

Frederick the Great 1712-1786



How shall we describe the “Incomparable,” the extraordinary compound of so many brilliant and repulsive qualities? How is he to be depicted, who was great as a king, and little as a man,--always admired in his public, never beloved in his private, character;--a just, generous, and laborious prince,--a vain, avaricious, and cold-hearted individual; luxurious by temperament, temperate in practice; a selfish epicurean, and affecting the harshness of the cynic;--peacefully disposed, and cultivating the arts of peace, yet exercising the arts of war in their direst form;--a man of letters, ignorant of the beauties, and disdainng the language of his country;--magnificent and mean; the builder of palaces, theatres, libraries and museums, and dying, literally, without a whole shirt in which he could be buried;--and, lastly, the most brilliant and successful soldier of his time,--and almost destitute of the soldier’s first quality, personal courage?

Frederick was born into the House of Hohenzollern on January 24, 1712, the son of Frederick William of Prussia and Princess Sophia-Dorothea, the sister of George of Great Britain. The couple enjoyed a political marriage and not much else. Frederick William was authoritarian and quick-tempered; Sophia was well-educated and loved the richness of life. Unlike in every way, Frederick’s parents sought to raise him in their own, if totally different, images. His education was principally military; his very toys were miniature implements of war suited to his age; and no sooner was he able to handle a musket than he was sent to drill, and forced, like all the Prussian officers of the period, to perform the duties and submit to the privations of a private soldier,--obliged even to stand sentinel before the palace in all the severities of a northern winter. Though rather feeble of constitution, he soon became a proficient in martial exercises. The different branches of science bearing on the art of war he was forced to study; but his leisure hours were devoted to reading French verses, and playing on the flute—pursuits that greatly displeased his royal father, who frequently threw the books into the fire, and the flutes out of the window.

Frederick William abused his son, often beating and humiliating him for trifling reasons. Finally, in 1730, at age 18, Frederick attempted to escape with childhood friend Hans Herman von Katte. The pair were caught and arrested for treason. Katte was beheaded in Frederick’s presence. His father pardoned Frederick, but placed him as a junior official in local administration to learn the ways of government.



After a tepid reconciliation, Frederick’s father arranged for him a marriage to Elizabeth Christine of Brunswick-Bevern, in 1733. Frederick quickly separated from her and for the rest of his life showed no interest in women. Frederick ascended the throne upon the death of his father in 1749 and abandoned peaceful pursuits to make his place in the geopolitical intrigue of 18th-century Europe. Fortunately, his loathsome father left Frederick with a strong army and ample funds.

In 1741, Prussia consisted of scattered territories across central Europe and few significant allies save for Great Britain. Sensing weakness in the Austrian Empire, Frederick deceived Habsburg Queen Maria Theresa to allow his armies to occupy Lower Silesia in exchange for protection from France, Spain and Bavaria. Then he proceeded to invade key areas, forcing Maria Theresa to cede almost all of Silesia by 1745.

In 1756, Austria, backed by France and Russia, tried to regain control of Silesia. Frederick struck preemptively, invading Saxony, and with his ally Great Britain started the Seven Years War. In a series of battles to the death, Frederick lost territory, then gained it, then lost it again. In 1760, Austro-Russian forces occupied Berlin, and Frederick, reduced to despair, considered suicide. However, the death of Empress Elizabeth of Russia placed advocate Peter III on the throne and Russia withdrew from the war. Although Frederick did not gain territory, the ensuing treaty allowed him to retain Silesia and made him popular throughout the many German-speaking territories. Prussia became one of the preeminent powers in Europe.

Domestically, Frederick's Enlightenment influence was more evident. He reformed the military and government, established religious toleration and granted a basic form of freedom of the press. He bolstered the legal system and established the first German code of law. Of all things, Frederick the Great, as he became to be known, left a legacy of devotion to Germany that set the example for leaders into the 20th century.

