

# Frederick the Great

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Frederick II was Prussia's third and longest reigning king. His lifetime (1712-86) saw the kingdom rise from a third-rank state to one of Europe's five 'great powers' alongside Britain, France, Russia, and Austria. At the time of his birth, his grandfather Frederick I ruled only as 'king in Prussia', a title conferred by the Holy Roman Emperor, Leopold I, in 1700 in return for Prussia's support for Austria during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14). Prussia's royal status was generally recognised internationally at the Peace of Utrecht in 1713, but it continued to rank as inferior to other monarchies; something that rankled Frederick II throughout his own reign. Frederick's father, Frederick William I, did little to improve Prussia's international standing during his reign (1713-40), but did strengthen his kingdom's capacity to wage war through military and administrative reform. Barely six months into his own reign, Frederick decided to use this capacity to exploit Austria's momentary weakness by invading Silesia. Two months later, in December 1740, Prussian troops crossed the Silesian frontier without declaring war, thereby opening the War of the Austrian Succession and determining the course of Prussian foreign policy for the rest of Frederick's lifetime.<sup>[1]</sup>

The Prussian army was largely untried, whereas the Austrian Habsburgs had dominated the Holy Roman Empire since the mid-fifteenth century and had seen off numerous challenges from France, Sweden, the Ottoman empire and various German princes. Frederick's invasion quickly ran into difficulties and he fled the field as his troops engaged the Austrians at Mollwitz in April 1741, thinking the battle lost. His soldiers persevered and defeated the Austrians in his absence.<sup>[2]</sup> This surprise victory transformed Frederick's fortunes, and emboldened other European

powers to join his attempt to dismember the Habsburg monarchy. By 1742, Frederick was able to leave the war temporarily, having secured Austria's grudging acceptance of Silesia's loss. However, fears that Austria was recovering prompted Frederick to intervene again in alliance with France in 1744.<sup>[3]</sup> The ensuing succession of convincing victories, this time secured under his direct and skilful command, convinced Austria to cede Silesia definitively to Prussia in 1745.<sup>[4]</sup>

Prussia was able to enjoy peace while most of the rest of Europe fought on for another three years. However, Frederick rightly guessed that the Austrian Habsburgs would try to recover Silesia and roll back Prussian influence. Henceforth, everything was subordinated to countering Austrian revenge and maintaining Prussia's hard-won influence. Frederick's priority was his army, which was disproportionately large, but still heavily outnumbered by the Austrians whose military capacity was enhanced through a series of administrative, fiscal and military reforms undertaken after 1748. Prussian finances appeared in good shape, because it had cash reserves and no debt, and many contemporaries and subsequent observers considered it a model to emulate. However, its access to credit was limited, and it lacked the human and material resources to sustain a long war. Frederick's strategy was based on the ability to strike first, as he had done in 1740, and he knew that he would not be able to fight for long without external help.<sup>[5]</sup>

Prior to Frederick's accession, Prussia did not feature prominently in British diplomacy, though its importance had grown with the Hanoverian Succession in 1714.<sup>[6]</sup> The Hanoverian Guelphs and Prussian Hohenzollerns were closely connected dynastically and

both were solidly Protestant, though differing confessionally, with the former being Lutheran and the latter Calvinist. Both had cooperated politically, with the Hohenzollerns supporting Hanover's controversial elevation to the status of an electorate (1692), as well as eventual succession in Britain, while the Guelphs reciprocated with recognition of Prussia's new royal status. However, both families were long-standing rivals for influence in northern Germany where they both aspired to expand their possessions by acquiring the same smaller principalities: chiefly East Frisia, and various imperial cities and Catholic prince-bishoprics. Following the conversion of the Saxon elector to Catholicism in 1697, both competed to lead the Protestant political block within the Empire, known as the Corpus Evangelicorum. Both were also rivals for influence in Mecklenburg where Hanover managed to outflank Prussia by securing an imperial mandate to maintain public order during that duchy's long-running dispute between the duke and the local nobility.<sup>[7]</sup>

British ministers had little sympathy for Hanover's expansionist ambitions once its ruler succeeded to the British throne in 1714. Nonetheless, Hanover's defence became a priority in British policy alongside the desire to contain France and prevent it overrunning the Netherlands. Cooperation with Austria seemed the best way to achieve these goals, given that Hanover's security depended on preserving the territorial integrity and internal political balance of the Holy Roman Empire. By contrast, Frederick planned to annex or acquire various minor German territories to round off his own possessions, and was far less concerned than his father had been to respect the Empire's constitution. For him, the Empire represented a convenient third line of defence after his own army and

any allies, and he exploited all the opportunities provided by its complex constitution to block Habsburg management of German affairs.<sup>[8]</sup>

Hanover's concerns for its own integrity, influence and position within the Holy Roman Empire all persisted after 1740, but were overshadowed from the British government's perspective by the question of how best to deal with Prussia's emergence as a European power following its conquest of Silesia. While Prussia's military potential had been demonstrated clearly, it took much longer for most British officials and observers to understand Prussia itself. Part of the problem was the hybrid character of Prussia as a state. The Hohenzollerns' possessions were a composite of different provinces which were slowly being subjected to more centralised rule. The largest, richest and most populous lands were within the Empire and thus were not fully sovereign, though Frederick managed to loosen some of the legal bonds by 1750. Prussia itself lay outside the Empire as an isolated enclave in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, from which it had become independent in 1660. It was this that provided the basis for the Hohenzollerns' royal status, but it was not until the First Partition of Poland in 1772 that they acquired the western half of historic Prussia, thus linking it with their other possessions. Frederick used this acquisition to adjust his title to king 'of' rather than merely 'in' Prussia, symbolically underscoring his claims to parity with the other great powers.<sup>[9]</sup>

Britain had traditionally dealt with the Hohenzollerns as it had with other German princes, either through the envoy sent to the Empire's permanent diet in Regensburg, or the envoy at the Habsburg court in Vienna. Periodic missions had been despatched to Berlin, notably in 1730-1 in a bungled attempt to

arrange the marriage of Frederick, then crown prince, to George I's daughter Amelia.<sup>[10]</sup> Deeply unhappy at his personal life and resentful of his father, Frederick had tried to escape to England in the mistaken belief he would be welcomed. He was arrested and tried as a deserter and his accomplice and friend was executed.<sup>[11]</sup> Though Frederick William released his son and restored him to a limited political and military role, Frederick was traumatised and the episode added to the sense of mutual distrust between the Guelphs and Hohenzollerns. George II tried to foster better relations by secretly sending money to Frederick, but formal diplomatic contacts remained intermittent.

Frederick's decision to continue his father's highly personalised style of rule after 1740 added to the difficulties of establishing contacts between Britain and Prussia. Frederick nominally maintained a court and government in Berlin, but in practice mainly resided in Potsdam and governed from his 'cabinet', or private office. There were ministers with the usual portfolios, including foreign affairs, but these generally reported to the king in writing, and received written instructions on what to do next. This method accords with the classic image of personalised, 'absolutist' rule, though Frederick's ability to shape events was severely limited by the information his officials fed him.<sup>[12]</sup> Frederick himself wrote voluminous correspondence directly to envoys, officers, princes and monarchs across Europe, as well as to philosophers and intellectuals, and many of his letters have been published, though the selection in the earlier volumes, produced before 1939, reflects the editors' concern to preserve Frederick's reputation as one of Prussia's greatest monarchs.<sup>[13]</sup>

Frederick's style of foreign policy made his character an important factor in Prussia's external relations.<sup>[14]</sup> He

was extremely hard-working and expected the same level of commitment from those who served him. He had a mean streak and did not forget slights easily, despite being broadly pragmatic in his wider policy choices. As one British envoy noted in 1762, 'He may for a time seem to dissemble; but he will not easily forget; and the first opportunity that offers, he will not fail to take his revenge, even at the expense of his real interest'.<sup>[15]</sup> Frederick's personal reputation mattered greatly to him and, despite mocking his grandfather's courtly display, he dedicated considerable effort to presenting himself as a powerful king. The real difference was style. Whereas Frederick I had been a baroque king who had staged an expensive coronation, Frederick II followed his father in cultivating a deliberately austere persona. However, in contrast to Frederick William's boorish and often manic behaviour, Frederick was deliberately cultivated and he liked to present himself as one of Europe's leading intellectuals who genuinely sought to improve his subjects' lives.<sup>[16]</sup>

Frederick was interested in Britain and was somewhat better informed than most of his contemporaries about how British politics worked, but he also failed to maintain a permanent high-level envoy in London.<sup>[17]</sup> His preferred language was French and much of what he knew about Britain and British intellectual and cultural life was filtered through French writers and translations of English-language material. Frederick was sceptical about most aspects of religion, but was quick to present himself as a champion of Protestant political liberties in the Empire since this was a useful tactic against Catholic Austria. Prussian propaganda presented the Seven Years' War (1756-63) as a religious conflict, and this was positively received in Britain once Prussia became an ally. Frederick's victories over the

Austrian, French and imperial armies in 1757 attracted considerable public attention in Britain where he was fêted as a Protestant hero. His image appeared on commemorative mugs and mass-produced etchings, while several pubs were renamed 'The King of Prussia'.<sup>[18]</sup> However, his popularity was never universal and always contingent on the wider international situation.

The Britons he encountered either directly or through correspondence and diplomacy varied in their views of Prussia. Most saw Prussia as economically, culturally and intellectually backward. Britons had no interest in trade with Prussia except on their own terms. Britain had already successfully blocked Austrian attempts to develop an overseas trading company in Ostend and was in no mind to allow Prussia to do the same at its base in the East Frisian port of Emden. British warships and privateers had seized Prussian goods and vessels during the War of the Austrian Succession, and the British government used a legal loophole to deny any responsibility to pay compensation.<sup>[19]</sup> Prussia lacked a navy and had no means to press its claims, so Frederick retaliated by withholding interest owed on a loan granted to the late Emperor Charles VI and secured on Silesian government revenues. He ignored the British government's claim that he was responsible for repaying the loan, now that he had annexed Silesia, and instead used the money to compensate his subjects for their losses.<sup>[20]</sup>

Relatively few Britons visited even after Frederick had become better known following his military victories. Some remarked positively on his extensive programme to rebuild Berlin's city centre, but it was the Prussian army that drew most of their attention, especially after the Seven Years' War.<sup>[21]</sup> William Fawcett published

translations of the Prussian infantry and cavalry regulations in 1757, and, as British Adjutant General after 1781, was influential in introducing Prussian drill and tactical doctrine into the British army.<sup>[22]</sup>

Diplomatic interaction between Prussia and Britain increased following the end of the War of the Austrian Succession in 1748. Frederick remained formally a French ally, but knew that France did not trust him, nor could he trust the French. He was not averse to switching alliances, but Britain seemed to have little to offer. Indeed, the British government's preferred option was always Russia, since not only was Russia recognised as a major power, but it was also a source of vital naval stores needed to maintain Britain's naval supremacy. Prussia was only considered a fall-back option should a suitable arrangement with Russia not be forthcoming. British policy remained wedded to the so-called Old System of a grand anti-French alliance anchored on Anglo-Austrian cooperation, with Russia, the Dutch Republic and other powers as potential subsidiary components.

The British government, under the Duke of Newcastle, promoted the Archduke Joseph as King of the Romans, or emperor-elect, in order to restore Habsburg influence and stabilise the Empire after 1748.<sup>[23]</sup> Frederick cooperated with France and used his influence as one of the Empire's electoral princes to frustrate this plan.<sup>[24]</sup> The scheme's failure forced Britain to return to seeking a Russian alliance to safeguard its continental interests, as relations with France deteriorated after 1754 into open warfare in North America. However, Frederick's position had not improved and he was aware that Austria was seeking a rapprochement with France. Thus, he responded positively to overtures for a limited alliance with Britain

to secure Hanover in the event of a continental war. The result was the Convention of Westminster in January 1756, which had the unintended consequence of pushing France and Austria into a formal alliance. This 'reversal of alliances' shattered the Old System and ended Britain's hopes of an agreement with Russia.

Rightly fearing his enemies were conspiring to dismember Prussia, Frederick launched a pre-emptive strike by invading Saxony in August 1756, thereby opening the Seven Years' War in Europe.<sup>[25]</sup> British ministers blamed him for dragging them into a continental war they had hoped to avoid. French forces soon overran Hanover and the situation looked dire, but Britain retrieved it by taking the entire Hanoverian army into its pay, as well as hiring the forces of six further smaller German territories. These troops were needed because Frederick refused to provide any meaningful military assistance, arguing all his forces were needed to fight the Austrians, Swedes and Russians who were now invading his own lands. Much of the burden of sustaining the Anglo-Prussian alliance fell on the British diplomat Andrew Mitchell (1708-71), who arrived in Berlin in May 1756 and stayed until 1762, returning again in 1765 until his death. Mitchell has been the subject of two good studies, while his private papers are easily accessible and add considerably to the material contained in the State Papers.<sup>[26]</sup> Mitchell managed to befriend Frederick and cope with the king's moods and mounting resentment at what was perceived as Britain's failure to support Prussia. A particular problem was Britain's refusal to send a fleet to the Baltic to interdict Swedish and Russian forces. As a result, East Prussia was lost to Russian occupation in 1757, substantially reducing Frederick's already limited resource base.

Mitchell's major achievement was a formal alliance in April 1758, which committed Britain to paying Prussia a subsidy of £250,000. The arrangement was renewed in December 1758 and again in 1759 and 1760.<sup>[27]</sup> Its real significance was as a sign of Britain's commitment to Prussia in Frederick's time of need, when he was fighting for his survival. The subsidy itself mattered less, because Prussia obtained far more by exploiting occupied Saxony and minting debased coin to pay for supplies. Negotiations continued to renew the agreement, but the mood shifted significantly in London after the conquest of Canada was completed in 1760. Increasingly, the Prussian alliance was regarded as an obstacle to peace with France. Pressure in Parliament and the press to abandon Prussia mounted once Spain entered the war in support of France in January 1762.<sup>[28]</sup> That month, a change of regime in Russia dramatically improved Frederick's fortunes as Russia temporarily switched sides and then abandoned the war altogether.<sup>[29]</sup> Though nominally allies, Britain and Prussia made peace separately, the former at Paris, and the latter at Hubertusburg, to end the Seven Years' War in 1763.

Frederick was able to develop his rapprochement with Russia into a full alliance in 1764 which lasted until 1780, freeing him from dependency on Britain. Subsequently, Anglo-Prussian relations languished despite Britain sending a succession of envoys after Mitchell's death in 1771.<sup>[30]</sup> Frederick actively undermined British efforts to recruit German auxiliaries during the American Revolutionary War and was the first European ruler to sign a treaty with the newly independent United States in 1785. However, he felt increasingly isolated and was obliged to fight the brief War of the Bavarian Succession (1778-9) against

Austria with only Saxony in support. That war exposed serious deficiencies in the Prussian army, adding to the need for allies to oppose Austria's increasingly threatening plans, centred on forcing the Bavarian Wittelsbachs to exchange their homeland for the richer, but strategically vulnerable, Austrian Netherlands. Russia's decision to switch to an Austrian alliance in 1780 left Frederick diplomatically isolated, and he fell back on fanning resentment amongst the German princes at Habsburg imperial rule. The result, in 1785, was the League of Princes led by Prussia, with Hanoverian and Saxon support, but this was always only a stop-gap until a more powerful ally could be found. Frederick himself was an obstacle to that search, since he was distrustful and distrusted in Europe. His death in August 1786 opened the way to a new Anglo-Prussian alliance in 1788 that, for a time, appeared to end Prussia's diplomatic isolation.

## NOTES

<sup>[1]</sup> Useful coverage in M.S. Anderson, *The War of the Austrian Succession 1740-1748* (London, 1995).

<sup>[2]</sup> SP 90/49.

<sup>[3]</sup> SP 90/60.

<sup>[4]</sup> SP 90/61.

<sup>[5]</sup> D.E. Showalter, *The Wars of Frederick the Great* (London, 1996).

<sup>[6]</sup> There is no full modern treatment of Anglo-Prussian relations, but older overviews are provided by D.B. Horn, *Great Britain and Europe in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1967), pp.144-71; R. Lodge, *Great Britain and Prussia in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1923).

<sup>[7]</sup> M. Hughes, *Law and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Germany: The Imperial Aulic Council in the Reign of Charles VI* (London, 1988).

<sup>[8]</sup> P.H. Wilson, 'Prussia and the Holy Roman Empire 1700-40', *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute London*, 36 (2014), 3-48, and 'Prussia's relations with the Holy Roman Empire, 1740-86', *The Historical Journal*, 51 (2008), 337-71.

<sup>[9]</sup> For the context, see J. Lukowski, *The Partitions of Poland 1772, 1793, 1795* (London, 1999).

<sup>[10]</sup> See SP90 vols. 27-28.

<sup>[11]</sup> SP 90/29.

<sup>[12]</sup> H.M. Scott, 'Prussia's Royal Foreign Minister: Frederick the Great and the Administration of Prussian Diplomacy', in R. Oresko (ed.), *Royal and Republican Sovereignty* (Cambridge, 1997), pp.500-26; W. Hubatsch, *Frederick the Great: Absolutism and Administration* (London, 1975); H.C. Johnson, *Frederick the Great and his Officials* (New Haven, 1975).

<sup>[13]</sup> The first series was published as R. Koser et al (eds.), *Politische Correspondenz Friedrichs des Grossen* (46 vols., Berlin, 1879-1939) and covers up to April 1782. Publication resumed in 2003 with volume 47, followed by volume 48 in 2015 encompassing correspondence until June 1783.

<sup>[14]</sup> The latest and best of the innumerable biographies is T.C.W. Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia* (London, 2016). Others worth consulting include T. Schieder, *Frederick the Great* (Harlow, 1999), and C. Duffy, *Frederick the Great: A Military Life* (London, 1985). The older German view is summarised by J. Kunisch, *Friedrich der Große* (Munich, 2004). A more recent interpretation is offered by P.M. Hahn, *Friedrich II. Von Preußen* (Stuttgart, 2013).

<sup>[15]</sup> Andrew Mitchell to John Stuart, Earl of Bute, 25 March 1762. SP 90/79 f.268.

<sup>[16]</sup> For Frederick's self-fashioning and subsequent glorification, see T. Biskup, *Friedrichs Große. Inszenierungen des Preußenkönigs in Fest und Zeremoniell 1740-1815* (Frankfurt, 2012). For Frederick's philosophical writings see G.P. Gooch, *Frederick the Great. The Ruler, the Writer, the Man* (London, 1947).

<sup>[17]</sup> The range of Prussia's engagement with the Anglophone world is reviewed by T. Biskup and P.H. Wilson, 'Großbritannien, Amerika und die atlantische Welt', in Stiftung Preußischer Schlösser und Gärten (eds.), *Friederisiko: Friedrich der Große - die Ausstellung* (Munich, 2012), pp.146-59.

<sup>[18]</sup> M. Schlenke, *England und die friderizianische Preussen 1740-63* (Freiburg, 1963).

<sup>[19]</sup> SP 90/65.

<sup>[20]</sup> E.M. Satow, *The Silesian Loan and Frederick the Great* (Oxford, 1915).

<sup>[21]</sup> SP 90/107.

<sup>[22]</sup> Fawcett's translations are available in modern reprints (New York, 1968). He actually translated the 1726 edition of Prussia's regulations, and not the revised versions Frederick issued during the 1740s.

<sup>[23]</sup> For more on this Election Plan, see Matt J. Schuman, *British Foreign Policy during the Seven Years' War (1749-63)*

<sup>[24]</sup> D.B. Horn, 'The origins of the proposed election of a king of the Romans 1748-50', *English Historical Review*, 42, (1927), 361-70; R. Browning, 'The Duke of Newcastle and the Imperial election plan 1749-1754', *Journal of British Studies*, 7, (1967/8), 28-47. Relevant material can be found in SP90 vol.63

<sup>[25]</sup> F.A.J. Szabo, *The Seven Years War in Europe, 1756-1763* (London, 2007). SP 90/66.

<sup>[26]</sup> P.F. Doran, *Andrew Mitchell and Anglo-Prussian Diplomatic Relations during the Seven Years War* (New York, 1986); K.W. Schweizer, *England, Prussia and the Seven Years War* (Lewiston, 1987); A. Bisset (ed.), *Memoirs and Papers of Sir Andrew Mitchell K.B.* (2 vols., London, 1850). Mitchell's extensive official correspondence is in SP90 vols.65-83, 85-90. See also British Library Add.MSS.6832 for his private letters to Holderness.

<sup>[27]</sup> SP 103/60.

<sup>[28]</sup> F. Spencer, 'The Anglo-Prussian Breach of 1762', *History*, 41 (1956), 100-12.

<sup>[29]</sup> January 1762 saw the accession of Peter III in Russia; he was overthrown by his wife in a coup d'état later that year. She went on to rule for thirty-four years as Catherine the Great.

<sup>[30]</sup> H. Dippel, 'Prussia's England policy after the Seven Years War', *Central European History*, 4, (1971), 195-214.

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