

HOW DID JOSEPH II GOVERN?*

Many contemporaries would have answered my question, “How did Joseph II govern?”, with the single word “despotically”. His brother and destined successor, Leopold, regularly called him and his actions despotic,¹ as did his chief minister, prince Kaunitz.² Count Rosenberg-Orsini, his favourite Court official and one of the five recipients of letters of friendship and gratitude which the emperor wrote on his deathbed, concurred;³ count Karl von Zinzendorf, the diarist and the minister whom Joseph had chosen to rationalise the government’s finances and the Monarchy’s taxation system, joined the chorus.⁴ So did count Pietro Verri, one of his principal officials in Milan, and his chief female friend, princess Eleonore Liechtenstein, who even dared to make the accusation in a letter to him.⁵ At the beginning of the reign one of these, count Verri, was among a small group who welcomed the emperor’s despotism on principle. He had had a part, perhaps a very great part, in the writing of his friend Cesare Beccaria’s *Crimes and Punishments* of 1764, which put forward enlightened despotism as the best hope for enlightened reform. But by the end of the reign he had come to condemn it, as the others mentioned had done all along.⁶

Foreign observers made similar points. When the duke of York reported to his father, George III, his impressions of life at the Court of Vienna, where he spent some weeks in 1784, he wrote that Joseph was “cruel to those under him to a degree that is hardly to be conceived”.⁷ In Naples early in 1787, Goethe, talking to count Filangieri, author of *The Science of Legislation*, found him “gedrückt durch die Furcht vor Joseph dem Zweiten. Das Bild eines Despoten, wenn es auch nur in der Luft schwebt, ist edlen Menschen schon fürchterlich”. Count Vorontsov, Russian envoy to Britain, wrote of Joseph in the same year: “je ne le conçois pas; il m’a l’air d’être abandonné de Dieu, méprisé et haï en dehors. Il est détesté à l’excès dans ses propres états où on le regarde comme un fol violent et tyrannique.”⁸

When princess Liechtenstein had accused him of despotism, he had denied the charge. But he himself had declared in his youthful *Rêveries* that he wanted to be accorded ten years’ despotism in order to be able to curb the nobility, with special reference to Hungary.⁹ He never in fact made such a request. But

* This article brings forward some of the main conclusions of my *Joseph II*, vol. II: *Against the World, 1780–1790* (Cambridge, 2009). It is concerned only with the emperor’s domestic policy within the Monarchy. The making of his foreign policy is another story, as is his activity as Holy Roman Emperor.

¹ E.g. *ibid.* pp. 15, 356–357.

² E.g. *ibid.* pp. 519–520, 631.

³ E.g. *ibid.* pp. 37–38.

⁴ E.g. *ibid.* p. 433

⁵ E.g. *ibid.* p. 22. For Verri see next n.

⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 15, 70–71, 499, 676. See the authoritative biography of Verri: C. Capra, *I progressi della ragione* (Milan, 2002), esp. chs V and X. Professor Capra generously gave me a copy of this work.

⁷ Frederick duke of York to George III, 15 Oct. 1784, in A. Aspinall (ed.), *The Later Correspondence of George III*, vol. I (1962), pp. 102–104.

⁸ Goethe, *Italienische Reise* (ed. A. Beyer & N. Miller, 1992), p. 232; *Arkhiv Knyaza Vorontsova*, vol. IX (1876), pp. 652–653: count Simon to count Alexander Vorontsov, 20/31 Aug. 1787.

⁹ See my “Joseph II’s *Rêveries*”, *MÖSA XXIII* (1980), pp. 142–160.

here are some striking examples of Joseph's inclination to despotism. In 1783 he wrote to count Kollowrat, the head of his chief domestic department:

Es ist nicht möglich die Geschäfte in einer Monarchie in Zentro zu leisten, wann die Theile nicht befolgen, und Ich unsicher seyn muß, ob das in Oktober, was Ich in Juny schon anbefohlen habe, geschehen ist. Sie werden sich also diesen zur Warnung dienen lassen, weil Ich will, und muß gehorchet werden.¹⁰

In his so-called *Hirtenbrief* or "pastoral letter" addressed to his officials, written and published late in the same year, he made numerous criticisms of their behaviour and demanded from them selfless and tireless dedication in future. He offered no thanks for their work to date. He wrote as though his policies were his alone, and that their success would be his alone. What he required of his officials was that they should steep themselves in his laws and in his way of thinking. If they would not operate in this way, then, he said, the bureaucracy was a waste of money and could be dispensed with. Joseph, it was said, was asking from his officials sacrifices such as were required of Capuchin monks; but at least the monks were promised their reward in heaven, whereas the officials were promised no reward at all.¹¹ Despite their resentment at his attitude, however, and their dislike of his introduction of *Conduitelisten*, after his death the bureaucracy notoriously sought to preserve and promote what came to be called *Josephinismus*.¹²

There was only one instance in which he acknowledged in his *Hirtenbrief* that he had to consider the personal views and interests of his subjects, namely in regard to taxation. But even in this matter he declared that taxpayers must simply have faith that he was spending their money wisely and economically. There could be no question of any public scrutiny or restriction of his financial management. He thought that the Estates of his provinces had no right actually to refuse his requests for money.¹³

In 1784 he dismissed with contempt the objections to his proposed Hungarian legislation, which included making German the language of official business and replacing the ancient system of representative local government with intendants.¹⁴ In 1787, as his Belgian provinces resisted similar reforms while he was engaged on a triumphal tour of the Crimea with Catherine II of Russia, he seemed to become mad with rage. He tore up proposals put before him by Kaunitz for concessions to the Belgian opposition and ordered him to send the torn-up document on to his sister and brother-in-law, the joint viceroys in Brussels, to make plain what he thought of it and them.¹⁵ When Eleonore Liechtenstein first met him after his return, she was ready to encourage him in moderation. But the expression on his face terrified her. "I thought I was seeing a lion seeking to devour me."¹⁶ When Joseph insisted in 1788 on carrying to completion

¹⁰ HHSa Nachlaß Kollowrat XI/11, no. 728, 9 Oct. 1783.

¹¹ The so-called *Hirtenbrief* was published under varying titles in several languages. It is printed almost complete in H. Klüeting (ed.), *Der Josephinismus* (Darmstadt, 1995), pp. 334–340. Prof. Klüeting kindly sent me a copy of this invaluable collection. The remark about Capuchins is in Garampi to Pallavicini, 30 Dec. 1783 (Archivio segreto vaticano, Nunziatura di Vienna, 182). See my *J. II II*, pp. 343–352.

¹² W. Haindl, *Gehorsame Rebellen* (Wien, 1991) is the best account. I am most grateful to the author for giving me a copy of her book.

¹³ My *J. II II*, pp. 347, 350, 586, 604–605.

¹⁴ C. von Hock & H.I. Bidermann, *Der österreichische Staatsrath (1760–1848)* (Vienna, 1879), pp. 141–142.

¹⁵ My *J. II II*, p. 518.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 520.

the serfdom and taxation survey and *Patent* for the central provinces, against the opposition of almost every official consulted, he wrote: “Ich muß also Meiner eigenen, von beiden Theilen entfernten, gewiss uneigennützigem und unparteiischen Meinung allein folgen.”¹⁷ Remarks of this kind are my justification for my sub-title “Against the World”. Joseph saw himself as having to combat ingrained prejudice and constant obstruction from officials, clergy, nobles and professionals, while receiving no gratitude from those he benefited.¹⁸

In the same month as the Estates-General in France declared itself to be the National Assembly, Joseph, after the Estates of Brabant had refused his request for money, annulled the province’s ancient medieval constitution, the *Joyeuse Entrée*, which he had sworn by deputy to uphold, announcing: “Il ne me faut pas votre consentement de faire le bien.”¹⁹ He often spoke of sending his armies to impose his will on Belgium and then treating it as a conquered country.²⁰ Geography, power-politics and the war he fought against the Ottoman Empire from February 1788 onwards made a mockery of his threats.²¹

Whether Joseph can properly be called despotic, however, depends on one’s definition of despotism. As commonly used, the word implies gross abuse of power by the ruler in his personal interest: the building of vast palaces, the accumulation of private treasures, the levying of taxes to sustain his life of luxury, the appointment of incompetent cronies to important positions, perversion of the legal process, the wholesale imprisonment or purge of opponents. Joseph was guilty of none of these things, except for a small number of interventions to stiffen court sentences.²² For example, what he built was not palaces, but fortresses and medical institutions, and he paid for the latter out of his personal resources.²³

The despotism of which he can reasonably be accused is the exercise of personal power beyond what the constitutions of his lands accorded him. The issue was well put in an *Essai sur la Monarchie Autrichienne*, a lengthy survey – over 400 pages of handwriting – evidently written just after his death, and associated with the double marriage between sons of Leopold and Neapolitan princesses in 1790. Kaunitz had clearly influenced this document very strongly. It declares:

...il y a loin du Monarque absolu, au Monarque Despote; qualification, qui ne convient aucunement au Souverain dans les Pays héréditaires; qualification, que ces Souverains ne voudraient jamais avoir, et qu’ils ont eu toujours en horreur.²⁴

In a despotic government, it goes on, the will and even the caprice of the sovereign is the only law, whereas in an absolute or monarchical government such as Austria’s

¹⁷ Hock & Bidermann, *Staatsrath*, pp. 141–142.

¹⁸ This is his theme in letter after letter to Leopold in A. von Arneth, *Joseph II. und Leopold von Toscana. Ihr briefwechsel von 1781 bis 1790* (2 vols, Vienna, 1872).

¹⁹ The phrase comes from J.’s long statement of 6 June 1789, printed e.g. in P.A.F. Gérard, F. *Rapédus de Berg* (2 vols, Brussels, 1842–1845), vol. II, p. 210. For J. and the Belgian rebels see my *J. II II*, pp. 512–525, 584–586, 610–622.

²⁰ Some of Joseph’s most strident and elaborate threats are to be found in Sir Robert Murray Keith’s report of a conversation with him in August 1787 (G. Smyth, *Memoirs and Correspondence ... of Sir Robert Murray Keith* (2 vols, London, 1849), vol. II, pp. 208–218).

²¹ See my *J. II II*, chs 16 and 17.

²² See P.P. Bernard, *The Limits of Enlightenment* (London, 1979).

²³ E.g. R. Waissenberger (ed.), *Klassizismus in Wien* (Vienna, 1978), p. 125.

²⁴ *Essai sur la Monarchie autrichienne 1790* (Austrian Studies Centre, University of Minnesota, MS Z943.6fEs73), pp. 62, 70, 508.

la volonté du Souverain est soumise à des conseils, à des formalités, à des privilèges des Etats, des peuples, des Corporations et des individus même, tandis que le Caprice ne sauroit point exister.

The ruler must always discuss and consult with ministers whom the people respect and “qui signent les lois après lui”. Joseph II, however, it is acknowledged with regret, had not always observed these formalities, and Kaunitz was most anxious to dissociate himself from this neglect:

Le prince Kaunitz se déclara contre plusieurs réformes, que feu l'Empereur projettoit, et son opposition fut telle, que le Monarque ne le consultoit que rarement.

This was very far from the whole story. But Kaunitz had opposed some of Joseph's policies and had complained of his practice of asking the advice of a committee and then adopting the view of a minority of its members, or indeed of no member.²⁵

There can be no doubt that Joseph acted unconstitutionally in Hungary from 1784 onwards and in Belgium from 1786.²⁶ He was contemptuous of the constitutions of these lands. But in the central provinces of the Monarchy his manner of ruling was rather different. In my first volume I argued that before 1780, while he sometimes erupted and demanded radical change of a despotic character, he also operated for long periods relatively calmly and patiently within the administrative system established by his mother. Something of the same oscillation can be seen during his sole reign. The most striking example of his listening to advice is his exchange of letters with *Hofrat* Heinke on ecclesiastical questions at the very beginning of his reign, which has attracted very little attention, no doubt because it is buried in vol. III of Maass's *Josephinismus*: Heinke persuaded him to give up his plan of taking over all church lands and placing them under the control of a Russian-style synod.²⁷ I have argued in my book on the monasteries that his monastic policy should be seen as a wise compromise.²⁸ Heinke and others – especially baron Kressel, who became in effect his minister for religious and ecclesiastical matters – made Joseph see that the confiscation of all church lands was bound to lead to excommunication and schism, whereas, given the precedents set by the rulers of France with the Gallican Church, it was difficult for the pope to condemn a sovereign's interference with church property so long as everything he ordered was in the wider interests of religion as generally understood.

Joseph's usual and special method of ruling, it seems to me, was a combination – a rather resourceful combination – of asserting his absolute power to make major changes while also deploying a wide range of trademark tactics to bring the bureaucracy reluctantly into line. I shall take two main examples, both of them concerning issues of major importance.

First, religious toleration.²⁹ This he understood to be a particularly difficult issue, both because of his recent disputes with his mother about it and because

²⁵ My *J.II* II, e.g. p. 653.

²⁶ The best account is now A. Szántay, *Regionalpolitik im alten Europa* (Budapest, 2005). The author, as well as sending me a copy of his book, has given me much help and guidance.

²⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 76–81. J.'s crucial letter asking Heinke's advice seems to survive only in the copy with which Heinke begins his reply, and hence its significance has been largely ignored. See F. Maass (ed.), *Der Josephinismus* (5 vols, Vienna, 1951–1961), vol. III, pp. 251–253.

²⁸ See my *Europäische Klöster im Zeitalter der Revolution, 1650–1815* (Wien, 2007), esp. ch. 8 and pp. 341–344.

²⁹ This discussion of toleration is derived from ch. V of my vol. II. See for Hungary the splendid collection of documents ed. E. Mályusz, *Iratok a türelmi rendelet történetéhez. II. József és a Magyar Protestantismus* (2 vols, Budapest, 1939–1940).

he knew that the Estates of many provinces regarded the privileged position of Roman Catholicism as an integral part of their constitution. His first major step concerned only Hungary, where Protestants undoubtedly had legal rights guaranteed by historic agreements. Right at the end of his first six months in full control, just before he left to make his inspection tour of Belgium in May 1781, he acknowledged the justice of a lengthy statement of grievances from Hungarian Protestant representatives and ordered that all these grievances, without exception, should be remedied. It was generally the case that, when he was far from Vienna, the reforming process slackened. Kaunitz's daughter remarked, while Joseph was in Belgium, that his officials' advice more often received his *Placet* than when he was in Vienna.³⁰ But she spoke too soon. On 16 June 1781 he issued this curt instruction from Ghent:

... das ganze *Religionspatent* von 1778 ... ist von nun an aufgehoben ... und in keinem Stücke, außer daß sie kein öffentliches Religionsexercitium haben, einen Unterscheid [sic] zwischen katholischen und protestantischen Unterthanen gemacht werden solle...

He ordered that this decree should be circulated to all civil and ecclesiastical authorities throughout the Monarchy.³¹ It was soon published, dated Vienna, 30 June.

I have seen the *Patent* of 1778 only in a version for Styria, but one of its clauses states that it is applicable to all central lands. It had reiterated all the old harsh penalties incurred by Protestants if they worshipped, possessed Protestant books, brought up their children as Protestants etc. etc.³²

My reading of this action of Joseph's is that, first, it was manifestly the act of a ruler who was defying Kaunitz's definitions of the Monarchy's constitution – repealing despotically, without consultation, and in a sentence, a recent and important law which many saw as effectively a constitutional provision. The dynasty had, after all, been working in the opposite sense for more than 160 years. He had been informed from Vienna that the law seemed unenforceable in a particular case, but its total repeal had not even been formally discussed. In this instance, his being hundreds of miles from Vienna, away from advisers, seems to have made it easier for him to act so categorically. But, secondly, I think this instruction must also in his mind have been a ploy to be used in the detailed discussions that he acknowledged would have to take place about the application of the decree in many different provinces. Kressel later put the point from the officials' side. He told the papal nuncio that,

Once the sovereign has adopted a principle, it is a waste of time to try to change it. The only thing to do is to raise all kinds of difficulties which make its implementation awkward.³³

I believe that this was both Joseph's view and the general view of the officials – and that it embodied their understanding of the absolute power of their ruler. He was the only lawgiver. Once he had pronounced, the principle he had put forward had to be accepted. In case they doubted that, it was understood that committees could discuss only what Joseph had asked them to discuss, and he would

³⁰ My *J.II* II, p. 183.

³¹ *Sammlung der ... Gesetze und Verordnungen in Publico-Ecclesiasticis vom Jahre 1767 bis 1782* (Vienna, [1782]), p. 131.

³² Dr. Leopold Auer kindly directed me to the facsimile of this edict in D. Knall, *Aus der Heimat gedrängt: Letzte Zwangumsiedlungen steirischen Protestanten nach Siebenbürgen unter Maria Theresia* (Graz, 2002), pp. 318–320.

³³ My *Europäische Klöster*, pp. 220–221. The quotation is from Garampi to Pallavicini, 5 May 1783 (Archivio segreto vaticano, Nunziatura di Vienna 182).

give orders restricting their agendas.³⁴ Kaunitz also accepted that, once the absolute ruler had pronounced, the principle he put forward had to be respected. But Kaunitz thought the absolute ruler should not make a grand new pronouncement until *after* a full process of consultation and approval by the officials.

The fact that Joseph had this curt document circulated so widely seems to me also of great significance. It was published and applauded by Nicolai's and Schlözer's prestigious journals, the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* and the *Staats-Anzeigen*. When Joseph returned to Vienna from Belgium, his officials had to accept not only that the absolute ruler had pronounced but also that he had publicly committed himself in favour of this quite new principle as the basis of law. Here, it seems to me, Joseph was using both publicity and his absence from Vienna to ease the path of his controversial legislation.

These, though, were not the only ploys he adopted to steer his proposals through. He sought and paid attention to the views of the *Staatsrat*, even though he had once urged its abolition. Joseph had of course long ago made sure that there would never be oral debates between its members ending with a decision. The body never met. Each member had to write an individual opinion and circulate it. To help counter opposition to toleration, he injected into the debate an anonymous memorandum that put forward views convenient to his case. He was to do this on several later occasions. This is a most disconcerting tactic for any committee, but must have been especially so when employed by the absolute ruler. It seems that, while guesses were made at the time and have been made since, the authorship of none of the several anonymous memoranda that Joseph produced in the course of pressing his views on legislation has been identified. It was and is quite conceivable that the emperor himself wrote some of them.³⁵

When the essential terms of the toleration *Patent* had been agreed, there was discussion as to whether it should be published. As often happened, prince Kaunitz was in favour and count Hatzfeld, the president of the *Staatsrat*, against. One can only suppose that Hatzfeld and others wished to keep the precise terms secret because that would enable them to make arbitrary decisions that no one could challenge from the text of the decree. Joseph was almost always in favour of publication, but on this occasion, strangely, he acquiesced in secrecy. Within a month, however, as perhaps Joseph foresaw, it became evident even to Hatzfeld that publication was inescapable: everyone now knew there was a *Patent* in existence; it was necessary that the precise terms should be available to all. Henceforward, immediate publication of Joseph's decrees would be normal, both in print and, by his order of 1782, from parish pulpits; and he would have collections of his laws printed and published on a scale previously unthinkable.³⁶

The various provinces received toleration decrees different in detail. But in Lower Austria, which of course was the most important of the Austrian provinces and the one in which publicity was best developed, a particular difficulty arose. It was the practice, as Kaunitz claimed in the *Essai* of 1790 and Michael Hochedlinger's recent *Aktenkunde* confirms, for the two major officials of a province to endorse *Patents* by countersigning them. Their names would be

³⁴ See my *J.II* II, p. 651 and n., citing an instruction from J. to Hatzfeld of early 1781.

³⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 184–185, 202.

³⁶ On the toleration case *ibid.* pp. 185–186. On the scale and publication of his decrees P.G.M. Dickson, *Finance and government under Maria Theresa* (2 vols, Oxford, 1987), vol. I, pp. 99–103 and his "Monarchy and Bureaucracy in Late Eighteenth-Century Austria", *English Historical Review* (1995), pp. 331–335. Prof. Dickson has given me invaluable advice and information over a period of more than thirty years.

printed at the foot of the law in question. But in this case the relevant officials in Lower Austria, most unusually, refused to countersign. According to some authorities then and since, all that their signatures would have meant was that the decree had been duly made in proper form. According to others, their signatures meant approval or at least acceptance of the terms of the decree. It appears that in this case these officials refused to sign for conscience' sake. So Lower Austria never had a so-called *Patent*, only a circular – though it was of apparently equal force.³⁷

A similar process occurred over the question of Jewish toleration or assimilation. Joseph himself began the process, just before he left for Belgium, with a document asserting the principle. There were then long discussions about detail and implementation which had to start from acceptance of the principle laid down by the ruler. Again the emperor injected an anonymous memorandum. The situation of the Jews varied so much from province to province that the new decrees had to be less uniform than those that emancipated Protestants.³⁸

Joseph regarded publication and publicity as crucial. Professor Wangermann has shown that a few pamphlets were encouraged or commissioned by the emperor or his supporters. Professor Kovacs has shown that Joseph's assertion that he never read pamphlets was untrue.³⁹ But I think that what emerges from detailed consideration of his legislative method is that pamphlets were not his first priority among the weapons of publicity. He cared more about newspapers or periodicals: one of the reasons he adduced for the future emperor Francis to come to Vienna to be educated was that in Florence he never saw his name in the newspapers.⁴⁰ The Göttingen Professor Schlözer's *Staats-Anzeigen* was a periodical found useful for its accurate information by both Maria Theresa and Joseph II.⁴¹ The connexion was symbolised by the first honorary degree awarded in Austria to a Protestant, to Schlözer at the University of Innsbruck in 1782. The special favour that Joseph showed to the obstreperous French journalist Linguet was justified by the huge reputation he had made with his *Annales*, a periodical which for a time Joseph allowed to be published in Belgium when neither England nor France was a safe haven for it.⁴² Joseph paid him substantial sums, naturalised him and gave him a low-ranking title. But the emperor cared most about the immediate publication of his decrees in the newspapers and from pulpits and, as soon as possible thereafter, in collections of his laws. He also made sure that his statements of certain principles, like the censorship ground rules and his pastoral letter, appeared in print as his own compositions. It might be added that some of what counts as his legislation, for example the *Patent* on freemasonry or his burial regulations, has the character of a manifesto as much as, or as well as, a law.

My second major example of Joseph's methods is the background to the tax and *Robot Patent* finally issued for the central lands, after years of prepara-

³⁷ My *J.II II*, p. 188. On the authentication of a Patent by countersignatures see now M. Hochedlinger, *Aktenkunde: Urkunden- und Aktenlehre der Neuzeit* (Wien, 2009), of which he generously sent me a copy, esp. pp. 163–165, 179–180.

³⁸ See my *J.II II*, pp. 196–213, 599–602.

³⁹ E. Wangermann, *Die Waffen der Publizität* (Vienna, 2004); E. Kovács, „Der Besuch Pabst Pius VI. in Wien im Spiegel josephinischer Broschüren,“ *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae* 20 (1982), pp. 163–217.

⁴⁰ See my *J.II II*, p. 360.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 194.

⁴² *Ibid.* pp. 152–153, 615–616, 618–619. Cf. D.G. Levy, *The Ideas and Careers of Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet* (London, 1980)

tion, late in 1789. The Hungarian version, as is well known, was never enacted, even though the preparations for it were nearly complete when Joseph had to abandon almost his entire Hungarian reforming programme at the end of 1789. Between 1784 and 1789 huge efforts went into the compilation of a register of every individual estate in the Monarchy, except in Belgium and Italy, with a view to a new taxation system and also to the reduction of *Robot*.⁴³ Every estate was intended to be surveyed, and it seems that this goal was almost achieved.

The officials involved, who included count Karl von Zinzendorf, mostly objected at least to the criteria adopted for the survey, and in some cases to the whole project. In 1787 some of them, including Zinzendorf, dared to ask for the summoning of an Assembly of Notables on the contemporary French model in order to thrash out an agreement about the tax system. Naturally Joseph dismissed the idea.⁴⁴ Early in 1788 Zinzendorf became so hostile to the project that he was removed from this part of his responsibilities. Then, early in 1789, the chancellor of Bohemia, count Rudolf Chotek, resigned his office, saying that he could not in conscience accept and countersign the tax *Patent*. Joseph's reaction is most revealing. When Chotek had previously stated his objections, which were fundamental, the emperor had rebutted them point by point and at considerable length. The minister was not persuaded. Even so, Joseph claimed that he could not understand why Chotek should think it necessary to resign. He had stated his objections to the policy. Joseph wanted a minister to express his honest views. But, according to the emperor, the constitution presumed that, once the ruler had made his decision, the minister should obey. If things went wrong, the fault would lie with the emperor and not the minister, but there was no reason for the latter to make a public stand.⁴⁵ Interestingly, Kaunitz had used the same argument when he strongly opposed but then acquiesced in Joseph's repressive measures in Belgium: it would be the emperor, he said, not he, who would be to blame if disaster followed.⁴⁶

In certain instances, however, Joseph seemed ready to abandon his absolutist stance. Two of the most striking have remained, so far as I am aware, unknown until now. It emerges from Zinzendorf's diary that, a few months before Joseph issued the pastoral letter in which he wrote of the necessity for subjects to accept the ruler's tax demands, he had attended a meeting of the Lower Austrian Estates and argued powerfully for tax reform, especially with reference to the *Tranksteuer*.⁴⁷ This is an extraordinary piece of evidence, recording apparently quite uncharacteristic behaviour on Joseph's part. It is to be hoped that future historians will be able to find out more about this event and perhaps discover other similar confrontations.

This is the other neglected and extraordinary piece of evidence of Joseph's flexibility. It is now pretty well known, thanks largely to the work of the late

⁴³ P.G.M. Dickson, "Joseph II's Hungarian Land Survey," *English Historical Review* 106 (1991), pp. 611–634, is informative on the whole project. See the admirable books of R. Rozdolski/Rosdolsky, *Die grosse Steuer- und Agrarreform Josefs II.* (Warsaw, 1961) and *Untertan und Staat in Galizien: Die Reformen unter Maria Theresia und Joseph II.* (Mainz, 1992).

⁴⁴ As well as Rozdolski's first book and Dickson's article, Hock & Bidermann, *Staatsrath*, pp. 169–174.

⁴⁵ See, as well as the sources cited in the previous note, the important article of A. Wolf, "Graf Rudolf Chotek, k.k. österreichischer Staats- und Conferenz-Minister," *Sitzungsberichte der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 9 (1852), pp. 434–460.

⁴⁶ My *J.II* II, p. 519.

⁴⁷ Zinzendorf's diary, HHSA: 23 Oct. 1783.

Professor Adam Wandruszka, that Alfred Ritter von Arneth, contrary to his assertions, omitted some passages of real political significance in his indispensable editions of the correspondence of Joseph II and his relatives. One omission which seems so far to have escaped notice is this:

Joseph to Leopold, 12 Dec. 1785: J'assiste deux fois par semaine aux conseils, une fois a la chancellerie d'Hongrie et une autre a celle de Boheme. Chaque fois c'est une séance de 6 heures mais je vois visiblement, que cella me facilite, et que cella avance les affaires.

This statement is quite contrary to Joseph's many years of fulmination against the time wasted in committees. It might even have been a concession to Leopold's advice. One can understand Arneth, in 1872, omitting the brothers' correspondence about the marital rape of their sister, the queen of Naples. But why on earth would he have thought he must suppress that passage? Would it have embarrassed Francis Joseph to know that his great-great-uncle had spent long hours on committees? Whatever Arneth's reasons were, the attendance of the emperor at such meetings has not, so far as I know, been noticed by any author. But, like his appearance at the Estates of Lower Austria, this committee-work shows Joseph ready to use every method at his disposal to promote his measures, even methods that seem incompatible with his absolutist claims.⁴⁸

I have discussed one possible answer to the question "How did Joseph II govern?" Despotically. Another answer might be: "Frenetically". It is simply unbelievable that, even allowing for the assistance of ministers and secretaries, he managed to issue so many instructions. The number of laws he enacted each year for the central lands was more than six times as many as his mother had produced. The increase for Hungary was similar. Notoriously, he often acted too quickly and had to issue a correction or modification. But the range of his legislation is astonishing, much of it is unmistakably in his personal style, and a good part of it was acceptable enough to survive well into the nineteenth century and even beyond – most conspicuously, the first part of the *Allgemeines bürgerliches Gesetzbuch*. He must have had an extraordinary capacity to switch his mind from subject to subject, and an extraordinary grasp of most of them.

Another possible answer to my question "How did Joseph II govern?" might be "absurdly". Frederick of Prussia wrote to his envoy in Vienna:

Il y a bien des idées qui peuvent entrer dans une tête impériale qui sont au dessus de celles qui naissent dans mon pauvre petit cerveau. Je vois avec étonnement cinq à six grandes entreprises menées de front, comme les quadriges des Romains, & je sais par moi-même, que j'ai bien de la peine à mener une seule entreprise avec exactitude.⁴⁹

On one occasion baron Eger, the zealous supporter of Joseph's tax scheme, came to see Zinzendorf in a dejected state, because he was bringing an order from the emperor that the relevant Patents and instructions were all to be prepared in less than a fortnight, before Joseph went off to his annual military camp. Zinzendorf wrote in his diary: "[Eger] s'étonna que je ne fesois que rire à cette precipitation ..."⁵⁰

Another answer to the question "How did Joseph II govern?" might be "in the interests of the mass of the people as he saw them". He was certainly not going to give them a vote: he thought electioneering degrading. But he was determined to curb lords' abuse of their power over their peasants. This brings

⁴⁸ See my *J.II II*, pp. 434, 501. I understand that the records of the "Bohemian" committee must have been destroyed in the fire of 1927, but that the Hungarian equivalents ought to be discoverable in Budapest.

⁴⁹ Frederick II to Riedesel, 2 March 1785 (Prussian State Archives R 96 49 J).

⁵⁰ See my *J.II II*, p. 433.

me to the most characteristic of all Joseph's trademark ploys. He spent nearly two years out of the nine years of his sole reign in travelling – not counting the ten months he spent campaigning in 1788. During most of these journeys he was both inspecting the terrain for military purposes and checking on the civil administration. This, in his mind, meant that he must give an opportunity to all persons of whatever social standing to inform him of their grievances. Every day when in Vienna, he famously made himself available on the *Controleurgang* in the Hofburg to petitioners. He did the same on his travels. A major concern was to find out what the inhabitants thought of his officials, and complaints often led to reprimands and dismissals.

This practice supplemented the use of publicity. When he had ordered the toleration decree for Transylvania to be published in the newspapers, he had been informed that Transylvania had no newspapers. Little more than a year later, the emperor in person visited the province – creating, at least while he was there, a public sphere within which he and his subjects interacted.

As happened on all his journeys within the Monarchy, he received countless petitioners and petitions, listened to grievances and discussed policies frankly – dangerously frankly – with his subjects. Here are extracts from a uniquely full account of this visit of 1783, which has been in print for more than a century, but in an obscure periodical. It was written by a minor official from the Protestant Saxon nation, which was feeling aggrieved because Joseph had just abolished its special privileges, enabling the majority Rumanians or Walachen, previously without political standing, to enjoy what was called *Concivilität*. When the Saxons protested to him,

Der Kaiser sagte sanft hitzig: „Ich wünsche Liebe und Einigkeit einzuführen und möchte das Jeder Mann mitwirke. Was haben Sie weiter?“ Wir antworteten: „Nach der Verfassung unsrer Religions Angelegenheit sind bis dato die Lehrer unsrer Schulen sowohl in Städten als Dörfern meistens von einigen Beiträgen, welche von den Mitgliedern der Kirche sind eingesammelt und freiwillig ... bezahlt worden. Nach Eurer Majestät Allerhöchstem Toleranz Decret hören alle Collecten ... auf, mithin können wir unsre Schullehrer nicht mehr bezahlen ...“ Der Kaiser sagte darauf: „Auf diese Art haben also Ihre Schullehrer nie eine bestimmte Bezahlung bekommen können und das ist ja nicht gut... Ihre Geistlichen und Schullehrer müssen bezahlt werden und zwar rechtschaffen bezahlt werden, besser bezahlt als die catholischen, denn Ihre haben Weiber und Kinder, diese aber nicht. Wenn meine Unterthanen Türken wären, so müssten auch ihre Dervische gut bezahlen werden und leben können ... Ich möchte deswegen gerne das Ganze zusammennehmen und gerecht austheilen, aber die catholische Geistlichkeit macht mir allerhand Hindernisse, ich habe den Teufel mit ihnen.“ Wir erstaunten über diesen Ausdruck, den Ihre Majestät doch gleichsam mehr in Scherz als ungnädig sagten ...

This exchange gives a vivid picture of Joseph's outlook and behaviour. He grasps the issues immediately and discusses them reasonably, he openly and rashly criticises the Roman Catholic Church, and makes quite a good, though risky, joke about dervishes. Although he did not give way immediately, he did later make a concession about Protestants' collections for charity. Other monarchs either never had such encounters or had them only rarely. Joseph went out of his way to listen to his subjects' problems and grievances whenever he could. And to some degree he would act on what they said. It is worth pointing out that the house in which this putative despot was lodging was guarded by just one soldier, who had orders to turn no one away who wished to see the emperor.⁵¹

⁵¹ See my article, "Joseph II, petitions and the public sphere" in H. Scott & B. Simms, *Cultures of Power during the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2007), where an English translation of the German passage will be found. Heydendorff's whole account has now been published in S. Pascu, *Izvoarele răscoalei lui Horea. Seria B. Izvoare narrative*, vol.

In quick summary, it has to be acknowledged that his most ambitious projects failed: the exchange of Bavaria with Belgium; the plan to make Belgian and Hungarian administration just like that of the central lands; and the tax and *Robot* survey and scheme. But many of his plans were very well thought out and executed: the toleration of Protestants and Jews survived him; he succeeded in abolishing *Leibeigenschaft* in the central lands; the dissolutions of monasteries went remarkably smoothly; he was evidently a great organiser of building works – the general hospital and the *Josefinum* were built extraordinarily quickly and efficiently;⁵² basic schooling developed rapidly during his reign; and he was good at deploying and supplying his army, even if he won only one significant victory with it, the capture of Belgrade in 1789. And he was one of the most successful theatre managers in history.⁵³

As T.C.W. Blanning has argued, his actions in the last few months of his reign, when he was mortally ill, were extraordinarily ruthless, clear-sighted and significant. Having at last accepted that his Belgian and Hungarian policies were doomed, he gave Philipp Cobenzl *carte blanche* to make a deal with the Belgian rebels in November 1789 and avowedly rejected “half-measures” in rescinding almost all his Hungarian legislation in January 1790.⁵⁴

There is an immense amount more to say, and I’ve no doubt that the huge quantities of paper that he left behind him in dozens of archives across Europe still have much to yield. But I hope that my book may be a basis on which other historians can build. For me the most conspicuous gap of all in the historiography is this: to discover what really survived of Joseph’s measures and methods into the reign of Francis II? The admirable collection of essays under this title *Was blieb von Joseph II?*⁵⁵ takes one some distance. But it is very hard – in fact I found it impossible – to discover exactly how much of his legislation remained in effect. Some serious historians still assert that he repealed all his measures for the central lands as well as for Belgium and Hungary.⁵⁶ In fact Leopold and Francis evidently left many of them undisturbed.

I will conclude, as I conclude my book, with a quotation from Eleonore Liechtenstein. She wrote in June 1791:

... l’influence du gouvernement [est] plus forte que tout ce que j’ai jamais imaginé du tems de ce pauvre Emp.r défunt, qui à la vérité nous faisait enrager, mais quel mouvement, quel feu, quelle abondance ne nous donnait-il pas? On ne pouvoit assez parler ou écrire, jamais on l’avait achevé, et il restait encore mille choses à une autre fois. À présent plus rien, c’est une apoplexie générale.⁵⁷

Vorgelegt von w.M. Arnold Suppan
in der Sitzung am 11. Dezember 2009

I (Bucharest, 1983), esp. pp. 16–18.

⁵² On this point I am grateful for discussions with Professor E. Kelényi and for the gift of his book *Franz Anton Hillebrandt* (Budapest, 1976).

⁵³ These matters are all discussed in my *J.II II*. See esp. the Conclusion.

⁵⁴ T.C.W. Blanning, *Joseph II* (London, 1994), esp. pp. 186–189. Prof. Blanning’s help has been of crucial importance to me from the very start of my project. Joseph’s withdrawal of nearly all his Hungarian measures is printed, e.g., in H. Haselsteiner, *Joseph II. und die Komitate Ungarns* (Vienna, 1983), p. 273.

⁵⁵ Melk, 1980, no editor named.

⁵⁶ This appears to be the view of J. Bérenger in his article “Tolérance: Joseph II” in *Das achtzehnte Jhd. und Österreich 22* (2007), esp. p. 204.

⁵⁷ Princess Eleonore Liechtenstein to Countess Leopoldine Kaunitz, 4 June 1791: Fürstliches Liechtensteinisches Archiv, Litomerice state archives, Zitenice branch, Czech Republic. Cf. A. Wolf, *Fürstin Eleonore Liechtenstein* (Vienna, 1875), pp. 226–227, where the translation from the French original is misleading.

