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The Invention of Frederick the Great

By Matheson Curry

An honors thesis presented to the
Department of History,
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Advisors: Dr. Michitake Aso & Dr. Richard Fogarty

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Abstract:

Frederick the Great is a titanic figure in European history. During his nearly half-century reign he transformed the miniscule territory of Brandenburg-Prussia into a formidable European power, and in the 1860s (about eighty years after Frederick died) Prussia eventually led the charge to form what we now know as Germany. Despite what Frederick may have actually thought about the idea of a purely “German” nation his contribution to the creation of the country, albeit unintentional, has been relentlessly lauded in the years after his death by many in Germany. Even today Frederick amazingly enough retains a large degree of his popularity. After all of the turmoil that Germany has endured throughout the twentieth century, why would a stoic Prussian autocrat who very publicly despised all things German still be viewed as a hero whose actions were instrumental to the founding of the country? I intend to answer this question using the historical phenomenon known as “invented traditions”. This paper examines different depictions of Frederick throughout the Weimar Republic, Nazi Germany, as well as East and West Germany up to the Reunification in 1991. The sources that are examined here are diverse and include films, biographies, articles, and a museum exhibition.

“*In the German context, every historical statement is inevitably a political statement.*”¹

Introduction

Friedrich II. von Hohenzollern, King of Prussia (1712-1786), also known as Frederick the Great, is a titanic figure in European history. During his nearly half-century reign he transformed the miniscule territory of Prussia into a formidable European power.² On the battlefields of the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763) he and his small army emerged victorious against five of Europe’s major powers at the time.³ In addition he was not just a talented commander; throughout his life Frederick was a staunch supporter of the Enlightenment and demonstrated his support in various ways. Not only was he a friend and patron of Voltaire, Frederick also enacted numerous reforms and laws which resembled the Enlightenment ethos, demonstrating to other powers in Europe that even the king himself was not above the rule of law.⁴

In the 1860s (about eighty years after Frederick died) Prussia eventually led the charge to form what we now know as Germany. Whatever Frederick may have thought about the idea of “Germany,” his contribution to the creation of this nation has been lauded by many Germans in the years after his death.⁵ Even today Frederick retains a large degree of his popularity. After all of the turmoil that Germany has endured throughout the twentieth century, why would a stoic Prussian autocrat who very publicly despised all things German still be viewed by many as a hero whose actions were instrumental to the founding of the country?⁶

¹ Christopher Duffy. *Frederick the Great: A Military Life*. (London: Routledge, 1988). 287

² Theodor Schieder. *Frederick the Great*. (Essex, United Kingdom: Pearson Education Limited, 2000. Translated by Sabina Berkley and H.M. Scott). 268; Koppel Pinson. *Modern Germany: Its History and Civilization. Second Edition*. (New York: The Macmillan Company. 1966). 156

³ Timothy Blanning. *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*. (New York: Random House, 2016). 302

⁴ *Ibid.*, 354, 400, 419.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 394

⁶ *Ibid.*, 370

My paper will address this question by examining Frederick through the theoretical lens of invented traditions. In his award-winning 2016 biography of Frederick the Great, Timothy Blanning notes that “The past thirty years or so has witnessed an explosion in publications about Prussian history”.⁷ This phenomenon was inaugurated by the “Prussian Wave” (“*Preußenwelle*”), and since then there has been a lively discourse on the subject of Prussia as well as Frederick the Great. Not only have there been numerous biographies written about the king by historians such as Blanning, but there have also been events such as museum exhibitions for the public; in 2012, the tercentennial of Frederick’s birth, two commemorative exhibitions were held in Germany.⁸ Blanning’s book places Frederick within the context of broader European history, both in the eighteenth century and beyond. In the final pages he briefly mentions Frederick’s role in propaganda spread by various regimes in the twentieth century, but he does not sufficiently answer “why?” By examining Frederick through the lens of invented traditions, this “why?” can be more sufficiently answered.

First proposed by British historians Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, and several others in their 1981 book *The Invention of Tradition*, invented traditions are something that is fairly modern (post-industrial revolution, as Hobsbawm specifies).⁹ Generally speaking the goal of invented traditions are to mold either repetitive behaviors or a consensus by implying continuity with a certain past.¹⁰ Invented traditions can be either physical, such as a flag, or symbolic, particularly something that symbolizes “the nation”. Hobsbawm identifies three types of invented tradition, and they can also overlap with each other: first, traditions that attempt to establish or symbolize group cohesion; second, traditions that attempt to legitimize institutions or

⁷ Ibid., 611

⁸ Ibid., 612

⁹ E.J. Hobsbawm et al. *The Invention of Tradition*. (London: Cambridge University Press. 1983). 3

¹⁰ E.J. Hobsbawm et al. *The Invention of Tradition*. 1

authorities; and third, traditions whose goals are to introduce a specific set of beliefs, values, or mores.¹¹

An invented tradition to one group of people can have an entirely different meaning to another group later in time. In the final paragraph of *The Invention of Tradition*, Hobsbawm argues that, “the most successful examples of manipulation are those whose practices exploit a clearly felt -although not necessarily understood- need among particular bodies of people”. These “needs” can change based on a particular time period. For example, Japanese historian Carol Gluck noted that many traditions associated with the Edo period in Japan were actually concoctions from later periods in time. Gluck also observes that “While invented traditions, once invented, remained traditional [...] they did not on that account stay the same (because the [particular] moment changed)”.¹²

Throughout the periods that this paper examines (the Weimar Republic, Nazi Germany, as well as East and West Germany up to the Reunification in 1991), Frederick -more specifically the “figure” of Frederick- was used in order to alleviate a pressing issue that each of these regimes had to confront.¹³ For example during World War II the Nazis frequently invoked Frederick’s reputation as a successful military commander to urge the German population to not lose hope and fight the Allied Powers. Conversely Frederick was invoked again by the two regimes that emerged from World War II -the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* , or GDR, and the the *Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, or FRG (“East” and “West” Germany respectively)- in

¹¹ Ibid., 7-9

¹² Carol Gluck. “The Invention of Edo”, in *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions in Modern Japan*, ed. Stephen Vlastos, 262-284. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: The University of California Press, 1998). 269

¹³ By “figure” I am not referring to the real Frederick *per se*, but a caricature of Frederick that each regime created in order to advance their contemporary ideologies.

order to explain the supposed origins of the Nazi ideology that ultimately led to the devastation of World War II.

This paper relies on diverse primary sources, and I have allocated them chronologically. The sections on the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany examine “narratives”: books, posters, paintings, and, most importantly, *Fridericus Fime*, or “Frederick Films”. With the exception of one biography, these sources do not intend to portray Frederick the Great accurately; rather their goal is to portray an idealized version of Frederick in support of an ideology, to invent a tradition. The next two sections explore the ways Frederick has been portrayed in the postwar era in both East and West Germany through the examination of two historical biographies. The final section, on the *Preußenwelle* examines a West German museum exhibit as well as articles from the news magazine *Der Spiegel*. The sources for the sections investigating the periods after World War II make greater attempts to portray the “real” Frederick, but they still relate to invented traditions because they seek to explain the historical antecedents of the states of East and West Germany.

Adoration of Frederick is not a trend that began in the 1900s. In fact Frederick was an extremely popular figure during his own time, earning the title “the Great” after defeating the Austrians in the Second Silesian War.¹⁴ Hero worship of Frederick began in the 1840s, approximately sixty years after his death in 1786, and continued as Germany began to mature throughout the remainder of the century.¹⁵ After Germany unified in 1871, Frederick’s image was used to try and promote unity among the highly regionalized country. Historians and playwrights portrayed Frederick as the first to try and fulfill Prussia’s “German vocation”

¹⁴ Timothy Blanning. *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*. 126

¹⁵ Katherine Roper. “Fridericus Films in Weimar Society: Potsdamismus in a Democracy.” (*German Studies Review* Vol. 26, no. 3 (October 2003): 493–513). 494

(“*deutscher Beruf*”), or, in other words, unification. Frederick’s wars were seen as the precursor to the German Wars of Unification that took place throughout the 1860s.¹⁶ Kaiser Wilhelm II tried to portray Frederick as a sophisticated man of taste, rather than as a man of the people, which actually worked to the Kaiser’s disadvantage.¹⁷ Because Germany was (and frankly still is) so regionally divided, Frederick more or less remained a local hero in the state of Prussia rather than a national one throughout the rest of the country.¹⁸ This trend continued until the end of the First World War.

Part I: The Weimar Republic (1918-1933)

One facet of invented traditions that is of particular importance for historians is that the mere existence of an invented tradition can help identify underlying problems of a nation that may or may not be so obvious.¹⁹ Germany’s defeat in World War I was devastating to many on both a personal and a national level. Not only had millions of sons, husbands, fathers, and loving family members been slaughtered for a cause that now seemed in vain, Germany as a nation was dealt several simultaneous blows that, for the time, made it feel like the nation could never recover. To start, Germany was no longer an Empire (A “*Reich*”), but a Republic. The Treaty of Versailles in 1919 not only straddled the country with millions in reparations to be paid to the victorious Allied Powers, they also stripped Germany of territories that had once been part of Prussia and gave them to the new country of Poland; a tiny section of land referred to as East Prussia (today belonging to Russia) was still allowed to exist under German rule, but it was

¹⁶ Eva Giloi. *Monarchy, Myth, and Material Culture in Germany 1750-1950*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). 314

¹⁷ Eva Giloi. *Monarchy, Myth, and Material Culture in Germany 1750-1950*. 328-29

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 319

¹⁹ E.J. Hobsbawm et al. *The Invention of Tradition*. 12

separated from the rest of the Fatherland by the “Polish corridor”, an issue of contention that haunted the Germans throughout the 1920s.

Moreover the German military, historically a source of pride for many, was reduced to a paltry maximum-strength 100,000 men by the Treaty, in addition to forbidding the creation of a navy or air force.²⁰ This restriction could not have come at a worse time; in 1918-1919 a revolution in Germany very nearly succeeded in overthrowing the government.²¹ The beginning of the 1920s ushered in a time of unprecedented economic inflation for Germany and its people, resulting in their currency, the *Reichsmark*, becoming literally worthless. In November 1923, one U.S. dollar was worth 4,200 billion *Reichsmarks*.²² For ordinary Germans it seemed that their misery in the newly established Weimar Republic was never going to end.

Shortly after the First World War came to an end, German writer Walther von Molo published a series of novels that dealt with several great German figures such as Friedrich Schiller and Prince Eugene of Savoy, however his most successful book was about Frederick the Great. *Fridericus*, as the novel was called, was an instant success with the public, depicting Frederick as the brilliant commander who persisted against impossible odds.²³ Around the same time as the release of *Fridericus* a reproduction of one of artist Georg Schöbel most well-known paintings, “Fridericus Immortalis” (Frederick the Immortal), had been released. It depicts Frederick awakening from his eternal slumber ready to return Germany to its former glory.²⁴

²⁰ Heinz Guderian. *Achtung-Panzer!: The Development of Armoured Forces, Their Tactics, And Operational Potential*. (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1995). 133-134

²¹ Matthew Stibbe. *Germany 1914-1933*. (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Limited). 2010. 54-59

²² Matthew Stibbe. *Germany 1914-1933*. 99

²³ Deutsch Historisches Museum. *Friedrich der Grosse: Verehrt, Verklärt, Verdammt* (“Frederick the Great: Revered, Transfigured, Damned”). (Berlin: Deutsch Historisches Museum, 2012). 136; Frederick’s official title in Latin was *Fridericus Rex*, or “King Frederick”. In Germany this title is used interchangeably alongside “*Friedrich der Große*” or “*Friedrich II. von Preußen*”.

²⁴ Deutsch Historisches Museum. *Friedrich der Grosse*. 162

Von Molo's novel and Schoebel's painting can be considered the genesis for the sort of hero-worship over Frederick that persisted throughout the Weimar Republic and beyond.

As ordinary citizens languished in squalor Frederick the Great once again entered onto the stage of political discourse in Germany. Frederick was now being used as a symbol by various conservative factions in Germany to attempt to subvert what they viewed as the "parliamentary chaos" that was the Weimar Republic. Far-right nationalist writer and publisher Friedrich Carl Holtz published the daily newspaper *Fridericus*, the same name as von Molo's novel, which criticized the government at every opportunity it had. Nazi propagandist Wilhelm Freiherr von Müffling proudly called Holtz's paper a "sharp weapon against the winners of the [1918] Revolution and republican mismanagement".²⁵

Fridericus was not the only pro-Frederick novel that was published during the Weimar Republic. Oskar Fritsch, lawyer and prominent member of radical right-wing groups in the region of Franconia, published the book *Frederick the Great, our Lord and Leader (Friedrich der Große, unser Held und Führer)* in 1924, claiming that the contents of the book directly applied to the situation of contemporary Germany: "Each word in this book has been written for the contemporary time period, because of how miserable it is". According to Herr Fritsch, Germany needed a strong leader after the three-pronged blows of the Treaty of Versailles, the 1918 Revolution, and the French occupation of the Ruhr valley. "Where the living have failed, we conjure the spirits of our great dead as leaders", claimed Fritsch. As the protagonist of his novel Frederick "Stands like a patron saint of German dignity and [its] right to exist, rising up from his grave".²⁶

²⁵ Ibid., 136; Original: "scharfe Waffe gegen die Revolutions-Gewinnler und die republikanische Misswirtschaft".

²⁶ Ibid., 136; Original: "Jedes Wort in diesem Buche ist für die heutige Zeit geschrieben, gerade weil sie so elend ist"; Original: "Wo die Lebenden versagen, beschwören wir als Führer die Geister unserer großen Toten"; Original: "Steht wie ein Schutzheiliger deutscher Würde und Lebensrechts [stieg er] aus dem Grabe auf".

Frederick's character was not just used to garner mere sentiments. Various right-wing political parties such as the German People's Party (DVP) and the German National People's Party (DNVP) used Frederick as the embodiment of their goal(s) of gaining back territory (once a part of Prussia) that had been given to the newly-established Republic of Poland. The commonly-used slogan was "*Rettet Preußen!*", or "Give Prussia back (to Germany)!"²⁷ Frederick was considered notoriously frugal in his own time, and during the days of hyperinflation his character was used as a contrast to the wealthy elites who were thriving while the average citizens were struggling to survive. The Reich's Party for Human Rights and Revaluation (*Reichspartei für Volksrecht und Aufwertung*) used Frederick and his Order's motto "To each his own" ("*Suum cuique*" in Latin, "*Jedem das Seine*" in German) as a means of demanding that those who lost their personal finances during the Inflation should be compensated.²⁸

During the early 1900s a new medium was being perfected that was soon available en masse: film. People needed a way to escape their incessant troubles, and studios across Germany answered that call. Throughout the mid-1920s all the way into the 1940s Frederick was the subject of fifteen films, ushering in an entire subgenre of German films referred to as "*Fridericus Filme*", or "Frederick Films". These films were immensely popular with the German public. Not only did they glorify the past, they carried hopes of future prosperity through historical anecdotes. These films were very impressive for their time, containing "lavish spectacles of eighteenth-century courts, a build-up to dire crisis, [and Frederick] standing firm against impossible odds."²⁹

²⁷ Ibid., 138, 142

²⁸ Ibid., 150

²⁹ Katherine Roper. "Fridericus Films." 493

For nearly all of these films Frederick was portrayed by veteran actor Otto Gebühr, and he was undoubtedly the best fit for the intended role. Not only did he physically resemble the Prussian king, his on-screen performance was uncannily similar to that of the actual Frederick, which was “reinforced by a host of gestures, facial expressions, the three-cornered hat, and the ever-present whippet” that Frederick liked to carry. Gebühr also mimicked Frederick’s gait, for the king was known to have problems with gout.³⁰ All of these actions made Gebühr’s Frederick “the most recognizable film character of the Weimar era”.³¹ In addition to playing Frederick on screen, events known as *Gebühr Abende* (“Gebühr evenings”) were hosted where the actor roleplayed as Frederick in full costume and, for a hefty fee, audiences could dress up as Prussian soldiers and “Frederick” drilled them.³²

It is worth mentioning the way Otto Gebühr’s Frederick was in many ways a continuation of previous idealized depictions of the Prussian king. The origin of these depictions can be traced back to a portrait of Frederick painted by Anton Graf in 1781. The painting is considered not only Graf’s chef d’oeuvre but also the best depiction of Frederick, for according to legend he hated sitting for portraits, however while he was visiting one of his relatives Graf was able to pin him down and get Frederick to agree to a portrait. After Frederick’s death painters such as Daniel Chodowiecki, Adolf Menzel, and others have depicted Frederick in a similar manner to Graf’s portrait: geriatric and slightly hunched because of his gout, while wearing a rather plain blue military uniform (The only accolade that is visible is his Order’s pennant) complete with his characteristic three-pointed hat (called a “*Dreispitz*” in German), Knee-high military boots, and his cane, or “*Krückstock*”.³³ Even though depicting Frederick as an older man does not make

³⁰ Ibid., 493-494; Timothy Blanning. *Frederick the Great*. 490-491

³¹ Katherine Roper. “Fridericus Films.” 494

³² Ibid., 494

³³ Peter-Michael Hahn. *Friedrich der Große und die Deutsche Nation*. 230

sense considering the time period most of Chodowiecki's and Menzel's paintings are supposed to take place, it contributes to the collective ideas that most Germans have when they picture Frederick, affectionately referred to as the "Old Fritz" (*Alter Fritz*). Furthermore, having Otto Gebühr play Frederick as an older man can symbolically be harkening back to the time of the "older" Germany before the catastrophe of the First World War.

While *Fridericus Filme* were popular forms of entertainment for millions of Germans, there is also a greater historical significance to be found in their analysis. There was a clear right-wing agenda behind the creation of these *Filme*; as one of the producers of the films stated, "One-man rule by an (enlightened) dictator was preferable to parliamentary chaos".³⁴ The films drew on the past military successes of Prussia in order to console the general public about the humiliations of the Treaties of Versailles and the "Polish corridor" which reminded the Germans of their territorial losses.

Some critics of the *Fridericus Filme* argued that these films were merely an attempt by the political right to palletize Germans' perpetual hunger for authoritarianism and militarism. One critic accused the *Filme* of being nothing but "*Zwei Stunden Potsdamismus*" ("Two hours of Potsdam-ism", meaning that the agenda behind these *Filme* was demonstrably pro-Prussian). However, as Dr. Katherine Roper argues, these critics are missing the point. She explains that millions of audience members "brought their perspectives on the experiences of war, defeat, economic crisis, social conflict, political turmoil, and pressures of modernity. The [*Fridericus Filme*] spoke to the resultant anxieties, grief, longings for spectacle, and hopes for national redemption, and as such, they form a window into Weimar society." Ultimately these critics'

³⁴ Eva Giloi. *Monarchy, Myth, and Material Culture*. 350

objections were overshadowed, and Frederick the Great found a new role as “the epitome of Prussian, and by implication, German greatness” in the era of the Weimar Republic.³⁵

As the Weimar Republic gave way to Nazi Germany, *Fridericus Filme* were still being produced, and continued until the middle of World War II. One film that is of particular interest is Carl Froelich’s *Choral von Leuthen* (“Choir of Leuthen”), which debuted in Stuttgart only four days after Hitler was appointed Chancellor on January 30, 1933.³⁶ The film gets its namesake from the Battle of Leuthen, one of Frederick’s greatest military triumphs against the Austrian Army in 1757.³⁷ The film starts with a defeat, but ends with the Battle of Leuthen demonstrating that Frederick and his army have been able to overcome previous failures and emerge victorious.³⁸ The director of the *Choral von Leuthen* remarks: “[In this film, Frederick] is not a character from sentimental operetta but the tough soldier of popular imagination and legend”.³⁹ The *Fridericus Filme* that follow the *Choral von Leuthen* repeat this general depiction.

Throughout most of the film the political subtext is not as overt as in other *Filme* of the time; in fact the *Choral von Leuthen* is arguably one of the lesser partisan films of the genre. Nevertheless, this film still inspired many Germans who were living in an age of uncertainty as the Weimar Republic gave way to the eventual rise of the Nazis. Furthermore there are two scenes that contribute to the notion of invented tradition. In one, Frederick is seen conversing with ordinary soldiers as they are marching into position, which gives the impression that Frederick is a man of the people and has no problems relating to commoners.⁴⁰ Later in the film

³⁵ Katherine Roper. “Fridericus Film.” 493-495

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 507

³⁷ Timothy Blanning. *Frederick the Great*. 200-201

³⁸ Carl Froelich. *Der Choral von Leuthen (The Choir of Leuthen)*. (Film, Historical Drama. UFA, 1933). 0:01:56; Carl Froelich. 1:00:25

³⁹ Erwin Leiser. *Nazi Cinema*. (New York: The Macmillan Company. 1975. Translated by Gertrud Mander and David Wilson). 113

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 0:58:23

Frederick is seen personally leading his men into battle, showing that he does not fear danger and leads from the front.⁴¹

One invented tradition that is prevalent throughout all of the *Fridericus Filme* is that during the films Frederick actually speaks in German. Even though this point may seem not only pedantic but also logical considering the audiences of these films were primarily German, having Frederick speak the language of the audience contributes to the narrative of social cohesion, implying that Frederick is “one of them” and they can easily relate to him; if he was to speak in another language the films probably would not have had the impact that they did. In reality Frederick mostly spoke French, and even though he was taught German as a child, he eventually grew to hate it, proclaiming “The German language is confusing, difficult to use, does not sound pleasant, and is not rich in metaphors”. By extension Frederick also hated German culture, stating that the *Nibelungenlied*, one of Germany’s greatest epic poems of the Middle Ages, was “not worth a shot of gunpowder”. Frederick also engaged in heated debates with some of the well-known and contemporary Weimar Classicists, particularly Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.⁴²

Part II: Nazi Germany (1933-1945)

As Germany seemed to be getting back on its feet it was dealt yet another blow in 1929 by the Great Depression. For many this new economic crisis seemed like a repeat of the previous crisis about ten years before, but as the straits started to turn even more dire, hope appeared in the form of a stout Austrian man who made up for his stature with his bombastic speeches. The Nazis, led by Adolf Hitler, promised to return Germany to its former glory before the shame of the Versailles *Diktat* and economic chaos.⁴³ As historian Christopher Clark highlights, many

⁴¹ Ibid., 1:06:23

⁴² Timothy Blanning. *Frederick the Great*. 369-372

⁴³ Note: In post-World War I Germany the Treaty of Versailles was referred to as a *Diktat*, implying that the terms were “dictated” to the Germans against their will.

leading Nazis, Hitler included, had a strong affinity for Prussia. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler claimed that Prussia was the “germ cell of the German Empire” and one of the Nazis’ earliest ideologues, Alfred Rosenberg, claimed that without Prussia there would be “no trace of a German people”.⁴⁴

One of the ways that the Nazis conveyed their ambitions was through Frederick the Great, their favorite Prussian. In his book *The Nationalization of the Masses*, George Mosse dubs nationalism the “new secular religion”. Similar to established religions, nationalism “relied upon a variety of myths and symbols which were based on the longing to escape from the consequences of industrialization”. Previous historians observed that German nationalism in particular is grounded in the “longing for myth”.⁴⁵ As part of this longing, Frederick became a “saint” in the Nazis’ historical canon.

Using Frederick and his persona as a vessel, the Nazis implied that their regime has historical precedent with Frederick the Great’s Prussia from the pre-industrial era. In the run-up to the German election of 1933 one of the Nazis’ ideas that they promoted was the progression of Frederick to Bismarck to Hitler, implying that Hitler was the next step in this procession of great leaders.⁴⁶ In May of that year, after Hitler was successfully appointed Chancellor, the aforementioned Nazi propagandist Wilhelm Freiherr von Müffling published a book entitled *Pioneers and Champions for the New Germany (Wegbereiter und Vorkämpfer für das neue Deutschland)*, featuring short biographies of men and women who helped contribute to the Nazi cause. On the cover of the book, the silhouette of Frederick with his famous palace, Sanssouci,

⁴⁴ Christopher Clark. *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). 657

⁴⁵ George L. Mosse *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars Through the Third Reich*. (New York: Howard Fertig, Inc., 1987). 6

⁴⁶ Eva Giloi. *Monarchy, Myth, and Material Culture*. 349

can be identified next to a picture of Adolf Hitler, implying that Frederick was one of the *first* pioneers and champions for the new Germany.⁴⁷

On February 27, 1933, the Reichstag, Germany's parliament building, was set on fire by Dutch communist Marinus van der Lubbe. This caused German President and relic of the Prussian nobility Paul von Hindenburg to sign the Reichstag Fire Decree almost immediately after the arson attack. The Decree suspended Germans' civil liberties and granting Hitler emergency powers, effectively making him the dictator of Germany. The Nazis took advantage of the Reichstag fire even further by hosting a grand opening ceremony for the new Reichstag facade almost a month later in the city of Potsdam on March 21, 1933, sixty two years to the day after the first Reichstag was opened.

This *Tag von Potsdam*, or "Day of Potsdam", is significant for several reasons. For the Nazis it was the perfect opportunity to demonstrate that they were the rightful successors of the German Empire of the late nineteenth century. Paul von Hindenburg, representing the old Prussian nobility, shook Hitler's hand on camera, symbolically ushering in the beginning of the new "Third Reich". The choice of Potsdam as the location for the celebrations is no mere coincidence either. Not only is it the location of Frederick the Great's Sanssouci palace, but at the time he was also buried in Potsdam's *Garnisonkirche* ("Garrison Church") alongside his father, Frederick William I. Hitler not only gave a speech inside the *Garnisonkirche* but he also laid a wreath at Frederick's grave.⁴⁸

As the 1930s moved along the Nazis began to rapidly consolidate their power, with Hitler becoming the undisputed *Führer* ("Leader") of Germany in 1934 after the death of President

⁴⁷ Deutsch Historisches Museum. *Friedrich der Grosse*. 166

⁴⁸ "Hitler and Hindenburg on the 'The Day of Potsdam' (March 21, 1933)". image by Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz. In *Nazi Germany (1933-1945)*, edited by Prof. Richard Breitman, *German History in Documents and Images*, German Historical Institute, Washington, DC (www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org).

Paul von Hindenburg. By 1936 the Nazis were at the apex of their power, but not everyone in Germany was content. One of these Germans was Dr. Gerhard Ritter, still today one of Germany's greatest historians. Dr. Ritter was certainly a nationalist, and even supported the Nazis during the beginning of their rule, but as time went on he eventually became disillusioned with what he rightly believed was an abuse of power. In 1936 he compiled a series of lectures he had previously given on the subject of Frederick into a biography entitled *Frederick the Great*.⁴⁹ Dr. Ritter uses this biography as a means of criticizing the Nazis on an intellectual level. For example he claims that “[According to Frederick], Calm reason, not recklessness and passion, should determine policy, and restrain and constantly guard the potential of violence”, referring to the “recklessness” of Nazi policy.⁵⁰ He also points out that one of Frederick's greatest achievements was his tolerance, contrasting with the Nazis' relentless persecution of Jews and other minorities within the country.⁵¹

Despite being well received by critics outside of Germany, Dr. Ritter's *Frederick the Great* made a minimal impact in resisting the juggernaut of Nazi power, eventually seeing him imprisoned by the Gestapo in 1944⁵² ⁵³. Fortunately Dr. Ritter survived the end of the war and continued to live and work until 1967. In the meantime, however, the Nazis' malevolent influence continued to expand, and the figure of Frederick continued to play a significant role in their propaganda. Nineteen thirty six was also the year that yet another *Fridericus Film* was released, the aptly-titled *Fridericus: Der Alte Fritz (Frederick: The Old Fritz)*. The film is an

⁴⁹ Gerhard Ritter. *Frederick the Great*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968. vii-viii

⁵⁰ Gerhard Ritter. *Frederick the Great*. 67

⁵¹ Ibid., 166,168

⁵² Ibid., x

⁵³ Andreas Dorpalen. “Historiography as History: The Work of Gerhard Ritter”. (The Journal of Modern History, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Mar., 1962): pp. 1-18). 7

adaptation of Walther von Molo's popular novel, with von Molo being one of the main screenwriters.

The film wastes no time in asserting its ideology. As soon as the introductory credits are over some title cards give historical background, claiming that the “aspiring Prussia” (“*aufstrebende Preußen*”) has been fighting against the major European powers for its mere “right to exist”, or “*Lebensrecht*”.⁵⁴ The notion that Prussia is in fact the victim of foreign aggression presides throughout the film. Later in the film the Marquise de Pompadour herself (whom Frederick had a searing hatred for) takes a map and, with the simple stroke of a pencil, divides Prussia amongst the three major powers of France, Austria, and Russia.⁵⁵ The allusion to the Treaty of Versailles is rather obvious.

Despite his puny country being the victim, Frederick only engages in war begrudgingly. As he is talking to a local magistrate, he rhetorically asks the man “Why do I fight wars?”, to which he answers “For peace”.⁵⁶ Several minutes later Frederick and his troops encounter a village that has been burned to the ground, forcing its inhabitants to become homeless. The villagers begin to lose faith in the war effort after having their homes destroyed, to which Frederick replies, “I would have myself quartered if it could bring you peace!”.⁵⁷ Later, as Frederick is conversing with the main antagonist of the film, Austrian spy Count Wallis, he proclaims “I don't want war! I would make peace tomorrow if I could”.⁵⁸ As Dr. Theodor Schieder highlights in his 1983 scholarly analysis of Frederick the Great, the notion of Frederick as a victim of aggression has origins as far back as the 1860s, however if one actually examines

⁵⁴ Johannes Meyer. *Fridericus: Der Alte Fritz (Frederick: The Old Fritz)*. (Film, Historical drama. Diana-Tonfilm. 1936. Redistributed by International Historical Films). 0:02:15

⁵⁵ Johannes Meyer. *Fridericus*. 1:10:54; Timothy Blanning. *Frederick the Great*. 210

⁵⁶ Johannes Meyer. *Fridericus*. 30:42; Original: “*Warum führe ich diese Kriege? Für den Frieden.*”

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 34:41; Original: “*Ich hätte mich geviertelt, wenn es eure Frieden bringen könnte!*”

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 0:56:10 to 0:59:06; Original: “*Ich will keinen Krieg! Ich würde morgen Frieden machen, wenn ich könnte.*”

Frederick's contemporary circumstances this notion shatters almost immediately: not only did the Prussian king have dreams of conquest when he was still the crown prince, "Even in a defensive war, plans for conquest were essential for Frederick".⁵⁹

In *Fridericus*, Frederick is shown to be not only a peaceful man at heart, but also a man of the people. As he and his entourage are riding through the countryside a messenger approaches Frederick's carriage and informs him that there is a famine in the region of Pomerania. The king immediately turns to his aide and not only dictates how many provisions are to be shipped to the suffering region, but that all of his silverware is to be melted down and turned into coins to help the population financially.⁶⁰ Almost immediately after Frederick sees some peasants in a field and converses with them. The peasants tell him that their farm has been ransacked by the Austrian soldiers and their cattle have starved to death, so out of sympathy Frederick gives them some Thaler coins to help them with their troubles.⁶¹ Later Frederick's convoy arrives in a local village where the inhabitants crowd around him out of adoration for their beloved king. A local magistrate comes strolling by in his own carriage while wearing fancy garments, unlike the common folk. Frederick becomes offended on behalf of the townsfolk and lambasts the magistrate, telling him "My civil servants should not be riding around in expensive carriages when the people are suffering!"⁶²

In order to mold good Nazi citizens there is a prevailing theme of obedience to one's authorities throughout *Fridericus*. Early on Frederick hatches a plan to have one of his soldiers purposely defect to the Austrian side in order to spread false information, however the soldier

⁵⁹ Theodor Schieder. *Frederick the Great*. 121

⁶⁰ Johannes Meyer. *Fridericus*. 0:23:28

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 0:24:20

⁶² *Ibid.*, 0:29:47; Original: "Meine Beamten sollten nicht in teuren Kutschen herumfahren, wenn die Menschen leiden!"

hesitates and tells the king, “I swore allegiance to you, *Majestät*”.⁶³ There is a subplot involving a young private who wants to desert so he can see his mother. In the beginning he declares “I’m still a reasonable man. I don’t want to be killed for a madman!”, referring to Frederick.⁶⁴ The private is later captured, stripped of his uniform, and brought before Frederick himself. The king is enraged that one of his soldiers dared contemplate escaping their royal obligation, but the private stands his ground and tells Frederick that “I wasn’t born to be a soldier.” Frederick retorts by telling his disgraced subject that he never did either, however “The world is ruled by necessity”.⁶⁵

Fridericus is an interesting entry into the *Filme* chronology because it is perhaps the only *Fridericus Film* where the Nazis’ gender politics is so conspicuous. Before Frederick berates the private, the boy’s mother pleads with the king to spare her son of whatever sort of torture he had in mind. Frederick’s orderly is about to remove the woman from the premises, but Frederick tells his orderly to stand down, for he sympathizes with the mother on some level. He tells his orderly that not only is it a mother’s job to forgive, but that “Mothers are always right”. Frederick then turns to the mother and tells her “It is you mothers for whom I fight for”.⁶⁶ One must not get the impression that Frederick is fighting for mothers on behalf of progressive-minded sentiments however; later he remarks that “Women easily lose their nerve”.⁶⁷

In 1942 the final *Fridericus Film* be released: *Der Grosse König (The Great King)*. The introductory credits proclaimed, “The essential scenes [of this movie] strictly abide by the facts,” and, “The most important statements from the King come directly from his mouth”⁶⁸. These

⁶³ Ibid., 0:09:09

⁶⁴ Ibid., 0:07:48

⁶⁵ Ibid., 1:06:53; Original: “*In dieser Welt regiert nämlich das Muss.*”

⁶⁶ Ibid., 1:05:13; Original: “*... für euch kämpfe ich doch.*”

⁶⁷ Ibid., 1:23:11

⁶⁸ Veit Harlan. *Der Grosse König*. (Film, Historical Drama. DEFA, 1942). 0:01:30

claims, however, are extremely dubious. After the introductory credits Frederick is shown speaking to a group of soldiers, claiming that they are fighting for all of Germany (“*Deutschland*”), not just Prussia (“*Preußen*”). Later, as he is speaking to his generals, Frederick boisterously proclaims “A German empire must come and Prussia must lead it!”⁶⁹ Both of these scenes are important for two related reasons: first of all, they imply that Frederick was consciously thinking about the creation of a German state, which did not exist at the time; furthermore these scenes, among others, brazenly contradict the statements made in the credits at the beginning. The real Frederick never gave any serious thought to the creation of a “Germany”, let alone a Germany with Prussia at its helm. In fact the notion of Frederick as an active progenitor of the German state is an invented tradition in and of itself, having origins further back than the Nazis.⁷⁰

Later in the film, as Frederick is speaking with his brother and fellow general Prince Henry, his brother suggests making peace with France so that Prussia does not have to fight five enemies simultaneously. Frederick not only objects, but is flabbergasted that the Prince dared to make such a suggestion. “Nonsense!” (“*Unsinn!*”), the Prussian king exclaims. He reminds Prince Henry that the French are malevolent to the core and only want to see Prussia divided and weak: “The intention of the Pact of Versailles is to fragment Prussia. I am familiar with this ‘Pompadour State’”. Frederick explains that if the French had their way, they would reduce “Prussia” to small principalities or “*kleine Herzoge*”, but he confidently asserts that he will not relinquish a single village (“*Nicht ein Dorf geben!*”).⁷¹

⁶⁹ Veit Harlan. *Der GrosseKönig*. 0:31:15; Original: “*und kommen muss ein Deutsches Reich, und Preußen muss es führen!*”

⁷⁰ Theodor Schieder. *Frederick the Great*. 180

⁷¹ Veit Harlan. *Der GrosseKönig*. 0:56:47- 0:57:04; Original read: “*Die Absicht des Versailler Paktes ist es, Preußen zu zerstückeln. Ich kenne diesem ‘Pompadour Staat’.*”

In the context of invented traditions this mere exchange of dialogue is perhaps the most important scene in the movie. Even though this scene strictly does not abide by the facts and the dialogue most likely did not come out of Frederick's own mouth, when one considers the historical context of Nazi Germany it begins to make more sense. When "Frederick" is talking about the alleged "Pact of Versailles" he is referring to the Thirty Years' War of 1618-1648. The Thirty Years' war was actually ended by the Peace of Westphalia with treaties signed in the cities of Münster and Osnabrück respectively, not Versailles; furthermore it is worth arguing that while the Thirty Years' War was particularly devastating for little Prussia, the lessons that it learned put it on the path to becoming the powerhouse we know it as today.⁷² These historical nuances however are negligible for a Nazi propaganda film. The shame of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles was most likely still be in the minds of the audiences that watched this film, and hearing that their very own Frederick the Great would protect them from the clutches of the French must have been invigorating.

Frederick's last line of dialogue with Prince Henry deserves special attention. He finishes his tirade by claiming "The French will always be enemies of Prussia, so long as Prussia still has territory to expand", contrasting his brother's earlier assertion that the French are "natural allies" ("*natürlichen Verbündete*") of Prussia.⁷³ It is understandable to assume that the French are the natural enemies of the Prussians, considering the two have clashed not only during the Seven Years' War but also the Napoleonic Wars, the Franco-Prussian War, the First World War, and just two years before *Der Grosse König* was released during World War II.

⁷² Christopher Clark. *Iron Kingdom*. 38

⁷³ Veit Harlan. *Der Grosse König*. 0:57:22-0:57:27; Original read: "...die Franzosen werden immer Preußens Feinde sein, solange Preußen sein Gebiet noch erweitern muss."

Anti-French sentiments aside, it is worth examining “Frederick’s” language that he uses when stating that “so long as Prussia still has territory to expand” (“*solange Preußen sein Gebiet noch erweitern muss.*”). “*Erweitern*” means to expand or widen;⁷⁴ the script could have him say “*erobern*” instead, which means to conquer or seize and probably makes more sense contextually, but has a much harsher tone.⁷⁵ France and Prussia- later Germany -have had numerous territorial disputes in the past, particularly over the ever-contentious region of Alsace-Lorraine or “*Elsaß-Lotharingen*” depending on who was in possession said region.⁷⁶ The choice of “*erweitern*” also makes sense when one considers the Nazis’ racial idea of *Lebensraum* (“Living space”) for the German people. Despite the devastation and misery that *Lebensraum* actually brought, the Nazis viewed their “expansion” as necessary if the Aryan race were to survive.⁷⁷

Der Grosse König has a similar climax to *Der Choral von Leuthen* with the Prussians defeating their Austrian foes, but what separates the former from the latter is the ending. In the latter the ending is rather simple, but *Der Grosse König*’s ending carries significant implications. Frederick returns home but instead of riding in his carriage for the victory parade he visits an empty church so he can weep in solitude over the grief he has experienced while at war for so long. A montage is shown depicting various scenes of prosperity; old battlefields are now calm, the trees are in bloom, and people can now plant their harvests. Frederick’s eyes are superseded into the background, implying that this newfound prosperity is all because of him. Right before the film fades to black a choir sings “O, Black Eagle of Frederick the Great” (“*Du Schwarze*

⁷⁴ Klatt, Edmund, et. al. *Langenscheidt’s Standard German Dictionary, German-English, English-German: Enlarged and Updated Edition*. (Berlin: Langenscheidt KG, 1983). 847

⁷⁵ Klatt, Edmund, et. al. *Langenscheidt’s Standard German Dictionary*. 844

⁷⁶ Koppel Pinson. *Modern Germany*. 148

⁷⁷ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “LEBENSRAUM” Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/lebensraum> Accessed on 07 February 2019.

Adler Friedrichs des Großen”) and if one listens carefully, one can briefly hear the melody of the German national anthem.⁷⁸

Despite all of the invented traditions within the film, the broader themes of *Der Grosse König* serves as invented traditions in and of themselves when examining the situation that Nazi Germany was in around the film’s release in 1942. At the beginning of the year the Nazis appeared to be unstoppable, having suffered only minor setbacks such as the Battle of Britain and their defeat outside Moscow the previous winter.⁷⁹ However, as the year dragged on, the fortunes of the Nazis was reversed, as the Wehrmacht eventually became enveloped in the catastrophic Battle of Stalingrad and were slowly pushed out of North Africa by the western Allies. The theme of perseverance and trust in one’s superiors that is prevalent throughout *Der Grosse König* is extremely appropriate if the Nazis wanted to encourage every German citizen to help contribute to the war effort.

In the introduction to his 1968 book *Nazi Cinema*, Erwin Leiser reminds his readers that “An audience of today may laugh at passages which Third Reich audiences fell for under the spell of propaganda”.⁸⁰ We have the hindsight to know that films like *Fridericus: Der Alte Fritz* and *Der Grosse König* are brazen examples of propaganda, however one must understand what needs facilitate the release of these films in the first place. The director of the film, Veit Harlan, remarked that he wanted to portray Frederick “as I think he was - as he must have been”.⁸¹ One can say that Harlan and other *Fridericus Filme* directors “invented” a particular type of Frederick, however it is important to remember that they did so not merely because they wanted to (or could); they did so because these films were vital to legitimizing the ideology of the Nazis.

⁷⁸ Veit Harlan. *Der GrosseKönig*. 1:51:52-1:53:40

⁷⁹ I use the word “minor” in relation to what is to come

⁸⁰ Erwin Leiser. *Nazi Cinema*. 9

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 113

In 1943 Joseph Goebbels rhetorically asked “Do you want a total war?!” at a rally, and the crowd responded with an enthusiastic “Ja!”. It is hard to imagine them responding the same way if they were asked the question two years later, as the Allies were getting ever closer to victory and everything around them was literally falling apart. Amazingly there were still those who believed that Germany could somehow win. As Hitler and his inner circle retreated into the bunker in April of 1945, one of the few possessions that the Führer took with him was a portrait of his favorite king, Frederick the Great. When American president Franklin D. Roosevelt died on April 12, Goebbels became enthralled with joy and linked the event to the Miracle of the House of Brandenburg of 1761⁸². The “Miracle” refers to the death of Empress Elisabeth of Russia, which caused her brother Peter III, an admirer of Frederick, to ascend to the throne and promptly make peace with the Prussians⁸³. Unfortunately for Goebbels, but fortunately for the rest of the world, history did not repeat itself.

While the Nazis believed themselves to be the rightful heirs to the transcendent idea of “Prussiandom”, Christopher Clark rightly points out that the Nazis’ interpretation of what it meant to be a Prussian was “opportunistic, distorted, and selective”.⁸⁴ The National Socialists became enthralled with the idea of Prussia as a “masculine” military power that through sheer brute force was able to become a leading European power and unite Germany, however huge swaths of Prussian history and intellectual thought were conveniently never mentioned. For example, in the *Fridericus Filme* that have just been analyzed, Frederick is portrayed almost exclusively as a populist “soldier king” who devotes all of his efforts in to making Prussia a great power. The Nazis did not dare mention Frederick’s contributions to the Enlightenment, since

⁸² Peter-Michael Hahn. *Friedrich der Grosse und die deutsche Nation*. 131; Original: “Wollt ihr den totalen Krieg?!”

⁸³ Timothy Blanning. *Frederick the Great*. 272-273

⁸⁴ Christopher Clark. *Iron Kingdom*. 662

those ideas are incongruent with broader fascist ideology. Dr. Clark writes that “Those who seek to legitimate a claim to power in the present often have recourse to the idea of tradition.”⁸⁵ Based on the Nazis’ treatment of Frederick it is clear that the “tradition” in this case is not legitimate; rather it has been invented in order to serve the needs of the National Socialist regime.

Part III: Postwar era in West Germany (1945-1980)

In early May of 1945 representatives of the German military surrendered to the Allies unconditionally, officially bringing the Second World War to an end for Germany. The Third Reich had not lasted for a thousand years, as Hitler had promised, but a mere twelve. The prosperity of the mid-1930s seemed like a distant memory as Germany not only lay in ruins and millions of people were dead, but the country was divided amongst the four victors. The territorial losses from the end of the previous war were nothing compared to what the Allies had planned.

In a few short years, there were two Germanies, the FRG, and the GDR. The former became a liberal democracy while the latter became a communist dictatorship.⁸⁶ On top of having their country divided the Germans also lost significantly more territory than after the end of World War I. In 1947 the Allied Control Commission abolished the state of Prussia on the grounds that it had been the “embodiment of militarism and political reaction”.⁸⁷ Prussia had now officially ceased to exist, but its legacy continued to spark debate post mortem. Winston Churchill called Prussia the “root of all evil” and the concept of “Prussian militarism” reared its ugly head once again.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Ibid., 662-663

⁸⁶ Koppel Pinson. *Modern Germany*. 554-562

⁸⁷ Lattek, Christine. “Preussen: Versuch Einer Bilanz, the Prussia Exhibition, Berlin, August to November 1981.” (*History Workshop* 13 (Spring 1982): 174–80). 174

⁸⁸ Lentz, Ellen. “PRUSSIA REDISCOVERED IN WEST GERMAN DISPLAY.” *New York Times*. August 24, 1981. <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/08/24/arts/prussia-rediscovered-in-west-german-display.html>.

Historians, both German and non-German, were desperate to know what led to a regime as repulsive as the Nazis to come to power in the first place, and similarly German citizens wanted answers as to what led up to such a nationally traumatic event as World War II. German history was now being re-framed to where all significant events somehow led up to the fateful year of 1933.⁸⁹ Some hypothesized as far back as Martin Luther, while others looked to more recent eras. Since Frederick the Great and Prussia were practically inseparable, people began to examine him from a different perspective. Almost immediately after World War II Frederick lost his prestige and was now seen by many Germans as one of the harbingers of not only “Prussian militarism”, but inadvertently the Nazis. Frederick had now gone from being a national hero to an aggressor and someone who was possessed by “*Eroberungslust*”, or “Lust for conquest”.⁹⁰

After the initial condemnation of Frederick in the aftermath of the Second World War, a lull began to set in. In the FRG the king went from being a pariah to being forgotten. In 1962, 250 years after he was born, there were no public celebrations (or condemnations for that matter) of Frederick or his legacy.⁹¹ Six years later, however, the anti-Frederick mania was re-kindled with the publication of a little book by the founder of the still-popular *Der Spiegel* magazine, Rudolf Augstein. His book, *Preußens Friedrich und die Deutschen (Prussia's Frederick and the Germans)*, was a full-on attack launched not only at Frederick, but at German historians who still held their cherished king in such high regard, specifically the recently-deceased Gerhard Ritter.⁹² Unsurprisingly German -specifically Prussian- historians have showered their Great king with unrelenting praise. German critics of Frederick did exist, such as Austrian-born Onno Klopp in

⁸⁹ Blackbourn, David and Eley, Geoff. *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). 286

⁹⁰ Deutsch Historisches Museum. *Friedrich der Grosse*. 157

⁹¹ Eva Giloi. *Monarchy, Myth, and Material Culture*. 361

⁹² Peter-Michael Hahn. *Friedrich der Große und die deutsche Nation*. 165

1867, but they were few and far between, and often they published their criticisms at their own peril. Deviating from the consensus was tantamount to blasphemy; in the 1920s outspoken critic of Frederick, Werner Hegemann, referred to his colleagues as Frederick the Great's "spiritual bodyguard".⁹³

The fact that *Preußens Friedrich und die Deutschen* was published in 1968 is no accident. In the broader context of world history the year was a watershed moment in anti-authoritarianism and radical left-wing thought, and not even Germany could escape the radical tide. Augstein's book rapidly found an audience among revolutionary-minded German students, such as the *Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund* (German Socialist Student Union), who believed that the FRG still retained a large degree of authoritarian sentiments, and that their country's prosecution of Nazi war criminals was insufficient.⁹⁴ Unlike the previous two eras that have been examined, the figure of Frederick was now relegated to the more restrictive corner of academia rather than becoming somewhat of a posthumous "celebrity" for the public to admire. The era of the *Fridericus Filme* were long gone, and scholars and authors such as Augstein were now trying to examine Frederick under a more critical lens in order to attain a more complete picture of the King. Nevertheless, the misery that Germany had endured over the past twenty five years loomed over their assessment and was most certainly a factor.

Even though Augstein's assertions are questionable by modern scholars of Frederick, one must understand the historical consensus that he was trying to contrast. Following World War II conservative-minded German historians, even though acknowledging that Nazism and the destruction it brought was terrible, still tried to salvage their national pride. They argued that

⁹³ Ibid., 84; Original: "*geistigen Leibregiment*".

⁹⁴ Deutsch Historisches Museum. *Friedrich der Grosse 1771*; Mark Kurlansky. *1968: The Year that Rocked the World*. (New York: Random House, 2004). 146-147

Nazi ideology was a “foreign bacillus” that had infiltrated Germany and turned otherwise decent citizens into murderers.⁹⁵ Augstein, offended by this idea, argues that there has always been an authoritarian, “Nazi-like” zeitgeist within Germany and its population, and this zeitgeist can be traced as far back as Frederick the Great.

Augstein wastes no time linking Frederick with said misery by asking, rhetorically, “The world wars, the displacement of East Germany (from West Germany), the amputation of a quarter of German territory, [and] the partition of the rest of Germany, does this perhaps have something to do with Frederick?”⁹⁶ This question is answered later in the chapter entitled *Der böse Friedrich* (“The Sinister Frederick”). Augstein argues that beginning with Frederick, German politics entered a state of “amorality”, viewing humanitarian concerns with a particular disdain. “Again and again”, the *Der Spiegel* founder insinuates, “the German brute finds it necessary to tear apart the web of cosmopolitan culture and civilization, be it out of boorishness or out of delusions of grandeur”. “France only had one Napoleon, Sweden only had one Charles XII, but after Frederick, under the guise of Kaiser Wilhelm II’s thick moustache, the mustachioed Ludendorff sprouts and, from Ludendorff’s own thick mustache, sprouts Hitler”.⁹⁷

Arguably the most impressive piece of historical persuasion is Augstein’s investigation into the inner mechanisms of the Prussian army, the institution that one cannot mention without mentioning Frederick in the same breath. The chapter, cleverly titled “The *Unenlightened* State” (“*Der unaufgeklärte Staat*”), begins with an epigraph from Georg Heinrich von Berenhorst, a Prussian major during the Seven Years’ War, in which he famously quips “The Prussian state

⁹⁵ Charles S. Maier *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1997). 141

⁹⁶ Rudolf Augstein. *Preußens Friedrich und die Deutschen*. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag. 1971). 7

⁹⁷ Rudolf Augstein. *Preußens Friedrich*. 117; Erich Ludendorff was one of the top German commanders of the First World War.

does not have an army; the Prussian army has a state”.⁹⁸ Augstein spends most of the chapter talking about the misery that the common soldier had to endure unendingly, particularly the incessant corporal punishment. “Military service was, besides for the officers, no honor, often sufficiently and literally a punishment”.⁹⁹ While Frederick did abolish torture in 1740, this applied to civilian life, not the army. One of the worst punishments a soldier could be forced to endure was “the gauntlet” (“*Die Gasse*”), in which a soldier would be forced to walk through a corridor of fellow soldiers on both sides of him holding thinly sharpened rods, being flogged the entire way.¹⁰⁰

In the years after his death Frederick’s wars have frequently been portrayed as a noble undertaking for all of those involved, from the highest ranking general to the lowly private. In *Der Grosse König* there is scene where the lead soldier, Sergeant Treskow, is punished for preemptively giving the signal to attack. After Sergeant Treskow receives his punishment however Frederick remarks to one of his aides that the Sergeant is to be promoted to Lieutenant, implying that the Sergeant’s punishment will be worth it.¹⁰¹ Augstein wishes to dismantle this narrative put forth by the film and others to show how corporal punishment in the army was not only cruel, but gratuitous. He includes an excerpt from German novelist Gustav Freytag’s *Images from the German Past (Bildern aus der deutschen Vergangenheit)*, in which one of the characters, Ulrich Braeker, describes the public beating of a young officer cadet where “there was no end to the beaten boy’s lamentation”.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Ibid., 91

⁹⁹ Ibid., 95

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 97. For a fairly accurate depiction of what this punishment was like, see Stanley Kubrick’s 1976 film *Barry Lyndon*.

¹⁰¹ Veit Harlan. *Der Grosse König*. 1:12:37-1:14:10

¹⁰² Rudolf Augstein. *Preußens Friedrich*. 101.

Unsurprisingly the abuse that every common soldier was subjected to took its toll on their morale. “Suicide, insanity, and desertion were for some commanders the order of the day”. One soldier, out of “great melancholy”, cut off two of his fingers, for which Frederick himself sentenced the soldier to “Twenty-four lashes from pike rods and two years of ‘fortress work’ (“*Vestungsarbeit*”)”.¹⁰³ Desertion was rampant throughout the Prussian army’s ranks, which is especially ironic considering Frederick himself tried to flee from military obligations when he was still the crown prince.¹⁰⁴ During the period of 1744-1745, it is estimated that 17,000 Prussian soldiers deserted their posts, and in one instance during the Austrian occupation of Breslau in 1757, 4,000 Prussian soldiers remained in the enemy-controlled city rather than evacuate. Only 500 men left the garrison.¹⁰⁵

After examining the misery of the ordinary soldier Augstein later gives his assessment of Frederick’s overall military performance. Until *Preußens Friedrich und die Deutschen* had been published the one aspect that all German historians could agree on was that Frederick was a skilled military commander, and should be remembered first and foremost as such. Augstein partially agrees with this assessment, claiming that “Without Hohenfriedberg, without Soor, without Leuthen, without the conquest and claiming of Silesia, Frederick would not have been Frederick *the Great*, but merely a significant monarch of the eighteenth century”. Our author bolsters this even further: “It was not his clever cynicism, his ambitious writing, nor his judicial reforms that made him the ‘first man of the century’ [...] Rather it was his battles around Silesia, of which resulted in twelve or so victories and three defeats”. However if the *Der Spiegel* founder were to merely agree with the consensus then there is no point to his book. Augstein,

¹⁰³ Ibid., 98. “*Vestungsarbeit*” is a euphemism for hard labor.

¹⁰⁴ Timothy Blanning. *Frederick the Great*. 43

¹⁰⁵ Rudolf Augstein. *Preußens Friedrich*. 96

being the Frederick critic that he is, reminds the reader that even the Prussian King lost some engagements, claiming “However the victor of Hohenfriedberg, Rossbach, and Leuthen in the [Seven Years’ War] was also defeated at Kolin, Hochkirch, and Kunersdorf, with the latter three being as disastrous as the first three were marvelous”.¹⁰⁶

Part IV: East Germany and its *Geschichtsbild* (1945-1980)

Augstein’s book may have landed a significant blow to Frederick’s prestige, but his rhetoric did not have any lasting effects. As the 1980s dawned the winds of change began to blow in a more favorable direction, this time from a rather unlikely source: the East. In 1979 East German historians held a conference in which they wished to debate and examine the historical antecedents of their state.¹⁰⁷ Before 1979 the GDR also viewed Frederick as a symbol of right wing reactionary thought, and as one of the harbingers of Nazism. Unlike the FRG, however, the GDR had to contend with the fact that within its territory the legacy of Prussia and its Hohenzollern dynasty still lingered, both figuratively and literally.¹⁰⁸ The way that they dealt with this dilemma was by creating what was called the *Geschichtsbild*.

The *Geschichtsbild*, which can be translated as “image of history”, existed both within the GDR and the FRG. Columbia University undergraduate Corinna Munn notes that what distinguishes the former’s *Geschichtsbild* is that it holds a dialectical view of history, meaning that the past directly relates to the future. Ultimately the goal of the East German *Geschichtsbild* is to prepare its citizens for the confrontation (and desired victory) of socialism over capitalism; in order to confront the enemies of the GDR (namely the FRG and the United States) the citizens

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 191. What we refer to as the “Seven Years’ War” in English is sometimes referred to as the “Third Silesian War” (“*Dritten Krieg um Schlesien*”) in German.

¹⁰⁷ Ingrid Mittenzwei. *Friedrich II. von Preussen. Eine Biographie*. (Berlin: VEB Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1987). 7

¹⁰⁸ Lattek, Christine. 175

must have an understanding of “both the reactionary and revolutionary tradition in German history”.¹⁰⁹ Here invented traditions start to become relevant because in order for a citizen to have a proper understanding of the past, events and figures must somehow be related to the GDR.

In the late 1940s historians and journalists alike asserted that Prussia and its militarism was the cause for the “misery” (*Misere*) that the German people had just experienced a few years before. Frederick’s wars, for example, were fought not *for* Germany, but rather *contrary* to it. Simultaneously various monuments and buildings that had been erected in the name of Prussian glory were now being destroyed, removed, or neglected.¹¹⁰ In 1950 one of the most well-known statues of Frederick, an equestrian statue overlooking Berlin’s Unter den Linden boulevard, was removed by the GDR as a symbolic gesture in opposition to “*reaktionaerian Preussentums*” (“reactionary Prussianism”).¹¹¹ Even though Prussia was not being utilized as a positive antecedent, it nevertheless served to try and unify the East German people against a common ideological enemy.

Slowly but surely this negative view of Prussia was beginning to change. In the 1950s, the GDR recognized that in order to build a successful state its population needed to have some sort of patriotic sentiment for said state. During the 1950s and 1960s various Prussian reformers of the early 1800s were starting to be “rehabilitated” by the state such as Stein, Scharnhorst, and Gneisenau.¹¹² Furthermore the East German press asserted that the rise of Nazism should be blamed on all of Germany equally, not just Prussia. They also mentioned that Prussian social

¹⁰⁹ Corinna Munn. “The Changing Depiction of Prussia in the GDR: From Rejection to Selective Commemoration.” (Columbia University, 2014). 9-10

¹¹⁰ Corinna Munn. “The Changing Depiction of Prussia in the GDR.” 12

¹¹¹ Deutsch Historisches Museum. *Friedrich der Grosse*. 157

¹¹² Corinna Munn. “The Changing Depiction of Prussia in the GDR.” 27

democrats had an alliance with German communists at one point, demonstrating that Prussian conservatism was not monolithic.¹¹³ Frederick however was still being condemned. While he was off fighting his enemies and spending large sums in order to sustain his conflicts, ordinary Germans had to suffer.¹¹⁴

In 1981 veteran East German historian Ingrid Mittenzwei published a biography of Frederick that strove to examine the Prussian king in a more positive (and objective) light. Frederick once again became the star of German historical discourse, and for perhaps the first time since the end of World War II he was not viewed with such contempt. *Friedrich II. Von Preußen: Eine Biographie* is not overflowing with Marxist polemics as one might expect; rather they are conspicuously absent. For some this can make the book rather dull, but there are some interesting tidbits that Dr. Mittenzwei writes about. She postulates that by conquering Silesia, Frederick unintentionally started a chain reaction that saw the rise of conservative reactionary thought which had far-reaching consequences for the population; it is this rise that led to the failure of the Frankfurt Revolution of 1848, in which the Prussian ruling class became the “executor” of popular consensus (“*Testamentsvollstrecker*”, as Marx put it).¹¹⁵

One facet that Dr. Mittenzwei refuses to absolve Frederick of is the First Partition of Poland, initiated in 1772. “If one does not question the ‘historical guilt’ of this act of aggression inflicted on a defenseless people in the midst of peace, one can not fail to refer to Brandenburg-Prussia and Frederick II. He was the author of the plan, his brother Prince Henry interpreted this policy.” Dr. Mittenzwei asserts that “The Prussian king did not have the slightest scruple to describe his role in the First Partition of Poland.”¹¹⁶ While it can certainly be argued that

¹¹³ Ibid., 26

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 24

¹¹⁵ Ingrid Mittenzwei. *Friedrich II. von Preussen*. 83

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 194

Frederick was the one responsible for the Partition, Dr. Mittenzwei's arguments become even more significant when one considers the broader political situation of the GDR. Since East Germany was part of the Warsaw Pact, that made them allies with Poland, who have always had a tenuous relationship with the Soviet Union. Merely a year after Dr. Mittenzwei's book was released Poland felt the wrath of the Soviets as a result of the activities from the "Solidarity" labor movement. Perhaps Dr. Mittenzwei's section about Poland was a veiled critique of Soviet oppression?

Despite castigating Frederick when it comes to Poland, Dr. Mittenzwei is much more lenient with his legacy as a whole. In the final chapter she makes two important assertions. Firstly, "A people cannot choose their history".¹¹⁷ While Frederick had been interpreted negatively in the past, Dr. Mittenzwei demonstrates with her biography that one cannot ignore all of the positive impacts that Frederick had made. In a radio interview our author explains that "An 'enlightened' conservative limited by the historical conditions and class interests in which he operated [...] Frederick II nonetheless contributed to historical progress". For years the GDR's view of Prussia was that of a reactionary state looking to quell any and all opposition, however Dr. Mittenzwei concludes her book by arguing, nevertheless, "Prussia is a part of our past".¹¹⁸

Part V: The *Preußenwelle* (1980-1991)

Similar changes were happening right on the other side of the Berlin Wall, with the FRG quickly becoming enveloped in what was called the "*Preußenwelle*", or "Prussian Wave".¹¹⁹

This *Preußenwelle* began with an exhibition in West Berlin's Martin Gropius Bau entitled

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 234

¹¹⁸ Asmus, Ronald D. "THE GDR AND THE GERMAN PAST." (*German Studies Newsletter*, no. 7 (March 1986): 19–24). 21–22; Ingrid Mittenzwei. *Friedrich II. von Preussen*. 234

¹¹⁹ Theodor Schieder. *Frederick the Great*. ix

“*Preußen – Versuch einer Bilanz*” (“Prussia- attempt at a balance”).¹²⁰ The exhibition, which cost approximately \$5,000,000 dollars to organize and featured 2,500 exhibits ran from August 15 to November 15, 1981.¹²¹ When it was over the exhibition surpassed expectations by attracting nearly 450,000 visitors!¹²²

According to Dietrich Stobbe, West Berlin’s Social Democrat mayor who first suggested the idea in 1977, the impetus for hosting the exhibition came from observing other parts of the FRG who had recently been celebrating their own past(s), such as the Wittelsbach exhibition in the state of Bavaria. “Everywhere in Germany a growing search for identity is becoming apparent and a growing need to find the historical roots for our present national circumstances,” Stobbe said.¹²³ There were, however, greater political implications for hosting this exhibit as well. As their neighbors to the east were in the midst of their own reassessment of Prussia, the FRG, and West Berlin specifically, felt that it should stake its own claim into how the former militaristic state affected their history as well. In a way, *Preußen – Versuch einer Bilanz* is West Germany’s counterattack over the subject of who gets to “inherit” Prussia.¹²⁴

Frederick was not the sole topic of the exhibition, but his personality and legacy are of such significance that he simply cannot be ignored. The overarching theme of Frederick’s portion within the exhibition is how he appears to be, among other things, a man of severe contrasts: his *L’Antimachiavel* was supposed to be a condemnation of ruthless power politics yet he invaded Silesia and fought three wars to keep it; he introduced religious tolerance and abolished torture yet, as Augstein also highlights, subjected his soldiers to horrendous

¹²⁰ “Prussia – Attempting an Assessment, Exhibition Guide (1981)”

¹²¹ Lentz, Ellen.

¹²² “Prussia – Attempting an Assessment, Exhibition Guide (1981)”

¹²³ Lentz, Ellen.

¹²⁴ Lattek, Christine. 175

punishments such as *die Gasse*; he was a friend and admirer of Voltaire yet he deliberately ignored prominent German philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (who was living in Prussia during Frederick's reign) and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz; finally he helped reorganize Prussia's economy along mercantilist policies yet he still prohibited serfdom. The exhibition also strives to show how the Enlightenment in Prussia, while still a significant achievement, was actually very restrictive by quoting Frederick directly: "Reason as much as you like and upon whatever you like, but obey!"¹²⁵

The way the exhibition deals with Nazism and its relationship to Prussia is rather interesting. They highlight the fact that in order to appear to traditional conservatives in Germany, the Nazis drew upon Prussian and militaristic ceremonies and aesthetics, using slogans like "*Macht Preussen weider preussisch!*" (Make Prussia Prussian again!). The Nazis were finally accepted by the remnants of the old Prussian regime during the *Tag von Potsdam*, as discussed previously. Even though insinuating that the Nazis are a direct successor to the state of Prussia is dubious at best, it is not hard to see that they directly built upon the characteristic Prussian values of "obedience, subordination, and loyalty", and that Hitler's foreign policy was in some ways a continuation of the aims of Frederick and Bismarck, i.e. expansion of Prussian (and by extension- German) territory.¹²⁶

At the end of the exhibition there are two gravestones, one erected for the 6 million Jews that were murdered during the Holocaust and the other to the 50 million victims of World War II.¹²⁷ Apart from this display there are no direct conclusions that the exhibition insinuates, which some may see as a problem, however one must remember that the exhibition's very title is an

¹²⁵ Ibid., 175. Frederick and Voltaire eventually broke off their friendship because the French philosopher could not fathom how Frederick considered himself to be "enlightened" while simultaneously being a warmonger.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 177

¹²⁷ Lentz, Ellen.

attempt (Versuch) at a balance, meaning that its true aim is to foster discussion, not stifle it.

Some historians such as Dr. Gottfried Korff, one of the main organizers of *Preußen – Versuch einer Bilanz*, asserted that “There is no direct line from Prussia to the SS.” On the other hand Dr. Peter Brandt, son of renowned West German politician Willy Brandt, contested Dr. Korff’s statement, claiming that, “the pronounced militarism of Prussian-German society, its special road toward capitalism and toward shaping a national state helped create historic preconditions that made it more likely for the Germans to resort to fascism in the sweeping capitalist crisis since 1929 than for countries with stronger liberal and democratic traditions”.¹²⁸

On the other side of the Wall the GDR perceived the exhibition with considerable worry, claiming that in light of NATO stationing troops and missiles in the FRG, *Preußen – Versuch einer Bilanz* indicates that West Germans are beginning to rediscover Prussia’s militaristic sentiments with vigor.¹²⁹ The GDR’s Soviet overlords shared these concerns; in the USSR’s main newspaper, *Pravda*, an article was published claiming that the West Berlin exhibition was merely a ruse whose real intention was to “rehabilitate the Prussian militarism that unleashed two world wars”.¹³⁰ In this narrow context the two communist regimes’ worries may seem justified, however as Dr. Christine Lattek outlines, when examining the broader social context of the FRG the GDR’s and the USSR’s insinuations begin to become increasingly unfounded.

First of all, NATO’s bolstering of the FRG was the result of external pressure, particularly from the United States; within West Germany itself the move was actually very unpopular. Furthermore, there existed virtually no sentiments of Prussian militarism within the FRG leading up to 1981, and in fact there is evidence to demonstrate that the West German

¹²⁸ Ibid.,

¹²⁹ Lattek, Christine. 178

¹³⁰ Lentz, Ellen.

government actually promoted the opposite. The FRG's military, the *Bundeswehr*, maintained a "low profile", as Dr. Lattek phrases it, meaning that unlike in Germany's past the West German military did not invade all aspects of a German citizen's daily life. Ironically enough the GDR, although proclaiming to be the opposite of reactionary Prussia, prided itself on the characteristic Prussian traditions of bureaucratic efficiency, strict adherence to authority, and ostentatious military pageantry earning the moniker of the "red Prussians".¹³¹

When one examines the historical antecedents of the FRG, the Eastern Bloc's fears, although somewhat understandable, become even more unfounded. The states that made up "West Germany", such as Bavaria, Schleswig-Holstein, and the Rhineland had once been the losers to Prussia during the Wars of German Unification throughout the 1860s, and consequently began to heavily resent their Prussian masters once Germany had formed. In staunchly Catholic Bavaria for example, Prussians were referred to contemptuously in the local dialect as *Saupreiss'n*, or "Prussian pigs". It should also be noted that local Neo-Nazi groups at the time were based in traditionally anti-Prussian enclaves such as the aforementioned Bavaria as well as Lower Saxony. Finally, the principles that the FRG was founded upon were a far cry from Prussian conservatism.¹³²

The *Preußenwelle* surged on, and not even the Berlin Wall could stop it. The GDR was also drastically modifying its position on Prussia around the same time. This modification was not limited to academia with the release of Dr. Mittenzwei's book In 1980, thirty years after Frederick the Great's equestrian statue was removed from the Unter den Linden, East German

¹³¹ Lattek, Christine. 178

¹³² Ibid., 178

leader Erich Honecker ordered it to be put back in its original place, where it remains to this day. Honecker claimed that the statue was “a piece of culture for the German people”.¹³³

Despite the overwhelming force of the *Preußenwelle*, there was a bit of pushback from none other than *Der Spiegel*. In 1986 the magazine published an issue that August entitled *Friedrich: Preussens Fürst, Deutschlands Führer* (“Frederick: Prussia’s Prince, Germany’s Führer”); the cover image is a bust of Frederick being cracked open, revealing Hitler’s face.¹³⁴ Within the issue there are three articles -one being an excerpt of a chapter from Augstein’s book- dedicated to upholding the notion that Frederick was responsible for Germany’s misery.

In one article, “Friedrich: Ein Denkmal kehrt zurück” (“Frederick: a Monument is Returned”), the author begins by describing an exhibition about Frederick in the GDR which is surprisingly objective. The author then goes on to remind their readership that Frederick should be viewed as an authoritarian who did not have the peoples’ best interests in mind, describing the tortures of *Die Gasse* as well as mentioning that Frederick, sometimes known as the “liberator of the farmers” (*Bauernbefreier*), did not in fact liberate them due to the resistance that he would have had to face from the nobility. The author concludes by proclaiming “He was the first servant of his state, but his state was a Moloch that devoured everything”.¹³⁵

Augstein also wrote his own article, “Von Friedrich zu Hitler?” (“From Frederick to Hitler?”) in which he first describes how Frederick was a very passionate and loving individual to those closest to him, such as his mother and sister, and asks his readers “Was Frederick, despite all of his brutality, still a man?”. “Yes, of course”, Augstein answers, “but so was Hitler”.

¹³³ Corinna Munn. “The Changing Depiction of Prussia in the GDR.” 43; Original: “eine Stück Kultur des Volkes.”

¹³⁴ In German *Führer* by itself just means leader, however calling someone “the *Führer*” implies that they are akin to Adolf Hitler.

¹³⁵ Anonymous. “Friedrich: Ein Denkmal kehrt zurück (Frederick: A Monument is Returned).” Original: “Er war der erste Diener seines Staates, aber sein Staat war ein Moloch, der alles verschlang”

“There is not a straight line from Luther to Frederick to Bismarck and then to Hitler”, but, as the author points out, one could not have been possible without the other. Augstein insists that the same men who went on to murder six million Jews in the Holocaust were coincidentally admirers of Frederick, Hitler being the most fanatical of them all. At the end of the article Augstein writes “Frederick has now been dead for 200 years, should we be celebrating him?”.¹³⁶

While sensationalist the *Des Spiegel* issue that was published in August of 1986 rapidly became an anachronism. By now most historians no longer subscribed to the idea that Frederick was an antecedent to the Nazis. As the 1980s continued Frederick’s perception gradually began to change for the better. One of the consequences of the *Preußenwelle* was not a renewed interest in Prussian militarism, however several biographies about Frederick were published, with each author attempting as balanced of an assessment as they possibly can. Dr. Theodor Schieder’s 1983 scholarly analysis of Frederick is considered not only one of the best analyses of the king to begin with, but at the time of its release it was considered the best contribution to the study of Frederick since Reinhold Koser’s pre-World War I biography.¹³⁷ Renowned military historian Christopher Duffy published a comprehensive analysis of Frederick’s military career, the first to do so since Theodor von Bernhardt’s study in 1881.¹³⁸

Conclusion (1991- Present)

In his will Frederick the Great specified that he wanted to have a simple funeral, being buried besides his cherished greyhounds in Sanssouci park. When he finally died on August 17, 1786, his wishes were not honored and he was given a lavish funeral procession to the

¹³⁶ Rudolf Augstein. “Von Friedrich zu Hitler? (From Frederick to Hitler?).” *Der Spiegel*, August 8, 1986. Original: “War [Friedrich], trotz aller Unmenschlichkeit, nicht doch ein Mensch?”; Original: “Zweihundert Jahre ist er nun tot. Soll man ihn feiern?”

¹³⁷ Theodor Schieder. *Frederick the Great*. ix

¹³⁸ Christopher Duffy. *Frederick the Great*. xi

Garnisonkirche in the middle of Potsdam where he was buried alongside his dreaded father.¹³⁹

Not long after his death the great Prussian king began to pass into legend, with many remembering the way that they *wanted* to, not necessarily for who he really was.¹⁴⁰ In a grotesque twist of fate the man who pounced at every opportunity to demean German culture and damn the very language has ironically been mythologized as the defender of everything German and the proverbial “grandfather” of the modern state of Germany, despite having strong opinions on the contrary.

When considering the facts it may seem perplexing that Frederick was portrayed as a proto German nationalist to begin with, however history is never as simple as Leopold von Ranke wanted it to be.¹⁴¹ Frederick’s life and achievements have been utilized by many in order to advance their particular cause(s). Hobsbawm and his colleagues have demonstrated that some of the most profound invented traditions have been concocted to not only enforce a particular set of beliefs but also to legitimize institutions. Furthermore, by examining invented traditions historians can extrapolate what kind of issues contemporary societies are facing to where they need to invent traditions in the first place.

Frederick the Great has had different aspects of his life either disproportionately celebrated or completely ignored in order to fulfill the “felt need” of particular regimes throughout twentieth century Germany. During the Weimar era he was utilized in order to give ordinary Germans some respite from the turmoil that they had to face day after day. Through political propaganda and the advent of the *Fridericus Filme* the Prussian king, having been dead

¹³⁹ Timothy Blanning. *Frederick the Great* 496

¹⁴⁰ There is a famous anecdote of Napoleon visiting Frederick’s tomb whereby he turned to his entourage and proclaimed, “Gentlemen, if this man were alive today, none of us would be standing here” (Timothy Blanning. 501).

¹⁴¹ An extremely influential historian, Leopold von Ranke claimed that history should be written “as it actually happened” (*Wie es eigentlich gewesen*) (Blackbourn, David and Eley, Geoff. 159)

for over a century, gave the general public hope that they can and will persevere and the good old days of the German empire will return once again. When the Nazis came to power, they harnessed the potential that Frederick demonstrably had over the German people and used him as a way of legitimizing their own government and philosophies, continuing with the success of the *Fridericus Filme*, producing even grander films that were stuffed with political subtext. Gerhard Ritter tried to combat the Nazis' invention of Frederick with invented traditions of his own, but ultimately, he was unsuccessful.

After the Nazis were defeated during the Second World War a new sort of "need" emerged in Germany: the need for answers. The German people and indeed the larger world, devastated by another six years of global conflict, needed answers as to why the Nazis were allowed to come to power in the first place. Frederick went from being lauded to being lambasted, with historians, both German and non-German, laying much of the blame on him. However this damnation only lasted for so long, as a new generation of Germans, both historians and laypeople alike, began to question the narratives put forth and started to examine Prussia, and Frederick especially, under a new lens. In the East Frederick became part of the GDR's *Geschichtsbild*, or "image of history", and while acknowledging that he was certainly not a left-winger, he and his legacy are in fact necessary for the GDR's very existence. On the other side of the Iron Curtain West German historians became entangled in the *Preußenwelle*, causing them to pull back the layers of propaganda that had tarnished Frederick for years, attempting to portray him in a more objective focus.

It is tempting to claim that these different interpretations of Frederick the Great are fabrications that either give us a heavily skewed depiction of the Prussian king, or an altogether incorrect one. While each regime has omitted certain parts of Frederick's life that they believe to

be inconvenient, it is important to remember that that the “truth” is still contained within each interpretation. In the book *Friedrich der Große und die deutsche Nation: Geschichte als politisches Argument*, German scholar Peter-Michael Hahn concludes by quoting French author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: “Error is not the opposite of truth, it is just another representation of our temple of life built with other stones, not true or false, but only different”¹⁴². The Nazis may have been too admiring, and Augstein may have been too critical, however both believed that what they were portraying was the “true” Frederick.

In 1991, two years after Germany unified once again, Frederick was finally given the burial that he wanted in Sanssouci park and interred next to his dogs. In a way, this re-interment symbolizes Frederick’s “rehabilitation” within the German consciousness, as he is now portrayed not as a harbinger of fascism or even Germany itself, but still as a great man. Today Frederick is as popular as ever, with Sanssouci and his other palaces being some of the more popular tourist attractions in Potsdam, if not country. In 2008 Frederick once again was featured in a cinematic role when he became the subject of a German documentary series, *Die Deutschen*, becoming the star of his very own episode, “*Preußens Friedrich und die Kaiserin*”. In 2012, the tricentennial of Frederick’s birth, commemorations were held, with exhibitions being hosted by the *Deutsches Historisches Museum* and the *Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten*. Historians are still finding new evidence about Frederick and debating his significance within the meta of history, showing how complex of a man he really was.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Peter-Michael Hahn. *Friedrich der Große und die deutsche Nation*. 240; German translation: “*Der Irrtum ist nicht das Gegenteil der Wahrheit. Er ist nur eine andere Darstellung unseres aus anderen Steinen gebauten Lebenstempels, nicht wahrer oder falscher, sondern nur anders.*”

¹⁴³ Today the biggest topic of debate for contemporary historians of Frederick is his sexuality (see Timothy Blanning 55-57).

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