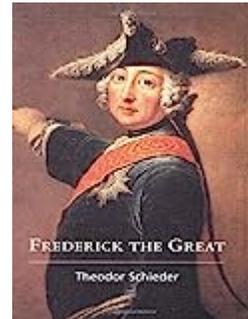




**Theodor Schieder.** *Frederick the Great.* Edited and translated by Sabina Berkeley and H.M. Scott. London and New York: Longman, 2000. xiv + 289 pp. \$31.80 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-01769-6.



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## BEYOND BIOGRAPHY? - FREDERICK THE GREAT REVISITED

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When Theodor Schieder's study *Friedrich der Groesse: Ein Koenigtum der Widersprueche* first appeared in 1983 it was not widely reviewed in Anglophone journals despite its arrival amidst the Preussenwelle; yet it has nevertheless become accepted in the intervening period as one of the most distinguished commentaries upon the reign. This new and welcome translation by Berkeley and Scott thus provides us with a fresh opportunity to assess the strengths of its analysis, and to scrutinise the structure of its exposition in the light of fresh research in the intervening seventeen years. But before we do so it should be noted that by no means all of Schieder's original has been translated, and the later sections of the book in particular have been sharply pruned back. Gone is the final chapter on Frederick and the concept of "historical greatness," and absent too are many of the studies of Frederick's relations with contemporary military and cultural figures, although the most important of these, with Voltaire, has been retained. The notes have also been discarded on the assumption that the special-

ists can and will consult the original. All these excisions seem justifiable, although the loss of the small section on "Frederick and German Literature" is perhaps less easy to defend, more particularly since the subject of Frederick's uneasy relationship with German language and culture was revived most recently by T.C.W. Blanning in his arresting essay in the commemorative volume for Ragnhild Hatton, *Royal and Republican Sovereignty*.<sup>[1]</sup> But overall the translators should be congratulated both on the way that they have negotiated these tricky editorial pitfalls and also for their technical skill and success in making the author's often labyrinthine prose both easily accessible and genuinely readable.

The substantial architecture of the work thus survives intact with the exception of the fact that the removal of the admittedly unsatisfactory section on "historical greatness" means that the book does now end rather abruptly with a very brief Afterword. Does this matter? The book was always most valuable for its deliberate choice of sharp analytical focus over narrative comprehensiveness; so the absence of a rhetorically effective conclusion to draw the threads of the argument

together is not a mortal omission, and more especially when Scott has provided an introduction which in large measure fills the gap. Rather more important is whether the detailed analysis originally offered by Schieder is by now worth the very considerable effort of translating the volume. On the whole the answer to that is positive, though recent publications have diminished and blunted its relevance in some important respects. Let us follow Schieder's lead and review the subject according to some key analytical cruces.

The distinctive approach of the book is best represented in its portrait of the king's personality, which is viewed as fundamentally divided between a genuine commitment (almost disconcertingly Hegelian at times) to the world of ideas and enlightened reform, and a pragmatic recognition and exploitation of the type of cynical militarist politics required to ensure the security and survival of a chronically under-resourced state, which would itself in turn require the king to remain *toujours en vedette*. This is the heart of the personal paradox hinted at in the original sub-title of the book. While there is here still an underlying ghost of an endorsement of the older view of Frederick as an early hero of German unification, in that his acquisition of Silesia is viewed as an anticipation of the successful policy of unification and centralisation by exclusion of Austria, it is nevertheless nuanced and tempered and made more ambiguous through the deployment of frequent references to Frederick's own writings, both philosophical and historical. An approach to Prussian history through the filter of royal personality can and always will be criticised because it still accepts uncritically that "world historical" individuals do have a disproportionate influence on the politics of their days; but it represents a distinct improvement on the blinkered nationalist approach of Hubatsch's older work in English translation, and moreover in the case of Frederick it is difficult to argue against the case that his military interventions in the first half of his reign, and eschewing of military actions in the second did make a decisive impact upon the structural development of the Prussia of his day.[2]

The book adopts the format of a series of thematic essays devoted to the upbringing and formation of the Crown Prince, the wars with the Habsburg Monarchy over Silesia, the fractious relationship between Prussia and Russia, the evolution of Frederick's attitudes towards the Reich, and what exactly it meant for Frederick to be an enlightened absolutist and "soldier-king." Schieder does not shirk the large general issues lying behind the biographical detail, and so there are also examinations

of what the Enlightenment and cameralism did and did not mean to Frederick, and how the author of the *Anti-Machiavel* may be reconciled with the ruthless exponent of reason of state doctrines. Best of all, perhaps, for both students and specialists is the second chapter, *The King and his Prussia*, a valuable tour d'horizon of the workings of the Prussian state administrative system, that is a model of lucid exposition of a subject that can often remain shrouded in arid detail and unrevealing bureaucratic obscurity. Throughout the work there are shrewd incidental observations and intelligent comparisons, particularly with nineteenth century developments, which still give the specialist and the general reader pause for thought.

Re-reading the volume makes one appreciate that Schieder was already sensitive to issues that have since become more historiographically fashionable, and that subsequent research has filled in rather than replaced his original interpretative framework: Frederick's complex relations with the Reich and the motivations behind and rhetorical features of his own historical writings are just two examples where Schieder is as illuminating a guide as more recent writers. But one topic worthy of more extended notice in this connection is his handling of the Frederician court which is described with fine discrimination and skill long before "court studies" became a fashionable and topical matrix for the discussion of political change, least of all in German historiography. The point is made that the king surrounded himself with a wide range of advisers and correspondents and confidants very few of whom also held formal office, and indeed there was little overlap between this inner circle and those who did hold important offices. Therefore quite a sharp distinction emerged between those in the court, who perpetuated the rituals that Frederick, no less than his contemporary monarchs, considered necessary elements of the traditional representation of royal power, and those, such as the members of the Berlin Royal Academy of Sciences, who were nevertheless part of "court society," involved in the presentation and justification of royal government to a wider public audience. Frederick is shown to be innovative in his recognition that both forms of publicity were necessary to the successful development of the image of monarchy at home and abroad.

The author is adept at isolating and directly addressing some of the hardest questions embedded in the practice of government under Frederick, such as the insistence on the preservation of the nobility's privileges in the army and the failure to push ahead with the aboli-

tion of serfdom beyond some amelioration of labour dues within the crown estates. Indeed the section devoted to these topics (pp. 42-63) may be recommended to students as one of the best available treatments of these complex issues. Schieder draws attention to important facts, often overlooked elsewhere, that must be part of any balanced assessment of these questions. He argues that the reliance on noble officers has to be seen against a background in which a majority of the rank-and-file troops were often not Prussian at all, and that for the nobility, a career in war was not unequivocally beneficial by any means, given the fact that the loss of earnings involved in separation from an estate were only partially compensated by the rewards of service. Moreover, Frederick recognised, in a way that Joseph II did not, that any restructuring of labour services and serf obligations on the estates of the nobles would create real problems in army staffing and in sustaining agricultural productivity that could only be overcome by the crown's provision of financial compensation, which would itself inhibit the growth of the financial surplus for emergency contingencies that Frederick considered so important.[3]

The question remains of whether these issues could have been addressed any more boldly, particularly after the successful conclusion of the Seven Years' War. Was the second half of the reign therefore a missed opportunity in which "reconstruction" could and should have moved on to wider-ranging reform? This is an area where more recent scholarship has finessed Schieder's arguments considerably (see, for example, the special edition of *German History* for November 1994, also coordinated by Hamish Scott). For although there is a section in Schieder's work devoted to the second retablissement this is still a book that favours the first "half" of the reign over the second in its overall coverage. This matters not merely because more recent scholarship has been moving to redress this imbalance, but also because the very qualities that Schieder admires so much in Frederick overall ("political decisiveness, an aptitude for military leadership and practical administrative talent" (p.2)) are less clearly visible during these years, where, despite the diplomatic coup and territorial gains of the First Partition of Poland, indecision, missed opportunities for agrarian reform and administrative sclerosis seem more evident characteristics.

Where the book is also weaker than it might be is in its coverage of ideology: it simply will not do to explain Frederick's actions, as Schieder does repeatedly in this work with reference to a uniform concept of *raison d'état*, by which Schieder seems to mean a broadly util-

itarian outlook at home and abroad. And when this issue is probed further in the section devoted to interpreting Frederick's Anti-Machiavel, the answers are not as helpful as one might have hoped. Schieder does not provide an alternative view that is really coherent on this point. At most he seems to be arguing that "Frederick's absolutism was enlightened not only because he pursued his goals rationally and had humanitarian intentions' but principally because he did not attempt to use the state to further his personal aims; on the contrary he allowed the state to employ him as its servant." (p.88) Yet if it is the case that state-sponsored Enlightenment in Frederician Prussia was more, to use Kant's phrase in his essay *Was ist Aufklärung?*, about creating a "hard shell" within which a proper public sphere of debate could emerge, and less about changes to the "military-cameralist complex," then there has to be more than a crude political algebra at its heart. It is important that Schieder argue for more here than simply an absolutism with divine right left out and a concept of self-conscious royal duty written in if he wishes to develop any coherent analysis of Frederick as a transitional figure in the history of absolutism and state-building.

We need, in other words, to become more fully self-conscious about the boundaries of the transition in question; and while that does not mean engaging in a fully marxist account of a transition out of feudalism in Eastern Europe, such as that attempted by Perry Anderson in his *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (1974), nevertheless some of the considerations about the nature of eighteenth century absolutism raised, for example, by the comparative sociologist Michael Mann in *The Sources of Social Power* are surely not merely apposite, but requisite here. As Mann points out, what was novel about the Frederician regime was not the type of centralised interventions that it initiated, which were in essence no more "militaristic" than those of other states of the period; instead, what made the Prussian state different was the scale of its expenditure and investment in military activity, which was in turn dependent upon its unprecedented ability to reach down into the localities reliably for fiscal support and manpower and supplies. This could only be sustained on such levels by relying on the nobility and binding that nobility to both military procurement and performance; and, moreover, as Frederick appreciated, for it to survive, the system had to be protected even against the desire among many of the nobility themselves to engage in trade, sell their estates to commoners or surrender administrative and military service rights at times when they seemed burdensome rather than rewarding. [4]

Such a system found some ideological support in contemporary cameralist thought, but Frederick himself was by no means sympathetic to the leading cameralists of his day, and indeed behaved with exceptional brutality to Justi. Moreover as Keith Tribe and, most recently, Peter Wilson have indicated there is no necessary causal connection between either cameralist theories and the economics of Prussian absolutism or for that matter between cameralism and the general reform agenda of the Enlightenment. [5] The French Enlightenment of the 1720s and 1730s which formed the basis of Frederick's intellectual frame of reference contained nothing that was of relevance to the core conundrums of Prussian absolutism. And that in part explains why Schieder has such difficulty in shaping a concept of enlightened absolutism that addresses the realities of Prussian statebuilding. Despite Frederick's own evocation of and sincere self-projection of his enlightened credentials as a monarch; and notwithstanding the real progressive achievements involved in legal reform and religious toleration, Prussia was not in the process of becoming a genuine Wohlfahrtsstaat in which the welfare of all or a majority of citizens became the centrepiece of the state's activity. [6] For all his elaborate commentary upon it, Frederick's system remained a utilitarian holding operation with no developmental dynamic written into it. The disasters of 1806 revealed this all too clearly, and represented ideological failures as much as military ones. And at times Schieder himself seems to move in this direction by suggesting that only those elements of the Enlightenment that were conformable to state aggrandisement were ever seriously politically entertained by Frederick. Indeed he recognises at one point that there "...is evidence of the almost desperate struggle to reconcile the King's preoccupation with national security with the original vision of the state's humanitarian purpose. (p.197) Thus there is something more generally poignant in Frederick's strategy after 1763 of holding parades every May in Berlin to impress foreign ambassadors with the simulacrum of Prussian military might. Sustaining the myth of invincibility had become a substitute by the later part of the reign for the generation of an account of how that "hard shell" of necessary state structures Kant wrote of could be creatively developed and enhanced into a more truly participatory society.

After all the particular merits and defects of this treatment of Frederick have been weighed up there remains the larger question of whether biography remains the best form of analysis for this subject. Could we now gain just as much, if not more from bringing different tele-

scopes to bear from different vantage points on Prussian history in the eighteenth century? While there may be a case for stressing the uniqueness of Frederick, the best advocacy for this view is already available in the most recent new biography by Giles MacDonogh, which uses Frederick's huge volume of mordant and consistently intelligent correspondence to very telling effect. [7] Indeed in its wake it is difficult to see how much more can reasonably be said to elaborate the workings of Frederick's cold, aloof and mocking personality and its interaction with his circle of intimates and political contemporaries. But if one looks for future directions in which research may develop, other pointers indicate that it may be more fruitful to view aspects of Frederick's reign in comparative perspective. The recent work of Peter Wilson on "social militarisation" within the Reich, and William Hagen and Edgar Melton on Eastern European agriculture, has indicated that there is no logical inference from the special blend of qualities in the ruler to any uniqueness in the Prussian pattern of development as such. Factors that lie outside the personal control or instigation of the ruler, and often changes on the international scene, are now stressed, even though the specific response of the ruler does still matter. Other topics that would repay study in this comparative fashion would include Frederick's intense cultural and intellectual competition with fellow monarchs, the development of court rituals, and his fiscal and entrepreneurial initiatives too, which have been rather neglected since the work of Otto Henderson. While such comparative approaches are hardly new (the distinguished study by Behrens, for example, remains an important point of reference) the volume of new scholarship on Prussia and the revival of interest in the politics of the Reich in the later eighteenth century indicate that this may be a potentially fruitful prism through which to refract the paradoxes of the "soldier-king." [8] But what is abundantly clear is that we can surely look forward now to assessments that will no longer mirror the fortunes of the Prussian state and its allegedly dynamic or negative role in German integration. In that (unforeseen) sense Schieder's book may truly be seen as transitional.

#### Notes

[1]. T.C.W. Blanning, "Frederick the Great and German Culture" in R. Oresko, G. Gibbs and H.M. Scott (eds.), *Royal and Republican Sovereignty in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Memory of Ragnhild Hatton*, (Cambridge, 1997), pp.527-50.

[2]. See Walther Hubatsch, *Frederick the Great*, (London, 1975).

[3]. Here Schieder draws welcome and overdue attention to Frederick's essay of 1777 on *The Forms of Government and the Duties of a Ruler*, a text that deserves more recognition in assessments of how Frederick perceived monarchy in general and his own practice of it after over three decades of experience.

[4]. See Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power. Volume 1: A history of power from the beginning to c.1760*. (Cambridge, 1986), pp.488-9. Against this background the refusal to tax the nobility becomes more explicable as a acknowledgment that this would involve recognition of and consultation with the aristocratic Estates, which might easily put at risk the secure and smooth deflection of resources towards the army.

[5]. See Keith Tribe, *Governing Economy: the Reformation of German Economic Discourse 1750-1850*, (Cambridge, 1988) pp. 8-11 for the first point, and Peter H. Wilson, *Absolutism in Central Europe*, (London, 2000), final chapter, for the second.

[6]. For recent impressive empirical confirmation see

Karin Friedrich's study of the repressive Prussian occupation of Royal/Polish Prussia in her *The Other Prussia: Royal Prussia, Poland and Liberty, 1569-1772*, (Cambridge, 2000). Ironically Schieder's own habilitationsschrift addressed much a similar topic.

[7]. Giles MacDonogh, *Frederick the Great. A Life in Deed and Letters*, (London & New York, 2000). This biography highlights by its very success the need for the publication of a new selection of Frederick's correspondence, which was as much a vehicle for his considered reflections on history, philosophy and politics as his formal published works.

[8]. See C.B.A.Behrens, *Society, government, and the Enlightenment: the experiences of eighteenth-century France and Prussia*, (New York, 1985).

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