

Were the problems besetting Maria Theresa due to the nature of her inheritance or her own mistakes?

As Maria Theresa was particularly keen to point out, 'I do not think anyone would deny that history hardly knows of a crowned head who started his reign under circumstances more grievous than those attending my succession.'¹ Certainly she was not without justification when she said that 'I found myself without money, without credit, without an army, without knowledge & experience, even without counsel.'² Her situation did indeed appear dire with a foreign power in the shape of Frederick of Prussia marching almost unopposed through her most productive province, Silesia. The elaborate series of diplomatic manoeuvres which her father had carried out to secure her inheritance - the so-called Pragmatic Sanction of 1713 - appeared to show serious faultlines, requiring prompt and immediate action to rectify. Prompt and immediate action built on the foundations, as Maria Theresa so bluntly put it, of no money, no credit and no army.

The declining years of Charles VI had been marked by humiliating defeat at the hands of the Ottoman Turks. The wars of 1737-9 had given the lie to Austrian military proficiency - with even the fortress of Belgrade being surrendered by Marshal Neipperg. Maria Theresa a decade later on unhesitatingly condemned 'the general calamities which became worse because each minister dared not demand additional sacrifices from the crownlands in his trust, and contented himself with criticising others at every opportunity.'³ In her opinion it was clear that the wars highlighted a serious deficiency in the system by which Austrian armies were funded by the Crown. Bartenstein at the time thought differently, saying 'the crownlands were exploited, many millions raised at a modest interest, and numerous and large armies raised and partly enlarged; indeed the Monarchy supported Your Imperial Majesty in the last two wars with more vigour than it has done before.'⁴ However neither he nor any of the other ministers could deny that on the death of Charles VI, Austria could ill afford a new war.

Yet Prussia's invasion of Silesia clearly highlighted the fact that the Pragmatic Sanction, bought at such a high price by Charles - for example he had to surrender his beloved Ostend Company to secure a British guarantee - covered over serious tensions in the composition of the Habsburg dominions. As Emperor over Germany, Archduke in Austria, King in Bohemia and Hungary and only Duke in Silesia, the personal lordship of the head of the House of Austria was the only thing which held his heterogeneous provinces together. The succession of a woman in these circumstances, despite the Pragmatic Sanction, was the cause of enormous strain for a Monarchy which had no identity outside the concept of primogeniture. Therefore even when Frederick of Prussia was on the point of invasion, he claimed to be supporting Maria Theresa stabilise her inheritance, though demanding that 'as an indemnification, the Queen of Hungary will not offer him less than the whole Duchy of Silesia.'⁵ Later on, he said 'I have no purpose than the preservation and real benefit of the House of Austria'⁶ - though the territorial gain was also important as 'Silesia is the portion of the imperial heritage to which we have the strongest claim, and which is the most suitable for the House of Brandenburg. It is therefore consonant with justice to seize the opportunity of the Emperor's death to take possession.'⁷ The difficulty of

¹ Crankshaw: *Maria Theresa*

² Crankshaw: *Maria Theresa*

³ Roider: *Austria's Eastern Question*

⁴ Roider: *Austria's Eastern Question*

⁵ Crankshaw: *Maria Theresa*

⁶ Crankshaw: *Maria Theresa*

⁷ Crankshaw: *Maria Theresa*

maintaining a sense of common territorial integrity across such a vast and varied set of dominions was shown by the speed with which members of the Silesian aristocracy accepted the Prussian invaders. The citizens of Breslau opened their gates to welcome Frederick, who soon afterwards felt able to write to his brother Henry: that 'the whole land rejoices at our arrival and is only afraid that we shall leave.'⁸ This is even partially confirmed by Frederick's opposite number Browne who wrote to his sovereign that 'from all outward appearances, we can promise ourselves nothing but good from the country people. I only wish we could be sure of the same from the nobility.'⁹

This maintenance of territorial integrity was one of the aims of the Pragmatic Sanction, yet it was undermined by the conflict with the far older Salic Law. With the succession of a woman, the Imperial Crown would leave the Habsburgs for the first time in 300 years. The loss this also deprived Maria Theresa of the traditional support of the German principalities. In itself, Imperial support would not have made an enormous amount of difference, since as with the Habsburg domains themselves, the *Reich* states had been worn out by involvement in Charles VI's disastrous Turkish campaigns. Saxony for example had only 20,000 effective soldiers in 1740; Cologne-Munster only 10,000; the Palatinate only 8,390. In contrast Prussia had 127,567 even in 1743, of which 60,000 marched through Saxony the following year.¹⁰ However, the invasion by Prussia of Silesia constituted a breach of imperial law and culture, and the fact that it went unpunished did serious damage to the *Reich*. The Pragmatic Sanction had been guaranteed by the Imperial Diet back in 1713, and as far as Austria was concerned, the permanent loss of either the Imperial Crown or Silesia could therefore render the Pragmatic Sanction *de facto* null and void. Given the brittleness of the dynastic ties holding the Habsburg dominions together, any such threat to the Pragmatic Sanction could prove fatal.

The unhappy heritage of Maria Theresa was completed by the crippling state of her finances. In 1740, State revenues were as low as 22m gulden per year, of which only 2-3m was disposable. State debt ran at 101m gulden, while the Crown's liquid assets came to only 87,000 gulden. Worse still, a substantial British loan of £320,000 made in 1737 was due to mature between 1743-52.¹¹ Even the existing meagre income was dependent on the goodwill of the provincial Estates in each of her territories, who not only had to consent to any form of taxation, but also to subsequently collect this on behalf of the Crown. As Maria Theresa said in relation to the Turkish Wars, 'the general calamities became worse because each minister dared not demand additional sacrifices from the crownlands in his trust.'¹² The truth of these provincial liberties and prerogatives can be seen from the promise that the Hungarian Diet extorted from Maria Theresa in return for their military support in 1741: 'the faithful states and orders of Hungary shall experience our hearty co-operation in all things which may promote the pristine happiness of this ancient kingdom, and the honours of the people.'¹³ It is true that this produced a promise to provide 40,000 troops - no small sum considering that in mid-December of 1740 the total effective Habsburg army numbered 107,892 of which only 7,359 in Silesia¹⁴ - yet for most of the rest of her reign, it was impossible to increase taxation in the Hungarian half of the Monarchy.

Clearly the first and most pressing problem therefore was the search for sufficient revenue to pay for the soldiers needed to maintain territorial integrity - and most importantly to wrest back

⁸ Crankshaw: *Maria Theresa*

⁹ Crankshaw: *Maria Theresa*

¹⁰ Wilson: *German Armies 1648-1806*

¹¹ Szabo: *Kaunitz and Enlightened Absolutism*

¹² Roeder: *Austria's Eastern Question*

¹³ Crankshaw: *Maria Theresa*

¹⁴ Wilson: *German Armies 1648-1806*

Silesia from Prussia. With the support of British loans - £300,000 per year at one point - and assistance in the form of the Pragmatic Army, Maria Theresa managed to survive the War of Austrian Succession, albeit with the temporary loss of Silesia. The first requirement after the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle were to reform a revenue system which had so clearly hampered the Austrian war effort. Although Bartenstein firmly said that 'in one word none of your illustrious forbears had access at any time to as much as was produced, was available and was sacrificed'¹⁵, this clearly was not good enough. Haugwitz for instance noted that Frederick II seemed to be able to extract 50% more revenue from Silesia than the Austrians had; Frederick had been able to supply his whole army for a year from the proceeds of Silesia; under Austrian control, it had paid for just two battalions of cavalry. This astonishing increase in productivity to the Prussian treasury appeared to come about despite the fact that the overall tax burden on Silesia was lighter than under Austria. The tax reforms proposed by Haugwitz in 1748 sought openly to support the standing army since as he said, without this 'it is impossible to protect and defend the aristocratic privileges that are dependent on it.' However as with all previous tax reforms, it met with vigorous opposition from provincial Estates, especially that of Hungary. Haugwitz did succeed in forcing through measures introducing limited land taxation during peacetime, as well as inheritance taxes and excise duties. Agreement was made with the various Estates providing consent for taxes over ten-year terms, between which times the central government would become responsible for collection of taxes. However, the crucial agreement of the Estates in tax-granting was only reached at the expense of concessions in other spheres of government - and the reforms could only work given peacetime expenditure. Instead, the longed-for war which began in 1756 meant that expenditure far outstripped even the liberal estimate of double peacetime rate - and before the reforms could bear fruit. Zinzendorf's 1761 plan to utilise the provincial estates' credit on the money market by issuing Exchequer Bills on the English model had a limited success as a temporary expedient. However it was only peace in 1763 which rescued the Austrian government from bankruptcy - a peace which once again had failed to achieve the territorial aims which were required.

Internal reform was not restricted to taxation, no matter how crucial this was in achieving the strength which Austria so clearly needed. Yet in the economic, judicial and agrarian spheres, reforms which brought the title of 'enlightened absolutism' to Maria Theresa and even more so her son Joseph certainly had a monetary value to the treasury. Measures reminiscent of the physiocrats in France were enacted, designed to increase the flow of trade - trade which could be taxed. An example is the partial abolition of internal customs barriers in the 1750s-60s. Admittedly this was very incomplete, with considerable barriers remaining, such as between the various constituent parts of the Monarchy for example between the Hereditary Lands and Bohemia. External tariffs were placed on imported manufactured and luxury goods in an attempt to boost local industry, though this did not have a noticeable success.

In agrarian reform, as well, moves made to restrict feudal practices came directly from attempts to end abuses of them by lords wishing to avoid taxation. As Haugwitz said in 1749, 'aristocratic privileges and liberties are to be held sacred, and it is precisely for this reason that abuses of them are not to be tolerated.'¹⁶ Seigniorial tax avoidance was often achieved by passing on the extra burdens onto the peasants, either by exceeding their tax ceiling or by the revival of ancient feudal dues, which came to much the same thing. The Silesian *Robot* Patent of 1771 - designed specifically to combat such abuses - led to the Dobris case in which Prince Mansfeld was fined 2,000 dukats plus government costs - a figure which finally totalled 30,000 gulden.¹⁷ If on the one hand the government wished to combat lordly abuses, the improvement of the status of the

¹⁵ Roeder: *Austria's Eastern Question*

¹⁶ Szabo: *Kaunitz and Enlightened Absolutism* p.75

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serf also produced definite economic improvements, in terms of increased agricultural productivity, and therefore indirectly taxable goods. Kaunitz produced a six-point plan in April 1767 calling for the abolition of serfdom; commutation of compulsory labour service; parcelling of large estates into peasant freeholds; abolition of common pasturelands; reform of the lay tithe and gathering better economic statistics for future planning of economic policies. Although this was rejected by Joseph, as 'affecting, one may say the palladium of seigniorial rights', it is noticeable that the principles came directly from the Agricultural Revolution in England. Even judicial reforms were undertaken to add to this attempt to bolster the status of the peasant. The Codex Theresianus of 1766 was 'to abrogate the Roman law and all the previous confused, partly obscure, partly mutually contradictory laws, and introduce in their stead a general and uniform law.' In other words there followed a restriction of numbers and powers of patrimonial courts handing out feudal justice. In addition, town courts had the power of *Blutbann* or the right to give capital sentences for petty offences removed. Judicial torture, used almost exclusively against the lower classes, was abolished on 2 January 1776.

However, this process of State-building was used as a deliberate attempt to allow the Habsburg realms to play the diplomatic game sufficiently well to regain its losses of 1742 and 1745. Relations with Turkey were kept assiduously cordial by the highly effective Austrian residents in Constantinople at this time, Penkler and Swachheim. Indeed, Turkey did not enter the War of Austrian Succession, to the astonishment even of the other diplomatic legations in Constantinople. The Dutch secretary at the Porte said in 1747 that 'it is amazing that he [Penkler] was able to negotiate and conclude secretly a double treaty of perpetual peace at a time when everyone assumed he was simply on the defensive, parrying the mortal blows that people were trying to inflict from left and right.'¹⁸ The double pacts were respectively the Austro-Russian pact 1746 and the extension of the Treaty of Belgrade in 1747 to a permanent peace. In Vienna, Kaunitz's most celebrated coup, the alliance with France to add to that of Russia, seemed to show that the House of Austria was still clearly one of the major players on the European stage. Yet the alliance, as with so much else in Austrian policy, was always aimed at the goal of the destruction and dismemberment of Prussia. The unexpected completion of the Treaty of Westminster in 1756 did not detract from the powerful coalition assembled by Austria to regain Maria-Theresa's inheritance in full.

In conclusion, the major difficulties of the first half of Maria Theresa's reign were found in trying to overcome the disastrous legacy of Charles VI. The brittle dynastic links between the areas of Habsburg rule had to be tempered by a war to secure the Pragmatic Sanction. The empty treasury which Maria Theresa received had to be replenished by wholesale financial reform. The military embarrassments of 1737-9 had to be overcome by triumphs over Bavaria and France in 1742 and ultimately over Prussia at Kolin, Hochkirch and Maxen. It was only after the Seven Years' War and the resignation of Silesia to Frederick that the struggle to secure Maria Theresa's inheritance finally came to a close.

¹⁸ Roider: *Austria's Eastern Question*