

DESPOT AND ROYAL FAMILY'S EXCERPT
Selection from *Forms of Government*
Frederick II of Prussia (1740–1786)
(Primary Source)

With respect to the true monarchical government, it is the best or the worst of all other, according to how it is administered.

We have remarked that men granted preeminence to one of their equals, expecting that he should do them certain services . . . the maintenance of the laws; a strict execution of justice. . . .

[The King should undertake] . . . a profound study of the local situation of the country, which it is the magistrate's duty to govern, and a perfect knowledge of the spirit of the nation. . . .

Princes and monarchs, therefore, are not invested with supreme authority that they may, with impunity, riot in debauchery and voluptuousness. They are not raised by their fellow citizens in order that their pride may pompously display itself, and contemptuously insult simplicity of manners, poverty and wretchedness. Government is not intrusted to them so that they may be surrounded by a crowd of useless people, whose idleness engenders every vice.

The ill administration of monarchical government originates in various causes, the source of which is the character of the sovereign.

Source: Thomas Holcroft, trans. *The Posthumous Works of Frederick II, King of Prussia* (London, 1789).

VOLTAIRE AND HIS STUDENT, FREDERICK II OF PRUSSIA



Engraving by Pierre-Louis Baquoy after a drawing by Nicolas Monsiaux, ca. 1795.
Reproduced with the kind permission of Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

ARMY OFFICERS' EXCERPT
Selection from *Forms of Government*
Frederick II of Prussia (1740–1786)
(Primary Source)

It is necessary to have among our neighbors, especially among our enemies, eyes and ears which shall be open to receive and report with fidelity what they have seen and heard. Men are wicked.

The military system ought . . . to rest on good principles, which from experience are known to be certain. The genius of the nation ought to be understood, of what it is capable, and how far its safety may be risked by leading it against the enemy . . . The discovery of gunpowder has entirely changed the mode of making war. A superiority of fire at present decides the day. Discipline, rules and tactics have all been changed, in order that they may conform to the new custom. . . . So many new refinements have therefore so much changed the art of war that it would be unpardonable for a general today to risk a battle according to the plans made by [great commanders from the past]. Victory then was carried by valor and strength: it is at present decided by artillery. . . .

There are states which, from their situation and constitution, must be maritime powers. . . . There are other states. . . . some of which may well do without shipping; and others that would commit an unpardonable fault in politics were they to divide their forces [between sea and land].

The number of troops which a state maintains ought to be in proportion to the troops maintained by its enemies. Their force should be equal, or the weakest is in danger of being oppressed.

Source: Thomas Holcroft, trans. *The Posthumous Works of Frederick II, King of Prussia* (London: Printed for G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1789).

SERFS' EXCERPT
Selection from *Forms of Government*
Frederick II of Prussia (1740-1786)
(Primary Source)

... the sovereign ought frequently to remember the condition of the poor, to imagine himself in the place of the peasant or the manufacturer, and then to say "Were I born one among the class of citizens whose labors constitute the wealth of the state what should I require from the king?" The answer which, on such a supposition, good sense would suggest it is his duty to put in practice.

In most of the kingdoms of Europe there are provinces in which the peasants are ... serfs to their lords. This, of all conditions, is the most unhappy, and that at which humanity most revolts. No man certainly was born to be the slave of his equal. We reasonably detest such an abuse, and it is supposed that nothing more than will is needed to abolish so barbarous a custom. But this is not true: it is held on ancient tenures, and contracts made between the landholders and tenant-farmers. . . . Whoever should suddenly desire to abolish this abominable administration would entirely overthrow the present way of managing estates, and would be obliged, in part, to compensate the nobility for the losses which their rents must suffer.

Source: Thomas Holcroft, trans. *The Posthumous Works of Frederick II, King of Prussia* (London: Printed for G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1789).

LANDOWNERS' EXCERPT
Selection from *Forms of Government*
Frederick II of Prussia (1740-1786)
(Primary Source)

. . . [W]hat are the most proper means invariably to maintain those provinces in abundance . . . that they may continue flourishing? The first is to be careful that the lands are well cultivated; to clear such grounds as are capable of tillage; to increase the breed of sheep and cattle, so that the more may be gained by milk, butter, cheese, and manure; afterwards to obtain an exact statement of how much grain is grown in good, indifferent, and bad seasons, and to subtract the quantity consumed, so that the surplus can be calculated, in order to determine the point at which exportation ought to stop . . . Every sovereign actuated by the public good is obliged to keep storehouses abundantly furnished, that supplies may be ready when the harvest is bad and famine prevented [as is the practice in Prussia]. During the scarcity of the years 1771 and 1772, [Prussia, his kingdom] beheld the miseries with which its neighbor Saxony and the provinces of Germany were afflicted, because this very useful precaution had not been taken. The people there pounded oak bark, on which they fed, and this wretched food did but accelerate death.

Source: Thomas Holcroft, trans. *The Posthumous Works of Frederick II, King of Prussia* (London: Printed for G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1789).

TRADESMEN'S EXCERPT
Selection from *Forms of Government*
Frederick II of Prussia (1740–1786)
(Primary Source)

For the country to be preserved in prosperity, it is indubitably necessary that the balance of trade should be in its favor. If it pays more for importation than it gains by exportation, the result will be that it will be annually impoverished. . . . The means to avoid incurring any such loss are to work up all the raw materials of which the country is in possession, and to process raw materials from abroad, so that the price of labor may be gained, in order to sell the country's products in a foreign market.

Three things are to be considered in respect to commerce: first the surplus of domestic products which are exported; next the products of foreign states, which enrich those who trade in them; and thirdly foreign merchandise, imported for home consumption. The trade of any kingdom must be regulated according to these three articles, for of these only is it susceptible, according to the nature of things. . . . To profit by such advantages as we are in possession of, and to undertake nothing beyond our strength, is the advice of wisdom.

Source: Thomas Holcroft, trans. *The Posthumous Works of Frederick II, King of Prussia* (London: Printed for G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1789).

GOVERNMENT TAX COLLECTORS' EXCERPT
Selection from *Forms of Government*
Frederick II of Prussia (1740–1786)
(Primary Source)

No government can exist without taxation, which is equally necessary to a republic and to a monarchy. The sovereign who labors in the public cause must be paid by the public; the judge the same, that he may have no need to twist the law. The soldier must be supported so that he may commit no robbery or violence for lack of food. In like manner, it is necessary that those persons who are employed in collecting the taxes should receive such salaries as may relieve them of any temptation to rob the public . . . This money must all be necessarily taken from the people; and the grand art consists in taking without overburdening the people. In order that taxes may be equally and not arbitrarily imposed, surveys and registers should be drawn up by which, if the people are properly classified, the taxes paid will be proportionate to the income of the persons paying.

Excise [sales tax] is another species of tax, levied on cities, and this must be managed by able persons; otherwise, those provisions which are most necessary to life, such as bread, beer, meat, etc., will be overtaxed; and the weight will fall on the soldier, the laborer, and the artisan.

Source: Thomas Holcroft, trans. *The Posthumous Works of Frederick II, King of Prussia* (London: Printed for G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1789).