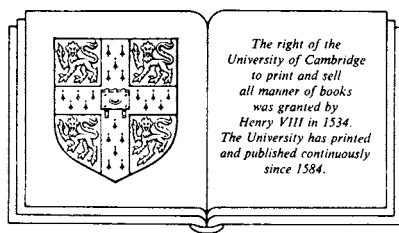


# Absolutism and the eighteenth-century origins of compulsory schooling in Prussia and Austria

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# Introduction

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As the title suggests, this book does two things. First, it examines efforts in the eighteenth century to make schooling compulsory in the two leading states of Central Europe, Prussia and Austria. Second, it explores some of the distinctive features of absolutist social policy in those territories.

Compulsory education is widely held to be a creation of modern industrial society. Whether viewed positively or negatively, as a symbol of cultural democratization or bourgeois exploitation, compulsory schooling is customarily linked to the rise of industrialization, urbanization, and mass communications – all those processes and innovations that are held to distinguish industrial societies from their pre-industrial, rural predecessors.

In Central Europe, however, efforts on behalf of compulsory schooling began long before the industrial age.<sup>1</sup> Already in the sixteenth century, Protestant and Catholic princes, prelates, nobles, and magistrates had sought to make religious education compulsory for their subjects. By the seventeenth century, their efforts had produced an extensive network of parish schools throughout Central Europe. Although the pedagogical momentum of the Protestant and Catholic reformations had begun to sag by the mid-seventeenth century, the rise of Pietism in the late seventeenth century gave renewed impetus to the compulsory school movement. First established in the Prussian city of Halle, Pietist schools proved the single most powerful force behind the movement for compulsory schooling in eighteenth-century Central Europe. To be sure, attempts by rulers of the period to establish schools in accordance with Pietist models often fell short of their mark. Nonetheless, these efforts produced new institutions

<sup>1</sup>See Mary Jo Maynes, *Schooling in Western Europe: A Social History* (Albany, 1985), p. 60.

and pedagogical practices that decisively shaped public education not only in Central Europe, but throughout the West.

Visit any public school classroom and you will find visible evidence of the Pietist legacy. The teachers will have certificates attesting to their pedagogical competence. Pietist schools were the first to require formal training for elementary schoolmasters, and this gave rise to the first normal schools. The pupils you observe use only textbooks that have been approved by the state board of education. Pietist reformers, again, were pioneers in the standardization of elementary school textbooks. Pupils raise their hands when they have questions, another Pietist innovation. Most pupils are taught collectively rather than individually, a method uncommon in German elementary education until the Pietist pedagogue Johann Hecker helped popularize the practice in the 1740s.

This book is less concerned with the legacy of Pietist pedagogy, however, than with the reasons for its original appeal. How did Pietism become such a potent pedagogical force in the eighteenth century? Why did Pietist pedagogy find such resonance among rulers and reformers of the period? Why, in an age when many viewed popular literacy as unnecessary or even dangerous, did rulers begin to promote universal literacy on an unprecedented scale? How successful were efforts on behalf of compulsory schooling, and what were the obstacles to its implementation?

The present study addresses these questions through a comparative study of the compulsory school movement in Prussia and Austria. It focuses on the reigns of two of the most prominent rulers of the eighteenth century, Frederick the Great of Prussia (1740–86) and Maria Theresa of Austria (1740–80), each of whom attempted to make elementary education compulsory. Frederick's decrees of 1763 and 1765 and Maria Theresa's school edict of 1774 would both represent important milestones in the history of Central European education.

Chiefly concerned with schooling at the level of policy rather than practice, this book does not pretend to present a comprehensive picture of elementary education in these two states. Although I have attempted to describe some of the fundamental features of Central European education in the eighteenth century, I confess to having only scratched the surface. A host of questions remain to be addressed by historians of Central European schools, such as regional distribution, attendance rates, social composition, and impact on social mobility and literacy. Although this book suggests some answers to these questions, they are far from conclusive and must await confirmation in more detailed studies.

The above disclaimer is designed not simply to disarm potential critics, but to clarify from the start the aims of this study. Originating as a doctoral thesis at the University of Chicago,<sup>2</sup> this book arose not out of a concern with education per se, but rather with the problem of social control in early modern absolutism. Social control posed particular problems in the eighteenth century because of the radical discontinuities that marked the age. The century saw the scope of state authority expand, but also demands for greater freedom from that authority. It witnessed the emergence of enlightened ideals of personal autonomy, but also the persistence of feudal relations of dependence. It saw the rise of new forms of economic production, but also the preservation of serfdom. It presided over the expansion of agrarian capitalism, but also the retention of seigniorial paternalism. It fostered highly literate cultural forms, but also harbored a largely illiterate population. It witnessed the growth of pietistic forms of religious expression, but also the tenacious survival of the theatrical devotional forms we associate with baroque popular piety.

It was the existence of these antinomies in political, social, economic, and cultural life that made popular education such an object of concern for absolutist reformers of the eighteenth century. Insofar as these polarities served to disrupt existing relationships of authority, education provided an instrument for reconstituting those relationships. The very attempt to expand popular schooling in eighteenth-century Prussia and Austria suggests, although not conclusively, the existence of a *Legitimationskrise* in relationships of authority. Although the eighteenth century is customarily known as the Age of Enlightenment, its leading representatives were far from agreeing that education for *le menu peuple* was necessarily desirable.<sup>3</sup> Given the fear of educating the common people that prevailed even among the most enlightened figures of the century, attempts by rulers to make education compulsory were all the more extraordinary and require explanation. A study of the campaign for compulsory schooling offers a unique perspective for examining how shifting conceptions of authority manifested themselves at the most fundamental levels of society. Social transformation, or resistance to it, invariably

<sup>2</sup>James Van Horn Melton, "Pedagogues and Princes: Reform Absolutism, Popular Education, and the Dialectics of Authority in Eighteenth-Century Prussia and Austria," Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1982.

<sup>3</sup>On the ambivalence of French *philosophes* toward popular education see Harry C. Payne, *The Philosophes and the People* (New Haven, 1976); and Harvey Chisick, *The Limits of Reform in the Enlightenment: Attitudes towards the Education of the Lower Classes in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton, 1981).



shows up in the way individuals define what the young should know and be. If absolutism in eighteenth-century Prussia and Austria was indeed characterized by an attempt to redefine the matrices of social and political authority, popular education should have played an important role in that endeavor. Given that such a redefinition took place, an analysis of the motives behind the absolutist promotion of compulsory schooling can help elucidate the broader social, economic, and cultural forces that produced a “crisis of *Herrschaft*” in these states. What changes in social, economic, and cultural life made it necessary to legitimate or exercise authority in a different fashion? Why had traditional modes of exacting obedience become ineffective or obsolete?

Until recently, two perspectives have dominated the study of Central European absolutism during this period. One, a product of the nineteenth-century statist tradition, stresses the evolution of bureaucratic institutions. Since the eighteenth century was the classic age of state building in Central Europe, this perspective has understandably focused on bureaucratization as the salient feature of early modern absolutism. This approach is typical of the massive source collections, such as the *Acta Borussica* for Prussia and Friedrich Walter’s *Geschichte der österreichischen Zentralverwaltung* for Austria, that have proven so indispensable to historians of absolutism. Also tied to this genre are classics in the field of administrative history like Otto Hintze’s comparative essays or Hans Rosenberg’s pioneering analysis of the Prussian bureaucracy.<sup>4</sup>

The second perspective, sometimes combined with the first and also dating back to the nineteenth century, has viewed the evolution of eighteenth-century absolutism through the prism of enlightened absolutism. This category first entered Central European historiography in the nineteenth century, when the German historian and neomercantilist Wilhelm Roscher elevated enlightened absolutism to the status of a developmental stage in the history of the state.<sup>5</sup> Since Roscher, historians have commonly viewed enlightened absolutism as a form of monarchy particularly suited to the economic backwaters of Central and Eastern Europe, where rulers adopted innovative policies in order to catch up with their more advanced neighbors to the west. This view was particularly fashionable during the 1920s and 1930s, when the Soviet transformation of Russia,

<sup>4</sup>Felix Gilbert and Robert M. Berdahl, eds., *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze* (New York, 1975); Hans Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy: The Prussian Experience* (Boston, 1958).

<sup>5</sup>Wilhelm Roscher, *System der Volkswirtschaft*, 10th ed., 2 vols. (Stuttgart, 1882), 2:392.

the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany, and the apparent demise of liberalism throughout Europe, all encouraged an emphasis on the dynamic role of the state. Singling out rulers such as Frederick the Great of Prussia, Joseph II of Austria, and Karl Frederick of Baden, historians of enlightened absolutism have been especially concerned with how the writings of Enlightenment theorists and publicists shaped and directed absolutist policy.<sup>6</sup>

These two perspectives have yielded valuable insights into the theory and practice of Central European absolutism. They often tend, however, to minimize or overlook the problem of social control in absolutist rule. Too narrow a concern with the evolution of state institutions risks imparting to eighteenth-century government the relative efficacy that bureaucracies enjoy today. Such an approach can easily lead historians to underestimate the practical obstacles that hindered the effectiveness of state institutions. At the same time, to be exclusively concerned with the exercise of authority through formal bureaucratic channels is to ignore the informal, noninstitutionalized paths of authority so prominent in societies of the Old Regime. Historians of absolutism often present a curiously one-dimensional view of their subject by reducing the content of eighteenth-century politics to the relatively narrow world of rulers and their bureaucracies. As Otto Brunner pointed out, the resulting distortions are further compounded by the dualism implicit in the post-Hobbesian political categories that inform modern historical thought. Church and state, state and society, sovereign and subject – these are dichotomies that can inhibit the historian's ability to understand the patterns of authority peculiar to the Old Regime.<sup>7</sup>

The category of enlightened absolutism, for its part, can also obscure the complexities of eighteenth-century administration through an excessive concern with the relationship between Enlightenment theory and absolutist practice. Without a sensitivity to the social and material constraints that circumscribed eighteenth-century rulers, the analysis of

<sup>6</sup>The literature on enlightened absolutism is too extensive to include here. Karl Otmar Freiherr von Aretin, "Der aufgeklärte Absolutismus als europäisches Problem," in *Der aufgeklärte Absolutismus* (Cologne, 1974), provides a useful historiographical survey, as does Leonard Krieger, *An Essay on the Theory of Enlightened Despotism* (Chicago, 1975). For more recent summaries see Charles Ingrao, "The Problem of 'Enlightened Absolutism' and the German States," and Eberhard Weis, "Enlightenment and Absolutism in the Holy Roman Empire," both of which appear in the *Journal of Modern History*, 58 (1986).

<sup>7</sup>Otto Brunner, "Das Problem einer europäischen Sozialgeschichte," in his *Neue Wege der Verfassungs- und Sozialgeschichte*, 2d ed. (Göttingen, 1968), pp. 81–84.

absolutist policy becomes a simple matter of establishing its literal connections with Enlightenment theory. The image conveyed is that of a ruler implementing policy much as a cook prepares dishes for his hosts: a dash of Physiocracy for agriculture, a touch of mercantilism for industry, a bit of natural law for the bureaucracy, a dose of Beccaria for the penal system, and voilà, enlightened absolutism! Such a mechanistic approach is inadequate not only because the imputed connections between Enlightenment principles and absolutist practice often dissolve upon closer scrutiny, but also because it reduces politics to the simple imposition of formal doctrines on passive and static societies.

This is not to deny the significance of such doctrines for eighteenth-century government, or to belittle the role of ideas in history. In the realm of politics, however, the relationship between ideas and action is highly complex. Reducing absolutist policy to the imposition of political formulas from above fails to capture the underlying interests and concerns that informed absolutist practice. This formalistic view of the relationship between political theory and practice ignores the social, economic, and cultural forces that helped shape absolutist policy in the eighteenth century. In other words, too great a concern with the absolutist practice of Enlightenment theory can obscure the theory immanent in absolutist practice. As an ideological phenomenon, absolutism encompassed more than the beliefs and attitudes of a particular ruler. Absolutist ideology was no more coterminous with the ideas of individual rulers than, say, the ideology of the New Deal was coterminous with the ideas of Franklin Roosevelt. Absolutist ideology was more than a set of political maxims; it was a mode of ruling, a leviathan of individuals, institutions, and procedures informed by patent or latent assumptions about the ends of power and the means of achieving them.<sup>8</sup>

If historians of absolutism sometimes overlook the less explicit and more diffuse mechanisms of control that operated in the early modern period, it is perhaps because we are ourselves products of societies with such advanced technologies of social discipline. One need not be a disciple of Foucault to recognize this. A major theme in the work of social theorists since the nineteenth century – Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and

<sup>8</sup>Along these lines, see William Sewell's plea for a broader conception of ideology, "one that treats ideology as anonymous, collective, and constitutive of social order," in his "Ideologies and Social Revolutions: Reflections on the French Case," *Journal of Modern History*, 57 (1985), p. 84.

Marcuse, to name just a few – has been the degree to which industrial societies are able to preserve social order through the use of highly internalized and invisible forms of control. As members of societies that have managed to control behavior with an unprecedented degree of efficiency, Western historians are apt to overlook the fact that the less industrialized and egalitarian states of early modern Europe faced problems of social control fundamentally different from those of today. Studies of absolutism that collapse the preservation of social order into formal bureaucratic structures or systems of thought ignore the degree to which rulers of the eighteenth century lacked those instruments of control over which governments today dispose, such as mass communications, the electronic media, mass consumerism, mechanized systems of transport, police and armed forces equipped with highly sophisticated technology, or mass education.

In probing into the reasons why schooling had become such a central concern to Frederickian and Theresian reformers, I have described a pattern of assumptions about the nature of authority that I believe characterized broad areas of absolutist social policy. Absolutist reformers in fields seemingly tangential to education – agrarian relations, manufacturing, popular piety, and the theater, for example – shared concerns strikingly similar to those held by reformers of popular education. What united these reformers was the conviction that the state, if it was to master social, economic, and cultural change, had to redefine the manner in which power was displayed and exercised. Whether seeking to commute labor services, restrict pilgrimages, foster industry, ban burlesques, or build schools, absolutist social policy in Prussia and Austria sought to strengthen moral pillars of authority by refining its exercise. Central to this refinement was a shift in the technology of social discipline, whereby the locus of coercion was to be transferred from outside to inside the individual. Implicit in this attempted transformation was the belief that the extraneous, visible, and objective forms through which authority had traditionally been exercised were no longer efficacious.

It is my contention that this search for more subjective and effective modes of coercion was a defining feature of absolutist social policy in eighteenth-century Prussia and Austria. To be sure, the attempt to reconstitute authority on a more subjective basis did not originate in the eighteenth century. Protestant reformers in the sixteenth century, for example, repeatedly stressed the difference between outward assent and inner conviction. This theme also characterized the Neostoic movement of the

late sixteenth and seventeenth century, a phenomenon whose importance for Continental political thought has been demonstrated by the constitutional historian Gerhard Oestreich.<sup>9</sup> But only in the eighteenth century was this theme expressed so explicitly in absolutist theory and practice.

As a study of absolutist social policy, this book is by no means the first to pursue the theme of social control. In an important essay on absolutism as an agent of social discipline, Oestreich considered the process of *Sozialdisziplinierung* in the early modern period a phenomenon equal in importance to the democratization of Western society in the nineteenth century. Marc Raeff has also explored absolutist efforts at transforming social behavior in a book of essays on "the well-ordered police state." Comparing Russia and the Germanies in the early modern period, Raeff argues that the apparatus of absolutism was instrumental in the development of an "active, productive, efficient, and rationalistic style of economic and cultural behavior." Cultural theorists, above all Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault, have also stressed the role of absolutism in promoting social discipline. Elias and Foucault credit absolutism with having fostered the shift from external coercion to self-discipline as mechanisms for regulating social behavior, a transformation that both view as critical to the development of "modernity" in the West.<sup>10</sup>

The insights of Oestreich, Raeff, Elias, and Foucault are profound and illuminating, and my own debt to these authors should be obvious throughout this book. Yet one must be careful not to exaggerate the transformation they describe. The exercise of authority in any society, whether "primitive" or "modern," always rests on a blend of "internal"

<sup>9</sup>See the essays in Part I of Gerhard Oestreich, *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State*, ed. Brigitta Oestreich and H. G. Koenigsberger, and trans. David McLintock (Cambridge, 1982).

<sup>10</sup>Gerhard Oestreich, "The Structure of the Absolute State," in *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State*; Marc Raeff, *The Well-Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600-1800* (New Haven, 1983); Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, 2 vols. (Bern, 1969). The best example of Foucault's views on the subject is his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977). For other analyses that focus on the theme of social discipline in the eighteenth century see Joachim Gessinger, *Sprache und Bürgertum. Zur Sozialgeschichte sprachlicher Verkehrsformen in Deutschland des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1980); Mohammed Rassem, "Bemerkungen zur 'Sozialdisziplinierung' im frühmodernen Staat," *Zeitschrift für Politik*, 30 (1983); James Van Horn Melton, "Absolutism and 'Modernity' in Early Modern Central Europe," *German Studies Review*, 8 (1985), a review of the issues raised in Raeff's work, and idem, "Arbeitsprobleme des aufgeklärten Absolutismus in Preussen und Österreich," *Mitteilungen des Instituts für österreichische Geschichtsforschung*, 90 (1982).

and “external” controls.<sup>11</sup> It would be absurd to claim that, say, the behavior of medieval individuals was not also embedded in a complex matrix of internal controls. For instance, the penitential system developed by the Catholic church in the Middle Ages certainly carried with it internal modes of control, however much Luther may have dismissed that system for resting on little more than “gallows sorrow.”<sup>12</sup>

Conversely, if self-discipline has assumed an increasingly important function in the regulation of human behavior since the early modern period, force and violence nonetheless remain central to the quotidian practice of ruling. In the case of eighteenth-century Prussia and Austria, the expansion of standing armies proved as important for the maintenance of domestic order as it did for the conduct of foreign policy. The development of standing armies in the early modern period enabled rulers to preserve social order in a way that had not been possible before. Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi, the eighteenth-century cameralist, was characteristically blunt in assessing the domestic role of standing armies in the eighteenth century: “In former times, before states had standing armies, mob rebellions were frequent. . . . But now that rulers have armies capable of imposing strict discipline and docility on the lower orders, religion and morality are sufficient for holding the mob in check. Since the common people know that the army can put down any popular disturbance, they rebel less frequently.”<sup>13</sup> In a more recent work, Otto Büsch has carefully described the role of the army as an agent of socialization and control in eighteenth-century Prussia.<sup>14</sup>

Although standing armies provided eighteenth-century rulers with an important coercive weapon, however, more positive instruments of control became increasingly necessary. As the scope of state authority steadily expanded in the eighteenth century, and as changes in social, economic, and cultural life eroded existing relationships of authority, absolutist reformers and officials became more convinced that the

<sup>11</sup>See David Sabean’s remarks on the nature of *Herrschaft* in his *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 20–27.

<sup>12</sup>See Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton, 1977).

<sup>13</sup>Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi, *Politische und Finanzschriften über wichtige Gegenstände der Staatskunst, der Kriegswissenschaft, und des Cameral- und Finanzwesens*, 3 vols. (Copenhagen, 1764), 3:141–142.

<sup>14</sup>Otto Büsch, *Militärsystem und Sozialleben im alten Preussen, 1713–1807* (West Berlin, 1962).

efficacious exercise of authority depended on freely rendered rather than coerced obedience. What distinguished absolutist social discipline as it evolved in eighteenth-century Prussia and Austria was not just its internal character, but the moral autonomy it sought to cultivate. For absolutist reformers of the time, an enlightened subject was one who rendered obedience voluntarily and spontaneously; conversely, an enlightened ruler exacted the obedience of his subjects through love rather than force. Joseph Sonnenfels, the Austrian cameralist and *Aufklärer*, expressed this view in his *Man without Prejudice*: “Enlightened subjects are obedient because they wish to be, subjects blinded by prejudice because they are forced. A domesticated lion fondles his master, while a lion in fetters constantly seeks to break out of his chains. The lion in bondage will eventually free himself of his fetters, and turn on his master in fury.”<sup>15</sup> Count Johann Anton Pergen, who would gain notoriety as chief of the Habsburg secret police under Joseph II, likewise argued in 1770 that rulers of “a state in which enlightened subjects acknowledge and fulfill their duties out of conviction . . . will face fewer uprisings and will need to issue fewer laws and commands.”<sup>16</sup> Carl Abraham Freiherr von Zedlitz, one of Frederick II’s chief ministers, told the Berlin Academy in 1777 that “an enlightened ruler prefers to govern subjects who serve and obey out of love and conviction, not those mired in the slavish habits of forced servitude.”<sup>17</sup> Thomas Ignaz Freiherr von Pöck, an archducal administrator in Lower Austria, similarly observed that obedience must come from inner conviction rather than external force. In his introduction to the fifth volume of the *Codex Austriacus* (1777), he observed: “A wise ruler does not seek to win the obedience of his subjects through force . . . but appeals to their reason and moves their hearts. This he does so that they will obey his laws not only because he requires it, but also because their deep convictions and righteous sentiments motivate them to do so.”<sup>18</sup>

In the eighteenth century, as I hope to demonstrate, schools became a central target of state policy precisely because they offered an instrument for exacting obedience in a less coercive fashion. Here the promotion of literacy was to be a crucial means of cultivating the moral autonomy of the

<sup>15</sup>Joseph Sonnenfels, *Der Mann ohne Vorurtheile*, 3 vols. (Vienna, 1785), 3:8.

<sup>16</sup>*Haus-, Hof-, und Staatsarchiv*, Vienna: Alte Kabinettsakten, Kart. 1, fol. 1126.

<sup>17</sup>Karl Abraham Freiherr von Zedlitz, *Über den Patriotismus als ein Gegenstand der Erziehung in monarchischen Staaten* (Berlin, 1777), p. 13.

<sup>18</sup>*Codex Austriacus*, 6 vols. (1704–77), 5:5.

subject. Part I, which describes the cultural and religious origins of the compulsory school movement, shows how Pietism and reform Catholicism relied heavily on popular education and literacy in their efforts to cultivate more inward forms of popular devotion. Pietist pedagogy, systematically formulated by August Hermann Francke in the early eighteenth century and later incorporated into reform Catholicism by the Silesian abbot Johann Ignaz Felbiger, provided both movements with a vehicle for reconstituting popular culture on a more literate basis. If I appear to have stressed the religious roots of absolutist reform at the expense of more "secular" sources, this reflects a deliberate attempt on my part to rectify the one-sided concern with Enlightenment thought that often characterizes studies of eighteenth-century reform.

Part II moves from the cultural and religious roots of pedagogical reform to the social and economic setting that gave it resonance. There I focus on the transitional forces at work in the Prussian and Austrian countryside, most notably the rapid expansion of the rural poor, the rise of rural industry, and changes in the relationship between peasant and seignior. From the standpoint of absolutist reformers, the concomitant disruption, or transformation, of social relations of production in the countryside necessitated a greater degree of moral autonomy in the peasant. Pietist pedagogy, with its stress on inner discipline and obedience, provided a means of fostering this autonomy.

Part III examines more narrowly the efforts to implement the Frederickian school decrees of 1763–65 and the Theresian edict of 1774. In evaluating the relative success or failure of those measures, I have tried to suggest some of the ways in which they helped lay the basis for mass public education. At the same time, these chapters examine in detail the obstacles and contradictions that seriously impeded the success of the compulsory school movement in these states. As in other fields of absolutist policy, a wide chasm separated royal edicts from their implementation. And as is so often the case with reform in general, school reform in eighteenth-century Prussia and Austria was to have consequences quite different from those envisioned by its original authors.