

SUMMARY

FREDERICK II THE GREAT AS A LIBERAL RULER

This book considers the rule of Frederick II, the king who ruled over Prussia from 1740 to 1786, and constitute an attempt to answer who he was as a man, a ruler and a politician. The main inspiration for this book to be written were the usual rash conclusions about Frederick in many historical books and the lack of precision in judging Frederick's ways and decisions in many biographical works.

Contrary to most books printed in Poland about this ruler, here Frederick is looked upon from a European perspective, and not just a Polish one. The main background for the judgement of his policies were the ideas of European Enlightenment that served as the base for the development of liberal ideas and ideology.

Analysis of the sources, including king's political treatises, and the biographical works about Frederick convinced me that he should be considered as a liberal ruler, if not in every step he was taking as a politician, definitely so in his views and long-term projects. After considering that material I am also inclined to conclude that the personality and the set of characteristics that this monarch possessed is a good proof that liberal tendencies can also flourish in monarchies. This proof gets even more sounding when Frederick is compared to most contemporary rulers.

After Henri Bergson and Karl Popper I understand liberalism as a political ideology that requires making the society more open and going through its strata more easily, thus allowing as much meritocracy in administration and economy as possible. Very important for this kind of liberalism to be applied is also the Voltairian and Kantian view of man and the purpose in life, meaning that grown human beings are sufficiently rational to take care of their moral development, and don't have to be constantly limited by religious authorities or political censorship.

The book is divided into ten chapters, that analyse different aspects of his policies. At the beginning we can find an attempt to present the king's portrait in German and Western historiography. The Polish historiography was especially highlighted as most of it is usually simplified and biased towards the king from both political and ideological reasons. The main question in this chapter remains of course the one of how liberal was Frederick II.

The second chapter's topic is the position of Frederick II on the map of European Enlightenment and its main successor – liberalism. I focused especially on German early liberalism, and on proposing the way in which one can distinguish liberal ruler from tyrannical and capricious one according to liberal projects of the era.

The next three chapters' purpose was to establish if Frederick the Great was really a highwayman of Europe as he was and is so often depicted. I tried to prove that that this perspective was more a creation of other courts' propaganda than a clear judgement. In this chapter one can also find an attempt to prove that Frederick II was relatively rational and down-to-earth when it comes to territorial appetites and conquests, especially when compared to Louis XIV or Napoleon Bonaparte, and that he disliked war unlike the two Frenchmen. Chapter number six refers to the relation between Frederick's liberalism and his policy towards Poland.

Chapter number seven refers to Frederick as the defender of 'German liberties', a notion that was too often disavowed as a mere product of Prussian propaganda, although Frederick II did indeed stop many dangerous Austrian attempts to dictate a very illiberal political situation in German territorial states, even in the Protestant North. Frederick's objective was more than just a welfare of Prussia, his ambitious and morals seem to be wider.

Eighth chapter's topic is the degree in which we can perceive Frederick as a member of the liberal enlightened international republic of philosophers and thinkers. I conclude that Frederick hesitated between the Hobbes's views on human nature and Locke's perspective on freedom and human needs. That's why he was not always consistent in his views but usually very much so in his reforms and the way of their justification. In that chapter Frederick is also defended as consistent adversary of censorship, except in the war time, and of religious toleration and freedom.

Topics of the last two chapters are Frederick as and the relations of the king towards the most liberal countries and nations of the era (Holland, Great Britain and the USA), and his perspective on tradesmen, peasants and artisans as well as towns and their liberties, and the concept of free-market economy.

At the end I conclude that the views the king had on the purpose of war, social liberties, religion, the law, economy and censorship allow to count him as one of the most liberal monarchs in European history.