

A portrait of Frederick the Great, drawn at a moment when Germany is passing through a similar crisis as Prussia almost two centuries ago.

THE LONELY KING

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WE do not intend to describe the history of the eighteenth century; nor to analyze the European struggles for power with their changing coalitions between England, France, Russia, Sweden, Germany and its individual states, in which Prussia raised itself to the level of a power; nor to discuss the problem of the rivalry between Prussia and Austria for power in Germany as manifested in the great personalities of Frederick on the one hand and Maria Theresa on the other. All we wish to do is to draw the portrait of a great man, the portrait of this Prussian king, Frederick II—he ruled from 1740 to 1786—whom the world called "the Great" while he was still alive. It is the human phenomenon, as magnificent as it was exceptional regardless of whether we look at it from the political and military or the ethical and philosophical point of view, which interests us here in the man Frederick.

Nature and inclination had not singled Frederick out to command an army, to ride across blood-stained battlefields, to supervise the sowing and harvesting of his peasants, to turn over every taler of the state treasury twice before spending it. Music and poetry, beauty and cultured pleasures, leisure to pursue lofty thoughts, to linger for ever in the serene fields of the Muses—that was what the innermost nature of this man longed for. That is what speaks to us from his music, his poems, his wealth of correspondence with the greatest minds of his age. How movingly the old king complained that the years of war had twisted his fingers with gout and ruined his flute-playing!

Only too soon did the demands of the state cast a shadow on the beautiful world of this richly endowed spirit, did duty, embodied in the unrelenting figure of his father, Frederick William I of Prussia, invade his dreams with pitiless severity. The young Crown Prince suffered so much from his father's harshness that he attempted flight. But he was caught. During his imprisonment he passed through a severe crisis which brought him to the edge of the grave and which, after an intense spiritual struggle, changed him from a carefree epicure into a tireless servant of his state.

Duty and sacrifice, service and yet again service, were from now on the inexorable motivating powers in his life. But never did Frederick cease to decry his fate, which had

made a general and an administrator of him against his nature and his will. Even from the most arduous days, the gravest hours of battle, he wrested a moment to write a poem or to comment upon some newly published philosophical work.

However, even in this he found neither peace nor contentment, for what he read and wrote was French, as stipulated by his education and the fashion of his day, to which he, too, was subject. Frederick never overcame the discrepancy between his German mother tongue, his German thoughts, and the French form, which he strove for as the ultimate perfection. So his intellect moved in the no-man's-land between both cultures, a stranger to the spirit of the German people and yet one of its ideals.

Loneliness and coldness surrounded the king more and more as his life wore on. When death took the confidante of his heart, his favorite sister Wilhelmina of Bayreuth, when war swallowed up his old comrades one by one, it became empty around the old man in Sanssouci, the little palace in Potsdam. Quarreling with his fate, filled with bitter irony toward mankind and its beautiful dreams, he lacked the consolation of the spirit which faith, affectionate ties with the people, or the close companionship of friends are wont to dispense.

Yet he was pervaded by the most sensitive and at the same time powerful feeling. It speaks to us from his letters to his sister, from his heart-rending grief over the death of his friends, from his sorrow over burned-down towns and homeless families. It is testified by the warm love with which his army and his people surrounded him. Frederick's burning heart is revealed to us by the simple narrative of how the king celebrated his victory. When, after the Seven Years' War, he came back to Berlin for the first time, gray and bowed, but victorious, when the jubilant torch procession of the populace went out to meet him, he had just returned from the battlefield of Kunersdorf, where he had suffered one of his worst defeats four years earlier. There he had reviewed in his mind's eye the regiments of his fallen soldiers. Arriving in Berlin, he avoided the crowds and quietly drove along side roads to Charlottenburg, where he had ordered a *Te Deum* in the royal chapel. When the choir began to sing the



chorale, the threadbare old man sat alone in the empty church, his head in his gouty hands, and wept.

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The king was denied happiness more than almost anyone else. For a long time, death appeared to him to be the only release—and yet even the dying man wrested the last few minutes of work from life. Why? Because the law of duty, the heritage of his father, the utmost demand of his heroic philosophy, had permeated his being through and through. Duty alone held back this life from the brink of death; for the struggle between his desire for peace in death and the demands of his country had to be fought out anew every day, until the old king renounced everything else to wear himself out in unremitting service.

With reverence we read the words of his last will: "Our life is a rapid transition from the moment of our birth to that of our death. During this short interval, man is destined to work for the benefit of the community to which he belongs."

When at the age of seventy-four, white-haired, toothless, his hands and feet crippled, Frederick felt death approaching, his last order was addressed to his cabinet counselors, whom from now on he called upon to attend to work at four instead of at six in the morning and to whom he apologized as follows: "My condition compels me to cause you this inconvenience, which will not last long for you. My life is waning, the time I still have must be made use of. It does not belong to me, but to the state." In this way, Frederick ennobled the office of a leader and set up an example for all time.

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Every generation has looked at the ageless picture of this monarch in its own way. The German of 1945 is inclined to see him as he was in his period of battle. Only those who live in danger can fully understand the threatened and the victorious.

Before our eyes arises a vision of the king in the Seven Years' War. After his rapid conquest of Silesia in two victorious campaigns, Austria had prepared the great counterblow which was not only to deprive Prussia of its new acquisition but also to force back the rising state into powerlessness. The threads of encirclement had been drawn, Russia and France gained as allies, Saxony and Sweden instigated to attack the flanks of the surrounded quarry. And now began the desperate struggle of tiny Prussia against a European coalition, the struggle of four millions against ninety millions who were advancing toward the center with a deadly superiority.

Frederick, always far inferior in the number of his men, gained a series of glorious victories. But their names—Prague, Rossbach, Leuthen, Zorndorf, Torgau, Liegnitz—were overshadowed

by the defeats of Kolin, Hochkirch, Kunersdorf. And what was worse: the king could not hope even by the boldest of military actions to destroy his opponents, each of whom was so incomparably superior to him.

In the second year of war, after the disaster of Kolin, Frederick's tortured eye saw no hope looming anywhere. From the west, the French were advancing across the River Elbe; Russian armies were plundering and burning deep in East Prussia and soon after before the gates of Berlin; Swedish troops were making inroads from the north to within fifty miles of Berlin; and the Imperial Army threatened from Thuringia. Frederick's army, however, was tied down by the chief enemy, the Austrian army, which was maneuvering for the recapture of Silesia and Saxony and for a thrust on Berlin.

It is now that we meet in documents and letters, decrees and reports, with that heroic combat lasting for years against the blows of fate, that steadfastness in the face of every disaster and failure, which won him final victory and brought him the name of "the Great." It was not his army and not the financial resources of his state, not his successful policy and brilliant strategy—for in both fields he was not infallible—it was not all this that decided the victory, but the supreme power of his will, the uncompromising nature of his determination never to give up and rather to perish than to admit defeat.

In the black hours after Kolin, the monarch wrote to his friend the Marquis D'Argens: "Think of me as of a wall into which misfortune has been shooting a breach for two years. I am being shaken from all sides. Domestic misfortune, secret worry, public distress, imminent new troubles, that is my daily bread. I have acquired a way of thinking suited to such times and circumstances. The next month will be terrible for us and decisive for my poor country. My calculation is: I shall save it or perish with it."

The war raged on. The French were severely defeated at Rossbach and fled back to the Rhine. The king wrote to his favorite sister: "Now I shall go to my grave in peace after the glory and honor of my nation has been saved. We may be unfortunate but no longer without honor."

Nevertheless, the menace of destruction seemed to loom bigger than ever. The small Prussian army, its king in its midst, was almost suffocated by the blood and smoke of war. Was peace never to come, death and destruction never to end? Was not a thinker like Frederick bound to be deeply conscious of the senselessness of the countryside devastation and seek to put an end to it? "Our procedure," he justified his attempt to make peace with France in a letter to Voltaire, "has been dictated to us by our heart, by a feeling of humanity, which would like to stop the flow of blood flooding

almost our entire globe, which would like to put an end to the murderous deeds, the cruelties, the incendiarism, and all the horrors committed by men who are becoming wilder every day by the habit of bathing in blood. If this war should last for some time, Europe will sink back again into the darkness of ignorance, and our contemporaries will become like beasts. It is time to end these scenes of atrocity.—That is all a tired, hounded, wounded, bitten, crippled, and torn lion can say.”

Seven years of service in the field, during which he never saw Berlin, serious sickness, grief over valued and esteemed generals, the loss of his mother, his brother, his sister, the burden of responsibility, the excess of work, and the desperate anxiety for his state, gnawed relentlessly at the king and prematurely aged him. There were hours in which the bowed man could see no way out and longed only for death. He wrote: “I have only one door through which to escape. It would be cruel to forbid it to me. I die a thousand deaths every day, and a single one can rid me of all my suffering. I shall give nature that which she would shortly have demanded from me, I shall exchange an exhausted remnant of life for a peace of which no one can ever rob me.”

But he had learned in the hardest school of all to put his own desires last. As yet his life did not belong to him. Never would he usurp the right of giving it away. The service to the state which he proclaimed in his political last will and testament: he lived that service every day to the uttermost.

What was the king's person compared to his task, the state? While all around him monarchs and princes were heedlessly wasting the work and lives of their subjects for their own whims, the King of Prussia decreed the following in a secret order: “Should the misfortune overtake me of being captured by the enemy, I forbid the slightest consideration being taken for my person or the slightest attention being paid to what I might possibly write from my imprisonment. If I should meet with such a disaster, I shall sacrifice myself for the state, and my brother is to be obeyed, who will answer to me

with his head that neither a cession of territory nor a ransom will be offered for me and that the war will be continued, being conducted in such a way as if I had never been in the world.”

His sense of duty produced an unshakeable steadfastness, the documents to which are inspiring. In 1760 Frederick declared: “Never shall I experience the moment which will oblige me to conclude an unfavorable peace. No reasons, no persuasion, can force me to sign my disgrace . . . I am firmly determined to risk all in this campaign and to attempt the most desperate actions in order to achieve victory or to find an honorable grave.”

And so he fought on, in victory never reckless or arrogant, in defeat neither disheartened nor despairing, striking out in all directions, answering every action of his opponent with a counteraction, always in danger but never lost, often defeated but yet invincible.

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It can be read in history books that the Seven Years' War was decided when Russia left the Alliance and Prussia's eastern flank was freed. Hence, one might conclude, it was only the chance political constellation which saved Frederick's lost cause. We, however, draw other conclusions. For, first of all, the Russian defection by no means ended the war: it needed the victories of Burkendorf, Schweidnitz, and Freiberg to bring Maria Theresa to the point of negotiation. Secondly—and this is the profound meaning of those events—it was only Frederick's unflinching determination which brought about the change in Russia's policy, only his endurance which made a more favorable political situation possible.

Once again those had erred who, skeptical and mocking, had compared material and numbers of men in long statistics and calculated such a ridiculous inferiority on the part of Prussia that they could, with the pitying expression of superior realism, prove to a nicety the hopelessness of Prussia's position. They had left out the main factor. For what had conquered and what will always conquer over numbers is the spirit.

