

## **CHAPTER 7**

# **PRUSSIA AND THE HOHENZOLLERNS**

### **7.1 BRANDENBURG-PRUSSIA IN 1648**

The Thirty Years' War had devastated Germany. Brandenburg had lost half its population through death, disease, and emigration.

Brandenburg was established by the Emperor Otto I in 950 A.D., and the ruler of Brandenburg was designated as an Elector of the Holy Roman Empire by Emperor Sigismund in 1417. By the time of the Thirty Years' War, despite its central location, Brandenburg was still an insignificant part of the Empire. By marriage, the House of Hohenzollern had also acquired widely-separated parts of the Empire. In the west, Hohenzollerns governed the duchy of Cleves and the counties of Mark and Ravensberg; in the east, they governed the duchy of East Prussia.

The Peace of Westphalia (1648) granted the Elector Eastern Pomerania, three tiny bishoprics and the archbishopric of

Magdeburg. Nothing in these possessions showed any promise of those disparate territories becoming a Great Power of Europe. Each province had its own Estates, representing the towns and the nobility. They had little in common and no common administration. The terrain had no natural frontiers for defense and was not economically significant. Its population was sparse, its soil poor and sandy. It was cut off from the sea and was not on any of the trade routes of Europe.

## **7.2 FREDERICK WILLIAM (1640 – 88)**

During his half-century reign the “Great Elector” established Prussia as a Great Power and laid the foundation for the future unification of Germany in the nineteenth century. He took the title “King of Prussia” since East Prussia lay outside the boundaries of the Holy Roman empire and thus was under no oversight whatever from the Austrian Hapsburgs.

Frederick William was the nephew of King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden and his wife was the granddaughter of William the Silent, hero of Dutch Independence. He sought to emulate the government organization of the Swedes and the economic policies of the Dutch.

Frederick had been well-educated and spoke five languages. He was a strict Calvinist and settled 20,000 Huguenot refugees on his estates. He granted toleration, however, to both Catholics and Jews.

He encouraged industry and trade and brought in foreign craftsmen and Dutch farmers. In each province he established a local government, headed by a Governor and Chancellor, but with control from the central government in Berlin.

His most historically-significant innovation was the build-

ing of a strong standing army. He was able to do this only through heavy taxes, a rate of taxation twice as heavy as French taxation during the height of Louis XIV's power. But the Prussian nobility were not exempt from those heavy taxes, as were the French aristocracy.

The Elector sought to encourage industry and trade, but he was in danger of taxing it out of existence. New industries were started: woollens, cottons, linen, velvet, lace, silk, soap, paper, and iron products. One of his achievements was the Frederick William Canal through Berlin which linked the Elbe and Oder rivers and enabled canal traffic from Breslau and Hamburg to Berlin. He was the only Hohenzollern to be interested in overseas trade before Kaiser William II. But without ports and naval experience, the effort collapsed.

The central dynamic of Frederick William's life was his Calvinism, through which he was convinced of the direct protection and guidance from God in all he did. He highly valued learning and founded the University of Pufendorf and the Berlin Library. He was greatly alarmed at the threat to Protestantism implied in Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 and joined the League of Augsburg in 1686.

### **7.3 FREDERICK I (1688 – 1713)**

The Great Elector's son (i.e., Elector Frederick III and King Frederick I) was a weak and somewhat deformed man, but won the affection of his people as did no other Hohenzollern. He loved the splendor of the monarchy and elaborate ceremony. He built beautiful palaces and provided splendid uniforms of white satin edged with gold lace for his guards. Dinner was announced by twenty-four trumpeters. An orchestra played and the servants wore blue trimmed with gold lace.

Potsdam had been built by the Great Elector. Frederick I built a new palace in Berlin and Charlottenburg for his Queen, Sophie Charlotte, who joined her husband in the many philosophical and religious discussions common in the palace.

Frederick I founded the University of Halle in 1692, a center for two of the great concepts of the time, Pietism and Natural Law. The king welcomed as immigrants not only craftsmen, but also scholars such as Jacob Lenfant, historian of the Council of Trent, Isaac De Beausobre, translator of the New Testament, and Philip Speuer, a leading Pietist of his day. The Enlightenment philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz persuaded Frederick to found an Academy of Science.

Much of Frederick I's reign was spent at war, for Prussia participated in the War of the League of Augsburg (1688 – 97) and the War of the Spanish Succession (1701 – 13) (See Chapter 1). Prussia did not gain territorially, but perpetuated the military tradition that was beginning. The costs of war were a heavy financial burden to the small state.

## **7.4 FREDERICK WILLIAM I (1713 – 40)**

This king was quite different from his father. He cut the number of court officials drastically, not only for economy, but because he was impatient with ceremony.

He believed Prussia needed a strong standing army and a plentiful treasury and he proceeded to acquire both. Prussia's army grew from 45,000 to 80,000 during his reign, despite a population of only 2.5 million. 80% of state revenues went for military expenditures, compared with 60% in France and 50% in Austria. On the other hand, he only spent 2% of tax revenues to maintain his court, compared with 6% in Austria under Maria Theresa. Frederick built the fourth largest army in Europe, paid off all state debts, and left his successor a surplus of ten million thaler.

Prussia maintained a large standing army in order to avoid war if possible, a policy that was maintained during Frederick William's reign. The only time he went to war was when Charles XII of Sweden occupied Stalsund. Prussia immediately attacked and forced Sweden out of Stralsund. In 1720 Sweden agreed to the Prussian annexation of the port of Stettin and Pomeranian territory west of the river Oder.

Prussia continued close relations with Holland and with England. King George I of England was Frederick William's uncle and father-in-law. His mother was George I's sister and his wife was George's daughter.

Prussia developed the most efficient bureaucracy in Europe. In 1723 the king established a General Directory of four departments, each responsible for certain provinces. Taxes were high, but income from the royal estates (about one-third of the kingdom) largely paid for the army. The king made policy decisions and left it to the bureaucracy to work out the details.

Subordinate to the General Directory were the seventeen provincial chambers. Merit promotions rewarded efficiency and diligence. The civil bureaucracy as well as the military were based on the principle of absolute obedience and discipline.

For oversight every provincial chamber included a special royal agent, or *fiscal*, to keep a close watch on how well the will of the king was followed. The king also required secret reports annually on all bureaucrats.

The whole Prussian bureaucracy consisted of only 14,000 poorly-paid civil servants (about 1/10th the proportionate number commonly found in 20th century European nations).

The king was a ceaseless worker and expected the same from those about him, including his son, the future Frederick the Great. The king entrusted his son's early education to his old governess, Mademoiselle de Rocoulles, a Huguenot refugee who taught Frederick to speak French better than German. The king regimented his son's education from 6:00 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. and the young boy learned all the fifty-four movements of the Prussian drill before he was five years old. Frederick William established a thousand schools for peasant children.

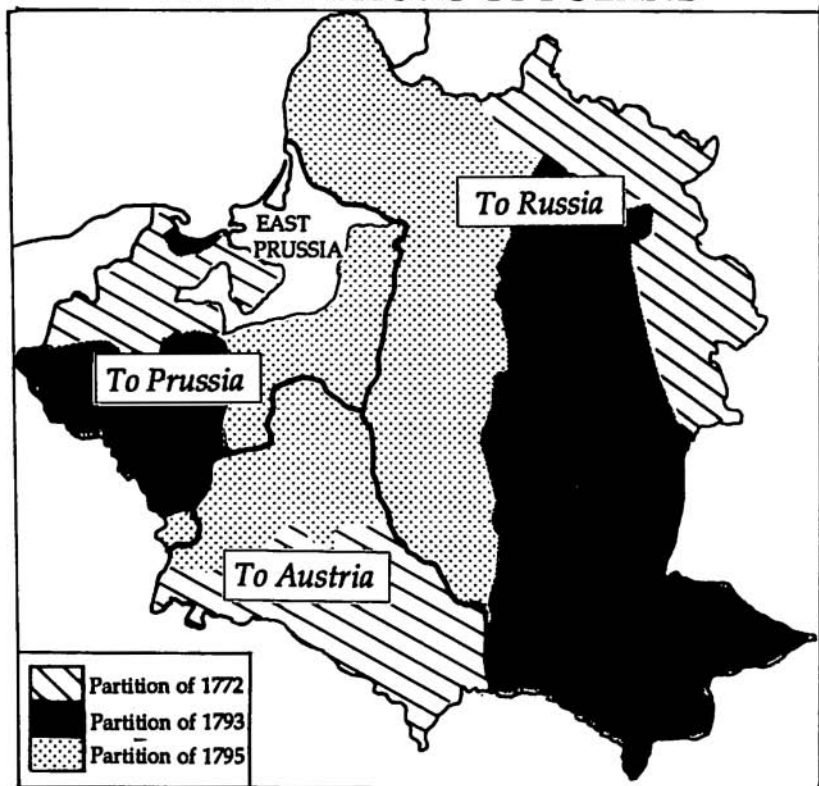
## **7.5 FREDERICK THE GREAT (FREDERICK II: 1740 – 86)**

Frederick the Great inherited his throne at age 28. His father left him a prosperous economy, a full treasury, an income of seven million thalers, and an army of 80,000. Unlike his father, Frederick loved French literature, poetry, and music. He played the flute and wrote poetry all his life.

Frederick's philosophy of government soon became apparent. He wrote in 1740: "Machiavelli maintains that, in this wicked and degenerate world, it is certain ruin to be strictly honest. For my part, I affirm that, in order to be safe, it is necessary to be virtuous. Men are commonly neither wholly good nor wholly bad, but both good and bad ...." The king did not believe the state existed for the gratification of the ruler, but the ruler for the state: he must regard himself as "the first servant of the state." All his life Frederick continued to ponder questions of religion, morality, and power. French literature dominated his reading.

In October 1740, the Emperor Charles VI died and in December Frederick ordered a sudden attack on Silesia. Thus began twenty-three years of warfare where the Great Powers of

## THE PARTITIONS OF POLAND



Europe were aligned against Prussia: France, Austria, and Russia. Their combined population was fifteen times that of Prussia. Prussia emerged a quarter century later with enlarged territories of rich land and nearly twice its former population, but at a cost of devastation. Prussia alone lost 180,000 killed and the entire society was seriously disrupted. Indeed, for a time, Frederick thought he would not survive “the ruin of the Fatherland.” Instead, Prussia emerged as one of the Great Powers of Europe.

The remaining twenty-three years of the king’s life were spent in re-building and reforming what he had very nearly

destroyed. Frugality, discipline, and hard work despite very high taxation were the values stressed throughout the society. The king provided funds to rebuild towns and villages, used reserve grain for seed-planting, and requisitioned horses for farming. He suspended taxes in some areas for six months as an economic stimulant. He started many new industries. By 1773, 264 new factories had been built: sugar refineries, leather works, porcelain manufacturing, tobacco works, and so forth. The government drained marshes along the rivers and settled hundreds of families in colonizing former wastelands. He oversaw the reform of the judicial system in an attempt to produce a more equitable nation governed by law. His system was one of "constitutional absolutism."

In 1772, as part of the First Partition of Poland, Prussia acquired west Prussia thus linking most of its territories.