

Frederick, II

Encyclopedia of World Biography, December 12, 1998

Born: January 24, 1712 in Berlin, Prussia

Died: August 17, 1786 in Berlin, Prussia

Nationality: Prussian

Occupation: King

Frederick II (1712-1786), or Frederick the Great, was king of Prussia from 1740 to 1786. He combined the qualities of a warrior king with those of an enlightened despot.

The eldest son of Frederick William I of Prussia and of Princess Sophie Dorothea of Hanover, Frederick II was born in Berlin on Jan. 24, 1712. His father was a hardworking, unimaginative soldier-king, with no outward pretensions and no time to waste on superfluous niceties. Even as an adolescent Frederick, with the tacit support of his mother, rebelled against this mold. He preferred French literature to German and the company of young fops to that of old soldiers.

In 1730 Frederick and a young friend, Lieutenant Katte, planned a romantic escape to England, but their plot was discovered. The would-be escapees were arrested and condemned to death for desertion, and Katte was executed in Frederick's presence. The crown prince was spared upon the entreaties of Emperor Charles VI, although it is doubtful that his father ever intended to go through with the execution. Frederick, however, was imprisoned in the fortress of Küstrin in the most rigorous conditions until, after some 6 months, he voluntarily approached Frederick William with a request for pardon. For the next 2 years, although still nominally a prisoner, Frederick was employed in a subsidiary position of the local administration of Küstrin, thus learning the intricacies of the Prussian administrative system.

In 1732 Frederick was appointed commandant of an infantry regiment and, having decided to obey his father, he learned soldiering with all the thoroughness with which he had previously avoided it. In 1733, at his father's insistence, he married Elisabeth Christine of Braunschweig, but his aversion to women was so pronounced that the marriage was, over the many years it lasted, never consummated.

Between 1733 and 1740 Frederick, who had grown into a young man whose unimposing stature was balanced by piercing blue eyes, an aquiline nose, and a good chin, exceeded even the expectations of his father in his dedication to hard, dull routine. But he also found time to devote himself further to French literature, to begin a lifelong correspondence with a number of French *philosophes*, and to try writing himself. One product of this period was the *Anti-Machiavel* (1739), a work in which he argued that the Italian's ruthlessly practical maxims for princes were no longer compatible with the more advanced ethics of a new age. He was soon given the opportunity to test his own conduct against these views.

War of the Austrian Succession

On May 31, 1740, Frederick William died, and Frederick became king of Prussia as Frederick II. Before he had time to accustom himself to his new position, the death of Emperor Charles VI on October 20 created a political crisis and presented Frederick with a unique opportunity. Like all the other leading powers of Europe, Prussia had subscribed to the Pragmatic Sanction, guaranteeing the succession of Charles's daughter Maria Theresa and the integrity of her dominions. But it was an open secret that at least France and Bavaria intended to make demands upon Austria as soon as the Emperor was dead, and Frederick saw no reason to stand by while others enriched themselves at Austria's expense. He offered to assist Austria in the maintenance of its possessions in exchange for the cession of the rich province of Silesia to Prussia. When this outrageous piece of blackmail was indignantly rejected, in December Frederick marched his troops into Silesia, thus launching the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748).

In the first phase of this struggle the combined onslaught of Prussian, French, and Bavarian forces threatened to overwhelm Austria. Not wishing to bring about a situation more favorable to his potential rivals than to himself, Frederick withdrew from the war in 1742 with most of Silesia as his price. When Austria, relieved of the necessity of fighting the Prussians, threatened to crush its remaining enemies, Frederick reentered the war in 1744. The conflict was finally ended in 1748 with Silesia still firmly in Prussian hands.

Seven Years War

Since the Austrians were antagonistic over the loss of Silesia, Frederick had reason to fear a renewal of the struggle. In the aftermath of the war both sides engaged in complicated diplomatic maneuvers. Austria, which had enjoyed a tentative alliance with Russia since 1746, tried to strengthen this while making overtures toward its old enemy France. Frederick in turn concluded the Treaty of Westminster (1755) with Great Britain, promising Prussian neutrality in the war that had just broken out between France and England. These maneuvers led directly to the Diplomatic Revolution, which in 1756 left Prussia facing an overwhelming Continental alliance of Austria, Russia, France, and Saxony. Rather than await inevitable death by constriction, Frederick attacked Austria, which he regarded as the weakest among the great powers facing him. Thus began the Seven Years War (1756-1763).

In this conflict Frederick distinguished himself by continually keeping at bay much more powerful antagonists. He took advantage of the natural lack of cohesion of coalitions and fought his enemies, so far as possible, one at a time. The superior discipline of the Prussian army allowed Frederick to march it to the theater of war in small detachments, from various directions, uniting only shortly before a battle was to be fought. He also made the most of the oblique order of battle which he had inculcated in the Prussian army and which allowed him to concentrate his forces against emerging weak spots in his enemies' more ponderous formations.

In spite of these advantages, by 1762 Prussia was on the verge of bankruptcy, its army was in no condition to continue the war, and Russian troops had occupied Berlin. At this juncture Empress Elizabeth of Russia died; her successor, the mad Peter III, an admirer of Frederick, pulled Russia out of the war. Thus saved, Frederick was able to conclude the Peace of Hubertusberg (1763), which restored the prewar status quo.

The Seven Years War taught Frederick that, while Prussia's recently acquired position as a great power had been successfully defended, any further adventures in foreign policy had to be avoided at all costs. Hereafter his policy was a strictly defensive one, bent primarily on preventing changes in the balance of power. This became evident when, in 1772, it appeared as if Austria and Russia were about to succeed in partitioning the Ottoman Empire. As there was no chance of securing reasonable compensation for Prussia, Frederick blustered and threatened until the principals agreed on a three-way partition of Poland. In 1778, when Joseph II of Austria attempted to acquire Bavaria, Frederick reluctantly went to war but engaged in no more than a halfhearted war of maneuver of which the Austrians at last tired; and in 1784, when Joseph tried to trade the Austrian Netherlands for Bavaria, Frederick organized the League of German Princes to preserve the status of Germany.

Domestic Policies

Frederick had inherited a well-run state from his father, a circumstance that allowed him to fight his major wars. But he worked as hard at internal administration as at military leadership. He very reluctantly delegated authority, took all important decisions himself, and ruled through ministers responsible only to him. His ruthless insistence on hard work and honesty resulted in a doubling of the revenues of the state in his reign and a tripling of the available reserve fund, this last in spite of the devastation associated with the Seven Years War.

Frederick continued the traditional Prussian policy of encouraging immigration of economically productive elements, particularly peasants, into the more backward and underpopulated areas of the state. In contrast, his policy toward the established peasantry tended to be restrictive. In spite of the spirit of the times, he refused to abolish serfdom where it existed, fearing that such a measure would weaken the landed nobility, which produced

both officers for his army and officials for his civil service.

In economics Frederick was a strict mercantilist, fostering the rather backward domestic industry with high tariffs wherever he could. He did not, however, extend these notions to the building of a fleet, so that Prussia did not participate in the great expansion of European overseas trade of the second half of the 18th century.

Apart from purely pragmatic measures, Frederick's reign was not a time of considerable reform. The one exception is the area of judicial procedure, where the efforts of his minister of justice, Cocceji, resulted not merely in a more extensive codification of the law but in the acceptance of the principle that the law is foremost the protector of the poor and the weak.

During his reign Frederick continued to concern himself with literature and music. He became, in a sense, the host of the most famous salon in Europe. Voltaire was only the best known of the *philosophes* to take advantage of his hospitality. The Prussian Academy of Sciences, which had long languished and which he renewed in 1744, provided much-needed subsidies for both major and minor luminaries of the French Enlightenment. At the same time Frederick had no use for those obstinate enough to persist in writing in "barbaric" German, and the young Goethe was not the only German author deprived of royal assistance for this reason.

But Frederick was not content to be merely a patron of literature. He found time to produce, besides *Anti-Machiavel*, the *Mirror of Princes* and a series of histories dealing with his own affairs that at his death filled 15 volumes.

An Assessment

Frederick was both lionized and vilified long after his death. In Germany his more nationally minded admirers produced a cult of Frederick the Great, the precursor of the all-German hero. In other countries he was blamed as the inventor of an implacable German militarism let loose upon the world. Both these views are gross distortions. Frederick was always a Prussian nationalist, never a German one. And while he was a soldier-king, his pervasive interests throughout his life were nonmilitary. The latter part of his reign was unquestionably pacific and in some cases even propitiatory in nature.

Frederick did not have a first-rate analytical mind, but Voltaire's denunciations of him after their famous quarrel do not sound much more convincing than his panegyrics when he still hoped to get some of the royal money. Frederick was parsimonious, perhaps to a fault, but his funds were in fact severely limited. His treatment of his queen, whom he refused even the right to reside near him, was perhaps unforgivable. Frederick II died at his beloved summer residence, Sans-Souci, near Potsdam on Aug. 17, 1786, and was followed on the throne by his nephew Frederick William II.

Further Readings

- Among the older English biographies of Frederick, the best is probably W. F. Reddaway, *Frederick the Great and the Rise of Prussia* (1904). Other useful biographies are Edith Simon, *The Making of Frederick the Great* (1963), and D. B. Horn, *Frederick the Great and the Rise of Prussia* (1964). Gerhard Ritter, *Frederick the Great: An Historical Profile* (1936; 3d ed. 1954; trans. 1968), and G. P. Gooch, *Frederick the Great: The Ruler, the Writer, the Man* (1947), are both stimulating essays dealing with aspects of Frederick's life. See also John A. Marriott and Charles G. Robertson, *The Evolution of Prussia: The Making of an Empire* (1915; rev. ed. 1946); Hajo Holborn, *History of Modern Germany*, vol. 2 (1963); Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (2 vols., 1966-1969); and Walter Henry Nelson, *The Soldier Kings: The House of Hohenzollern* (1970). *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia* by David Fraser emphasizes Frederick's military and political history, but does not neglect his family and personal life (2001).
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