



Dennis E. Showalter. *The Wars of Frederick the Great.* London and New York: Longman, 1996. xi + 371 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-06259-7.



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The Wars of Frederick the Great

More myth than understanding surrounds Frederick II. Since the early nineteenth century, historians, writers, and soldiers have cloaked his personality and achievements in an heroic-romantic mantle from which it has been nigh impossible to ascertain the man himself. Iconoclasts such as Hans Delbäck who attempted to separate fact from legend met only with opprobrium. Today, most history books portray “Frederick the Great” as an Enlightened despot who saved Prussia from annihilation, improved the lot of his subjects, and elevated his small kingdom to the status of a European power. While such statements are more or less correct, we have lacked an objective, detailed, and mature assessment of Frederick II as a politician, a warrior, and a king. For this reason, the arrival of Dennis Showalter’s *The Wars of Frederick the Great* is welcome, indeed.

The book consists of seven well-selected chapters, a few pages of reflections, and some suggestions for further reading in the form of a brief bibliographic essay. The chapters are organized chronologically according to key political decisions or developments. Chapter 1 sets the European stage, describing ways of war in the Age

of Reason, the character, composition, and standard operating procedures of the Prussian army, and quirks of Frederick as a young man. Chapter 2 describes the wars for Silesia (1740-45), including Frederick’s bold decision to invade, his misogyny, and his hunger for glory. Chapter 3 discusses and evaluates the reforms that Frederick introduced and the preparations for war that he made between 1745 and 1756 to re-enter the struggle for power in central Europe on a more effective footing. Chapter 4 addresses the stunning victories (e.g., Rossbach and Leuthen) and sobering defeats (e.g., Prague and Kolin) of 1756 and 1757. Chapter 5 covers what Showalter describes as “The Years of balance: 1758-59.” Chapter 6 chronicles Prussia’s “darkest hour,” the years 1760-63, when disaster seemed imminent. Chapter 7 describes Prussia’s recovery and re-emergence over the thirty-three years from 1763-86, in which the state rebuilt itself and the army evolved from an indisputably effective warfighting tool into an equally effective instrument for deterrence.

As the author indicates in the book’s introduction, he had intended to “emphasize” eighteenth-century war-

making: “the *behaviour* of the diplomats, the soldiers, and the institutions to which they belonged” (p. xi). The book’s battle narratives provide the reader an appreciation for the difficulties of command and control and for battlefield execution in eighteenth-century warfighting. He captures the Clausewitzian elements of danger, fog, friction, chance, and uncertainty; and presents the dynamic nature of a battle’s unfolding from opposing perspectives. The reader will encounter a few anachronisms, however. For example, the author often uses the term “task force” to describe a mixed element of cavalry and infantry dispatched for an indeterminate amount of time to accomplish a specific mission. While the author’s point is to emphasize the tentative, non-standard nature of such organizations, the term is somewhat misleading since the modern task force also includes command and support structures tailored for specific missions, which was not generally the case in the eighteenth century. On the other hand, until a better term is found, “task force” may be the best way to convey to the reader the non-standard patterns in which squadrons and battalions were organized for action in the mid-1700s.

Readers should also prepare themselves for the occasional “Dennisism.” For example, the phrase, “Hesitating and over-caution can produce effects similar to those generated by repeatedly testing the speed of a buzzsaw with the bare hand” (p. 29) created mental images that remained with this reviewer for another fifteen pages. That, of course, was the point. Generally, the author’s over statements are both quirky and humorous, though the comparison of Frederick’s boldness to that of twentieth-century “gang-bangers” and such tends to destroy the “barriers” of historical uniqueness. Anachronisms serve to instruct by way of parallel, but at what cost?

Nuance and detail, according to the author, are what separate “system-makers” such as “Marxists, *Annalistes*, or international-relations theorists” (p. xi) from events in the physical world. Indeed, his discussions of Frederick’s wars include such nuance as that produced by the interplay of the personalities of Maria Theresa, Elizabeth, Peter III, Catherine II, Kaunitz, Daun, Laudon, Schwerin, and Seydlitz. *The Wars of Frederick the Great* shows the importance of detail in the myriad chance events that influenced decisions both far and wide, and battles both large and small to make eighteenth-century politics and warfighting far more art than science. However, whether we can rescue the study of politics and war from the static models of the system-makers remains to be seen.

Based on the virtue of its rendering of eighteenth-century warfighting alone, *The Wars of Frederick the Great* makes a valuable contribution to political and military history. However, this book achieves more than that. In addition to placing Frederick’s campaigns into their proper political, social, and operational contexts, this study offers a multi-dimensional depiction of the great king that extends beyond the heroic-romantic portrayals of writers such as Thomas Carlyle and Reinhold Koser, beyond the nationalistic and tendentious writings of General Staff historians such as Friedrich von Bernhardi and Hugo von Freytag-Loringhoven, and beyond the satirical-ironic renderings of Hans Delbrück and Theodor Schieder.

Frederick emerges from the pages of Showalter’s book as the quintessential political animal—cunning, shrewd, manipulative, duplicitous, ruthless, dishonorable, and at times even despicable. He pushed blame onto his subordinates when a battle did not go well; and stole the glory and credit when it did. Despite what he wrote in *Anti-Machiavel*, Frederick, in a very Machiavellian way, made and broke treaties when he found it convenient to do so; and in his dealings with other monarchs, he often acted more like a spoiled child than a king. In the course of serving 47 years as Prussia’s sovereign, including over a decade as a warrior-king, Frederick matured. His judgment improved and his goals became more realistic.

Regarding Frederick’s generalship, the author maintains that Prussia’s king was neither an annihilationist, as the German General Staff later claimed, nor an *Ermatung*-strategist, as the Delbrück school argued, since each of “these approaches tends to make war an abstraction, end in itself. For Frederick war was a means to an end” (p. 106). However, Showalter’s position seems merely the obverse of Otto Hintze’s, namely, that Frederick the Great was both an annihilation- and an *Ermatung*-strategist. Furthermore, by their very nature, all discussions of *types* of strategy treat war, and politics for that matter, as abstractions. In any case, as Showalter shows, Frederick genuinely preferred to fight quick, decisive battles; and he attempted to act upon this preference in nearly all of his campaigns. The book’s description of the Prussian king as military strategist thus tends to support the General Staff’s interpretation of Frederick’s strategic method—there was something to its representations of the Prussian king after all.

Overall, Showalter’s depiction of Frederick shows him at once very human and very political; and, most importantly, it flows from the author’s laudable efforts

to show that politics uniquely influenced nearly every aspect of eighteenth-century warfighting. The book concludes that although Frederick II “did not transcend his milieu either as soldier or as statesman (358),” he established and secured Prussia’s place as a continental power and decisively shaped European history for the next two hundred years.

In sum, this is an excellent book, one that undergraduate and graduate alike will find useful. It is a must for any study of Frederick the Great and/or his wars. Whether or not we agree with the author’s conclusions and portrayal, they demand our attention.

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