

The Austrian Woman: A Brief History of the Imprisonment and Death of Marie Antoinette (13 August 1792-16 October 1793)

Nathan Fitzgerald

Marie Antoinette was born on the 2 November 1755 at the Hofburg palace in Vienna, Austria. As Evelyne Lever says her birth “was a difficult labor, but around seven-thirty in the evening, a perfectly formed infant girl came into the world” She was the daughter of Maria Theresa (the archduchess of Austria, queen of Hungary and Croatia) and her mother a busy woman by all accounts “barely paused in her paperwork to give birth”, while her father was Francis I, the Holy Roman emperor. She was their 15th and penultimate child. Shortly after her birth she was placed into the care of Countess von Brandis, governess to the imperial children.

Marie Antoinette was raised by von Brandis along with her sister Maria Carolina who she retained a close relationship with for the rest of her life. As a sign of devotion to the Virgin Mary all of Maria Theresa’s daughters were called Maria. As such Marie Antoinette was called by her second name to avoid confusion.

In terms of schooling “she received an education typical of an 18th century aristocratic girl, focusing primarily on religious and moral principles...”under the instruction of Christoph Willibald Gluck she became a gifted musician.

With the conclusion of the Seven Years War the Austrians needed a way to stop the growing power of the kingdom of Prussia. It was decided the best way to do this was to keep the Franco-Austrian alliance alive however the Prussian and British victory during the war had damaged this alliance and as such the empress felt it had to be cemented in marriage. As Marie Antoinette was the only eligible daughter left, it was decided that she would marry Louis-Auguste the Dauphin of France. She was only 14 at the time. In preparation for her life in France she was given lessons in what would be required of her.

Marie Antoinette and Louis-Auguste were married by proxy in Vienna on 19th April 1770 with her brother Ferdinand standing in for the Dauphin. She “... swore on a bible to renounce her right through her mother to the Austrian hereditary lands...”.) She then left Vienna for France and met her husband for the first time at Compiègne on 14 May 1770.

There were two days of celebrations at Versailles. “On May 16, 1770, a lavish second wedding ceremony took place in the royal chapel at Versailles.” As the Dauphine of France she was well received and her first official appearance in Paris was a success. “At first, Marie-Antoinette was beloved by the people of France as the embodiment of youth, beauty and promise...” she also loved the people of Paris and they loved her “How fortunate we are, given our rank, to have gained the love of a whole people with

such ease” Some members of the court were still untrusting of her because of her Austrian roots.

She eventually became queen in 1774. By this time however the French public had become disillusioned with their monarchs. There are many reasons the royals lost favour. Among these were her extravagant lifestyle. An example of this was that “she had a model farm built on the palace grounds so that she and her ladies-in-waiting could dress in elaborate costumes and pretend to be milkmaids and shepherdesses.” This was at a time when the majority of French people were poor and struggling to survive.

The Queen really lost their support after the diamond necklace affair. This is when a French countess convinced a French cardinal (who had been banished from court after insulting the queen’s mother) that she was a friend of the queen and could convince her to let the cardinal return to court if he bought her a diamond necklace. The countess did not know the queen and the king ordered his forces to “arrest the cardinal!” Although the queen knew nothing about these events the people thought she masterminded it as a scheme to get valuable jewellery. This was not true but the public believed it.

When France went bankrupt after helping the American rebels during the American War of Independence, the government introduced a new tax on the poor third estate. Further problems led to the events on “July 14 1789 when 900 workers and peasants stormed the Bastille prison.” This was in direct defiance of the king’s power and sparked the beginning of the French revolution. The French population fed up after years of bad management by the king had lost faith in their rulers.

On the 5th October 1789 protesters marched from Paris to Versailles demanding that the king and queen hand over bread. Some of the mob forced their way into the Queen’s apartment and she only just escaped through a passage linking her room to the king’s. She was then forced to face the mob on the balcony. She first came out with her children using them as human shields. She then stood there alone for ten minutes with her head bowed to the mob. She and her family were then forced to go to Paris, never to see Versailles again. In Paris “The crowds sarcastically called the royal family the baker, the baker’s wife and the little crumbs”

On the night of 20-21 June 1791 the flight to Varennes took place. The royals tried to escape to the eastern frontier to cross the border to Austria. When this failed they were taken back to the Tuileries. This event led to a growth in republicanism as the French people believed the royals had betrayed the revolution.

The royal family were imprisoned at the Temple prison in Paris on the 13th August. On the 21st September 1792 the National Convention of France abolished the monarchy. On the 2nd of September after the defeat at Verdun, (where Prussia defeated France), thousands of people were taken from prisons and killed. One of the most famous victims of the massacres was the Princess de Lamballe one of the queen’s closest friends. She was asked to renounce her loyalty to the royals and when she refused she

was handed over to the mob. She was stabbed and torn to pieces. Her head was taken to the prison on a spike and the mob wanted the queen to kiss it. The queen was kept away from the windows and did not see the head but when she was told about it she fainted.

On "Dec 11, 1792, the King was transferred to the Conciergerie, a medieval prison, considered to be the antechamber of death" to await trial. On Jan 2st 1793 he was executed for treason by guillotine.

Marie Antoinette was transferred to the Conciergerie on the 2nd August 1793. She was only referred to as widow carpel or as prisoner 280. She was kept in the worst cell in the prison and was always accompanied by a guard. The Convention put her on trial on the 14 October after she was only given two days to prepare a defense. At eight a.m. on the 15 October the court was in session in the Palais de Justice. She was dressed in a black dress and a widow's bonnet. She sat in an armchair placed in front of the prosecutor's table.

The trial was open to public view and hundreds turned out to see "Madame deficit". The former queen was barely recognizable due to the haggard face she was left with after all the suffering she had faced. When asked to state her name she responded Marie-Antoinette de Lorraine d'Autriche. This was a reference to her French paternal heritage as well as her Austrian origin.

The main charges brought against her were "depleting the national treasury" "maintaining secret relations and correspondences" and "plotting conspiracies." All of the charges were punishable by death. The tribunal demanded that she be the one to answer the court's questions not her lawyers. The tribunal called on forty-one witnesses who accused her of various crimes. They accused her of giving wine to the Swiss Guard to encourage them to perform the Champs de Mars massacre, of smuggling money out of the country and of wearing pistols to assassinate the Duc d'Orléans. While no evidence other than gossip was used in court the tribunal still found her guilty and sentenced her to death.

After sentencing she was sent to her cell where she asked for a pen and paper to write a letter of farewell to her sister in law Madame Elisabeth. She said she was not afraid to die and she asked Madame to look after her son. It never reached her sister.

On 16 October 1793 the day of the execution arrived. The executioner bound her hands behind her back and shaved her hair to the nape of her neck. She then traveled to the guillotine in an open cart for everyone to see. She was seated next to a priest who she ignored the entire time. She walked the steps to the guillotine with grace and at twelve-fifteen the blade fell and the head was lifted up to cries of "long live the republic." Her body was taken to the small cemetery of madeleine. On 1st November she was buried. The gravedigger sent an invoice to the authorities saying "The widow Capet, 6 livres for the coffin, 15 livres, 35 sols for the grave and the gravediggers."

Marie Antoinette's death was also seen as the death of the *Ancien Regime* and despite the Bourbon and Bonaparte restorations France would never be a kingdom like it was in her time. She has been vilified as a cruel wealth spending monarch who did not care about her people. She has been the star of films, books and poems. If you supported her or hated her every historian agrees she changed the course of French history. "Instead, she tends to arouse interest and compassion. "After her death on the scaffold, Marie Antoinette entered the world of legend and became a mythic figure"