

Iron Kingdom

The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947

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After the collapse of the German Wehrmacht the Red Army inexorably pressed west, pushing ahead of it a desperate crowd of German refugees and leaving in its wake burned villages, looted and gutted manors, erasing almost all traces of the old Junkers who had lorded the land for centuries. The old and venerable town of Königsberg, calling forth images of Kant and Hilbert, was razed to the ground, leaving only the most abstract feature of a place, namely its geographical location, intact. Centuries of German culture came to an end in the wake of one of the most extensive ethnic cleansings in modern times as a result of a war, in which such ethnic cleansings had become commonplace. The Germans may have deserved it, but the loss, cultural as well as humane, did in no way counteract other losses suffered during the war, only adding to them. Ultimately all human cultures and achievements are universal and belongs to us all.

What was lost was not so much Germany in general as Prussia in particular, and in the aftermath of the catastrophe of the Second World War, Prussia and especially Prussianess, whatever what is meant by the latter, were conceived as the roots of all evil, and which had to be stamped out in order to once and for all quench that militaristic spirit which had infused Germany and which would otherwise threaten to rear its ugly head and cause renewed havoc. It is against such simplistic, not to say vulgar, assessments the book is addressed, providing not so much a revisionist history as a sober and impassioned one, for which the times finally seem to be ready.

Prussia had indeed inauspicious beginnings as the land of the Hohenzollern dynasty, one principedom among others in the formal and splintered configuration known as the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. The land was in the beginning the landlocked Brandenburg, an infertile plain of sandy forests and lakes. When the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus landed on German soil to take part in what would become known as the Thirty Years War, the Brandenburger Elector was a cornered ally wholly at the mercy of the Swedish troops, which like all other participants of that religious conflict, brought havoc wherever they chanced to find themselves. The war brought hardships, unimaginable to us moderns, with populations suffering repeated decimations due to devastation brought about by outright slaughter, epidemics and famines.

The German lands were feudal, meaning that they were parceled up with no regards to the ethnicity or religious affiliation of their populations, and thus not unusually scattered in disconnected components. What provided the continuity was the personal continuity of the lineage. And dynastic lineages were intertwined by marriages, meaning that territorial expansions more often than not were effected less by naked steel than naked flesh. The Hohenzollern dynasty was no exception. The great Elector, the successor of the hapless prince who had been at the mercy of the Swedes, managed to survive by astute diplomacy

and military alliances, in fact even routing a Swedish army incompetently deployed at Rathenow and Fehrbellin in 1675. The Swedes, however, were bailed out by their constant ally, the French, and allowed to hold on to their Pomerian possessions for almost another century and a half. The 18th of January 1701 saw the birth of the Prussian monarchy through the coronation of Friedrich I, (son of the great Elector), at Knigsberg, the capital of the distant province of East Prussia, which was to give the incipient Kingdom its name. What would follow would be a succession of Williams, Friedrich Williams and plain Friedrichs for more than two centuries. Yet through most of that period Prussia remained a secondary player in continental affairs, holding onto a precarious niche created by the absence of a German unified state in the centre and the retreat of the Swedes to the north, squeezed in by the interests of the Austrians to the South, the Russians to the East, and somewhat less insistently so by the French in the distant West.

Prussia was a dynastic holding, never a Nation state, and this distinction is very important to keep in mind. A dynasty is very much akin to a commercial enterprise with an army, and it shares many of the interests and goals of such an entity in its searches for and consolidations of markets. The greatest Prussian Monarch - the flute playing Friedrich the Great, is a case in point. He was a German monarch and a protestant to boot, yet he despised German and religion, carrying on a court of enlightened despotism, in which French was spoken as a matter of course, and free-thinking went without saying. It was incidentally also a very masculine court, from which women, especially the unfortunate queen, were banned. According to Voltaire, who later fell out with the King, it was in addition to a cultured one, also one in which horsemanship and homo-eroticism played an important part.

Prussia was at the 18th century a small country with a large army. In fact it was not clear whether it was a country with an army or merely an army with a country. As the country was focused on the monarch, and the monarch very much identified with his army, especially so with Friedrich William I and his more famous son - Friedrich the Great, the latter quip may not be so much out of place. But the focus on an army also emphasized the similarities of a commercial enterprise, it was adamant that the affairs of the State were kept in order, which led to inevitable reforms in organization and bureaucracy, creating a loyal and efficient corps of civil servants. In fact it may not be an exaggeration to claim that the Prussian state became a model state of efficiency and thrift.

The military exploits of Friedrich the Great are legendary, and in fact perverted and exploited by Nazi propaganda. Skill and luck are the inevitable prerequisites for any succesful military commander, and Friedrich lacked neither, especially not the latter, which stood him in good stead during his audacious annexation of Silesia in front of the very eyes of the Austrians. The Seven Years War 1756-63 tested his luck more severely, attacked as he was on all fronts, yet extraneous circumstances allowed him to survive. The implosion of the moribound Polish empire, once upon a time along with Lithuania, so powerful, led to three consequetive partitions starting in 1772, and resulted in large territorial acquisitions in the east, in particular connecting the outlying province of Eastern Prussia with the main body.

Prussia came into its own in the 18th century, but just how precarious its position was, did not become apparent until the disaster brought about by the Napoleonic wars. The

prestigious army collapsed at Jena in 1806 and the country was overrun and subjugated by the French forced into an alliance with the latter wholly on conditions dictated by Napoleon. Thus during the 1812 Russian campaign, Prussians served both on the French and Russian side¹. This led to conflicts, when the Napoleonic army had collapsed chased by the Russians across Prussia. Would the Prussian officers be loyal to their King and honor the formal alliance with France and thus oppose the Russian forces, or should they make common cause with their natural allies?

The catastrophe of the Napoleonic wars, which almost extinguished the Prussian state, led to drastic re-evaluations of the State itself, and with the settlements of 1815, when the European map was redrawn at the Congress of Vienna, Prussia had to relinquish some of its eastern territories in exchange for substantial gains in western Germany, bringing the Rhinelands and the Westphalia under the Prussian crown. It is the period of Hegel, the archetypical Prussian philosopher (although not of Prussian stock) with his exaltation of the State as a transcendent entity with a will and purpose of its own. But also the period of the two brothers Humboldt, Alexander the great explorer and Wilhelm the educator with his modern views not only on advanced but also on elementary education, instigating reforms that would lead to a very high degree of literacy of the general population.

The recent acquisitions in the west compromised the religious homogeneity of the State, as those territories were confessionally Catholic. Prussia was a Protestant state, although its Monarchs had early on abandoned the original Lutheran faith of the majority of their subjects and become Calvinist converts, no doubt due to their early Dutch dynastic connections. This had brought tension, sometimes even persecution of the Lutherans, as being conceived as to papistic in their services. In the early 19th century one of those Friedrich Williams, the third to be exact, had decided to create a common Prussian confession, so to be called The Prussian Church Union, in which he tried to combine features from both the Lutheran and Calvinist camp. As to be expected such top-down approaches had only a limited success, and instead confessional freedom became a cornerstone of the Prussian way of life, latter to be inscribed into the constitution² Still Prussia did traditionally look out for the Protestants, famously not only providing a sanctuary for the persecuted Huguenottes of France (who no doubt contributed significantly to the prosperity of the Prussian State), but also looking out for more obscure minorities, the Salzburger protestants trudging in twenty-six columns all the way to Prussian Lithuania back in 1732, being a case in point, their emigration being a kind of early 18th century media-event. This shows that emigration in those days not only looked for the virgin lands of the west across the Atlantic, but more accessible virgin lands to the east were still for the taking. One may in this see a harbinger of the 'Lebensraum' to the east.

¹ The well-known Prussian military thinker Clausewitz is a case in point, offering his services to the Russian Czar

² The case of the Jews is as always something of a Litmus test for confessional tolerance. The higher echelons of the Jews, financially as well as culturally, found willing acceptance in the upper stratas. For the lower orders the situation was not quite as rosy. Although there was no real persecution, there was a common understanding that Jews should be expected to convert to Christianity in order to enjoy fully all the privileges of citizenship, and many Jews did. Strictures against the Jewish minorities were gradually stripped away during the 19th century.

The Prussian State did have its confrontations with workers uprisings, especially in the industrial part of Silesia, during which the Prussian army had to be involved in order to impose law and order. Yet, as Clark notes, the degree of brutality against its own citizens pale in comparison with the that of the British. Had the Prussians ever acted as ruthlessly against their own subjects, as the British did against the Irish (or the Indians for that matter) historians would have been quick to point out incipient Nazi behaviour. But in fact while the British authorities were liberal in meeting out death sentences, mostly for transgressions against property, the Prussian authorities were far more restrictive (by a factor of fifty or so) and only executing people guilty of homicide.

The next serious crisis to befall the Prussian monarchy after the Napoleonic wars was the revolution of 1848. The King Friedrich William IV was adamant not to allow a written Constitution to become between him and his subjects, but eventually he had to back down. A three-tiered house of representatives was founded, securing the rights and privileges of the landed Junker classes, but there was never a real delineation between the powers of the King and the Assembly when it came to the army, the elected representatives only having a say in the budgetary matters of the army during peace-time. This led in the early 1860's to a crisis that was seized upon by Bismarck, who soon made himself indispensable to the King William I brother and successor of the previous.

The unification of Germany was of course an old idea, but it did not gather real momentum until the early 19th century when the idea of natural ethnicity defined by a common language, history and by implication destiny, became very popular among the liberal elites. In many ways this idea was anathema to the dynastic traditions of Europe, in particularly illustrated by the extensive intermarriages across borders³. In fact nationalism, now considered as populist rightwing reaction, was at the time seen as progressive and liberal. For one thing it was very democratic in the egalitarian sense of transcending traditional hierarchial and financial barriers between people. Such egalitarianism may have meant very little in practical matters, but it provided excellent inspiration for rhetorical flourishes. The Prussian state also had had to contend with growing Polish nationalism in its eastern provinces, initiating mixed policies of appeasement and suppression, although many non-German speaking subjects, like the Masurians were loyal patriotic Prussians. A stronger political impetus was provided by the Italian unification. While in Italy, the northern state of Piedmont took on the role of the leading player, the case of Germany was complicated by having two natural candidates for such a role. Traditionally the Austrian Emperor of the Habsburg dynasty was the primer inter pares among the thirty odd Electors of the Holy Roman Empire, but the Prussian influence had become steadily more important. For one thing Austria was a multi-ethnic empire, and a subsumption of the German states into such an empire would of course not be what German Nationalists had in mind. The alternative would be that the German part of the Austrian-Hungarian empire would split off from the rest, but such a development would not be in the interest of the dynasty, which had barely been able to hold off a Hungarian cessation with the help of Russian intervention. The two options of a Grossdeutsch solution under Austria and a Kleindeutsch under Prussia had crystallized itself, with the latter looking more and more realistic. In fact a first tentative step had been taken when the then King Friedrich William

³ Once again bringing home the analogies by modern multi-national corporations.

IV had been offered the imperial crown in 1849 but had rejected it. Shortly thereafter a customs union was formed, including most German states but excluding Austria. In fact a look at the map of the union would uncannily suggest the future German Reich, yet the road to unification was long, and in fact without Bismarck brutal intervention during the decade of the 1860's it might have been long in coming.

Four wars paved the way for German unification. The first did not directly involve Prussia itself, as it stood on the sidelines when France and Italy waged war against Austria relieving it of some Italian-speaking provinces. The next war was a direct provocation by Bismarck, who after having secured the neutrality of France and Russia, went into an alliance with Austria attacking Denmark to intervene in the problem of the Succession of Schleswig-Holstein, a German duchy united under the Danish Crown, but with a different tradition of royal succession. German national unrest in the provinces had been the case for some decades before, but international intervention had protected the Danes. But not now. Schleswig-Holstein seceded, and Bismarck claimed them as Prussian breaking his alliance with Austria, which soon led to a war between the two major German States, a war by the way pioneering the use of railroads for rapid mobilization. The outcome was not really that clear, many of the minor German States sided with Austria. As to manpower both sides were about equal, the qualitative difference being that while the Austrians relied on traditional shock tactics of its infantry, the Prussians had improved rifle technology and consistently trained their soldiers to use it most effectively. As matters developed on the battlefield, the Prussian innovations turned out to tip the balance. With the Austrian forces routed in 1866, Prussia had established itself as the main German player, but still the time for unification was not ripe. For this Bismarck bided his time for a showdown with Napoleon III. Why was a war with France necessary for German unification?

Bismarck clearly wanted a war, but he would not start it on his own, but let the French take the initiative⁴. Thus it was provoked on the flimsiest of pretexts, pertaining to the succession on the Spanish throne, and involving an telegram involving the contacts between a French diplomat and the Prussian King at the spa at EMS, a telegram Bismarck skillfully edited by suitable omissions and publicized. The war with France supposedly being conducted to remind the western German states of their vulnerability visavi the French empire. The outcome of the short war is well-known, involving the capture of the French emperor, and the aftermath of the Parisian Commune, and ending in the declaration of the German Unification in Versailles in 1871.

Bismarck would remain at the helm of Germany for another twenty years⁵ Germany/Prussia now being for the first time ever a primary power in international politics. Internally the German Empire was not such an integrated structure, with the different components, especially Prussia, still having a high degree of autonomy, with many institutions working in parallel. In particular the old Prussian assembly was still in effect, not displaced by the more encompassing German one. And the emperor had still a dual

⁴ According to Bismarck to start a preventive war would be the same as shooting yourself in the head because you are afraid to die.

⁵ The emperor used to complain that it was not easy to be an emperor under Bismarck, the latter controlling him as a rider controls a horse, constitutionally at a disadvantage but having the advantage of brains and will, and thus being able to steer the brute along paths of his own making.

position, both as a King of Prussia and a German Emperor, nota bene not the Emperor of Germany. Bismarck, the author of the saying that 'politics is the art of the possible' turned out to be a master of the craft, sacrificing principles for flexibility. As is well-known he tried to mollify the growing socialist movement by various reforms of pensions and social insurance⁶. Maybe one of his less successful schemes was the Kulturkampf he unleashed against the Catholic church, a campaign which in its vicious media manifestations against the robed priests calls into mind the vulgarity of anti-semitism. It was also a campaign that ultimately failed to achieve its objectives, and instead of marginalizing the Catholics saw them consolidating themselves by claiming the political Center.

As is well-known, Bismarck did not get as well on with the first Emperor's grandson, who dismissed him after a few years in power. William II did not fare well in the opinions of posterity. Ludicrously vain and recklessly impulsive, in fact maybe the first media-conscious royalty, always having his doings dutifully filmed, he constantly embarrassed his ministers by his impromptu public utterings, which may have been perfectly fine in intimate circles when seen in well defined contexts, but when scrutinized publicly tended to be disastrous, illustrating the backside of always being in the public eye. Whether the Emperor actually was personally responsible for the First World War seems hard to prove, although at the time it was commonly held by the Allies, who wanted him tried and hanged. True is that with the continuation of the war, Hindenburg and Ludendorff, heroes against the Russians, took complete control over the civilian authorities. At its end, the Emperor was urged to engage in a suicidal military mission, but instead he chose to abdicate, at first vacillating considering to renounce only his imperial crown, not his Prussian, and eventually he had to flee to Holland, thereby closing the circle of the Hohenzollern dynasty, whose first members had been successfully broomed by the Dutch.

The end of the First World War almost ended in a Communist revolution Soviet style, but was nipped in the bud by military interventions, notably by the so called Freicorps, improvised out of the demobilizing armies. Prussia lived on during the Weimar republic, and in fact constituted a democratic bulwark against the forces who sought its dissolution. It is thus grossly unfair, as Clark points out, to see Prussia as driving force of German reaction. Hitler came to power through the machinations of some German reactionary nobilities, notably van Papen, who had no Prussian roots. The Nazi movement was at its heart a populist one not to be masterminded by the traditional conservative aristocracy, as the latter would learn, but this did of course not prevent many of them to enthusiastically joining the very same movement, but not on their own terms. Needless to remind the reader, neither Hitler nor Goebbels were Prussians, although this did not prevent them from using so called Prussianhood, whatever that could mean, to their own propagandistic advantage. It is true that Prussia had a rather bad name in most of western and southern Germany, and that Prussian soldiers often had been lampooned; yet as Riesz-Ranicke reveals, although many of his teachers in his Berlin Gymnasium had joined the Nazis, their Prussian upbringing did not allow them to treat him unfairly as a Jew. It is undeniable that many of the atrocities committed by the Nazi armies, were in fact perpetrated by Prussians, but also equally by supposedly more refined Rhinelanders and Austrians, not to mention by members of subjugated populations. In the eyes of posterity, the Prussians were partly

⁶ Bismarck is also known for having cultivated the socialist La Salle

vindicated, by the fact that the majority of those who participated in the plot against Hitler came out of Prussian Nobility⁷. Ironically, Clark points out, the Russian attitude to the Prussians was more sympathetic, perhaps because of the long history of common causes, but nevertheless this did not prevent them from pulverizing the Prussian lands as noted initially. By the end of the War, Prussia was dead. Dead as a geographical and constitutional entity, and also deconstructed as a cultural. Yet, the emerging DDR, found itself needing it in order to achieve some historical legitimacy. And now after reunification and the emergence of a even wider meta-context in the form of a European Union with its ostensible emphasis on regions rather than nation states, the time for a Prussian revival may have come.

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⁷ Much have been made of their heroism, and this is of course quite understandable. It is doubtful though whether they would actually have been duly respected by the Allies, had they succeeded in their plans. What they objected to was the madness of Hitler, and in particular, one would hope, his genocidal excesses, not German military expansionism per se of which they must have at least been secretly proud, hoping as they did to achieve a dignified peace.