

CHAPTER X

THE SYSTEM OF DOUCE VIOLENCE

It was said that every Habsburg felt himself to be an instrument of Providence and interpreted this mission *à sa façon*. This statement is particularly true in the case of Maria Theresa (1740–80) who continued with new and personal means the realization of the traditional aims of the dynasty: the work of unification, Germanization, and Catholicization. She worked with an unbending energy for these ideals but she partly replaced the former methods of military violence by means of a feminine captivation, of patient compromises, of sugared violence, and even, if necessary, with the tears of the persecuted woman in all the cases in which she faced a more serious resistance. Indeed the only feudal opposition which remained dangerous for her in her empire, the opposition of the Hungarian nobility, she was able to disarm, at least transitorily, by these methods of feminine refinement; nay, she was successful in inducing Hungarian feudalism to make great efforts for the defense of her throne when it was threatened by a formidable coalition of her enemies. “The beautiful, brave young lady with the Hungarian face” as she was called in the circles of Hungarian nobility drew the estates into a veritable enthusiasm which among the luxuries of her Viennese court and in the refined social life of the baroque culture forgot more and more their former offenses and complaints.

The first lady of the empire lured the Hungarian aristocrats to Vienna and encouraged them for a permanent stay and for marriages with Austrian ladies. She adorned them with her decorations (even establishing a new Hungarian order for this purpose, the Order of St. Stephen) and founded for their sons a special institute and college, the so-called *Theresianum* where the noble Hungarian offsprings were educated together with the Austrians in the honor of the dynasty and in the cult of the empire. (More than a century ago in the same spirit another institution, the so-called *Pazmaneum*, was established by the brilliant leader of the Hungarian counter-reformation, Peter Pázmány, where the Hungarian theological pupils grew up in the spirit of the court and centralization.) Later she surrounded herself with the “Hungarian noble bodyguard,” a corporation into which every county was entitled to send two youths. By this policy she laid a moral foundation for the Austrian court nobility. The successors of all those adventurers who poured into Vienna from all parts of the empire were melted for the first time into a conscious class regarding the

service to the throne as their real life profession. The supreme measure for all values became the imperial grace and the imperial will.

Though through her husband, Francis of Lorraine, Grand Duke of Tuscany, to whom she presented sixteen children, new blood and a more liberal spirit was introduced into the reigning house now called Habsburg-Lorraine, the Empress adhered stiffly to her Catholic and anti-Protestant religious traditions, perhaps not only from fanaticism but because she hated the reformed religion as the fomenter of the national resistance in Hungary and as the state religion of her rival, Frederick the Great, the Prussian king, to whom she was compelled to abandon her province Silesia. We may say that her religious policy was scarcely more humane than that of her predecessors. The Empress, on the other hand, regarded the business of conversions as one of her chief royal functions. When she sent one of her sons abroad to study the world she wrote the following severe instruction for him: "You must blindly follow your confessor in all that pertains to your conscience, religion and morality. Without his permission you must not read a single book, not even the smallest pamphlet." She enforced these rigid principles not only in her family life but also in the policy of the empire and, in the middle of the eighteenth century, a new cruel wave of persecution of the Protestants fell on Hungary.

However, the Empress not only continued the old absolute and clerical traditions of her dynasty but, at the same time, she introduced two new elements of the greatest importance into the Austrian state ideal. The one was her work by which she formed from the former loose conglomerate countries a more and more united and strongly centralized bureaucratic state. That great organizing task which was carried on in France by Louis XIII and Louis XIV and in Prussia by her powerful contemporary, Frederick the Great, was achieved by her genius in Austria. She swept out definitely the organs of feudal particularism and built up the whole vast machine of the modern state in all spheres of public administration, in the center, in the middle instances, and in the field of local affairs. Vienna was now able to carry out its will over the whole territory of the empire, even in the newly acquired Galicia and Bukovina (with the partial exception of Hungary where they still did not dare to apply in full rigor a complete centralization) by means of its own organs, and by its own bureaucracy in the spirit of a unified system of law and administration. The unification of Bohemia, for instance, with the other countries of the empire, was no longer a mechanical but an administrative and organic process. The old *Ständestaat*, the ancient feudal state, the state beyond the state, (with the exception of Hungary) was now completely annihilated. Therefore, not without reason is Maria Theresa regarded as the *founder of the unified Austrian state* which is no longer a sheer military and power-organization for the taming of the estates and the

continuation of a warlike imperialistic policy but a *Beamtenstaat*, a state of civil officials, which is intended first of all as an administrative system.¹

And with this great change a second and not less fundamental one comes into Austrian state life. Now for the first time the imperial power appears to be in a constant, direct, and vital contact with its real subjects, with those millions of bondsmen who, by the old feudal state, were hermetically separated from the throne. In consequence of imperial finance, administration, and justice, Maria Theresa made the great discovery of enlightened absolutism: an Austrian sovereign got a clear consciousness of the fact that the force of her army, the stability of her throne, depended in the first place on the economic and cultural conditions of the great masses of population. And a really grandiose state activity began in this direction. The government of Maria Theresa carried on in the territory of the whole empire, even in Hungary, a long series of fundamental social reforms which infused fresh blood in the torpid veins of the former feudal state. Useful agricultural arts were encouraged by means of public administration and education, by a rational regulation of forest exploitation, by the promotion of horse and sheep breeding, by the diffusion of potato culture, and by the betterment of communication. But the greatest achievement of the social policy of the Empress was the reconstruction of the relations of the bondsmen by the preparation of the so-called "urbarium," which by fixing a minimum acreage for the use of each serf and the maximum for their burdens, tried to make the situation of the poor peasants tolerable. In these efforts the Empress exercised great energy: "I must do justice both to the rich and the poor, I must satisfy my conscience and I won't lose my soul for the interest of some magnates and noble persons." In vain was she threatened by the Hungarian lords with the specter of serf rebellions. The Empress strenuously continued her work. She received the delegations of the peasantry personally and under her government and that of her wonderful son, the later Joseph II, was established that almost mystical authority of the imperial power before the oppressed peoples which could not be annihilated thoroughly even by impotent and reactionary successors to the throne.

In the field of popular education, too, from the elementary schools up to the universities, the work of rebuilding and reorganization continued, of course in a strongly Catholicizing and Germanizing spirit. But this Germanization was not directed against the mother-tongue of the people but it aimed rather to establish in the place of the dead Latin language which remained the language of the nobility, particu-

¹The meaning and significance of the whole system was masterly analyzed by Joseph Redlich: *Das österreichische Staats- und Rechtsproblem* (Leipzig, 1920), I, 25-37.

larly in Hungary, a modern language for the use of international communication and the state administration. Indeed, her famous decree, the *Ratio educationis*, delivered a deadly stroke in Hungary and in her annexed parts against the exclusive rule of the Latin language. Beside the Latin language she declared the German literature as the "only source of civilization" and she intended to make German in a short time the general language of the whole empire.

On the other hand the great and comprehensive cultural work of the Empress continued the same spirit of a rigid absolutism under the exclusive influence of the court and the Jesuits. She wished sincerely the welfare of the common people but entirely in the old Habsburg spirit and its narrow limits. She sought even to conserve the rule of the nobility in the social sphere. A progressing peasantry, *but under their old rulers*: this was her aim. "Those who are born in boots should not desire to wear shoes," she said on one occasion. Similarly in the realm of the spirit she abhorred modern notions. Her censors made a veritable war on condemned books. Pascal, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Locke, Milton, even the great historical work of Gibbon, and the *Werther* of Goethe were tabooed, according to notes of contemporaries. The bishop of Eger alone burned four thousand books. The list of prohibited books was officially printed by the government, but later this list too was forbidden that the public should not be informed about books of which they did not previously know.²

From the Austrian side it was often asserted that Maria Theresa had actually solved the very problem of the monarchy which she grasped not only from a jurial and military point of view but with a woman-like warmth and intuition (she was often called the *Landesmutter*, the mother of the country), and if her successors, especially her son, had not abandoned the *douce violence* system of the grand lady by which she softened step by step the Hungarian feudalism and incorporated it in an almost unconscious way into her unified realm, then many crises of subsequent periods could have been avoided and the *Gesamtstaat*, the unitary state, could have been achieved without revolutionary convulsions. This point of view seems to me very shortsighted because it tries to explain great historical changes exclusively from the point of view of a single ruling coterie. It will suffice to allude to the fact that even in Bohemia they did not succeed in the extirpation of national separatism in spite of the total elimination of the old patriotic feudalism and cessation of the old constitution. It is almost certain that the national idea would have arisen even with an entirely tamed nobility. We can go even farther and assert that the very methods of the Empress led inevitably toward the creation of the national feeling and idea by laying down the fundamentals for the material

² Acsády, *op. cit.*, II, 522-23.

and spiritual culture of the great masses. However Austrian, even Germanizing, the tendencies of the Empress may have been, her work must have become revolutionary from a national point of view, too, in the sense that by it the great masses of the peasantry were lifted up from their somnolent existence of many centuries and the first dawning of a civic consciousness was infiltrated in these skulls thickened by feudal absolutism. From here until the vague presentiment of national consciousness is only a step. Her work was also revolutionary concerning the better elements of the noble classes themselves. The German and French cultural influences, with which they came into daily contact in the splendid international court of the Empress, aroused in them *a contrario* the consciousness of their own vegetating and backward national language and literature. This process really occurred in the noble bodyguard of Maria Theresa where some enthusiastic young Magyars, critical or poetic souls, lifted the standard of the languishing Hungarian literature and elaborated a program for its reconstruction. "We became very cramped in things Magyar," they said, and began courageously to fish out "the precious gems" of their mother tongue "from the thick, dirty dust" of the feudal Latinity. The Germanizing Empress became against her will the regalanizer of the national consciousness and this propaganda *malgré elle* was continued in exactly the same unintentioned manner by her son, and successor to the throne, who began again new methods of dealing with the Habsburg state idea.

CHAPTER XI

THE SYSTEM OF THE REVOLUTIONARY ABSOLUTISM

Joseph II (1780–90), who had already functioned during a part of his mother's reign as a co-regent saw distinctly the shortcomings of this system, that it remained on the surface, that it was based too much on feudalism and clericalism, and that it was incapable of solving the greatest problem of the monarchy, the problem of the serfs. Traveling extensively in Europe, and sometimes entirely incognito in his own countries, and studying intimately the historical and philosophical literature of his epoch, (he admired Voltaire and once he called personally on Rousseau) this conviction of his matured into a real political passion the more because he was in heart and in mind a real child of the great rationalist century who had not the least doubt that a sovereign could transmit directly the abstract philosophical truths into life provided he possessed sufficient energy and consequence.

And indeed, history has seldom witnessed such an idealism, such a humanitarianism, and such a sense of duty on the throne as that by which this revolutionary despot was characterized. For Joseph II remained just as stiff a type of autocratic ruler as his predecessor. He hated the estates and in his times there was not a sufficiently developed bourgeois public opinion which could have participated in political power. And in the question of militarism his policy was very rigid. The slightest neglects of duty in the army were punished with the cudgel.¹ Especially the example of his famous rival, Frederick the Great, enforced on him this absolutist and militarist conception. In any case, the fact that after the loss of Silesia within the German empire a new German great power arose beside Austria, the more and more menacing Prussian state became a decisive motive in the hearts of the Habsburgs.

However, the new state ideal of Emperor Joseph differed radically from the conception of his mother. He no longer wanted to be a gorgeous sovereign with a prestige lent from the church and surrounded by the greedy luxury of the court nobility. In his nineteenth year he said:

The inner force, good laws, an honest judiciary, an orderly finance, an imposing military force, a progressing industry, a ruler held in esteem are more worthy of a great European court than festivals, parades, expen-

¹ Further interesting details will be found in Beidtel, *Geschichte der österreichischen Staatsverwaltung, 1740–1848*, I, 59–66.