



Antal Szűcs. *Regionalpolitik im alten Europa: die Verwaltungsreformen Josephs II. in Ungarn, in der Lombardei und in den Österreichischen Niederlanden 1785-1790.* Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2005. 490 pp. EUR 40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-963-05-8219-3.

Reviewed by Peter Illing (Christ's College, Cambridge University)

Published on H-Low-Countries (October, 2006)

Joseph II's Reformabsolutismus: Principled and Unprecedented?

This purports to be the first monograph to discuss Joseph II's administrative reforms in the three outlying territories of the Austrian Monarchy (Hungary, Lombardy and the Austrian Netherlands) in depth using archival sources. The scale of this comprehensive study is shown by the fact that the bibliography covers works written in six languages. Using the sources, scattered in archives and libraries throughout Europe, further requires knowledge of Latin as well as the capacity to read Gothic script. It is therefore easy to believe the author when he describes this as a project begun in the late 1980s with his research on Hungarian administration under Joseph II (p. 9). This perhaps justifies his claim that there is no book that considers the theory and results of these reforms across all three areas and which places them in a long-term context (p. 17). Given the difficulties involved, it thus seems a little unfair to castigate other historians for failing to do so. Furthermore, as he later admits, the sources are less than abundant. The relevant Hungarian archives have been missing since 1842, the records in Milan are unsorted, and ironically the Bruxe-lois files, which cover the shortest period—a bare two months of 1787—are the best preserved (p. 285).

Szűcs's introduction sets out the gaps that he intends to fill, the basic historiography of the defined field within the three countries and then a discussion of *Reformabsolutismus*. The process of reform is not just placed within the context of Joseph II's reign, but also within the context of Austrian reform from the end of

the Austrian War of Succession (1740-48) as one of the historical issues tackled is the continuity between Maria Theresia's rule and that of her son, Joseph II, which is connected to the question of whether Joseph II had a coherent theory justifying his alterations to government. Szűcs sees the initial reforms as pragmatic measures taken to save the Austrian Monarchy from Prussia (p. 21), refined by Prince Kaunitz from 1757 onwards, and attributes factional motivations to Joseph II's use of Haugwitz's proposals in the 1770s to win ground over Kaunitz (pp. 31-34).

Despite apparently having no true theory, Joseph II, as the author admits, had a clear goal in mind, namely a unified and uniform state. This required that the power of the Estates be broken. This was a departure from previous policy which, for Szűcs, occurred in 1784 with the overhaul of the Hungarian administration (p. 61). Yet, without Theresian measures, Joseph II's radical measures would have been impossible. In Hungary, he relied on middling gentry educated in Theresian academies (pp. 68-69), and in Lombardy, work done by previous officials was crucial (pp. 105-106). Joseph II's standpoint becomes clearest in responding to critics. When the Ungarisch-Siebenbürgisch Hofkanzlei argued in January 1785 that a compromise should be reached with the Estates to limit costs, Joseph II appealed to his right as monarch to improve institutions in line with Natural Law for the welfare of the State (pp. 78-79). Later, in response to Kaunitz's objections, Szűcs summarizes Joseph II's view-

point as follows: the interest of the sovereign was that of the state which was identical with that of society (p. 125). Kaunitz objected to precisely that aspect of the reform which Joseph II favored, the concentration of powers in the minister as local dictator. Indeed, it appears that Joseph II was dreaming of implementing a system run by mini-Joseph II's.

Most of the book concerns the discussion of policy formation in Vienna and the reform of the local administration in Hungary, Lombardy and the Austrian Netherlands. Then the actual business of local administration is scrutinized and carefully described for each of these provinces in turn followed by a brief account of the troubles of 1787 in the Austrian Netherlands. Given the interests of this list, the focus will rest on the Netherlandic aspects, but suffice to say that Szntay traces a full account of Hungarian and Lombard officials, their districts and remits as well. Szntay is describing here a shift from a composite dynastic state to a unitary absolutist state. Since this required Joseph II to sideline members of his own family, tensions were inevitable. It is to Szntay's credit that he does not overlook this personal dimension, noting Joseph II's criticism of his brother Archduke Ferdinand, governor-general of Lombardy (pp. 121-122), as well as the objections of his sister, the Archduchess Marie-Christine, and her husband, Albert von Saxe-Teschen, governors-general in Brussels (pp. 156-167). Reform in the Austrian Netherlands was hinted at early on, but delayed until late 1785 when plans from Milan were sent to Brussels to serve as models. This awareness of the interconnectedness of governmental concerns is a key strength of this book. Yet in contrast, the final

section is almost purely concerned with the resistance in the Austrian Netherlands, relying on the Governors-general's material in the Hungarian State Archives, and does not really attempt to explain why problems should arise in the Austrian Netherlands rather than elsewhere. For instance, one could argue that one contributing factor could be the memory of the French occupation of 1746-48.

Most of these measures were intended to improve finances, yet finances are neglected in this book. For instance, while Szntay is aware of earlier attempts to introduce intendents in the Austrian Netherlands, he appears blissfully unaware of the work of the *Jointe des administrations et subsides* which intervened in local finances from 1764 on as successor to the *Jointe pour l'audition des comptes* (1749). The text is rich in notes many of which are extensive citations from the source material. Sadly these quotes, whether in the text or the notes, are mostly kept in the original language. For those who do not read the full range of languages displayed (French, Italian, German and Latin), these may remain a mystery. The ancillary material at the back which encompasses over a hundred and seventy pages betrays the author's Hungarian focus: for instance, of the ten maps provided, eight are devoted to Hungary and one each to Lombardy and the Austrian Netherlands. His bibliography is full but with some odd gaps: despite his interest in administrative history, he seems not to have consulted recent prosopographical studies of Austrian Netherlandic officials by Renate Zedinger (2000) or Claude Bruneel (2001).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-low-countries>

Citation: Peter Illing. Review of Szntay, Antal, *Regionalpolitik im alten Europa: die Verwaltungsreformen Josephs II. in Ungarn, in der Lombardei und in den sterreichischen Niederlanden 1785-1790*. H-Low-Countries, H-Net Reviews. October, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12421>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.