

Frederick II (“the Great”) on the Eve of the Battle of Leuthen (November 28 and December 3, 1757)

Abstract

On the eve of the battle of Leuthen, Frederick’s situation seemed desperate, and he dispatched the following message to Minister Finckenstein. It was one of several “military testaments” to his risk-embracing warfare. The dramatic address to his officers, reported in an 1802 publication, is characteristic of Frederick’s rhetoric and mentality. On December 4, 1757, Frederick attacked the Austrians and their allies at Leuthen, where his forces prevailed on the battlefield, despite his adversaries’ considerable numerical advantage.

Source

November 28, 1757

[...]

I have issued orders to my Generals concerning all matters which must be done after the battle, whether the fortune of it be good or evil. For the rest, as concerns myself, I wish to be buried at Sans Souci, without display or pomp, and at night. I desire that my body should not lie in state, but that I should be taken there without ceremony and buried at night.

As to public affairs, the first thing should be that an order should be issued to all Commanding Officers to swear allegiance to my brother. If the battle is won, my brother is nevertheless to send a messenger to France to carry the news, and at the same time, to negotiate terms of peace, with full powers.

My will is to be opened, and I discharged my brother of all the money legacies in it, because the desolate condition of his finances will make it impossible for him to fulfill them. I commend to him my aides-de-camp, especially Wobersnow, Krusemark, Oppen and Lentulus. This is to be taken as a military testament. I commend all my domestic household to his care.

December 3, 1757

[...]

“Gentlemen! I have had you brought here, firstly, in order to thank you for the loyal services that you have rendered to the Fatherland, and to me. I recognize them with feelings of deep emotion. There is hardly one among you who has not distinguished himself by great and most honorable feats. Relying on your courage and experience, I have prepared a plan for the battle that I shall, and must, wage tomorrow. I shall, against all the rules of the art, attack an enemy which is nearly twice as strong as ourselves and entrenched on high ground. I must do it, for if I do not, all is lost. We must defeat the enemy, or let their batteries dig our graves. This is what I think and how I propose to act. But if there is anyone among you who thinks otherwise, let him ask leave here to depart. I will grant it him, without the slightest reproach.”

At this point Frederick paused. There was a dead silence, broken, we are told, only by some sobs; but no one moved. Frederick went on:

“I thought that none of you would leave me; so now I count entirely on your loyal help, and on certain

victory. Should I fall, and be unable to reward you for what you will do tomorrow, our Fatherland will do it. Now go to the camp and tell your regiments what I have said to you here, and assure them that I shall watch each of them most closely. The cavalry regiment that does not charge the enemy at once, on the word of command, I shall have unhorsed immediately after the battle and turned into a garrison regiment. The infantry regiment which begins to falter for a moment, for whatever reason, will lose its colors and its swords, and I will have the braid cut off its uniforms. Now, gentlemen, farewell: by this hour tomorrow we shall have defeated the enemy, or we shall not see one another again.”

Source: C.A. Macartney, ed., *The Habsburg and Hohenzollern Dynasties in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, in *Documentary History of Western Civilization*. New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1970, pp. 351-52. Introduction, editorial notes, chronology, translations by the editor; and compilation copyright © 1970 by C.A. Macartney. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

Source of original German texts: Gustav Berthold Volz, ed., *Der Große König, Werke, Briefe und Gespräche*. Berlin: Verlag von Reimar Hobbing, 1923, pp. 108ff; and Gustav Berthold Volz, ed., *Die Werke Friedrichs des Großen*, vol. 3, *Geschichte des Siebenjährigen Krieges*. Berlin: Verlag von Reimar Hobbing, 1913, pp. 224-25.

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