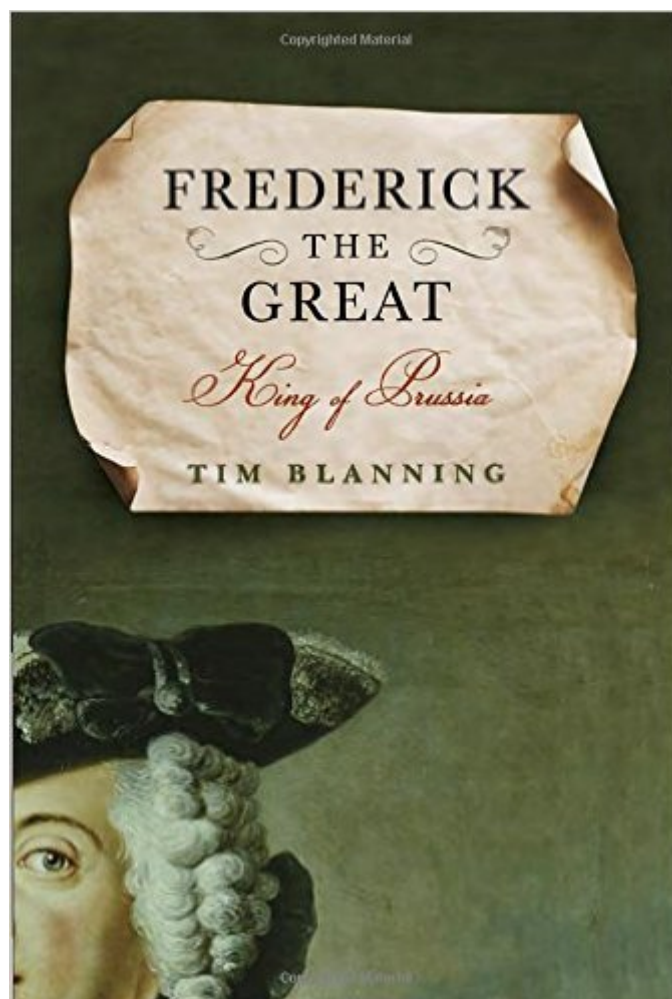


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Frederick The Great: King Of Prussia



Synopsis

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.ââ "Commentary" â Blanning, in clear thinking and prose, investigates all aspects of Frederickâs personality and reign. . . . The last word on this significant king, for years to come.ââ "Booklist (starred review)" â Masterly . . . Blanning brilliantly brings to life one of the most complex characters of modern European history.ââ "The Telegraph" (five stars) â "A supremely nuanced account . . . This biography finds [Blanning] at the height of his powers.ââ "Literary Review

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Customer Reviews

Frederick II of Prussia (1712-1786; reigned 1740-1786) - known from 1748, the end of the eight year War of the Austrian Succession, as Frederick the Great - lived and reigned rather long for his time. As king, he seems to have been two more or less irreconcilable people; the one a reader and musician whose preferred language was French, the other a warlord of considerable aggression. He delegated virtually no ultimate responsibility, sought to control everything and everyone, and was careless of the lives of his soldiery (generals and other noble officers as well as peasant soldiers). There is more. His treatment at the hands of his father, Frederick William I - extending to execution of Frederick's best friend - almost beggars belief. Then there was his 50 year intellectual correspondence with Voltaire, with Voltaire taking up residence in Frederick's Potsdam for an extended period. And the years of Frederick's reign were a time of great advance in many scientific and intellectual areas - which he generally welcomed and promoted. Much of the attraction of Prussia for many outsiders was that it was formally protestant, but Frederick was himself a determined atheist. So there is a great deal to be told about Frederick and the Prussia of his day,

and the task is almost as complex as was the man. Tim Blanning's attempt with this book to provide a readable, single volume life has much to commend it. It runs to 465 pages of text, and around 200 pages of notes, bibliography, index, maps and more. All of that is fairly standard for modern popular histories, but Blanning's book is notable also for its fair presentation, with quotations and references, of relevant commentary from other historians. That is much less common.

I have read quite widely (though only in English) books about the History of Prussia, but, from previous experience of Tim Blanning's writings (see my reviews of his "The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture" and of his "The Romantic Revolution"), I expected that I would learn a great deal more from this biography; and I was not disappointed. In particular this is not only a political but also a sensitive psychological study of Frederick the Great's complex personality. A life of Frederick must of course deal extensively with his diplomacy and his military campaigns - but I found the minutiae in that part of the book - about a third of the text - quite heavy going. Much more enjoyable and much more entertainingly written is the domestic side of the story. It is well known how tyrannical and boorish Frederick's father, Frederick William I, was; but here we have an account of the extremely painful illnesses, including porphyria (the disease from which his cousin twice removed, George III, was to suffer), which afflicted him all his life and which partially account for his titanic rages. And there are significant and illuminating details about the childhood and adolescence of Frederick which I have never seen elsewhere, but which explain much about his later life. Blanning supports the view, previously denied or skirted around, but firmly asserted only recently (2011 and 2013) by other biographers of Frederick, that, after some youthful flings with women, he was homosexual and there are sections on the men who were his intimates - his valet Fredersdorf, and the Italian man of letters Algarotti.

The life and reign of Frederick the Great of Prussia provides ample fodder for armchair psychologists. The son and heir of an abusive father, he grew up determined to emerge from the paternal shadow and accomplish great things in his own way. Frederick achieved that goal, becoming a transformational monarch who brought his country out of obscurity and made it one of the Great Powers of eighteenth century Europe, while at the same time making himself a well known leader of Enlightenment culture. Tim Blanning's excellent new biography ably captures both aspects of Frederick's life. Frederick was born in 1712 the son and heir of King Frederick William I of Prussia. Prussia was then an obscure country broken into several non-contiguous sections scattered across northern Germany. Frederick William I was a possible porphyria sufferer and

subject to violent rages, many of them directed at his eldest son, who seemed insufficiently masculine in that he enjoyed art and music and other cultural pastimes the King considered wastes of time. When Frederick became King in 1740 he was determined to live up to and outdo his father's military accomplishments while at the same time establishing a new role for himself as the "first servant of the state," the quintessential Enlightened monarch who toiled ceaselessly to better his subjects' lives. To a large degree Frederick succeeded in both aims. Prussia became the best governed state in Europe, with new schools and roads, new crops like the potato, new art museums and opera houses, and a wide degree of religious tolerance (except of the Jews, for whom Frederick had little use.) Frederick was tireless, travelling widely around his territories and making himself available to even the lowliest peasants.

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