



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 2. From Absolutism to Napoleon, 1648-1815

Prussian King Frederick II (“the Great”), Correspondence preceding the First Partition of Poland (1770-71)

These exchanges display Frederick’s caution in the face of an international situation in Eastern Europe in which a Russian war with the Ottoman Empire, accompanied by civil war in Poland, threatened to bring Austria onto the battlefield, so as to contest Russian gains at the Turks’ expense and to pursue its own expansive ambitions. As it stood, Austria had already started advancing these ambitions in 1769 by seizing lands under Polish overlordship on the Hungarian border. Frederick had long regarded the annexation of Polish Royal Prussia, which lay between Prussia’s East Prussian and Pomeranian provinces, as highly desirable, but also difficult to attain. But in the dangerous constellation of 1770-71, it was also likely that, should a Russo-Austrian war explode, Prussia would find itself caught between the warring parties and thus obliged to return to the battlefield, despite the wounds that Frederick’s earlier wars had inflicted on Prussia. Better, then, as these letters suggest, to settle the Austro-Russian conflict at Poland’s expense. And so it was that the first partition of Poland came about: Austria took Galicia, Russia took parts of the Russo-Polish borderlands, and Frederick won the real prize, Polish Royal Prussia, rebaptized and subsequently known in Germany as “West Prussia.”

Prince Henry to Frederick (Saint Petersburg, June 14, 1770)

I admit that my imagination was struck by this idea, the first time that you have done me the honor of speaking of proposals made to you, however vague. But if it is a chimera, it is such an agreeable one that I find it difficult to renounce. I should like to see you master of the coasts of the Baltic, sharing with the most formidable German Prince the influence that those Powers, united, might exercise in Europe. If it is a dream, it is a very gracious one, and you may imagine that the interest that I take in your glory makes me wish to see it realized.

Frederick to Prince Henry (Potsdam, June 25, 1770)

I see, my dear brother, that you are blessed with a hearty appetite in political affairs. But I, who am old, have lost that which I possessed in my youth. Not that your ideas are not excellent, but one must have the wind of fortune in one’s sails for such enterprises to succeed, and I no longer dare, or am able, to flatter myself of this. It is, however, always good to keep these plans in reserve, to realize them if the occasion presents itself. We are placed between two Great Powers, Austria and Russia; it is certain that, to keep the balance between them without risk, we are too weak at present to acquit ourselves well; but the biggest evil is that neither Austria nor Russia is very anxious to contribute to our aggrandizement.

Frederick to Privy Councillor of Legation Count von Solms at Saint Petersburg (Potsdam, February 20, 1771)

I think it well to communicate to you the details which I have received of the occupation effected by the Austrians of territory along the frontiers of Hungary, which seems to me interesting enough to merit the attention of the neighboring Powers. I have just learned that not only the Starosty [District] of Zips, but also those of Novitarg, Czorstyn, and another area equally considerable have been surrounded by an Austrian cordon; that the territory so occupied is probably some 20 miles in length, from the County of Sáros in Hungary to the frontiers of Austrian Silesia; that it contains in all several towns and up to ninety-seven villages; that the Court of Vienna has already exercised sovereign rights there several times; that in reply to the complaints made by the Republic of Poland, Prince Kaunitz has given replies which are vague, but clearly indicate an intention to assert ancient rights, and they are probably already at work in Vienna to make a case to justify and support these various seizures.

I have no doubt that Petersburg has already informed itself of most of this. I even remember that the first news which arrived of the occupation gave rise in the minds of many persons at the Russian Court to the idea of an equal aggrandizement for all Poland's neighbors, and although I saw from one of your reports that that idea did not take general hold, and although I feel very strongly the reasons that could be adduced against it, I have yet thought well to write to you, because these reasons are always based on the assumption that the Court of Vienna will desist from its enterprise, whereas all the indications which I have just passed on to you make it plain that it is firmly resolved to persist in it.

If we thus look at the realities of the position, the question is no longer one of maintaining Poland intact, since the Austrians want to truncate it, but of preventing this dismemberment from upsetting that balance between the House of Austria and my own that is so important for me and of such interest to the Russian Court itself. But I see no other way of maintaining it than to imitate the example set me by the Court of Vienna, to assert, as it does, old claims which the archives will produce for me, and to place myself in possession of some little province of Poland, which can be restored if the Austrians desist from their enterprise or retained if they try to make good the pretended title alleged by them.

You will yourself feel that an acquisition of this kind could offend no one, that the Poles, who are the only party which would have a right to cry out, have by their attitude forfeited any right to be considered either by the Court of Russia or by my own, and that once the Great Powers are agreed, this could not prevent the work of pacification.

But I should like first to know the real feelings of the Russian Court on this question, and I leave you free to choose whatever means you regard as most proper and fitting to achieve this. If you succeed in getting the Empress and her Minister to adopt my views, you will be rendering me a service that will be the more agreeable because, as I see it, this is the only means of preserving equality between me and the Court of Vienna. I consequently have no doubt that you will

employ all your tact to carry out this commission in accordance with my wishes, and that you will render me an exact and detailed account of how far you have been successful.

Frederick to Count von Solms (Potsdam, February 27, 1771)

Your dispatch of the twelfth of this month has duly reached me, and since it informs me that the postillion carrying the post of January 27 was robbed near Petersburg, I hasten to send you herewith a duplicate of my orders of the twenty-seventh of that month.

I also enclose a passport which the "Administrator" of the district of Poland occupied by the Court of Vienna issued on November 8, 1770, to the Staroste [Prefect] Pelilcancyk, which shows only too clearly that that Court already regards that district, with all its dependencies, as States incorporated in its Kingdom of Hungary. This move proves clearly enough that it is determined to keep it, and I have every reason to suppose that it will never relinquish it unless obliged to do so by *force majeure*.

This idea naturally leads me on to another, and leads me to believe that the best course would be if Russia and I profited equally from this situation, and if, imitating the Court of Vienna, we looked to our own interests and derived some real and proportionate advantage from it. It seems to me, in fact, that it must be indifferent to Russia in which quarter she gets the compensation she is, as your despatch announces, so anxious to obtain. For although her present war arose solely out of Polish affairs, I do not see why she need think only of gaining her compensation from the territory of that Republic, and for myself, if I want to prevent the balance from being tipped too far to the Austrian side, I could not renounce obtaining for myself, in the same way, some small part of Poland, if it were only as a token equivalent for my subsidies and the losses and damage that I have suffered during this war. Even more, I shall be greatly pleased if I am able to say truthfully that it is to Russia that I am chiefly obliged for this new acquisition, which will, at the same time, furnish a new opportunity for us to reaffirm our mutual links and to render them more unbreakable than ever.

As to her peace negotiations, she may, on the contrary, rest well assured that I shall not cease to support her to the best of my power, and that I shall leave no stone unturned to procure for her a glorious peace; and on this point, I must inform you that her Minister at Vienna, Prince Galitzin, has already carried out the commission which he was ordered to perform with Prince Kaunitz. So far, however, he is still waiting for his answer, Kaunitz having only received his proposals *ad referendum*, pending Her Imperial and Royal Majesty's decision. He will soon be given his answer, and we shall see how it will run. [. . .]

[*The rest of the despatch is concerned only with enjoining the completest secrecy.*]

Source of English translation: C.A. Macartney, ed., *The Habsburg and Hohenzollern Dynasties in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, in *Documentary History of Western Civilization*. New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1970, pp. 355-59. Introduction, editorial notes, chronology, translations by the editor; and compilation copyright © 1970 by C.A. Macartney. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

Source of original French texts: R. Koser, *Aus der Vorgeschichte der ersten Teilung Polens* [*From the Prehistory of the First Partition of Poland*] (Session Reports of the Royal Academy of Berlin, 1908), pp. 286ff; and *Politische Korrespondenz Friedrich des Großen* [*Political Correspondence of Frederick the Great*], vol. XXX, nos. 19687 and 19710. [The correspondence appears here in the original French.]