

August II (“the Strong”) of Poland with Frederick William I (“the Soldier King”) in 1728 (c. 1730)

Abstract

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the German territorial princes endeavored to strengthen their principalities by taking advantage of the chaos caused by the Thirty Years War, the campaigns of Louis XIV, and the struggle against the invading Ottomans. The two rulers shown here were radically different in terms of temperament but equally tenacious in the pursuit of aggrandizement. August II (“the Strong”) of Poland (left) was given to a restless and lavish lifestyle. In 1694, he succeeded his brother as Elector of Saxony (having done so under the name Frederick August I of Saxony). Three years later, after converting to Catholicism to ensure both Polish and Austrian support, he convinced the Polish nobility to elect him king of Poland. (It should be noted that the venture also required the payment of substantial bribes.) In 1706, he lost the Polish crown during the Second Northern War but managed to reassert his rule there in 1709 – with thanks being owed, in no small part, to Prussian support.

Frederick William I (“the Solider King”) (right) was averse to pomp and squandering. He made few territorial gains but was more successful than August in achieving an absolutist form of government. Embracing the Pietistic virtues of duty and hard work, he created a greatly expanded, highly disciplined army and an efficient, frugal bureaucracy. To raise state revenues, he established mercantilist policies and fostered internal colonization (e.g., by settling the Salzburg Protestants in East Prussia). Despite his epithet, he avoided – apart from besieging the Swedes in Stralsund in 1715 – all warfare, sparing himself and his realm its state-crippling burdens.

Source



Source: Copperplate engraving by Lorenzo Zucchi (1704-79) after a painting by Louis de Silvestre the Younger (1675-1760), c. 1730. Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

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