

Marie-Antoinette

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(1755-1793)

Marie-Antoinette, in full Marie-Antoinette-Joséphine-Jeanne d'Autriche-Lorraine (Austria-Lorraine), original German Maria Antonia Josepha Joanna von Österreich-Lothringen, queen consort of King Louis XVI of France (1774-93). Frivolous, imprudent, and prodigal and an enemy of reform, she contributed to the popular unrest that led to the Revolution and to the overthrow of the monarchy in August 1792.

The 11th daughter of the Holy Roman emperor Francis I and Maria Theresa, Marie-Antoinette was married in 1770 to the dauphin Louis, grandson of France's King Louis XV. The timid, uninspiring Louis proved to be an inattentive husband; and by the time he ascended the throne in 1774, Marie-Antoinette had withdrawn into the companionship of a small circle of frivolous court favourites.

Her extravagant court expenditures contributed—though to a minor degree—to the huge debt incurred by the French state in the 1770s and 1780s, and her close associations with the more dissipated members of the court aristocracy prompted her enemies to circulate slanderous reports of her alleged extramarital affairs. These vilifications culminated in the Affair of the Diamond Necklace (1785-86), in which the Queen was unjustly accused of having formed an immoral relationship with a cardinal. The scandal discredited the monarchy and encouraged the nobles to oppose vigorously (1787-88) all the financial reforms advocated by the King's ministers.

During these crises, as in those to come, Marie-Antoinette proved to be stronger and more decisive than her husband. After a crowd stormed the Bastille on July 14, 1789, the Queen failed to convince Louis to take refuge with his army at Metz. In August-September, however, she successfully prodded him to resist the attempts of the revolutionary National Assembly to abolish feudalism and restrict the royal prerogative. As a result, she became the main target of the popular agitators, who attributed to her the celebrated and callous remark on being told that the people had no bread: Let them eat cake! ("Qu'ils mangent de la brioche!"). In October 1789 popular pressure compelled the royal family to return from Versailles to Paris, where they became hostages of the Revolutionary movement. Six months later Marie-Antoinette opened secret communications with the Comte de Mirabeau, a prominent member of the National Assembly who hoped to restore the authority of the crown. Nevertheless, her mistrust of Mirabeau prevented the King from following his advice. After Mirabeau died in April 1791, she turned for assistance to a group of émigrés. They arranged for the King and Queen to escape from Paris on the night of June 20, but Revolutionary forces apprehended the royal couple at Varennes (June 25) and escorted them back to Paris.

Marie-Antoinette then attempted to shore up the rapidly deteriorating position of the crown by opening secret negotiations with Antoine Barnave, leader of the constitutional monarchist faction in the Assembly. Barnave persuaded the King to publicly accept the new constitution (September 1791); but the Queen undermined Barnave's position by privately urging her brother, the Holy Roman emperor Leopold II, to conduct a counterrevolutionary crusade against France. Leopold avoided acceding to her demands. After France declared war on Austria in April 1792, Marie-Antoinette's continuing intrigues with the Austrians further enraged the French. Popular hatred of the Queen provided impetus to the insurrection that overthrew the monarchy on Aug. 10, 1792.

Marie-Antoinette spent the remainder of her life in Parisian prisons. Louis XVI was executed on orders from the National Convention in January 1793, and in August the Queen was put in solitary confinement in the Conciergerie. She was brought before the Revolutionary tribunal on Oct. 14, 1793,

and guillotined two days later.

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