On the Logic of Autocracy and the Plasticity of History: The Case of Frederick William I, King of Prussia

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You may be wondering why an American audience should be interested in a European monarch of the eighteenth century – a man most of you have hardly ever heard of, king of a country that does not even exist anymore because it was wiped off the map in 1947. However, it seems to me that the history of Frederick William I of Prussia (1688-1740) offers the potential for general insights beyond his specific case, since much of what is going on these days reminds me of premodern phenomena. Historical analogies can be illuminating because they enable us to look at our own time from a more detached perspective.

First, the case of Frederick William I allows certain insights into the social logic of autocracy and the autocratic personality in general – despite the huge differences between the eighteenth century and the present, which I do not underestimate. Secondly, the so-called Soldier King [*Soldatenkönig, Roi-Sergeant*] is an exemplary figure for demonstrating the plasticity of historiography and the suggestive power of retrospective rationalization.

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A person who rejects the social conventions of his time and whose nonconformity openly questions what contemporaries take for granted will usually be excluded, at best condescendingly smiled at, at worst persecuted or declared insane; he becomes either a harmless eccentric or a rebel and may end up in a hospital or in prison. What is especially interesting is what happens when such an outsider himself gets into the position of a ruler. He is then either domesticated by his new role and adjusts to the societal expectations, or – and this is presumably the rarer case – he retains his nonconformity and even makes it the new norm. This is what happened in Frederick William's case.

In the following, I will first briefly illustrate the normative disruption that the king foisted on his realm. Secondly, looking at his childhood, I will show that this disruption was an obsessive and in part consciously provocative act of defiance, a kind of culture war against the contemporary elites. In the third section, I will trace the dialectical relationship between omnipotence and impotence, taking the significant case of the Western provinces of Cleves and Mark as an example. Fourth, I will briefly analyze in how far the king's favorite played the role of a shadow ruler. In the fifth section, I will briefly sketch how contemporaries judged the king. And finally, I will analyze his posthumous historical transformation and show how a personality who was considered a psychopath by the people around him turned into "the educator of the German nation to Prussianhood."[2]

I. Disruption

Frederick William I began his reign with a bang.[3] On the second day after his father's death in 1713, he withdrew to his hunting lodge Wusterhausen, accompanied only by a few confidants – it was strictly forbidden to follow him there – and set about organizing everything according to his own ideas. This new arrangement essentially consisted of an unprecedented excess of downsizing,

2 Carl Hinrichs, *Friedrich Wilhelm I., König in Preußen. Bd.1: Jugend und Aufstieg* (Hamburg, 1941). – On Frederick William I, see: Johann Gustav Droysen, *Friedrich Wilhelm I. König von Preußen* (=*Geschichte der Preußischen Politik,* IV. Theil, 2. Abt.), (Leipzig, 1869-1870); Otto Hintze, *Die Hohenzollern und ihr Werk* (Berlin, 1915); Friedrich von Oppeln-Bronikowski, *Der Baumeister des preußischen Staates: Leben und Werk des Soldatenkönigs Friedrich Wilhelms I.* (Jena, 1934); Jochen Klepper, *Der Vater: Roman eines Königs* (Stuttgart, 1937); Wolfgang Venohr, *Der Soldatenkönig: Revolutionär auf dem Thron* (Frankfurt am Main / Berlin, 1. Aufl. 1988, several further editions until 2017); Friedrich Beck, Julius H. Schoeps, eds., *Der Soldatenkönig: Friedrich Wilhelm I. in seiner Zeit* (Potsdam, 2003); Frank Göse, Jürgen Kloosterhuis, eds., *Mehr als nur Soldatenkönig: Neue Schlaglichter auf Lebenswelt und Regierungswerk Friedrich Wilhelms I.* (Berlin, 2020); Frank Göse, *Friedrich Wilhelm I.: Die vielen Gesichter des Soldatenkönigs* (Darmstadt, 2020); Benjamin Marschke, *Frederick William I of Prussia: A Cultural Revolution* (forthcoming).

3 Carl Hinrichs, "Der Regierungsantritt Friedrich Wilhelms I." (1956), in id., *Preußen als historisches Problem* (Berlin, 1964), 91–137.

which also, but by no means exclusively, related to his father's oversized royal court. Frederick William abolished not only almost all court offices but also countless judicial and administrative posts and drastically reduced the salaries of the remaining civil servants. The court artists left the country; the court orchestra was dissolved. The chamber trumpeters became field trumpeters; the king had opera melodies, preferably by Handel, arranged as military marches; the *Lustgarten* was turned into a military parade ground. No detail was too minor not to fall victim to the cutbacks; even the funding for paper, sealing wax, pens, and ink was halved. Among the many radical measures was an order to completely reorganize the entire judiciary within one year in order to abbreviate trials.

It was a shock. The economic consequences of the measures were catastrophic for all classes. They deprived the country of cash and brought the credit system to a standstill. Many merchants, craftsmen, and artists fled the country in a hurry; bankruptcies increased; the real estate market collapsed; the city of Berlin alone is said to have lost several thousand inhabitants. Some of the measures were later quietly revised, while others, such as the judicial reform, came to nothing. But the essential change was irreversible.

The beneficiary of this unprecedented disruption was the military, which was demonstratively placed at the top of the social hierarchy and subsequently expanded to an extent that overshadowed even the army of the hegemonic monarchy of France.

II. Culture War

Perhaps most remarkable about all this is that the king violated traditional political, moral, economic, legal, and aesthetic norms right from the start in a demonstrative manner, fully aware of the provocation. Not only did he refer to himself as "tyrant" and his rule as "despotic" but later he also explicitly identified himself with historical tyrant figures such as Caligula, the Roman emperor notorious for his soldierly behavior and humiliation of the contemporary elites.

It is not without good reason that this transformation has been labelled a "cultural revolution" or "top-down revolution." It was, in fact, a kind of culture war that was directed against both the baroque court of his father, Frederick I, and the elegant salon of his mother, Sophie Charlotte. Frederick William's culture war can be regarded as a kind of revenge for the torments of his childhood and youth. His upbringing was a martyrdom for everyone involved – for the educators as well as the pupil. We have a fantastic source for this: the diary of his Calvinist tutor Jean Philippe Rebeur.[4] Rebeur repeatedly describes the pattern of compulsive behavior that Frederick William already displayed as a child and never changed for the rest of his life. He was helplessly subject to his affects, constantly wavering between opposite extremes. Attacks of raging madness (threatening his chamber staff, for example, "to have them all hanged and their heads chopped off") alternated regularly with emotional outbursts, deep contrition, and crying fits that lasted for hours. The crown prince kicked, strangled, rolled around on the floor, beat his head against the wall, threw a playmate out of a window, and drew his rapier on his teacher, but also on himself, only to beg for proof of love a moment later. The beloved tutor suddenly and unexpectedly died in 1703, when the crown prince was fifteen, and was never replaced. Frederick William fell seriously ill for several weeks; the court physicians could not find a physical cause.

The older Frederick William grew, the more he displayed a demonstrative truculence toward the norms of his environment, such as discipline and demeanor, moderation, loyalty, etc. His mother was deeply worried and attested her son boundless avarice and a complete lack of empathy, in short: a "vicious heart."[5] One sought in vain to teach him the virtues of a good ruler and *honnête homme*: magnanimity, mildness and mercy, control of affects, but also politeness and gallantry toward the female sex.

According to his tutor's testimony, Frederick William especially hated the frivolous roles expected of him on the courtly stage. The crown prince, with his angelic curls, delicate white skin, high voice, and his strikingly feminine good looks, had, for instance, been

4 Heinrich Borkowski, ed., "Aufzeichnungen von Johann Philipp von Rebeur über seine Tätigkeit als Informator Friedrich Wilhelms I.: Vom Mai 1697 bis Januar 1701" *Hohenzollern-Jahrbuch* 8/1904: 214–230; 9/1905: 155-168.

5 Queen Sophie Charlotte to Henriette von Pöllnitz, in Jean-Pierre Erman, ed., *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de Sophie Charlotte Reine de Prusse* (Berlin, 1801), 183-4.

Figure 1. Anthoni Schoonjans, *Crown Prince Frederick William as David*, oil on canvas, 1702. Schloss Charlottenburg.

obliged to perform as the biblical David or even as Cupid and had been disgusted by these roles. There was a fierce conflict between the norms of his religiously strict Calvinist tutor and the culture of gallantry and intellectual refinement at his mother's salon, a conflict that apparently overwhelmed the child. His tutor was very successful in just one respect: in inculcating in the Crown Prince a desperate fear of a merciless, wrathful God. Consequently, throughout his life he hated everything connected with the spheres of his mother and his father.

When Frederick William became king at the age of 24, he divested himself of what had tormented him in his youth. From one moment to the next, he saw himself placed in the position of being able to avenge himself for all the past mortifications by turning the uncourtly, rude habitus for which he had been humiliated and punished as a child – namely, the physical and mental attitude of the lower military ranks – into the new norm. For the same reason, he replaced the diffuse gender identity of his youth with a pointedly masculine, homo-social – and at the same time homophobic – habitus.[6]

6 Benjamin Marschke, "Competing Post-Baroque Masculinities. Pietist Masculinity and Prussian Masculinity in the Early Eighteenth Century," in Pia Schmidt, ed., *Gender im Pietismus. Netzwerke und Geschlechter-Konstruktionen* (Halle, 2015), 197–210.

As king, he staged the rituals of the aristocratic and scholarly cultures in grotesque parodistic distortions in order to lead them literally *ad absurdum*. Thus a court jester (so called *Lustiger Rat*, Jolly Councilor) was appointed president of the Royal Academy of Sciences, for example, and awarded the most prestigious titles and honors of the time. Or a distinguished law professor had to discuss the foolishness of his own profession before the assembled university. All of the rituals and requisites of the social order became objects of grotesquery. In this way the king blatantly violated the noble concept of honor which forbade ridiculing those weaker than oneself – since everyone was weaker than the sovereign. What made Frederick William's case special was that the king himself denigrated the social order to which he owed his own legitimacy.

III. Omnipotence and Impotence

Right at the beginning of his reign, the king introduced a completely new style of communication that went against the principles of premodern ruling practice. Princes were traditionally dependent on a certain degree of voluntary acceptance, loyalty, and cooperation on the part of the estates – more precisely, the nobility and the communal elites. Rule had a responsive character; the ruler had to listen to the concerns of "the country" and respond to them – simply because he was dependent on the support of the estates. There were institutionalized participation procedures for this type of responsive governance: assemblies of estates, councils, judicial colleges, etc. A good prince had to abide by the "rights and liberties of the country," which he invoked by oath at his ascension to the throne. He had to be accessible (if only in his own best interest) and listen to advice and complaints.

Frederick William I ignored this basic principle of consensual rule. Most of the time he isolated himself from Berlin in Wusterhausen, surrounded only by a few selected confidants, not accessible to delegates of the estates, foreign envoys, or even his own

ministers. Communication with the authorities in the capital and the provinces took place primarily in the form of the dreaded written orders from the solitude of his study. Administration was to function according to the military model of command and obedience. Frederick William stated this, for example, in a cabinet decree written by his own hand in his personal idiosyncratic orthography (1714): "They shall dance to my tune or the devil take me. I will have them hanged and roasted like the tsar and treat them like rebels. If I order an officer to do something, he will obey. But the damn ink-shitters think themselves superior and will not obey me. I will scorch and burn them like the tsar and deal with them like a tyrant."[7]

I would like to illustrate this autocratic pattern by one significant example, the case of Cleves-Mark, two provinces on the Lower Rhine, which were characterized by a high level of urbanization, lively trade, and proto-industrial labor. In order to better exploit the resources of these territories, Frederick William first disempowered the assemblies of estates there and abolished the communal autonomy, i.e. the core of the territories' "constitution," which he himself had confirmed when he had ascended to the throne.[8] This paved the way for increasing tariffs and a new consumption tax, *Akzise*, that was levied on all trade goods at the city gates. However, these measures soon proved disastrous for trade and commerce. Merchants looked for other trade routes, craftsmen emigrated, and the population shrank significantly. Even the highest royal tax authority had to admit that the complaints from the provinces were not unfounded and spoke out in favor of revising the new tax. They couldn't convince Frederick William, however. Quite the contrary – he threatened the critics among his ministers in an almost untranslatable rant: "I declare all who voted against the tax to be rogues, scoundrels, ignoramuses, dawdlers, useless

7 "Sie sollen nach meiner pfeiffe dance[n] oder der Deuffel hole mir. ich laße sie hengen und Brahten wie der Zahr und tractire sie wie Rebeller . . . wenn ich ein Officier was befehle so werde obediret aber die verfluchte Blagckscheißer wollen was voraus haben und mir nit obediren. ich will sengen und Brennen und [als] tirang mit Ihnen verfahren." *Acta Borussica: Denkmäler der Preußischen Staatsverwaltung im 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften. *Behördenorganisation und die allgemeine Staatsverwaltung Preußens im 18. Jahrhundert,* ed. Gustav Schmoller, Otto Krauske, Victor Loewe (Berlin, 1894-1912), vol. II, 130-131 (henceforth cited as *Acta Borussica*).

8 Hugo Rachel, *Die Handels-, Zoll- und Akzisepolitik Brandenburg-Preußens 1715-1740* (Acta Borussica, Reihe Handels-, Zoll- und Akzisepolitik, vols. II,1-2) (Berlin, 1922); Ilse Barleben, *Die Entwicklung der städtischen Selbstverwaltung im Herzogtum Kleve während der Reform Friedrich Wilhelms I.,* phil. Diss. Bonn 1931; Stefan Gorissen, "Preußischer Fiskalismus oder Kampf gegen kleinstädtische Korruption? Die preußische Akzise- und Städtepolitik in Kleve-Mark unter Friedrich Wilhelm I.," in Johannes Altenberend, Burkhard Beyer, eds., *Akzisestädte im preußischen Westfalen. Die Stadtrechtsverleihungen von 1719 und die Steuerpolitik König Friedrich Wilhelms I.* (Gütersloh, 2020), 127–150.

bread eaters".[9] When even the royal commissioner, who had carried out the reform in Cleves-Mark himself, spoke out against the further expansion of the tax, Frederick William rejected his objections with the argument: "Duram [the commissioner] has certainly been bribed"[10] – a charge for which there was no evidence at all.

But even Frederick William could not completely ignore the fact that taxes from Cleves-Mark were decreasing. Even an autocrat could not override elementary market mechanisms. In 1730, he therefore appointed a highly deserving civil servant, a certain Friedrich Wilhelm von Borck, as chief administrative official of the western provinces[11] and Borck immediately embarked on an intensive reform program. However, what had been destroyed over the previous fifteen years could not be repaired quickly. The ministers in Berlin, who received the complaints and knew best about the provinces' plight, did not dare to inform the king. They refused to forward an emergency report from Borck, although they confirmed to each other confidentially "that the people in Kleve are suffering badly. Therefore, it would be good if all the circumstances were confessed to His Majesty."[12]

But the officials' fear of royal disfavor was greater than their love of truth, and not without reason. For what was needed now was a scapegoat who could be blamed for the missing taxes. And that was none other than Borck. He now found himself accused of plundering the subjects, which served as an explanation for their economic misery. The king reacted to these accusations and dismissed Borck immediately without any justification. At the Berlin court, Borck was pitied as the victim of his subaltern officials who had plotted against him in order to exonerate themselves. Borck himself did not even know what he was being accused of. He wrote to the king that he did not want mercy, but only the opportunity to defend himself to restore his honor. The king, however, refused to listen to him, let alone launch an investigation or a proper trial. His friends implored Borck not to insist on his rights but rather to submit unconditionally, for otherwise he risked being thrown into prison or even being executed (as had already happened to other top officials before). An investigation was, in fact, launched

9 „ich declarire hiemit das alle die gegen die accis gesprochen geschrieben absonderl[ich] gegen vottiret vor schelm Hundesfötter Ignoranten Benhasen Dachdiebe unnütze Broht fresser halte". Rachel, *Die Handels-, Zoll- und Akzisepolitik*, vol. II, 30-31.

10 *Acta Borussica,* vol. IV,1, 302.

11 Wilhelm Stolze, "Zwei preußische Oberpräsidenten in Rheinland-Westfalen im 18. Jahrhundert (Friedrich Wilhelm von Borcke und Karl Freiherr vom Stein)," in *Studien und Versuche zur neueren Geschichte. Max Lenz gewidmet von Freunden und Schülern* (Berlin, 1910), 246–250.

12 *Acta Borussica,* vol. II, 418.

– not on behalf of the king but of Crown Prince Frederick –, which concluded that "everything that had been insinuated against him, Borck, consisted entirely of defamation and irresponsible distortion of the facts."[13] The king, however, never admitted his obvious injustice. It was left to his son and successor to fully rehabilitate the impeccable civil servant.

13 *Acta Borussica*, vol. II, 559.

I have presented the Borck case in such detail because it reveals a great deal not only about Frederick William's character but also about the logic of autocracy. The more direct power is concentrated in the ruler's person, the more isolated he becomes. This is the paradox of autocracy (Carl Schmitt). The autocrat insisted on deciding everything himself and disempowered all institutions that traditionally provided the center with bottom-up reports. Complaints were either ignored or the complainants were threatened. If the royal orders did not have the desired immediate effect, the messengers delivering the bad news had to fear being held accountable themselves. Critics risked a lot. As a result, the king lacked reliable information. This made it almost impossible to correct even evidently wrong decisions.

When the problems became obvious, the king's claim to omnipotence created a dilemma: he was confronted with his own powerlessness. For he expected the administration to function mechanically like a regiment on drill: namely, without delays, deviations or alternative suggestions. Concessions and compromises appeared to bend his absolute will as ruler. Like in the military, he wanted to enforce his will through excessive threats of punishment, which created an atmosphere of constant fear but did not lead to the countless orders actually being enforced against all of the obstacles in the real world. Obviously, the administration of a bundle of different provinces functioned differently from that of a drilled regiment. But the king demanded that a guilty party had to be found and punished, and he could withdraw his trust quite suddenly. It was precisely those whom the king himself had endowed with the greatest powers who were exposed to the greatest risk. This led to a climate of intimidation, superficial conformism, and mutual denunciation among the officials. The omnipresent

fear led to avoidance strategies and prevented obvious mistakes from being corrected.

The autocrat's fantasy of omnipotence and his experience of impotence were two sides of the same coin. For Frederick William himself did not actually believe that what he had ordered would be performed obediently. His relationship with almost everyone around him was characterized by mistrust and fear of conspiracy. In this way he paradoxically promoted exactly what he suspected and feared the most, namely that officials were concealing grievances and betraying him. If the autocrat claimed to judge, decide, and control everything himself, then he alone was to blame for the consequences of his decisions. However, this was out of the question for Frederick William, who rejected any accountability. Therefore the civil servants faced an insoluble dilemma: the king expected their blind obedience but shirked the responsibility that he, as an absolute monarch, should have borne for the consequences of his orders. Instead, he blamed the very people who had dared to warn him about the disastrous effects of his actions. As a result, what he achieved was the opposite of administrative efficiency and control. The autocratic regime of mistrust had a tendency to reinforce itself. The key to Frederick William's rule was fear – *terreur* – which is the principle of despotism according to Montesquieu's "Spirit of the Laws;" fear of the king in a double sense: the subjects feared the king, but the king also feared the subjects.

IV. Shadow Ruler

In striking contrast to Frederick William's general mistrust and disloyalty, there was one person whose advice he was willing to follow unconditionally, namely Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Dessau, the notorious field marshal with an almost mythical reputation as an invincible war hero, a prince who had transformed his small principality into a model absolutist territory, which, however, resulted in the impoverishment of his subjects and an Imperial Court case against him. Leopold, twelve years older than Frederick William,

Fig. 2. Jakob Samuel Beck, *Portrait of Leopold of Anhalt-Dessau*, oil on canvas, eighteenth century. Schloss Molsdorf.

was the latter's most admired and revered role model – comparable only to the Russian Tsar Peter the Great whom he also admired and imitated – not least because of his fearsome appearance: Leopold was tall, had thick moustaches and an intimidating "dark" face, which the king with his short stature, soft features, light-colored, beardless cheeks and blond curls tried in vain to resemble.

The unlikely friends were united in their passion for perfectly drilled, handsome, exceptionally tall men in dashing uniforms. Together they worked on reshaping the Prussian army into a perfect, geometric, mechanically functioning piece of art.[14] Leopold was the addressee of all of the king's actions; he was the only one with whom the king kept a confidential correspondence. His judgement was the king's highest standard, and the king desperately wished to be recognized by him and proudly presented his successes to him.

But the king was only too aware of the prince's superior military experience while he himself had only conducted one military campaign – with Leopold as supreme commander. He seems to have feared that his friend might challenge his authority and therefore occasionally emphasized his role as sovereign towards him. But this did not detract from Leopold's informal influence – on the

14 Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, "Ars militaris: The Art of War as Aesthetic Practice in the Eighteenth Century," in Annette Gerok-Reiter, Jörg Robert, Matthias Bauer and Anna Pawlak, eds., *Different Aesthetics. Principles – Questions – Perspectives* (Berlin / Boston, 2025), 151-174.

Fig. 3. Antoine Pesne, *Portrait of King Frederick William I*, oil on canvas, early eighteenth century, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen.

contrary. The king was far too keen to gain the general's recognition. In fact, he followed Leopold's plans in almost all measures, from the most substantial reforms to the minutest details, from the colonization of East Prussia, for example, to the cut of his regiment's uniforms. In cases of conflict, Frederick William took sides with Leopold and did not hesitate to stab his own authorities in the back. Leopold, for his part, knew how to use the king's military and economic passions to direct him. Frederick William fulfilled almost every wish of the prince and his family: for example, he enfeoffed him with extensive estates in Lithuania and set up a regiment for Leopold's six-year-old son.

The relationship between the king and Leopold of Anhalt-Dessau is characteristic of the logic of autocracy as well: the influence of an intimate confidant, on whom the ruler is emotionally dependent but who has no formal responsibility, is all the more effective the less formalized it is. The result is a parasitic exploitation of royal authority by the favorite.

One could enumerate a lot of further evidence. One could, for example, talk about the king enacting laws – such as bans on violent recruiting, selling offices, duels, or forced drinking – which he did not respect himself and which, in fact, he also expected his

own officials to violate – only to hold them responsible if their behavior caused public scandal. One could also talk about the king regarding the whole realm as his private "household," explicitly calling the subjects his property, and running the government as an economic endeavor. One could talk about the king impeding the establishment of a reliable and impartial bureaucracy by denying the officials adequate salaries and any kind of legal security. One could talk about the king's erratic foreign policy, which led to the opposite of what he intended. One could also talk about the king's vindictiveness. Not to mention the unprecedented scandal that he almost had his own son sentenced to death, but then, as is well known, had his son's friend executed as a substitute.[15]

15 See, for example, Timothy Blanning, *Frederick the Great, King of Prussia* (New York, 2015).

16 Ernst Consentius, ed., *Meister Johann Dietz erzählt sein Leben* (Ebenhausen, 1915), 309.

17 Damian Hugo Graf Schönborn-Buchheim, *Acta Borussica*, vol. I, 441ff.

V. Contemporaries

The question arises as to the psychic – or psychopathological– pattern of the autocrat's behavior. However, historians are not psychologists. As obvious as it may be from today's perspective to view the king as a textbook case of a narcissist, we must be careful not to judge historical figures by standards that were unknown in their own time. As historians, we must, instead, stick to the sources. Hence the question: How did his contemporaries judge Frederick William I? People from all social strata provide judgments – from craftsmen to foreign envoys, from newspaper correspondents to members of the royal family. After Frederick William I had acceded to the throne, we read, for example, that "truly, a miserable and gloomy time has broken out," that everyone suffered "from the distress always increasing here," or that in Berlin there was "no end of lamentation and complaining."[16] The emperor's envoy reported that the "confusion and displeasure" were "indescribable and everyone . . . whether farmer, burgher, courtier, from the civil or military estate [is] so desolate and so dissatisfied, that it can't be believed."[17] Fifteen years later, a traveler through Germany wrote "He [Frederick William I] perpetrates an abominable tyranny on his subjects. . . . . He places scoundrels in his courts, to whom he gives a salary of 200 florins, so that they sell justice in order to live. . . . Merchants do not dare to travel to his states because they

Fig. 4. Frederick William I, possibly a self-portrait as an old and a young man, 1736. Staatliche Schlösser und Gärten Potsdam-Sanssouci.

are plundered, insulted, and forced to serve in the army by the officers. Almost all tradesmen flee. . . . Poverty reigns in his states, and he himself behaves ridiculously." In short: "It is a misery to be a subject of this prince."[18] The author of the travelogue was none other than Montesquieu.

In other words: contemporaries perceived the king just as he provocatively staged himself, namely as a "tyrant" according to the European tradition, as expounded from Aristotle to Fénelon, whose "mirror of princes" had guided the crown prince's education. Frederick William fulfilled most of the criteria of a tyrant in an almost textbook manner – but, notably, not all of them. His chastity, his industriousness, his austerity, and his fear of God did not fit the classical pattern. These were the virtues that the Enlightenment authors of the later eighteenth century already praised in the king because they interpreted them as *bourgeois*.[19]

The ultimate motive of all the king's actions, as he himself put it, was "to be respected and admired by the whole world."[20] But exactly that was not in his power, and in this he failed completely. The most famous war hero of the time, Eugene of Savoy, ridiculed

18 Charles-Louis de Secondat Baron de la Brède et de Montesquieu, "Voyage de Gratz à La Haye" (*Oeuvres complètes*, présenté et annoté par Roger Caillois) (Paris, 1949), vol. II, 847f.

19 Benjamin Marschke, "A Conspicuous Lack of Consumption. Money, Luxury, and Fashion in King Frederick William I's Prussia (c. 1713-40)," in Mary Lindemann, Jared Poley, eds., *Money in the German-Speaking Lands* (New York / Oxford, 2017), 96–120.

20 Frederick William I, Instructions for his successor (1722). *Acta Borussica* vol. III, 445.

the bizarre Prussian army, in which height and beauty were more important than military experience. Emperor Charles VI simply called him a fool. Members of his beloved Royal Regiment deserted in large numbers. Subjects and foreigners as well as court officials suspected "that the king isn't right in the head."[21] The court physicians diagnosed that he intermittently showed symptoms of mental illness – as we know now, he suffered from porphyria, a severe hereditary disease with symptoms of mental aberration.[22] And even his closest confidants – including Leopold von Anhalt – wrote behind his back that he showed signs of insanity. A unique double portrait from 1736, four years before his death, painted by the king himself in a phase of severe illness, might be interpreted as a self-portrait of the old king having painted himself as a young man, with the empty eyes of the former as a hint to his suffering and despair.[23]

21 See, for example, Christophe Louis de Seckendorf, *Journal secret* (Tübingen, 1811), 70; 87-88.

22 Claus A. Pierach, Erich Jennewein, "Friedrich Wilhelm I. und Porphyrie," *Sudhoffs Archiv* 83/1 (1999): 50–66.

23 Generaldirektion der Staatlichen Schlösser und Gärten Potsdam-Sanssouci, ed., *Friedrich Wilhelm I. Der Soldatenkönig als Maler* (Potsdam, 1990).

VI. Posterity

Finally, we need to address a puzzling historiographical question: How did it come about that a monarch who blatantly trampled on the fundamental norms and values of his time and who, in the eyes of his contemporaries, exhibited the signs of a classic tyrant could mutate into "the German nation's educator to Prussianhood"?

One key explanation is the indisputable fact that Frederick William's disruptive measures changed the conditions of rule and assembled the resources of money and soldiers from which his son Frederick II ("Frederick the Great") could then profit in his wars of expansion. Frederick II's military success subsequently gave the father's actions a higher meaning. The son's glory overshadowed but also enhanced the image of the father, who now appeared as the necessary forerunner, the pioneer of Prussia's and later Germany's rise to power. Although his father had humiliated and traumatized him more than anyone else, Frederick II himself paved the way for this interpretation. In a historical narrative by his own hand, Frederick not only appeared as the one who outdid his father in military matters but also as the magnanimous concilia-

tor, resolving the radical father-son conflict in higher harmony.[24] As a smart historian of his own dynasty, he shaped his father's image for generations to come. The glorious son became the chief witness of the moral and political rehabilitation of his despotic father. The political and military success of the son retroactively lent his father's obsessions an ethical aim and purpose.

Another explanatory factor is that many Enlightenment authors of the late eighteenth century sympathized with Frederick William's thrift, industriousness, and anti-court, anti-ceremonial affects – by interpreting them as "bourgeois virtues." This, however, was a misunderstanding. The fact that Frederick William was a declared enemy of court culture and the nobility's privileges in no way made him a friend of the middle class; on the contrary, he despised the middle class just as much. Yet the opinion of the enlightened public about the Soldier King was ambivalent. Although they appreciated his austerity, they were repulsed by his predilection for physical violence, his lack of self-control, his misogyny, and all the other behavioral abnormalities that were difficult to square with enlightened ideals. In the age of the Napoleonic Wars, Frederick William's image was exaggerated in a nationalistic and anti-French manner – especially by the king's first professional biographer, a friend and admirer of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel named Friedrich Förster, who depicted Frederick William as "a king who built a solid dam against the further advances of the universal dominion of Frenchness in Germany." This national achievement, according to Förster, "justified everything that we will now have to report about arbitrariness, harshness, passion, and apparent barbarism under this government." Frederick William "should be less accused of despotism than the nation [should be accused] of a slavish attitude."[25] In other words: The effeminate nation needed a severe male master. It was not Frederick William who ruled but the *Weltgeist,* "world spirit", ruling through him.

There were critical voices, too – from liberals of the early nineteenth century such as Heinrich Heine to socialist critics of Prussian-German militarism in the early twentieth century such as Franz Mehring.[26] Against this kind of criticism, Prussian histo-

24 „Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la Maison de Brandebourg," in Johann David Erdmann Preuss, ed., *Oeuvres de Frédéric le Grand* (Berlin, 1846-1856), vol. I.

25 Friedrich Förster, *Friedrich Wilhelm I. König von Preußen*, 5 vols. (Potsdam, 1834-1835), vol. I, 2, 169.

26 Heinrich Heine, "Französische Zustände" (1832) (=*Werke und Briefe*, vol. IV) (Berlin / Weimar 2.ed., 1972); Franz Mehring, *Zur deutschen Geschichte bis zu der Zeit der Französischen Revolution 1789* (=Gesammelte Schriften, vol. III) (Berlin, 1963).

rians insisted on Frederick William's highest moral dignity. Otto Krauske, for example, co-editor of the monumental *Acta Borussica*, wrote in 1901: "Many traits that were previously seen as the whims of an unpredictable, arbitrary ruler had a deeper, moral origin."[27] And the eminent historian Otto Hintze stated in 1915: "We know that this system of government was not based on personal arbitrariness or despotic whim, but on a great political necessity," namely Prussia's rise to power and later the formation of the German nation state.[28] Historians thereby ignored that Frederick William himself had not had any notion of an abstract sovereignty of the state, not to mention German unification. The National Socialists, finally, explicitly celebrated Frederick William's deviance. What they esteemed about him should be obvious: contempt for the rule of law, rabid anti-intellectualism, the militarization of society, male bonding, paradoxically combined with homophobia, "necessary cruelty," the claim to "nothing but the blindest discipline."[29] As a "royal revolutionary," Frederick William was especially suited to be a role model for National Socialists. He allowed them to appropriate the glorious tradition of the Hohenzollern dynasty and at the same time to symbolize a revolutionary rupture. This was very much in line with the intended closing of ranks between the Nazis and the old conservative elites as it was staged at the "Day of Potsdam" in 1933, when Hitler shook hands with Hindenburg. Nationalist historians – not only Nazis – discovered in Frederick William "the same spirit that just now was in the process of building something great."[30] Carl Hinrichs, the acclaimed author of an unfinished biography of the king, wrote in the foreword to the first volume in 1941 that Frederick William laid "the origins of its [Germany's] feared and admired effectiveness, organization, order, discipline, and methodology — in short, its Prussian education."[31] Historians on the opposing side of the war saw this similarly: in 1941, a biography of Frederick William was published in New York with the title "The Potsdam *Führer*."[32]

But the comparison breaks down in one essential point: all his life, Frederick William showed no taste for wars of expansion – as is well known, these were first engaged in by Frederick II. To appro-

27 Otto Krauske, "Vom Hofe Friedrich Wilhelms I.," *Hohenzollern-Jahrbuch* 5 (1901): 173–201.

28 Hintze, *Die Hohenzollern und ihr Werk*, 282.

29 One example among many: Otto Weber-Krohse, "Friedrich Wilhelm, König in Preußen," *Nationalsozialistische Monatshefte* 5 (1934): 646-665, 758-774.

30 Oppeln-Bronikowski, *Friedrich Wilhelm I.*, 7.

31 Hinrichs, *Friedrich Wilhelm I.*, Vorwort.

32 Robert Ergang, *The Potsdam Führer: Frederick William I, Father of Prussian Militarism* (New York, 1941).

Fig. 5. Film still from *Der alte und der junge König*, dir. Hans Steinhoff, 1935. The scene shows Emil Jannings as Frederick William I and Werner Hinz as Crown Prince Frederick.

priate both kings for their own purposes, the National Socialists needed to dissolve the father-son conflict in harmony. It was no coincidence that when *Deka Film*, the production company founded by Josef Goebbels, made its very first propaganda film in 1935, the title was *Der alte und der junge König* [The Making of a King]. The film glorifies the son's absolute submission to the father, without whose brutal hardness the son could not have become "the Great." The Nazi daily newspaper *Der Völkische Beobachter* jubilated: "This is a film. The German film. Finally . . ."[33]

If the Prussian-German historians praised Frederick William as the man who taught the German people true Prussianhood, the Allied winners could take that literally after the war in 1947, when they wiped Prussia from the map on the grounds that "it had long been the bearer of militarism and reaction." In postwar Germany, suddenly no one wanted to know anything about such a continuity. Historians, however, repressed the memory of how energetically they themselves had contributed to this narrative of continuity. This is not the final chapter of the story though. It is not surprising that Frederick William is currently experiencing a certain renaissance among the new German Far Right. Professional historians tend to normalize him and warn against "critical exaggeration."[34] In my opinion, there is nothing to exaggerate, the sources are bizarre enough. Trivializing this king does not do him justice; it ignores what makes him interesting in the first place. I am convinced that his biography can teach us something about the logic of autocracy and about the power of historical post-rationalization and posthumous glorification. I would like to

33 *Der Völkische Beobachter*, February 7th, 1935.

34 See, for example, Frank Göse, Jürgen Kloosterhuis, eds., *Mehr als nur Soldatenkönig: Neue Schlaglichter auf Lebenswelt und Regierungswerk Friedrich Wilhelms I.* (Berlin, 2020); Frank Göse, *Friedrich Wilhelm I.: Die vielen Gesichter des Soldatenkönigs* (Darmstadt, 2020).

conclude with a quotation from the great Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt's *Reflections on History*:

> The crimes of the man, therefore, who bestows on a community greatness, power and glory, are condoned . . . but he must then continue to be great and realize that he will bequeath to his successors a fateful legacy, the necessity of genius, if what has been won by force is to be preserved until the world regards it as a right. Here everything depends on success. . . . Yet from the fact that good came of evil, and relative happiness of misery, we cannot in any way deduce that evil and misery were not, at the outset, what they were.[35]

35 Jacob Burckhardt, *Reflections on History,* transl. M.D. Hottinger (London, 1943), 198-199, 213. Burckhardt, who was a Swiss citizen and not a subject of the German Empire, could afford to turn down an appointment to the most prominent German professorship of history, the succession to Leopold von Ranke at Berlin University, in 1872.

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