Title: The Death of Enlightened Despotism: To what extent was the French Revolution of 1789 responsible for the departure of enlightened despotism within the Habsburg Monarchy?
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Date: November 28, 2012
Institution name/journal where submitted: McGill University

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Introduction

The reign of Joseph II broke with the traditional *modus operandi* of the Habsburg Monarchy. The ambitious reforms implemented under his enlightened despotism survived not much longer than their architect. Paradoxically, Joseph II’s legacy would mirror the dichotomy of the term so often associated with his rule, i.e. enlightened despotism. Beginning in the final year of his reign, Joseph II’s reforms were individually dismantled – briefly gasping for a breath of life under Leopold II – and then unequivocally aborted with the accession of Francis II and the showcased Jacobin Trials. The Habsburg Monarchy chose to hold hands with the privileged elite, and walked the path of reaction until it reached the crossroads of 1848.

The Habsburg crisis of orientation coincided with the French Revolution, its radicalization, and finally the Legislative Assembly’s declaration of war on the Austrian Empire. This paper maintains that under the reign of Joseph II and Leopold II the developments in France were of a secondary nature—shadowed by the dual opposition of secessionism in Belgium and Hungary, and the demand of the privileged elite to regain their former standing in political and economic affairs. Yet, with the accession of Francis II and the onset of war with revolutionary France, the situation changed, i.e. the threat perceived by the monarchy was no longer that of the privileged elite but of radical Jacobinism. This allowed conservative forces within the Austrian Empire to effectively use the French Revolution as a pretense to stamp out the last remnants of Josephinianism.

The author of this paper argues that the rejection of enlightened despotism was neither unanimous nor inevitable, but the result of changing circumstances – with asserted pretenses – fostered by political forces within the Habsburg Monarchy. The French Revolution acted a pretense for political reaction, not as the deathbed of Josephinianism.

**Joseph II: the Paradox of Reform**
Joseph II (r.1780-1790) was a champion of enlightened despotism—which translated itself directly into the nature of his reforms and their consequent reception. He was born a child of the Enlightenment but made no concessions regarding his absolutism. Joseph II fervently pursued an agenda of reform unlike any Habsburg monarch before or after his reign—to be sure, a tour de force. Tellingly, whereas Maria Theresa (r.1740-1780) had issued approximately 100 edicts per year during the co-regency, Joseph II produced nearly 700 a year, or almost two a day.¹ The emperor’s resourceful agenda is illustrative of the nature of his reforms. On the one hand, they were a continuation of Maria Theresa’s agenda of state rationalization and centralization. On the other, Joseph II embraced the utilitarian concept that the chief obligation of the state was to secure the welfare of the greatest number of people: ‘das Allgemeine Beste’.² This concept is illuminated by the following statement by Christian August Beck, who had been a tutor of Joseph II:

“Sovereigns must consider that it is their task to promote the security and welfare of their subjects. As true fathers of the fatherland they must never lose sight of the laws of justice and righteousness....As God’s lieutenants on earth they must imitate humanity’s lawgiver and never demand from us but what will be conducive to our own happiness.”³

Joseph II’s personal acquaintance with the ideals of Enlightenment ensured that his reforms were of a different nature to those of Maria Theresa. Nevertheless, it must be understood that a policy of enlightened despotism appeared in Austria no less than elsewhere in response to practical urgent necessities, and not as the fruit of philosophical persuasion⁴—as may be presumed from the abovementioned quotation. Yet not all the consequences of Joseph II’s reforms had been foreseen, and here lay the dilemma. Joseph’s reforms helped to awaken the non-privileged classes in the Habsburg

¹ Ingrao p.197  
² Robertson p.8  
³ Wangermann p.20 – can use primary source  
⁴ Wangermann p.2
dominions from their political slumber and to bring them, for the first time since the Reformation, into the field of political action.\textsuperscript{5}

The Tax and Agrarian Regulation of 10 February 1789 deserves special attention when considering the retreat of enlightened despotism. It would be the last major reform decreed by Joseph II, and with detrimental consequences. At its core, the edict proposed a 30 percent limit on income taxes for peasants who farmed rustical land. This represented a significant adjustment since the average peasant paid over 70 percent in taxes.\textsuperscript{6} The emperor’s intention was to free the peasantry from the excessively burdensome obligations imposed by the land-owning elite, and to achieve greater agricultural output.\textsuperscript{7} Moreover, with a war waging in the Balkans against the Ottoman Empire, Joseph II wished to avoid potential unrest from within the ranks of the Fourth Estate, since economic depression and rising food prices affected them the greatest. However, Joseph found himself in a vicious cycle: the preparations for the great reform served only to give a further stimulus to the new political consciousness that was emerging in the countryside.\textsuperscript{8} Because they were convinced that further concessions were on their way, much of the peasantry withheld all tax payments for several months, often leading to violent confrontation.\textsuperscript{9} So, paradoxical as it may seem, the edict itself would become the main source of discontent amongst the Fourth Estate.

Peasant unrest came on top of the stubborn opposition increasingly voiced by the privileged elite. Joseph II’s administrative restructuring of the previous years had deprived the nobility of much of its political power, and now the Emperor’s agrarian initiative promised to harm their economic well-being. Finding himself domestically isolated, Joseph finally agreed to delay implementing the Tax and Agrarian Regulation until the end of 1790. This initial retreat briefly silenced noble opposition within most of the hereditary lands. However, it did little to appease the old Estates within Belgium and Hungary—both of which were demanding political autonomy from the Habsburg Monarchy.

\textsuperscript{5} Wangermann p.3  
\textsuperscript{6} Ingrao p.205  
\textsuperscript{7} …  
\textsuperscript{8} Wangermann p.32  
\textsuperscript{9} Ingrao p.205
Joseph II’s domestic crisis was amplified internationally by the costly war with the Ottoman Empire; by Frederick Wilhelm II’s (r.1786-1792) persistent efforts to destabilize the Monarchy; and, most importantly, by the French Revolution. In May of 1789 France’s Fourth Estate rose up against the Ancien Regime. Joseph II initially did not view the French Revolution as a direct threat—if only because the sources of opposition in the two Empires came from diametrically opposite directions: whereas the Belgian revolt and Hungarian conspiracy articulated the privileged elite’s opposition to Joseph’s centralization and rationalization; the French nation was driven by a desire for a more just and efficient government. Nonetheless, the rising political consciousness of the non-privileged classes cannot be analyzed in isolation to the events of the French Revolution. Both Joseph II and the privileged elite were well aware that the prevailing popular discontent amongst the Habsburg peasants amounted to more than mere grumbling at everyday hardships. “They were aware of a new tone, a new propensity to discuss and criticize all governmental actions—a new sense of equality.” News from France was thus welcomed by those individuals who had already been infected by the ‘fever of freedom’—a consequence of Joseph’s far-reaching reforms.

Joseph II was compelled to recognize that enlightened despotism had reached the stage of crisis in which it was beginning to contradict its own purposes. The non-privileged classes had gained enough freedom to desire more and to envisage, however vaguely, complete social and political emancipation. This was so far from his intentions that Joseph II ultimately decided that the continuing existence of his empire, enlightened or otherwise, necessarily depended on the acquiescence of the privileged elite. Without this support, the emperor felt he was powerless to do anything except preside over the disintegration of his monarchy. One must not ignore the fact that since Joseph II had returned to Vienna from his campaign in Bukovina in November 1788, he was severely ill and unable to retain all the reins of government in his

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10 Ingrao p.220
11 Wangermann p.35
12 Wangermann p.4
13 Wangermann p.36
14 Wangermann p.3
15 Wangermann p.52
own hands. Naturally, the privileged classes chose to profit from their emperor’s copious difficulties and exploit his internal isolation – no less than his unfortunate foreign entanglements – to enforce a sweeping restoration of those privileges which had been stripped over the course of his reign.\(^{16}\) In effect, Joseph II’s retreat from enlightened despotism became a rout. He revoked next to all of his administrative reforms but died on 20 February 1790 before he was able to make further amends.

**Leopold II: One Step Back, One Step Forward**

It was inevitable that Joseph II’s successor would continue the retreat of enlightened despotism—if only initially. Leopold II (r.1790-1792) was left with a monumental task: Belgium and Hungary were still in revolt; Prussia was allied to the Ottoman Empire and threatened a two-front war; the non-privileged classes remained restless as the French Revolution unfolded; and, most urgently, the confidence of the privileged classes had not yet been won. Like his brother Joseph, Leopold II was a child of the Enlightenment. He had served as the Grand Duke of Tuscany for the past 25 years and established an enviable record as an enlightened reformer. Likewise, he was able to reach compromise and, in this regard, was more like his mother, Maria Theresa. Leopold II began his reign with a powerful gesture. The Tax and Agricultural Regulation (or the Patent of 10 February 1789) was out of necessity sacrificed to win that minimum confidence of the nobility which was essential to the continued existence of the monarchy. In May 1790 he made another large concession by giving landlords the right to refuse *robot* commutation—overriding Joseph II’s Directive Regulation patent of 1783. The crown temporarily withdrew from the business of actively protecting the peasants and returned to the more passive role of mediation.\(^{17}\) Leopold’s strategic retreat was successful and swiftly reassured the monarchy’s conservative and traditional elements into acquiescence.

The resulting domestic calm gave Leopold II greater room to manoeuvre on the stage of foreign policy. His first stroke was to successfully appease Frederick Wilhelm II by agreeing that the *status quo ante*

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\(^{16}\) Wangermann p.36
\(^{17}\) Ingrao p.210
bellum would preside in the Balkans following peace with the Ottoman Empire—which came with the Treaty of Sistova in August 1791. He then moved against the rebellious Hungarian nobility, who were won over although Leopold II conceded little more than the restoration of the constitutional relationship that had existed at the death of Maria Theresa. Finally, the secessionist currents in Belgium were defeated and Habsburg authority re-imposed by the end of 1790. Within a year, Leopold II had saved the monarchy from near collapse. The French Revolution, however, continued to create anxiety as it developed in a direction Leopold II had little influence in directing. Domestically, this anxiety intensely felt by the ruling class began to blur the line between the ideas of ‘discontent’ and ‘treason’—a narrative that would culminate in the Jacobin Trials. Moreover, an increasing number of reports found their way to the Leopold’s desk stating that the French revolutionaries were sending emissaries abroad to foster discontent. Whether the reports were accurate or not, they were bound to become a factor in internal policy.

Although Joseph II had tightened censorship at the end of his rule, the ideals of the French Revolution continued to find their way into the Austrian Empire. The wife of Count Attems, the representative of the Styrian lords, wrote to her husband depicting the mood of the Fourth Estate in the spring of 1791:

“Lots of people here are busy…popularising the French Constitution….There is a big traffic in books…with the result that there is now a general desire for the French Constitution and also the confidence that it will be attained….”

Leopold II responded to such news by tightening censorship further, concluding that:

“All…references to the French principles, so fraught with danger at the present time, as well as all expositions of, or favourable comments on, the French system which in the present state of public opinion might well create a most mischievous and pernicious impression on the people.”

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18 Ingrao p.210  
19 Wangermann p.62  
20 Wangermann p.63  
21 Wangermann p.81 – can use primary source
But unlike Joseph II later in his reign, Leopold II relied not solely on repression. He was well aware that he had to win and retain the confidence of the Fourth Estate if he was to hold his own against the privileged orders. He therefore believed the non-privileged classes had to be persuaded to make their peace with the monarchy. Despite the political developments in the Fourth Estate, and despite the French Revolution, he was convinced that this was achievable. The conclusion of war with the Ottoman Empire in the summer of 1791 made it possible to remove a number of unpopular policies. The emperor launched new periodicals to influence public opinion, and chose to reform the legal system: chiefly by abolishing most of the crueler punishments of Joseph II. In addition, Leopold sidelined his predecessor’s powerful secret police and undertook, with the direction of Joseph von Sonnenfels, the reorganization of the police into a bureaucratized institution of the Enlightenment. The emperor had by no means forsaken the Fourth Estate; nor had he forsaken enlightened despotism.

Leopold II desired to roll back the advances the privileged elite had made early in his reign. He pursued clandestine tactics to achieve this goal, going so far as to appoint intellectuals to write subversive literature that attacked the feudal claims of the privileged elite. This literature shed no negative light on the monarchy, nor did it mention the French Revolution, but it intentionally evaded the ordinary censorship and was circulated widely across the empire. The emperor’s clandestine policy was most actively pursued in Hungary, which was consistently the vanguard of aristocratic opposition. In some cases there is even evidence of financial remuneration given to the author of the subversive literature. Tellingly, the Hungarian Ignaz von Martinovics, one such writer, would later be executed during the Jacobin Trials. How can one explain a policy seemingly inconsistent with Leopold’s initial retreat from enlightened despotism? Essentially, it becomes clear that Leopold II, though anxious of the growing political consciousness of the Fourth Estate, did not fear this awakening or the French Revolution enough.

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22 Wangermann p.61 – can use primary source
23 Wangermann p.89
24 Wangermann p.89
25 Sonnenfels was an enlightened professor at Vienna University and a Councillor at the Court Chancellery.
26 Wangermann p.95
27 Wangermann p.86
28 Wangermann p.87
so as to shed his predispositions and forsake his and Joseph II’s enlightened principles. Leopold II considered the feudal demands of the privileged elite as an equally, if not more, serious threat to his monarchy; and consequently took steps to challenge their power. Leopold II unexpectedly died on 1 March 1971, before he could finalize the consolidation and direction of his policies.

**Francis II: the Showcased Jacobin Trials**

Francis II succeeded unexpectedly at the age of 24. Lacking the self-confidence that comes with age and experience, he needed to rely heavily on his ministers. Yet the domestic crisis of the Habsburg Monarchy of the preceding years and the persistence of the French Revolution had convinced the chief ministers—e.g. Count Francis Colloredo, Supreme Chancellor Kollowrat, Hungarian Chancellor Palffy, and Minister of State Hatzfeld—that lasting stability could be secured only by the complete abandonment of all enlightened reform, and the restoration of the influence of the old Estates: the nobility and clergy. Thus, the ultimate retreat from enlightened despotism was the almost inevitable consequence of the new relationship between sovereign and minister. Moreover, Leopold II had trusted few men and had conducted many of his policies unilaterally—at times even secretly. Francis II could therefore not so easily continue where his father had left off. Nevertheless, early in his reign the direction of the monarchy was by no means decided. One month following his accession to the throne, Francis II decided to arouse Leopold’s project for a resumption of mandatory robot commutation: which was first implemented by Joseph with the Directive Regulation patent of 1783, until Leopold was forced to abandon it in May 1790. But Francis II’s attempts at reform were cut short, and consequently, labor services would not disappear from the Habsburg lands until 1848.

It is rather likely that in a more stable political environment the young emperor would have sustained the enlightened agenda of Leopold II—but times were turbulent. On 20 April 1972 the Legislative Assembly in France declared war on the Austrian Empire. This decision brought the French Revolution

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29 Wangermann p.106
30 Ingrao p.223
standing on the doorstep of the Habsburg Monarchy; and overnight, Jacobinism became the greatest threat of the monarchy. The privileged classes quickly caught scent of the new wind that was blowing from Vienna. Instinctively, the nobility took the opportunity to acquire concessions from the crown. Francis II’s ministers welcomed the nobility with open arms while Francis was more reluctant but acquiesced: as the desire for social justice has always been a recessive trait in governments obsessed with their own survival. The political situation mirrored the early months of Leopold’s reign, with his repeal of Joseph’s Patent of 10 February 1789—only this time reaction was far from being a temporary strategic measure, as war would last for the best part of the next two decades. So whereas Leopold II had striven to secure the loyalty of the Fourth Estate in order to resume the work of enlightened despotism, Francis II now strove to secure the support of the privileged elite for the prosecution of the war.31

Large strides towards the dismantling of enlightened despotism included the re-shuffling of the bureaucracy, the abandonment of the peasantry, and a tightening of censorship. In November 1792, large-scale compulsory retirements of officials who were assumed to be Josephinians were carried out. The new adverse sentiment felt by Francis II towards Josephinianism is expressed in the following excerpt from a letter he sent to his brother, the Palatin of Hungary:

“Die Veränderung bei den Dikasterien…ist mit gutem Erfolg geschehen, und habe ich so viel möglich alle räudigen Schaafe ausgeputzet.”32

On a similar note, it is significant to record that when the Bohemian peasants became restless at the end of 1792, their leaders were labelled by the government as Jacobins, when in fact their demands were merely the re-enactment of the Patent of 20 February 1789. 33 Furthermore, exactly as it happened that the definitions of ‘discontent’ and ‘treason’ had unfailingly merged; so now did the terms ‘Josephine’ and ‘Jacobin’ find themselves in a similar shade of grey. The final stride towards the dismantling of enlightened despotism was censorship. Censorship had been steadily tightened since 1789, but the new

31 Wangermann p.110
32 Wangermann p.111 – you can use primary source
33 Wangermann p.114
regulations of 1792 amounted to more than a mere continuation of this policy. Under Francis II, the government’s fear of the printed word dictated policy to the exclusion of every other consideration. \(^{34}\) Francis II would abandon the edifice of enlightened despotism forever.

The reforms of Joseph II and Leopold II, however, had brought about too great a development in political consciousness to make a mere passive for even fatalistic acceptance of Francis II’s new direction possible. The monarchy was no longer forged by an alliance of crown, church and aristocracy—as had been the case during the Baroque period. It was now supported by a much broader constituency that included a professional bureaucracy, an imposing military establishment, and an educated minority. Fifty years of bureaucratization, secular education, and populist reform had reshaped the greater part of the monarchy’s ruling elite, and certainly impacted the lives of the non-privileged classes for better or for worse—changes that could hardly be undone overnight. Francis II may have silenced criticism in the public sphere, but within the confines of private establishments the general tone of discussions became more radical, hopes more pronounced, and projects more daring. \(^{35}\) With the insistence of Count Franz Joseph von Saurau and the recently reinstated Minister of Police, Count Johann Anton von Pergen, the Emperor now moved against these “sneaking agitators.” \(^{36}\) The following excerpt from a report by Count Saurau’s agent Degen, provided on 21 July 1794, provides insight into the unfolding affair:

“My plan has done the trick. Hebenstreit had asked me to meet him in the Brigittenau today. Your Excellency will not fail to appreciate how strongly this confirms my assertion that nothing is easier than to stir up trouble in the provinces and even in the Capital with a little money and some esprit d’intrigue.”\(^{37}\)

The following day Hebenstreit met with Degen to discuss his revolutionary tactics. On the 24 of July Hebenstreit and his associates were arrested and charged with treason; additional arrests quickly followed.

\(^{34}\) Wangermann p.108
\(^{35}\) Wangermann p.134
\(^{36}\) Langsam p.477
\(^{37}\) Wangermann p.150 – can use as primary source
in most of the provinces and in Hungary. The showcased Jacobin Trials dragged on for almost a year, lasting until the spring of 1795. Forty convictions were made. Hebenstreit, Martinovics, and seven others were subsequently executed, while the remainder served lengthy prison sentences. Interestingly, many of the men that were arrested were ex-officials who had served under Joseph II and Leopold II, but recently pensioned by Francis. Josephinism overtly came to be associated with Jacobinism; and in such, the Jacobin Trials marked the culmination of a narrative that witnessed the total rejection of enlightened despotism. Francis II and his primary ministers wished to use the trial to set a far-reaching precedent—a warning against any further unrest. The victory of reaction was consequently complete: the repressive measures introduced before and especially after the trials – and doubtless the trials themselves – succeeded in silencing the people and interrupting the development of their political consciousness which had taken such big strides as a result of Josephinian reforms and the French Revolution.

**Conclusion**

By late 1789, Joseph II found himself overwhelmed by circumstance and lost faith in his own reforms—convinced that enlightened despotism had reached the stage of crisis in which it was beginning to contradict its own purposes. The awakening of a politically conscious Fourth Estate trapped Joseph II in a vicious cycle whereby his reforms created the demand for greater reform. This same predicament confined Joseph II in regards to the nobility, and he was left domestically isolated. Leopold II initially continued his brother’s strategic retreat from enlightened despotism so as to win that minimum confidence of the nobility which was essential to the continued existence of the monarchy. Leopold II believed that it was not the Enlightenment but the lack of it that was responsible for the upheaval of the French Revolution, and consequently chose to appease the Fourth Estate—even choosing to play it against the privileged classes so as to roll back their recent advances. Francis II may possibly have

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38 Wangermann p.152
39 Ingrao p.225.
40 Langsam p.478
41 Wangermann p.186
continued along father’s direction had not the playing field changed. Hence, whereas Leopold II had
striven to secure the loyalty of the Fourth Estate in order to resume the work of enlightened despotism,
Francis II now strove to secure the support of the privileged elite for the prosecution of the war.

The existentialist crisis of enlightened despotism within the Habsburg Monarchy between the volatile
years of 1789 to 1795 represented a struggle between conservative forces and the champions of
enlightened reform. The non-privileged classes of monarchy were central to this struggle, because
although they did not actively partake, their development as a growing politically conscious entity had
far-reaching impacts on the political dynamic in which this struggle was waged. The French Revolution
was a side theatre in this struggle and did not herald the awakening of the Fourth Estate within
monarchy—that was chiefly the doing of Joseph II’s agenda of enlightened despotism. Yet, there is no
denying that the French Revolution did have a considerable impact on the progression of these domestic
dynamics: first, by providing confidence and substance to the demands of the non-privileged classes; and
second, by acting for both the conservative and enlightened forces of the monarchy with a precedent with
which to advance their respective political agendas. In conclusion, the Jacobin Trials marked the
culmination of a narrative that witnessed the total rejection of enlightened despotism—as the notions of
Josephinianism and Jacobinism merged into similar shades of grey.

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