The Emergence of the Eastern Powers, 1756–1775

H.M. SCOTT

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The rise of the eastern powers

I

The political emergence of Austria, Russia and Prussia was part of a wider eighteenth-century evolution which discovered the region and established the idea of eastern Europe.[1] At least since the Renaissance, the continent had been divided conceptually between south and north. During the age of the Enlightenment new fault lines became established, as 'eastern' and 'western' Europe were invented and so became the two areas which made up its land mass. Contemporaries simultaneously incorporated Russia into the new, though geographically imprecise, region designated as 'eastern Europe'. The continental wars of 1756–63 and 1768–74 were important in establishing these new dispensations: exactly as they were to be for the emergence of the eastern powers.[2] By drawing attention to the area and to the important political developments under way, these conflicts highlighted its importance for western Europeans. That emergence, however, was primarily based upon earlier internal and international developments in each of the states which rose so impressively during the third quarter of the eighteenth century.

The first to become a leading European power had been Austria. Unlike Russia and Prussia, who emerged as first-class states only during the decades examined in this book, the Habsburg Monarchy had been a great power in name, if not in fact, since around 1700. This political emergence had always rested on a fragile domestic base. It was not that the extensive though far-flung territories ruled from Vienna were lacking in resources, particularly when compared with the other eastern powers. Austria was always more prosperous than her two rivals and more populous than Prussia, though her economy was also based on agriculture, with much less trade or manufacturing than the more advanced states in western Europe.[3] Vienna's problem had always been that of mobilising sufficient resources to support the extensive commitments which geography, dynastic loyalty and external circumstances imposed upon the central European Habsburgs. By the mid-eighteenth century the lands of the Monarchy were extremely far-flung. No other state was

[1] See Lawrence Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stamford, CA, 1994). [2] Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, pp. 171, 196–8, 362.

[3] The most up-to-date survey, albeit rather theoretical in tone, is Roman Sandgruber, *Ökonomie und Politik: Österreichische Wirtschaftsgeschichte vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Vienna, 1996), esp. parts 3 and 4.

involved at so many points on the map of Europe, though Russia's vast empire in Asia created strategic problems of an altogether different order.[4]

Austria's enlarged European role had been a by-product of the struggle against Louis XIV and, to a lesser extent, her own conflict with the Ottoman empire. The fundamental rivalry in early modern Europe had been that between France and the House of Habsburg. The seventeenth-century decline and eventual extinction of the family's Spanish branch had placed their Austrian cousins in the front line against the powerful French monarchy. This rivalry was exploited after 1688 by the Dutch Republic and the British state (together known as the 'Maritime Powers') in their joint search for an ally – and, more important, an army – to put into the field against France, and in this way reduce their own military effort. Dutch and English loans and subsidies helped to finance Austria's involvement in the wars of 1689–1714; these were again to be important during the 1740s.[5] Simultaneously, Habsburg armies had secured an important series of victories over the Ottoman empire during two periods of fighting (1683–99; 1716–18) and thereby recovered control over the Kingdom of Hungary, the greater part of which had been occupied by the Ottoman empire since the first half of the sixteenth century. In 1718 Habsburg possessions in south-eastern Europe had reached an extent which would not be surpassed until shortly before the First World War. These gains, together with Austria's contribution to the Anglo-Dutch struggle against France, elevated her to the front rank of European states. Yet the resources necessary to support such a role could only with difficulty be squeezed from the territories over which the Habsburgs ruled.[6]

This was largely the consequence of the distinctive way in which these lands had been acquired and were now governed. By the mid-eighteenth century Habsburg possessions sprawled through central Europe, with outposts in the distant Austrian Netherlands (most of present-day Belgium and Luxembourg) and in the Italian Peninsula, where Milan was administered directly and Tuscany was ruled personally by Maria Theresa's husband, Francis Stephen, after 1737.[7] A further, small, group of outlying territories was located in western Germany along the Rhine, collectively known as 'Further Austria' (*Vorderösterreich*). The heartlands of the family's power, however, were the central European possessions lying on both sides of the river Danube: principally the Austrian provinces ruled from Vienna, the so-called 'Lands of the Bohemian Crown' (which provided most of the economic and

[4] See below, pp. 14–15.

[5] Gustav Otruba, 'Die Bedeutung englischer Subsidien und Antizipationen für die Finanzen Österreichs 1701 bis 1748', *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 51 (1964), pp. 192–234. Bielfeld considered that this dependence militated against Austria being seen as a first-class power: *Institutions politiques*, II. 80.

[6] The classic study of this is Jean Bérenger, *Finances et absolutisme autrichien dans la seconde moitié du XVII^e siècle* (Paris, 1975).

[7] Upon his death in 1765, the Grand Duchy of Tuscany became a family secundogeniture, being ruled by Joseph II's younger brother, Leopold, from 1765 to 1790.

demographic resources needed to uphold Habsburg power) and the Kingdom of Hungary along with the neighbouring and small principality of Transylvania which was ruled directly.[8] Finally, possession of the imperial dignity – since 1438 in practice hereditary in the family, with the single exception of the period 1740–5 – conferred overlordship, together with some real powers, throughout the Empire.[9]

These territories had been acquired at separate times and in different ways, and remained a dynastic polity: the court and the army, together with loyalty to the House of Habsburg and a culture rooted in the dominance of Counter-Reformation Catholicism, did far more to hold the scattered possessions together than institutional bonds. There was no uniform system of government. Even after the reforms of 1749, which merged the administrations of the Austrian and Bohemian lands, the Monarchy's subjects continued to be ruled through a variety of institutions and Vienna's authority varied significantly from one province to another, while the Kingdom of Hungary enjoyed semi-independent status. Particularism and provincialism had been strengthened by imperfect political and territorial integration which had taken place. In most territories, the traditional élites and the local Estates remained extremely influential during the third quarter of the eighteenth century, and vigorously defended their separate legal systems and distinctive laws. The consequence was that the expansion of central authority and the ability to impose taxation which it conferred were always imperfectly realised, even in the context of the structural limitations upon all government in early modern Europe. In every major continental state during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there had been a significant increase in the reach of central authority, and especially its fiscal power, but no such evolution had occurred in the Habsburg Monarchy before the 1740s. The contrast with Vienna's great German rival, Prussia, was particularly striking and proved to be significant during the half century after 1740. This was always Austria's Achilles' heel: as it again proved to be during and after the Seven Years War.

The Habsburg army was a microcosm of the polity which supported it.[10] In the aftermath of the Thirty Years War – mirroring an evolution found in many central European territories – a standing army had grown up, and in the wars around 1700 it had increased significantly in size.[11] These troops had won important victories over Ottoman forces, and had performed respectably in the European wars against

[8] The Austrian and Bohemian territories were together known as the 'Hereditary Lands'.

[9] R.J.W. Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy 1550–1700* (Oxford, 1979), is the seminal study of this territorial and political consolidation. For the period after 1700, there are some penetrating remarks in Grete Klingenstein, 'The meanings of "Austria" and "Austrian" in the eighteenth century', in Robert Oresko, G.C. Gibbs and H.M. Scott, eds., *Royal and Republican Sovereignty in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Memory of Ragnhild Hatton* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 423–78.

[10] The best guide is J. Zimmermann, *Militärverwaltung und Heeresaufbringung in Österreich bis 1806* (Munich, 1983).

[11] Figures for its 'official' strength, counting infantry and cavalry in the line army, for the period 1695–1794, are contained in Dickson, *Finance*, ii, Appendix A.

Louis XIV. The Austrian army was always handicapped, however, by shortage of funds, particularly during the wars of 1733–48, and by its own structure. Once again the contrast with its Prussian rival was striking. The rank-and-file was filled up by a mixture of voluntary enlistment and forcible recruiting carried out by the provincial Estates, which together yielded far less impressive results than Prussia's Cantonal System, or even Russia's practice of levying recruits.[12] The officer corps was more cosmopolitan than in any other major European army, reflecting not merely the Monarchy's own diversity but also the extent to which the territorial nobilities appeared to have shunned military service. The shortcomings of leadership from which Austria's army suffered were in stark contrast to the disciplined officer *cadre* provided by Prussia's Junkers. Finally, even in the mid-eighteenth century, the Habsburg forces contained elements of older dispensations, above all the system of regimental proprietorship which recalled the era of military entrepreneurship a century before. The colonel-proprietor (*Inhaber*) retained important judicial, financial and administrative functions, which militated against the establishment of a strict military hierarchy and gave the army the character of a federation of regiments. This was to be found in all eighteenth-century forces, but not to the extent that it existed in the Austrian army. Its poor performance in the wars of 1733–48 had led to significant efforts at reform after the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748), though at first their impact had been incomplete. The shortcomings of the armed forces epitomised the way in which Austria's international position was always weakened, even in comparison to her eastern neighbours, by the deficiencies of her internal administration.

II

Before the eighteenth century, Russia's impact upon early modern Europe had been very limited. Located on the continent's eastern rim and separated by important religious, cultural and political traditions, contacts with the countries further west had been sporadic. This had been accentuated by her sheer size and diversity. Russia's frontiers, in Asia and in Europe, were far more extensive than those of any other state,[13] and her spectacular territorial expansion exacerbated the problems of defence and government. By comparison with the other two eastern powers, the Russian empire was rich in subjects and especially land. The available resources, however, were spread far more thinly, across an empire which sprawled through much of Asia towards the Far East. Successful expansion, from the sixteenth century onwards, had created an empire which far outstripped any European polity in scale. This vast territory, however, was far from uniform. The Black Earth areas which lay to the south and east of the traditional capital, Moscow, were rich grain-

[12] See below, pp. 15–16, 21–2, for these.

[13] This has recently been highlighted by John P. LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World, 1700–1917: The Geopolitics of Expansion and Containment* (New York, 1997).

growing regions which were the mainstay of Russian agriculture. Elsewhere the agrarian economy was primitive. Most of the empire comprised steppe, forest or, in Central Asia, desert, while it would be the later nineteenth century before a transport infrastructure was created. The facts of geography which Russia's rulers believed a source of weakness appeared a matter of simple strength when viewed from Europe. Contemporaries were blind to the problems of governing this gigantic land mass, which far eclipsed those of any other continental state, and instead regarded European Russia's relative invulnerability to attack as a special source of her strength.[14] The empire's feet of clay were seldom glimpsed further west.

Knowledge of the vast, mysterious, Muscovite empire, most of which lay across Asia, had been very limited, particularly in western Europe. Eighteenth-century maps distinguished clearly between 'Russia in Europe', which extended as far as the Urals, and 'Russia in Asia'.[15] She long remained – to western observers at least – a semi-Asiatic country, set aside from the European mainstream by her distinctive religion, culture and political system. In 1739 the French foreign office conjured up the danger that Russia's 'troupes barbares' might flood into Germany in a future war, articulating a fear which was to prove particularly tenacious, surviving until the early twentieth century.[16] The clear implication was that she was still a political outsider, not part of Europe's community of nations. Until the important reign of Peter I (1682/96–1725, known as 'Peter the Great'), she had not even been incorporated into the developing network of reciprocal diplomacy. The Russian empire had appeared as peripheral as its Ottoman counterpart. It was 1712 before a European writer – the abbé de Saint-Pierre – definitively included Russia among the European states.[17] Five more years elapsed before the French *Almanach Royal* first included the Romanov monarchy among the 'Kingdoms of Europe'.[18]

This belated inclusion was brought about by Peter I's important victories over the Swedish state during the first decade of the Great Northern War and the growth of Russian power which these signalled. He had destroyed Sweden's military power and with it her empire, and so re-established Russia on the Baltic, making her dominant in northern Europe. His troops had wintered in Mecklenburg in 1716, underlining the new potential of the Russian army. These successes, and the substantial territorial gains to which they led at the Peace of Nystad (1721), had enormously increased Russian power and prestige, and had given Peter's empire a new importance. They had been accompanied by the rapid modernisation of the armed forces, including the creation of a Baltic navy, and of government. These reforms built upon the work of Peter I's seventeenth-century predecessors and especially his own father Alexis (1645–76). Within a decade the army was completely overhauled, with

[14] Schroeder, *Transformation of European Politics*, pp. 14–15, 26.
[15] Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, pp. 23, 154.
[16] Instructions for the Marquis de la Chétardie, 1 July 1739, *Recueil . . . Russie*, ed. Rambaud, I, pp. 344.
[17] Simon Dixon, *The Modernisation of Russia 1676–1825* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 28.
[18] Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, p. 152.

new garrison and line regiments and an enlarged and more effective cavalry. Above all, a coherent and unified recruitment system was consolidated, which proved to be a relatively efficient way of establishing and maintaining a large military establishment.[19] Though burdensome upon the peasantry it conscripted and frequently inefficient, it was to provide Russia's eighteenth-century armies with relatively abundant manpower, one important ingredient in their success. Central government was modernised and expanded, though there were important limitations upon what was achieved. The shortage of trained personnel and the sheer vastness of the areas to be administered meant that central authority was vestigial in the more remote regions, while Peter I's impressive achievements had been highly personal in nature and did not prove enduring during the generation of political instability (1725–62) which followed his death.

Peter's successes had been accompanied by a significant expansion in economic and diplomatic contacts with Europe. Reciprocal permanent representation between Russia and the other European states – one of the hallmarks of modern diplomacy – began in the early eighteenth century.[20] Until then, her rulers had sent individual and short-term embassies for specific purposes and had only maintained a permanent representative in neighbouring Poland-Lithuania. The exigencies of the Great Northern War and Russia's enhanced international status under Peter I had led to a rapid increase in the number of diplomats sent and received and to the establishment of the first permanent Russian missions in central and western Europe. By 1701 Russian representatives were to be found in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen. There were more or less permanent embassies in Britain and Prussia from 1707, in France from 1720 and in Spain from 1724.[21] By the time of Peter I's death in the following year, Russia had been incorporated into the network of permanent, reciprocal diplomacy which linked the various European capitals.

This was not immediately accompanied, however, by an enlarged role within the European states system, underlining that though the two overlapped, they were not identical.[22] There was a clear distinction between Russia's rise as a military power under Peter I and her emergence as a great power, which was only achieved after the Seven Years War.[23] He had given his state a new importance in northern and eastern Europe, but he had not pushed Russian influence very far into central Europe: that would not be accomplished for another half century.[24] This was later recognised by

[19] D. Beyrau, *Militär und Gesellschaft im vorrevolutionären Russland* (Cologne, 1984), parts I and II; John L.H. Keep, *Soldiers of the Tsar: Army and Society in Russia 1462–1874* (Oxford, 1985), chs. 6–8.

[20] See D. Altbauer, 'The Diplomats of Peter the Great', *JGO* NF 28 (1980), pp. 1–16; and Avis Bohlen, 'Changes in Russian Diplomacy under Peter the Great', *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 7 (1966), pp. 341–58.

[21] M.S. Anderson, *The Rise of Modern Diplomacy 1450–1919* (London, 1993), p. 70.

[22] See above, p. 2.

[23] See the comments of George E. Munro, the editor and translator of Soloviev, *History of Russia* XLVII. xii.

[24] Manfred Hellmann, 'Die Friedensschlüsse von Nystad (1721) und Teschen (1779) als Etappen des Vordringens Russlands nach Europa', *Historisches Jahrbuch* 97/8 (1978), pp. 270–88; cf. below, pp. 253–4.

Nikita Panin, Catherine II's foreign minister, who wrote on one occasion that 'In leading his people out of ignorance, Peter the Great considered it a tremendous achievement to make them equal to powers of the second rank.'[25] Russia's military might was recognised by the time of his death in 1725, and she was henceforth to play a more significant role in eastern Europe, concluding important alliances with Austria and, for a time, Prussia.[26] But the Russian empire was not seen in London, Versailles or even Vienna as a leading state for another generation, until the Seven Years War. On the eve of that struggle Kaunitz still did not regard his ally as a state of equal standing to Austria, viewing her as an 'auxiliary power' which needed foreign subsidies if her military potential were to be mobilised.[27]

There were several reasons for this. Sweden's defeat and the partition of her Baltic empire had been attributed not only to Russia's new power but to her own weakness. Swedish human and economic resources had been seriously overextended, while the King, Charles XII (1697–1718), had pursued a mistaken and even foolhardy strategy. Petrine Russia was viewed as the agent as much as the fundamental cause of her eclipse. Fifty years later, the situation would be quite different. Prussia, with her formidable military machine, efficient administration and remarkable ruler, was clearly emerging as a leading continental state and this would magnify the impact of the Russian performance during the Seven Years War.[28] Neither Peter nor his successors secured admission to the ranks of Europe's leading states, not least because throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, Anglo-French rivalry in western Europe continued to dominate European diplomacy and alliances were shaped principally by fear of France. It was unclear to contemporaries exactly what assistance the distant and remote Russian empire could give against the French monarchy. Twice during the first half of the eighteenth century – in 1735 and 1748 – Russian troops had made the long march across Europe in an attempt to influence a struggle against Bourbon power. On both occasions these contingents arrived too late to play any active part in the fighting, reinforcing the widespread scepticism about her value as an ally.[29] The disintegration of an international system shaped by Anglo-French rivalry was essential to the emergence of Russia as a great

[25] Soloviev, *History of Russia*, XLV. 109.

[26] There is a notably intelligent discussion of Russia's eighteenth-century impact on Europe in Martin Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), pp. 17–84. This process is examined in the exhaustive and exhausting study by Walther Mediger, *Moskaus Weg nach Europa: der Aufstieg Russlands zum europäischen Machtstaat im Zeitalter Friedrichs des Grossen* (Brunswick, 1952), a study which, paradoxically, demonstrates at considerable length Russia's *limited* impact until Catherine II's reign. See also Reiner Pommerin, 'Bündnispolitik und Mächtesystem: Österreich und der Aufstieg Russlands im 18. Jahrhundert', in Johannes Kunisch, ed., *Expansion und Gleichgewicht: Studien zur europäischen Mächtepolitik des ancien régime* (Berlin, 1986), pp. 113–64, and Jeremy Black, 'Russia's Rise as a European Power, 1650–1750', *History Today* 36 (August 1986), pp. 21–8, which seriously exaggerates Russia's impact.

[27] Pommerin, 'Bündnispolitik und Mächtesystem', p. 131.

[28] See below, pp. 42–51.

[29] This was shared by Kaunitz: Lothar Schilling, *Kaunitz und das Renversement des Alliances: Studien zur aussenpolitischen Konzeption Wenzel Antons von Kaunitz* (Berlin, 1994), p. 121 and, more generally, pp. 97–121.

power. A further obstacle to full integration was Russia's failure, until Catherine II's reign, to adopt the distinctive diplomatic culture which was one foundation of the European states system.[30]

There was a final reason for her limited international impact before the Seven Years War: the narrow and at times blinkered policies pursued by Russian rulers and their advisers during these decades. Eighteenth-century great power status was not simply a matter of resources and relative power. Military muscle was an essential requirement, but did not itself secure that position, which possessed an ideological and qualitative dimension conferred by the conceptual sophistication of a country's leadership. This was most clearly appreciated by the late Andrew Lossky:

> This quality of greatness had little to do with manpower, resources or other quantifiable elements of strength. To put it crudely, it consisted in the ability of statesmen to count beyond three. Any statesman who is not mentally deranged can count up to three: my country, my country's enemy, and the enemy of my country's enemy, who is my ally. On this basis, it is quite possible to carry on an adequate foreign policy, but it will always have an air of simplistic provincialism about it. A statesman who can count to four will also be able to count beyond four; he will perceive an infinity of possible variations in the degree of hostility or alliance as well as the possibility of limited alliance with one's enemy or of limited hostility with one's ally. His mind's eye will also be able to take in at a glance the entire diplomatic chessboard in all its complexity. Such a statesman will have an inestimable advantage over his provincial-minded opposite numbers.[31]

While Lossky's undervaluing of the importance of resources may be questioned, his approach is illuminating. In the eighteenth century, statesmanship consisted of the ability to see the entire international system and the diplomatic possibilities it offered, rather than one dimension of it, and this conceptual sophistication in turn was a precondition of true great power status.

This suggests why Russia only became a leading European power during Catherine II's reign. The Petrine legacy to Russian foreign policy had been a preoccupation with three Baltic problems, all essentially dynastic in nature, and a corresponding neglect of the wider European issues.[32] This was accompanied by a failure to sustain the political momentum created by Peter I. Until the Seven Years

[30] See below, pp. 151–61, for a fuller analysis.

[31] This formulation of Andrew Lossky's *dictum* comes from his *Louis XIV and the French Monarchy* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1994), p. 62; an earlier version is to be found in his essay 'France in the System of Europe in the Seventeenth Century', *Proceedings of the Western Society for French Historical Studies* (1974), pp. 32–48.

[32] See the illuminating essay by Hans Bagger, 'The Role of the Baltic in Russian Foreign Policy, 1721–1773', in Hugh Ragsdale, ed, *Imperial Russian Foreign Policy* (Cambridge , 1993), pp. 36–72; the episodic and very detailed study by Mediger, *Moskaus Weg nach Europa*, confirms these dynastic preoccupations; the survey of the period 1725–62 by Michael G. Müller, 'Das "petrinische Erbe": Russische Grossmachtpolitik bis 1762', in Klaus Zernack, ed., *Handbuch der Geschichte Russlands, II:i – 1613–1856* (Stuttgart, 1986), pp. 402–44 – which assumes that Russia became a great power by 1725 – underlines the dominant place of these Baltic issues at this time and in fact demonstrates Russia's limited impact upon the European states system prior to the Seven Years War.

War, St Petersburg's diplomatic outlook was dominated by the political legacies of Peter I's treaties with Courland, Mecklenburg-Schwerin and especially Holstein-Gottorp. Relations with other states were viewed through this narrow Baltic prism, which was one reason why efforts to conclude alliances with Britain and France immediately after 1725 had been unsuccessful. The ministry of A.P. Bestuzhev-Riumin after 1744 saw a broadening of this perspective and began the process which would culminate in Russia's emergence as a great power.[33] The Chancellor sought to establish and maintain alliances with Britain, Saxony (whose Elector was also King of Poland) and especially Austria, and to direct this grouping of states against the rising power of Prussia, who appeared a rival in north-eastern Europe. This amounted to the creation and maintenance of a glacis, a region under St Petersburg's control beyond the western frontier which kept Russia's enemies at bay, and it became an enduring aim of her foreign policy. These objectives were apparent in the 1746 alliance with Vienna, renewing one concluded two decades earlier. But even Bestuzhev's foreign policy during the 1740s and 1750s had still been strongly influenced by the legacies of these dynastic problems and especially the Holstein-Gottorp issue.[34] The political sophistication demanded of a true great power would only be provided by the Empress and Panin after 1763.[35]

Russia's hesitant emergence as a naval power exactly paralleled her political evolution. During the second decade of the Great Northern War she had emerged as a major Baltic naval state, though the impetus had not been sustained, partly due to recurring financial problems. The 1730s had seen a rapid decline in this fleet and, though the Swedish War of 1741–3 and the heightened international tension of the later 1740s saw some improvement, it had been followed by a further sharp deterioration which continued until the very end of the 1760s. Throughout the first seven decades of the eighteenth century, the Russian navy had not even been the Baltic's largest fleet. Until the 1770s it had usually been smaller than that of Denmark, and only marginally larger than that of Sweden. Its purpose had been essentially defensive: that of protecting the Gulf of Finland and particularly the vulnerable new capital, St Petersburg, from attack. There were in any case formidable obstacles to Russia's emergence as a major naval power. Personnel was an enduring problem. Though serfs, sometimes provided with a year of basic training at sea, could be used to man the vessels, many of the officers had to be found abroad: Russia's officer corps was the most cosmopolitan of any major eighteenth-century navy. The material problems were even more serious, and they were to be magnified by the increased range and scale of the fleet's operations under Catherine II. Since they were built of larch and pine rather than oak, Russian ships had the shortest life-span of any

[33] His decisive impact upon Russian policy is apparent from Mediger, *Moskaus Weg nach Europa*, pp. 247–95, 582–627. See also the detailed and at times overblown study by Francine-Dominique Liechtenhan, *La Russie entre en Europe: Elisabeth I^re^ et la Succession d'Autriche (1740–1750)* (Paris, 1997).

[34] This would remain important in Catherine II's foreign policy: see below, pp. 125–9.

[35] See below, pp. 125–8, for a fuller account of this dynastic imbroglio.

contemporary navy. Until the war with the Ottoman empire after 1768, Russia would not be a significant European naval power and this inhibited her wider political evolution.

III

Prussia's emergence was quite different in nature. The Hohenzollern monarchy was a minor state which, during the middle decades of the eighteenth century, rose spectacularly in stature, rather than a powerful but peripheral empire which moved closer to the centre of the international system. When Frederick William I (1713–40) died, Brandenburg-Prussia was – in her new King's precise formulation – an hermaphrodite, being a kingdom in name but an electorate in fact. This expressed her relative insignificance when her best-known eighteenth-century ruler, Frederick II (1740–86; usually known as 'Frederick the Great') came to the throne. When her subjects in the Kingdom of Prussia are included, she was the most populous German territory after the Habsburg Monarchy. Since 1697 Brandenburg-Prussia had been the leader of the *corpus evangelicorum*, the Protestant party within the Holy Roman Empire (*Reich*). She was one of the larger electorates – Saxony, Bavaria and Hanover were the others – which were sufficiently powerful to be recognised as of more than German importance. On the European stage, however, she was a third- or, at best, a second-class state in 1740. The Hohenzollerns' acquisition of a royal title – 'King in Prussia' – in 1701 added lustre to the Hohenzollern dynasty, but prestige ran ahead of actual power for at least another half century.

Territorial dispersal, together with limited demographic and economic resources, were significant obstacles to Prussia's political rise. Her provinces were exposed and scattered across half the continent. Until the acquisition of Royal (that is to say, Polish) Prussia in 1772, the state known to historians as 'Prussia' in fact consisted of three widely scattered groups of territories: in the west the Rhineland enclaves of Cleves, Mark and Ravensberg, together with East Friesland, acquired in 1744; the core territories of Brandenburg, Pomerania and Silesia, together with Magdeburg and Halberstadt, lying astride the rivers Elbe and Oder; finally the exposed salient of East Prussia, the source of the dynasty's royal title. The consequent problems of self-defence, in the face of hostile and predatory neighbours, were considerable: the furthermost border of East Prussia lay some 750 miles from the Rhineland possessions, a particularly great distance during an era when communications were slow and unreliable. As Voltaire remarked, Frederick the Great was really 'King of the border strips'.

These problems were intensified by the fact that Prussia lacked the resources to support her commitments and ambitions, as Frederick continually emphasised and exaggerated in his writings in a blatant attempt to magnify his own achievements. Yet Prussia's relative poverty could not be doubted. Her population was around 2.25

million in 1740; by 1786, and largely due to the important territorial gains made during Frederick's reign, it had climbed to around 5.8 million. Her population density was particularly low by European and German standards. All the other continental great powers were much stronger demographically. France at mid-century had around 25 million inhabitants; Russia at Catherine II's accession in 1762 had some 23 million; while in that same year the central European lands of the Habsburg Monarchy had around 14 million. Even the fifth great power, the island kingdom of Britain (excluding Ireland) had between 6 and 7 million inhabitants during the Seven Years War. Prussia was also relatively poorly endowed with economic resources, although the export of agricultural produce to western Europe did raise significant sums in cash. With the exception of the Rhineland territories, however, the Hohenzollern lands were impoverished and backward, and contained little industry. Both in the central provinces and in East Prussia, poor soil together with an inhospitable climate ensured that subsistence agriculture prevailed, with a dependent and sometimes enserfed peasantry and small agrarian surpluses. Commercial activity was at a very low level, with only grain and grain-based products being exported, and was driven largely by the demands of the Prussian state, while geographical location and poor internal communications together ensured that the Hohenzollern territories were by-passed by the major trade routes.

Frederick also inherited significant assets when he became King on 31 May 1740. Principal among these was an army which was unusually large for a country of its size, population and political importance. Successive Hohenzollern rulers, aware of the vulnerability of their scattered possessions, had built up a large military force for self-defence. Its creation has shaped internal developments since the Great Elector's accession in 1640, and during Frederick William I's reign it ordinarily consumed around 70 per cent of annual peacetime revenue. In 1740 the army was some 80,000 strong, impressive on the barrack square but untested in combat. With the exception of some indecisive operations in the Rhineland in 1734, during the War of the Polish Succession, it had not fired a shot in anger since the siege of Stralsund in 1715. Its last important victory had been gained as long ago as 1675, though Prussian contingents had fought impressively in the allied armies during the War of the Spanish Succession.

This powerful army was supported, and to a considerable degree made possible, by a system of conscription which had been given its final shape in 1733.[36] Though neither ubiquitous nor uniform, the famous Cantonal System enabled a first-class army to be maintained on the scanty available resources, while an officer cadre was provided by the territorial nobility: the Junkers had come to dominate the military

[36] See the pioneering study by Otto Büsch, *Militärsystem und Sozialleben im alten Preussen 1713–1807* (Berlin, 1962). His thesis of 'social militarisation' has proved controversial and is being seriously qualiied by recent research, which is valuably surveyed by Peter H. Wilson, 'Social Militarization in Eighteenth-Century Germany', *German History* 18 (2000), pp. 1–39.

commands and, to a lesser extent, the civil administration.[37] The old King also bequeathed to his son a war-chest (*Staatsschatz*) of 8 million *taler* in gold coin, built up from the annual budgetary surpluses which he created. Finally, Frederick inherited an admired and relatively efficient administrative system, the centrepiece of which was the General Directory, established in 1723. Within the limitations of eighteenth-century government, it was remarkably successful in extracting the men, money and agrarian produce needed to support the army and pay the other expenses of the Prussian state.

The military and administrative foundations laid by 1740, together with the social integration achieved under Frederick William I, would provide the necessary foundation of Prussia's eighteenth-century political emergence. But these advantages, in the estimation of most contemporaries, were insufficient to overcome the drawbacks, above all Prussia's territorial vulnerability and her basic poverty, which preoccupied Frederick the Great throughout his reign. Eighteenth-century Prussia always lacked the resources required to establish herself securely as a great power. The achievement of her rulers, and especially of Frederick himself, was to make her a first-class state on a material base more appropriate to a country of the second or even third rank. Even by the time of his death in 1786 and after the important acquisitions of Silesia, East Friesland and Polish Prussia, the Hohenzollern monarchy remained only the thirteenth largest European state in terms of population and the tenth in terms of its geographical extent, though its army ranked fourth (or even third) in size.

Mid-eighteenth-century Prussia had one further advantage which proved decisive: the personality of her King. Political leadership was always important and could be decisive within the competitive states system of eighteenth-century Europe, and never more so than in Prussia's case. To become a member of Europe's political élite, a state – or rather its ruler and that monarch's advisers – had to think and act like a great power.[38] The crucial moment in this transition for Prussia was Frederick the Great's accession in 1740. His predecessor had accepted a secondary political role, pursuing essentially limited objectives such as Berlin's established dynastic claims to the Rhineland enclaves of Jülich and Berg. Frederick William I's political vision was relatively narrow and traditional, and he had usually been content to follow the lead of the Emperor, Charles VI (1711–40).

The contrast after his son's accession had been striking. From the moment he became King – indeed, from his days as Crown Prince – Frederick the Great thought and acted like the ruler of a first-class power, and within a quarter of a century he had raised Prussia to this status. By his political vision, his military successes and his

[37] See in particular Peter-Michael Hahn, 'Aristokratisierung und Professionalisierung: der Aufstieg der Obristen zu einer militärischen und höfischen Elite in Brandenburg-Preussen von 1650–1725', *FBPG* NF 1 (1991), pp. 161–208.

[38] See above, p. 18.This was also true of Russia's political emergence, in which the key point was Catherine II's accession in July 1762: see below, pp. 160–1.

diplomatic skills, he made his scattered possessions into a major state, while remaining aware that the domestic base to sustain this role was probably lacking. His decisive political leadership was based upon remarkable intellectual and political abilities together with an ego to match. Believing that the *status quo* was not an option and that territorial expansion was essential in order to overcome Prussia's poverty and strategic vulnerability, the young King pursued the expansionist aims which he viewed as the logical conclusion of his father's impressive domestic achievements. His political vision was far wider, encompassing the whole European diplomatic chessboard. It was apparent in an immediate enlargement of Hohenzollern aims which went far beyond the purely dynastic and largely German objectives pursued under Frederick William I.

IV

Prussia's upward trajectory was inaugurated by her sudden and wholly unexpected invasion of Silesia in December 1740.[39] This wealthy and strategically located Habsburg province lay to the south and east of Brandenburg. The decision to invade was Frederick's alone, and exemplified the new spirit which guided Berlin's policy. Opportunities were there to be seized, and the King judged that which presented itself in late autumn 1740, on the unexpected death of Charles VI, to be uniquely favourable. Encountering minimal Austrian resistance, he overran Silesia within six weeks. An attempted Habsburg counter-attack in spring 1741 was unsuccessful. In April the well-drilled Prussian infantry won an important if fortuitous victory at Mollwitz which encouraged the formation of a wide-ranging coalition directed against Austria and containing France, Spain, Savoy-Piedmont, Bavaria and Saxony. It was this alliance and especially French military power which was to play the leading role in the subsequent struggle.

The War of the Austrian Succession would not be concluded until October and November 1748, when the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle was signed.[40] Yet Prussia was actually at war for less than half this time: some three years out of a total of eight. German scholarship, acknowledging this, refers not to the 'War of the Austrian Succession' but to the 'First Silesian War' (1740–2) and the 'Second Silesian War' (1744–5). By spring 1742 Frederick's war-chest was all but exhausted, and in June he signed a unilateral peace with Maria Theresa (Treaty of Breslau, confirmed at Berlin in the following month) by which Prussia withdrew in return for guaranteed possession of Silesia. When this appeared to be threatened by an Austrian recovery, the King re-entered the war in August 1744. Impressive victories at Hohenfriedberg

[39] The best survey of Prussia's impact upon Europe is still that contained in the standard life-and-times by Reinhold Koser, *Geschichte Friedrichs des Grossen* (3 vols., 6th–7th edns, Berlin, 1925). Among more recent discussions, that by Schieder, *Friedrich*, pp. 127–224, is particularly noteworthy.

[40] There are recent studies by M.S. Anderson, *The War of the Austrian Sucession 1740–1748* (London, 1995), and Reed Browning, *The War of the Austrian Succession* (Stroud, 1994).

(June 1745) and Soor (September), together with the decisive success won by the veteran Prussian commander, Prince Leopold of Anhalt, at Kesseldorf (December), enabled the King to conclude another unilateral agreement with Vienna. By the Peace of Dresden (December 1745) he withdrew from the struggle for the final time in return for a further guarantee of Silesia. The eventual peace settlement at Aix-la-Chapelle provided an international guarantee, which Frederick greatly valued, for this striking gain. The Hohenzollern monarchy's enhanced European status was evident in the way in which her present ally France and her would-be ally Britain competed for the honour of inserting this clause into the final treaty.

Frederick had secured Silesia by exploiting the wider continental struggle and allowing other states to bear the brunt of the fighting against Austria. Convinced of Prussia's strategic vulnerability and believing that scarce resources forced him to fight what he termed 'lively and short wars' – his father's war-chest had been seriously depleted after only two campaigns – the King pursued an opportunistic and single-minded strategy which gained him a new province and considerably enhanced international standing, at the price of a well-deserved and enduring reputation for faithlessness where international agreements were concerned. The three occasions on which he had deserted the anti-Austrian coalition – first, in October 1741 by the truce of Kleinschnellendorf, then by the unilateral settlements of Breslau-Berlin and Dresden – were not forgotten by his allies, especially France, and would come back to haunt him in the years ahead. Frederick's troops had won some significant victories, though there had been reverses as well: the retreat from Bohemia in the final months of 1744 had been little short of a disaster. Prussia's army, however, had gained considerably in reputation and also in size: it was now approaching 150,000 strong.

Neighbouring states such as Hanover (whose Elector was also King of Great Britain) and Saxony (whose ruling family were also Kings of Poland-Lithuania until 1763) were alarmed by the potential of the Prussian military state. The extent to which its revenues and resources were devoted to the single objective of supporting a formidable army caused particular anxiety. There is no doubt that Prussia's striking gain, which was extremely unusual in the eighteenth century because it had involved seizing territory from an established great power rather than a second-rank or declining state, increased her political standing. Other chancelleries were far more aware of Prussian power than a decade before, and were anxious to understand how such a poor and seemingly vulnerable state could support such a formidable army, collecting and analysing all the information they could about the Hohenzollern monarchy and its remarkable ruler. It is important, however, not to exaggerate what Frederick had achieved during the 1740s. Within the Empire, Prussia's rise had been striking. It was the first occasion on which one of the Electorates had achieved equality with the House of Habsburg, with its much larger territorial power-base and imperial dignity. In the wider context of central European politics the King's achievements were more limited. He had secured ter-

ritory and prestige for his state, and renown for himself, but he had not made Prussia a great power. Silesia was a considerable territorial gain, particularly for the impoverished Hohenzollern lands. The river Oder which ran through the new province and then Brandenburg on its way to the Baltic was now a potentially important commercial artery. Silesia's thriving linen industry was very significant for the backward Hohenzollern economy while, with state support, woollen production would develop impressively. Its economic importance was evident in the fact that, within a decade, it was providing no less than 45 per cent of Prussia's total exports. It thus brought what the Hohenzollern state had hitherto lacked: a manufacturing region.

It also posed problems for the government in Berlin. The new province had to be integrated into the Prussian administrative system, which proved to be difficult and time-consuming, and its fortifications had to be improved. Its acquisition increased the already extended frontiers which had to be defended, while Austria was quite unreconciled to its loss, which compromised her security and military strategy. The recovery of the province was to be the central Habsburg aim throughout the next two decades and continued to influence Vienna's policy until the very end of the eighteenth century. Prussian possession of Silesia meant that the invasion route from its foothills across the Bohemian plain to the very gates of Vienna lay open, with only Moravia as a defensive barrier behind which Austrian forces could organise. Though such an enterprise was not without its difficulties and even risks, Frederick could invade Bohemia at will from his Silesian redoubt: as he did during the Seven Years War. The province's strategic and material benefits, however, were less important than its symbolic importance. By seizing Silesia, Prussia signalled to her neighbours and to the leading European states that she was a rising political force, and obliged Austria to acknowledge that she faced a formidable rival in Germany.

The Prussian annexation of Silesia drove a wedge between Saxony and Poland, united dynastically under the Wettins, and strengthened that family's enmity towards its powerful neighbour.[41] Graf Heinrich von Brühl, Augustus III's principal adviser, was alarmed by the emergence of Prussia's military power during the 1740s and aware of the vulnerability of the Electorate-Kingdom. Rivalry between the Wettins and the Hohenzollerns, political neighbours as well as two of the more powerful German Electorates, was traditional, and this had strengthened as the power of each had waxed. During the first half of the eighteenth century, however, Prussia's impressive internal consolidation had contrasted starkly with the mounting debts and political weakness of the Wettins, for whom possession of the Polish crown (1697–1763) had not brought the anticipated advantages. The Electorate of Saxony, however, remained one of the leading middle-sized German states. Its population of around 2 million rivalled that of Brandenburg-Prussia, while its economy

[41] This is apparent from Aladár von Boroviczény, *Graf von Brühl: der Medici, Richelieu und Rothschild seiner Zeit* (Zürich, Leipzig and Vienna, 1930), which, in spite of the preposterous subtitle, provides an informative political biography of Saxony's leading minister.

was far more advanced than that of its Hohenzollern neighbour. Rich soil was the basis of its agrarian prosperity, while it also contained thriving craft industries, significant mining and an important transit trade. Frederick, in his endless search for new resources, set out to exploit his rich but vulnerable neighbour. The decade before 1756 saw a vigorous customs' war, with Prussia wrecking negotiations which would have encouraged the development of a transit trade. The King continued this commercial antagonism after the Seven Years War.[42] Indeed, he long contemplated annexing his wealthy neighbour, though how realistic an aim this was must be questioned.[43]

The War of the Austrian Succession had also aroused Frederick's hostility and even fear towards Saxony. This was less because of her military potential than the political and strategic threat which she represented. Financial difficulties ensured that her army was now only 25,000 strong, a total which would shrink still further by 1756.[44] The political threat was more serious, since possession of the Polish crown made the Wettins clients of Russia; they were also traditional allies of Austria.[45] Yet it was the strategic threat which had been highlighted by the recent fighting which most concerned Frederick. The Wettins had their own claim to the imperial throne, and so the Electorate had initially been part of the anti-Austrian coalition, but it had then reverted to its traditional support of Vienna. In the Second Silesian War, the danger of an invasion of Brandenburg from Saxony had been evident: in the closing months of 1745 an Austro-Saxon army threatened to attack the Hohenzollern heartlands and was only prevented from doing so by its own slowness. The vulnerable and defenceless frontier with the Electorate was the principal source of Frederick's enduring concern with – and fear of – the threat posed by Saxony, which lay only some fifty miles from his own capital, Berlin. He feared it would be used as an advanced bridgehead for an attack: in 1752 he revealingly described it as a dagger pointing at Brandenburg's heart.[46] Supplies could be moved rapidly down the river Elbe, which flowed through the Electorate before bisecting Hohenzollern territory.

The strengthened hostility towards Saxony was one further legacy of the War of the Austrian Succession for Prussia, and it would prove enduring. Frederick acknowledged the considerable progress his state had made, but recognised that it was incomplete. The King saw, more clearly than many foreign observers, the shortcomings of the Prussian army, upon which his international position ultimately depended. The period of peace after the First Silesian War in June 1742 had seen determined efforts to improve the cavalry and infantry, and these continued after

[42] See below, p. 112.

[43] See the 1752 Political Testament: *Die politischen Testamente*, ed. Dietrich, pp. 368–72 *passim*; its successor of 1768 endorsed this objective: pp. 658, 664.

[44] Peter H. Wilson, *German Armies: War and German Politics, 1648–1806* (London, 1998), pp. 252, 264: on the eve of the Seven Years War it was 19,000.

[45] See Frederick's comments in 1752: *Die politischen Testamente*, ed. Dietrich, pp. 334, 342.

[46] Dennis E. Showalter, *The Wars of Frederick the Great* (London, 1995), p. 132.

1745. The next decade saw a significant overhaul and a considerable expansion of the army, personally supervised by the King in a series of inspections, parades and manoeuvres. Prussian government was simultaneously strengthened, particularly its ability to exploit the new province and to encourage state industries. The broader aim was to integrate the economy still further into the military state. Its success was apparent in the increasing proportion of royal income spent on the army. Under Frederick William I this had been around 70 per cent. Between 1740 and 1756 it rose to 83 per cent and, during the Seven Years War, it would reach 87 per cent.[47]

This was undertaken for purely defensive purposes. Domestic consolidation, not further foreign adventure, was the King's priority after 1745. Frederick was acutely aware of Prussia's strategic overextension and of the still-limited resources which would be available to resist an Austrian attempt to recover Silesia: he well understood that Vienna was unreconciled to its loss. He also recognised that Prussia remained a second-class power. In his confidential survey of foreign policy drawn up as part of the first Political Testament in 1752 he did not rank his own Hohenzollern monarchy among Europe's leading states. His analysis recognised that France and Britain, the only two unambiguously great powers, dominated the international system, and that the next most powerful were his arch-enemy Austria and, in a different way, Russia.[48]

Prussia's security depended upon the established alliance with France, which was based upon shared hostility towards the Austrian Habsburgs. Frederick declared on one occasion that the Duchy of Lorraine (from which Maria Theresa's husband, Francis Stephen, had been expelled in 1737 and which would eventually become part of the French monarchy) and Silesia were two sisters. France had married the younger and Prussia the elder, and this forced them to pursue the same policy.[49] These ties, however, had already been weakened by the King's own conduct. During the 1740s he had abandoned France on three separate occasions, by signing unilateral agreements with Vienna in defiance of his treaty obligations. This had secured Silesia, but at the price of worsening relations with Versailles, where his desertion was neither forgotten nor forgiven. In the short term, the War of the Austrian Succession had strengthened the Franco-Prussian axis. This was because the decline of Bavaria, strikingly evident during the 1740s, had made Prussia the principal basis for France's policy within the Empire. Frederick's alliance appeared secure as long as French foreign policy retained its anti-Austrian orientation and in 1748, at the end of the latest attempt to destroy Habsburg power, that seemed unlikely to change.[50] Prussia's essential problem was that her acquisition of Silesia had been made

[47] Adelheid Simsch, 'Armee, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Preussens Kampf auf der "inneren Linie"', in Bernhard R. Kroener, ed., *Europa im Zeitalter Friedrichs des Grossen: Wirtschaft, Gesellschaft, Kriege* (Munich, 1989), pp. 35–46, at pp. 39–40.

[48] *Die politischen Testamente*, ed. Dietrich, p. 344 and pp. 330–50 *passim*.

[49] Political Testament of 1752: *Die politischen Testamente*, ed. Dietrich, p. 344.

[50] For the King's confidence on this point, see Political Testament of 1752: *Die politischen Testamente*, ed. Dietrich, p. 346.

possible by the existing diplomatic constellation, but her own rise threatened and eventually destroyed those very patterns upon which she herself depended.

Before long a new direction in Austrian foreign policy posed a challenge to the Prusso-French axis.[51] Its proponent was a member of the Moravian service nobility, Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz, who was one of a group of younger advisers who had emerged during the 1740s and had represented Austria at the Aix-la-Chapelle peace conference.[52] He came to prominence in 1749, during the important debates about future Habsburg foreign policy. Kaunitz appreciated that Prussia's rise within Germany between 1740 and 1745 had made her Vienna's greatest enemy, and sought to realign its priorities to take account of this. Silesia's recovery was seen as the principal objective, and important administrative and military reforms were already under way, in preparation for a future war. They were accompanied by a reorientation of Austrian diplomacy, which now recognised Prussia and not France as its principal enemy. With Maria Theresa's decisive support, Kaunitz argued for and set out to create a *rapprochement* and, if possible, an actual alliance with Versailles. Sent to France as ambassador (1750–2) he unsuccessfully pursued such a treaty: at this point the established diplomatic patterns held firm. In 1753 Kaunitz was placed in charge of Habsburg foreign policy as Chancellor (*Staatskanzler*) and, though for the moment his projected alliance made no obvious progress, Austria's eventual aim was clear.

By the second half of 1755 Prussia's international position was beginning to unravel, against a background of an undeclared Anglo-French war in North America which was heightening tension within Europe and threatened to spread to the continent.[53] Frederick had always feared Russia's potential power and its threat to his East Prussian Kingdom. He knew that the Empress Elizabeth and her leading

[51] The classic, though occasionally somewhat deterministic, account remains Max Braubach, *Versailles und Wien von Ludwig XIV. bis Kaunitz: die Vorstadien der diplomatischen Revolution im 18. Jahrhundert* (Bonn, 1952), pp. 360–456; Schilling, *Kaunitz und das Renversement des Alliances*, provides an important and thought-provoking examination of his approach to international relations at this period.

[52] The literature on Kaunitz is surprisingly meagre in view of his quite central importance, though this situation has recently begun to improve. There are two rather inadequate older biographies: Georg Küntzel, *Fürst Kaunitz-Rittberg als Staatsmann* (Frankfurt, 1923), is a rapid and uncritical summary of his foreign policy, while Alexander Novotny, *Staatskanzler Kaunitz als Geistige Persönlichkeit* (Vienna, 1947), is interesting but equally one-sided, concentrating on Kaunitz as a 'man of the Enlightenment'. Grete Klingenstein's superb *Der Aufstieg des Hauses Kaunitz: Studien zur Herkunft und Bildung des Staatskanzlers Wenzel Anton* (Göttingen, 1975) established a new standard for writing on Kaunitz and provided a compelling account (pp. 158–301) of his formation and early career, though it only extends up to 1753. It does contain, however, some perceptive comments (pp. 9–25) on Kaunitz historiography. The Chancellor's approach to foreign policy is the subject of the major study by Schilling, *Kaunitz und das Renversement des Alliances*, while Franz A.J. Szabo, *Kaunitz and Enlightened Absolutism 1753–1780* (Cambridge, 1994), examines his role in domestic policy down to Maria Theresa's death. Finally, many aspects of his career are studied in the important collection of essays edited by Klingenstein and Szabo, eds., *Staatskanzler Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz-Rietberg*.

[53] The King's foreign policy in the critical months from mid–1755 until late August 1756 can be followed in *Pol. Corr.*, XI–XIII *passim*. Richard Waddington, *Louis XV et le renversement des alliances: préliminaires de la guerre de sept ans 1754–1756* (Paris, 1896), remains unsurpassed as a study of the Diplomatic Revolution and the origins of the Seven Years War.

minister, Bestuzhev-Riumin, were anxious to weaken Prussia, seen as a potential rival in north-eastern Europe and an obstacle to further Russian expansion there. Frederick knew that a renewed Russo-Austrian alliance signed in 1746, the so-called Treaty of the Two Empresses, contained a secret clause which provided for the eventual partition of the Hohenzollern monarchy. Yet until the mid-1750s he believed that Russia's lack of a wealthy ally would protect him from attack, underlining that he did not yet view her as a leading power. He calculated that St Petersburg's own poverty and backwardness were so great that only subsidies could propel the Russian military machine into action.[54] In September 1755, Europe's leading commercial state, Britain, concluded a subsidy convention (that of St Petersburg) putting Russian troops and ships at London's disposal as part of the British diplomatic effort to threaten France's ally Prussia and in this way protect George II's Hanoverian homeland should war spread to Europe. Though this convention was never ratified, it set in motion a series of events which revolutionised European diplomacy and involved Frederick in the new war which he had long dreaded.

The King feared Russia and her threat to East Prussia. This, together with the apparent British-Russian axis, forced Frederick to act to strengthen his own security. He believed – or, more accurately, hoped – that British influence in St Petersburg might weaken Russian antagonism towards Prussia, though this did not prove to be the case. In January 1756, building on some generalised British approaches which had begun in the middle of the previous year, Prussia's King signed a remarkably vague agreement – far short of a treaty of defensive alliance – with Britain, the so-called Convention of Westminster. This provided for joint action to defend the peace of Germany, if the colonial war should lead to a French attack on Hanover. It was a further dimension of London's efforts to protect George II's Electorate through continental alliances. Though this proved a misjudgement on Frederick's part, by the winter of 1755–6 his options were rapidly narrowing and it was an understandable reaction to the Anglo-Russian agreement and Prussia's deteriorating security position.

The Convention of Westminster had a decisive impact at the French court, where it was seen as Frederick's latest and most serious betrayal. This was particularly important as the Franco-Prussian alliance was about to lapse, and Prussia's agreement with London ensured no new treaty would be signed with Versailles. Instead, it breathed new life into the Austro-French negotiations, until then becalmed. Kaunitz's renewed offers of an alliance were accepted and the First Treaty of Versailles was signed on 1 May 1756. This conventional defensive alliance was the centrepiece of the famous 'Diplomatic Revolution' of that year, ending as it did a tradition of political rivalry and open warfare between the Austrian Habsburgs and the French monarchy which went back to the end of the fifteenth century. The Austro-French *rapprochement* was a particularly serious matter for Frederick, since

[54] Political Testament of 1752: *Die politischen Testamente*, ed. Dietrich, pp. 334, 348.

it completed the encirclement of Prussia, now isolated in the face of three powerful enemies. The Hohenzollerns' principal foe, Austria, had alliances with France and Russia, and was preparing for a war which – Frederick believed – would be launched in 1757. Indeed, in the late spring of the previous year only Austrian diplomatic pressure had postponed a unilateral Russian attack on her Hohenzollern rival. Against this threatening background, the King seized the initiative and, on 29 August 1756, led his troops into neighbouring Saxony, thereby precipitating the continental Seven Years War.

The invasion of Saxony, like that of Silesia fifteen years earlier, appeared simple aggression. It was also, more importantly, a diplomatic miscalculation. Though Austria's aims were offensive, her alliances with France and Russia were purely defensive in nature and required a Prussian attack to make them operative: as Kaunitz was well aware. If Vienna launched a war in spring 1757, the Habsburgs would have Russia (which had mobilised for an attack on Prussia in spring 1756: one source of Frederick's anxieties at that time, until preparations were suspended) but not France on their side. French armies and subsidies, however, were crucial to Kaunitz's calculations. By invading Saxony, the daughter of whose Elector was married to the French *dauphin* (heir apparent), Frederick ensured that Louis XV's monarchy would fight in the continental war and would eventually commit her considerable resources against Prussia. The King had always believed that his military superiority would enable him to defeat Austria and Russia alone, but he now faced France as well.

Frederick had wanted to avoid a conflict, but once convinced it was inevitable he set out to dictate its shape and nature. The decision to fight was, once again, the King's alone: among his advisers and immediate family only General Hans Karl von Winterfeldt, the rising star of the Prussian military establishment, supported the decision to invade Saxony. By mid-June 1756 the King was convinced that he would be attacked in the following spring, and might even have to face three armies simultaneously.[55] Determined that any war must be as short as possible, to protect Prussia's limited resources, he concluded that he should seize the initiative. Frederick's established anxieties about the strategic threat from Saxony were reinforced by his conviction that the Electorate was, or would soon become, a member of the coalition which menaced him. In these circumstances there was a strong military argument – and as war approached military factors came to predominate over diplomatic considerations in Frederick's own thinking – for a pre-emptive strike. In 1744–5 Prussian troops had violated Saxon territory, when its ruler re-entered the war on Austria's side, in a dress rehearsal for their behaviour after 1756. In the event Frederick's actions in the late summer and autumn of that year enjoyed apparent success. The Elector's army was surrounded and disbanded, and 18,000 soldiers were incorporated into Prussian regiments, though many subsequently deserted.

[55] See the correspondence for these months in *Pol. Corr.*, XII.

The Saxon ruler was permitted to withdraw to his Polish Kingdom, where he remained until the end of the intense struggle which now began. The Seven Years War would not be concluded until 1763, by which point it would have transformed the eighteenth-century states system.