

One Volk, One Reich, Many Fredericks: The “Great” Frederick the Second during the Third Reich

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Abstract

The Nazi regime politicized history by mobilizing Germany’s past for their present purposes. This article examines the ways in which the Nazis instrumentalized the public image of Frederick II—“the Great” eighteenth-century Prussian monarch—across the existence of their political movement. It argues that the Nazis mustered his legacy when they felt insecure with their own legitimacy, but they launched past him when they felt able to soar on their own. At stake was the Nazi sense of self-confidence in their public support: more appeals to Frederick at the start and finish of their reign meant the German people needed convincing to follow the Nazis to whatever ends. Fewer appeals from 1935 to 1937, during the middle of the Nazi reign, meant their regime felt most secure after they had consolidated power at home but before they launched their racial war of extermination abroad. From this case study, we not only understand the instrumentalization of history for political purposes in one of modern history’s most infamous dictatorships, but we also forge a new mechanism for measuring how political regimes express self-doubt and self-security about their own popular legitimacy.

Keywords

Nazism, Second World War, politics of history, Frederick the Great, *Geschichtspolitik*

The 1919 Treaty of Versailles mandated Danzig was to remain a free city surrounded by an independent Poland. Twenty years later, the prospect of incorporating Danzig’s Germans into Nazi Germany provided Hitler with the impetus for a German attack. Eighteen days after the start of the invasion, Hitler spoke before the Danzig crowds to mark the speed of Germany’s victory: “Today you have the Germany of Frederick the Great before you” (de Sales 1941, 704).¹ With all his own unprecedented successes, why did Hitler claim to revert to the past?

1 For the original German, see Jay Luvaas’s first chapter of *Frederick the Great on The Art of War*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999), 34.

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The answer lies in the importance of mobilizing the past for political struggles in the present, especially when politicians feel public support might falter without reinforcements from history itself. While the Nazi project was laced with internal contradictions, a central one for this investigation was a paradox explored in Ian Kershaw's work, *The 'Hitler Myth: Image and Reality in the Third Reich'*: despite being the quintessence of totalitarianism, the Nazi regime ultimately relied on popular support, or at least complicit acquiescence. Hitler had officially come to power in a democratic system, and he depended on the explicit and tacit approval of the German population throughout his rule (Kershaw 1987, 1-10, 42-7). He was not—nor did he seek to be—a divine-right monarch. Rather, he was the “People’s Chancellor,” and his movement needed to mobilize modern means to legitimize his modern power (Kershaw 1987, 50). Ironically, the Nazis exhumed their modern means from the mausoleum of German history.

This paper studies the Nazi construction of Frederick “the Great” to fit their immediate political needs. How did the Nazis appropriate and manipulate images of an “enlightened monarch” to justify their destructive political ends? How and why did these constructed images of Frederick shift over the lifespan of the Nazi movement in accordance with changing circumstances? Such questions draw inspiration from Robert Gerwarth's *The Bismarck Myth: Weimar Germany and the Legacy of the Iron Chancellor*, a foundational work in the field of *Geschichtspolitik* [politicization of history]. His monograph showed the politicization of Bismarck iconography and images in civil discourse, national monuments, and public memory during Germany's first Republic. In this paper, I extend Gerwarth's method to an earlier Prussian figure, King Frederick II, within the context of Germany's most infamous regime, the Nazi Third Reich (Gerwarth 2005, xii, 5, 9-10). Doing so allows us to reveal new aspects not of Frederick—as this was never really about him—but of the Nazis and their *Geschichtspolitik*.

In their efforts to convert monarchical memory into political capital, the Nazis faced foundational tensions of their own making: the Nazis' needs were expedient and thus inherently ever shifting; urgently synchronized in any moment and thus inherently dynamic diachronically; proactive to “get ahead” of the narrative released to the public and thus inherently reactive to events on the ground, especially as events increasingly eluded their control. Thus, the Nazis constructed and relied upon multiple manifestations of Frederick, and they used these different forms to fit their situational political needs. I argue that, in general, the Nazis employed Frederick as a legitimizing agent when they sensed their overall hold on power was precarious. However, the Nazis

presented their movement as pushing past Frederick when they felt secure enough to frame themselves as the pinnacle of German history.

To substantiate this claim, I present a narrative in three parts. The first covers the years leading up to and just after the Nazi assumption of power in 1933, when Nazi rhetoric mobilized Frederick to discredit their opponents, legitimize Hitler as Frederick’s heir in their coagulating *Führerprinzip* [leadership principle], and to make the rabble-rousing Nazis palatable to conservative Prussian military *élites* (de Sales 135-6; Toland 1976, 320-1; Kershaw 48-56). In the second part of the narrative, from 1935 to 1937, the Nazis downplayed Frederick as the pre-war popularity of Nazism allowed Hitler to eclipse Frederick as the new horizon of German history. But that eclipse was partial and brief, as Frederick’s shadow was intentionally preserved as a penumbra, relegated to the margins but maintained in case of later need. The third section reveals that later need: from 1938 to 1945, the Nazis remobilized Frederick to legitimize increasingly reckless diplomatic and military decisions. In the wartime context, the Nazis morphed Frederick’s penumbra into a defunct *deus ex machina*.

At stake was nothing short of Nazis’ self-perception. Given their obsession with “the struggle,” they created so many of their own Sisyphean tasks. In this instance, the balance between relying on the “the old” to build “their new” Germany always had to be exact yet evolving. Hence, was it only ever elusive.

Part I: Frederick as Absolute Monarch, 1923-1934

Before and during the Nazi assumption of power, the Nazis deployed Frederick to cast aspersions on the Weimar Republic so as to legitimize Hitler during his rise. In the early 1920s, Adolf Hitler was a leading figure of the right-wing, fringe National Socialist German Workers’ Party. His earliest speeches referred to Frederick: in 1923, Hitler proclaimed, “there might one day arise a Frederick the Great, a William I, and that democracy and a parliamentary regime might be sent to the devil” (de Sales 54). To him, the Weimar Republic was not capable of following whatever sort of historical trajectory the standouts from the Hohenzollern dynasty had established. Here in the Weimar context, inchoate but coagulating Nazi thought employed Frederick as a way to cast shame and illegitimacy on the reigning democratic system they so despised. It is important to note that at this point Hitler did not explicitly claim to be the rightful heir to Frederick’s legacy, but he did boldly claim that his opponents were *not* to be viewed as the legitimate next step in German history.

It was in this context that Adolf Hitler was arrested in 1923 for his attempted Munich *Putsch* to overthrow the Republic. In prison, Hitler penned his

infamous manifesto, *Mein Kampf*, which contained musings on and appeals to Frederick. *Mein Kampf* showed that the Nazis used Frederick in limited ways in the 1920s. They only needed him to condemn the democratic regime, but they did not necessarily claim outright that Hitler was to be the next Frederick. On page 357 of his book, Hitler stated, “As long as, for example, the historical memory of a Frederick the Great has not died, a Friedrich Ebert is only able to create moderate astonishment. The hero of Sans Souci is to the former barkeeper of Bremen approximately like the sun is to the moon” (Hitler 1939 [1925], 357). Hitler intended to pull the legitimizing rug of the past out from under the Weimar Republic by condemning its leading politician as a dim reflection of Frederick’s shining glory. He further used Frederick to assault the Republic when he stated, “The father of a Frederick the Great could do that [defend the State], but the fathers of our Jewish variety of democratic parliamentary nonsense cannot do it.” Hitler weaponized the past to tear others down by juxtaposing his glorious image of Frederick with his antisemitic tropes that besmirched the current system (Hitler 894). In his manifesto, Hitler thus propagated the view that Frederick was the ideal leader whose benevolence put to shame what he saw as the indecisive pluralism of the Weimar Republic.

Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany on 30 January 1933, and he used Frederick’s memory in the opening of the Reichstag on 21 March. This opening ceremony became a commencement of sorts for Hitler’s role in public life (Kershaw 48-56). That Hitler chose a location other than the Reichstag building itself should come as no surprise in light of the Reichstag fire that had helped secure his rule. However, Hitler did not open the German legislature at Berlin’s Kroll Opera House, where the Reichstag met while its building was repaired. Rather, Hitler wanted the event in Potsdam because he wanted to assume power in the town so affiliated with Frederick and his palaces. Specifically, Hitler chose the Garrison Church as the location for the ceremony, for it was where Frederick II’s tomb lay (Toland 320-1)—in clear violation of Frederick’s own will (Asprey 1986, 634). Hitler made a speech inside the church, and President Paul von Hindenburg, the hero of the Great War, placed flowers upon Frederick’s tomb (Toland 320-1).

Here, Hitler presented himself as the rightful successor to Frederick’s legacy (de Sales 135-6; Toland 320-1; Kershaw 48-56). The unprecedented choice of opening the government in a church removed from the capital conveyed this momentous message. Not only was Hitler paying homage to the past by receiving his authority in such a space, but by extension, he was also arguing that he would continue the glorious aspects of Germany’s past.

While his pageant contained many aspects of a royal coronation, he was in fact appealing to the past to legitimize a different form of government from the past. Rather than claim royal birth and divine right, Hitler was still nominally bolstering popular sovereignty by opening the session of the Reichstag. His legal assumption of power showed his desire to have legitimacy from the people. He used the memory of a well-revered monarch to construct a sense of continuity with the past and thus garner popular support for his new government (Kershaw 1-10, 42-7, 55-6).

All of this pageantry glorifying Frederick was also an attempt to bind the German military *élites* to Hitler (de Sales 135-6; Toland 320-1; Kershaw 48-56). The professional military had regarded one of Hitler's paramilitary organizations, the notorious *Sturmabteilung* [Storm Troopers, SA], as undisciplined rabble-rousers lurking the streets and causing nothing but chaos (Kershaw 84-95; de Sales 135-6). The rumors of homosexuality among the SA's leaders also did not help their reputation in the eyes of the conservative, Prussian-trained heads of the German military (Kershaw 84-95). This staged presentation used Frederick to appease the conservative *élites* Hitler so desperately needed for his foreign policy ambitions. Hitler employed Frederick in this instance not only to make official his continuing of Frederick's historical legacy, but also to make his assumption of power more palatable to the conservatives with nostalgia for Prussia's past (de Sales 135-6). Interestingly, once Hitler achieved what he needed from Frederick, he allowed his own image to launch past that of his acquired predecessor.

Part II: Frederick as Eclipse, 1935-1937

During Hitler's birthday celebrations of 1936, propaganda minister Goebbels stated, "Never in the history of all time has one man united in his own person as he has the trust and feeling of belonging of an entire people" (Kershaw 79). From this instance, it seemed Frederick was someone who could be jettisoned to the past in order to propel Nazism to the apex of German history. Indeed, throughout this brief span of the Third Reich, the lack of references to Frederick in the official speeches of Hitler became almost conspicuous. Frederick's absence indicated a marked departure from the past, which was no longer needed to secure power from within nor to justify putting the Reich in danger from without. At least, not yet.

The marching fields in Nuremberg were to showcase the Nazi movement. Here the Nazis sought to manifest their idealized *Volksgemeinschaft* [People's Community]. During a youth rally in September of 1936, young folks

representing the future of the new Germany entered the arena bearing standards. The official report of the day's proceedings claimed:

Their [the youth's] march through Germany carrying the flag was an affirmation of the love and loyalty the whole German youth has for the *Führer*. They are the flags that were sanctified on the tomb of Frederick the Great, and before them a Hitler Youth carries the bloody flag... The moment the participants enter the stadium is a splendid experience for the participants in the Adolf Hitler March. They had carried their flags across country roads in all of Germany, through sun, rain and storm ("The Ceremony of the Hitler Youth at the 1936 Nuremberg Party Rally" 1936).

Rather than paying homage to Frederick on the former monarch's hallowed grounds in Potsdam, Hitler forced Frederick's symbols to come to him in Nuremberg ("Ceremony of the Hitler Youth"; Toland 320-1). The youth carried these standards all over Germany and then brought the flags to this unprecedented communal moment in German history. While the Nazis paid their respects to the past, they did so in the context of building up Nazism as the climax of Germany's past and present. Frederick's image appeared in this context as a relic of the past to be offered to Germany's new leader, now at his zenith of popularity, legitimacy, and stability ("Ceremony of the Hitler Youth").

The entrance of the German military at the same rally further illustrated the point. The record of the day's proceedings went into marked detail about the presentation of new standards for the army. The record stated:

To the tune of the "Frederick the Great March," the flag bearers march in, the musicians at the head, then three detachments each with 30 flags of the old army... The individual units carry their new flags... Then General Field Marshall von Blomberg steps to the microphone and greets his soldiers... "Soldiers! The Führer and Reich Chancellor gave the new Wehrmacht its flags on 16 March 1936. A holy tradition has been given new life. ("The Wehrmacht on the Zeppelin Field" 1936).

This staging of Nazi pomp was meant to mirror the historical trajectory Hitler hoped to disseminate. Frederick's Prussian past had been critical to getting to this point, but now Hitler himself had something new to offer Germany. The Nazis planned specifically for the soldiers to enter the rally while hearing military remnants from the Prussian past. At the rally, they were then

presented with all that was new about Hitler's Germany, encapsulated by the new Nazi military standards ("The Wehrmacht on the Zeppelin Field").

To be clear, the Nazis saw Frederick as an important figure in his past historical context. But that had been then, and this was now. Hitler now propagated the view that he himself was the "Greatest," trumping any previous historical precedents, who were now relegated back to their circumscribed place and time. Later at that same rally, Hitler made clear that the Nazi movement was the apex of the German historical trajectory when he stated:

Soldiers! You have come to this place in Nuremberg for the third time! For the first time, you carry the battle flag of the new Reich! For the first time you hold in your hands your new regimental flags! We see in this scene the transformation that Germany, our Germany, your Germany, has undergone. The transformation is the result of a vast work of educating our people, and no less work in every area of our national life ("The Wehrmacht on the Zeppelin Field").

Hitler expounded on the novelty that his movement presented to the German people. The soldiers had been coming here for three years, yet this year was the first one where the new Nazi banners were distributed. Only in the historical context of 1936 was Hitler comfortable claiming to be Germany's present and future.

Further visual demonstrations, or lack thereof, showed that the Nazis downplayed Frederick's image during this time. At the University of Heidelberg, the academic atmosphere was very conducive to Nazism, including (especially) its concept of a community founded on race and eventual territorial aggrandizement (Remy 2002, 1-11). In the winter of 1936, the University planned a celebratory memorial festival. This public display was meant to commemorate the hundred-and-fiftieth year of Frederick's death. Despite the planning, the event never took place. The exact details behind its cancellation may never be fully known. Frank Engehausen opined that the celebration of the school's five hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary trumped any concerns over Frederick (Engehausen 2006, 140). Regardless of the official reason for the University cancelling such a commemoration, the fact that it did not happen bolstered the assertion that this period saw Nazi Germany subsume Frederick's image.

Also at the University of Heidelberg, a graduate student named Hans Heimer Jacobs was studying German history with Professor Günther Franz (Wolgast 2006, 498). In 1936, he completed his dissertation: "Frederick the Great and the Idea of the Fatherland." Unfortunately for Jacobs, he was unable to get

this dissertation printed in any running historical journals. In fact, just after finishing this work, he was let go from his position as a low-level lecturer at the University of Heidelberg (Wolgast 498). These facts did not suggest that the content of his dissertation was the sole reason that the faculty dismissed him from the school. What was certain was that his work on Frederick did not salvage his academic career there. It thus appears that in the high-end world of academic scholarship, writing on Frederick at this time, as opposed to sowing racial ideas into the past, was neither popular nor deemed a career-making historical contribution. Frederick was to disappear behind the glimmer of Nazism, and scholars writing otherwise were not so successful.

An image underscored that Nazism had eclipsed Frederick. Because they were quotidian, postcards helped the Nazis curate insidious, ubiquitous messages. The image here was of a postcard from Berlin.² The card had a picture looking straight down Berlin's main boulevard, *Unter den Linden*. The postcard itself



showed no date but was from 1937, presenting the boulevard's appearance for Benito Mussolini's official visit to the Reich capital (for the date, see: Schulz 2024; "AK Berlin, *Unter den Linden in strahledem* [sic] *Lichterglanze, Hakenkreuzsäulen*" [*Unter den Linden* ablaze in radiant light, Swastika Columns]; Getty Images 2024). Presumably, the Nazis had prepared this latest ornamentation of the boulevard for the 1936 Berlin Olympics (Baddeley 2012).

The image showed the glorious equestrian statue of Frederick, ostensibly overseeing some imagined field of battle. This statue was perched in the middle of the street and bisected the image in two. However, the rendering of the monarch was cast completely in shadow, making its exact form almost undetectable. The statue faded away into darkness, as the government made no attempt to shine any street light on it. Rather, the lighting was all aimed at the Nazi pillars. Two brightly shining columns adorned with ringed swastikas

² I purchased this postcard in June 2013 at a street market in Berlin (in Mitte near the Museum Island).

flanked Frederick’s statue, with no shortage of light on the smaller columns topped with Nazi eagles lining both sides of the street. Repeating Reich eagle columns radiated light into the dark cityscape all the way down the boulevard. This postcard captured the essence of Nazi *Geschichtspolitik* regarding Frederick from 1935 to 1937: Frederick *had* been a significant figure from some time ago, but the time had come to move on to all that Hitler could offer. Nazism presented something new, the *Volkgemeinschaft*, that was to eclipse any previous historical time period. Even the text on the back of the card failed to pay its respects to Frederick. It simply stated: “Berlin/Unter den Linden in Festival Decoration.”³ In the era of Nazi-sponsored domestic tourism—their infamous *Kraft durch Freude* [Strength through Joy] program—visitors to Berlin were to spread to their friends and families the image that the Reich’s capital did possess some vague notion of its past. But postcards were created to portray a location in specifically designed way. Here the ideal way was to show that Frederick never disappeared, as his statue was neither sequestered nor destroyed. However, Hitler wanted to highlight the might and uniformity of Berlin as not “just” a royal Prussian capital but also as *the* imperial Nazi metropole. At this point, the Nazis saw Frederick’s Prussia as a launchpad to propel their own Greater Germany into the light, and in so doing, they eclipsed their own self-claimed progenitor.

At heart, Hitler sought to transcend his past hero once he believed his own gravitas could maintain the *Volk* securely in the orbit of his movement. From 1935 to 1937, the Nazis no longer needed Frederick to condemn the now defunct Weimar Republic, nor did they need him to bestow legitimacy upon Hitler. The Nazis had already silenced their political opposition, and having been in power for a few years already, their increasing support from below decreased their prior dependency on support from the past. Specifically when the Nazis dropped Frederick was crucial. It illustrated that from 1935 to 1937 was when the Nazis perceived themselves as enjoying their highest domestic approval. Having eliminated enemies from within and not yet beset by enemies from without, the Nazis felt at this point that they could best stand on their own. It was in this context that Nazi rule seemed most secure. Because of their own next steps, however, this Nazi sense of self-stability would prove short lived.

3 Text from the back of this Berlin postcard.

Part III: Frederick as Absolutes, 1938-1945

In the context of his victory over Poland in 1939, Hitler presented “the Germany of Frederick the Great” to the German people in the quotation used to open this investigation. Such a statement did make sense given both Frederick and Hitler had now acquired vast Polish territories (de Sales 704). This claim was also historically problematic, to say the least. But its anachronistic nature was exactly what made it so telling. It demonstrated the extent to which Hitler was again reliant on the past, so much so that he was willing to stretch it thinly over his decisions to justify them. Hardly fitting for a man who had so recently felt secure enough to supersede the past and present his movement as the pinnacle of German history.

Why did Hitler double back to and double down on Frederick in his rhetoric? Unlike in the Weimar era or the early Nazi years, the image of Frederick that the Nazis appealed to at this point was not about discrediting democracy. Nor was it about making Hitler into Frederick’s successor. Rather, this image of Frederick was about justifying Hitler’s ever-daring foreign policies—the actions that eventually ensnared Germany in a fight for its life. Even Hitler himself would prove insufficient on his own to justify yet another World War.

To explain this change over time, this third narrative section focuses on a specific type of primary source: posters the Nazi Party published weekly containing inspirational quotations for passersby, from invested Party member to curious bystanders and bored commuters alike. The *Weekly Quotation Posters of the NSDAP* started in 1937, and the Nazis turned to Frederick on numerous occasions for some 1938 printouts. One such example appeared in an October issue for the region of Kurhessen, which presented Frederick in a militant manner: “It is not important that I live, but it is important that I do my duty.” The alleged quotation came with an image of Frederick II, making the desired connection clear (“Weekly Quotation Posters of the NSDAP” 1938). That the Nazis employed Frederick in an ever-militarized manner made sense: Hitler had recently annexed the Sudetenland, a question that had brought Nazi Germany closer to war than ever before. This crisis caused a great deal of anxiety among the German people, as they were not ready physically, emotionally, or psychologically for another war (Kershaw 133-39). Responding to such anxiety, the Nazis instrumentalized Frederick to make the prospect of future annexations and potential war more palatable to the *Volks*. By 1939, Nazis revived Frederick as a legitimizing means, but they had escalated the ends to that of territorial expansion.

Within this context, Nazi Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939. That same day, Hitler delivered a rousing speech in the Reichstag to justify

his decision. Blaming Poland itself for initiating hostilities, he pledged to be fighting for peaceful principles, meaning the establishment of what he would deem a non-bellicose Polish regime. Such a blatant lie was not strong enough to stand on its own and needed further rhetorical backing. Thus, towards the speech's conclusion, Hitler recentered Frederick's legacy. He claimed:

If, however, anyone thinks that we are facing a hard time, I should ask him to remember that once a Prussian king, with a ridiculously small State, opposed a stronger coalition, and in three wars finally came out successful because that State had that stout heart that we need in these times (Hitler 1939).

Hitler made clear that Germany's fate would not be defeat, but victory comparable only to that of Prussia under Frederick. With these two sentences, Hitler magically inverted Prussian guilt into German victimhood (Hitler 1939). The Nazis successfully revived Frederick's image but tethered it to their war effort doomed to fail.

When his victory over Poland was assured, Hitler gave his triumphal speech in Danzig. His claim, "Today you have the Germany of Frederick the Great before you," was indeed perplexing (de Sales 704). Frederick was a Prussian monarch who had waged war on numerous other German states in the centrifugal maelstrom that was the Holy Roman Empire. But Nazi historical thinking did not have to stand up to intensive scrutiny—it only had to make sense in the manner the Nazis willed it. Hitler's claim was marginally understandable in terms of acquiring Polish territory: Hitler thought he was repeating the Partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that Frederick had helped to initiate. This intended meaning was very telling. Hitler acquired Danzig in his invasion, a feat even Frederick had not been able to accomplish (Asprey 598-600). Despite the fact that he surpassed Frederick's achievements, Hitler was not willing to stand as the pinnacle of German history. He still felt compelled to appeal to Frederick's memory to justify his invasion, a gamble that had incited another World War against Germany. Not only was he appealing to Frederick, but he was also claiming that Frederick's past was a goal to which Germany would do well to return (de Sales 704). Once the actual fighting of the war had begun, Frederick's example became an ever more glorious objective. Hitler's rhetoric also shows how the Nazis perceived their own basis of support among the German people. Their radical foreign policy decisions could not be justified with novel Nazi racial theories alone; they needed to conjure precedents from the past so that their *Volk* would throw itself once more against France and Great Britain.

Following the graduate student Hans-Heimar Jacobs along his career path further demonstrated the reintroduction of Frederick. Having left the University of Heidelberg, Jacobs found his way to the University of Jena. Jacobs had better luck here, as he was eventually offered a teaching position in 1943. However, he was still unable to publish his 1939 work, "Frederick the Great and his Thoughts on State." This time, it seems his failure was because of an overcorrection at the university level. The faculty at the University of Jena faulted his research because it presented an overly harsh presentation of Frederick. The faculty noted that because of this book's sometimes judgmental tone, Jacobs had failed to turn out a "considerable work" (Gottwald 2003, 926). By 1939, writing on Frederick was acceptable, so long as it was done enthusiastically. This detailed anecdote from Jacobs's life shows how Frederick was to be re-summoned as a brilliant hero in the context of Hitler's bold gambles. In this historical context, Jacobs's conclusions fell short of the faculty's now enthusiastic welcoming of Frederick (Gottwald 926).

The war really escalated on 22 June 1941, when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union to make way for an even Greater Germany. The sheer number of men and material required to invade was daunting—approximately 3,050,000 troops were to march into the USSR (Bessel 2006, 112). Ironically, the invasion's initial successes added to the burden, as additional men were needed for the occupation of vast Soviet territory (Browning 1993, 4-11). The Nazi escalation of the war also required Nazi propaganda to intensify in kind (Herf 12-6). Frederick's image did not escape this increasingly radicalized usage, and, over time, it began to embody Nazism's belief in the binary of total victory or total defeat.

The Nazis mustered Frederick to disseminate their perceived reality of the situation. Two different weekly quotation posters from June turned to Frederick—one before the invasion began and the second the week after—and both suggested the Herculean task for the average German. At the start of June, Germans read: "Heroes have created your empire. Preserve it in such a way that the glory of your fathers does not become your shame. Frederick the Great." ("Weekly Quotation Posters of the NSDAP" 1941). The colossal burden was thus framed as generational. By the end of the month, Germans read: "It will be a difficult year, but one must stay alert, and each who honors and loves the fatherland must give his all. Frederick the Great." For the first time, the Nazis employed Frederick to defend their decision that they themselves admitted would prove "difficult." Not only were the stakes now higher, but also Frederick was now used to justify absolutes. Directly commanding the average German to "give his all" illustrated the

first pebble in an eventual Nazi rockslide of risking total obliteration for total victory ("Weekly Quotation Posters of the NSDAP" 1941). To be sure, the poster the week the invasion commenced displayed a quotation from Hitler himself ("Weekly Quotation Posters of the NSDAP" 1941). However, that the propagandists pinched Hitler's words between Frederick's showed that the Nazi *Führer* was once more seeking the good graces of the Prussian King. The Nazis further radicalized their portrayal of Frederick in these posters as time went on, all to justify their increasingly annihilatory war. For the issue of August 24 to August 30, the leaflets stated: "Now we must wage war such that the enemy will lose any desire to break the peace again. Frederick the Great in 1756 at the beginning of the Seven Years War." ("Weekly Quotation Posters of the NSDAP" 1941). The specific indication that Frederick allegedly said this as the Seven Years War broke out was telling. That conflict had seen Prussia's darkest hours, with its ultimate emergence from the struggle still as a continental power. The Nazis gave the historical context of this quotation as if to tell their people that come what may, the Soviets must be defeated for Germany to survive ("Weekly Quotation Posters of the NSDAP" 1941).

As early as fall 1941, the Nazis began to revive and reconstitute the public memory of Frederick in ways that tethered him to the Nazi conceptualization of absolutes. An immediate victory, like those the Nazis had achieved elsewhere, seemed to be slipping from grasp by September. The Nazis expressed this sentiment when their "Weekly Quotation Poster" for 14 September to 20 September stated, "One achieves great things only through courage. With this assurance, and with the firm determination to strike everyone who stands in the way, one can defy hell and the Devil. Frederick the Great." ("Weekly Quotation Posters of the NSDAP" 1941). Not only were the Nazis connecting total war to Frederick's image, they were also emphasizing notions of total mastery over all domains and realms, even the biblical. By January 1942, the Nazis demonstrated Frederick's applicability to extremes when they issued their copy of this weekly poster: "The greater soul of the hero must be an example to the highest and the lowest in all situations. Frederick the Great." ("Weekly Quotation Posters of the NSDAP" 1942). This poster meant to perpetuate the idea of individual bravery in the face of both grand successes and large setbacks.

And setbacks started to abound. A year later, in his speech on 18 February 1943 following the infamous Nazi defeat at Stalingrad, Goebbels publicly constructed the ultimate apotheosis of Frederick. With the military situation now dire, the propaganda leader's appeal to Frederick reached its apex:

In past years, we have often recalled the example of Frederick the Great in newspapers and on the radio. We did not have the right to do so. For a while during the Third Silesian War, Frederick II had five million Prussians, according to Schlieffen, standing against 90 million enemies. In the second of seven hellish years he suffered a defeat that shook Prussia's foundations. He never had enough soldiers and weapons to fight without risking everything. His strategy was always one of improvisation. But his principle was to attack the enemy whenever possible. He suffered defeats, but that was not decisive. What was decisive is that the Great King remained unbroken, that he was unshaken by the changing fortunes of war, that his strong heart overcame every danger. At the end of seven years of war...he stood above the devastated battlefield as the victor (Goebbels 1944 [1943]).

This deification of Frederick signified the culminating, climactic point in the Third Reich's use of his image. For the sake of rhetoric, Goebbels admitted that all of the Reich's previous references to Frederick up until this point had been a stretch. Only now, essentially, was Germany's predicament such that it truly resembled Frederick's situation in the Seven Years War. That was how serious yet motivating Goebbels wanted to present the loss at Stalingrad. Indeed, Goebbels went on to say:

How does our situation compare with his?! Let us show the same will and decisiveness as he, and when the time comes do as he did, remaining unshakable through all the twists of fate, and like him win the battle even under the most unfavorable circumstances. Let us never doubt our great cause (Goebbels 1944 [1943]).

In the context of 1943, the Nazis emphasized Frederick in a reverent manner, all to garner support for Hitler and his war effort. Furthermore, the Nazis invoked him specifically in the context of the Seven Years War in order to bolster the Nazi affinity for absolutes in the face of setbacks.

Meanwhile, Hitler's own appeals to Frederick in this context onward mostly took the form of dilettantish lectures to his generals, who increasingly had the misfortune of bringing him bad news (Trevor-Roper 1953, 102). On 28 January 1942, Hitler spoke with Field-Marshal Milch and with two men involved with the *Luftwaffe*, Jeschonnek and Galland. In this conversation, Hitler apparently asserted nostalgically, "When one reflects that Frederick the Great held out against forces twelve times greater than his, one gets the impression: 'What a grand fellow he must have been!'" (Trevor-Roper 213).

With almost childlike wonder, Hitler expressed longing admiration for his own image of Frederick; Hitler constructed Frederick's past as a shining example, one that Germany would do well to emulate. Such a statement also started a pattern of Hitler critiquing his generals by invoking Frederick's past as an ideal that they were failing to actualize (Trevor-Roper 213). In another private discussion on 20 August, Hitler stated:

The history of war can furnish not one single instance in which victory has gone to the markedly weaker of the combatants. The nearest approach to it is the case of Frederick the Great, who had luck in defeating, by superior skill, adversaries who are numerically slightly superior.

Again, Hitler was willing to admit that Germany was in a predicament, surrounded as it was (Trevor-Roper 525). Such a confession was not even meant as public fearmongering to rouse the *Volk*. Rather, it was a confidential acceptance that current events were not so rosy. Only by replicating Frederick's heroism could the Third Reich survive (Trevor-Roper 525). Just six days later, in a more melancholic outcry, Hitler complained to Grand Admiral Reader:

No one has a monopoly of success. Frederick the Great is the nearest thing to an exception. To what should one ascribe his success – foolhardiness or what? Frankly, I do not know. The cards were stacked against him, and Prussia was a miserably poor little State. Nevertheless he ventured forth with incredible temerity; on what, I wonder did he base his faith in victory? If we compare our present situation with his, the comparison will make us feel ashamed...

With this apotheosis of Frederick, Hitler claimed to consider himself fortunate just to mimic even a fraction of Frederick's supposed triumphs. This quotation continued the pattern that Hitler used Frederick to cast scorn upon others, as he asked why his incompetent subordinates could not achieve victory from a supposedly stronger starting position (Trevor-Roper 536).

Hitler carried on invoking Frederick to justify his delusional military strategy. Around October 1944, Hitler mobilized Frederick to rationalize an all-or-nothing offensive into the Ardennes, later dubbed the Battle of the Bulge. In an effort to quiet generals who had expressed reservation about this strategy, Hitler blurted out:

Apparently you don't remember Frederick the Great...At Rossbach and Leuten he defeated enemies twice his strength. How? By a bold attack... Why don't you people study history...History will repeat itself...The

Ardennes will be *my* Rossbach and Leuten. And as a result another unpredictable historical accident will take place: the alliance against the Reich will suddenly split apart (Toland 939-940)!

Frederick's image in this context increasingly reinforced the necessity of absolutes in Nazi strategy: either total victory or total defeat. Evidently, Hitler did not read his history well either, or else Hitler might have realized the differences between Frederick and himself. The contrast in the resolve of their enemy coalitions could not have been starker (Szabo 426-33).

The ultimate failure of Hitler's military strategy culminated in the spring of 1945, when Hitler found himself confined to a subterranean bunker in Berlin. He made sure his painting of Frederick was with him in this ersatz Reich Chancellery (Toland 1001). Goebbels was also in the bunker, and a particularly interesting exchange occurred between him and General Busse via telephone. On 13 April 1945, Goebbels received word that United States President Franklin Roosevelt had passed away, and he exclaimed excitedly to this military commander, "The Czarina is dead!" (Szabo x). This claim was a clear reference to the death of the Russian Czarina during the Seven Years War, which led to Russia's withdrawal from the conflict and to Prussia's survival. Goebbels claimed this message would boost the spirits of the military, implying that the history of the Seven Years War was now replaying: the US would simply drop out of the war following the death of its leader. Anachronistic and inaccurate, Goebbels's allegory showed the extent to which the Nazi upper echelon sought to retrofit their own present into Frederick's past. In the context of the war's close, the Nazis still used Frederick to legitimize their waning power over the crumbling military. They claimed that Frederick's past—rather, their construction of it—was potentially repeatable, and thus did they reveal the extent to which the power of Nazism as a movement was truly shaken. No longer were they presenting Nazism as novel or aggrandizing. Rather, its main appeal was only that it might be able to duplicate the past (Szabo x).

In his final days, Hitler apparently had Goebbels read to him historical writings on the Seven Years War (Toland 971). Like a child being read to before bed to ward off nightmares, Hitler used these stories to escape momentarily the very real nightmare of his own making. The mental defeat of Nazism was made apparent when Goebbels admitted to himself that using Frederick to buttress Hitler did not prevent total collapse. He supposedly wrote that even Hitler himself did not embody the needed amount of "Fritzisch" qualities. Frederick had now eclipsed Hitler (Szabo x).

Concluding Reflections

The Soviets reached Berlin first. Frederick's statue was removed and would not be replaced until 1985 under the German Democratic Republic (Gerwarth 168). How this regime used and ignored Frederick's image in its own history should be the topic of further study. For the Nazi regime, however, Frederick's legacy was a powerful tool for the Nazis when they felt their rule needed legitimizing. But when they felt confident enough to stand on their own, Frederick's image was essentially dropped, though never destroyed.

The most revealing phase was from 1935 to 1937, when the Nazis eclipsed Frederick in their rhetoric. Frederick was to be accepted as a *past* figure, important for history, but not for Germany's Nazi present. In this historical context, the Nazis subordinated Frederick's image under all that was new about Nazism. The novelty of the Nazi movement meant the *Volksgemeinschaft*, whereby the whole nation was to live as one unified and supportive community. That the Nazis eclipsed Frederick from 1935 to 1937 helps to show that this time frame was when the Nazis perceived their popular support to be at its zenith. Nazi Germany's initial military conquests from 1938 to 1941 may have created their high-water mark in terms of territory, but conquests did not create their high-water mark in terms of legitimacy. Rather, the Nazis' new World War rightfully created doubts about their mastery of Germany's fate, and so the Nazis fell back on old habits. This time, they deployed the *Geist* of the Soldier King to reinforce their regime at home, in a doomed attempt to compensate for their inability to deploy real soldiers to reinforce their regime at the front.

While Frederick had survived his own disastrous wars, Hitler did not. The Nazi conceptualization of Frederick could essentially be whatever the Nazis needed him to be rhetorically. But Frederick would always remain just that—a fictional *deus ex machina*, not actual salvation. Ultimately, the deified glorification of a certain past, so marginalized just a few years earlier, was inadequate to enact miracles for the Nazis. Fortunately for the world, Frederick's famous "Miracle of the House of Brandenburg" in the Seven Years War never translated into a "Miracle of the House of Hitler" in the Second World War.

To be clear, parts of Frederick's past did reoccur, just not the parts Hitler had hoped: Berlin was once again occupied by Russian troops as it temporarily had been during Frederick's wars. But now, the Garrison Church just outside Berlin—the very one that had housed Frederick's tomb and which had provided such a symbolic setting for Hitler's appointment to Chancellor—lay in ruins, all because of Hitler's war (Toland 320-21; Asprey 634).

On 30 April 1945, just before his suicide and the complete collapse of his regime, Hitler gave away a prized possession. As the last German troops wishing to evacuate Berlin left the *Führerbunker*, Hitler took one aside and gave this soldier a painting: his prized portrait of Frederick. Supposedly, Hitler stated, “I don’t want this picture to get lost. I want it to remain for the future. It has great historical value.” Perhaps apocryphal, especially given its *Aeneid* resonances, Hitler’s commitment to Frederick’s memory stubbornly remained until the end, even to the extent that he hoped a later leader could restore Frederick’s legacy. He suggested a physical remnant would be a commendable historical reminder for posterity (Toland 1001).

Hitler worked for years on his destructive goals, which had then been projected onto Frederick’s past. From 1923 to 1934, the Nazis used Frederick to construct the launchpad for their movement, which they then used to jettison themselves to new heights from 1935 to 1937, before returning back down to him from 1938 to 1945. Ultimately, as Hitler burrowed into his Berlin bunker to commit suicide, so too did the Nazi movement dive down beneath Frederick’s legacy and implode in the hellish subterranean pits of its own making. The connection between Frederick and Hitler has indeed been historically informative, just not in the glorifying trajectory that Hitler had envisioned. Rather, the Nazi use of Frederick demonstrated the power and pitfalls of instrumentalizing the past for the present.

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