The 18th century was a time in which kings wrote the history of Europe. However, Maria Theresa of Austria emerged as a strong and powerful queen. She bravely defended Austria during a Prussian invasion and launched a series of domestic improvements that helped her people.

With no male heir, King Charles VI of Austria feared that other powers in Europe would try to seize his kingdom after his death. As a result, he convinced these European monarchs to accept Maria Theresa, his eldest daughter, as the next ruler of Austria. In 1740, Charles died, and the 23-year-old queen inherited a troubled country. Her people were uneasy. They thought that her husband would rule the nation, and they did not trust him. In addition, poor weather had produced bad harvests, and there was widespread hunger.

Maria Theresa learned about these worries by sending one of her ladies-in-waiting in disguise into Vienna to hear what her subjects were saying. For example, the people resented the fact that wild animals roamed the forests owned by the monarchy, eating food that they could eat. She won their approval by ordering the animals killed.

Just months after Maria Theresa became queen, Frederick II of Prussia moved his army into Silesia, Austria’s richest region. Later in life, she wrote that she faced this situation “. . . without money, without credit, without an army, without experience and knowledge, even without counsel.” Her father’s old advisers gave her simple advice: give up Silesia.

The young queen proved to be made of sterner stuff. In June 1741, Maria Theresa received another of her titles, becoming the queen of Hungary. She then asked the Hungarian people for troops in her conflict with Prussia. “The very existence of the kingdom of Hungary, of our person, of our children, and our crown, are now at stake . . . .” she said. The war with Prussia dragged on for many years, and in the end Austria was forced to give up Silesia. Her stand had made a mark, however. All of Europe now saw her diplomatic skill and her resolve to maintain her kingdom.

In 1756, the Seven Years’ War began. This was Austria’s attempt to win back Silesia. Maria Theresa had felt abandoned by Britain, an old ally of Austria, in that first war. She now formed a new alliance with Britain’s longtime enemy, France. Britain, though, joined Prussia, and they won the war. However, Austria did not suffer additional loss of land.

For most of Maria Theresa’s rule, she focused on improving conditions in her realm. She reformed the government, cutting the power of local authority and giving the Crown more control. She formed new schools to train people to serve in her government. She also won the right to set taxes for ten years at a time—in the past, local government bodies had set new levels of taxation each year. Now, she could count on a steady supply of money. Furthermore, the queen recognized that the peasants paid the major share of taxes in her kingdom. As a result, she issued laws that made that system fairer and limited the power of large landowners.

The queen also made the army larger and better trained. In addition, she issued an order to set up a public school system in Austrian lands. Finally, she brought people to settle rural areas where no one lived, which resulted in increased farmland.

Maria Theresa made these changes to strengthen her position, but they also benefited her people. Crankshaw summarizes her rule: “She had held her society together, encouraged its individual talents, and left it better than it was before.”

**Questions**

1. **Determining Main Ideas** What would you say was the main idea of this biography?
2. **Making Inferences** How would you describe Maria Theresa's character?
3. **Drawing Conclusions** Would you say that Maria Theresa was a good queen? Explain.
William of Orange belonged to the royal families of two of the main Protestant powers in 17th century Europe—the Netherlands and England. As a result, he devoted himself to preventing the growth of Catholic France. It was to further that goal that he gladly accepted the offer to become king of England in 1688.

William was born to the house of Orange, a family that had helped the Netherlands win independence in the 1500s. In 1672, France and England invaded this country and William, though only 22 years old, was put in command of its army. The Dutch military had long been neglected, and parts of the country were quickly overrun. In desperation, William ordered the destruction of the dikes, devices that prevented the sea from flowing onto land. By flooding parts of his country, he prevented the advance of the enemy armies.

William then boldly refused a peace offer from England and France. Determined to continue the fight, William worked on two fronts. He strengthened the army while using diplomatic skill to find allies. He won some victories and within a few years forced the French to retreat.

During this time, William married his cousin, Mary. Both were grandchildren of King Charles I of England, and both had a claim to the English throne.

Throughout the early 1680s, William continued his efforts to limit French power. He wanted to ensure the survival of the Netherlands and prevent French religious influence. France was a Catholic nation, and William was the leading Protestant power in Europe. He had hoped to forge an alliance between the Netherlands and England, but the English never agreed to one.

In 1685, James, Mary's father and a Catholic, became king of England. That change brought William new opportunities. English Protestants feared that James would make the country Catholic again. They thought they could use William as a way to stop James. Some hoped that James would remain childless and that William and Mary would produce a son. Their child could be named to follow James on the throne to ensure that England would remain Protestant. Others talked about naming William as a regent to control James. William, who was still seeking an alliance against France, listened to their plans.

In 1688, however, James and his wife had a son, a Catholic heir. A group of Protestant leaders then invited William to come to England and become king immediately. Skillfully avoiding James's strong navy, William crossed the English Channel. He landed with an army of 15,000, declared that a new Parliament should be elected, and easily marched to London. James fled for Europe.

Even then, William and Mary's status was uncertain. Some said that Mary should rule and that William, who was foreign born, should not have any real power. Nevertheless, Mary insisted that they rule together, and they were crowned king and queen. However, Mary died only a few years later.

William ruled both England and the Netherlands until 1702. He spent much of these years leading armies. First, he had to end revolts in Scotland and Ireland. Later, he fought on the continent, continuing his long struggle against France. He had a new cause for war now because Louis XIV of France was trying to put James back on the English throne. In early 1702, William urged Parliament to form an alliance with the Netherlands against France. While the bill was being debated, William died. Nevertheless, Parliament approved his plan and declared war on France. Parliament added that for the war to end, France must recognize the Protestant succession in England.

Questions

1. **Drawing Conclusions** Which of the ideas on William's banner do you think was more important to him? Why?

2. **Analyzing Causes and Recognizing Effects** Why did the English turn to William in the struggle with James?

3. **Synthesizing** What does succession mean and why was it important in England in this period?