

‘Here lies Joseph II who was unfortunate in all his undertakings.’ Could Joseph have fairly blamed his ultimate failure on misfortune?

Joseph II's accession to the full control over the Austrian dominions did not by any means mark a decisive change in the rule of the Monarchy, since he had already been for 15 years along with his mother a co-regent. It did not mean a change in the governing personnel either, with the incumbent ministers such as van Swieten and Kaunitz remaining in their posts. In most other matters, though, it marked a decisive change in that the new ruler had little respect for existing political realities, inasmuch as he said ‘one must pay no attention to the conventions and prejudices which have established themselves over the centuries.’¹ Joseph, having finally assumed power now his mother was dead, was keen on undertakings made more radical for their frontal assault on previously sacrosanct privileges. As he said, ‘nobody takes a step without bickering, scribbling and preaching for hours. Petty reforms will not do; the whole must be transformed.’

A first target of Joseph's attention was to implement economic reforms to encourage the development of industries and to increase industrial employment in his domains. His approach to this must surely have been influenced by his father, described contemptuously by Frederick the Great as ‘the banker of the court’, along with notable Cameralists such as Martini, Sonnenfels and Sinzendorf. Francis I in his private capacity was almost certainly the foremost industrialist in Europe by means of his personal investments in various enterprises, and likewise his son tried to create of wealth by state investment & intervention. The tariff barrier which was imposed on the Habsburg lands had the effect of virtually excluding all foreign goods, while domestic growth was encouraged by tax-relief, subsidies & loans. Joseph soon felt able to write to his brother Leopold that ‘shipping on the Danube heading for the Levant and Crimea is daily increasing ... Industry & manufactures are prospering in the absence of the prohibited goods.’² The major state industries themselves provided a great deal of encouragement to private firms spinning off from them. The Linz Textiles Factory for example provided a market for local needlemaking factories, as well as creating over a thousand jobs directly. Nor was it simply a case of public investment being required to maintain the situation, since the Brno Fine Cloths Factory did not collapse in 1789 solely due to the war with Turkey drying up markets: instead such a number of former employees were able to independently set up competing businesses that the State enterprise itself found itself unable to compete. A new industrial base was certainly created from judicious investments and encouragement to private enterprise. The number of industrial workers in Bohemia doubled in the years 1775-89 from 80,000 to 152,000. By comparison, the total population of the province only went up by 20%.³ The economic reforms were accompanied by an enthusiastic reception to modern technologies for example steam engines - of which Austria possessed Continental Europe's first example. New crops were adopted with varying degrees of success by the agrarian sector, such as flax, rice, maize, tobacco and potatoes. Admittedly the results of Joseph's investments were patchy, with large amounts of money being poured into scarcely profitable luxury industries such as silk and porcelain. However it could hardly be said that his grasp of business was a misfortune to him. Indeed it can at least partly explain the great rise in State revenue from taxation, which from being 65.8m gulden in 1781 reached 87.5m gulden in 1788.

¹ Blanning: *Joseph II and enlightened despotism* p.20

² Blanning: *Joseph II and enlightened despotism* p.54

³ Blanning: *Joseph II and enlightened despotism* p.54

On the other hand, the rise in revenue was more than matched in the rise in state expenditure. The National Debt rose from 40m gulden in 1740; to 140m gulden in 1780 to 370m gulden in 1790. Much of this came from the sums of money required to pay for Joseph's adventurous and generally unrewarding foreign policy. While still co-regent his prosecution of the War of the Bavarian Succession merely sapped Austrian resources without fighting a Prussian opponent who had succeeded in posing as the true defender of the Empire. Likewise the skirmishes in the Netherlands in 1784 against the Dutch failed to produce even the minimum rewards in the shape of navigation of the Scheldt river, while still relinquishing Imperial claims to Maastricht. Indeed, Joseph's cavalier handling of the affair so profoundly worried both the Powers of Europe and the minor Imperial principalities that the latter created a League of Princes under Joseph's arch-enemy, Prussia. Even the traditionally subservient Archbishop of Mainz felt able to join this league, aimed almost solely against the pretension of the Habsburg emperor and in favour of the Imperial *status quo*. No wonder Kaunitz felt obliged to complain that 'you know as I do how much this wretched man deserves the title of infamy: "All-Time Destroyer of the Empire."' The war with Holland also profoundly alienated Belgians from the Habsburgs, seeing how Joseph considered them merely as a pawn in his diplomatic game. Finally, the Turkish War of 1787-90 provided three years of consistent failure, for which Joseph's personal leadership must take much of the blame. While Russia gained full rights to the Crimea and Wallachia, Austria achieved nothing while critically weakening her military control over existing provinces, most notably Hungary and the Austrian Netherlands. Yet none of these foreign disasters can truly be ascribed to misfortune. Instead lack of planning and forethought had contributed greatly to the military and political defeats. An example is the fact that in 1785 he said that 'I never thought of making war with the Dutch, and hence have never prepared any maps.'⁴ Likewise the personal incompetence of Joseph in the military sphere as seen by the Turkish War was far from due to misfortune - upon the appointment of Loudon in 1790, the military situation markedly improved. In fact as Frederick of Prussia said 'I am beginning to think that this prince is very inconsequential; he drops his projects as soon as he meets with serious obstacles.'

The wars were so expensive that additional sources of revenue would have been necessary even had this not already been a priority before the death of his mother. Austria's was in surplus in 1786, yet just three years later the annual deficit had run up to 22m gulden. That the Church should have become a target for taxation was not in itself strange, seeing the immense wealth locked up in Church institutions. The secularisation of the property of the monasteries brought in 60m gulden, used mostly for public welfare projects. By secularising other church land he made the senior clergy like to any other senior civil servant, with a salary - albeit a large one - paid for by the state. Yet even this measure released in Hungary alone 633,000 gulden per year, which was mostly spent on the smaller salaries of parish priests. Yet despite the fact that these reforms hit the Church at a most vulnerable spot - the source of its economic independence - it was not primarily these financial reforms which earned Joseph the hatred not only of the upper church structure but even the priests and people too. Instead, this came about through Joseph's apparently ceaseless meddling in the liturgical and spiritual practices of the church in a way which undermined public confidence in Joseph's own religiosity. Certainly it was hard for the clergy to regard Joseph as pious given that he said in 1783 'marriage is in itself a civil contract and consequently the government has the right to decide on the validity or invalidity of the marriage contract.'⁵ In response to this direct challenge to Catholic doctrine Cardinal Migazzi said to him 'In matters of faith and morals, the pope is the supreme judge ... Once the majority of Catholics recognise a papal judgement as true, it acquires the stamp of infallibility and he who opposes it is an apostate.' Yet Joseph was clearly happy to be called that seeing as the subsequent year he unilaterally abolished the crimes of witchcraft, marriage to non-Christians and apostasy.

⁴ Padover *The Revolutionary Emperor* p.234

⁵ Padover *The Revolutionary Emperor* p.140

The papal visit to Vienna was also partly caused by the emperor's curt treatment. An example is a letter to Pius VI saying 'I perceive you have not the logic in Rome which is prevalent in my states...I hope you will excuse my brevity; I have neither time nor talent for writing a *thema*, particularly one so extensive as those which are usually met in a Roman Museum.'⁶

Yet Joseph and Kaunitz's humiliating treatment of the pope was not reciprocated by the people, who flocked to see the pontiff in defiance of the emperor's wishes. Indeed the people formed a standing opposition to the more petty regulations which Joseph constantly produced even over liturgical matters. Examples of these are the reduction of feast-days, bans on the distribution of amulets, reduction in the numbers of Divine services, discarding of relics & most importantly, promotion of German liturgy in place of Latin. These utilitarian and modernising trends ran directly counter to the Baroque tradition which had its high point in the reign of Maria Theresa. The external and superficial details of religion were extremely important to most humble Catholics, and regulations such as Joseph's ban on coffins for burials were simply ignored. In more isolated cases, real disturbances were caused by proposed changes. An example is a mob in Bregenz which tore down the decree regarding the liturgy, assaulted the commissar & forced the local officials and priest to sign a declaration stating that Mass would be celebrated in the old way.⁷ The very real opposition to Joseph's reforms were by no means products of misfortune, but the expression of a very real disturbance of one of the certainties of to the unenlightened masses. That Joseph did not predict probable reactions shows a definite sign of intellectual conceit in the assumption that all people would agree in governing religion by Reason.

Likewise Joseph failed to realise until too late the profound prejudices among his people against Protestants and Jews, and the difficulty of assimilating these two groups into society. The Toleration decree clearly states the economic benefits flowing from it, saying 'His Majesty, being persuaded of the injurious effects of all coercion which does violence to the human conscience, and believing that the greatest benefits to religion and to the state emanate from that genuine spirit of tolerance which is agreeable to the principles of human charity.'⁸ Consequently within 5 years, the number of Protestants doubled from 74,000 to 157,000. However, this toleration did not take into account the fierce anti-Semitism especially in the capital, and so Joseph was forced to water down his proposal to prohibit Jews from moving to Vienna or to build a synagogue there. As for Protestants as well, Joseph's toleration had definite limits, best shown by his continued persecution of a group in Bohemian calling themselves Deists. This was done 'not because he is a Deist but because he claims to be something without knowing what it is.'⁹ Upon meeting serious obstacles again, Joseph was prepared to drop his plans. On a related subject, the relaxation of censorship laws again provided an example of liberal laws subsequently being gradually withdrawn. Despite the abolition of book censorship, Joseph still retained Maria Theresa's ban on Voltaire's works - in German. He also kept the prohibition of discussions on religion in coffee-houses or saloons. Even this policy Joseph recognised as a failure before his death, and in 1790 he said in the shadow of the French Revolution 'It is generally recognised that books, the contents of which are calculated to undermine the principles of all religion, morality and social care...are in fact dangerous in their effects and it is therefore a duty towards humanity to prevent, as far as possible, the circulation of such books.'

However the most important source of misfortune Joseph came across was in his deliberate policy of ignoring local customs and privileges as being irrelevant and antiquated. Indeed Joseph even lectured Kaunitz that 'When, after experience, I make certain propositions, I expect them

⁶ Padover *The Revolutionary Emperor* p.162

⁷ Blanning: *Joseph II and enlightened despotism*

⁸ Padover *The Revolutionary Emperor*

⁹ Padover *The Revolutionary Emperor*

to be accepted and not considered merely as a lamentation of mine on which you make a lawyerish plea for the preservation of precedents.' To Chotek he was similarly scathing, saying 'But that a man of spirit like you, out of sheer obstinacy and quixotism, should take such a step when, even if the tax patent were really harmful the blame should not fall on you, that I admit, has astonished me.'¹⁰ In this way, it was clearly difficult for Joseph to appreciate - at least not until too late - the delicate political sensibilities of his far-flung subjects. His urgent desire was to legislate that 'All jealousies and prejudices between province & province, nation & nation must cease. The distinctions between nations & religions must disappear and all citizens must consider each other as brothers.'¹¹ Yet by doing so he ignored the very different histories of his various dominions. Hungarians certainly did not take kindly to being treated almost like a colony, with tariff barriers even against goods from other Habsburg territories. Her historical tax privileges provoked retaliation from the government in that 'Until Hungary is placed in a position equal to that of the other Hereditary Provinces, the Treasury cannot support any handicraft which would curtail the means of subsistence of the Hereditary Provinces'¹² - thus Hungary did not share in the state investment in industry. Sights were also made to her national pride such as Joseph's refusal to be crowned in Hungary, and then had the Crown of St Stephen taken from Pressburg to Vienna. Yet most galling of all was the wholesale attack on her national freedoms, categorised scathingly as 'the boasted freedom of Hungary is only a privilege of the nobility and clergy to live at the expense of the whole country.' Reorganisation into 10 provinces run by appointed commissars was the last straw. Likewise in Belgium, Joseph deliberately ignored local liberties during his visit in 1781, while his administrative reforms - essentially on the Hungarian model - jarred greatly on a province who had only had to accept rule from Vienna for less than 70 years.

In both cases, the subsequent insurrections - either only threatened such as in Hungary in 1788-9 which resulted in the revocation of administrative reform or actual as in Belgium which expelled Austrian troops in 1789 - were the only possible outlets for protest with all constitutional procedures abolished. They were neither of them accidents of fate, but reflected greatly on two of Joseph's great faults - his insensitivity to dissenting views and his lack of ruthlessness in enforcement. The weakened military state caused by the Turkish war cannot hide the fact that in both cases Joseph did 'not understand why, against whom, how nor for what all this is directed.' He could not understand why a populace which had gained so much in his opinion from his reforms would repay him with rebellion and scorn - yet as Frederick had said 'he drops his projects as soon as he meets with serious obstacles.' Censorship and persecution did reappear, while 'His Majesty no longer cares how they bury themselves in future.' However in marked contrast with his brother-in-law, Joseph faced no Revolution. For most peasants, the monarch who had emancipated them shortly before remained the best hope for reforms, while no urban poor existed in Vienna as they did in Paris. Yet crucially, Joseph's attempts to create a unitary state around Vienna had failed - it was ironic that the provincialism which had foiled Joseph's reforms should ensure stability in an age of revolution.

¹⁰ Padover *The Revolutionary Emperor* p.130

¹¹ Padover *The Revolutionary Emperor* p.128

¹² Blanning: *Joseph II and enlightened despotism*