army became highly disciplined, with obedience and order the most prized virtues.

Frederick William's son Frederick II ("the Great") built on his father's example in many ways, further expanding education, demanding honesty and hard work of his officials, promoting improvements in agriculture and industry, and personally leading his troops. He used the huge Prussian army more than his father had, doubling the population of the country by taking Silesia from Austria, and warding off attempts by the combined forces of France, Austria, and Russia to conquer Prussia during the Seven Years War.

Sweden and Poland

Prussian success at creating a strong state depended on a line of soldier-kings, and for a brief period Sweden under the Vasa dynasty – which also ruled Finland – followed this pattern as well. Gustavus Adolphus, the most dynamic of these kings, came to the throne as a teenager, when Sweden was fighting Denmark, Poland, and Russia. He was largely victorious in these wars, gaining control of a number of Polish and Russian ports and dominating trade in the Baltic. He created a more systematic bureaucracy, opened primary and secondary schools supported by the government, and promoted trade and shipping. After significant victories by the emperor's forces, Gustavus Adolphus entered the Thirty Years War on the side of the Protestants, pressing all the way into southern Germany with his troops, some of whom had been forcibly conscripted in what was Europe's first nationwide draft. He died on the battlefield, but his very able chancellor Axel Oxenstierna (1583–1654) kept command of the army, and Sweden gained a huge amount of territory, becoming the most powerful state in northern Europe, despite the fact that the population of Sweden itself was tiny, only a million in comparison with France's twenty million.

Gustavus Adolphus paid for his wars by selling royal lands to wealthy nobles, though this was a short-sighted solution, as it made the land tax-free. Nobles also received salaries or pensions for serving as army officers, and after the king's death, they asserted their power and privileges. Swedish political history for the next two hundred years saw a series of such noble bids for power, alternating with periods in which kings tried to become absolutist on the French or Prussian model. What made the Swedish case distinctive was the fact that peasants were also active players in this struggle. In the later seventeenth century, Swedish kings forced the higher nobility to give back about half the land they had bought, and then sold it to peasants and lesser nobles, making it taxable. These groups then provided support for the monarch in his moves to assert more centralized control, at least until King Charles XII (ruled 1697–1718), led an army against the Danes, Poles, and Russians in the Great Northern War. Defeated as much by the Russian winter as by actual battles, as Napoleon and Hitler later would be, Sweden lost all of its Baltic possessions. Charles escaped to Istanbul, where he spent several years trying, unsuccessfully, to

make an alliance with the Ottomans. On finally returning to Sweden he was shot in the head, perhaps by one of his own troops.

The assassination of Charles XII ushered in what Swedish historians call the "Age of Freedom," a fifty-year period in which the Swedish national assembly, called the *Riksdag*, ruled the country. The *Riksdag* was the only assembly in Europe that included a house with peasant representatives, though the nobles, clergy, and townsmen who made up the other three houses were suspicious of the peasants and often held secret meetings that excluded them. This was a prosperous period economically for Sweden, and the *Riksdag* encouraged science and manufacturing; in 1731 it chartered the Swedish East India Company to expand trade with China and Southeast Asia. Disastrous losses in still more wars, however, first against Russia and then Prussia, provided an opportunity for a reassertion of royal control. Gustav III (ruled 1771–92) restored absolutist government in 1772 with a *coup d'état*, throwing the leaders of the *Riksdag* in prison. Gustav also died by assassination, his successor was forced to abdicate after military losses, and the Swedish nobility chose the next several kings, much as the English gentry had engineered the choice of monarchs several times in the seventeenth century. By this point Sweden had lost Finland and all of its other Baltic territories to Russia, and was no longer a major power; the Swedish East India Company went bankrupt in 1813.

Poland experienced similar struggles between the nobles and the kings for political dominance, but here the noble class, called the *szlachta* (pronounced shlahta), was completely successful. In the sixteenth century, the *szlachta* affirmed its right to elect the kings of Poland, and throughout much of the seventeenth century it elected younger members of the Vasa family who had married into the existing Polish dynasty and whose older brothers or cousins ruled Sweden. The seemingly endless wars between Poland and Sweden were thus due in part to family jealousies and conflicts. Warfare in the seventeenth century was generally disastrous for Poland, which lost the Baltic areas to Sweden and the Ukraine to Cossacks, cavalry warriors who lived in independent self-governing communities north of the Black Sea, many of them former serfs who had fled Russia. The Cossacks – the word comes from the Turkish word for robber or adventurer – used the opportunity to murder tens of thousands of Jews, asserting the Jews were agents of Polish oppression. Under the leadership of an able military leader elected king, John III Sobieski (ruled 1674–96), Polish troops were key to the defeat of the Ottomans outside Vienna, but Sobieski could not use these military successes to obtain more power for the monarchy or to reform the way the Polish parliament (*sejm*) operated. The *sejm* itself was paralyzed by the practice of the *liberum veto*, which allowed a single member to defeat any measure.

The eighteenth century saw a string of devastating wars on Polish soil, some involving foreign combatants and others primarily civil wars, with foreign powers intervening on the side of one faction or another. Between 1768 and 1772, Russian armies won a series of victories against the Turks, which alarmed Austria, which began making preparations to invade Russian-held territory.

37 The memoirs of Jan Pasek

Jan Chryzostom Pasek (1636?–1701) was a member of the Polish lower nobility and an army officer who fought in wars against Sweden and Muscovy in the 1650s and 1660s. Toward the end of his life, he began composing memoirs in which he always portrayed himself as the hero; they provide dramatic stories about battles, but also small details about the realities of military life, including the importance of horses and of maintaining social distinctions. This is from a description of one battle with Muscovite troops near Minsk in 1660.

Our army set forth, with God as our aid, in order to gain an early start at this play. On this march, everyone performed his own devotions – songs, hours [prayers to the Virgin Mary]; our chaplains, riding on horseback, heard confessions. Everyone was making himself as ready as he could for death . . . Just opposite our right flank at the crossing was a manorial farm, stockaded; Muscovy, anticipating we would try our luck there, had garrisoned within several hundred foot [-soldiers] with four small cannons. They concealed themselves until we were struggling out of that marshland onto solid ground; only then did the Muscovite infantry move out. Now do they give fire, now do they scorch us from the cannons, balls fly like hail, felling many of our men; others are shot down by musketfire. Nevertheless, we charged them at full tilt, knowing we had to unless all were to perish, should we turn our backs. And now, having jostled blindly into the fire, we mingled with them like wheat and chaff, for there was little else to do.

Then did a fierce massacre take place in that crush; the worst were the battleaxes. Yet a quarter of an hour did not go by, from the moment we tangled with them, before we had slain them all, so that not a single one escaped, we being in the open field; there were 100 corpses it was said. Our men also suffered, some were killed, some wounded; my bay [horse] was shot in the chest under me, smashed in the head with a battleaxe, another time in the knee. I would have used him still, if not for that knee-wound. Such luck I had with horses in the army, that I can't recall ever selling one, after having paid dear for him; every one of them was either injured, or died, or was killed; this ill-luck drove me from the army. For I would be a soldier now, and would have been all this time, except that my father no longer had the means wherewith to buy horses, and I, too, was disgusted by this ill-luck; many a time I'd shed tears over it. I changed mounts then, switching to my grey horse, having bid my retainer [i.e. the servant who accompanied him] who was riding it, to wander back on foot across the river; but he soon overtook me, riding a captured horse, a better one than that upon which I was seated . . . the mercenary cavalry opened heavy fire on us, whereas our men fired back seldom, having already used up their charges on the infantry; besides, we lacked the time to reload. Thus, I always say that a loaded musket is most useful while advancing on the enemy, but once armies are locked in combat, reloading can but seldom be accomplished – the saber's the main thing here. Only sabers are effective when it's man against man, this one against that, that one against this . . . Now we were slaughtering them like sheep. Had I but one retainer with me then, he could have had his choice of the handsomest steeds, for the superior officers were being cut down, and whatever was elegant was on horseback. What can you do if your rascal of an attendant is most alert when his master is at the bottle, but nowhere to be seen when in battle! Nor is it very much in style for a cavalier to be holding the reins of a second horse; if there is no one around to hand it to, then he who values his dignity will prefer not to take it at all.

(From *Memoirs of the Polish Baroque: The Writings of Jan Chryzostom Pasek, A Squire of the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania*, ed. and trans. Catherine S. Leach [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976], pp. 67, 68, 69, 71. Reprinted with permission.)

Fearing a resumption of Europe-wide fighting just five years after the treaty that ended the Seven Years War, Frederick the Great of Prussia proposed that instead of gaining land from the Ottoman Empire, Russia should be given part of Poland. This expansion of Russian holdings would be balanced by similar expansions in Prussia and Austria, as they also would take parts of Poland. The deal was agreeable to all three powers, and Poland lost half its population in this partition, with the Polish king and parliament unable to do anything about it. Political reforms and national revolutions were also unable to stop two further partitions in 1793 and 1795, and Poland disappeared from the map of Europe.