



Eva H. Balazs. *Hungary and the Habsburgs, 1765-1800: An Experiment in Enlightened Absolutism.* Budapest: Central European University Press, 1997. vii + 429 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 963-9116-03-3, \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-963-9116-10-8.

Reviewed by Howard N. Lupovitch (Department of History and Program in Jewish Studies, Colby College)

Published on HABSBURG (October, 1999)

Policies and Personalities

Works on Habsburg and Hungarian history frequently begin with a prefatory explanation of the exceptional status of the Kingdom of Hungary within the Habsburg Monarchy, noting that the Habsburgs ruled in Hungary as kings, as opposed to the rest of their domains where they ruled as emperors. The great exception to this rule, it is further noted, was the reign of Emperor Joseph II, when the Hungarians had to forego their special status and endure the imperial designs of the “hatted sovereign” for a decade. Thus Habsburg policy in Hungary during the short reign of Joseph II was designated imperial and not royal. These two developments, the special status of the Hungarian within the Habsburg Monarchy and the exceptional situation during the reign of Joseph II, embodied much of the complexity of the relationship between the Hungarians and the Habsburgs during the second half of the eighteenth century, an at times tempestuous relationship that is the subject Eva Balazs’s much-needed reexamination of this decisive half-century. From the outset, it is clear that she has skillfully navigated the treacherous middle ground between an esoteric analysis and an accessible survey of a complex subject.

She is not the first to write on this subject. On the contrary, the rapprochement between the Hungarians and Maria Theresa and their ensuing confrontation with Joseph II have been a commonplace feature of virtually all works on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Habsburg and Hungarian history, and a point of long-standing historical debate. For some historians, the failure of Joseph II to subjugate the Hungarians to the centralizing will of

the dynasty, along with a deteriorating effects of foreign entanglements, were the major factors in undermining his whole program of enlightened absolutism; these historians argue further that these factors anticipated more serious problems that eventually weakened the monarchy, most notably the inability of the Habsburgs to solve the seemingly never-ending nationalities problem that eventually tore the monarchy apart. For other historians, the policies of Joseph II constituted a breach of contract of epic proportions that left the Hungarians no alternative other than political intransigence. Either way, the end result is the collapse of the monarchy, the formation of smaller successor states, and all the resulting problems, hence the charged views on both sides of the argument.

Balazs sees the period differently. The economic policies of the Habsburg court during the eighteenth century are controversial. Some historians, most notably Ferenc Eckhart, have cited them as evidence of malicious intent with regard to the Hungarians, while others cite them to exonerate the dynasty. Balazs goes beyond such irreconcilable disagreements by arguing instead that “Vienna did not have a single, coordinated and consistently pursued policy for its economy during the second half of the eighteenth century, and so the repercussions for Hungary, rarely consonant with those elsewhere in the monarchy, were correspondingly diverse.” (p. 16) The literature on the subject, itself a worthwhile case study in the diverging paths of Habsburg and Hungarian historiography, teems with biases and ideological baggage, and one of Balazs’s major accomplishments is to probe be-

yond conventional disagreements regarding the impact of Josephinism on the subsequent developments in the monarchy, and to explore instead a more fundamental and fruitful question that, in the end, sheds more light on the reign of Joseph II: what was Enlightened Absolutism?

The first step in answering this question requires a re-consideration of the conventional periodization of Habsburg and Hungarian history during the second half of the eighteenth century. The pivotal event in Habsburg-Hungarian relations, Balazs suggests, was not the ascension of Joseph II in 1780, but the Hungarian Diet of 1764. She argues that it marked a shift in Hungarian politics from the European perspective that infused the leaders of Rakoczi's War of Independence to the domestic-centered concerns of the Hungarian nobility. This is a crucial point, not least of all because of a common tendency to confuse or conflate chronological proximity with historical parallelism.

Here Balazs reaches the heart of the problem: the difficulty in disentangling the enlightened from the absolutist elements of enlightened absolutism, and in placing enlightened absolutism in a suitable political context. At first glance, she seems to founder on this point, placing enlightened absolutism in an eighteenth-century context during the first section of the book, and then placing the Josephinian reforms in a context of "a decade of revolutions." (p. 145) A closer look suggests that Balazs has deftly placed the emperor in a suitable context. While it is true that the outbreak of revolution in France in 1789 followed on the heels of the Josephinian reforms, prompting some to see Joseph II as precursor to liberal government, the fact remains: Joseph II was neither a typical sovereign of the eighteenth century nor a precursor to nineteenth-century liberal monarchy, but a transitional figure between eighteenth-century absolutism and nineteenth-century liberalism. Thus Balazs avoids an overly simplistic solution. Her understanding of Joseph II as a transitional figure accounts for the similarities between his reform program and those of his mother and Hohenzollern cousin Frederick no less than the parallels between Josephinism and other events of the 1780s.

Instead of trying to fit Joseph II to a rigid definition of enlightened absolutism, Balazs suggests a usable and flexible alternative to this taxonomical problem: "It is indeed the very essence of Enlightened Absolutism that we should acknowledge a central figure."(p. 4) In other words, Joseph II was an enlightened absolutist in the tradition of Joseph II. Balazs begins to unravel the question that lies at the heart of the book by taking into account

the intimate connection between Habsburg sovereigns and the policies they enacted. Her approach is at once obvious and novel. Obvious because her emphasis on the role of a central figure seems axiomatic in the study of absolute monarchy; novel because most studies on the Habsburgs focus either on the policy or their personalities, but seldom on the relationship between the two. In the case of the Habsburgs, personalities played an ever-present and decisive role in the formation of policy, and Balazs examines right away two elements that influenced the Habsburgs and their advisors: the intellectual milieu of the eighteenth century, and the ideological differences and endless sparring that distanced Joseph II and Maria Theresa one from the other.

The eighteenth century was a time of ideological ferment, and the intellectual world of the period was a battleground for old and new ideologies. For sovereigns this meant the opportunity to choose from among an increasingly diverse melange of political theories and administrative strategies. This conglomeration of ideas reached Vienna from all directions. The notions of legal jurisprudence of Hugo Grotius reached the Habsburg court via the mediating influence of Johann Chistoff Wolff. Innovative theories of economic organization came from Italy when Maria Theresa inherited Tuscany through her husband and consort. And, not least of all, the ideas of the *Philosophes* found an attentive audience in Vienna. Here Balazs draws from her work on the impact of the French Enlightenment, and showcases her innovative use of sources, in this case the recollections and consular records of the French ambassador in Vienna.

This mixture of currents influenced Maria Theresa and Joseph II differently. That mother and son were confronted with a similar corpus of ideas, yet drew different and at times antithetical conclusions from it, reflects the way different ideologies produced sharp differences between them. Maria Theresa's affinity for cameralism, a seventeenth century ideology that laid the basis for her decision to steer the Czech lands toward industry and Hungary toward agriculture, stands in sharp contrast with Joseph II's fascination with Freemasonry, which his mother regarded as religious heresy. Balazs not only compares the ideas that influenced the rulers, as others have done, but places their disparate world views alongside their personal relationships with each other and with their advisors. This is a crucial and at times overlooked point. After all, mother and son ruled together for a decade and a half, and Balazs draws upon from the correspondence both between Maria Theresa and Joseph and between Joseph and Leopold, an inval-

able collection seldom used so engagingly.

In the end, however, we are waiting to hear about Josephinism and why it failed in Hungary. It seemed to work for a time, Balazs suggests. Certain types of reforms were possible, even by a monarch that refused to wear the crown of St. Stephen. The beginning of the end came but once Joseph began to tamper with the sacrosanct privileged status of the Hungarian nobility by asking them to participate in the state census of 1784-87. There is nothing much that is new here, although readers can enjoy the way in which Balazs engages the standard works on this period such as the three volume work by Henrik Marczali, rather than quote them uncritically, and rereads many of the primary documents that historians such as Marczali used.[1] Ultimately, though, Balazs winds up with a standard answer: the ability of mother and son to bring their domestic aims to fruition depended largely on their ability to win the support of the Hungarian nobility. The success of Maria Theresa, alongside the failure of Joseph II, is understandable from a policy point of view, but taking into account the obstinacy of Joseph II in contrast to the shrewd diplomacy of her mother makes the disparate outcomes that much clearer.

If Balazs had ended here, she would have left her read-

ers in limbo. By looking beyond 1790 to the longer-term impact of Josephinism in Hungary, however, she provides the punchline that makes the entire book worthwhile. The Hungarian nobility defeated the programs of Joseph II but only on constitutional grounds, and not on their own merit. Thus the reforms survived in Hungary, on a smaller scale and in forms not threatening to the status of the nobility or, at least, to its upper echelons. By ending the book with a look to the post-Josephinian period, Balazs links the decades before and after Joseph II. In this way, she provides a more integrated history of Hungarian-Habsburg relations, and paves the way for further examination of a subject that, to some, may have seem closed.

Note:

[1]. Henrik Marczali, *Magyarország története II. Magyarország története II.* 3 vols. (Budapest: M. Tud. Akademia Konyvkiado-Hivatala, 1882-8).

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the reviewer and to HABSBURG. For other permission, please contact <reviews@h-net.msu.edu>.

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

<https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg>

Citation: Howard N. Lupovitch. Review of Balazs, Eva H., *Hungary and the Habsburgs, 1765-1800: An Experiment in Enlightened Absolutism*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. October, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3524>

Copyright © 1999 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.