

CHAPTER XIV

THE RISE OF PRUSSIA

REFERENCES: WAKEMAN, *Ascendancy of France*, pp. 172-83, 289-96, 308-10; HASSALL, *Balance of Power*, Chapters VI., VII., VIII., IX., XI. (pp. 298-320); LONGMAN, *Frederick the Great*; HENDERSON, *History of Germany*, Vol. II., Chapters I.-V.; TUTTLE, *History of Prussia* (first volume uncritical; last three volumes, dealing with Frederick the Great, very creditable); CARLYLE, *Frederick the Great* (a monumental work, very partial to its hero); BRIGHT, *Maria Theresa*; BRIGHT, *Joseph II.*

SOURCE READINGS: ROBINSON, *Readings*, Chapter XXXII., Sections 4-8; WILHELMINE, *Margravine of Baireuth*, *Memoirs* (this princess, sister of Frederick the Great, is a most entertaining gossip):

Early history
of the mark of
Brandenburg.

THE modern kingdom of Prussia has developed from very inconsiderable beginnings which take us back many hundred years. Its cradle is the so-called mark or march of Brandenburg, founded in the tenth century, in those remote feudal times when Germany was practically confined between the Rhine and the Elbe, and was constantly threatened on its eastern border by the incursions of the Slavs. The mark was intended to be a military outpost against these people, who, besides being of a different race, filled the lately Christianized Germans with added horror because they were still heathen. The margrave, as the head of the mark was called, was soon not content to stand upon the defensive, but carried the war into the territory of the enemy, crowded back the Slavs foot by foot and took possession

of their lands as far as the Oder. The mark thus came to embrace a considerable territory, lying for the most part between the Elbe on the west and the Oder on the east, and its ruler, the margrave, waxed so great that in the fourteenth century he was recognized as one of the leading princes of Germany, receiving the title of elector. Meanwhile, the first race of margraves, to whom Brandenburg owed its extension, died out, rival claimants appeared, and for some time such confusion reigned that the mark threatened to relapse into barbarism. Out of this anarchy it was saved by the fortunate accession of the House of Hohenzollern, which has guided the destiny of Brandenburg to this day.

The Hohenzollerns proved themselves in general a family of strong common-sense and steady endurance, with the result that they have raised themselves from rung to rung of the ladder of dignities, until in our day the head of the House has become German emperor. Before the year 1415, when Frederick of Hohenzollern was put in possession of the mark of Brandenburg by Emperor Sigismund, the family had not filled a large rôle in history. It originated in the south of Germany, not far from the borders of Switzerland, and gradually acquired considerable possessions around Nuremberg, but its real history begins only with its transfer to the north.

Origin of the
House of
Hohenzollern.

Frederick took up his task in Brandenburg with energy and intelligence, secured his borders, overawed his knights, and established peace upon the highways. When he died in 1440 the mark lay quietly in the hollow of his hand. One hundred years later Joachim II., the contemporary of Luther, ranged himself on the side of the Reformation without, however, arriving at anything like such a rôle in the religious history of the period as his neighbor, the elector of Saxony. It was in fact, not until the seventeenth century that the

The early
Hohenzollern
margraves.

Two important acquisitions.

History of Prussia.

East Prussia and West Prussia.

margrave of Brandenburg began to outstrip all the other princes of the Empire, for under the Elector John Sigismund (1608-19) the family fell heir to two lucky legacies, which secured for it considerable territories in the extreme east and in the extreme west of Germany. In 1609, by the death of the last duke of Cleves and Juliers, John Sigismund acquired some lands on the lower Rhine, and in 1618 he succeeded to the duchy of Prussia on the Baltic.

What is meant by Prussia, and exactly what land was it that the margrave of Brandenburg acquired under that name in 1618? To answer this question we are obliged to pause for a moment and look backward. The name Prussia was applied in the Middle Ages to the land which lay along the eastern shore of the Baltic, and was the home of a heathen and Slav tribe called Prussians. In the thirteenth century the Teutonic Knights, one of those military orders which abounded in the age of chivalry, undertook to serve the cause of Christ by conquering the land and converting the inhabitants to Christianity. The enterprise was successful. Either the Prussians accepted the cross or were butchered and replaced by German colonists; and the Grand Master of the Knights, as their chief was called, became a great potentate and ruled over a large territory. But his glory did not last long. The land of the order bordered upon Poland, frequent wars took place with that great kingdom, and at last the Knights were defeated and had to accept an ignominious peace (Treaty of Thorn, 1466). The king of Poland divided their territory into two parts, East Prussia and West Prussia; while keeping West Prussia absolutely for himself, he gave back East Prussia to the Knights as a fief of the Polish crown. Thus West Prussia disappeared for the present in the kingdom of Poland, but East Prussia continued to have a separate and interesting history. In the sixteenth century, at the time of Luther, the Grand Master Albert, a

scion of the House of Hohenzollern, became a Protestant, broke up the order, and converted East Prussia into a duchy with himself as hereditary duke. His family continued to rule till 1618, when it became extinct, and the duchy fell, as we have seen, to the Hohenzollerns of Brandenburg. It was an important acquisition, but it came to the margrave on the old terms; that is, he held it as a fief of the Polish crown.

It was at this time that the Thirty Years' War broke out in Germany. The combined Hohenzollern possessions in Cleves along the lower Rhine, in Brandenburg, and in East Prussia, should have made the elector of that period, George William (1619-40), an important factor in the struggle; but as he was an exception to the Hohenzollern rule, and had neither honor, courage, nor intelligence, he vacillated between Protestants and Catholics, and lived to see his lands invaded, harried, and ruined by both. It was left to his son, Frederick William (1640-88), known as the Great Elector, to redeem his country and carry the name of Brandenburg for the first time into European politics.

When Frederick William succeeded to the throne (1640), the Thirty Years' War had reduced his lands to the last degree of misery. He straightway adopted a vigorous policy, expelled all foreign soldiery from his states, and in general displayed such energy that, when the Peace of Westphalia (1648) was signed, he received a number of valuable additions of territory—namely, the four secularized bishoprics of Halberstadt, Minden, Camin, and Magdeburg, and the eastern half of Pomerania on the Baltic. Brandenburg had a valid claim to all of Pomerania, but the claim could not be realized, as a great power, Sweden, took the western and better half for herself.

Frederick William found himself on his accession at the head of three separate groups of territories, Brandenburg

Mean rôle of Brandenburg during the Thirty Years' War.

Frederick William, the Great Elector.

Absolute sovereignty.

at the centre, with Cleves and Prussia to the west and east. Each of these territories constituted a distinct state with its own Diet, which not only voted but also collected the taxes; in other words, each province was ruled by the elector in strict coöperation with a representative body. Living in an age of absolutism, Frederick William soon resolved to make himself master, undermined and practically dissolved the Diets, and put himself in complete control of the revenues of his territories. Then he proceeded to form an army entirely dependent on himself, raised it by tireless efforts to 25,000 men, and became before his death a respected factor in the councils of Europe. Absolutism and the standing army are his chief contributions to the organization of the state.

Civilizing
labors of the
Great Elector.

But the Great Elector was no common tyrant who broke down opposition to his will in order to dispose at pleasure of the resources of his subjects. He considered himself the father of his country, called to reign in order to advance it along all lines of human endeavor. He encouraged industry and agriculture, built roads and canals to facilitate commerce, drained marshes, and called colonists from near and far in order to bring again under the plough the lands which the Thirty Years' War had turned into a wilderness. His most notable achievement in this respect is associated with the name of the Huguenots. When, by reason of Louis XIV.'s folly and bigotry, the Edict of Nantes was revoked (1685) and the Huguenots began to seek homes elsewhere, the Great Elector sent them a pressing invitation to come to him. Some twenty thousand joyfully responded, and were settled mainly around Berlin. With characteristic industry they turned the sand wastes around the northern capital into kitchen gardens, and by their intelligence communicated a powerful mental stimulus to all northern Germany.

With increased resources and an efficient army at his disposal, Frederick William was not likely to let any opportunity slip to increase his territory. As matters stood after the Peace of Westphalia, his chief rival was Sweden, ensconced in western Pomerania, only a few hours' march from Berlin. This alone would have sufficed to make Sweden an object of hatred and suspicion, even if there had not been the additional reason that Frederick William considered western Pomerania to be by right his own. Luckily for him Sweden had other enemies, more formidable than himself—Denmark, Russia, Poland, in fact the whole ring of the Baltic powers. The paramount position which Sweden had won was distasteful to them and they were ever ready to seize any opportunity for lowering her pride. In 1655 war broke out between Sweden and Poland, during which Frederick William, whose territories lay between the hostile states, was alternately coaxed and bullied by both. But he steered his course between the combatants with such unscrupulous dexterity that he came out of the war with profit and prestige, having forced the king of Poland to surrender the suzerainty of East Prussia. Henceforth the elector held that territory in full sovereignty.

His hostility to
Sweden.

A few years later he introduced his new army to the world and scored an astonishing triumph. The occasion was furnished by Louis XIV., who in 1672 fell upon Holland, resolved to crush that stout little republic. Frederick William together with the emperor rose in its defence, an interference that so enraged Louis that he persuaded the Swedes, who were bound to him by treaty, to invade Brandenburg. This unexpected move obliged the elector, who was operating on the Rhine, to hurry home. Approaching by forced marches and with great stealth, he fell in June, 1675, upon the enemy at Fehrbellin and beat him signally. Fehrbellin brilliantly opens the military annals of Branden-

War with
Sweden, 1675-
79.

burg, and what followed showed that the victory was not merely a lucky stroke, for the elector pursued the Swedes into Pomerania and conquered the province. But to his deep chagrin he got no good from his victory, for when Louis XIV. closed by the Treaty of Nimwegen (1678) the Dutch war, he stood faithfully by his ally, Sweden, and compelled the Great Elector to disgorge his Swedish conquests.

The Silesian dispute.

After this disappointment he tried to advance his interests in the province of Silesia, where the House of Hohenzollern had ancient claims to certain districts, to wit, to the four duchies of Liegnitz, Brieg, Wohlau, and Jägerndorf. The province of Silesia belonged to the House of Hapsburg, and the emperor, who was the head of this House, refused to admit the validity of the Hohenzollern claims. As Hapsburg was more than Hohenzollern, and the emperor counted for more than the elector, the claimant got no satisfaction until the time came when the emperor, weary of the unfruitful dispute, declared his willingness to compromise. In 1686 he induced Frederick William to surrender, in return for the district of Schwiebus in Silesia, all his presumptive rights in that province. But the emperor, who was Leopold I., played a double game. While he was openly negotiating this arrangement with the elector, he was secretly persuading the elector's son, who was not on good terms with his father, to promise to give back Schwiebus on his accession. Two years later Frederick William died (1688), and his son Frederick, who succeeded him, had to live up to the bargain, but could and did maintain with much show of reason that the return of the purchase money revived his unsettled claims. This Silesian incident is of importance because it turned up again some fifty years later, when the punishment for the trickery of the Emperor Leopold was visited a hundred-fold upon an innocent successor.

The Elector Frederick (1688-1713) was a very different man from his solid, practical father. Weak and deformed from birth and incapable of mental application, he showed throughout his life that he cared much more for the pleasures of the court than for the duties of his office. Nevertheless, his reign is made memorable by the fact that he won for the elector of Brandenburg the new title of king in Prussia. As Frederick was a vassal of the Empire, the title could be assumed only with the consent of the emperor, who granted it after long delay and with much reluctance, as payment for a loan of troops in the impending War of the Spanish Succession. On January 18, 1701, the ceremony of coronation took place at Königsberg, the capital of East Prussia, and henceforth the Elector Frederick III. of Brandenburg was known by his higher title of King Frederick I. in Prussia.¹ The title king in Prussia was adopted in preference to that of king of Brandenburg, because as king of Brandenburg he would still be a vassal, whereas drawing his royal title from Prussia, which was not part of the Empire and was subject to no one, his crown would have an added lustre. The name Prussia was henceforth used as a common designation for all the Hohenzollern states, and gradually drove from common usage the older designation, Brandenburg.

The elector of Brandenburg becomes king in Prussia.

Frederick's successor, King Frederick William I. (1713-40), is a curious reversion to an older type. He was the Great Elector over again, with all his practical good sense and love of administrative detail, but without his genius for diplomatic business or his political ambition. He gave his life to the organization of the state along the lines laid down

King Frederick William I. (1713-40), organizer and administrator.

¹ The first form of the title was as here, king *in* Prussia, in order to forestall any criticism from Poland, which, having incorporated West Prussia, might have protested against the title king *of* Prussia, as implying the sovereignty over all Prussia. Nevertheless, the simpler form, king of Prussia, came before long into general use.

by his famous ancestor, carrying to an efficiency unrivalled in his day the army and the administration. By close thrift he managed to raise his standing army to some 80,000 men, which put little Prussia in military matters in a class with the great states of Europe. And what troops they were! An iron discipline moulded them into the most precise military engine then to be found in Europe, and a corps of officers which did not buy its commissions, as everywhere else at that time, but was appointed strictly on merit, applied to it a trained and devoted service. In his civil administration also he built upon the foundation of the Great Elector. The grandfather had established the unity of the state by breaking down the local authorities, but it was left to the grandson to create a body of professional civil servants who administered the state directly under the king. The highly centralized administration of the Prussia of to-day, which with all its obvious defects, such as excessive "red tape," is still a model in its way, may be set down to the credit of King Frederick William I.

He acquires
the better part
of Swedish
Pomerania.

For these two creations of an army and a civil service Frederick William holds a high place as a domestic king. In foreign affairs he did not do so well, being unsuited for the delicate transactions of diplomacy by his rough, blustering temper. However, the good fortune which had enabled almost every one of his ancestors to accumulate some new territory, continued to attend him, since he added a part of Swedish Pomerania to the Prussian crown. The opportunity was furnished by the downfall of Charles XII. at Pultava (1709). While he was stubbornly and stupidly lingering in Turkey, his Baltic neighbors appropriated his territories, and Frederick William, in order not to be left out in the cold, sent an army of occupation into Pomerania. Of course on his return the Swedish lion stood at bay against his aggressors; but when he died in 1718 the government

hastened to come to terms with the victors and ceded to Prussia the mouth of the Oder with the port of Stettin. The new territory was small, but its position made it invaluable to the commercial development of the Prussian state.

This sturdy king, who has left such solid memorials behind him, made himself, through some of the strangest eccentricities which have ever characterized a human being, the laughing-stock of Europe. His conception of his office was a curious compound of Biblical patriarch and modern drill-sergeant. He had his eye upon everybody and everything. If he suspected a man of being wealthy, he would compel him to build a fine residence to improve the looks of the capital. He had a particular abhorrence of idleness; the very apple-women, while waiting in their booths for customers, were ordered to do some useful knitting, and the police were empowered to pick up any random loungee they found and put him to social service in the army. But perhaps his wildest eccentricity was his craze for tall soldiers. At Potsdam, his residence some miles from Berlin, he established a giant guard, for which he gathered recruits from all parts of the world. He petted and coddled his giants like a sentimental father, and was so completely carried away by his hobby that he, who was thrifty to the point of avarice, offered enormous prices in all markets for tall men, and did not scruple to capture them by force when they refused to enlist.

His eccentricities.

This unpolished northern bear naturally kept his elegant neighbors in convulsions of laughter by his performances. On one occasion, however, his eccentricity threatened to end not in laughter but in tears. The king's son and heir, Frederick, known afterward as the Great, was a self-willed, careless fellow, who was drawn much more to books and music than to soldiering, and grew up in all respects the very opposite of his bluff, practical father. Parent and son

His conflict
with the crown
prince.