

Marie Antoinette: Villain or Victim?



As Queen of France, Marie Antoinette had no official role and no legitimate political power- her main job was to produce a male heir to continue her husband's royal line. The coronation of Louis XVI was greeted warmly by the French people, who had great hopes that after the fifty-year reign of Louis XV, the young King would bring new ideas, much-needed reforms, and a fresh approach to governing France in a rapidly changing world.

This goodwill quickly eroded as the King's economic policies failed, while his Queen failed to produce an heir. He seemed to lose interest in government as she became increasingly social, attending the Opera and dances in the capital, gambling, and partying late into the night at Versailles.

During the 1780s, with the French government sliding into financial turmoil and poor harvests driving up grain prices across the country, Marie Antoinette's fabulously extravagant lifestyle became the subject of public anger. The queen was renowned for her fine taste, particularly her affection for new and grandiose fashions, jewelry and hairpieces. One year, Marie Antoinette was given a dress allowance of 150,000 livres but managed to spend more than three times that amount. Countless pamphlets accused the queen of ignorance, extravagance and adultery, some featuring salacious cartoons and others dubbing her "Madame Deficit."

Marie Antoinette's first child, Marie-Therese Charlotte, was finally born in December 1778, followed by Louis Joseph in 1781, Louis Charles in 1785 and Sophie Béatrix in 1786. As she grew older, the Queen became less extravagant, devoting herself to her children, two of whom died in childhood. However, sympathy for her personal tragedies did not curb the anger directed at her public persona. At some point around 1789, when being told that her French subjects had no bread, Marie Antoinette supposedly sniffed, "Let them eat cake." With that callous remark, the queen became a hated symbol of the decadent monarchy. There is no evidence that Marie Antoinette ever uttered that famous quip, which had been attributed to various Royal Family members over the years to illustrate their indifference to the troubles of the common man.

On July 14, 1789, workers and peasants stormed the Bastille prison, marking the beginning of the French Revolution. On October 6th, a crowd estimated at 10,000 gathered outside the Palace of Versailles and demanded that the king and queen be brought to the Tuileries Palace in Paris. The always indecisive Louis XVI acted almost paralyzed, and Marie Antoinette immediately stepped into his place, meeting with advisers and dispatching urgent letters to other European rulers, begging them for help.

On the night of August 10, 1792, militants forced the Legislative Assembly to "suspend" the King. On September 22nd, the new National Convention voted to declare France a republic, abolishing the monarchy. From that moment on, Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were no longer King and Queen, but, like many others, imprisoned citizens suspected of treason.

Marie Antoinette became a widow when her husband was guillotined to death after being tried and convicted of treason in January 1793. Her two remaining children were subsequently taken from her. After a brief trial, Marie Antoinette was convicted of treason in October 1793. On October 16, she was executed by guillotine. She was 37 years old.

