**HISTORY,B.A,PART-1,PAPER-2,UNIT-5**

**DR.MD.SHAKIL AKHTAR**

**Enlightened despotism**, also called **benevolent despotism**, form of government in the 18th century in which absolute monarchs pursued legal, social, and educational reforms inspired by the [Enlightenment](https://www.britannica.com/event/Enlightenment-European-history). Among the most prominent [enlightened](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enlightened) [despots](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/despots) were [Frederick II (the Great)](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Frederick-II-king-of-Prussia), [Peter I (the Great)](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Peter-the-Great), [Catherine II (the Great)](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Catherine-the-Great), [Maria Theresa](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maria-Theresa), [Joseph II](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-II), and [Leopold II](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Leopold-II-Holy-Roman-emperor). They typically instituted administrative reform, religious toleration, and economic development but did not propose reforms that would undermine their [sovereignty](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sovereignty) or disrupt the social order.

**Frederick II**, byname **Frederick the Great**, German **Friedrich der Grosse**, (born January 24, 1712, Berlin, Prussia [Germany]—died [August](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/August) 17, 1786, [Potsdam](https://www.britannica.com/place/Potsdam-Germany), near Berlin), [king](https://www.britannica.com/topic/king-monarch) of [Prussia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Prussia) (1740–86), a brilliant military campaigner who, in a series of diplomatic stratagems and wars against [Austria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Austria) and other powers, greatly enlarged Prussia’s territories and made Prussia the foremost military power in Europe. An [enlightened](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enlightened) absolute monarch, he favoured [French language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/French-language) and art and built a French [Rococo](https://www.britannica.com/art/Rococo) palace, Sanssouci, near Berlin.

Frederick, the third king of [Prussia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Prussia), ranks among the two or three dominant figures in the history of modern [Germany](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Germany). Under his leadership Prussia became one of the great states of Europe. Its territories were greatly increased and its military strength displayed to striking effect. From early in his reign Frederick achieved a high reputation as a military commander, and the Prussian army rapidly became a model admired and imitated in many other states. He also emerged quickly as a leading exponent of the ideas of [enlightened](https://www.britannica.com/event/Enlightenment-European-history) government, which were then becoming influential throughout much of Europe; indeed, his example did much to spread and strengthen those ideas. Notably, his insistence on the primacy of state over personal or dynastic interests and his religious [toleration](https://www.britannica.com/topic/toleration) widely affected the dominant [intellectual](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectual) currents of the age.

Even more than his younger contemporaries, [Catherine II the Great](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Catherine-the-Great) of Russia and [Joseph II](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-II) in the Habsburg territories, it was Frederick who, during the mid-18th century, established in the minds of educated Europeans a notion of what “enlightened despotism” should be. His actual achievements, however, were sometimes less than they appeared on the surface; indeed, his inevitable reliance on the landowning officer (Junker) class set severe limits in several respects to what he could even attempt. Nevertheless, his reign saw a revolutionary change in the importance and [prestige](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prestige) of Prussia, which was to have profound [implications](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/implications) for much of the subsequent [history of Europe](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Europe).

**Early Life**

Frederick was the eldest surviving son of [Frederick William I](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Frederick-William-I), king of Prussia, and [Sophia Dorothea](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sophia-Dorothea) of Hanover, daughter of [George I](https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-I-king-of-Great-Britain) of [Britain](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Kingdom). Frederick’s upbringing and education were strictly controlled by his father, who was a martinet as well as a paranoiac. Encouraged and supported by his mother and his sister [Wilhelmina](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Wilhelmina-margravine-of-Bayreuth), Frederick soon came into bitter conflict with his father. Frederick William I deeply despised the artistic and intellectual tastes of his son and was infuriated by Frederick’s lack of sympathy with his own rigidly puritanical and militaristic outlook. His disappointment and [contempt](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/contempt) took the form of bitter public [criticism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/criticism) and even outright physical violence, and Frederick, beaten and humiliated by his father, often over trifling details of behaviour, took refuge in evasion and deceit. This personal and family feud culminated spectacularly in 1730, when Frederick was imprisoned in the fortress of Küstrin after planning unsuccessfully to flee initially to France or Holland. Lieutenant Hans Hermann von Katte, the young officer who had been his accomplice in the plan, was executed in Frederick’s presence, and there was for a short time a real possibility that the prince might share his fate. During the next year or more Frederick, as a punishment, was employed as a junior official in local administration and deprived of his military rank. The effects of this terrible early life are impossible to measure with accuracy, but there is little [doubt](https://www.britannica.com/topic/methodic-doubt) that the violent and [capricious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/capricious) bullying of his father influenced him deeply.

In 1733, after a partial reconciliation with his father, Frederick was married to a member of a minor German princely family, Elizabeth Christine of Brunswick-Bevern, for whom he never cared and whom he systematically neglected. In the following year he saw active military service for the first time under the great Austrian commander [Eugene of Savoy](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eugene-of-Savoy) against the French army in the Rhineland. In the later 1730s, in semiretirement in the castle of Rheinsberg near Berlin and able for the first time to give free rein to his own tastes, he read voraciously, absorbing the ideas on government and [international relations](https://www.britannica.com/topic/international-relations) that were to guide him throughout his life. These years were perhaps the happiest that Frederick ever experienced. However, his relations with his father, though somewhat improved, remained strained.

## Accession To The Throne And Foreign Policy

Frederick William I died on May 31, 1740, and Frederick, on his accession, immediately made it clear to his ministers that he alone would decide policy. Within a few months he was given a chance to do so in a way that revolutionized Prussia’s international position. The [Holy Roman](https://www.britannica.com/place/Holy-Roman-Empire) emperor [Charles VI](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-VI-Holy-Roman-emperor), of the [Austrian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Austria) [house of Habsburg](https://www.britannica.com/topic/House-of-Habsburg), died on October 20, leaving as his heir a daughter, the archduchess [Maria Theresa](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maria-Theresa), whose claims to several of the [heterogeneous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/heterogeneous) Habsburg territories were certain to be disputed. Moreover, her army was in a poor state, the financial position of the Habsburg government very difficult, and her ministers [mediocre](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mediocre) and in many cases old. Frederick, however, thanks to his father, had a fine army and ample funds at his disposal. He therefore decided shortly after the emperor’s death to attack the Habsburg province of [Silesia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Silesia), a wealthy and strategically important area to which the [Hohenzollerns](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hohenzollern-dynasty), the ruling family of Prussia, had dynastic claims, though weak ones. The most important threat to his plans was [Russian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Russia) support for Maria Theresa, which he hoped to avert by judicious bribery in [St. Petersburg](https://www.britannica.com/place/St-Petersburg-Russia) and by exploiting the confusion that was likely to follow the [imminent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/imminent) death of the empress [Anna](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Anna-regent-of-Russia). He also hoped that Maria Theresa would cede most of Silesia in return for a promise of Prussian support against her other enemies, but her refusal to do so made war inevitable. The first military victory of [Frederick’s](https://www.britannica.com/event/War-of-the-Austrian-Succession) reign was the [battle of Mollwitz](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Battle-of-Mollwitz) (April 1741), though it owed nothing to his own leadership; in October Maria Theresa, now threatened by a hostile coalition of [France](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-France), Spain, and [Bavaria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bavaria), had to agree to the [Convention of Klein-Schnellendorf](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Truce-of-Klein-Schellendorf), by which Frederick was allowed to occupy the whole of Lower Silesia. However, the Habsburg successes against the French and Bavarians that followed so alarmed Frederick that early in 1742 he invaded Moravia, the region south of Silesia, which was under Austrian rule. His rather incomplete victory at Chotusitz in May nonetheless forced Maria Theresa to cede almost all of Silesia by the [Treaty of Berlin](https://www.britannica.com/topic/treaties-of-Berlin) of 1742 in July. This once more allowed Habsburg forces to be concentrated against France and Bavaria, and 1743 and the early months of 1744 saw Maria Theresa’s position in Germany become markedly stronger. Frederick, again alarmed by this, invaded [Bohemia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bohemia) in August [1744](https://www.britannica.com/event/Silesian-Wars) and rapidly overran it. However, by the end of the year lack of French support and threats to his lines of communication had forced him to retreat. Moreover, the elector [Augustus III](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-III) (king of [Poland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Poland) and the elector of Saxony) now joined Maria Theresa in attacking him in Silesia. He was rescued from this threatening situation by the prowess of his army; victories at Hohenfriedberg in June 1745 and at Soor in September were followed by a Prussian invasion of [Saxony](https://www.britannica.com/place/Saxony-historical-region-duchy-and-kingdom-Europe). The [Treaty of Dresden](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Treaty-of-Dresden), signed on December 25, 1745, finally established Prussian rule in Silesia and ended for the time being the complex series of struggles that had begun five years earlier.

Silesia was a valuable acquisition, being more developed economically than any other major part of the Hohenzollern dominions. Moreover, military victory had now made Prussia at least a semigreat power and marked Frederick as the most successful ruler in Europe. He was well aware, however, that his situation was far from secure. Maria Theresa was determined to recover Silesia, and the peace she signed with France and Spain at Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748 allowed her to accelerate significant improvements in the administration of her territories and the organization of her army. Frederick’s alliance with France, which dated from an agreement of June 1741, was based merely on mutual hostility toward the Habsburgs and had never been effective. More serious, anti-Prussian feeling was now running high in Russia, where both the empress [Elizabeth](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elizabeth-empress-of-Russia), who had ascended the throne in 1741, and her chancellor, Aleksey Bestuzhev-Ryumin, bitterly disliked Frederick. Moreover, Great Britain, under [George II](https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-II-king-of-Great-Britain), seeking an effective continental ally against France, seemed to be moving closer to Maria Theresa and Elizabeth. In September 1755 Britain signed an agreement with Russia by whichRussia, in return for British subsidies, was to provide a large military force in its Baltic provinces to protect, if necessary, the electorate of Hanover, ruled by George II, against possible French or Prussian attack. Frederick was deeply alarmed by this: a hostile Austro-Russian alliance backed by British money seemed to threaten the destruction of Prussia. In January 1756 he attempted to escape from this menacing situation by an agreement with Britain for the neutralization of Germany in the Anglo-French colonial and naval war that had just begun. This, however, deeply antagonized [Louis XV](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Louis-XV) and the French government, who saw the agreement as an insulting desertion of France, Frederick’s [ostensible](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ostensible) ally. The result was the signature in May of a Franco-Austrian defensive alliance. This did not in itself threaten Frederick, but he soon became convinced that a Russo-Austrian attack on him, with French support, was imminent. He determined to forestall his enemies and, in a daring move, invaded Saxony in August 1756 and marched on into Bohemia. This action has been more actively debated by historians than any other event of Frederick’s reign because it raised in an [acute](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/acute) form the [general](https://www.britannica.com/topic/general) issue regarding the [morality](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/morality) of preventive military action. Though Frederick took the offensive and thus unleashed a great military struggle, there is no doubt that he was by 1756 seriously threatened, indeed, even more seriously than he himself realized, and that his enemies, most of all the empress Elizabeth, meant to destroy Prussia’s newly won international status.

# Trials and lessons

The [Seven Years’ War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Seven-Years-War), on which he embarked thus soon became a life-and-death struggle. In 1757 [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France), Sweden, Russia, and many of the smaller German states joined the ranks of his opponents, while the Prussian invasion of [Bohemia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bohemia) collapsed after a serious defeat at Kolín in June. Brilliant victories over the French and Austrian armies, respectively, at Rossbach and Leuthen in November and December partially reestablished Frederick’s position, but it still remained extremely precarious. Ruthless exploitation of every available resource (notably of much of Saxony, which was under Prussian military occupation during most of the war), debasement of the currency, and a British subsidy that he received in 1758–62 allowed Frederick with increasing difficulty to keep up the unequal struggle. More than anything, however, he was helped by the complete failure of his enemies to cooperate effectively,

while a partly British and British-financed army in western [Germany](https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany) from 1758 onward neutralized the French military effort. Nevertheless, the strain was immense; in October 1757 a cabinet order suspended all payment of salaries and pensions to Prussian civil servants and judges apart from diplomats serving abroad. Frederick could still win victories in the field, as, for example, at Zorndorf (August 1758) against the Russians at heavy cost or at Liegnitz and Torgau (August and November 1760) against the Austrians. But he also suffered serious defeats at Hochkirch in October 1758 and above all at the hands of a Russian army at [Kunersdorf](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Battle-of-Kunersdorf) in [August](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/August) 1759. This disaster temporarily reduced him to despair and thoughts of suicide; if it had been effectively followed up by his adversaries, he could not have continued the struggle. As the forces he could put in the field dwindled and resistance grew among his subjects to the unprecedented burdens imposed by the war (in 1760 the landowners of [Brandenburg](https://www.britannica.com/place/Brandenburg-historical-margravate-Germany) refused to contribute further), the Prussian position became increasingly difficult; by 1761 it was desperate. However, the death in January 1762 of the empress Elizabeth, the most bitter of all Frederick’s enemies, completely changed the situation. Her successor, [Peter III](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Peter-III-emperor-of-Russia), a fanatical admirer of [Prussia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Prussia) and Frederick, signed an armistice in May, followed by a Russo-Prussian peace treaty. This turn of events ended [Maria Theresa’s](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maria-Theresa) hopes of recovering [Silesia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Silesia). The [Treaty of Hubertusburg](https://www.britannica.com/event/Peace-of-Hubertusburg) (Feb. 15, 1763), which ended the war in Germany, left the province in Frederick’s hands. Prussia had survived, and its military reputation was now greater than ever. The cost had been enormous, however. The Prussian army had lost 180,000 men during the struggle, and some Prussian provinces had been completely devastated. Henceforth Frederick was determined to avoid another such conflict: the alliance with Russia that he signed in 1764 and which lasted until 1780 was directed largely to this end. Nevertheless, he still firmly opposed any growth of Habsburg power in Germany, and in July 1778 a new Austro-Prussian struggle broke out over the efforts of the emperor [Joseph II](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-II), the son of Maria Theresa, to gain a large part of [Bavaria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bavaria). This [War of the Bavarian Succession](https://www.britannica.com/event/War-of-the-Bavarian-Succession) was half-hearted and short-lived, and the [Treaty of Teschen](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Treaty-of-Teschen) ending it in May 1779 was a severe check to Joseph’s ambitions and a diplomatic victory for Frederick. But this new conflict showed unmistakably that Austro-Prussian rivalry stemming from the events of 1740–41 was now a deeply ingrained fact of German political life. Fear of Habsburg ambitions continued to haunt Frederick to the end of his reign. His last significant achievement was to inspire the formation, in July 1785, of the League of Princes ([Fürstenbund](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Furstenbund)), which united a number of German states—the most important being Hanover, Saxony, and the archbishopric of Mainz—in successful opposition to Joseph II and his renewed efforts to acquire the whole of Bavaria in exchange for the Austrian [Netherlands](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-the-Netherlands).

## [Partition of Poland](https://www.britannica.com/event/Partitions-of-Poland)

The most important [foreign policy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/foreign-policy) development in the second half of Frederick’s reign was the first partition of [Poland](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Poland), in 1772. By this Prussia gained the Polish province of West Prussia (though without the great commercial city of Danzig), and thus Brandenburg and Pomerania, the core of the monarchy, became linked with the theretofore isolated [East Prussia](https://www.britannica.com/place/East-Prussia). This gave the state a much greater territorial [coherence](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coherence) and more defensible frontiers. It also moved its geographic centre decisively to the east and sharpened the social and political differences that tended to separate it from the states of western Europe.

Frederick had always hoped for territorial gains of this kind, and, as the weakness and confusion of the internally divided Polish republic increased during the 1760s, the possibilities of realizing them grew. In 1769 he tried indirectly to interest [Catherine II](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Catherine-the-Great) of Russia in a partition but in vain. By January 1771, however, faced by strong Austrian opposition to her expansionist ambitions in southeastern Europe, the empress had changed her mind. The visit to [St. Petersburg](https://www.britannica.com/place/St-Petersburg-Russia) in that month of Frederick’s younger brother Prince Henry played a decisive role in making a partition possible; the Habsburg government, which had hoped to recover Silesia or gain territory in the Balkans, was persuaded to join in the process. Frederick bears much of the responsibility for the partition, for he alone of the monarchs who took part had consciously desired it. Since both Russia and [Austria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Austria) were persuaded to follow a policy that was largely Prussian in inspiration, it ranks as perhaps his greatest diplomatic success.

# Domestic Policies

In administrative, economic, and social policy Frederick’s attitudes were essentially [conservative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservative). Much of what he did in these areas was little more than a development of policies pursued by his father. He justified these policies in terms of the rationalizing [rhetoric](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rhetoric) of “enlightened [despotism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/absolutism-political-system),” whereas the devoutly Protestant [Frederick William I](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Frederick-William-I) had done so in terms of religious obligation, but many of the objectives, and the means used to attain them, were the same. Frederick, in spite of his appalling personal relationship with his father, admired him as a ruler and freely acknowledged the debt he owed him. “Only his care,” he wrote during the [Seven Years’ War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Seven-Years-War), “his untiring work, his scrupulously just policies, his great and admirable thriftiness and the strict [discipline](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discipline) he introduced into the army which he himself had created, made possible the achievements I have so far accomplished.”

Like Frederick William I, Frederick thought of kingship as a duty. To him it entailed obligations to be met only by untiring and [conscientious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conscientious) work. It was his duty to protect his subjects from foreign attack, to make them prosperous, to give them efficient and honest administration, and to provide them with laws that were simple and adapted to their wants and their particular temperament. In order to achieve these objectives, the ruler must sacrifice his own interests and any purely personal or family feeling. Raison d’état, the needs of the state, took [precedence](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/precedence) over these and also over the immediate comfort and happiness of his subjects. The ruler could carry out his duties effectively only if he kept the reins of government firmly in his own hands. His rule must be personal. He must not rely on the ministers who were likely to be influenced by selfish ambitions or factional feeling and who might well keep important information from their master if they were allowed to. Personal rule alone could produce the unity and consistency essential to any successful policy. In his Anti-Machiavel, a somewhat conventional discussion of the principles of good government published in 1740 just before his accession, Frederick wrote that there were two sorts of princes—those who ruled in person and those who merely relied on subordinates. The former were “like the soul of a state” and “the weight of their government falls on themselves alone, like the world on the back of Atlas,” whereas the second group were mere phantoms. Yet he would have rejected outright, and on the whole with justification, any suggestion that he ruled as a [despot](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/despot). On the contrary, he would have claimed that his power, however great, was exercised only within limits set by [law](https://www.britannica.com/topic/law) and that the obligations [inherent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inherent) in his position made it impossible for him to govern in an arbitrary way.

## Problems of autocracy

The insistence that any effective monarchical rule must be intensely personal had obvious potential dangers. As Frederick grew older, these showed themselves with increasing clarity. His whole psychology was hostile to the development in the Prussian administration or army of any real originality, new ideas, or willingness to take [initiatives](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/initiatives) or accept individual responsibilities. He fostered among those who served him a tendency to play safe and to perform their duties conscientiously but to do no more than that. Under him the Prussian administration was the most honest and hardworking in Europe. Its achievements, however, stemmed from the [impetus](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/impetus) supplied from above by the [king](https://www.britannica.com/topic/king-monarch) rather than from any creative force inherent in the system itself. The provincial War and Domains Chambers established by Frederick William I in 1722 remained very important, and their number grew from 9 to 12. The General Directory, again created by [Frederick William](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Frederick-William-elector-of-Brandenburg), as the main organ of central government with wide-ranging powers, acquired under Frederick several new departments (for commerce and manufactures in 1740, for mines and metallurgy in 1768, for forestry a few years later) but tended, as the reign went on, to become ossified and to lose a good deal of its former importance. The administration of [Silesia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Silesia) after its acquisition in the 1740s was notably efficient, and its resources helped greatly in carrying Frederick through the dark days of the Seven Years’ War. But tradition and [continuity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/continuity) rather than [innovation](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/innovation) were the hallmarks of the Prussian administration under him; many of what new departures there were (for example, an effort in 1770 to introduce a system of state examinations for entry into the civil service) were not very effective. Many of the truly successful [innovations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/innovations) were in the [judicial system](https://www.britannica.com/topic/judiciary), where the reforming efforts of Samuel von Cocceji resulted in all judges in higher and appellate courts being appointed only after they had passed a rigorous examination. Cocceji also inspired the establishment in 1750 of a new Superior Consistory to supervise church and educational affairs and began the process of legal codification that culminated after Frederick’s death in the issue of the Prussian Common Law (Das Allgemeine Preussische Landrecht) of 1794, one of the most important 18th-century efforts of this kind. Yet Frederick’s unwillingness ever to admit a mistake or change his mind tended, as he grew older, to make the processes of government increasingly rigid and inflexible. The government’s refusal to adapt and adjust, which was already visible during the monarch’s later years, culminated in the Prussian collapse of 1806 before the armies of Napoleon.

# Army and the state

The overriding objective of Frederick’s rule was to increase the power of the state. His desire to foster education and cultural life was sincere, but these humanitarian goals were secondary compared with the task of building a great army and gaining the financial resources needed to maintain it. The army was the pivot around which all else turned, and the administrative system existed essentially to recruit, feed, equip, and pay it. In proportion to the resources available to support it, its size was unequaled anywhere in Europe. In 1740 Frederick inherited a standing army of 83,000 men; when he died, this figure had risen to 190,000 (though of these only about 80,000 were Prussian subjects). Under him it remained a force of peasants and of numerous foreign recruits obtained often by outright kidnapping, officered by landowners. In [Prussia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Prussia) the army was recruited almost entirely in the countryside; the function of townsmen was to pay for it through their taxes, not to serve in it. Up to a point Frederick tried to protect the peasants and the soldiers against the demands of the [Junker](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Junker) landlord-officers. In 1749 and 1764 he issued decrees limiting the obligations of the peasant to his lord, and in 1748 he ordered officers not to treat their men “like serfs”; but these were essentially efforts to prevent the plight of the peasant from becoming so desperate that he would be driven into flight and thus jeopardize the supply of recruits. Throughout Frederick’s reign, army service was for the majority of his subjects the most onerous of all the burdens imposed by the state. In order to finance the great army, heavy demands were made on territories that for the most part were poor. Nothing, however, seemed more important to the monarch than amassing a large reserve of cash to be used for the recruitment of men in case of war. The financial demands that a serious conflict would make were constantly on his mind, and the desperate struggles of 1756–62 confirmed him in his beliefs. Much of the tax system, based on the excise (largely a tax on food) paid by the towns and the contribution (a complex property tax) raised in the countryside, supplemented by the profits of the extensive royal domains, remained essentially unchanged. Still, Frederick experimented with a number of new taxes, notably with a new system of taxing tobacco and some less important commodities (introduced in 1766 under the supervision of a French [entrepreneur](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/entrepreneur), Le Haye de Launay), but these [innovations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/innovations) did not bring about significant changes. Indeed, many of Frederick’s fiscal policies were ill-judged; for example, the maintenance of a great reserve of cash, which removed from circulation much of the liquid capital of a poor society, was economically damaging. Yet strict control of expenditure and relatively efficient tax collection meant that the government, unlike many others of the age, was never hamstrung by lack of money. Frederick’s economic policies were squarely in the [mercantilist](https://www.britannica.com/topic/mercantilism) tradition. “The foundation of trade and manufactures,” he wrote in his Testament Politique of 1752, “is to prevent money leaving the country and to make it come in.” The direct and simplistic way in which these ideas were sometimes applied can be seen in an order of 1747 forbidding individuals to take more than 300 thalers in specie out of their territories. So far as possible Prussia was to avoid importing foreign manufactured goods, and to this end domestic producers were to be helped by privileges and even outright grants of money. Exports were to be encouraged in the same way. In particular, much money was spent on efforts to develop a substantial silk industry, with generally disappointing results. By the end of the reign textiles of all kinds accounted for two-thirds of Prussia’s industrial production, and the textile industry employed about 90 percent of the industrial [labour force](https://www.britannica.com/topic/labor-in-economics), but this situation owed little to Frederick’s economic policies. Efforts to foster the production of porcelain—which, like silk, was one of the industrial status symbols of a number of 18th-century rulers—were also costly and not very effective. A small number of favoured industrialists, notably David Splitgerber and Johann Ernst Gotzkowsky in the 1750s, benefited by these policies, but for Prussia as a whole they were largely a misuse of resources. Other new creations such as the Maritime Trading Company (Seehandlung), a government-backed corporation set up in 1772 to develop overseas trade, and even the Royal Bank of Berlin, established in 1765, were also marginal to the economic life of Frederick’s territories, which, except to some extent in [Silesia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Silesia), in the area around [Berlin](https://www.britannica.com/place/Berlin), and in the little county of Mark in western [Germany](https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany), continued to be based on agriculture. Some of the state’s programs, however, achieved real success, though sometimes at high cost. Most important was the sustained effort, in the 1760s and ’70s, to attract immigrants and to settle them on waste or depopulated land; this settlement program formed the central feature of the rétablissement, the making good of the losses of the [Seven Years’ War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Seven-Years-War). During Frederick’s reign more than 300,000 settlers were attracted to Prussia from other parts of Europe—a substantial addition to a population that in 1740 had numbered only about 2,200,000. In addition, the army provided a large market for arms and woolen cloth for uniforms and thus did something to stimulate [economic growth](https://www.britannica.com/topic/economic-growth). Moreover, in peacetime the soldiers served with their regiments only for a few months of the year, spending the remaining part in agriculture or some urban employment. The fact that they were in this way [integrated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/integrated) into society helped to offset the burden that so great a military effort placed on the economy.

Frederick’s social policies were as [conservative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservative) as his economic ones. He considered the nobility the most important class in Prussian society. From it were drawn the majority of the army officers and virtually all the higher-ranking ones. It also produced the majority of his officials and all his ministers and completely dominated local government in the countryside. In Frederick’s eyes, the nobility alone of all the social groups had a sense of personal honour and responsibility. The continued existence of the state depended on it, and the regime could not function without its cooperation. Thus its interests were always to be safeguarded. In particular, it was not to be diluted by the grant of noble status to self-made bourgeois, and land owned by noble families was to be protected against purchase by members of the urban middle class, however wealthy. Frederick stated these ideas repeatedly in his voluminous writings on statecraft, notably in the political testaments of 1752 and 1768 drawn up for his successor. Given this [attitude](https://www.britannica.com/science/attitude-psychology), it is not surprising that his reign saw little practical improvement for the [peasantry](https://www.britannica.com/topic/peasantry), much of which, in Pomerania, [Brandenburg](https://www.britannica.com/place/Brandenburg-historical-margravate-Germany), and [East Prussia](https://www.britannica.com/place/East-Prussia), was still personally unfree, owing labour services to noble landowners. In principle, Frederick sincerely disliked [serfdom](https://www.britannica.com/topic/serfdom). In practice, however, he realized that any rapid move against it risked the disruption of Prussia’s agricultural life and the erosion of the position of the all-important nobility. His efforts to improve the lot of his peasant subjects were therefore little more than gestures. As part of his commitment to stimulate recovery from the losses of the Seven Years’ War, he tried to abolish serfdom in Prussian Pomerania and also to give the peasantry of Upper Silesia greater security of [tenure](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tenure), but none of this had much practical effect because he never contemplated any significant change in the social order.

Frederick prided himself on being, among rulers, the leading representative of the high [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture) of his day. He was a [prolific](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prolific) writer on contemporary history and politics; his Histoire de mon temps (1746) is still a source of some value for the period it covers. He produced large quantities of [mediocre](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mediocre) poetry and composed music. He invited to Prussia several of the leading French [intellectuals](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectuals) of the age, notably [Voltaire](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Voltaire) (with whom he soon quarreled). But here again his outlook was essentially conservative. Culture to him meant French culture: he wrote and spoke French by preference, using German only when necessary. He had no interest in the profound [intellectual](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectual) stirrings occurring in Germany. Berlin under him never became an important intellectual centre. [Gotthold Ephraim Lessing](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gotthold-Ephraim-Lessing), perhaps the greatest German writer of the mid-18th century, described Prussia as “the most slavish country in Europe,” and [Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Carl-Philipp-Emanuel-Bach), the most distinguished of the musicians serving Frederick, did so rather reluctantly. Frederick’s religious [tolerance](https://www.britannica.com/topic/toleration), however, was genuine: it was one of the things that helped to mark him in the eyes of contemporaries as a truly [enlightened](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enlightened) ruler. The abolition of judicial torture, one of his first acts as [king](https://www.britannica.com/topic/king-monarch), also showed his genuine belief in this aspect of enlightened reform. On an even more fundamental level, the General Education Regulations (General-Landschul-Reglement) of 1763 attempted to create a system of [universal](https://www.britannica.com/topic/universal) [primary education](https://www.britannica.com/topic/elementary-education) throughout the Prussian monarchy. Lack of resources limited its practical effect, but it was the most ambitious effort of the kind theretofore seen anywhere in Europe.

# Significance Of Frederick’s Reign

Both by his accomplishments and by his example Frederick deeply influenced the course of [German history](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Germany). In the struggles of the 1740s and ’50s he weakened still further the tottering structure of the [Holy Roman Empire](https://www.britannica.com/place/Holy-Roman-Empire). The bitter Austro-Prussian rivalry that he began was to be a dominant political force in [Germany](https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany) and central Europe for well over a century. Not until the final Prussian victory over Austria in 1866 was the long contest for leadership in Germany finally resolved. For his share in creating the division of the German world Frederick was later attacked, sometimes bitterly, by a number of historians who saw him as having prevented the emergence of a united Great Germany that included all the major German-speaking areas of Europe. Certainly, he had no sympathy, and indeed no understanding, for the embryonic German [nationalism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nationalism). The efforts of some writers of the 19th and 20th centuries to present him as a forerunner of German national unity are quite misleading. His renewed attack on [Maria Theresa](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maria-Theresa) of [Austria](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Austria) in 1744, for example, frustrated an Austrian invasion of Alsace and its possible return from French to German control, and during the [Seven Years’ War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Seven-Years-War) he offered more than once to cede to [France](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-France) territory in western Germany in the hope of breaking up the coalition that threatened him. Moreover, by his part in the first partition of [Poland](https://www.britannica.com/event/Partitions-of-Poland) he helped to create an important common interest with Russia: thenceforth both states had as one of their major objectives the suppression, or at least the strict control, of Polish nationalist [aspirations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aspirations). For generations to come this was to be a factor turning [Prussia’s](https://www.britannica.com/place/Prussia) attention to eastern Europe and making it less Western in some of its political attitudes than might otherwise have been the case. Yet in many ways Frederick deserved the admiration that later generations, especially in Germany, increasingly felt for him. For all his social and [intellectual](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectual) [conservatism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservatism) he never ceased to feel himself in sympathy with the [enlightened](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enlightened) intellectual currents and political strivings of the age and with their tolerant and humanitarian aspects. Building on the foundations laid by his father, he consolidated a Prussian [ethos](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethos) of duty, effort, and [discipline](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discipline) that, despite some serious negative features, was to become for several generations one of the major political traditions of Europe.