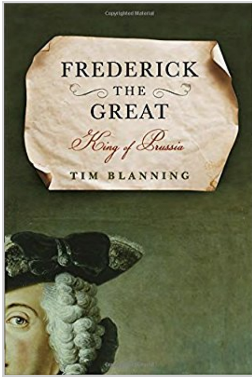

Frederick the Great: King of Prussia

By Tim Blanning

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The definitive biography of the legendary autocrat whose enlightened rule transformed the map of Europe and changed the course of history

Few figures loom as large in European history as Frederick the Great. When he inherited the Prussian crown in 1740, he ruled over a kingdom of scattered territories, a minor Germanic backwater. By the end of his reign, the much larger and consolidated Prussia ranked among the continent's great powers. In this magisterial biography, award-winning historian Tim Blanning gives us an intimate, in-depth portrait of a king who dominated the political, military, and cultural life of Europe half a century before Napoleon.

A brilliant, ambitious, sometimes ruthless monarch, Frederick was a man of immense contradictions. This consummate conqueror was also an ardent patron of the arts who attracted painters, architects, musicians, playwrights, and intellectuals to his court. Like his fellow autocrat Catherine the Great of Russia, Frederick was captivated by the ideals of the Enlightenment—for many years he kept up lively correspondence with Voltaire and other leading thinkers of the age. Yet, like Catherine, Frederick drew the line when it came to implementing Enlightenment principles that might curtail his royal authority.

Frederick's terrifying father instilled in him a stern military discipline that would make the future king one of the most fearsome battlefield commanders of his day, while deriding as effeminate his son's passion for modern ideas and fine art. Frederick, driven to surpass his father's legacy, challenged the dominant German-speaking powers, including Saxony, Bavaria, and the Habsburg Monarchy. It was an audacious foreign policy gambit, one at which Frederick, against the expectations of his rivals, succeeded.

In examining Frederick's private life, Blanning also carefully considers the long-debated question of Frederick's sexuality, finding evidence that Frederick lavished gifts on his male friends and maintained homosexual relationships throughout his life, while limiting contact with his estranged, unloved queen to visits that were few and far between.

The story of one man's life and the complete political and cultural transformation of a nation, Tim Blanning's sweeping biography takes readers inside the mind of

the monarch, giving us a fresh understanding of Frederick the Great's remarkable reign.

Praise for *Frederick the Great*

"Writing Frederick's biography . . . requires a diverse set of skills: expertise in eighteenth-century diplomatic and military history, including the intricacies of the Holy Roman Empire; a familiarity with the music, architecture and intellectual traditions of Northern Europe; and, not least, a profound sense of human psychology, the better to grasp the makeup of this complex and tormented man. Fortunately, Tim Blanning . . . has all of these skills in abundance."**—*The Wall Street Journal***

"At once scholarly and highly readable . . . [Blanning] has given us a superb portrait of an enlightened despot, equally at home on the battlefield and in the opera house, both utterly ruthless and culturally refined."**—*Commentary***

"Blanning, in clear thinking and prose, investigates all aspects of Frederick's personality and reign. . . . The last word on this significant king, for years to come."**—*Booklist* (starred review)**

"Masterly . . . Blanning brilliantly brings to life one of the most complex characters of modern European history."**—*The Telegraph* (five stars)**

"A supremely nuanced account . . . This biography finds [Blanning] at the height of his powers."**—*Literary Review***

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Editorial Review

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About the Author
Until his retirement in 2009, **Tim Blanning** was a professor of modern European history at the University of Cambridge, and he remains a fellow of Sidney Sussex College and of the British Academy. He is the general editor of *The Oxford History of Modern Europe* and *The Short Oxford History of Europe*. He is also the author of *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture,* which won a prestigious German prize and was short-listed for the British Academy Book Prize, the *New York Times* bestseller *The Pursuit of Glory, The Triumph of Music,* and *The Romantic Revolution*. In 2000 he was awarded a Pilkington Prize for teaching by the University of Cambridge.

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chapter 1

The Inheritance

The Lands of the Hohenzollerns

“Apart from Libya, there are few states that can equal ours when it comes to sand,” wrote Frederick to Voltaire early in 1776, adding later the same year in his Account of the Prussian Government that it was “poor and with scarcely any resources.” Not for nothing was Frederick’s core territory Brandenburg known as the “sandbox of the Holy Roman Empire.” This was a land of thin soil thinly populated, where lakes alternated with heaths, bogs with moors. Frederick told d’Alembert that the good people of Aachen had come to believe that their foul-tasting mineral water represented the summit of God’s creation, in the same way that the Jews worshipped the mud of Jerusalem, but as for himself, he could never work up the same sort of enthusiasm for the Prussian equivalent: sand.

This repeated denigration was, of course, fishing for compliments. “If I could do all this with so little, what might I have done if I had had the population of France or the riches of England?” was his unspoken question. It was all greatly overdone. Much of the soil of Brandenburg may have been infertile, but at least it was not mountainous. Across its featureless landscape wound rivers wide and slow flowing, well suited for transportation in an age when roads were dust bowls when the sun shone and glutinous pits when the rains came. This was a natural gift to which Frederick’s predecessors had given a generous helping hand. During the 1660s, for example, his great-grandfather, Frederick William “The Great Elector,” had completed the “Müllrose canal,” begun back in 1558, to allow shipping to cross from the Oder to the Spree and Berlin, and from there via the Havel to the Elbe and the North Sea. As his Austrian enemies slogged their way up hill and down dale, how they must have envied the Prussians the waterways that allowed them to move men and matériel so easily.

In any case, the Hohenzollern possessions were much more than just Brandenburg. In the far west, on the Dutch frontier, was the duchy of Cleves, sitting astride the Rhine, together with the adjacent county of Mörs. The latter included the town of Krefeld, home to a large community of Mennonites and their flourishing textile manufactories. On the right (eastern) bank of the Rhine was the county of Mark, bisected by the river Ruhr, which eventually gave its name to the most industrialized region of continental Europe. Also in fertile Westphalia were the counties of Ravensberg, Tecklenburg and Lingen and the principality of Minden. Further east, immediately to the south of Brandenburg, were the principality of Halberstadt and the duchy of Magdeburg. The city of Magdeburg on the river Elbe boasted one of Germany’s biggest cathedrals and strongest fortifications. This was a famously rich and fertile province and any sand to be found there was used for building. Attending a peasant wedding outside the town just before the end of the Seven Years War, Count Lehndorff and the 300-odd other guests sat down to a feast of 42 boiled capons, 2 steers, 14 calves, and carp worth 150 talers, all washed down with wine and brandy to the value of another 150 talers.

Away to the northeast of Brandenburg was the duchy of Pomerania, with its long Baltic coastline and the excellent port of Stettin at the mouth of the river Oder. In the opinion of Frederick’s demanding father, Frederick William I, this was “a good fertile province.” Further east still, separated by a broad stretch of territory ruled by Poland, was East Prussia, outside the Holy Roman Empire and on the very edge of German-speaking Europe. Although decimated by plague between 1708 and 1710, which killed around a third of the population, and fought over repeatedly during the Great Northern War of 1700–1721, the province had then enjoyed a sustained revival. Waves of refugee immigrants from oppressed or overpopulated parts of southern and western Germany, including the 17,000 Protestants expelled by the

Archbishop of Salzburg in 1732, increased the population by 160,000 to reach 600,000 by 1740. Thanks partly to the need to offer new settlers favorable terms, there was a surprisingly high proportion of completely free peasant holdings, comprising around a fifth of the total.

The Royal Domains

These bits and pieces of territory strung out across a thousand miles of the North European Plain had been acquired at different times and in different circumstances. They were held together by four threads of varying thickness: dynasty, religion, language and membership of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (with the exception of East Prussia, which had been a fief of the Polish crown until 1660). Of these, the most material link was spiritual, for the secularization of Church property following the reception of the Reformation had given the Electors of Brandenburg a colossal domain far in excess of that enjoyed by any other European ruler. Unlike the spendthrift Tudor and Stuart monarchs of England, the Hohenzollerns had held on to their windfall and had even increased it. Frederick William I issued a standing order to his officials to purchase at regular intervals any large estate in the duchy of Magdeburg worth between 100,000 and 150,000 talers that came on the market. In the course of his reign (1713–40) he spent 8,000,000 talers on new acquisitions and had doubled domain income to c. 3,500,000 talers a year.

To say that the king was the largest landowner in his state gives only a weak impression of his ascendancy. These domains covered no less than a quarter of his territory, including about a third of the cultivable area, providing some 50 percent of the total revenue in 1740. Only about a dozen estates, most of them studs, were administered directly. Most were leased by auction to about 1,100 to 1,500 tenants for periods of six to twelve years in units of about 2,000 acres. The tenant-in-chief, who not only had to make the highest bid but also provide evidence of financial security, retained at most two or three farms, subletting the remainder, along with the mills, breweries, distilleries, brickworks and other royal property he had leased. Perhaps surprisingly, these officials, known as Beamte, were all commoners; indeed, nobles were expressly excluded from the bidding process.

The Junkers

In an agrarian world, land is status, land is power. As we shall see, it was this degree of control which allowed Frederick to direct agricultural development with a precision denied less-well-endowed sovereigns. It also elevated the Hohenzollerns to a lofty eminence from which they towered over even their biggest magnates. There were very few of the latter anyway and certainly no equivalents of the French or English grandees who lived in palaces like the princes they were. In Brandenburg and Pomerania there were no magnates at all. Only in East Prussia did the Dohnas, Finckensteins and Schliebens live in some style on large estates, but even there the average size of the 420 noble estates in the province was only 667.5 acres. The origin of the word used to designate a Prussian noble—“Junker”—is revealing, deriving as it does from “junk herr” or “young lord,” the younger son sent off from the German interior in the Middle Ages to seek his fortune in the wild lands of the east.

Fame and fortune often proved elusive for the migrants. Over the centuries, however, they became the beneficiaries of a distinctive institution based on landownership which became established in the lands to the east of the river Elbe. This was the manorial estate, combining both social control and economic domination. Over the peasants on his estate the Junker not only exercised judicial authority and police powers but also conscripted their labor to till his soil, milk his cows, tend his flocks, transport his goods, work in his breweries or mills and even serve in his household. He was also in charge of the community’s religious, social and educational facilities (where they existed). His permission was required—and usually had to be purchased—when the peasant wished to marry, choose a different profession or leave the estate. In return,

the Junker provided the peasant with a plot of land and was obliged to provide assistance in the event of sickness or old age. Needless to say, not all of these conditions existed in equal measure in all places all of the time. In some places there were peasants who were completely free and independent landowners, or enjoyed hereditary tenure, or were paid wages for additional services. Nevertheless, this manorial system gave the Prussian Junkers a distinctive identity and control of local government.

In common with many parts of the Holy Roman Empire, and indeed Europe, they also enjoyed representation at a provincial level through their control of the assemblies confusingly known as "Estates" (Landstände). Aided by their superior creditworthiness, the Estates had achieved considerable influence on both financial and judicial affairs. During the long reign of the energetic Frederick William the Great Elector (1640–88), however, their role had been reduced. The creation of a standing army, a central authority—the Privy Council—independent of the Estates, and an effective fiscal system combined to relocate sovereignty in the Hohenzollern territories. Whether this represented the establishment of an "absolutist" system is neither here nor there. What it did mean was that decision making at a national level was now firmly in the hands of one man and a relatively high degree of integration had been achieved in both civil and military administration. A crucial date was 1653 and the agreement between the Elector and the Estates of Brandenburg known as the "Rezess." This used to be presented as a shameful deal between ruler and nobles, with the former being given control of the center in return for ceding the landowners control of their peasants. The current view is that the Junkers gained little or nothing they did not have already, whereas the Elector achieved everything he wanted.

Even if "compromise" is not quite the appropriate label for the Rezess of 1653, relations between the Elector and his nobles were always more cooperative than confrontational. Every now and again the stick had to be brandished, as in 1672 when the recalcitrant East Prussian noble Christian Ludwig von Kalckstein was abducted from Warsaw and executed. Even more brutal was Frederick William I's treatment of another East Prussian Junker, Councillor von Schlubhut, accused of misappropriating money intended for the relief of the Salzburg refugees. Interrogated by the king in person when on a visit to Königsberg in 1731, von Schlubhut made light of the offense, condescendingly promising to pay the money back. His further observation, when told that he deserved to be hanged—"It is not the done thing to execute a Prussian nobleman"—showed how little he knew his sovereign. Frederick William had a gallows erected outside Schlubhut's office the same night and hanged him from it the next day, but not before first attending church and listening attentively to a sermon on mercy ("Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy"—Matthew 5:7).

Frederick William had a generally low opinion of his nobles. In the "political testament" he wrote for his son in 1722, he denounced those of East Prussia as "false and sly," those of the Altmark, Magdeburg and Halberstadt as "very bad and disobedient" (especially the Schulenburgs, Alvenslebens and Bismarcks) and those of Cleves and Mark as "stupid oxen, as malicious as the Devil and very attached to their privileges." On the other hand, he thoroughly approved of the Pomeranian Junkers ("as good as gold, a bit argumentative but obedient if spoken to properly") and those of the Neumark, Uckermark and Mittelmark regions of Brandenburg. The acid test was their willingness to send their sons for army training. In the past, they had shown little enthusiasm for a military career and, when they did, they preferred Dutch, Danish or Polish service. Frederick William soon put a stop to that, having registers compiled of all young nobles between the ages of twelve and eighteen. If they were backward in coming forward, as they often were in East Prussia, he dispatched armed posses to round them up. By 1722 his new academy at Berlin had more than 300 cadets. As he freely admitted, his motive was aimed as much at social disciplining as at military efficiency.

Life at a Prussian cadet school probably compared unfavorably even with life at English boarding schools, but it did have its compensations, including—as in the latter institutions—a good education. Frederick William promised reluctant parents that their sons would be taught reading, writing, mathematics, the French

language, geography, history, fencing, dancing and riding, would be well housed and well fed and—most important of all, in his view—would be brought up to be God-fearing Christians. They were also, of course, guaranteed employment in the Prussian army. This was very welcome, given the relative poverty of most Junker families. Only very few could afford to allow even the eldest son to live on the estate in a manner befitting a nobleman. Denied access to ecclesiastical benefices by their Protestantism, they found an austere but welcome substitute in the officer corps. Frederick William I more than doubled the size of the army, increasing the officer corps to 3,000.

The early years for the young Junkers were undeniably difficult. No matter how ancient their pedigree, they had to start as ill-paid ensigns and could barely survive without assistance from their families. But promotion to the rank of captain and control of a company's finances brought relative comfort; further promotion to a colonelcy and a regiment brought relative riches. Of the 1,600 Junker boys who attended the Berlin cadet school between 1717 and 1740, more than 90 percent were commissioned and forty became generals during Frederick the Great's reign. No wonder that Frederick William I admired the Pomeranians so much: as early as 1724 the nobility there consisted almost entirely of serving or retired officers and there was not one family in the province without at least one serving member.

A Junker leaving military service could find alternative employment in the civilian administration, most notably as a Landrat (district councillor). This was the most important post in the Prussian system because the eighty-odd Landräte formed the vital interface between central government and local landowners. It was they who directed all the important business, supervising the collection of taxes, providing for troops moving through their districts, regulating relations between peasants and their lords, promoting agricultural improvement, preventing or mitigating natural disasters, collecting information and publicizing government decrees. They represented both their fellow Junkers and the ruler, for they were appointed by the latter but were proposed by the former. Even if Frederick William I often ignored their recommendation, this was always a system founded on cooperation. That goes a long way in explaining the effectiveness of the Prussian administration: what the center directed was often actually put into practice. It was no accident that the most efficient local government in Europe was to be found in England and Prussia, for in both it was based on partnership between the sovereign at the center and the notables in the localities. If the English justices of the peace were "partners in oligarchy," the Prussian Landräte were "partners in autocracy."

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