneously evoke both esteem and affection from her subjects.
Maria Theresa promulgated financial and educational reforms, promoted commerce and the development of agriculture, and reorganised Austria's ramshackle military, all of which strengthened Austria's international standing. However, she refused to allow religious toleration and contemporary travellers thought her regime was bigoted and superstitious. As a young monarch who fought two dynastic wars, she believed that her cause should be the cause of her subjects, but in her later years she would believe that their cause must be hers.
Early life and background

The second but eldest surviving child of Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI and Elisabeth Christine of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, Archduchess Maria Theresa was born early in the morning of 13 May 1717, at the Hofburg Palace, Vienna, shortly after the death of her elder brother, Archduke Leopold, and was baptised on that same evening. Most descriptions of her baptism stress that the infant was carried ahead of her cousins, Archduchesses Maria Josepha and Maria Amalia, the daughters of Charles VI's elder brother and predecessor, Joseph I, before the eyes of Joseph's widow, Empress Wilhelmine Amalia.

Archduchess Maria Theresa in 1720, Anonymous. The flowers which she carries in the uplifted folds of her dress represent her fertility and expectations to bear children in adulthood.
It was clear that Maria Theresa would outrank them, even though their grandfather, Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I, had his sons sign the Mutual Pact of Succession, which gave precedence to the daughters of the elder brother. Her father was the only surviving male member of the House of Habsburg and hoped for a son who would prevent the extinction of his dynasty and succeed him. Thus, the birth of Maria Theresa was a great disappointment to him and the people of Vienna; Charles never managed to overcome this feeling.
Maria Theresa replaced Maria Josepha as heiress presumptive to the Habsburg realms the moment she was born; Charles VI had issued the Pragmatic Sanction of 1713 which had placed his nieces behind his own daughters in the line of succession.

Maria Theresa was a serious and reserved child who enjoyed singing and archery. She was barred from horse riding by her father, but she would later learn the basics for the sake of her Hungarian coronation ceremony.
The question of Maria Theresa's marriage was raised early in her childhood. She was first engaged to be married to Leopold Clement of Lorraine, who was supposed to visit Vienna and meet the Archduchess in 1723. However, news reached Vienna that he had died of smallpox.

Leopold Clement's younger brother, Francis Stephen, was invited to Vienna. Even though Francis Stephen was his favourite candidate for Maria Theresa's hand, the Emperor considered other possibilities.
Francis Stephen was to receive the Grand Duchy of Tuscany upon the death of childless Grand Duke Gian Gastone de' Medici. The couple were married on 12 February 1736.

The Duchess of Lorraine's love for her husband was strong and possessive. The letters she sent to him shortly before their marriage expressed her eagerness to see him; his letters, on the other hand, were stereotyped and formal. She was very jealous of her husband and his infidelity was the greatest problem of their marriage, with Maria Wilhelmina, Princess of Auersperg, as his best known mistress.
Charles VI died on 20 October 1740, at the Favorita Palace, Vienna, probably because he had eaten poisonous mushrooms. The Emperor, who spent his entire reign securing the Pragmatic Sanction, left Austria in an impoverished state, bankrupted by the recent Turkish war and the War of the Polish Succession; the treasury contained only 100,000 florins, which were claimed by his widow. The army numbered only 80,000 men, most of whom had not been paid in months; they were nevertheless remarkably loyal and devoted to their new sovereign.
Maria Theresa found herself in a difficult situation. She did not know enough about matters of state and she was unaware of the weakness of her father's ministers. She decided to rely on her father's advice to retain his councillors and defer to her husband, whom she considered to be more experienced, on other matters. Both decisions, though natural, would prove to be unfortunate.

She dismissed the possibility that other countries might try to seize her territories and immediately started ensuring the imperial dignity for herself; since a woman could not be elected Holy Roman Empress, Maria Theresa wanted to secure the imperial office for her husband. The first display of the new queen's authority was the formal act of homage of the Lower Austrian Estates to her on 22 November 1740. It was an elaborate public event which served as a formal recognition and legitimation of her accession. The oath of fealty to Maria Theresa was taken on the same day in Hofburg.
Over the course of twenty years, Maria Theresa gave birth to sixteen children, thirteen of whom survived infancy. The first child, Maria Elisabeth (1737–1740), was born a little less than a year after the wedding. Again, the child's gender caused great disappointment and so would the births of Maria Anna, the eldest surviving child, and Maria Carolina (1740–1741). While fighting to preserve her inheritance, Maria Theresa gave birth to a son, Joseph, named after Saint Joseph, to whom she had repeatedly prayed for a male child during the pregnancy. Maria Theresa's favourite child, Maria Christina, was born on her 25th birthday, four days before the defeat of the Austrian army in Chotusitz.
Five more children were born during the war: Maria Elisabeth, Charles, Maria Amalia, Leopold and Maria Carolina (1748–1748). During this period, there was no rest for Maria Theresa during pregnancies or around the births; the war and child-bearing were carried on simultaneously. Five children were born during the peace between the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War: Maria Johanna, Maria Josepha, Maria Carolina, Ferdinand and Maria Antonia. She delivered her last child, Maximilian Francis, during the Seven Years' War, aged 39. Maria Theresa asserted that, had she not been almost always pregnant, she would have gone into battle herself.
Shortly after giving birth to the younger children, Maria Theresa was confronted with the task of marrying off the elder ones. She led the marriage negotiations along with the campaigns of her wars and the duties of state. She treated her children with affection but used them as pawns in dynastic games and sacrificed their happiness for the benefit of the state. A devoted but self-conscious mother, she wrote to all of her children at least once a week and believed herself entitled to exercise authority over her children regardless of their age and rank.

Son Joseph II (Joseph Benedikt Anton Michael Adam; 13 March 1741 – 20 February 1790) was Holy Roman Emperor from 1765 to 1790 and ruler of the Habsburg lands from 1780 to 1790.

Son Leopold II (5 May 1747 – 1 March 1792), born Peter Leopold Joseph Anton Joachim Pius Gotthard, was Holy Roman Emperor and King of Hungary and Bohemia from 1790 to 1792.
Like all members of the House of Habsburg, Maria Theresa was a Roman Catholic, and a devout one as well. She believed that religious unity was necessary for a peaceful public life and explicitly rejected the idea of religious toleration. However, she never allowed the Church to interfere with what she considered to be prerogatives of a monarch and kept Rome at arm's length. She controlled the selection of archbishops, bishops and abbots.
• Maria Theresa was as conservative in manners of state as in those of religion, but implemented significant reforms to strengthen Austria's military and bureaucratic efficiency. She employed Count Friedrich Wilhelm von Haugwitz, who modernised the empire by creating a standing army of 108,000 men, paid for with 14 million gulden extracted from each crown-land. The central government was responsible for the army, although Haugwitz instituted taxation of the nobility, who never before had to pay taxes. Maria Theresa oversaw the unification of the Austrian and Bohemian chancellories in May 1749.

• Maria Theresa doubled the state revenue between 1754 and 1764, though her attempt to tax clergy and nobility was only partially successful. These financial reforms greatly improved the economy.
• **Medicine**
  - Gerard van Swieten, whom Maria Theresa had recruited following the death of her sister, Archduchess Maria Anna, founded the Vienna General Hospital, revamped Austria's educational system and served as the Empress's personal physician.

• **Civil rights**
  - Among other reforms was the Codex Theresianus, begun in 1752 and finished in 1766, that defined civil rights. [122] In 1776, Austria outlawed witch burnings and torture, and, for the first time in Austrian history, took capital punishment off the penal code, as it was replaced with forced labor. It was later reintroduced, but the progressive nature of these reforms remains noted. Much unlike Joseph, but with the support of religious authorities, Maria Theresa was opposed to the abolition of torture. Born and raised between Baroque and Rococo eras, she found it hard to fit into the intellectual sphere of the Enlightenment, which is why she only slowly followed humanitarian reforms on the continent.
Education

Aware of the inadequacy of bureaucracy in Austria and, in order to improve it, Maria Theresa reformed education in 1775. In a new school system based on the Prussian one, all children of both genders from the ages of six to twelve had to attend school. Education reform was met with hostility from many villages; Maria Theresa crushed the dissent by ordering the arrest of all those opposed. Although the idea had merit, the reforms were not as successful as they were expected to be; in some parts of Austria, half of the population was illiterate well into the 19th century.

Maria Theresa regarded the theatre as a source of amusement and national pride and insisted upon observing special rules to achieve a high moral tone.
• Emperor Francis I died on 18 August 1765, while he and the court were in Innsbruck celebrating the wedding of his second son, Leopold. Maria Theresa was devastated. Their eldest son, Joseph, became Holy Roman Emperor. Maria Theresa abandoned all ornamentation, had her hair cut short, painted her rooms black and dressed in mourning for the rest of her life. She completely withdrew from court life, public events, and theater. Throughout her widowhood, she spent the whole August and the eighteenth of each month alone in her chamber, which negatively affected her mental health. Upon his accession to the imperial throne, her son Joseph ruled less land than his father had in 1740.
The relationship between Maria Theresa and Joseph was not without warmth but was complicated and their personalities clashed. Despite his intellect, Maria Theresa's force of personality often made Joseph cower. Sometimes, she openly admired his talents and achievements, but criticised him behind his back.
Death and legacy

- The empress fell ill on 24 November 1780, ostensibly of a chill. Her physician Dr. Störk thought her condition serious. By 28 November, she asked for the last rites, and the next day, at about nine o'clock in the evening, she died surrounded by her remaining children. With her, the House of Habsburg died out and was replaced by the House of Habsburg-Lorraine. The empress is buried in the Imperial Crypt in Vienna next to her husband in a coffin she had had inscribed during her lifetime.
• Maria Theresa left a revitalised empire that influenced the rest of Europe throughout the 19th century. Her descendants followed her example and continued reforming the empire. The acquisition of the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria gave the empire an even more multinational character that would ultimately lead to its destruction. Her introduction of compulsory schooling, as a means of Germanisation, eventually triggered the revival of Czech culture.
• 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 Luxemburg, 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; Princely Countess 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 of the Wendish Mark and of Mechlin; Dowager Duchess of Lorraine and Bar, Dowager Grand Duchess of Tuscany.
Maria Theresia’s coat of arms

Author of presentation: Igor Pavluković