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‘Lively and thoughtful... an excellent account... yields valuable insights’ *London Review of Books*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher Clark is Reader in Modern History at St Catharine's College, Cambridge. He is the author of *The Politics of Conversion: Missionary Protestantism and the Jews in Prussia, 1728–1941* (Oxford, 1995) and a biography of Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Iron Kingdom

The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947



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Acknowledgements

Between March 1985 and October 1987, I lived and studied in West Berlin, a place that no longer exists. It was a walled city islanded in Communist East Germany, ringed by a palisade of concrete slabs, ‘a cage,’ as one visiting Italian journalist put it, ‘in which one feels free.’ No one who lived there will forget the unique atmosphere of this marooned western citadel – a vibrant, multi-ethnic enclave, a haven for youthful refuseniks dodging West German military service, and a symbol of the Cold War in which formal sovereignty still rested with the victorious powers of 1945. There was little in West Berlin to invoke the Prussian past, which seemed as remote as antiquity.

Only when you crossed the political border at Friedrichsstrasse station, passing through turnstiles and metal corridors under the scrutiny of unsmiling guards, did you encounter the heart of the old Prussian city of Berlin—the long line of graceful buildings on Unter den Linden and the breathtaking symmetries of the Forum Fredericianum, where Frederick the Great advertised the cultural pretensions of his kingdom. To cross the border was to travel back into the past, a past only partly obscured by wartime devastation and decades of post-war neglect. A tree had sprouted in the broken dome of the eighteenth-century French Church on the Gendarmenmarkt, its roots reaching deep into the stonework. Berlin Cathedral was still a blackened hulk disfigured by the artillery and rifle fire of 1945. For an Australian from easygoing seaside Sydney, these crossings had an inexhaustible fascination.

Students of the Prussian past can draw on one of the world’s most sophisticated and varied historiographies. There is, first of all, the rich and still robust tradition of transatlantic Anglophone writing on Prussia. For readers of German, there is the extraordinary native Prussian canon, which reaches back to the beginnings of history as a modern academic discipline. The articles and monographs of the classic era of Prussian historiography are still remarkable for the depth and ambition of their scholarship and for the verve and elegance of their writing. The years since 1989 have seen a renewal of interest among younger German scholars and brought wider recognition to those East German historians whose work, notwithstanding the narrow intellectual horizons of the German Democratic Republic, did much to illuminate the evolving textures of Prussian society. One of the chief pleasures of working on this book has been the licence to browse widely in the writings of so many colleagues, alive and dead.

There are also more immediate debts. James Brophy, Karin Friedrich, Andreas Kossert, Benjamin Marschke, Jan Palmowski, Florian Schui and Gareth Stedman Jones shared with me pre-publication versions of their manuscripts. Marcus Clausius sent copies of his transcripts from the archives of the German Colonial Office. I benefited from the advice and conversation of Holger Afflerbach, Margaret Lavinia Anderson, David Barclay

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How does one thank the most important people of all? Josef and Alexander grew tall during the writing of this book and distracted me in a thousand happy ways. Nir Lübbren bore my selfish obsession with humour and good grace and was the first reader and critic of every paragraph. It is to her that I dedicate this book with much love.

Introduction

On 25 February 1947, representatives of the Allied occupation authorities in Berlin signed a law abolishing the state of Prussia. From this moment onward, Prussia belonged to history.

The Prussian State, which from early days has been a bearer of militarism and reaction in Germany, has de facto ceased to exist.

Guided by the interests of preservation of peace and security of peoples, and with the desire to assure further reconstruction of the political life of Germany on a democratic basis, the Control Council for Germany enacts as follows:

ARTICLE I

The Prussian State together with its central government and all its agencies is abolished.¹

Law No. 46 of the Allied Control Council was more than an administrative act. In expunging Prussia from the map of Europe, the Allied authorities also passed judgement upon it. Prussia was not just one German territory among others, on a par with Baden, Württemberg, Bavaria or Saxony; it was the very source of the German malaise that had afflicted Europe. It was the reason why Germany had turned from the path of peace and political modernity. 'The core of Germany is Prussia,' Churchill told the British Parliament on 21 September 1943. 'There is the source of the recurring pestilence.'² The excision of Prussia from the political map of Europe was thus a symbolic necessity. In history had become a nightmare that weighed upon the minds of the living.

The burden of that ignominious termination presses on the subject matter of this book. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the history of Prussia had been painted in mainly positive tones. The Protestant historians of the Prussian School celebrated the Prussian state as a vehicle of rational administration and progress and the liberator of Protestant Germany from the toils of Habsburg Austria and Bonapartist France. They saw in the Prussian-dominated nation-state founded in 1871 the natural, inevitable and best outcome of Germany's historical evolution since the Reformation.

This rosy view of the Prussian tradition faded after 1945, when the criminality of the Nazi regime cast its long shadows over the German past. Nazism, one prominent historian argued, was no accident, but rather 'the acute symptom of a chronic [Prussian] infirmity'; the Austrian Adolf Hitler was an 'elective Prussian' in his mentality.³ The view gained ground that German history in the modern era had failed to follow the 'normal' (i.e. British, American or west European) route to a relatively liberal and untroubled political maturity. Whereas the power of traditional elites and political institutions had been broken in France, Britain and the Netherlands by 'bourgeois revolutions', so the argument ran, this had never been achieved in Germany. Instead, Germany followed a 'special path' (*Sonderweg*) that culminated in twelve years of Nazi dictatorship.

Prussia played a key role in this scenario of political malformation, for it was here that the classical manifestations of the special path seemed most clearly in evidence. Foremost among these was the unbroken power of the Junkers, the noble landowners of the districts to the east of the river Elbe, whose dominance within government, the military and rural society had survived the age of the European revolutions. The consequences for Prussia and by extension for Germany were, it appeared, disastrous: a political culture marked by illiberalism and intolerance, an inclination to revere power over legal grounded right, and an unbroken tradition of militarism. Central to nearly all diagnoses of the special path was the notion of a lopsided or 'incomplete' process of modernization in which the evolution of political culture failed to keep pace with innovation and growth in the economic sphere. By this reading, Prussia was the bane of modern German and European history. Imprinting its own peculiar political culture on the nascent German nation-state, it stifled and marginalized the more liberal political cultures of the German south and thus laid the foundations for political extremism and dictatorship. Its habits of authoritarianism, servility and obedience prepared the ground for the collapse of democracy and the advent of dictatorship.⁴

This paradigm shift in historical perceptions met with energetic counterblasts from historians (mainly West German, and mainly of liberal or conservative political orientation) who sought to rehabilitate the reputation of the abolished state. They highlighted its positive achievements – an incorruptible civil service, a tolerant attitude to religious minorities, a law code (from 1794) admired and imitated throughout the German states, a literacy rate (in the nineteenth century) unequalled in Europe and a bureaucracy of exemplary efficiency. They drew attention to the vibrancy of the Prussian enlightenment. They noted the capacity of the Prussian state to transform and reconstitute itself in times of crisis. As a counterpart to the political servility emphasized by the special-path paradigm, they stressed notable episodes of insubordination, most importantly the role played by Prussian officers in the plot to assassinate Hitler in July 1944. The Prussia they depicted was not without flaws, but it had little in common with the racial state created by the Nazis.⁵

The high-water mark for this work of historical evocation was the massive Prussian Exhibition that opened in Berlin in 1981 and was seen by over half a million visitors. Room after room full of objects and tables of text prepared by an international team of scholars allowed the viewer to traverse Prussian history through a succession of scenes and moments. There were military paraphernalia, aristocratic family trees, images of life at court and historic battle paintings, but also rooms organized around the themes of 'tolerance', 'emancipation' and 'revolution'. The aim was not to shed a nostalgic glow over the past (though it was certainly too positive for many critics on the political left) but to alternate light and shadow, and thereby to 'draw the balance' of Prussian history. Commentaries on the exhibition – both in the official catalogues and in the mass media

focused on the meaning of Prussia for contemporary Germans. Much of the discussion centred on the lessons that could or could not be learned from Prussia's troubled journey into modernity. There was talk of the need to honour the 'virtues'—disinterested public service and tolerance, for example – while disassociating oneself from the less appetizing features of the Prussian tradition, such as autocratic habits in politics or a tendency to glorify military achievement.⁶

Prussia remains, more than two decades later, an idea with the power to polarize. The unification of Germany after 1989 and the transfer of the capital from Catholic, 'western' Bonn to Protestant, 'eastern' Berlin gave rise to misgivings about the still unmastered potency of the Prussian past. Would the spirit of 'old Prussia' reawaken to haunt the German Republic? Prussia was extinct, but 'Prussia' re-emerged as a symbolic political token. It has become a slogan for elements of the German right, who see in the 'traditions' of 'old Prussia' a virtuous counterweight to 'disorientation', 'the erosion of values', 'political corruption' and the decline of collective identities in contemporary Germany.⁷ Yet for many Germans, 'Prussia' remains synonymous with everything repellent in German history: militarism, conquest, arrogance and illiberality. The controversy over Prussia has tended to flicker back into life whenever the symbolic attributes of the abolished state are brought into play. The re-interment of the remains of Frederick the Great at his palace of Sans Souci in August 1991 was the subject of much fractious discussion and there have been heated public disputes over the plan to reconstruct the Hohenzollern city palace on the Schlossplatz in the heart of Berlin.⁸

In February 2002, Alwin Ziel, an otherwise inconspicuous Social Democratic minister in the Brandenburg state government, achieved instant notoriety when he intervened in a debate over a proposed merger of the city of Berlin with the federal state of Brandenburg. 'Berlin-Brandenburg', he argued, was a cumbersome word; why not name the new territory 'Prussia'? The suggestion set off a new wave of debate. Sceptics warned of a rebirth of Prussia, the issue was discussed on television talk shows across Germany, and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* ran a series of articles under the rubric 'Should there be a Prussia?' (*Darf Preussen sein?*) Among the contributors was Professor Hans-Ulrich Wehler, a leading exponent of the German special path, whose article – a vociferous rejection of Ziel's proposal – bore the title 'Prussia poisons us'.⁹

No attempt to understand the history of Prussia can entirely escape the issues raised by these debates. The question of how exactly Prussia was implicated in the disasters of Germany's twentieth century must be a part of any appraisal of the state's history. But this does not mean that we should read the history of Prussia (or indeed of any state) from the perspective of Hitler's seizure of power alone. Nor does it oblige us to assess the Prussian record in binary ethical categories, dutifully praising light and deploring shadow. The polarized judgements that abound in contemporary debate (and in parts of the historical literature) are problematic, not just because they impoverish the complexity

of the Prussian experience, but also because they compress its history into a national teleology of German guilt. Yet the truth is that Prussia was a European state long before it became a German one. Germany was not Prussia's fulfilment – here I anticipate one of the central arguments of this book – but its undoing.

I have thus made no attempt to tease out the virtue and vice in the Prussian record or to weigh them in the balance. I make no claim to extrapolate 'lessons' or to dispense moral or political advice to present or future generations. The reader of these pages will encounter neither the bleak, warmongering termite-state of some Prussophobe treatise nor the cosy fireside scenes of the Prussophile tradition. As an Australian historian writing in twenty-first-century Cambridge, I am happily dispensed from the obligation (or temptation) either to lament or to celebrate the Prussian record. Instead, this book aims to understand the forces that made and unmade Prussia.

It has recently become fashionable to emphasize that nations and states are not natural phenomena but contingent, artificial creations. It is said that they are 'edifices' that have to be constructed or invented, with collective identities that are 'forged' by acts of will. No modern state more strikingly vindicates this perspective than Prussia: it was an assemblage of disparate territorial fragments lacking natural boundaries or a distinct national culture, dialect or cuisine. This predicament was amplified by the fact that Prussia's intermittent territorial expansion entailed the periodic incorporation of new populations whose loyalty to the Prussian state could be acquired, if at all, only through arduous processes of assimilation. Making 'Prussians' was a slow and faltering enterprise whose momentum had begun to wane long before Prussian history reached its formal termination. The name 'Prussia' itself had a contrived quality, since it derived not from the northern heartland of the Hohenzollern dynasty (the Mark Brandenburg around the city of Berlin), but from a non-adjacent Baltic duchy that formed the easternmost territory of the Hohenzollern patrimony. It was, as it were, the logo the Electors of Brandenburg adopted after their elevation to royal status in 1701. The core and essence of the Prussian tradition was an absence of tradition. How this desiccated, abstract polity acquired flesh and bones, how it evolved from a block-printed list of princely titles into something coherent and alive, and how it learned to win the voluntary allegiance of its subjects – these questions are at the centre of this book.

The word 'Prussian' stills stands in common parlance for a particular kind of authoritarian orderliness, and it is all too easy to imagine the history of Prussia as the unfolding of a tidy plan by which the Hohenzollerns gradually unfurl the power of the state, integrating their possessions, extending their patrimony and pushing back the provincial nobilities. In this scenario, the state rises out of the confusion and obscurity of the medieval past, severing its bonds with tradition, imposing a rational, all-embracing order. The book aims to unsettle this narrative. It attempts, firstly, to open up the Prussian record in such a way that both order and disorder have their place. The experience of w

– the most terrible kind of disorder – runs through the Prussian story, accelerating and retarding the state-building process in complex ways. As for the domestic consolidation of the state, this has to be seen as a haphazard and improvised process that unfolded within a dynamic and sometimes unstable social setting. ‘Administration’ was sometimes a byword for controlled upheaval. Well into the nineteenth century there were many areas of the Prussian lands where the presence of the state was scarcely perceptible.

Yet this does not mean that we should relegate ‘the state’ to the margins of the Prussian story. Rather we should understand it as an artefact of political culture, a form of reflexive consciousness. It is one of the remarkable features of Prussia’s intellectual formation that the idea of a distinctively Prussian history has always been interwoven with claims about the legitimacy and necessity of the state. The Great Elector, for example, argued in the mid seventeenth century that the concentration of power within the executive structures of the monarchical state was the most reliable surety against external aggression. But this argument – sometimes rehearsed by historians under the rubric of an objective ‘primacy of foreign policy’ – was itself a part of the story of the state’s evolution; it was one of the rhetorical instruments with which the prince underpinned his claim to sovereign power.

To put the same point a different way: the story of the Prussian state is also the story of the story of the Prussian state, for the Prussian state made up its history as it went along, developing an ever more elaborate account of its trajectory in the past and its purposes in the present. In the early nineteenth century, the need to shore up the Prussian administration in the face of the revolutionary challenge from France produced a unique discursive escalation. The Prussian state legitimated itself as the carrier of historic progress in terms so exalted that it became the model of a particular kind of modernity. Yet the authority and sublimity of the state in the minds of educated contemporaries bore little relation to its actual weight in the lives of the great majority of subjects.

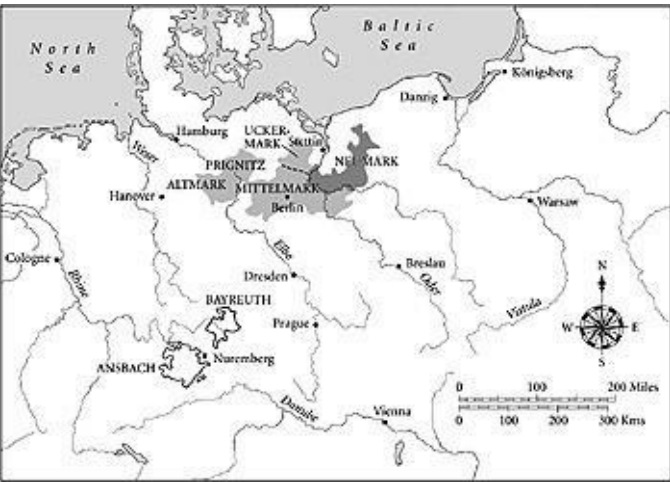
There is an intriguing contrast between the modesty of Prussia’s ancestral territorial endowment and the eminence of its place in history. Visitors to Brandenburg, the historical core province of the Prussian state, have always been struck by the meagreness of its resources, the sleepy provinciality of its towns. There was little here to suggest, let alone explain, the extraordinary historical career of the Brandenburg polity. ‘Someone ought to write a little piece on what is happening at present,’ Voltaire wrote at the beginning of the Seven Years War (1756–63), as his friend King Frederick of Prussia struggled to fight off the combined forces of the French, Russians and Austrians. ‘It would be of some use to explain how the sandy country of Brandenburg came to wield such power that greater efforts have been marshalled against it than were ever mustered against Louis XIV.’¹⁴ The apparent mismatch between the force wielded by the Prussian state and the domestic resources available to sustain it helps to explain one of the most curious features of Prussia’s history as a European power, namely the alternation of moments of precocious

strength with moments of perilous weakness. Prussia is bound up in public awareness with the memory of military success: Rossbach, Leuthen, Leipzig, Waterloo, Königgrätz, Sedan. But in the course of its history, Brandenburg-Prussia repeatedly stood on the brink of political extinction: during the Thirty Years War, again during the Seven Years War and once again in 1806, when Napoleon smashed the Prussian army and chased the king across northern Europe to Memel at the easternmost extremity of his kingdom. Periods of armament and military consolidation were interspersed with long periods of contraction and decline. The dark side of Prussia's unexpected success was an abiding sense of vulnerability that left a distinctive imprint on the state's political culture.

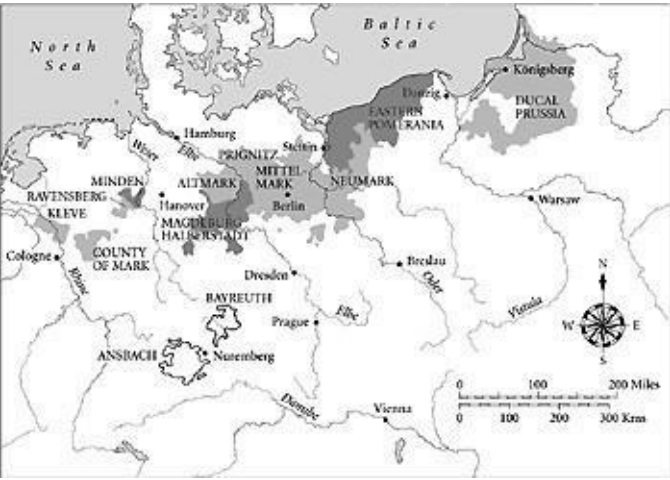
This book is about how Prussia was made and unmade. Only through an appreciation of both processes can we understand how a state that once loomed so large in the awareness of so many could so abruptly and comprehensively disappear, unmourned from the political stage.

A History of Brandenburg–Prussia in Six Maps (pp. xxvi–xxix)

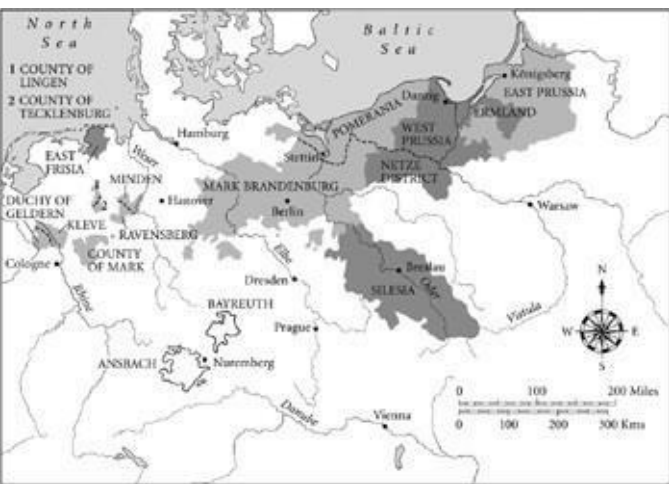
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Map 1. The Electorate of Brandenburg at the time of its acquisition by the Hohenzollerns in 1415



Map 2. Brandenburg-Prussia at the time of the Great Elector (1640-88)



Map 3. The Kingdom of Prussia at the time of Frederick the Great (1740–86)



Map 4. Prussia during the reign of Frederick William II, showing the territories taken during the second and third partitions of Poland

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