

Book Review: Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger's *Maria Theresia: Die Kaiserin in ihrer Zeit (Maria Theresa: The Empress in Her Time)*.

Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2017. Pp. xxviii+1083.

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A queen-empress out of a picture book, Maria Theresa is remembered as a beguiling beauty and kind-hearted, wise regent with constant concern for the wellbeing of her court and subjects. She is said to have ruled over her people with the same benevolence and warmth as each of her sixteen children. In this comprehensive thousand-page biography of the empress, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger makes it clear that, with few exceptions, this trope has dominated the historiography in the centuries after Maria Theresa's death in 1780. However, through her use and analysis of a wide-range of primary sources and secondary literature, Stollberg-Rilinger succeeds not only in reforming the biographical representation of Maria Theresa, but she also offers historians and enthusiasts an impressive and meticulously researched view into courtly life in the eighteenth century.

In her biography, Stollberg-Rilinger utilizes an underestimated source to clear away some old myths about the merciful Maria Theresa. Oberhofmeister Johann Joseph von Khevenhüller conscientiously fulfilled his task as court chronicler, and his testimonies provide an almost inexhaustible source material, which Stollberg-Rilinger deftly utilizes. The image of the nearly supernatural, ever-loving mother of her people put forward by great nineteenth-century admirer and biographer Alfred von Arneth in his sweeping ten-volume biography was fostered by later historians, who likewise were taken in by this carefully crafted image of a compassionate and popular Empress-Queen. Building her analysis on a multitude of sources, Stollberg-Rilinger demonstrates how Maria Theresa's behavior and actions owe more to cold political calculation than love for her people. Stollberg-Rilinger notes how the popular historical depictions of the empress still found today, with even the poorest of the poor asking for an audience, or the child of a beggar nursing at her breast out of sheer kindness (as the well-known 1868 painting by Alexander von Linzen-Mayer suggested), do not match up with the real empress. The exaggeration or fabrication of these myths does not deny the fact that the regent acted with a comparatively extraordinary steadfastness, modesty and kindness towards her subjects. One only needs to look at how Maria Theresa held an unusually large number of audiences and received many supplicants.

This widespread benevolent image of Maria Theresa is connected to a theme running throughout the book, namely her femininity. Maria Theresa's enemies viewed her femininity as a weakness and as grounds for abuse, contempt, and skepticism, especially during the War of Succession. However, the Hapsburg dynasty and the empress-queen herself knew how to present Maria Theresa as a fertile and loving mother. According to Stollberg-Rilinger, love for her own many children seemed to be a ubiquitous symbol of her role as a loving mother of her country, a description Maria Theresa would use herself. Stollberg-Rilinger shows that her iconization as the mother of the country was a representation that historians have long misunderstood as emphasizing femininity. In reality, this symbolizes the relationship between empress-queen and her subjects. Maria Theresa's unique ability to separate her role as ruler and her femininity, demonstrated for instance by her use of the title *Rex*, as opposed to the female counterpart *Regina*, illustrates this point.

Stollberg-Rilinger's biography also provides new insights into Maria Theresa's relationship with Franz Stephan I, who Stollberg-Rilinger rightly describes as the "hapless husband." Historians have considered Franz Stephan's independent role to be minor, partially due to the deliberate destruction of sources by Maria Theresa herself. His wife's significantly superior rank and greater respect at the court meant that he was often left in the shadows and his masculine honor was often questioned by the public. Being identified as the supposedly more masculine between the two led to a balancing act by the empress-queen. Stollberg-Rilinger shows that the various historical depictions of the relationship between the two spouses can be clearly classified as ideals typical of their time. For example, historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries tried to portray the regent and her husband as bourgeois, since this corresponded to the contemporary ideal. In addition to examining the relationship between Maria Theresa and Franz Stephan, Stollberg-Rilinger devotes a large part of the book to the regent's sixteen children, of whom only ten survived their mother. In particular, the biographer reports in detail about, as the name of one of the sub-chapters reveals, the "unruly daughters": Marie Antoinette, Carolina of Naples, and Amalia of Parma.

A clear strength of the biography is the comprehensive contextualization of all stages of Maria Theresa's life. The detail with which the biographer covers the regent herself and does not neglect the context of greater events in all their complexity is demonstrated throughout the biography and proves particularly profitable for the reader. Stollberg-Rilinger succeeds in introducing the reader to the fundamental changes in the European world in the eighteenth century. For instance, Stollberg-Rilinger references Maria Theresa's attitude toward the emerging Enlightenment, which the empress-queen abhorred not least because of her own legitimation through divine right and Jesuit religiosity. The constant secularization driven by the Enlightenment and the increasing criticism of belief by intellectuals affected Maria Theresa and led to the Habsburg monarchy's luster being tarnished by the end of the regent's life. Against the backdrop of multi-layered relationships, duties, and the everyday challenges and phenomena of the eighteenth century, the biography offers the reader an extremely well-grounded, multidimensional picture of the regent.

Ultimately, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger has managed to cover Maria Theresa's life and reign in—it must be said—just 1000 pages. The biography is richly illustrated with various pictures of paintings and other works of art related to the empress. The book itself is well organized with clear divisions of the subject matter that enables readers to

find information efficiently. Also noteworthy is the four-hundred-page, comprehensive appendix with sources and literature references, which clearly reflects Stollberg-Rilinger's meticulous investigation of primary sources and secondary literature. The biographer does not neglect a single aspect of the queen-empress and sheds light on the broader world of the eighteenth century. These features, among others, make the book valuable both for historians and enthusiasts.