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“Some Here Are Warm for the Part of America”

_The American Revolution and the Imperial Court at Vienna, 1776–1783_

“EVERY IDLE FELLOW TALKS of America,” complained the British ambassador Sir Robert Murray Keith about his Viennese neighbours to his friends in London. He first sounded that alarm in 1774. As time rumbled on, the rumours of discontent between Great Britain and her thirteen colonies became an unavoidable fact, much to the fascination of the “idle” onlookers in Vienna. When war broke out a year later and the unilateral announcement of independence followed another year after, Viennese courtiers became fully aware and engrossed by events transpiring across the Atlantic. They were not merely passive observers, however. American news fuelled sympathies as well as speculation. There were those who felt content to follow events closely and those who could not do so without expressing their support. There were, of course, those who disagreed with the American crusade, but they were in a minority. The imperial court at Vienna was a largely pro-American scene. When the first official American representative, William Lee, arrived in Vienna in 1778, he could write home with pride about how “Some here are Warm for the part of America.”

Identifying who these “warm” supporters of the American Revolution were within the Viennese court reveals the widespread interest in American affairs within Habsburg government circles. This includes individuals who worked and attended court in Vienna, from the clerks to the socialites to the highest echelons of political circles, including the imperial family themself. The rather pro-American stance to be found across this hierarchy might seem surprising at first but it speaks to the cultural and intellectual power of the American Revolution. Discussing the attitudes of imperial courtiers in Vienna is a necessary step in understanding the American Revolution’s impact upon the Habsburg Monarchy, especially since courtiers’ knowledge and opinions shaped the policies of the Habsburg dynasty and the policy of the Holy Roman Empire.
The nobility, moreover, were social shapers, signifying contemporary intellectual and cultural currents. Whilst French and British influences were undeniable in their socio-cultural cosmos, a distinct American line entered the highest Habsburg circles as a result of the fascination surrounding the Revolution as a political event. Absorption of the American Revolution at the Viennese court produced discernible effects; it shaped the monarchs’ responses to the Revolution as well as the first American envoy’s chances of success. As a continual site of cultural exchange, political patronage, and social visibility, the imperial court at Vienna also determined, in part, the cultural tone for the rest of the Habsburg lands. Fascination with the American Revolution, once signalled there, became an obsession across the whole of the Monarchy. In doing so, courtiers not only defined their own cultural cosmos but also the wider reception of America throughout the Habsburg Monarchy.

Imperial Courtiers and the American Revolution

Individuals rarely commit to paper with their own name something which they do not believe to be true. In this sense, letters written to Benjamin Franklin, arguably the most famous celebrity of the revolutionary cause in Europe, provide one of the most insightful windows into the effects of the American Revolution and its widespread popularity within the Habsburg Monarchy. It is, admittedly, an imperfect window; one which marginalises those who felt disgruntled by the American revolutionary influence, or those whose letters have failed to be preserved. But the outpouring of sentiment manifested in the surviving letters from the Viennese elites does offer an illuminating perspective as to how the American cause was received among imperial courtiers. Three officials contacted Franklin from inside the walls of the Hofburg, the main residence of the Habsburgs in Vienna. The earliest message came from Joseph Bek, a comptroller (Raitrat) in the accounting department of the war ministry (the Hofkriegsbuchhalterei). Bek’s letter gushed with his enthusiasm for the United States. He hoped to emigrate and serve through Franklin’s sponsorship. His desire to “sacrifice” himself for the American cause came from his reading of “The History of America,” which likely referred to William Robertson’s volumes of the same name. Bek possibly received these tomes through his friendship with the Zinzendorfs; Count Karl von Zinzendorf, the governor of Trieste, who knew Robertson personally from his visit to Scotland and read his works, and his half-brother Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf who, as president of the former Court Accounting Chamber (Hofrechnungskammer), wrote a recommendation for Bek to Franklin.
Whereas Bek requested Franklin’s assistance—an example that many others in the Habsburg Monarchy would emulate—two other courtiers sought to offer gifts to Franklin. Paul Strattmann worked in the Court Library (Hofbibliothek) as a court censor when he wrote to Franklin offering a catalogue of French books. His gift to Franklin was a token of esteem but also as an offer of service should Franklin need a librarian. In 1786, Johann Melchior von Birkenstock, another member of the censorship committee and court councillor (Hofrat), gifted Franklin a copy of his work commemorating Frederick II of Prussia, which Franklin deemed worthy enough to acknowledge. Importantly, Birkenstock shared with Franklin a deeply held sentiment for the United States. “I pray to God,” Birkenstock informed Franklin, “that he will preserve for you for the glory of your country, for the consolation of all good people, a long succession of years, and that he will fill you with blessings reserved for the most worthy mortals.” These were hardly empty words since Birkenstock asked Franklin to “accept these vows, Sir, as true and sincere.” Vowing to pray for the prosperity of the United States was a remarkable promise for a Viennese courtier to make, especially one who sat on the censorship committee within a monarchical state.

Such sentiments espoused by Birkenstock and Strattmann help explain the relatively lax censorship of Americana in the Habsburg lands during this period. From mid-century onwards, censorship in the Habsburg Monarchy fell under the purview of a central committee consisting of religious officials, university elders, and several courtiers. After Maria Theresa’s death in 1780, her son Joseph II relaxed many of these efforts and allowed a flood of new domestic works to enter market. From 1754 until the thaw of the 1780s, the committee maintained a running list of banned works in the Catalogus librorum prohibitorum (The catalogue of prohibited books), which mainly consisted of works critiquing the clergy, philosophical and literary works deemed too “radical,” and, of course, pornography. In all, the committee banned 5,000 works in the period before Joseph II’s sole accession and only a few hundred thereafter. The vast majority were French and German works; English texts numbered just over a hundred by 1791. During the Revolution, only seven works relating to America appeared on the censors’ lists. In 1776, three books received the “damnatur” (rejected) grade as retroactive bans on works of fiction which portrayed America in an adventurous light. Apart from a German translation of William Russel’s History of America, the remaining texts pertained directly to the Revolution and included a German rendition of one of Samuel Adams’s speeches. No other revolutionary tract or American figure’s works were banned in the Habsburg Monarchy until the 1790s. The reaction was the same in other regions such as
the Austrian Netherlands and Habsburg Lombardy where censorship rates were lower and the Catholic Church determined efforts towards more religious and moral matters rather than political tracts. The relatively lenient attitude of censorship officials towards Americana, combined with the fact most nobles could obtain outlawed works through various means, effectively rendered the imperial court and the Habsburg Monarchy completely permeable to the expansive literature surrounding the Revolution.

Newspapers in the Habsburg Monarchy reported on American matters rather freely but when editors did fall foul to censorship due to the Revolution, they received support from the court nobility. The state-sponsored *Wienerisches Diarium* produced the highest amount of Americana in the Habsburg Monarchy out of twenty-four other newspapers and periodicals which discussed the Revolution. From tumultuous Boston in 1774 to surrender at Yorktown in 1781, around 3,500 pages described revolutionary events in the *Diarium*. In April 1779, its editors created a separate “American News” section. Texts by American revolutionaries frequently appeared in German translation without any difficulty from censors. In fact, Thomas Jefferson’s *Summary View of the Rights of British America* became the first such published text in late 1774.

There were some signs of self-censorship, however. Prior to 1776, for example, emigration to North America was a reoccurring theme in the *Diarium* but this topic halted abruptly from then until the end of the war. When the Declaration of American Independence became known in Europe, most Habsburg newspapers exercised caution—with the exception of those in Lombardy and Tuscany—by omitting the charges against King George III and printing only the preamble and conclusion. Other newspapers in the Habsburg lands showed clear signs of tampering. In one Hungarian newspaper, the editor apologised to his readers for the blank spaces about the Revolution in previous issues due to what he called the “High Authority.”

In December 1777, the *Wienerisches Diarium* incurred the same scrutiny after publishing an article that would become known in Vienna as the “American Catechism.” The article outlined the radical devotion of the Revolution’s adherents through a fictional interview with a mob of rebellious patriots in the form of a series of fictive questions and answers. The final exchange provided the most alarming refrain: “What shall pass if you should be defeated? Answer: We would set everything ablaze and kill ourselves, our women and children.” When Maria Theresa learned of this publication, she was incensed that such an article had been published and sought retribution against the editors. However, one nobleman intervened to protect them from punishment. Count August von Seilern
had been the Habsburg ambassador in London during the 1760s where he reported sympathetically about the colonists during the early disturbances with the British in North America.\textsuperscript{59} By 1777 he had returned from London and was the Governor of Lower Austria (\textit{Statthalter des Erzherzogtums Österreich unter der Enns}). He interceded in the case over the “American Cathecism” by insisting that the newspapers had not impinged upon monarchical supremacy by printing the text, but rather had merely sought to show the “fanaticism” in North America.\textsuperscript{30} Seilern’s reluctance to prosecute the editors reflected the general tolerance shown by courtiers towards the flood of Americana during the Revolution.

Across the Habsburg Monarchy, administrators shared similar sentiments. The head of the regional government in Lombardy, Count Johann Josef von Wilczek, convinced Franklin’s Milanese friends to confer his “highest esteem” and sought to obtain an original English copy of the constitutions of the United States—this was after one of them had lent him a copy in French.\textsuperscript{31} In the Austrian Netherlands, Count Joseph Nicolas Windischgrätz declared Franklin to be a worldwide inspiration.\textsuperscript{32} He extolled Franklin’s wartime actions, claiming he had done “so much good for [his] country [. . .] and for humanity.”\textsuperscript{33} In a giddier second letter, written in response to Franklin’s simple receipt of the fifty copies of Windischgrätz’s latest essay, he confessed his wish to meet Franklin, willing as he was to travel from Brussels to Paris in order to become the “happi- est man” in the world if Franklin accepted.\textsuperscript{34} Buoyed after their meeting in late April 1785, Windischgrätz wrote once more to reiterate his “eagerness” to fulfil any of Franklin’s future “orders” either in the Austrian Netherlands or the Holy Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{35}

Windischgrätz was the sort of aristocratic who enjoyed contact with famous minds like Franklin.\textsuperscript{36} However, his interactions with Franklin were also somewhat more sincere than his interactions with other famous scholars. In addition to flattering words, Windischgrätz actively supported American activities by acting as a courier for American newspapers, which Franklin sent to Vienna.\textsuperscript{37} But Windischgrätz was an erratic intellectual whose progressive views jarred with his contemporaries who thought him to be wild, vain, and an overly utopian thinker.\textsuperscript{38} In a series of pamphlets published in the mid-to late 1780s, Windischgrätz dabbled in philosophical and political matters in sometimes meandering tracts. In one treatise, his \textit{De l’âme, de l’intelligence et de la liberté de la volonté} (Of the soul, of intelligence, and of freedom of will), he merged his philosophical studies with Franklin’s electrical theories, asserting that human intelligence was defined by an internal electricity.\textsuperscript{39} By 1787, his mind had hardened towards the belief that government should not transgress natural rights of
Some Here Are Warm for the Part of America

Amid the revolutionary unrest in the Austrian Netherlands in the late 1780s, Windischgrätz advocated constitutional rights and defended these in radical pamphlets that “turned heads” and drew the ire of his friend, Emperor Joseph II. The American Revolution was therefore a natural attraction for Windischgrätz given his intellectual leaning and his admiration of Franklin.

When in Vienna, Windischgrätz was part of a close coterie of influential courtiers thanks to his first wife, the Countess Maria Josepha Windischgrätz (née Erdödy) and her friends. The “society of the five dames” brought together prominent members of the court’s aristocracy for almost daily informal gatherings starting in 1767. As a close friend of the Windischgrätzes and fixed member of the group, Count Philip Cobenzl noted how the meetings in the Viennese townhouses and country palaces revolved around sipping tea and chatting as “one of us read from an interesting work of some sort.” Discussions of the American Revolution featured in these chatty moments. Karl von Zinzendorf noted the oration of an American revolutionary text during one dinner party in 1783 with several of the dames in attendance.

Yet despite the collective being composed of “political and religious radicals,” it is doubtful that this coterie harboured much American support beyond perhaps those of the Windischgrätzes. Although Princess Eleonore von Liechtenstein (née Oettingen-Spielberg) delighted in reading Voltaire and became an epitome of an enlightened woman at court, she mistrusted revolutionary movements. For her, the American Revolution was simply a step too far as reflected in her distaste for the upheaval caused by the Revolution. During one meeting, Liechtenstein derided the official “sixth member” of the group whose idleness in trying to end the American Revolution caused her great frustration. The “sixth member” was the emperor, who joined the group from 1769 onwards. At another point, Joseph’s visit to the Dutch Republic in 1781 annoyed her further since she felt the visit was mistimed and could damage relations with the British who had just gone to war with the Dutch.

Her preference for ending the American war came from her sister-in-law, another one of the dames, Princess Leopoldine von Liechtenstein (née von Sternberg), who was friends with Lady Juliana Penn, the daughter-in-law of Pennsylvania’s founder William Penn. In a letter to Leopoldine, Lady Penn had explained the dire situation of the loyalist dynasty whose family estates had been confiscated by the patriots without compensation. Almost destitute, she appealed to the Liechtensteins for Joseph’s intervention, and the duo tried to help. Given the criticism of the emperor’s actions, Eleonore and Leopoldine likely knew that Joseph would be unable or unwilling to offer any assistance and so they hesitated.
until the end of the conflict when they asked an intermediary “in the most pressing way” for Franklin’s intercession on behalf of the Penns. Franklin of course ignored the request as he had Lady Penn’s earlier direct appeal to him. Though Lady Penn was not successful, her appeal increased the negative views of the American Revolution held by both Eleonore and Leopoldine Liechtenstein. Others within the group also disliked the American cause. At the prominent Burghausen salon, Countess Leopoldine von Kaunitz (née Oettingen-Spielberg) erupted into “a grand tirade against the Americans” when the emperor raised the subject. Such an outburst greased the millwheels of gossip at court.

Apart from the dames, there were several prominent Anglophile salons in Vienna which harboured those more unsympathetic to the American cause. The houses of the Pergen and Thun families constituted this bulwark. Both households shared close ties to the British ambassadors serving in Vienna. Countess Philippine Gabriele von Pergen (née Groschlag) and Count Johann Anton von Pergen considered themselves intimate friends of Sir Robert Murray Keith. Count Pergen command excellent English and wrote extensively to Keith on personal matters when out of town. The previous ambassador David Murray, then Viscount Stormont, occupied the same house as the Thun family on Minoritenplatz and fraternisations were so close that guests suspected an affair between Stormont and Countess Wilhelmine von Thun (née Uhlfeld). Years later, Keith relocated to the same residence. Both households became renowned among British travellers for their hospitality and friendly dispositions towards Britain. The famed travel writer of his age Nathaniel Wraxall waxed lyrical on their importance for such visitors to Vienna. “The houses of both [...] form the best resource for the English during their stay in this capital,” he wrote.

Count Karl von Zinzendorf, a frequent guest at the Pergen’s whenever he was in town, noted the continual presence of English guests. On one occasion, he happened to overhear Countess Pergen reassuring her visitors that there were “ten royalists for every one American” in Vienna. At first, Countess Thun was broadly sympathetic to the Americans. “I am a Bostonian at heart,” she wrote to one of her British friends in 1775, but bloodshed dampened her enthusiasm. Both countesses played host to the centre of British life among Viennese courtiers.

There is no evidence of any anti-American sentiments among the wider court nobility apart from pro-British salons and the dames. The first explicitly anti-American propaganda in the Habsburg Monarchy circulated privately after the Napoleonic Wars when most aristocrats viewed all revolution negatively. In fact, courtiers contested the condemnation of the American Revolution by the dames. In 1781, Zinzendorf noted a “dispute about the Americans” over a
dinner hosted by the Liechtensteins.\textsuperscript{59} He did not describe the argument in any
great detail nor the positions of the attendees, leaving us to surmise that the
likely pro-American guests were Gottfried van Swieten—Strattmann’s boss at
the Court Library—and Count Joseph Johann von Seilern, the son of Count
Seilern who had defended the publication of the Declaration of American Inde-
pendence.\textsuperscript{60} Likely opposing them were the conservative-minded Bishop of Wie-
ner Neustadt, Johann Heinrich von Kerens and the elderly Prince Heinrich von
Auersperg, then aged eighty-four, who were close friends of the Liechtensteins
and the British ambassador. In any case, the divides over America between the
dames and their guests was enough to merit Zinzendorf’s record.

Zinzendorf himself was certainly one of the most learned men in the Habsburg
Monarchy about the American Revolution. A Saxon by birth but scion of an
ancient Austrian family, Zinzendorf was the nephew of the Protestant evange-
list, Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf who had led the Moravian Herrnhuter to
North America in the 1740s.\textsuperscript{61} After studying in Jena and moving to Vienna, Karl
von Zinzendorf embarked upon a series of state-sponsored commercial tours as
a means to gather intelligence on the latest economic and administrative ideas.\textsuperscript{62}
Great Britain, as part of his tour, was where he gained his intimate knowledge
of America. He met Benjamin Franklin in London, walked with William Rob-
ertson in Edinburgh, travelled the Highlands with Johan Murray, the fourth
earl of Dunmore—before he became the royal governor of Virginia—and dined
with Glasgow’s infamous tobacco barons.\textsuperscript{63} In a report prepared for the Vien-
nese court, simply entitled his Observations, Zinzendorf devoted an entire section
to the economic and legal arrangements of British North America.\textsuperscript{64} Spanning
nearly one hundred pages, Zinzendorf described how the colonial government
operated in all twenty-six British-American colonies. He listed their major man-
ufactured goods, detailed various colonial currencies, explained property rights,
calculated the populations of each colony and their tax incomes, and provided a
history of major cities from Boston to Charleston. As a result of his British soujo-
turn, Zinzendorf became an unquestionable authority on the American colonies
in the Habsburg Monarchy at the beginning of the Revolution.

Zinzendorf spent most of the American revolutionary years in Trieste where
he served as governor between 1776 and 1782. He used his position to procure
Americana in Trieste, where traders smuggled anything for a price. He developed
a huge appetite for such literature, reading all he could about the Revolution. In
1778, for instance, he read Thomas Paine’s Common Sense, John Dickinson’s Let-
ters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania, and the British radical Richard Price’s Obser-
vations on the Nature of Civil Liberty.\textsuperscript{65} Zinzendorf’s interest persisted long after
the war. In the 1790s, he read histories of the Revolution by Americans David Ramsay and Charles Stedman. His personal contacts fleshed out the rest. In 1780, Zinzendorf heard first-hand accounts of the Ticonderoga campaign from English guests over a game of whist. On another occasion, he met with a British veteran of the war. Consuls and merchants became Zinzendorf’s avid informers of revolutionary news throughout the period. During his frequent visits to the Vienna, Zinzendorf went out of his way to learn from others about the Revolution. He sought out those more knowledgeable and exchanged texts on American topics. As an inquisitive person, the American Revolution fascinated Zinzendorf throughout this period.

Imperial courtiers were well-informed about the Revolution and animated by its cause. In an age when courtly life and the governance of a nation were so closely linked, the personal opinions of administrators mattered a great deal. Positive reception of the American struggle enabled transparent encouragement among officials for Franklin and his Revolution. In terms of the censorship, the deeply held views of two committee members accounts to some degree for the negligible efforts to curb the flow of Americana during the Revolution. Count Seilern’s defence of the Wienerisches Diarium reflected his more favourable disposition towards the American colonies resulting from his earlier time as ambassador in London and his advocacy was strong enough to question his monarch’s intentions. Zinzendorf’s erudition about British North America influenced his later outlook on trade between Trieste and the United States. In short, absorption of the American cause among courtiers influenced tangible aspects of the Habsburg reaction to the Revolution.

Impugning the American Influence at Court

For certain, a curiosity about the American Revolution pervaded the atmosphere at court in Vienna. The nobility was united by an interest in the progress of American affairs. During the revolutionary years, speculations abounded, and news of the latest victories were shared among all ranks of the nobility. This incessant obsession of courtiers drove the British ambassador, intent on suppressing the issue, to utter despair. The desperation is almost tangible in Sir Robert Murray Keith’s personal correspondence with a group of friendly civil servants in London known as “the Gang.” “I would give my best suit of gala clothes for the gift of a six months’ fore-knowledge of your American affairs,” he offered to one friend in the British admiralty. To another he proposed fifty pistols in exchange for any news about the “refractory offspring in America.” Keith
constantly bemoaned how he was “famished,” “parched,” “too little informed” about American events and implored his friends to become his “Cicerone in America,” or his guide with “their echo to my attentive ear,” or his “pilot to guide me into port.”

When his friends in London failed him, he often turned to others in the British diplomatic corps but without much success either. The sudden death of his younger brother, Sir Basil Keith, Governor of Jamaica from 1773, left Keith bereft and without another avenue for information. As a member of the Scottish aristocracy, however, Keith often played host to a number of young Scots on their Grand Tours of Europe and came to rely on these informal channels for American news. When the young Scottish aristocrat Henry Hay-Macdougal visited Vienna during the winter of 1776, for example, Keith received letters containing forwarded reports from relatives fighting in North America. Resonant of Keith’s desperate situation, Hay-Macdougal informed his father on multiple occasions how “We long much for good American News.”

Keith laid bare the reasoning behind his desperation in his personal letters. He sought to combat the “public clamour” for Americana at the Viennese court where, in his opinion, only the voices of “the noisy brawlers for licentious democracy” could be heard. As early as March 1774, Keith bluntly pointed out the precariousness of the situation:

Everybody here talks wildly about liberty, and electricity, because they understand neither; and I am shrewdly suspected to be a friend to monarchy and King George, and therefore to have seen everything that regards America and the Doctor [Franklin] with an eye of partiality. I shall fight, however, a rare battle, under your banner; only give me now and then a few materials to dumbfounder my noisy opponents.

Keith clearly felt that an information war was being waged in Vienna between him and those advocating for the Americans. He also wanted to rehabilitate the British standing against “the absurdities with which every paper has been filled” and to “stem with honour the torrent of falsehood and presumption.” Following talk of desertions in the British army in North America, Keith was relieved to learn from friends that this was just hearsay and he used this news “to knock half a dozen lies on the head.”

Keith sensed, however, that he was fighting a losing battle such was the interest and pro-American feeling among courtiers. Compounding his situation was the increasingly bad turn of events as Britain slowly but surely lost control of the American colonies. Keith could not conceal British defeats from Viennese
courtiers. One of Keith’s young Scottish visitors commented in a letter to his mother upon learning of the recent naval defeats and of the British surrender after the Siege of Yorktown,

You can’t conceive how our poor country is now despised, even by those who acknowledge the Great Power, Patriotism, and Courage of Great Britain. They ask, have you lost your Senses that you don’t procure better commanders, and punish those who behave ill. A Foreigner asks an Englishman [here]: where are all your sailors who distinguished themselves in the last war? Your Hawke, your Boscawen, your Howe, your Keppel, your Gilchrist, your Elliot etc. etc. Those that never sought conquering and who never turned their back to their enemies. The Englishman with silent sorrow shakes his head.86

“Silent sorrow” summed up the feeling of shame that clouded Keith’s status in Vienna as a result of the war. Such was the bitterness of loss that another of Keith’s Scottish guests wrote home to the Highlands towards the end of the war, “I am almost ashamed to wear the English uniform; the taking of Minorca surprises everybody here and I suppose the whole world too.”87 By 1780, the British chances at victory seemed so remote that Keith led his delegation and friends to a chapel in St. Stephen’s Cathedral to pray for England.88

Among the foreign diplomatic corps at the Viennese court, Keith was most certainly outnumbered by pro-American supporters. He remarked how news of British defeats made it “hard to hold my head as high as I shall ever wish to hold it,” especially among the “score of foreign ministers who […] look upon the faithless Bourbons as the very lords of the ascendant.”89 Indeed, the French delegation acted as a bastion of support for the Americans in Vienna. Prior to 1778 when France openly took part in the conflict, they ensured Franklin had open channels of communication with Vienna.90 In transporting back and forth letters from his friends, the chief secretary in one instance slipped in his own letter to Franklin, offering him another means of conveyance and supporting the application of the delegation’s courier who wished to go fight for the United States.91 At the same time, another secretary offered to sell Franklin his recipe for improved gunpowder, something which he felt would secure patriot victory.92 Cardinal Louis de Rohan, the French ambassador from 1772 to 1774, offered one of Franklin’s friends in Vienna the use of his palace in Paris should he not have means to visit Franklin.93 These supportive acts preceded the later hosting and direction of the first American envoy to the court of Vienna by French representatives.
Keith’s only hope was the attitude of the State Chancellor (Staatskanzler), Prince Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz-Rietberg. As his biographer points out, “no subsequent foreign minister, including Metternich, wielded the kind of domestic influence that Kaunitz did.” Kaunitz was the gatekeeper for international affairs. He decided what issues to bring to the monarchs’ attention and formulated his own articulations before doing so. It is for this reason that Kaunitz has been touted as a “de facto third head of state.” Although Kaunitz was a noted fan of enlightened thinkers and many historians have pointed to his interest in the French philosophes and patronage of the arts, there is no evidence that he held any interest in American ideals. In all his memoranda and discussions on American-related events, Kaunitz adopted an opinion heavily defined by geopolitical considerations and a marked caution towards the upheavals caused by rebellion against British monarchical authority. Containment appears to be the byword for his initial reaction. At no other point was Kaunitz clearer about his fears of democratic revolution than in his remarks on first reading the Declaration of American Independence in the Viennese newspapers. He believed it to contain “extraordinary sections which may cause the spirit of rebellion to spread like a plague.” For Kaunitz, the anti-monarchical nature of the Revolution was the seemingly greater danger to ward against.

None of his official or personal writings with the Habsburg monarchs strays from this guarded approach. Much has been made of the terms “insurgents” and “rebels” that Kaunitz used to describe Americans in his despatches to Habsburg diplomats, yet these descriptions do not reveal any great insights into his views on their Revolution since such terms were commonplace among European officials. What is more revealing is that Kaunitz held on to this terminology longer than other officials within the Habsburg administration, perhaps demonstrating that his subtle bias against the Revolution persisted longer than those of his contemporaries. When confronted with the news of Franklin’s arrival in Paris amid rumours of an intended alliance, Kaunitz regarded Franklin’s intentions as “foolish” if the rumours were true. Kaunitz certainly expressed his belief that any American victory would be “hard to expect” but the effects of one should be prepared for either way. This black-and-white logic surrounding American events is the major characteristic of Kaunitz’s reaction to the Revolution. In spite of his dominance over the State Chancellery, Kaunitz’s logic was only advisory in nature, as the Habsburg monarchs remained the sole arbiters of executive authority and indeed had rather different ideas.
The Imperial Family and the American Revolution

In considering the position of the foreign monarchs, historians have tended to assume a natural alignment against the Americans since a revolution against the British crown transgressed the rights of rulers. This assumption is only half correct in the Habsburg case. Not all members of the Habsburg dynasty shared a negative outlook on American events. They were equally affected by the same curiosity which intrigued the Viennese court at large.

When the Continental Congress proclaimed independence in 1776, Maria Theresa had ruled the Habsburg Monarchy for just over thirty-five years. Her early reign endured a baptism of fire during the War of Austrian Succession and the failure to reverse territorial losses in the Seven Years’ War. She lost all appetite for international conflict and dedicated the remaining years of her reign to securing peace and stability for her realm. It was within this context that the sixty-year-old monarch received the unwelcome news of revolution across the Atlantic. Her initial reaction chimed with Kaunitz: the American Revolution was something to be ended and shielded against in the meantime. When an article known as the “American Catechism”—advancing the American justifications for the war—appeared alongside a translation of the Declaration of American Independence in the Wienerisches Diarium, her response centred on stifling public awareness in case it should “breed incivility” within her realms.

Maria Theresa was equally fearful about the international fallout of the Revolution. She feared it would lead the whole of Europe to war. “The war in America,” she fretted to her daughter Marie Antoinette, queen of France, “may very easily cause a conflagration where I could be driven against my will, especially with our despicable neighbour Prussia.” Her fears seemed borne less out of prediction than her memory of the Seven Years’ War when conflict in North America had boiled over into a war in continental Europe.

Maria Theresa remained highly vigilant about American events due in part to her paranoia over its consequences. Among the people of the Habsburg court, she may have indeed been the most informed about the actual events of war thanks to her network of informants, which she cultivated up to her death in November 1780. Aside from the steady stream of information from Kaunitz’s ministry, she also relied on other court officials for news from America, who supplied to her “reflexions upon the present affaires of the world which she could not so well be informed of by her own ministers.” Franklin, by way of his Habsburg correspondents, sensed a way to influence the imperial court. On December 29, 1777, the first of many long reports Franklin penned made its way into the hands of
Maria Theresa’s secretary, Baron Karl Joseph von Pichler, which summarised Franklin’s views on the current state of the war. Franklin showed a clear determination to influence Maria Theresa towards a more favourable outlook on the Americans. His reports emphasised atrocities committed by the British, the losses suffered by mistreated Hessian recruits, and the significance of American victory at Saratoga. One line spoke directly to her as a sovereign:

If America without England can become formidable, what would become of England combined again with America? Those who know the natural insolence of the British Nation will think that the common interest of Europe is to keep these two nations separate.

These lines were aimed at coaxing Maria Theresa’s support for American independence by reminding her of Britain’s propensity for expansion and the dangers of American defeat. Maria Theresa left no written reaction to these texts, but she expressed gratitude to the court officials for supplying her with these informal updates, which demonstrates her curiosity to learn about the Revolution.

When Maria Theresa passed away in late 1780, this dissemination campaign continued with her son Joseph II who from then on ruled as the sole sovereign of the Habsburg Monarchy. He received a French translation of Franklin’s views in
1782, which was also read aloud to Joseph’s private chamberlain, Count Karl von Hatzfeld—such was the interest at the court. It was not the first time Joseph had received and read such material. In August 1782, a similar set of Franklin’s reflections arrived, which the emperor kept personally. Franklin’s direct link into the Habsburg court and by extension the royal family was unusual for European courts. In France, American envoys waited on invitations to speak with the king, whereas in Vienna, their desired words could be translated and delivered personally to the Habsburg monarch.

When Joseph II travelled to Paris to visit his sister Marie Antoinette in 1777, two myths regarding him and the American Revolution were born. Only one can be proven. In advance of his journey, Joseph made known the sort of people he wished to meet in the French capital, Franklin included. There was one stumbling block, however. Joseph could not openly invite Franklin to an audience nor could he, as an imperial ruler, pay a visit to a rebellious commoner. Although the meeting between the American revolutionary and the “revolutionary emperor” was intended to be a meeting of enlightened minds, they could not escape the political ramifications if such a meeting were to take place. Yet Joseph seemed determined to meet with Franklin. Intent on finding a solution, Habsburg ministers arranged for an intermediary to host the meeting in an unofficial capacity. They chose Raimondo Niccoli, the head of the Tuscan delegation in Paris and a supportive figure to the Americans, since his service to the emperor’s brother and his affinity with Franklin would endear him to both sides.

On Monday, May 26, 1777, Franklin received an invitation to drink hot chocolate at the Hotel de Mirabeau two days later with Niccoli, a Count Falkenstein—Joseph’s customary travelling alias—and two Frenchmen. Franklin had all the reason to accept. It was a great opportunity to press the claims of the Americans directly to one of Europe’s great powers and to the head of the Holy Roman Empire, the source of German mercenaries for the British. Moreover, the personal admiration between these two men went both ways. Franklin had noted the arrival of the “very industrious” emperor a few weeks earlier. He also later commented that “I respect very much the Character of that Monarch, and think that if I were one of his Subjects he would find me a good One.” Franklin and Joseph were to be disappointed, however. Franklin recollected the event on the back of his invitation immediately after the arranged meeting: “The Emperor did not appear, and the Abbé [Niccoli] since tells me that the Number of other persons who occasionally visited him that morning [. . .] prevented his coming [. . . though] at twelve he came but I was gone.” As a result Franklin and Joseph never actually met in person and one of the greatest encounters of
the enlightenment, perhaps on par with the meeting of Johann Sebastian Bach and Frederick II of Prussia, vanished.

Niccoli obscured the truth from Franklin by telling him a “number of other persons” had prevented Joseph’s attendance. The “other persons” were in fact the British delegation in Paris. The British ambassador knew about the meeting and worked to thwart it. He and his secretaries descended upon Joseph that morning and stalled him long enough to prevent him meeting with Franklin. In spite of their endeavours, the British did not prevent one of the emperor’s subordinates from attending the meeting. Count Johann Philipp Cobenzl—the same count who had attended meetings with the dames—recorded in his diary how he enjoyed his time at Count Niccoli’s and his “appointment with Doctor Franklin.” No further contact came between the two parties during the emperor’s stay, however. News of the British subterfuge eventually spread and even soon found its way back to Vienna. “I know he [Joseph] wished to have a discourse with you,” one courtier later mourned, “and he should be sorry some management for England had prevented him to instruct himself in the company of a philosopher.” Joseph’s plan to meet Franklin may have been sabotaged, but his high regard for Franklin still became widely known.

Underhand British actions could not prevent the rumours among French courtiers that Franklin had in fact met Joseph. In 1787, the Scottish statistician and architect William Playfair published a pamphlet titled Joseph and Benjamin – A Conversation, which he claimed was based upon “a French manuscript.” Whether or not such a French manuscript existed is unknown. Playfair’s work was a rich fictional dialogue in which the two men discuss human nature, economic theory, and exchange good humour between them. His version of the encounter was an idealised form of enlightened interaction between men renowned for their progressive inclinations. Playfair’s publication cemented the ambiguity of the meeting in the public mindset despite the poor reviews it received in London. In the fictional conversation, the character of Joseph is supportive of Franklin’s revolutionary efforts and so the first myth was born.

The second myth arose from one of the many dinners during Joseph’s stay in Paris. A guest at one reportedly asked him whether he supported the actions of the American patriots. Joseph cryptically replied something along the lines of “I am a royalist by trade.” This remark became arguably Joseph’s most well-known utterance on the American Revolution. It was included in numerous contemporary publications but without a credible source. Since then this quotation has appeared frequently, most notably in American literature. There is no
single verifiable trace of whether Joseph said this or not. It is likely this phrase was invented. As the Habsburg ambassador commented to Maria Theresa a few months after Joseph’s departure, “The public continues to be preoccupied with the details of the emperor’s journey; they amuse themselves by composing a thousand anecdotes that I do not believe are genuine.” Moreover, it was simply not in keeping with the rest of his visit where everything was carefully choreographed and even the meeting with Franklin was conducted under the strictest measures to avoid any signs of partiality. In all likelihood, Joseph kept his opinions on such matters close to his chest.

Joseph expressed his true feelings on the American Revolution with individuals closer to him. In his personal correspondence with his ambassador in London, Count Ludovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso, Joseph revealed an increasing disdain for British actions in the American Revolution. He disagreed with what he perceived to be Belgiojoso’s “slight Anglomania” considering the disastrous campaigns in North America. “You cannot deny,” he argued to Belgiojoso, “that it would be impossible to make worse all the affairs of England, that is politically and militarily, from the last years.” In subsequent letters, Joseph saw the consequences of the Revolution as overwhelmingly negative for Britain. “The fruits of this disorder,” he warned, “where there is neither love of country, nor of the state, nor of the sovereign, will be felt for a long time.” This sorrow for the effects of the Revolution was the closest Joseph came to condemning it. However, he did not outright denounce the Americans for causing such chaos. They appeared in his letters as a rather more innocent by-product of British misrule than active instigators—his descriptions mimicking a line espoused by Franklin in the reports that made its way to Joseph at court. In a personal letter to his brother, Joseph voiced his belief in British comeuppance after receiving the “happy” news from Belgiojoso that the famous British Admiral Rodney had been roundly defeated by French forces. “I am not as English as they believe,” he confided to him, “nor as they want me to be.”

In his private correspondence with the Russian Empress Catherine II, Joseph went a step further. He expressed pity for the “poor Americans” who he felt had been beaten, bankrupted and sat “like frightened hens, waiting for someone to shoot them.” “Poor Americans” was a phrase he used often to Catherine even as he described their forces as “superior” and noted that British victory was impossible. In the early 1780s, “Americans” was not yet a fully established term within the Habsburg administrative vocabulary. Kaunitz and others still used the pejoratives “rebels” and “insurgents” but Joseph adopted the newer demonym, perhaps revealing a tacit—or willing—acceptance of their political independence.
Joseph’s view on the Revolution evolved over the course of the war from an initial interest to be informed like his mother, to wishing to meet with Franklin despite the political consequences, to a natural aversion towards it brought on by the discord created in Britain and, finally, to the acceptance that the United States of America would be a sovereign nation. Throughout it all, Joseph, along with his ministers, struggled to maintain a neutral balance. This was the reason why he came under fire from the dames for not acting to end the war just as the British carefully monitored his actions for sympathising with the Americans. Caught in the middle of what he called a “big and furious game,” Joseph’s true feelings towards the Revolution centred on frustration with an event not of his design and outside of his control. It was the price to pay for being “a royalist by trade.”

The same cannot be said for Joseph’s younger brother. As the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Pietro Leopoldo occupied an easier position. The Revolution still affected his grand duchy in a number of ways, however. Commercial ties between the Tuscan ports and the New England fisheries had existed for decades and such connections as well as the lure of further wealth forced the Grand Duke to act sooner on the issue than his brother. Hence Pietro Leopoldo developed
an intense interest in the American Revolution, its developments, and ideas. He corresponded with the Tuscan schemer Filippo Mazzei in order to find out more and, knowing the Tuscan delegation in Paris had substantial inroads with the American commissioners, sought to gather further information from them. He received translations of American documents and subscribed to the partisan *Affaires d’Angleterre et d’Amérique* (English and American affairs), which Franklin published with French collaborators. When Pietro Leopoldo temporarily relocated to Vienna in 1778 to deputise for his brother and mother during the War of the Bavarian Succession, he continued this subscription and had the American propaganda delivered directly to the imperial residence at the Hofburg.

In March 1779, Pietro Leopoldo left Vienna for Florence in a disgruntled mood. Over the course of his deputyship, he felt horrified at the running of the Monarchy: finances were poor; civil servants waged interdepartmental war, radicals agitated for religious reform, Hungarians decried new taxation, foreign alliances were either weakened or faltering, and, worst of all, the emperor only uttered “frightful, despotic statements.” Upon his return to Florence, he set about a new project to redefine the political order between subjects and sovereign in Tuscany. In his *Primo distesto ed idee sopra la formazione degli stati nuova costituzione pubblica* (First draft and ideas on the formation of states and the new public constitution), he planned to relinquish absolute power in favour of popular consent. Such ideas, he argued, were more in line with the modern ideals of French philosophers, whom he deeply admired. Leopold’s new constitutional ambitions owed a share of influence to American thinkers, too. In one section, Leopold declared every Tuscan had “an equal right to happiness, well-being, security and property.” The familiar-sounding line is unequivocally American. Tuscan newspapers had published complete translations of the Declaration of American Independence years earlier with the immortal phrase, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” But another American declaration might have been his inspiration; in June 1776, the Virginia Convention adopted George Mason’s Declaration of Rights which also proclaimed the rights to “life and liberty, [...] property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.”

Pietro Leopoldo’s new plans contained many echoes of the Virginian Declaration of Rights yet it was Pennsylvania’s constitution of 1776 which provided him with concrete ideas about how best to enact more enlightened government. He studied a French translation of the Pennsylvanian constitution intently, producing a handwritten copy and his own ten-page *Observations*. Pietro Leopoldo’s notes were his gut-reactions to the ideas he encountered in the American text, offering a fascinating insight into a Habsburg archduke’s first-hand take on the radical democratic experiments unfolding across the Atlantic. His *Observations*
opened with a bold declaration of his own admiration for American political ideas: "What I ask is that, in order to make a good [legal] code in all states, even in monarchies, one begins with the principle posed by the Americans, the principle of equality." Pietro Leopoldo saw this core American value as the basis for any good form of government; "political equality," he later noted, "is essential to the democratic order [...] there should be no exception for anyone." In his view, the safeguarding of this equality clearly existed in Pennsylvania’s constitution through innovations such as limited terms and the rotation of positions, which Pietro Leopoldo felt would eradicate any abuses of power.

For the next three years, the Grand Duke toiled away on his constitutional project, swapping ideas and drafts with his chief minister Francesco Maria Gianni. Concerning the extension of what Pietro Leopoldo termed people’s “sacrosanct natural rights”—another allusion to “unalienable rights” in the Declaration of American Independence—and Pietro Leopoldo’s calls for wider democratic participation, Gianni frequently dissented. Gianni saw the Tuscan people as unfit for democratic duty. The notorious Medici family had ruled Tuscany for the better part of three centuries before the Habsburgs took control in 1737; such a legacy, Gianni claimed, had corrupted the Tuscan people beyond recognition. They could not be entrusted to act for the greater good. Pietro Leopoldo might have agreed with him. In an earlier study of his Tuscan holdings, the Grand Duke acknowledged that his people possessed a “certain shrewdness” or “deception” and were "always divided amongst themselves.”

In his Observations, Pietro Leopoldo had already conceded, “When one understands the human heart, one sees how difficult it is to sustain governments at a certain degree of perfection. It is men who govern and [for perfect government] it would be necessary that the leaders be above man, that they be angels.” As much as Pietro Leopoldo endeavoured to endow his subjects with greater rights, his constitutional project stagnated. The bout of intense collaboration with Gianni starting in 1779 gave way to long periods of apathy throughout the 1780s. Despite the immensity of his reform achievements in Tuscany, Pietro Leopoldo’s constitutional ideas remained in draft form. Notwithstanding, for a brief time during the American Revolution, a Habsburg ruler seriously contemplated its ideas and sought to implement them in his own lands.

Conclusion

If we are to understand the magnitude of the American Revolution, we must be able to comprehend its totality. The imperial court at Vienna, far removed from the Atlantic coastline, was not impervious to American revolutionary
sentiments. Courtiers expressed a large degree of fascination for the goings-on in North America. The ideals they encountered, the gossip it produced, even the disagreements it provoked, set the imperial court abuzz. Much to the despair of the British ambassador in Vienna, there was a positive attitude towards American victories and little by way of counter-revolutionary rhetoric. There is little evidence to show that the Viennese court was a divided society over the Revolution and much to show that it was generally supportive. Noblemen such as Seilern, Wilczek, and Windischgrätz and administrators such as Bek and Birkenstock looked favourably upon the success of the patriots. Zinzendorf, one of the most knowledgeable bureaucrats, devoured whatever information he could come across regarding the Revolution.

Franklin gained unrivalled access to the monarchs unlike anywhere else in Europe. The imperial family were awash with information about the American Revolution: Maria Theresa read tailor-made reports by Franklin whereas Joseph sought to meet the latter for himself whilst his brother Pietro Leopoldo mused upon the Revolution’s principles. It can be of no surprise to anyone that when the first American representative arrived in Vienna in May 1778, he exclaimed how “some here are warm for the part of America.” The cultural phenomenon of the American Revolution, its spectacle and its influence, forces us to recognise the magnitude of its reach—even in a place we might assume to be too remote and within circles previously assumed to be too anti-revolutionary.