

Was Brandenburg-Prussia a more secure state at the death of Frederick the Great than it had been at his accession?

Frederick William I's survey of 1722 listed the faults in his inheritance - plague had wiped out the population of East Prussia; royal domains were mortgaged & bankruptcy appeared imminent; even the army was under-strength and weak. These things had mostly been rectified by the Soldier King before his death. In fact, despite his long-standing personal dislike of his father - over which his obedience always won out - the young Frederick II always bore a strong respect for the measures which his father had put into place for the well-being of the state. An example of Frederick William's innovations was the *Kanton Regiment* of 1733, which increased the number of Prussian subjects in the army to two thirds of its total number, while simultaneously allowing them to maintain a useful function in the economic growth of civilian life. 13,000 of the 23,000 musketeers were on leave throughout 1733 working in various trades and on the fields.¹ Most impressive of all was Frederick William's effective resettlement of the province of East Prussia - an achievement his crown prince witnessed several times at first hand. Encouraging immigration from Protestant areas such as French Switzerland, Salzburg, Rhineland Palatinate, the previously plague-ridden province saw its population increase from 150,000 in 1713 to 600,000 in 1740. With an increase in population, this also increased the tax revenues and manpower available to maintain the superbly-trained army which Frederick William was so fond of - and East Prussia as his crown prince eagerly pointed out did provide no small number of the giant soldiers

In fact the legacy which Frederick William handed onto his son seemed distinctly promising: a full treasury, and a large and well-disciplined army matched all the requirements set down by Prince Eugene for success in eighteenth-century diplomacy. Yet the action which Frederick took within months of his own coronation served on the one hand to confirm and on the other to severely test the value of his father's planning. The invasion of Silesia was motivated, as Frederick later admitted, by 'Ambition, the opportunity for gain, the desire to establish my reputation - these were decisive, and thus war became inevitable.'² It was the author of the *Anti-Machiavel* who in another context said 'The principle of aggrandisement is the fundamental law of every government.' Although later in life he mitigated this by saying 'Princes necessarily possess ambition, but this ambition must be wise, moderate and enlightened by reason',³ Frederick's attempt on Silesia was neither moderate nor enlightened. It changed the nature and international perception of Prussia, in such a way that earned her the implacable enmity of world-powers. It meant more than ever that her existence at all was only as secure as her generals could keep it.

One of Frederick William's proudest achievements was managing to keep Brandenburg-Prussia financially viable throughout his reign. Indeed he left his son with sufficient money in the treasury to fund not only the first of his Silesian wars, but also the best part of his second without recourse to extra sources of revenue. Admittedly the relative lack of resistance on the part of the Austrians made this much cheaper than it could have been, as well Frederick knew. It also necessitated substantial reserves for the funding of future wars, and Frederick himself continued this priority. At the outbreak of war 1756, there were 13.2m talers in the treasury, even taking account of the depredations of the War of Austrian Succession on his tax base in Silesia. Likewise every attempt was made to shield his domains from the financial exploitation which war required. The unfortunate electorate of Saxony was forced to provide 48m talers towards Frederick's war-effort, while Mecklenburg and Swedish Pomerania provided almost 5m talers.⁴

¹ Hubatsch *Frederick the Great* p.33

² quoted in Ritter: *Frederick the Great*

³ quoted in Ritter: *Frederick the Great* from Frederick's *Political Testament* (1754)

⁴ Beutin: *The effects of the Seven Years War on the Prussian economy*

Since the English subsidy in wartime came to 27m talers, thus only 45m of the full cost of 139m talers had to be made up from extra taxation or other extraordinary measures. Indeed, during the Seven Years' War, of all the Prussian provinces, it was only Silesia who was forced to pay all of the taxes due from her.⁵ With no systems of credit that could raise loans in the model of Britain, France or Austria, Frederick was forced to rely on debasement of his coinage in order to increase his revenues over the pressing wartime period. However, the usage of this expedient was in fact remarkably effective - for example the first devaluation of the taler in 1757 from 14 marks of silver to 18 brought in 600,000 talers - the cost of eight regiments. Correspondingly, the value of the English subsidy expressed in talers went up due to the devaluations - therefore the subsidy of 1760 was worth 6.3m talers, yet the following year in 1761 the subsidy was worth 10.7m talers.⁶ Clearly the repeated and almost annual devaluations had a disastrous effect on the fledgling economy of the Prussian provinces, with rapid inflation and rising prices for many items including foodstuffs. Even so, it is very unclear quite how necessary the devaluations actually were, given the secret reserves which not even his ministers knew of. Certainly at the end of the war, Frederick's treasury still had ample precious metal to cast commemorative medals of the victory. Indeed on his death in 1786, Frederick was able to leave his son 51m talers - a sum sufficient to fund six campaigns. Financially speaking, Frederick left his state as secure as he had received it - though economists both contemporary and modern have criticised the fact that 'a large treasure lying dormant in his coffers impoverishes the kingdom; riches increase by circulation and trade cannot subsist without reciprocal profit.'⁷

If he made a priority of maintaining cash surpluses, Frederick's economic policies made if anything a higher priority of maintaining surpluses in as many sectors of economic life as possible. An example is the constant supply of foodstuffs in his territories by careful storage of grain. Possibly this was influenced by his recollections of visiting East Prussia in the 1730s, when he reported to his father that 'I have witnessed its wretched poverty. If the king does not open the granaries before New Year, you can depend upon it that half the population will starve to death.'⁸ Certainly, the plan to safeguard the grain-supply was effective, with 10 times as much grain being stored in 1786 as was the case in 1740. At the same time, there was also sufficient money in reserve to buy 120,000 tonnes of grain, should the need ever arrive. As Frederick said 'it is not my intention to make a profit; I care only that the reserves for future needs be replenished.' Such needs included the desperate conditions in occupied Saxony and Bohemia in 1771-2, where the price of rye rose to 5 talers a bushel; in Prussia it cost only half that.⁹

What nutritional security cannot conceal was the drastic human impact of the wars of Frederick's reign - in areas such as East Prussia which had still not fully recovered from the Thirty Years' War over a century beforehand. Silesia for example saw 6,000 houses and 3,700 farm buildings destroyed in the fighting, Brandenburg had suffered damage worth 6m talers and Berlin forced to pay 2m talers to avoid being destroyed by occupying Austrian and Russian troops. Frederick's answer, in much the same fashion as his father's, was to inaugurate a programme of resettlement encouraging immigration. The Oderbruch drainage scheme begun 1746, elicited the following comments: 'A channel dug from Küstrin to Wriezen drained the swamps and two thousand families were able to settle there... Thus a new province came into existence, created by the victory of diligence over ignorance and laziness.'¹⁰ So extensive was this form of reconstruction that by 1775, 999 new villages had been created (not including those in Silesia not included in the

⁵ Henderson: *Studies in the Economic Policy of Frederick the Great* p.76

⁶ Beutin: *The effects of the Seven Years War on the Prussian economy*

⁷ Lord Malmesbury quoted in Henderson: *Studies in the Economic Policy of Frederick the Great* p.160

⁸ Hubatsch *Frederick the Great* p.60

⁹ Hubatsch *Frederick the Great* p.59

¹⁰ Hubatsch *Frederick the Great*

survey), settling 57,475 families. In other words around 250,000 new settlers had been attracted into Brandenburg-Prussia. Upon the acquisition of West Prussia in 1772, Frederick almost directly imitated his father forty years previously, so much so that already by 1775 50 new villages had been created, providing homes for 1,119 families. More noticeable than this was toleration he extended - in marked contrast to Maria-Theresa in the Habsburg lands - towards religious minorities. The refusal to confiscate Catholic churches meant that despite the fact that the province contained 560 Catholic churches as opposed to just 12 Protestant. Indeed, it was said that Frederick was even considering allowing the construction of mosques if it would encourage Tartar immigration. Building work was not just confined to rural areas, though. Due to a government building plan, the number of buildings in Berlin increased five-fold between 1740 and 1786; in Potsdam the increase was eight-fold. Consequently the population of Berlin, which in 1740 was 98,000, reached 150,000 by 1786 (of which 25,000 garrison).

Much of the fledgling Prussian industry also suffered terribly under the strains of war, which drained their manpower and heavily reduced their markets. The number of working Silesian weavers down went down by 12% over the course of the Seven Years' War, for instance. More generally, Prussian textiles manufacture in 1763/4 was only 75% of the 1755/6 figure.¹¹ It was only State-backed industries such as weapons factories and textiles plants for army uniforms who were in a position to do well out of wartime. The armaments industry, for example, made a loss in peacetime (1746-70) of an average 3%; during the War of Austrian Succession profits reached 7% and during the Seven Years' War 15% profit. However, wars had a much lesser economic impact in Prussia than in the mercantile nations through the draconian set of import-bans which Prussian industries lived under even in peacetime. For example, Silesian linen-makers - excluded from their traditional markets elsewhere in the Habsburg Monarchy - found themselves prohibited from selling even in the older Prussian territories. Frederick's justification for this was that 'Sheer necessity compels me to watch very carefully our balance of payments and to open my hand not to give money to foreigners but to receive from them. I prohibit imports as much as I can so that my subjects shall be encouraged to produce those things which I forbid them to get from elsewhere.'¹² It is unsurprising given this attitude - backed up by his statement that 'industry makes the real profits' - that Frederick tended to treat industry as a money-making investment for himself personally, as can be seen by his attachment to state-regulated monopolies. In this way he poured 2m talers worth of state investment into the silk industry, which by 1786 still only made an average 3 million talers worth of goods per year. In this way the porcelain factory, which had opened in Berlin 1757 but quickly failed, was made profitable only application of extreme political pressure on overseas markets. By 1785, it still only made 24,000 talers profit per year. Frederick's attitude to economic infrastructure was constantly side-tracked by other issues - for example he refused to build roads in case they were used by the enemy, and concentrated on canals instead. Likewise he refused to abolish internal customs dues since they provided a substantial part of state income.

The final way in which his policies helped to secure the state was through fostering the already existing programme of social cohesion between the Crown and nobility via the unifying mechanism of the army and State service. This can be most clearly seen through the attempts in the 1750s to exclude non-nobles from the officer corps - and thus from the reserved branches of civilian government. In return for guaranteeing their landed estates, the nobility and clergy lost their exemptions from taxation. Yet crucially, and as opposed to France, government posts were very clearly not venal. This can be best seen in the case of Münchow refusing monetary gift from merchants of Breslau. On being appealed to, Frederick said 'I approve of his behaviour and I think you should keep the money and use it for some other purpose. This should teach you that

¹¹ Beutin: *The effects of the Seven Years War on the Prussian economy*

¹² quoted in Hubatsch *Frederick the Great* from Frederick's *Political Testament* (1754)

I do not allow my officials to plunder the country; every one of them must be satisfied with his salary.¹³ State service was a bond more important than every personal interest, and as Frederick said even before ascending to the throne, 'we ought to consider that Machiavel reasons according to the Interest of the State, which has as absolute power over princes, as princes have over their subjects.'¹⁴ This interest included even the peasantry, and mild attempts were made to protect them by removing the most burdensome services. Frederick's decree that 'first of all serfdom in villages owned by the crown, the nobility and the towns is to be abolished as from this hour' was followed by the abolition of judicial torture .

Yet despite the outward appearance of security for Prussia of Frederick's later years, there were structural weaknesses in the composition of Prussian government. Most clear was the fact that the bureaucracy remained completely reliant on all decisions being passed through one extremely active man in the shape of Frederick. His son Frederick William appeared to have little of his father's extraordinary appetite for decision-making and leadership. Yet the system required it, as can be seen from regulations such as the 1748 Instruction to the General Directory which stipulated that 'ministers are not to waste time over *particularia* and the settling of rarefied disputes; if within six minutes any dispute remains unsettled, a *relatio a regem* is to be drawn up immediately.'¹⁵ During Seven Years' War Frederick's absence on campaign meant his instructions were merely to maintain all programmes at their existing levels. The bureaucracy was an executive rather than an innovative body, and even where they did take initiatives, Frederick maintained provincial Estates since they provided a counterweight not to himself but to the bureaucracy. Without a strong king, the Prussian system of government seemed brittle.

The territorial expansions into Silesia, West Prussia, East Friesland and Swedish Pomerania also brought problems of integration into the existing *Gesamtstaat*, which Frederick left unresolved. Despite the 14,050 new families settled with state aid in Silesia by 1775, the toleration of Catholic immigrants financial help given to industries such as the mills in Luckenwalde, hardly any Silesian nobles felt sufficiently integrated into their new country to come to Berlin for the marriage of Frederick William. This proved even more difficult in areas like West Prussia which had substantial populations which were neither Protestant nor German. Frederick returned the Netze valley to Poland 1772, clearly disturbed by the rapid and unlooked-for expansion¹⁶

Likewise Frederick's own military talents and prestige appeared essential to maintain Prussia in its status as a first-rank power. Even his tireless attention to army regulations could not prevent the break-down of the Prussian supply-train in the Potato War of 1778-9. Defending the extended length of her borders looked likely to exceed her resources, even without war to contend with. As Frederick said in his *Anti-Machiavel*, 'It is particularly dangerous for a Prince to suffer the people to languish and grow soft and effeminate at a time when the fatigues of war harden and discipline their neighbours.' Maintaining Great Power status without the clear, militarily-gifted leadership proved impossible. The state could perhaps survive - a fact which looked unlikely in 1759 - since its reputation had been secured. Its continuing importance depended on maintaining and adapting the structure which had served Frederick so well.

¹³ Hubatsch *Frederick the Great* p.79

¹⁴ Frederick the Great: *Anti-Machiavel*

¹⁵ Hubatsch *Frederick the Great*

¹⁶ Hubatsch *Frederick the Great* p.183