

GREATS IN GOVERNANCE

# MARIA THERESA

*The Great Reformer*



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INSTITUTE OF GOVERNANCE



## Maria Theresa

Over her forty-year reign (1740–1780), the Austrian queen Maria Theresa delivered a masterclass in governance, overseeing sweeping reforms that transformed how her empire was governed, taxed and educated.

The young queen began her reign, aged only twenty-three, with no political training, few capable advisors, and resistance to her right, as a woman, to rule at all. Even the ministers in her own court were betting that she would not last a season on the throne. Her dominion across central and eastern Europe was heavily in debt, on the brink of war, and politically divided.

But Maria Theresa would more than prove her right to rule. She instituted critical economic and social reforms, and centralised a deficient public administration. Maria Theresa, the “benevolent mother of her people”, is a defining example of how wise and careful leaders can overcome the odds, and leave a lasting legacy.





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January  
2021





Portrait of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria by Martin van Meytens II

# A Determination to 'Stop the Rot'

**T**he Hofburg palace stands in the heart of Vienna. The year is 1750 and in one of the royal palace apartments the Austrian queen, Maria Theresa, is composing her political autobiography, her *Politisches Testament* or 'Political Testament.' Only thirty-three years old, the queen has recently given birth to her eleventh, of what will be sixteen, children. She is married, to Francis I, the Holy Roman Emperor, but she is the effective ruler. She holds a collection of titles — Queen, Archduchess, Holy Roman Empress — over the Habsburg-ruled lands across central and eastern Europe. Her empire is no longer at war, but, as she writes, the queen's mind is not at peace.

Nearly a decade of fighting has revealed the fragility of Austria's politics, military and finances. The queen is responsible for a vast array of provinces and principalities but lacks the authority and capacity to govern them effectively. The current system of governance is built on outdated customs and is prone to gridlock. Her ministers act with the emboldened power of "co-regents", but, as she writes, they govern "with only half-hearted regard to the general welfare." There is "paralyzing disharmony" and "incessant inter-ministerial warfare". Maria Theresa's *Political Testament* is more than a list of grievances. She is recounting the difficulties of Austria's past and envisioning the future changes needed, for her people, and her heirs.

*"I determined to alter the whole rotten Constitution, central and Provincial, completely and to set up new institutions of nature to put the system on firm footing."*



*Map showing the extent of the Habsburg dominions across Europe, c. 1740, when Maria Theresa acceded to the throne.*



# Building up New Capabilities and Trust

## Tested as Female Leader

Maria Theresa was born into the House of Habsburg, one of Europe's most influential and powerful dynasties. When her father Emperor Charles VI died, she was lawfully the next in line to the throne, but as the first female Habsburg heir, the legality of her rule, and the boundaries of her empire, were openly questioned by major European powers, such as France, Bavaria and her arch rival - Frederick II, King of Prussia. These powers saw a pretext and an opportunity to challenge and grab Habsburg power, which resulted in the ensuing War of Austrian Succession, 1740-1748. But Maria Theresa would slowly but surely build her own sovereign legitimacy. In the case of the dominion of Hungary in particular, there was not even a provision in the constitution for a female ruler, so in 1741 Maria Theresa became *Rex Hungariae*, the lawful 'King of Hungary'.

The queen wrote about these difficult early years. As a young woman, she had not been tutored for her royal responsibilities. "I found myself without money, without credit, without army, without experience and knowledge of my own, and finally, also without any counsel..."

## Building a Trusted Circle of Capable Advisors

At the start of her reign, Maria Theresa was not blessed with good advisors. Many of them were elderly and out of touch. Maria Theresa had taken the advice of her late father, who had earlier counselled her to retain his ministers in the event she came to the throne. Having learned what she could from them, the queen sought more loyal and capable replacements. The most influential of these would be Count Friedrich Wilhelm Graf von Haugwitz and Dr Gerard van Swieten.'



*Friedrich Wilhelm von Haugwitz*

In 1747 Haugwitz had been first appointed to reform the administration of Carinthia and Carniola. Proving himself, he swiftly rose to become Maria Theresa's most powerful advisor during the early years of her reforms. Maria Theresa wrote of Haugwitz, "He was truly sent to me by Providence, for to break the deadlock I needed such a man, honourable, disinterested, without predispositions, and with neither ambition nor hangers-on, who supported what was good because he saw it to be good..."

Haugwitz advised the queen on how to take an anti-feudal approach to her lands, to harness the economic power of the provinces, and to restore the empire's military. As the economy grew under his direction, Haugwitz was able to increase funding towards the military. Field Marshal von Daun, President of the Hofkriegsrat [central military administrative authority] would successfully reorganise and systematise the army (now doubled in size) with better training and equipment.

Another key figure was the queen's personal physician, the Dutchman Dr Gerhard van Swieten. He led important modernising reforms to health services and the education of medics. He became president of the medical faculty at the University of Vienna, where he introduced textbooks and linked the medical school to public health initiatives. He was even tasked with investigating and stamping out unhygienic burial practices in parts of the empire that were linked to local superstitions about vampires! He was instrumental in convincing Viennese physicians to inoculate against smallpox, the leading cause of death in Europe in the 18th century.



*Dr Gerhard van Swieten*





*Archduchess Maria Johanna Gabriela of Austria (1750-1762), the eleventh child of Maria Theresa. She died aged 12 of smallpox, one of four of Maria Theresa's 16 children who succumbed to the disease.*

### Leading by Example to Fight Infectious Disease

Maria Theresa referred to the smallpox as the “archenemy” of the House of Habsburg, as it had claimed many of her relatives, and killed four of her own children. In 1767, at the age of 50, Maria Theresa herself contracted smallpox — historians think it was by giving her daughter-in-law, who was bed-ridden with the disease, a comforting hug.

Maria Theresa survived, but the disease scarred her face, her family, and ravaged Vienna. In 1768 she decided to have her remaining children inoculated, as a vaccine had not yet been created. Inoculating meant swallowing or injecting a small amount of smallpox pustules in the hope that one's body would fight off the disease and be permanently immune to it. It was risky — sometimes even the small exposure proved lethal — but, for those inoculated in Maria Theresa's family, it worked.

Still, there was public scepticism about inoculation. Maria Theresa had orphans in Vienna inoculated and established a smallpox hospital in the city. She invited sixty-five of the first children inoculated to dinner in the gallery of the Schönbrunn Palace, waiting on them herself, and assisted by her own children. These endeavours helped shift public opinion.

This was far from her only public health initiative. Under her rule, the first departments for obstetrics were founded in Vienna and Prague, and more hospitals for women were established. More medical schools were opened, overall healthcare improved and infant mortality declined.





View of the Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna and its Great Parterre garden. During the reign of Maria Theresa, this imperial summer residence became the glittering focus of court life and played host to the leading statesmen of Europe.



# Reforming the Institutions of Government

Surrounded by more capable advisors, the queen was able to turn her attention to systematic governance reforms. ‘There was no central government,’ a biographer writes of Austria in 1740. ‘There was a queen and a chancellor and sovereign council who set foreign policy and conducted wars, but they were dependent, in effect, on the voluntary contributions of the Estates, dominated by an aristocracy who paid no taxes.’ The powerful Estates and their respective ministers acted in their own self-interest. Maria Theresa needed stronger institutions to organise her empire and a systematic approach for how to manage the wealthy nobility who held the power and the purse strings across her lands.

## Centralising and Systematising Government

Maria Theresa began her key administrative and economic reforms from 1748. She created a new administrative agency: the Directorate for Public and Financial Affairs [*Directorium in publicis et cameralibus*]. This agency was tasked to centralise taxation, public safety, education, foreign policy, and economic decision-making. And though these reorganisation efforts began in Vienna, the restructuring would ultimately reach down to the regional and district level.

Haugwitz first helped centralise the political and financial administration of the German and Bohemian lands to Vienna. These lands held the most economic and strategic importance. The powers of the regional Estates were reduced, and provincial-level agencies were made directly answerable to the new streamlined State Chancellery. The local Kreise [districts], were each headed by a Kreishauptmann [district headmen] who were trained civil servants. Each provincial Diet [deliberative assembly] was made to set taxes for ten years, as opposed to the previous one year, which ensured greater revenues and continuity of planning.

The crown’s revenue on Maria Theresa’s accession was estimated to be 80,000 gulden (a type of gold coin). By the end of her reign, it was 50 million gulden. Maria Theresa ultimately achieved a balanced budget and for the first time levelled taxes on the nobility and the clergy. To do this, Maria Theresa worked with commissions of experts to

determine a fair system to tax landowners. They were charged very low rates by modern standards - income was calculated at 5% of all their property, land, and rents, and on this income the landowning nobility had to pay taxes of only one-per cent.

Further reforms were instituted to the legal code. The judiciary was separated from the political affairs of state in 1749, and a new high court established. The first censuses and tax cadastres (a type of land survey) were introduced. Having more reliable statistics enabled the state to gain data-driven insights regarding the lands and their population. The 1770 census is credited in influencing Maria Theresa's peasant reforms, aimed to modernise rural society and encourage the conversion of the tenant farmers into private property owners.

Economic reforms included the abolition of internal tariffs, geared towards a large-scale economic area with unitary rules. Indeed, some economic historians have drawn parallels between these efforts and the European Union.

### **Building a Pipeline of Talent**

A capable civil service is built upon a strong education system. In the closing lines of the *Political Testament*, Maria Theresa urges her heirs 'to train up' a generation of young bureaucrats, who "through their zeal and application may fit themselves to render salutary, ample, and effective service ... to the public." In 1746 the queen founded the *Theresianum* in Vienna, a publicly-funded civil servant academy. It was to educate and train talented young men for public service. Haugwitz brought the leading German political economist, Johann Heinrich Gottlob Justi to Vienna, to teach German as the language of administration, and to train students in modern economic theories and practices. The Theresianum has since produced Prime Ministers, Nobel Prize winners, mayors and Field Marshals, and still runs as a school in Vienna today.

Maria Theresa further founded the 'Oriental Academy' in 1754. The Academy focused on training in foreign languages, for diplomatic service and, "to protect and promote the commercial and political interests of Austria". It is now named the Diplomatic Academy, the world's oldest school of international relations.

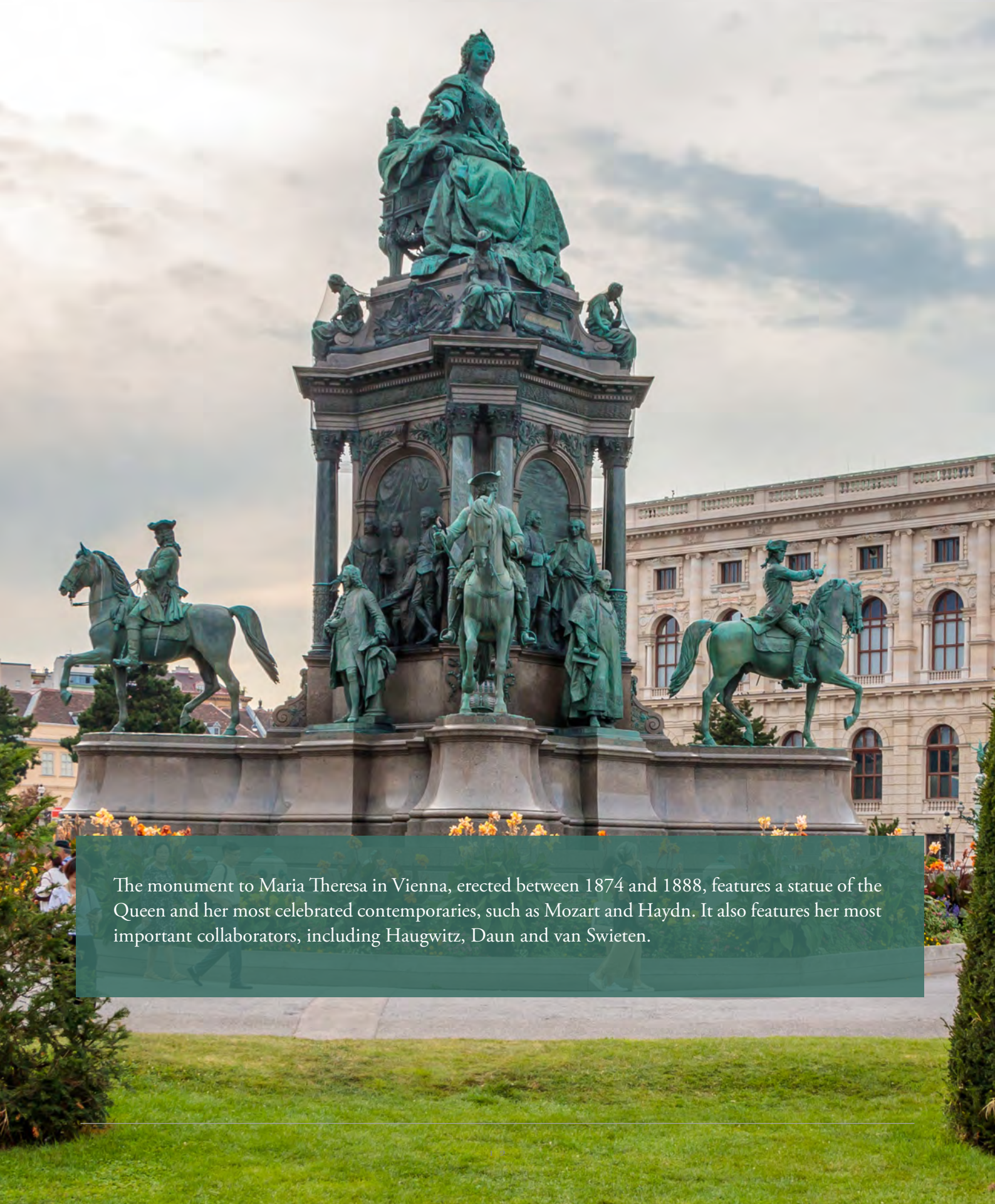
**Interwoven in all of these achievements was a re-imagining and reworking of how governance should work. Underpinning these efforts was Maria Theresa's desire to leave for her heirs a stronger kingdom than the one she had inherited.**





Interior of the Library in the Theresian Academy or *Theresianum* founded by Maria Theresa of Austria in 1746.





The monument to Maria Theresa in Vienna, erected between 1874 and 1888, features a statue of the Queen and her most celebrated contemporaries, such as Mozart and Haydn. It also features her most important collaborators, including Haugwitz, Daun and van Swieten.



# Maria Theresa

## –“Enlightened Despot” and “Benevolent Mother of Her People”

As one of her biographers writes, “Maria Theresa contrived to sail through life surrounded by ‘no-men’ [as opposed to ‘yes-men’]; picking their brains; paying attention to what they said; sometimes, when she saw fit, modifying her own views to accord with evidence supplied by them; more often overriding them; but always retaining their devotion.” In this way, Maria Theresa stands out as a life-long learner, a practical reformer who welcomed innovation while balancing the traditions and duties of her position.

We can see this complexity in how many of her administrative reforms bore the hallmarks of rational political thought, yet she was deeply averse to the ideals of the European enlightenment. As a devout Roman Catholic she believed that religious unity was necessary for a peaceful public life and so explicitly rejected the idea of religious tolerance.

In her later years, Maria Theresa appointed her son Joseph II as co-regent. She became less driven by the military, political and economic affairs of state and more by concern for her subjects, such as the plight of peasant labourers and a plan for compulsory primary schooling for all girls and boys.

Maria Theresa made her mark as the only female sovereign in the 650 years of Habsburg rule. But much more than that, she is celebrated for bringing her empire back from the brink of dismemberment, for the successful governance reforms she instituted, and for her deep concern for her people. This passionate commitment to duty, and her unique identity, is best expressed in Maria Theresa’s own words:

*“... as much as I love my family and children too, so much that I will spare no industry, care, anxiety, or effort for their sake, yet the universal best for my countries has always priority over my family since, of these countries, I am the universal and prime mother.”*

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January 2021

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