



Jean-Pierre Lavandier. *Le Livre au Temps de Joseph II et de Leopold II: Code des lois de censure du livre pour les pays Austro-Bohémiens (1780-1792).* Bern, France: Peter Lang, 1995. 365 pp. \$55.95 (paper), ISBN 978-3-906753-73-7.



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Published on HABSBURG (May, 1996)

The Censorship Policies of Joseph II and Leopold II, 1780-92

Was Joseph II a “liberal” emperor? Did he seek to meet the Enlightenment’s demand for freedom of the press and the abolition of censorship? He has certainly been considered in this light by most of his biographers. Unlike Frederick II of Prussia, Joseph did not believe that the ruler was the servant of the state. It was his brother, Leopold II, who went a step further and announced his belief that even a hereditary sovereign was the servant of the people.

Jean-Pierre Lavandier has devoted this study to a survey of the laws on censorship published during the reign of Joseph II (1780-90) and that of his brother, Leopold II (1790-92). Some continuities with the reign of Maria Theresa (1740-80) are pointed out. Was Joseph II really the impetuous ruler he has been made out to be? Certainly, the laws on censorship show that the opposite may have been the case. His reforms were introduced in the spirit of modernizing the Habsburg Monarchy by introducing freedom of the press on June 11, 1781. The censorship laws of that year were considered to have been liberal. By the end of the 1780s, partly because of the pressure of the French Revolution, a fear of subversion

gained ground and a new round of restrictive legislation was decreed. Its aim was to control the press, the book trade, and the publication of books.

Lavandier’s work is intended for a scholarly audience. It provides a useful list of the censorship laws as they appeared in the legislative compilations or *Hand-buecher* of these reigns. These were themselves censored before they could be printed. Few archival records have survived, as the State Council papers were destroyed in the 1920s. The papers of Count Pergen, who dealt with education and security matters, were consulted. Church-state relations are studied only from the perspective of the censorship laws, and not in terms of the policies pursued. The history of education is often also involved when relations with the church are described, but seem to have been omitted here.

Joseph II’s reign has been a popular subject for study among liberal historians since the nineteenth century. Lavandier follows their perspective and links Joseph’s reforms to the modernization of absolute monarchy in Austria-Bohemia. He has demonstrated that Joseph’s reforms moved from liberalization in the early 1780s to

more control by 1789. Lavandier deals with Josephinism in a superficial way. He applies the term to include the censorship system and its reform. In 1781 Joseph instituted a far-reaching centralization of censorship by creating a head office or Supervisory Commission in Vienna. All local government commissions had to report to it. The actual work of censorship was parceled out to readers, often university professors, who reported to the commission. This *Studien-und Buecherzensurhofkommission* of June 11, 1781, was abolished by Leopold on January 1, 1792. Its functions were moved into the Austrian-Bohemian Chancellery and placed in the hands of a specialist. Leopold allowed materials to be sent to him for decision if the censors felt uncertain about a manuscript or a book. During Leopold's reign, professors could use only prescribed textbooks and were not permitted much personal comment. Joseph had allowed more freedom of discussion to academics.

Lavandier argues that Joseph did not really seek to separate church and state in a modern sense. He appeared, to contemporaries, to favor Protestants because in 1782 he at first permitted the free circulation of Protestant religious books. In 1782 he also permitted Jews to read all books approved by his censors, but in 1785 banned reprints of more occult works. His attempt to control the reading and publishing of devotional works for all Christian religions led to a clash with Cardinal-Archbishop Anton Migazzi of Vienna in 1781-82. Reading the Bible was deemed heretical when Joseph came to the throne. On August 10, 1781, Joseph allowed all Roman Catholics to read the Bible. Then he subjected Migazzi's press to censorship, but conceded the clergy the right to prohibit Bible reading (1782). After that the bishops remained excluded from book censorship; that function remained exclusively with the Vienna Commission. Hymnbooks were permitted for the Lutheran minority, but in 1783 and 1785 Joseph banned imports of the Prussian Hymnbook of 1780, the Augsburg Confession, and Luther's catechisms.

Joseph proved to be extremely suspicious of the readings of the clergy and sought to prevent the reading of papal bulls and certain breviaries. Calendars, too, seemed suspicious and were subject to a stamp tax in 1784 and 1786. Lavandier does not explain the distrust of calendars. Often they contained astrological and occult information and that may have provided a reason. Perhaps they were sometimes political because peddlers (colporteurs) carried them. Colportage was strictly regulated and often prohibited (1787, 1791).

Lavandier does not discuss Joseph's relations with the Austrian and Bohemian nobility. The emperor knew that his nobles read and kept the key works of the Enlightenment in their salons. Frederick II knew that Joseph read Voltaire. (So did the State Chancellor, Kaunitz). By 1789, Joseph had banned the German edition of Voltaire as well as the translation of foreign books. Was this the result of the upheavals in France? Lavandier believes that to have been the sole cause. The supposedly liberal Leopold II also asked all German princes to outlaw revolutionary writings in their realms in 1791. The real threat to the Monarchy itself posed by the revolutionary ferment is linked to this shift in policy. The story might be continued beyond the outbreak of war in 1792, but Lavandier does not study the reign of Francis II. There are few modern biographies to serve as a guide. It may be said that these, and other, of the enlightened despots renounced their Enlightenment beliefs during the 1790s because the revolutionary generation called for the complete overthrow of their rule. Lavandier concludes that censorship created a discrepancy between official opinion and the suppressed beliefs which may have offered ideas needed to resolve the crisis of the times.

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Citation: Helen Liebel-Weckowicz. Review of Lavandier, Jean-Pierre, *Le Livre au Temps de Joseph II et de Leopold II: Code des lois de censure du livre pour les pays Austro-Bohemiens (1780-1792)*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. May, 1996.

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