

Maria Theresa's Tricentennial in the Czech Republic of 2017

IVO CERMAN

Public events commemorating historical anniversaries in Bohemia have usually focused on turning points of Czech national history, or on tragical events of the 20th century. Last year, it was different. The tricentennial of the birth of Empress Maria Theresa met with an unusually strong interest on the part of the Czech public, even though it does not belong to these national milestones.

Maria Theresa has usually been commemorated on 1st of September because that is the first day of school year in the Czech republic and she has always been recognized as the ruler who implemented the compulsory school attendance in Bohemia. This is, why she had been known to the large public even before last year's celebrations. Last year's jubilee triggered a general reevaluation of her person and her era in Czech history. The strong interest of the media may have been motivated by the potential the journalists saw in her lifestory. There was a chance of telling the story of a strong woman who was a fighter and a mother at the same time. This is what actually happened.

Media sought to attract larger public to a Maria Theresa who was portrayed like a predecessor of present-day working mothers who also have to divide their

time between their job and their family. The recurring question was, whether she really loved her husband, Emperor Franz Stephan of Lorraine. It should be also noted that this focus on Maria Theresa as a woman was paradoxically connected with the false claim that she, as a woman, had been ill-prepared for her role as a ruler and therefore unfit for the job. The background idea was that she received some kind of peculiar female education which neglected all the modern sciences necessary for the post of a ruler.¹ Unfortunately, this claim was supported also by several Czech woman historians.

Luckily, the media interest in Maria Theresa's anniversary was generally used by historians for the reevaluation of her reign as an era of the Enlightenment. The 18th century is in Czech school textbooks usually interpreted as an era of enlightened absolutism, which is usually credited for its administrative and military reforms, but the Habsburg monarchy is hardly ever considered as a part of Enlightenment Europe. In the meantime, the historiography of a younger generation of historians managed to show that there was also some kind of Enlightenment in Central Europe which was not limited only to administrative

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¹ This new urban myth has been denied by Barbara STOLBERG-RILINGER, *Maria Theresia. Die Kaiserin in ihrer Zeit*, München 2017, p. 22–25.

and economic reforms. General questions concerning ethics, natural law and medicine were also discussed here. The newest Czech work discussing her reign was our collective volume *Habsburkové 1740–1918. Vznikání občanské společnosti [The Habsburgs 1740–1918. The Making of the Civil Society]*,² which had perhaps influenced the media in their approach to the anniversary. Apart from that, new works by Jakub Zouhar on historiography, Daniela Tinková on the responses to the French Revolution and on medicine or Claire Madl's on aristocracy and book culture were published.

The Czech general public had already appreciated Maria Theresa's merits for the public elementary education. Thanks to last year's media coverage, the general public also began to appreciate her university reforms which opened the monarchy to Enlightenment ideas.³ I have to admit it was mainly my own tactics to use the media attention for Maria Theresa's private life to promote this reevaluation of her era. From then on, the Czech general public knows that the Enlightenment and the natural law made their impact even in our country.

This said, I also have to admit that the attempt to elaborate on this success with the anniversary of the *Dezemberverfassung* of 1867 failed miserably. The *Dezemberverfassung* was the first valid constitution in our history which guaranteed civil rights and its reevaluation would be

seen as a final step in the reevaluation of Czech national history of the premodern era. Even though the Austrian liberals who fought for the civic rights guaranteed in the December constitution were knowingly elaborating on the legacy of the Enlightenment, their achievement did not attract the interest of the Czech media, or of the general public. There was no attractive personal story that would be connected to it, and the fact that the framers of the constitution were all „Germans“ may also be responsible for this lack of interest. The 150 anniversary of the *Dezemberverfassung* and its liberties went on unnoticed in the Czech public, but so it was in Austria, where there was only an exhibition in the Parliament and a festive conference to commemorate it.

In what follows, I would like to discuss into more detail what was happening here last year. I will divide my exposition into four parts: TV shows, museum exhibitions and public events, history conferences and theme issues of Czech journals.

TV Shows

The tone for the celebrations was set by the Czech public TV which was collaborating with Austria's ORF on an international film about Maria Theresa. The publicity which this film received gave impulse to other media. The image of Maria Theresa as a working mother was actively promoted by the screenplay writer Miroslava Zlatníková in a number of in-

² IVO CERMAN (ed.), *Habsburkové 1740–1918. Vznikání občanské společnosti*, Praha 2016.

³ See IVO CERMAN, *The Enlightenment universities*, in: idem – Rita Krueger – Susan Reynolds (edd.), *The Enlightenment in Bohemia*, Oxford 2011, p. 55–68.

terviews which were published in various Czech journals and on the internet. The mini-series *Maria Theresia* was screened at the end of the year.⁴ Actually, it showed just the first years of her reign, and the story turned only about her relationship with Franz Stephan and a certain Hungarian lover. The part of Franz Stephan was played by a young Czech actor Vojta Kotek. The movie was a Czech-Austrian-Hungarian coproduction.

The intellectual origin of the image of Maria Theresia as a working mother must be looked for in another ORF team which prepared a documentary on Maria Theresia for the series *Universum*.⁵ The producer of this documentary Monika Czernin presented her image of Maria Theresia as something entirely new because it was based on the newly rediscovered letters between Maria Theresia and Sophia countess Enzenberg. The new focus seems to be invented by the French feminist historian Elisabeth Badinter who was also speaking in this documentary. This documentary was also screened on Czech TV.

There was also the third movie produced by the Czech TV, it was made by the brothers Caban, who are well known in the world of Czech alternative culture.

Their documentary titled *Panovnice [The Female Sovereign]* combined interviews with Czech historians with travels to Vienna and excerpts from history literature. The documentary was conceived as a kind of film essay on various subjects and stereotypes which the Czech general public usually connects with her era. However, the programme editors of Czech TV refused to broadcast this documentary after its internal screening.⁶ Only the first part of the mini-series has been finished. It has never been screened publicly.

On the day before the anniversary, Czech TV invited Ivo Cerman to speak in the morning show on CT24, where the question of Enlightenment and rights was discussed. The main event was, however, on Saturday 13 May 2017 when the Czech TV consecrated the whole evening to a long podium discussion on the legacy of Maria Theresia. The main speaker was the historian Martina Ondo Grečenková from the History Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences.⁷ The Czech TV prepared also a special issue of the talk show *historie.cs*, where Martina Grečenková, František Stellner, and Eduard Maur met to discuss the issues of her times and Ivo Cerman made a voice-over

⁴ *Marie Terezie*, dir. Robert Dornhelm, screenplay Miroslava Zlatnikova, ORF-Czech TV – Hungary 2017.

⁵ *Universum history: Maria Theresia – Majestät und Mutter*, dir. Monika Czernin, Ernst Gossner, ZDF 2017.

⁶ A statement from the producers to the author of this article.

⁷ <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ivysilani/11412378947-90-ct24/217411058130512/obsah/543332-300-let-od-narozeni-marie-terezie-m-terezie-manzelka-a-matka-hyde-park-a-rozhovor> (accessed 18/01/2019).

commentary on the Enlightenment and natural law.⁸

Museum exhibitions and public events

In Austria, the main event was a huge exhibition commemorating various aspects of Maria Theresa's reign. This was not the case in the Czech republic. The Prague Castle planned to organize a big exhibition, which was supposed to take place in the former Damenstift. It was also announced that the exhibits would be used for a permanent exhibition that would be located in the rooms formerly used by Maria Theresa. This enterprise failed miserably because the most important objects were all lent to the Austrian exhibition. Since the Austrian exhibition was prolonged, people in Prague were left empty-handed for they had nothing to show. Finally, the Prague Castle organized only an awkward theatre presentation on 13th May 2017, where actors dressed as Maria Theresa and Franz Stephan were talking to masses of tourist about the beauties of Prague. As of now, the promise to refurbish the rooms in the former Damenstift has not been fulfilled yet.

Finally, only Comenius's National Pedagogy Museum in Prague managed to organize an exhibition commemorating Maria Theresa's reign. The exhibition *Hurrah to school with Maria Theresa [Hurá do školy s Marií Terezií]* focused on the school reform and recalled the school buildings, the social position of teachers

and Johann Ignaz Felbiger's teaching methods.

Where Prague failed, chateaux around the country had to step in. Chateau Konopiště near Benešov organized one exhibition, and chateau Libeň in Prague organized another. The most important public event of this anniversary might be the decision of Prague 6 to establish a public monument commemorating Maria Theresa. It would be situated in the new municipal park near the northern walls of Prague Castle, at the exit from the tunnel Blanka. On the 13th May 2017 the town hall organized a foundation-stone laying ceremony. The historian Ivo Cerman spoke there about the philosophical message of Maria Theresa's monument in Vienna, and the philosopher Jan Sokol spoke about the main historical events of her era. If the monument were realized, it would be the only public monument to Maria Theresa in the Bohemian lands.

Another public event took place on the Křečhoř hill near Kolín, where there is an old monument commemorating the battle of Kolín in 1757, in which Austrian troops defeated Frederick II of Prussia. The local patriots organized a three day reenactment of the battle which was presented as a project called *Lace Wars [Válka v krajkách]*. Several units of local patriots cruised the surrounding villages from 26th to 29th June 2017 to make the people feel what war was about in the 18th century.

⁸ <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ivysilani/10150778447-historie-cs/217411058220018> (accessed 18/01/2019).

History Conferences and Papers

Surprisingly, the anniversary made a feeble impact on the life of scholarly community, since there was only one history conference devoted to the times of Maria Theresa. It was organized by the Czech Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies and its chairperson Daniela Tinková. It took place from 12th to 13th May 2017 in Prague.

On the other hand, several historians were speaking about the times of Maria Theresia in public lectures on the radio or in provincial towns. The art historian Jaroslav Sojka, working at the Prague Castle, was invited to speak about the coronation of Maria Theresia in the respected show *Radiojournal* (12th May 2017). Ivo Cerman was speaking about the times of Maria Theresia in several radio shows, the most important of which was *The Guest at Home [Host do domu]* on 22nd May 2017 because it made a larger impact.

These shows focused on educational reforms and sought to emphasize that these pertained not only to elementary schooling, but also to universities. Maria Theresa's reforms brought here the ideas of social compact and human rights. The aim was to replace the fractured conception of Czech national history, which emphasizes failures and interruptions, by a conception which would underscore the continuous growth of liberties and civil society.

Theme issues

Finally, Maria Theresa's reign has become the topic of a number of magazines. Most of them tried to attract the readers' attention by publishing some shocking news about her negative attitude to the Czech nation. They often employed a strategy based on using a real quote from Maria Theresa, into which they inserted the terms „Czechs“ or „Czech nation“. For example the magazine *Květy [Flowers]* 15/2017 published a cover saying *Marie Terezie: „Čechům se musí diktovati! Nemají rozum ani vůli“ [Maria Theresa: „the Czechs must be dictated to! They have no reason, or will“]*.⁹ This was actually a quote from Ernest Denis Bohemia after the White Mountain, where this sentence appears as a quote from her political testament.¹⁰ However, the original statement did not refer to „the Czechs“, but to the Estates. So, it was the Estates who have to be dictated to, and who have no reason or will.

Theme issues were published by magazines such as *Echo24*, *Týden [The Week]* and the history magazine *Dějiny a současnost [History and Present]*, *Živá historie [Living History]* 4/2017. The magazine *Respekt* published a long query among Czech historians and public figures asking them whether we should recall the legacy of Maria Theresa.

The theme issue of the history magazine *Dějiny a současnost* has been edited by historians from the University of South Bohemia. The supplement titled

⁹ *Marie Terezie: „Čechům se musí diktovat! Nemají rozum ani vůli.“*, *Květy* 15/2017.

¹⁰ „*Se stavy nelze nic pořádit, nemají hlavy ani vůle, třeba postupovat s nařízeními.*“ ERNEST DENIS, *Čechy po Bílé hoře I* (translated by Jindřich Vančura), Praha 1921³, p. 689.

Maria Theresia. Zakladatelka moderní monarchie [Maria Theresa, the founder of the modern monarchy] has been edited by Ivo Cerman. It presented four articles on selected topics. Jiří Hofman returned to the military reforms, which have been unusually disregarded in that year¹¹, Ivo Cerman explained what kind of natural law¹² was introduced to Habsburg universities during the reforms. He stressed its importance for the inception of universal human rights. Markéta Skořepová presented actual opinions of historical demographers on the Bohemian famine of 1771–1772.¹³ Jakub Zouhar from the University of Hradec Králové, who is an expert on Jesuit historiography, returned to the abolition of the Jesuit order.¹⁴ The article cleared some popular misconceptions about the Jesuits.

The journal *Lidové noviny* published a long article by the historian Daniela

Tinková titled *Osvícenkyní proti své vůli* [Enlightened against her will]¹⁵ which appeared in the weekend supplement of 13th May 2017. It presents a survey of the history of her reign, focusing on the modernization of administrative structures and the bureaucratic apparatus. This is a topic which is discussed also in the final section, which should discuss „the making of a civil society“. The article presents the Enlightenment as a product of foreign intelligentsia, emphasizing the role of jansenists and freemasons.

In conclusion, the international cooperation of our public media on the tricentenary of Maria Theresa helped to attract the public attention to the 18th century. Historians managed to change the public attitude to her era, which began to perceive the connection between Czech history and the European Enlightenment.

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¹¹ Jiří HOFMAN, „Už to nejsou ti staří Rakušané.“ *Vojenské reformy Marie Terezie*, *Dějiny a současnost* [History and Present] 39, 2017, Nr. 5, p. 12–14.

¹² IVO CERMAN, *Před Rousseauem... Počátky myšlenky lidských práv v době Marie Terezie*, *Dějiny a současnost* 39, 2017, Nr. 5, p. 15–17.

¹³ MARKÉTA SKOŘEPOVÁ, *Vybladovělá země. Český hladomor 1771–1772*, *Dějiny a současnost* 39, 2017, Nr. 5, p. 18–20.

¹⁴ JAKUB ZOUHAR, *Zrušení tovaryšstva Ježíšova a katolické osvícenství*, *Dějiny a současnost* 39, 2017, Nr. 5, p. 21–23.

¹⁵ DANIELA TINKOVÁ, *Osvícenkyní proti své vůli*, *Lidové noviny*, 13 May 2017.

Ivo Cerman

Maria Theresa's Tricentennial in the Czech Republic of 2017 (Abstract)

The article provides a systematic survey of all the scientific and social events connected with the tricentenary of Marie Theresa and explores their impact on the Czech historical consciousness. The author argues that tricentenary changed the public's attitude to the age of enlightenment. The public have accepted more general values, such as natural law and human rights, and began to perceive the Habsburg monarchy as a part of Enlightenment Europe.

KEY WORDS

Maria Theresa; Historical traditions; Bohemia; Enlightenment