

Joseph II: Vol. II, Against the World, 1780-1790

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It has been a long time. The first volume of Derek Beales's biography of Joseph II took about as long to write as the Holy Roman Emperor's 15-year co-regency with his mother Maria Theresa, the ruler of the Habsburg or Austrian Monarchy, in 1765–80.⁽¹⁾ The second volume occupied its author for more than twice the span of Joseph's breathless sole reign in the Monarchy.⁽²⁾ Much has changed since 1987. Despite being 200 pages shorter than its successor, volume I is actually the thicker of the two. It has reassuringly textured, off-white paper, rather than the smooth but thin white pages of the second volume, and it is stitched, rather than glued. The editors of the second volume have missed a few spaces and cross-references. 'That's progress...' some may sigh. Presumably Maria Theresa, but not Joseph, would sigh with them. For it must be acknowledged that it helps the reader to have the illustrations at the relevant points in the text, rather than assembled into groups of plates. And the illustrations are as crisply reproduced as they are well chosen. We are told by the author, who exhibits exemplary courtesy in thanking and acknowledging the assistance and contributions of others, of the care that has been taken to ensure that the format of the second volume matches the first as closely as possible. On the whole, this is a handsome tome. We shall see how well it weathers the next 20 years and more, for this book will surely stand for many decades as the most authoritative work on its endlessly fascinating subject, and a gold standard of historical biography.

In a pithy introduction of 12 pages, Beales starts by recapitulating the chief themes and conclusions of the first volume, drawing attention especially to those areas in which his attention to new or neglected sources challenged older interpretations. These include the greater than expected role played by Joseph in ecclesiastical, military, and foreign affairs. Whereas until 1780 Joseph had focused his efforts to accelerate the wholesale reform of the Monarchy principally on convincing his mother, thereafter he often saw himself as battling the entire world. From this derive the subtitles of the two volumes.

Beales's sensible priority as a biographer is to distinguish Joseph's personal contribution to the policies and actions of the government carried on in his name' (p. 8). Without his mother to persuade, Joseph's motivations in some cases become more elusive. Beales does not take the motives expounded in the emperor's vast output of laws, decrees and proclamations at face value, however characteristic of his manner of thinking. On the other hand, Joseph wrote a great deal privately, in self-justifying and often self-pitying mode, to his brother and heir Leopold, Grand Duke of Tuscany. Much light is thrown on Joseph's conduct of business and decision-making by the long and critical 'Relazione' written by Leopold following his visit to Vienna in 1784, and by the detailed diary of the minister chiefly responsible for government finance for most of the sole reign, Karl von Zinzendorf. All of the former and most of the latter remain unpublished. So too are the copious and informative letters of one of Joseph's closest friends (at least he thought so), Princess Eleonore Liechtenstein, kept at Zitenice in the Czech Republic.

The author gains much, too, by scouring the observations of foreign diplomats in Vienna, contained in the archives of the Vatican, London, Moscow, Venice, Turin, and Berlin (the published edition of Frederick the Great's *Politische Correspondenz* stops in 1782). The obvious omissions are the Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères in Paris, and the in Sächsisches Landes-Haupt Archiv in Dresden, but in mitigation, French foreign policy in the 1780s has been relatively well studied (3), and the French and Saxon despatches were combed by Joseph's first great biographer, Paul von Mitrofanov.(4) For all the multi-volume fruits of the labours of 19th-century historians, such as Alfred Ritter von Arneth, much crucial political and diplomatic correspondence – both Austrian and of other provenance – remains unpublished. As might be expected, Beales has used a great deal of material relating to the government of the Monarchy in the Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv in Vienna, but among the numerous other archival seams mined are those of Brussels, Budapest, and the abbeys of Pannonhalma in Hungary and Tongerlo in Belgium.

All this said, much of this volume inevitably relies on printed primary sources and an extensive secondary literature. The latter is especially important for questions of law reform, police, finance, the economy, agrarian relations, and the affairs of Hungary, Tirol, and Lombardy. While in such cases Beales usually contributes fresh perspectives and some important correctives to received thinking, the most original chapters (of both volumes) concern ecclesiastical and foreign affairs, as well as Joseph's routine, travels, and methods.

The introduction concludes with a review of the more important advances in the field since the appearance of volume I (much of it the work of P. G. M. Dickson). The arrangement of the 17 chapters is broadly chronological. The first six cover the first three years of the reign; the last two and half concern the last three. Of the remainder, most are focused principally on the middle years of the decade. Six chapters are concerned wholly or in large part with foreign policy, including, inevitably, the last two. Two chapters cover the entire reign. Five are devoted to religious questions. The remaining six deal with other domestic questions: they cover, *inter alia*, the inauguration of Joseph's personal rule and his relationship with his ministers, especially Prince Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz-Rietberg, the peasant question, the land survey and land tax, policies to reduce provincial privileges, and law reform. Even a relatively long review such as this must be selective in the themes discussed.

One of the most arresting claims made by Beales is that Joseph promoted 'a new Catholicism' (pp. 314–26). His interference in the details of religious worship is legendary, but 'Josephism' (of which Beales provided an excellent definition in volume I, p. 439) encompassed greater toleration for non-Catholics, including Jews, a relaxation of censorship, education, including the training of clergymen, a shift of resources from the

monastic to the parish clergy, the foundation of new bishoprics, and a reduction of the powers of the papacy within the frontiers of the Monarchy. The whole of the sixth chapter is devoted to Pius VI's famous visit to Vienna in 1782. Here, and in the later section on the emperor's return visit to Rome in 1783 (pp. 353–5), Beales shows that – unlike Kaunitz – Joseph was prepared to allow the pope to save face, and would compromise on matters of abstract principle in order to get the bulk of what he wanted. Moreover, despite his reputation, Joseph usually knew when to draw back (at least in ecclesiastical matters). He did not turn over Church property to purely profane uses. It is in the context of ecclesiastical reforms that we learn most about Joseph's characteristic method of getting his way. He was usually prepared to consult and take advice about the implementation of reforms, but not about their fundamental wisdom. However, he would sometimes frame the discussion by setting out extreme declarations of principle that could not be challenged. He would then act decisively in ways that often surprised his advisors. With rare exceptions – such as his early retreat from the idea of taking all Church property into the care of a National Synod, which would pay the clergy salaries (pp. 78–81, 328–29) – once a policy was announced, the only thing that could be done, was, in the words of Baron Kressel, 'to bring up one by one the difficulties that make it awkward to carry out' (p. 330). More so, perhaps, than any other part of the book, the chapters on religious matters will surely remain definitive for many decades to come.

Chapter 12 presents Joseph as Holy Roman Emperor. We discover that, despite the emperor's irritation with the imperial constitution, he did not neglect his imperial rights. Indeed, his exploitation of them was a contributory factor in the formation of the *Fürstenbund* or League of Princes against him in 1785–6. This chapter ends with a valuable explanation of how Joseph's brothers, Leopold and Max Franz, the archbishop-elect of Cologne, were able to deploy traditional Habsburg strategies to restore the dynasty's position in the *Reich* within a few months of Joseph's death. Had it not been for the French Revolution, Joseph's impact on the Holy Roman Empire would have been slight.

Chapter 13 encompasses Joseph's routine in Vienna, and his impact on the city and its culture. We learn, for example about Joseph's recurrent ill health and sexual promiscuity, although Beales questions the assumption that the former resulted from the latter. The section dealing with music, especially with Joseph's patronage of Mozart, is evidently a labour of love, and as appetizing as a silver-wrapped *Mozartkugel*. This section is not, however, mere indulgence, either for the author or the reader. Given that Joseph is best known today as 'Mozart's emperor' the attention given to the composer is entirely justified. It emerges that Joseph was effectively his own director of the court theatre. Indeed, this was one of his principal pleasures. Joseph's interference cannot be considered malign, when it was thanks to his personal interest that Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* was commissioned and staged. Beales's ability to expose shallow and wishful thinking is especially apparent when he demolishes several myths surrounding Mozart, Enlightenment, and Freemasonry.

He returns to these themes in chapter 15. Masonic practices and slogans, at least in the Austrian Monarchy, were far from the rationalism usually associated with the Enlightenment, and it was partly on these grounds that Joseph brought the movement under stricter control. Moreover, freedom of expression remained remarkably great, despite its constriction at the end of the reign. Similarly, the detention, secretly and without trial, of persons considered dangerous to the state, has sometimes been presented as a harbinger of sinister 20th-century practices. 'But', concludes Beales, 'a total of seven in the two years 1788–9 is hardly draconian' (p. 554).

The lengthy, thorough conclusion summarizes the main findings of the book. This, no doubt, will be all that most undergraduates will read. Particularly useful to them will be the three sections entitled, like essay questions, 'Was Joseph Despotic?', 'Was Joseph Enlightened?', and 'Was Joseph Revolutionary?'. As one might expect, after the careful consideration of so much evidence, Beales often nuances existing views. For example, he tempers Tim Blanning's interpretation of Joseph as a 'modernizer'.⁽⁵⁾ At least one aspect of Joseph's personal monarchy was 'archaic' (p. 689): his receipt of thousands of petitions from the humblest of his subjects, both in Vienna, and during his long and frequent travels around his dominions. Nevertheless, the answers to the questions posed above are clear, even forthright. They are: 1) Yes, in that he frequently 'did not accept the usual or customary restrictions on absolutism', but not in the sense of 'the absolute

corruption, which, according to Lord Acton, was generated by the possession of absolute power' (pp. 653, 656); 2), yes, on the whole, provided that one refers to the usages of the later 18th century; 3) yes, because 'his earlier legislation made huge changes, religious, legal, cultural and political, many of which survived the reaction under his successors'. Among hereditary monarchs, only Peter the Great, who ruled alone for three times as long, achieved anything comparable (p. 665).

This is not an Austrocentric book – Beales is severe on those historians who have made wider conclusions about the Habsburg Monarchy on the basis of research applying only to the territory of the current borders of the Republic of Austria. He shows how Joseph's reforms were implemented in different ways and enjoyed varying degrees of success and failure in the diverse territories of the Monarchy. Nor, however, does this volume exhibit the principal counter-tendency in the historiography – to stress the role of Hungary in explaining Joseph's failures. On the contrary, Beales argues that the challenge faced by the emperor from the Hungarian nobility was considerably less serious than the successful revolt against him in Belgium. Not coincidentally, Catholic monasteries were far more influential in the Netherlands than in Hungary, and Belgian abbots were among the leaders of the rebellion.

The emphasis on Belgium is linked to a further point. For most of his reign Joseph managed to keep his internal and foreign policies separate; indeed, he generally gave priority to the former. Only towards the end of his reign, contends Beales, did they become dangerously entangled (p. 647). This conclusion bears on the author's final estimation of his subject. For Beales delivers some withering verdicts on Joseph's conduct of foreign policy. For example, after considering Joseph's support of the Russian annexation of the Crimea, his failure to force the opening of the River Scheldt, and his failure to exchange the Belgian provinces for Bavaria, he states: 'Joseph's diplomatic activity between 1782 and 1785 had been as contemptible in its manner as its achievement' (p. 397). He had not secured his objectives, but had worsened his reputation for a 'Thirst for Aggrandisement' (in the words of the British Ambassador, Sir Robert Murray Keith, p. 398). This reputation was in fact not wholly justified. It is Kaunitz, rather than the emperor, who emerges from the book as a heedless, bellicose expansionist (although he had the courage to tell the emperor the unpleasant truth at the end of his reign).

The argument for the *Primat der Innenpolitik* may prove controversial. One aim – probably the principal one – of Joseph's domestic reforms was to create the populous, prosperous, patriotic, and adequately educated society that could support an army capable of maintaining and enhancing Austria's status as a great power. Moreover, among the achievements that Beales esteems highest are Joseph's fiscal and military reforms – a major factor in the Monarchy's survival of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. After an unfortunate start, in which Joseph's generalship was found wanting, the Austrian armies performed extremely well against the Ottoman Empire in 1789. It was revolt in Belgium that prevented victory from being consummated. Again, it is the Belgian dimension that enables Beales to rein back the revisionists who have optimistically assessed the situation of the Monarchy at the time of Joseph's death, and criticized Leopold II for making too many concessions (pp. 639–43).

The best books, even long ones, leave the reader still hungry. It must be admitted that the areas that Beales covers more economically were, on the whole, of lesser importance to Joseph himself. Nevertheless, this reviewer would have appreciated fuller treatment of higher education, and greater attention to Joseph's policies towards the Uniate Churches of Galicia, Transcarpathia, and Transylvania. The Polish question is not raised at all during the discussions of Joseph's relations with Catherine the Great. There is a strong case for believing that, in the aftermath of the War of the Bavarian Succession and at the beginning of his sole reign, Joseph played the Polish card (via his Galician *sujets mixtes*) as one means of putting pressure on Russia. Once the Russian alliance was secured, he scrupulously stayed out of Polish affairs, except to secure what he wanted regarding the Catholic Church in Galicia.⁽⁶⁾ No mention is made of the emperor's (admittedly brief) meeting with the Polish king, Stanisław August Poniatowski, en route to his *rendez-vous* with the tsaritsa in 1787. Joseph's verdict is revealing: 'the king is in his society an amiable man, but he never leaves that air of royalty, which is a little theatrical in a Poniatowski'.⁽⁷⁾ This testifies to that mixture of informality and snobbery in his behaviour, which is so well analysed by Beales elsewhere in the book (pp. 20–5, 435–8, 664).

Joseph was widely considered 'such a difficult man – often unreasonable, arrogant, despotic, too hasty, sometimes nasty' (p. 671). He could be particularly unpleasant to his closest family. At one point Beales memorably compares Joseph to Shakespeare's Richard II (p. 487). Yet the emperor has been fortunate to find a biographer with the qualities – not least patience, perspicacity, common sense, and fair-mindedness – needed to do him justice. Beales writes with a lapidary ease that far surpasses the all-too-rapid utterings (at worst, ravings) of his subject. He also, having judiciously established the terms of reference, asked the pertinent questions, and sieved and weighed up the relevant evidence, argues his principal cases with a vigour, clarity, and cogency that is reminiscent of Joseph at his most purposeful.

Beales is fair to Joseph, and appreciative of his achievements, despite being fundamentally out of sympathy with his approach to government. 'The confrontation in 1787 between what it was beginning to be possible to regard as "the Belgian people" or "the Belgian nation" on the one hand and its despotic ruler on the other was a battle between two irreconcilable approaches to government: on one side the British, Burkean pursuit of piecemeal reform by obtaining the consent of the established authorities, preserving much of the past and accepting the survival of anomalies; on the other the imposition from above of rational, uniform solutions against the wishes of the established authorities. Within the Habsburg dynasty itself Leopold was secretly on the constitutional side, and Joseph on the despotic' (pp. 515–16). Readers of Beales's earlier work on Catholic monasteries in Europe will know where his sympathies lie.⁽⁸⁾

In the first volume, Beales practised what he had earlier preached in his ground-breaking article on 'The False Joseph II': the careful interpretation of sources, and their full documentation in footnotes.⁽⁹⁾ Having eloquently put the case for biography in his inaugural lecture ⁽¹⁰⁾, at a time when professional historians tended to sneer at the art, he delivered a model of historical biography. Such was its brilliance, such was the acclaim, that few second volumes can have been as eagerly anticipated. Were expectations raised so high – and for so long – as to make disappointment inevitable? No. Derek Beales has delivered again. Magnificently.

Notes

1. Derek Beales, *Joseph II: Vol. I, In the Shadow of Maria Theresa, 1741–1780* (Cambridge, 1987).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Less than ten years: 29 November 1780–20 February 1790.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. E.g. Orville T. Murphy, *Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes* (Albany, NY, 1982); id., *The Diplomatic Retreat of France and Public Opinion on the Eve of the French Revolution, 1783–1789* (Washington DC, 1998); Munro Price, *Preserving the Monarchy: The Comte de Vergennes, 1774–1787* (Cambridge, 1995).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Paul von Mitrofanov, *Joseph II. Seine Politische und Kulturelle Tätigkeit*, translated from the Russian

- edition of 1907 by V. von Demelic, (2 vols., Vienna, 1910). The strengths and flaws of this work are discussed by Beales in *Joseph II*, vol. 2, pp. 9–11.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. T. C. W. Blanning, *Joseph II* (Harlow, 1994), passim.[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. Ewa Zielińska, 'Rzeczpospolita wobec zbliżenia rosyjsko-austriackiego na początku lat osiemdziesiątych XVIII w. Sprawy Barona Karla Juliusa i Biskupa Kajetana Sołtyka' [The Commonwealth and the Russo-Austrian rapprochement in the early 1780s. The questions of Baron Karl Julius and Bishop Kajetan Sołtyk], doctoral thesis (Historical Institute, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, 2004).[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. Joseph II to Kaunitz, Kherson, 15 May 1787, in *Joseph II, Leopold II und Kaunitz. Ich Briefwechsel*, ed. Adolf Beer (Vienna, 1873), pp. 259–60. I am indebted to Derek Beales for a photocopy. Translation according to Adam Zamoyski, *The Last King of Poland* (London, 1992), p. 298.[Back to \(7\)](#)
 8. Derek Beales, *Prosperity and Plunder: European Catholic Monasteries in the Age of Revolution, 1650–1815* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 313–4. See also id., 'Edmund Burke and the monasteries of France', *Historical Journal*, 48 (2005), pp. 415–36.[Back to \(8\)](#)
 9. Derek Beales, 'The False Joseph II', *Historical Journal*, (1975), pp. 467–95, reprinted with modifications in Derek Beales, *Enlightenment and Reform in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (London, 2005), pp. 117–54.[Back to \(9\)](#)
 10. Derek Beales, 'History and biography: an inaugural lecture' [1980], in *History and Biography: Essays in Honour of Derek Beales*, ed. T. C. W. Blanning and David Cannadine (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 266–83.[Back to \(10\)](#)

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