

*Maria Theresa: The Habsburg Empress in Her Time.* By Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger. Translated by Robert Savage. Princeton–Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021. 1104 pp.

In connection with the 300th anniversary of the birth of Maria Theresa of Habsburg (1717–1780), many biographies were published. Among them, the work of Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, a professor of early modern history at the University of Münster, stands out for its excellence. Stollberg-Rilinger's biography was originally published in German in 2017 and then in English in 2021.

As one of the leading representatives of the German school of political and cultural history, Stollberg-Rilinger places great emphasis on the symbolic communication of Maria Theresa and her court, but she keeps in mind that her protagonist was also a private person with a private life. She bases her panorama-tableau of Maria Theresa's life on an excellent selection of sources, mainly correspondence, reports of ambassadors, travelogues, contemporary diaries, and visual sources. Stollberg-Rilinger analyzes numerous visual artworks and literary sources related to the mentality of the time and the ways in which Maria Theresa presented herself to the world around her as a ruler. As she explains, Stollberg-Rilinger adopts an "ethnological" point of view towards her main character. She tries to avoid anachronisms, rejecting depictions of Maria Theresa as a family mother and ruler-heroine such as the monument to her in front of the Hofburg in Vienna and the characterizations offered by the historians of the successor nation states of the former Habsburg Monarchy.

In the chapter entitled "The Heiress Presumptive," we learn about the childhood and youth of the Habsburg Archduchess. Stollberg-Rilinger refutes the popular view according to which Maria Theresa was not prepared to rule. In fact, she was educated by Jesuit teachers in the subjects usual for male princes of the time. Stollberg-Rilinger outlines the context of the Viennese court of Emperor Charles VI. She pays attention not only to the monarchy's foreign policy and the dynastic chess games, but also to the logic of favor in the Baroque court. Analyzing the details of Maria Theresa's marriage to Francis Stephen of Lotharingia, Stollberg-Rilinger examines the point of view of the ways in which this union of two ruling houses was portrayed the public.

The next chapter deals with the war of the Austrian succession. In addition to the most important military and diplomatic events, Stollberg-Rilinger also covers the leaflet and propaganda campaign that accompanied the conflict. Due to the conventions of the time and her frequent pregnancies, Maria Theresa

could not play the role of a warlord, but she was able to use her identity as a woman as part of the propaganda, primarily the topoi of the brave and warlike heroine and the beautiful woman and loving mother who, at the cost of numerous territorial losses, managed to protect her throne from the aggressors. Maria Theresia very strategically separated her biological gender from her role as a ruler. The manner in which she presented herself at the coronation of the Hungarian king at the Diet of 1741 offers a good example of this. She wore a crown for a man, performed as a king (*rex*) in a ceremonial sense, and was depicted with a sword and on horseback, not as a queen (*regina*).

The chapter “Empress, Emperor and Empire” presents the coronation of the emperor in 1745, his subordinate position in relation to her wife, and Maria Theresa’s policy regarding the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. According to Stollberg-Rilinger, we cannot speak of a German imperial policy that was independent of the dynastic power games of the Habsburg House. Maria Theresa was skeptical about the practical value of the imperial title. The imperial institutions were practically paralyzed by the Habsburg–Hohenzollern rivalry and the constant disputes over precedence.

In the fifth major unit (“The Reforms”), Stollberg-Rilinger outlines the history of the reforms in the hereditary lands introduced by Friedrich Wilhelm Haugwitz in 1748–49 and the reforms proposed by State Chancellor Kaunitz in 1761. She places great emphasis on the presentation of the process of transition from the traditional administrative system based on provincial privileges and customary rights to the rationalized-centralized state bureaucracy. In her view, the reforms created new problems, the solutions to which required repeated amendments, so this started a mechanical chain reaction of reforms, while Maria Theresa’s rule was still based on personal presence. In order to overcome the new challenges, the aging monarch increasingly relied on others and the new elite at the top of the state machine, which was becoming increasingly bureaucratic and required a high degree of professionalism.

In the next two chapters (“Body Politic, Distinctions” and “Refinements”), we read about the body politics of the era of the empress, i.e., the history of depictions of beauty, the court norms of sexuality, the empress’ conservative opinion and decrees on libertinage, and finally about Maria Theresa’s births and family life. Stollberg-Rilinger refutes the widespread legend according to which Maria Theresa lived an almost petty-bourgeois family lifestyle. In fact, she did not spend much time with her children. In her daily life and in her treatment of her children, she followed the harsh aristocratic customs of her time.

Chapter eight on the Seven Years' War follows the war's military and diplomatic events and analyzes the mechanisms and aims of wartime propaganda. Stollberg-Rilinger comes to the conclusion that the patriotic German press, which was launched in these years and was more successful than the Austrian press, destroyed the reputation Maria Theresa had managed to acquire in the previous years. As a result of the "diplomatic revolution," the empress, who allied with the "archenemy" (the French), became the aggressor. Frederick the Great of Prussia, in contrast, shone as the defender of the Protestants and the German nation. In addition, according to Stollberg-Rilinger, the overall balance of the war was negative for Maria Theresa. She did not achieve her political goal (the recovery of Silesia), and her government reforms also failed, and state debt continued to grow rapidly.

The chapter "Capital of the Dynasty" focuses on the family and dynastic politics of Maria Theresa. Stollberg-Rilinger considers the queen's children, from the perspective of their marriages, as victims of dynastic politics, whom Maria Theresa, like her ancestors, saw as means of increasing the family capital and acquiring territory. The care she provided as a mother extended not only to ensuring that her children had an excellent education, but in order to protect their lives, in an almost exceptional way among European ruling dynasties, she also administered the vaccine against smallpox, which was considered the latest discovery.

In "Mother and son," Stollberg-Rilinger presents the period during which Joseph II reigned as co-ruler (*corregentia*). One observes, during this period of two and half decades, the collision of two worldviews and styles of governance. While Maria Theresa was ruler by the grace of God, Joseph, raised in the ideology of the Enlightenment, assumed the image of the first servant of the state and its subjects. The next three chapters (Chapters 11, 12, and 13) deal with various domestic political aspects of Maria Theresa's reign. Chapter 11 examines religious policy, Chapter 12 the relationship with the marginal social communities, and Chapter 13 Maria Theresa's relationship with the subjects of public order and her measures related to the peasantry. Her Catholic religiosity was characterized by her rejection of the idea of religious tolerance, which led to the persecution of the secret Protestants in Austria and the measures taken against Jews in Bohemia and Moravia. This is hinted at by the fact that the rationalization of religious practice and the restriction of the prerogatives of the Catholic Church began under her rule. On the one hand, she regarded the subjects of public order as useful taxpayers and an important human resource

for the military, rather than as citizens with rights, and on the other hand, she also regarded the peasantry's deplorable status as an ethical matter that troubled her conscience. Stollberg-Rilinger presents the queen's controversial relationship with the peasantry based on an example, the history of the peasant uprising in Bohemia in 1775. The last chapter ("The Autumn of the Matriarch") focuses on the history of the relationship between the old empress Maria Theresa and her distant, married children. We observe in these relationships different degrees of maternal influence, emotional blackmail, and the search on the part of the children for independence.

All in all, Barbara Stollber-Rilinger manages, in her biography of Maria Theresa, to merge the many contradictions into a whole. In the epilogue, she describes the empress as a ruler who was "out of step" and who lived on the border between the traditional religious-baroque and the Enlightenment, as reflected in her way of thinking. Not only did she manage dynastic politics with stereotypically masculine determination, make strategic use of the symbolic languages of the baroque court, zealously practice her Christian faith, and prove a master of written and oral communication, with her reforms, she saved the Habsburg Monarchy from military and financial collapse and set her society on the path toward modernization. Stollberg-Rilinger is perhaps among the biographers of the empress to apply new approaches, such as considering the role of propaganda, the functions of the images of Maria Theresa as a female ruler, and the history of emotions. She omits discussion of many smaller issues (e.g., the role of the Kingdom of Hungary and the Hungarian elite), but since the publication of the 10-volume work by Austrian historian Alfred Ritter von Arneth, who lived in the second half of the nineteenth century, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger's biography of Maria Theresa is certainly the most versatile, extensive, and problem-sensitive narrative of the life of the empress and her time.

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