

CHAPTER

21

HISTORYMAKERS

Maria Theresa

Dutiful Defender of Austria

Section 3

"... She could fight like a tiger and was at war for a large part of her reign; but she never fought [to gain land but] always ... to preserve her inheritance. ... She was not a zealously reforming queen. Her reforms were radical and far-reaching, but she reformed, as she fought, because she saw what had to be done. ..."—Historian Edward Crankshaw on Maria Theresa

The 18th century was a time in which kings wrote the history of Europe. However, Maria Theresa of Austria emerged as a strong and powerful queen. She bravely defended Austria during a Prussian invasion and launched a series of domestic improvements that helped her people.

With no male heir, King Charles VI of Austria feared that other powers in Europe would try to seize his kingdom after his death. As a result, he convinced these European monarchs to accept Maria Theresa, his eldest daughter, as the next ruler of Austria. In 1740, Charles died, and the 23-year-old queen inherited a troubled country. Her people were uneasy. They thought that her husband would rule the nation, and they did not trust him. In addition, poor weather had produced bad harvests, and there was widespread hunger.

Maria Theresa learned about these worries by sending one of her ladies-in-waiting in disguise into Vienna to hear what her subjects were saying. For example, the people resented the fact that wild animals roamed the forests owned by the monarchy, eating food that they could eat. She won their approval by ordering the animals killed.

Just months after Maria Theresa became queen, Frederick II of Prussia moved his army into Silesia, Austria's richest region. Later in life, she wrote that she faced this situation "... without money, without credit, without an army, without experience and knowledge, even without counsel." Her father's old advisers gave her simple advice: give up Silesia.

The young queen proved to be made of sterner stuff. In June 1741, Maria Theresa received another of her titles, becoming the queen of Hungary. She then asked the Hungarian people for troops in her conflict with Prussia. "The very existence of the kingdom of Hungary, of our person, of our children, and our crown, are now at stake. ..." she said. The war with Prussia dragged on for many years, and in the end Austria was forced to give up Silesia. Her stand had made a mark, however. All of

Europe now saw her diplomatic skill and her resolve to maintain her kingdom.

In 1756, the Seven Years' War began. This was Austria's attempt to win back Silesia. Maria Theresa had felt abandoned by Britain, an old ally of Austria, in that first war. She now formed a new alliance with Britain's longtime enemy, France. Britain, though, joined Prussia, and they won the war. However, Austria did not suffer additional loss of land.

For most of Maria Theresa's rule, she focused on improving conditions in her realm. She reformed the government, cutting the power of local authority and giving the Crown more control. She formed new schools to train people to serve in her government. She also won the right to set taxes for ten years at a time—in the past, local government bodies had set new levels of taxation each year. Now, she could count on a steady supply of money. Furthermore, the queen recognized that the peasants paid the major share of taxes in her kingdom. As a result, she issued laws that made that system fairer and limited the power of large landowners.

The queen also made the army larger and better trained. In addition, she issued an order to set up a public school system in Austrian lands. Finally, she brought people to settle rural areas where no one lived, which resulted in increased farmland.

Maria Theresa made these changes to strengthen her position, but they also benefited her people. Crankshaw summarizes her rule: "She had held her society together, encouraged its individual talents, and left it better than it was before."

Questions

1. **Determining Main Ideas** What would you say was the main idea of this biography?
2. **Making Inferences** How would you describe Maria Theresa's character?
3. **Drawing Conclusions** Would you say that Maria Theresa was a good queen? Explain.