

Primary Source Analysis

Frederick the Great was a clever and resourceful man who ruled Prussia for over 40 years until his death in 1786. He studied the words of the times greatest philosophes and published many works including poems, letters, and treatises. One of his greatest works was '*the First Servant of the State*', which he intended as a blueprint for his heir on the best way to rule Prussia. This analysis will cover an extract from that famous work.

The First Servant of the State was a private letter written in 1752 by King Frederick 'the Great' II of Prussia. King Frederick ruled Prussia as an Enlightened Despot, with strong steadfast views and a tight control over his state. He received an enlightened education as a child and as a young man, speaking French and studying, as well as conversing, with the most prominent philosophes and other enlightened people. The year 1752 is significant as it was during the time period that Frederick pushed through a series of law and legal reforms in Prussia.¹ This year was also between his major military battles, after the conquering of Silesia in 1740 but before the Seven Years War, which began in 1756. These events would affect how he approached the letter and the tone it was written in. During a time of profound changes to the law in Prussia, Frederick would want to write the private letter in a way that reflected the tone of the reforms he was implementing.

As previously mentioned, *the First Servant of the State* is a private work, which would make Frederick freer with his word choice and writings, yet still conveying a certain message. Frederick intended this to be seen only by himself and, upon his death, his heir. His heirs were his brother Augustus William and later, his nephew Frederick William II. It would never be closer to his own thoughts than this letter, as anything intended for the public would have been edited to be aligned with the mask of an enlightened man that he wore. At first glance, this document is simple. It sets out guidelines on how best to run Prussia after Frederick the Great's death. It can be summarised to one phrase, be a monarch and not a minister. Ministers do not put their subjects first and only make decisions to further their own interest (which is different than the State's interests). A monarch, according to Frederick II, was someone who "will pursue only

¹ Walter Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots* (London: Hodder & Stoughton Educational, 1990), 52.

the public interest, which is his own.”² It makes it clear that there is more to being a monarch than just ruling. A monarch is a servant to his State and has a social contract that makes him responsible to the State. A true monarch works for the betterment of the State and does not live in supreme luxury without providing the people with something in return.³ In the letter, he sets out that the best type of government for the state and how the government must be directly overseen by the monarch, not advisors or ministers.⁴ Lastly, Frederick points out that true happiness is attained by gaining the lands of your enemy before they decide to attack you first.⁵ Frederick was very Machiavellian in his planning and writings, saying one thing and meaning another.

At first glance, *The First Servant of the State* seems relatively straightforward. Looking deeper however, proves that not everything is as it seems. The unwitting testimony revealed in this work reveals that Frederick the Great does not believe his heir will be an effective ruler and that they will not rule Prussia well. He has so little trust in them that he must leave behind instructions on how to rule Prussia, so his heir does not screw up all the arduous work Frederick II put in to making Prussia what it was by the end of his life. He also makes several threats to his heir in the document. The quote at the end of the piece seems merely like a reminder that monarchs answer to their subjects but can be taken as a threat from Frederick to his heir. It is saying either do me (Frederick the Great) justice or face the consequences.⁶ What those consequences are, are unclear. In lines 25-26, Frederick II mentions that bad monarchs become “the laughing stock.”⁷ That is another underlying threat from Frederick II to his heir, to not be a bad monarch and scar the reputation of Prussia and Frederick II. There are also contradictions between Frederick’s words in *the First Servant of the State* and his actions. He writes that a minister will “consolidate his own position through the number of people whom he makes dependent on him.”⁸ He claims these are the actions of a poor ruler, yet this is exactly what he

² Frederick II of Prussia, “*The First Servant of the State*,” ed. Simon Eliot and Keith Whitlock (Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1992), line 2.

³ Frederick II of Prussia, “*The First Servant of the State*,” lines 29-30.

⁴ Frederick II of Prussia, “*The First Servant of the State*,” lines 21-23.

⁵ Frederick II of Prussia, “*The First Servant of the State*,” line 24-25.

⁶ Frederick II of Prussia, “*The First Servant of the State*,” line 36-37.

⁷ Frederick II of Prussia, “*The First Servant of the State*,” lines 25-26.

⁸ Frederick II of Prussia, “*The First Servant of the State*,” lines 4-5.

does. He becomes the head of government and makes all the decisions; after all, a monarch must “direct its principal affairs” himself.⁹

Comparing other works by Frederick II to *the First Servant of the State* brings forward some harsh differences. In *the First Servant of the State*, Frederick talks about how a monarch’s interests are aligned with and the same as the public’s interest. That he, as monarch, will act for the betterment of the State as it is naturally his goal.¹⁰ This goes against what he wrote in 1766, in a letter to the Electress Maria Antonia of Saxony. In that letter, he stated that a man in power will act in a way that is not what he is naturally inclined to do.¹¹ If a monarch acts in the best interest of the State, which is naturally his own interests, then how can he be a monarch if that will cause him to act against his natural disposition? He also mentions in *the First Servant of the State* that the monarch must protect his people, even if it means war. Once again, this goes in direct conflict with another of his earlier published works. In his treatise “The ‘Anti-Machiavel, or Refutation of Machiavelli’s “the Prince”” from 1740, Frederick II states that war “is so rich in misfortunes, its outcome is so uncertain and its consequences are so disastrous for a country.”¹² If war is potentially so disastrous for a country, then why does Frederick engage in it? He supposedly went to war over Silesia right after becoming King to prevent Austria from attacking Prussia. Frederick should never have gone to war according to the logic put forward in the Machiavelli treatise. It was too dangerous for the country and put his subjects at significant risk, subjects he had a social contract to put before anything or anyone else.

Frederick the Great’s works are often contradictory and full of double meanings. He says many things that look good and align with his public image on the surface, but in all reality have a totally different message. What he says in one piece often contradicts what is said in another. Although all his public works have a consistent attitude and message, they differ greatly from his private works. Frederick’s most famous work, *the First Servant of the State*, has the most logical

⁹ Frederick II of Prussia, “*The First Servant of the State*,” line 32.

¹⁰ Frederick II of Prussia, “*The First Servant of the State*,” line 34-35.

¹¹ Frederick II of Prussia to Electress Maria Antonia of Saxony, 08 March 1766. Reprinted in *The Enlightenment – Texts 1*, edited by Simon Eliot and Keith Whitlock (Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1992), pg. 48.

¹² Frederick II of Prussia, “The Anti-Machiavel, or Refutation of Machiavelli’s “The Prince,”” in *The Enlightenment – Texts 1*, ed. Simon Eliot and Keith Whitlock (Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1992), pg. 48.

explicit message and at the same time, offers an implicit message full of double meanings and warnings for an heir he thinks is not worthy of the title.

Bibliography

Frederick II of Prussia. "The First Servant of the State." In *The Enlightenment – Texts 1*, edited by Simon Eliot and Keith Whitlock, 45-46. Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1992.

Frederick II of Prussia to Electress Maria Antonia of Saxony, 08 March 1766. Reprinted in *The Enlightenment – Texts 1*, edited by Simon Eliot and Keith Whitlock. Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1992.

Frederick II of Prussia. "The Anti-Machiavel, or Refutation of Machiavelli's "The Prince."" In *The Enlightenment – Texts 1*. Edited by Simon Eliot and Keith Whitlock, 48. Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1992.

Skylar Brebrich
UWTSD #1804922
HPHI5014
Professor Lester Mason
11 October 2018

Secondary Source Analysis

The aim of this work is to examine the background information, historiography and content of “Europe and the Enlightened Despots” by Walter Oppenheim to ultimately decide the worth of the book as an academic aid when studying the Enlightenment.

1. Background of the Author and Publisher

The book was written by Walter Oppenheim, which not much information can be found about. He is a historian and is attached to the ‘Access to History’ series of books published by Hodder & Stoughton Educational (now known as Hodder Education). It was first published in 1990 and was republished throughout the decade. The fact it was republished so much indicates that was a popular book at the time and could have been considered a standard coursebook for those studying the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment during the 1990s. ‘Europe and the Enlightened Despots’ is an academic work most likely aimed at undergraduate students, advanced secondary school students, teachers and lecturers. The study guides at the end of each chapter of the book are an excellent resource for teachers, to help create teaching guidelines, and to students, to help create quality notes and make sure they are understanding the material discussed in the book.

2. Details About the Book

As it was first published in 1990, it follows the modern academic school of thought that was popular at the time. Walter Oppenheim writes the book as a social history. He pays special attention to social issues, such as religion and education, and largely glosses over the details regarding the military and battles. If he does mention the military, Oppenheim often comes at it from a social angle, like the effect conscription and military service had on families and the soldier’s life at home.

3. Subject Matter

As evident by the title ‘Europe and the Enlightened Despots’, Walter Oppenheim looks at the despotic rulers of Europe in the eighteenth century and the effect the enlightenment had on them. He begins with the first chapter titled “Enlightened Despotism”, which serves as an introduction to Europe in the eighteenth century. He briefly analyzes various wars and

revolutions that shaped the continent into what it was, such as the weakening power of the Church in the aftermath of the various wars of religion and the rise to prominence of science after the Scientific Revolution.¹ In the second chapter, Oppenheim discusses the key writers of the Enlightenment that influenced the enlightened despotic rulers. The key writers discussed are Montesquieu, Diderot, Voltaire and Rousseau. He also makes a quick mention of others such as Beccaria and Turgot. The inclusion of a chapter dedicated to the Enlightenment philosophes was done to give the reader a better background on where the ideas of the Enlightened Despots came from. Diderot, for example, was loved by Catherine the Great and was often invited to Russia so they could talk and discuss ideas.²

Chapters three through five discuss the main enlightened despots of the eighteenth century: Frederick the Great of Prussia, Catherine the Great of Russia, and Joseph II of Austria. Frederick II, born in 1712, was raised by a cruel father and King who did not approve of Frederick's scholastic pursuits. When Frederick II took the throne in 1740, he was expected to usher in a new era of Prussian way of life. He ultimately failed to live up to expectations. Frederick II 'the Great' was not very enlightened in all reality. He used enlightened ideas to garner attention and maintain connections with popular scholars of the time such as Voltaire, who did not really like him and often called his poetry "more dirty linen to be washed."³ Like many despots, Frederick picked and chose what parts of the Enlightenment he liked and would implement, such as agricultural innovation, and ignored everything else, such as the newly developed economic policies of trade and industry.⁴ His most truly enlightened idea was regarding his role as King. Frederick the Great despised the Divine Right of Kings used by other monarchs and instead claimed himself to be the "First Servant of the State"; He was not chosen to be King because God said so, he was chosen as King to serve the people in the best way possible and especially if the best way happened to be in his best interests.⁵

Catherine the Great ruled Russia from 1762-1796 and, like Frederick II, used her enlightened education to her advantage. Early in her reign, Catherine created a council called the *Zemstvo* which was made up of different peoples from a variety of social standings across

¹ Walter Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots* (London: Hodder & Stoughton Educational, 1990), 4-6.

² Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots*, 14.

³ Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots*, 36.

⁴ Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots*, 43-44.

⁵ Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots*, 50-51.

Russia (but not serfs). It was an enlightened idea that in reality was only created to legitimise her claim to the throne and was disbanded after serving its purpose.⁶ She was religiously tolerant of all faiths, including Jews, but at the same time weakened the Church by seizing their lands and making priests little more than state servants.⁷ Catherine the Great started out strong on modernizing Russia in the first half of her reign by implementing enlightened ideas, such as widespread education. By the end of it, she was so horrified by the French Revolution that she isolated Russia from any ideas related to the Revolution and the Enlightenment. She kicked French people out of Russia, recalled any students studying abroad in Europe and receiving an enlightened education, and put in place very harsh censorship laws against revolutionary and enlightened French ideas.⁸

Joseph II of Austria believed in the enlightened idea of a social contract between the ruler and his subjects that was made popular by Frederick II.⁹ Joseph held to the idea that the social contract gave him supreme power over his people that nobody could stop, as long as he acted in the 'best interest' of Austria. It is Joseph's refusal to compromise that set him apart from others such as Frederick II. He was the only monarch to "take the theories of the monarch enjoying total power to their logical conclusion."¹⁰ Joseph believed in State control over education and the abolition of serfdom.¹¹ Joseph's main goal was to create an efficient, humane state that was ruled by a him as a benevolent King. He had no problem using enlightened ideas to do it, but Joseph did not have the support of the nobles in Hungary and the Netherlands, which caused his system to begin to come tumbling down.¹² The reaction of his people to the French Revolution proved to be Joseph's ultimate downfall, forcing him to repeal all his reforms or else face losing his empire.¹³

Chapter six details minor enlightened despots who ruled through various applications of enlightened ideas. Some of the despots mentioned include Dr Struensee of Denmark (r. 1770-72), whose enlightened religious reforms ultimately got him executed, and Charles IV of

⁶ Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots*, 62.; Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots*, 68.

⁷ Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots*, 76.

⁸ Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots*, 79.

⁹ Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots*, 93.

¹⁰ Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots*, 93.

¹¹ Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots*, 94-95

¹² Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots*, 101.

¹³ Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots*, 115.

Naples (r. 1734-59), where the country's problems were too deep to be dealt with by the Enlightenment.¹⁴

Chapter seven is a conclusion regarding enlightened despotism in eighteenth century Europe. Oppenheim sums up his view by saying that "the people of Europe in the mid-eighteenth century were generally fortunate to have been ruled by those monarchs who historians label the Enlightened Despots."¹⁵

4. Worth as an Academic Aid

Oppenheim's book is a very good introductory survey of Enlightened Despots in Europe. It focuses almost too much on social issues and ignores other avenues. It is a good catch-all with a fine amount of details in its chosen area. Oppenheim went one step further than others despotic writers, by detailing the reign of Joseph II of Austria, who is an exceptional example that often gets left out of other works. Oppenheim's book would be a great supplementary source to add to a bibliography, but not the best base an entire paper on.

For me, it was a wonderful way to dig deeper into enlightened despots than we were able to in class and enriched my knowledge of other eighteenth century rulers of Europe besides the standard Frederick II and Catherine the Great. The mentioning of the smaller monarchs who employed aspects of Enlightened Despotism was completely new to me and brought new information forward that complemented the course and my personal knowledge.

¹⁴ Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots*, 136-137.; Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots*, 128.

¹⁵ Oppenheim, *Europe and the Enlightened Despots*, 157.

Bibliography

Oppenheim, Walter. *Europe and the Enlightened Despots*. London: Hodder & Stoughton Educational, 1990.

Skylar Brebrich
UWTSD #1804922
HPHI5014
Professor Lester Mason
11 October 2018