



2024 History Essay Contest

School 7/8th Grade Winner

The Austrian Duchess of Habsburg

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Maria Theresa Walburga Amalia Christina was born on May 13, 1717 at the Hofburg Palace in Vienna, Austria. Her parents were the Holy Roman emperor Charles VI and Elizabeth Christine of Brunswick Wolfenbüttel. As last remaining heir of the Habsburg dynasty, Charles VI had feared that he would not be able to pass on the Habsburg lineage to his heir if he did not produce a male child. Before Maria's birth, he had worked to change the Salic Law, which restricted, "any female heir from succeeding her father" ("Maria Theresa - Children, Reforms & Accomplishments"). He had also promoted the Pragmatic Sanction in 1713. This royal act would ensure that Maria was entitled to receive succession to the Habsburg throne.

The early royal life Maria led was filled with lessons on embroidery, sewing and etiquette. Like any typical princess, Maria was destined to marry a rich, noble prince, who held power in many provinces. However Charles VI allowed his daughter to marry whoever she loved. In 1736, Maria married Duke Francis Stephen of Lorraine, France. Since France did not approve of his connections with the Habsburgs, Duke Francis was forced to switch his province with the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, a lesser one. Together Maria Theresa and Duke Francis had sixteen children. Of these only ten made it to adulthood. The most famous of her 11 daughters was Marie Antoinette who later became the queen of France.

In 1740 after the death of her father, Maria succeeded the Habsburg throne at the age of 23. She appointed her husband as co-regent. Those under her power were quick to accept her as Empress, but soon Maria faced the opposition of the European powers. These Europeans gathered under the leadership of Frederick II, King of Prussia, who later became known as Frederick the Great. In December, they invaded Silesia, Maria's greatest Austrian province. France and Bavaria later held another invasion in Maria's territories. This started the eight year War of the Austrian Succession. In 1748 Maria's authority as ruler and peace for the war was founded at Aix-la-Chapelle.

During that period of war, Maria discovered that she needed a stronger central army to keep the empire's power stable. Of the few administrators who she managed to appoint, Count Fredrick William Haugwitz was the best at assisting with plans for her reform. Though many noblemen opposed her, she somehow managed to draw power and money from rich provincial estates. In the end, Austria's small army grew from these various dominions. Its army reached twice the size that it once was. This advanced the country's military, but it also focused on defining the core territories of the crown. It helped strengthen the throne's control over any province that might be tempted to overthrow it. Additionally Maria Theresa reformed education in order to better the government. She reorganized schools to advance the training of judges and civil servants in her treasury. Maria's most popular reform was ensuring the tax income of the bureaucracy by managing an office that assisted in collecting the taxes. She wanted union between her people and herself. By raising the tariffs on nobles, she could lower them for those in the lower classes. This, she saw, was a way of getting the peasant support and alliance.

In 1756 The Seven Years' War broke out. Maria had taken advantage of the growing army and allied with France and Russia to take back her old wealthy province. Maria's alliance with France was unified when she married her children to the future king of Louis XVI, Isabella of Bourbon-Parma, and Ferdinand of Bourbon-Parma. The Empress of Russia died suddenly in 1762, withdrawing Russia from the war. Maria knew better to keep fighting with one of her strongest allies gone. She and Fredrick II agreed to a treaty in 1763 under the circumstances that Prussia would get to keep Silesia. A few years later in 1765, Maria's husband, Francis died. His death soaked all the earlier vigor out of Maria's life. She

quickly became isolated from her public life. She elected her eldest son, Joseph II co-regent of the Habsburg Monarchy. Though this regency was to be shared between the two, mother and son shared a strained relationship with her holding all the power of the crown. During their shared regency, the War of the Bavarian Succession started lasting from 1778 to 1779.

Maria died of pneumonia on November 29, 1780 at the Hofburg Palace in Vienna, Austria. She had reigned for forty years there with a firm grip over her territories. She left behind a strong central government for her son.

Maria Theresa was a significant figure in the 18th century politics of Europe. She was the only female ruler in Habsburg history whose rule marked a new golden age for Austria. Her portrayal of maternal ruling for her people formed the image of “mother of her nation. She took initiative when her kingdom needed her most and responsibly reformed her lands into a more powerful union. As a female during that time, this was highly looked down upon, but Maria overcame these obstacles and secured the line of succession for her family. By uniting the populace with the government, she earned the respect and admiration of her people even though she was a woman. She stayed strong even when her husband died and is named the most popular monarch of the Habsburg Monarchy. Many have built monuments of her including the most well known is the Theresien Platz in Vienna which displays her sitting with her advisers. Her actions still exert an influence today, in the Theresianische Ritterakademie, where she set up a private education for aristocratic children. Today the school has become a private secondary boarding school and the Diplomatic Academy. Streets and towns have been named after her for all the reforms she committed to, but most famous is the Maria Theresa Thaler on which she is depicted. It was used worldwide as currency and is still a popular collector’s item. Maria Theresa left her mark as a strong, capable leader who encouraged changes to improve her territories. She was the most efficient sovereign of her dynasty.

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