**Germany Permits Itself to Celebrate Prussian King**

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POTSDAM, Germany — The official delegation honoring Frederick the Great’s 300th birthday had just finished laying a laurel wreath and a grand cross of white flowers at his grave here on Tuesday when a 70-year-old retiree quietly slipped in behind them and placed a small potato on the gray slab of stone that marks the monarch’s resting place.

“I’m a born Potsdamer and my father was, too, and I guess a little of the old Prussiandom is still in my veins,” said the man, Harry Günther, a retired engineer, standing before the yellow walls of Frederick’s magnificent summer palace, [Sanssouci](http://www.germanplaces.com/germany/sanssouci-potsdam-sights.html), on a chilly, foggy morning, a light coating of snow on the grass. He praised Frederick’s Prussian virtues, like hard work, honesty and thrift.

The potato, one of more than a dozen left by admirers, is a traditional token to honor Frederick’s role in spreading the cultivation of the food staple in his lands. “Old Fritz made sure they grew them,” Mr. Günther said, using the monarch’s popular nickname. “Plus, they last longer than flowers.”

At a moment when Europe has turned to Germans for leadership and aid, Germany has turned to a long-dead Prussian king to try to better understand itself. Frederick embodied to his very core the contradiction in the term “enlightened despot.”

He built a reputation as a military commander that later inspired even Napoleon, fighting a series of wars against the Habsburg Empire to win and hold the valuable province of Silesia. The bloody Seven Years’ War almost cost him Silesia and indeed Prussia, but against a coalition of France, Austria, Saxony, Sweden and Russia he held out. After partitioning Poland in 1772, Frederick took a fragmented and relatively weak state and turned it into a Continental power.

His legacy was long tarnished by the Nazi embrace of his wars of conquest and aggression, but as [World War II](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/w/world_war_ii_/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) recedes with the passing years, Frederick has staged a comeback. For better or worse, the taboo against Prussian militarism has lost enough of its sting for Germany to permit itself a yearlong, all-out Frederick celebration.

Christopher Clark, a historian and Cambridge professor, in a lecture in Berlin on Tuesday, said that Frederick the Great compared himself to a mirror, unable to be himself but instead reflecting what was around him. How little has changed. Through his many interests and accomplishments it seems at times that he is all things to all Germans.

A Renaissance man in the age of Enlightenment, Frederick played the flute and composed symphonies, was a patron of the arts, corresponded with the philosopher Voltaire and wrote philosophical and historical tracts of his own. He personally led his troops on the battlefield and directed the planting of not only potatoes but mulberry trees to feed silkworms. Silk production was meant to turn the backwater kingdom into an economic powerhouse, though the idea turned out to be something of a sow’s ear.

If Frederick were alive today, his upbringing would easily earn him a place on talk-show sofas for teary confessionals. His father, Frederick William I, beat him relentlessly. Once, when young Frederick tried to run away, his father had him arrested and made to watch as his friend Hans Hermann von Katte was executed as a conspirator.

With regard to that friend, speculation is rampant that friendship was only part of the story for the two young men, whose sexual orientation is also much discussed. (Frederick did marry but had no children.) There is no question about Frederick’s affection for his greyhounds. He asked to be buried beside them here, and 11 markers show where they rest on the same terrace of the rococo palace. Needless to say, Frederick was also a passionate builder, who helped define Berlin and Potsdam architecturally and drew his own sketches to aid in the design of Sanssouci.

But even some Frederick experts are surprised at the tidal wave of attention paid to his tricentennial.

“At the beginning I never would have thought there would have been so much happening,” said Jürgen Luh, a historian at the [Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation Berlin-Brandenburg](http://www.spsg.de/index.php?id=1&sessionLanguage=en), who helped put together a major [exhibit](http://www.friederisiko.de/) that opens here in April. “But now really is a moment when we can examine Frederick again, unencumbered and without prejudice.”

A whole host of exhibitions, including one devoted to Frederick and the potato, which was transported from the New World to Europe by the Spanish in the 16th century, compete with lectures and symposia for attention. He did not introduce it to Prussia, but did issue directives to promote its cultivation.

“In reality he was not the great benefactor of the common people that he appears to be in the legends,” said Marina Heilmeyer, an art historian and one of the curators of the potato exhibit. “But I think it is this multifaceted figure that fascinates people more than the hero on the pedestal.”

A new play about Frederick’s life opened this month, and a novel about his friendship with Voltaire has just been published, along with several nonfiction books. Traditional concerts of his symphonies and concertos compete with remixes and interpretations of the same music by younger D.J.’s and musicians.

At the ceremony on Tuesday morning in Potsdam, an anachronistic procession of admirers in the Pickelhaube spiked helmets and curled mustaches typical of the German empire that succeeded Prussia marched up to his grave.

Another group, dressed in what they said was accurate ceremonial garb from the 18th century, including three-cornered hats, also paid their respects. Dirk Gieseke, 49, wore white gloves to honor Frederick, a fellow Mason, and left three roses on his grave. “In politics we are looking for new role models,” Mr. Gieseke said. “In times of great change you have a search for values.”

Harald Aschoff, 72, interjected. “We also have to think about his weaknesses,” Mr. Aschoff said. “He led unjustified wars that resulted in the deaths of thousands and part of history is living with the negative as well as the positive.”

As daily newspapers published supplements, series and special sections dedicated to the king, German public television broadcast a new film — part documentary and part dramatization — in which the king is played in youth and old age by the actors Anna Thalbach, and her mother, Katharina Thalbach. With its title, “Frederick: A German King,” the filmmakers consciously claim the Prussian for a country that did not exist during the monarch’s lifetime.

“Frederick was not a German,” said Fritz Stern, university professor emeritus at Columbia University and an expert on German history. “But there are very few figures in Prussian or German history that are as captivatingly difficult, as complex.”

Mr. Stern was himself born in the city of Breslau, which Frederick seized by force along with the rest of Silesia from the Austrian Habsburgs just months into his reign in 1740. Today, the city is named Wroclaw and is part of Poland, a country Frederick once cut to pieces when he partitioned it with Russia and Austria.

“There is no excuse for the aggression, but this is also a ruler who upon ascending to the throne immediately abolished torture in judicial proceedings,” Mr. Stern said. “We could learn from that even today.”