Frederick II ("the Great"), Notes to Himself on the Invasion of Silesia (1740)

Abstract

These reflections, jotted down in French soon after the unexpected death of Austrian Emperor Charles VI, display the ruthless realism of Frederick's political thinking about international relations and war. They also convey his cynicism about the power of money and economic interests to prevail in the minds of politicians and lesser rulers over the stark *raison d'état* (rationally determined state interest) that he took as his guiding light. Charles VI's unexpected death (and the lack of a male successor to the imperial office) gave Frederick a pretext to seize the rich Austrian province of Silesia. He thereby overrode his father's earlier ratification of Charles' "Pragmatic Sanction," by which the principal German and European powers accepted the succession, following Charles's eventual death, of his daughter, Maria Theresa. (In 1745, her husband, Francis Stephen of Lorraine gained election as German Emperor, while she wielded great power in her own right as ruler of the Habsburgs' hereditary possessions in Austria, Bohemia, and Hungary, and acted *de facto*, in concert with her husband and later her son Joseph II, as German Empress.)

Source

Silesia is the part of the Imperial succession on which we have the best claims, and that which would suit the House of Brandenburg best; it is right to maintain our claims and to seize the opportunity of the Emperor's death to take possession of the areas concerned.

The superiority of our troops over those of our neighbors, the promptitude with which we can act, and, in sum, the advantage which we possess over our neighbors, is complete, and gives us, in an unforeseen occasion such as this, an infinite superiority over all other European Powers. If we wait to act until Saxony and Bavaria have made the first hostile moves, we shall be unable to prevent Saxony from enlarging her territory, which, however, is entirely contrary to our interests, and in that case we have no good pretext. But if we act at once we keep Saxony down, and by preventing Saxony from acquiring remounts we make it impossible for her to make any move.

England and France are at loggerheads; if France interferes in the affairs of the Empire, England can never allow it, and in this way, each of the two opposed parties will always offer me an advantageous alliance. England can never be jealous of my acquisition of Silesia, since that can do her no harm, and she can, on the contrary, hope for advantages in the present state of her affairs, which require alliances.

Holland will look on indifferently, especially if one guarantees the merchants of Amsterdam the capital which they have invested in Silesia.

If we fail to reach satisfactory agreement with England and Holland, we shall certainly be able to do so with France, which in any case will be unable to thwart our designs and will regard with satisfaction the blow to the Imperial House.

There remains Russia. None of the other Powers of which I have spoken are in a position to give us trouble; Russia alone might be able to cause difficulties for us.

Next Spring, we shall not find anyone in our way; thus, if Russia wants to attack us, she can be assured that she will have the Swedes in her rear, so she would be putting herself between the hammer and the

anvil. If the Empress is alive, the Duke of Courland, who has very rich estates in Silesia, will court my favor in order to keep them; furthermore, we must shower down among the leaders of the Council the rain of Danae, which will make them think as we want. If the Empress is dead, the Russians will be so occupied with their internal affairs that they will have no time to think about foreign questions; and in any case, it is not impossible to procure the entry into Petersburg of an ass with a load of gold.

I conclude from all this reasoning that we must put ourselves in possession of Silesia before the winter, and negotiate during the winter; then we shall always find cards to play, and we shall negotiate successfully when we are in possession, whereas if we act otherwise, we shall sacrifice our advantages, and we shall never get anything out of simple negotiation, or else the others will impose burdensome conditions on us, for granting us trifles.

Source of English translation: 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. 326-28. 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 French text: J.C. Droysen et al., *Politische Correspondenz Friedrichs des Grossen* [*Political Correspondence of Frederick the Great*]. Berlin: Duncker, 1879-1919, vol. I, pp. 90-91. [The notes appear here in the original French.]

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