

## JOSEPH II.



He was born on the 13th of March 1741 in Vienna as the eldest son of the empress Maria Theresa and her husband Francis I. He was strictly and thoroughly educated. Joseph's first marriage in 1760 to the Bourbon princess Isabella of Parma, whom he loved passionately, ended in tragedy when she died of smallpox three years later. In 1765 he married Maria Josepha of Bavaria, who in 1767 also died of smallpox. His inability to make decisions necessarily limited his ambition. After his father died, in 1765, he became emperor, but Maria Theresa made all the important decisions. After her death in 1780, Joseph tried to finish her work of reform. He immediately directed his government on a new course. He was the most radical of the enlightened despots. An eager student of the enlightenment, Joseph traveled in disguise among his subjects to learn of their problems. His efforts to improve their lives won him the nickname the "peasant emperor".

Despite opposition, he granted toleration to Protestants and Jews in his Catholic empire. He ended censorship of the press and theatre and attempted to bring the Catholic Church under royal control. He sold the property of many monasteries and convents and used the proceeds to build hospitals. Joseph even abolished serfdom. Like many of his other reforms, however, this measure was canceled after his death. He abolished brutal punishments and the death penalty in most instances, and imposed the principle of complete equality of treatment for all offenders. His Imperial Patent of 1785 abolished serfdom but did not give the peasants ownership of the land or freedom from dues owed to the landowning nobles. It did give them personal freedom.

He died on 20 February 1790. He is buried in tomb number 42 in the Imperial Crypt in Vienna. His epitaph is: "Here lies Joseph II, who failed in all he undertook." Joseph was succeeded by his brother, Leopold II.

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