

Topic Page: [Marie Antoinette](#)

Definition: **Marie Antoinette** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Queen of France. Daughter of Emperor Francis I and Maria Theresa of Austria, she married the future Louis XVI in 1770. Her life of pleasure and extravagance contributed to the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789. She initiated the royal family's attempt to escape in 1791, was held prisoner, and then finally guillotined.



Image from: [Portraits of Louis XVI \(Versailles, 1754, Paris, 1793\) and Marie Antoinette \(Vienna, 1755, Paris, 1793\) in Bridgeman Images: DeAgostini Library](#)

Summary Article: **Marie Antoinette**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(*ǎntwǎnĕt'*, *ǎntwǎnĕt'*), 1755–93, queen of France, wife of King Louis XVI and daughter of Austrian Archduchess Maria Theresa and Holy Roman Emperor Francis I. She was married in 1770 to the dauphin, who became king in 1774. Her marriage had been made to strengthen France's alliance with its long-time enemy, Austria. The union, however, was not altogether popular, and Marie Antoinette's actions only increased hostility toward her. She constantly sought the advice of the Austrian ambassador and attempted to influence French foreign policy in favor of Austria.

Unhappy in her marriage, which remained unconsummated for seven years, she surrounded herself with a dissolute clique, led by Yolande de Polignac and Marie Thérèse de Lamballe, and threw herself into a life of pleasure and careless extravagance. Her notorious reputation led to scandals such as the Affair of the Diamond Necklace and to rumors concerning her relations with officers of the guard and with Hans Axel Fersen. The famous solution to the bread famine, “Let them eat cake,” is unjustly attributed to the queen, but it is certain that Marie Antoinette lacked understanding of economic problems. With the birth of her first son, her life became more sedate.

Although she had contributed to the downfall of A. R. J. Turgot in 1776 and was hostile to Jacques Necker, her influence on the king's decisions during the first two years of the French Revolution (1789–91) has been exaggerated. She was brought with the king from Versailles to Paris (Oct., 1789) and was seized at Varennes when the royal family attempted to escape (1791). Despite her hatred of the Revolution, the apathy of the king forced her to conduct negotiations first with the comte de Mirabeau, then with Antoine Barnave. Simultaneously, however, she secretly urged Austrian intervention; after war was declared, she fully identified the cause of the Bourbon dynasty with that of France.

After the storming of the Tuileries palace (Aug., 1792), she and her husband were removed to the Temple and accused of treason. The king was executed in Jan., 1793. Marie Antoinette's son was taken from her (see Louis XVII), and she was transferred to the Conciergerie. Known derisively as the “Widow Capet,” she was tried before the Revolutionary Tribunal (Oct. 14–15, 1793), found guilty, and guillotined (Oct. 16). In her last misfortunes she displayed steadfastness, courage, serenity, and dignity. Her portraits, notably by *é*lisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, are well known.

Among Marie Antoinette's published correspondence see *Lettres de Marie Antoinette* (2 vol., 1895-96) and.

Bernier, Olivier ed., *Secrets of Marie Antoinette: A Collection of Letters* (1986).

See also biographies by S. Zweig (tr. 1933), A. Castelot (tr., 1957), D. M. Mayer (1969), P.

Huisman (tr. 1971), J. Haslip (1987), A. Fraser (2001), and C. Weber (2006).

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New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Retrieved from

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