INTRODUCTION

Grand narratives, ordinary Prussians

The historical realm this book conjures up, though now mostly vanished from the western world, casts a long shadow. It was the agrarian regime of subordinate villages and powerful landlords, as old as Egypt. Into it, until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most Europeans and many North Americans were born, and only recently did it cease to be the prime site of life and death for the rest of humanity.

In this study it is also Prussia – in most minds, a vague and distant, troubling or even menacing concept. It is, more precisely, a Prussia that looms large in explanations of the unstable and violent course of modern German history: the Prussia of the landed nobility and their subject villagers, from the late middle ages to the nineteenth century. But from these pages an unexpected picture will emerge, both of villages and manors, state and society, soldiers and civilians. Some reigning views on German and central European history will fall out of focus, and a new passage will appear across the early modern European world to the twentieth century’s much-debated modernity. This work is also an essay in historical envisioning amid present-day debates between philosophical pessimists and optimists, “constructivists” and “objectivists,” over the possibilities of historical knowledge. It aims also to illuminate in the mind’s eye various groups of people invisible in histories of high culture and politics, or hidden behind conventionalized identities assigned them by modern social science. And, though this study’s landscape is German, it communicates by many paths with the larger world.

Prussia was a north German state, embracing an array of provinces centered on Brandenburg, with Berlin as princely residence (map 1). From the fifteenth to the nineteenth century it expanded both to west and east, until it stretched from the Rhine river and the North Sea across the Baltic plains to Imperial Russia. Under the Hohenzollern dynasty, Brandenburg-Prussia emerged, plundered and ravaged from

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Ordinary Prussians became an archetypal “absolutist monarchy,” distinguished, admired, and feared for its large standing army. The landed nobility officered this force, while a mushrooming bureaucracy of mostly commoner origins collected royal taxes financing it. In the age of Frederick II, “the Great” (ruled 1740–86), Prussia laid claim not only to European major-power status, but to eighteenth-century Reason. Despite its imperfections, Frederick’s “enlightened absolutism” helped strengthen an emergent bourgeois civil society which, both in his day and in the nineteenth century, proved a hothouse of educational and cultural attainment and capitalist growth. These qualities, paired with military strength, supplied Chancellor Otto von Bismarck with the tools to hammer the numerous other German states, excepting defeated Austria, into the Prussian-dominated German Empire of 1871.1

1 The vast literature on pre-Napoleonic Prussia tends to offer a celebratory-nostalgic view (from conservative German pens) or a critical-condemnatory perspective (from left-liberal and Marxist authors, both German and Anglo-American). For bibliography and critique see William W. Hagen, “The Descent of the Sonderweg: Hans Rosenberg’s History of Old-Regime Prussia,” Central European History (hereafter: CEH) 24 (1991): 24–50. A modern masterwork is Reinhart Koselleck, Preussen zwischen Reform und Revolution: Allgemeines Landrecht, Verwaltung and

Map 1: East-Elbian Germany in the eighteenth century.
Introduction

World War I destroyed this state, toppling the Hohenzollerns. Its successor was the democratic Weimar Republic of 1918–33, among whose many enemies were Prussian conservatives, especially those with ties to the prewar high bureaucracy, army officer corps, and large landowning class. Symbolized and even embodied in the second Weimar president and World War I field-marshal Paul von Hindenburg, Prussian conservatism was instrumental in crippling Weimar democracy and bringing Hitler and the National Socialists to power in 1933. Although Prussia had also been since the nineteenth century a stronghold of middle-class liberalism, working-class socialism and, later, communism, the Nazi avalanche crushed them.

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Many of Hitler’s generals were Prussian aristocrats, and while some of them participated in the 1944 plot to assassinate him, at World War II’s end the Prussian legacy, tied so intimately to German militarism, stood profoundly discredited. At the postwar 1945 Potsdam Conference, Truman, Churchill, and Stalin approved cession, mainly to war-terrorized Poland, of all the once-Prussian German lands to the east of the Oder–Neisse river line, but forty miles in Warsaw’s direction beyond Berlin. The German population there largely fled before the Soviet army or was evacuated to German soil farther west. In 1947 the Allied Control Council in occupied Germany pronounced Prussia’s death sentence in a decree abolishing it as a territorial concept and entity. Today there are few people still alive who would describe themselves as Prussians, unless they descend from the former far-distant Baltic province of East Prussia. The Hohenzollerns had once ruled most of the lands comprising the ill-fated German Democratic Republic (1949–90), but these regions, such as Brandenburg, have reverted to provincial identities that never ceased to be significant.

Such are the associations the concept of Prussia conjures up in most minds today, even in Germany itself. Inseparable from it are the qualities of loyalty, discipline, and order, which the state instilled in its inhabitants through the army, the state-dependent Protestant church, and schools. While, in the realm of stereotype and prejudice, Catholic Austria and south and west Germany sometimes evoke amiable disorder (Schlamperei), Prussia often summons the idea of unquestioning obedience, even “cadaver-obedience” (Kadaver-Gehorsam), a nineteenth-century epithet for Prussian army discipline. Above all, Prussia is linked to the idea of dominated subject, rather than self-determining citizen. The German word for subject is Untertan, and it looms large in these pages.

Introduction

There is no more widespread explanation of the modern German catastrophe than the argument that, between the French Revolution of 1789 and the National Socialist power-seizure in 1933, Germany failed to develop a democratic political culture based on morally autonomous citizens. Otherwise, the Weimar Republic’s fall and widespread popular acquiescence in Nazi dictatorship and crimes would not have occurred. The prime impediment to democratization was the survival into the twentieth century of the Prussian monarchy and the conservative-authoritarian institutions it fostered and shielded. Though the 1848 Revolution bequeathed constitutional and parliamentary government to Prussia, and though the German Empire of 1871 rested on universal male suffrage, at the level of society and culture the Prussian lands remained, as this argument holds, a stronghold of the subject mentality. Its inhabitants deferred to those who “wore the king’s coat” and harkened to the commands of “the state,” a historical actor whose moral and civilizational role enlightened absolutism’s defenders, and after them the philosopher Hegel, apostrophized.3

Many nineteenth-century German liberals, and not only Protestants, followed Hegel in placing trust in the progressive potential of the Prussian state, which one of them, the historian Friedrich Dahlmann, described in conservative pre-1848 years as “the magic spear which heals as well as wounds.”4 Yet in the twentieth century this perspective grew unfamiliar. It is also usually thought that the industrial capitalism which came to flourish in Prussian Germany assumed harshly authoritarian forms, reinforcing the dominant political culture’s anti-democratic tendencies. Bismarck’s rebaptism of the Prussian monarchy in the ideological and psychological


waters of nineteenth-century German nationalism, with its frustrated yearning for state unity and national prestige, yielded explosive effects, especially once ruthless war for European and world hegemony broke out in 1914. The spread in the war’s aftermath of a vengeful right-wing extremism opened the path to mass murder and genocide whose execution depended on ordinary Germans’ readiness to follow orders.

This is the basic story of the German Sonderweg or “separate path” to the misshapen and destructive modernity of National Socialism, rather than the comparatively benign modernity of the western liberal-democratic welfare state. The same argument holds that, among Prussianism’s pillars, none was mightier than the nobility. This numerous class, whose scions— including Bismarck himself—figured so prominently in the government and army, was economically anchored in possession and self-management of large landed estates, occupying much of the agricultural land in Prussia’s heartlands east of the Elbe river. The Prussian nobility emerged from German medieval eastward expansion. Because many of their founding members were west German noble families’ sons, they came to be known, as they settled in the east, as “Junkers” (Junker), a contraction of the term “young lord” (junger Herr). Eventually, especially in the nineteenth century, the term Junker acquired strongly polemical and pejorative meaning, which it retains today, though the word has lost any contemporary referent. It evokes coercive and even brutal masters of landed estates and dependent villages who, when clothed in the uniform of army officer, county administrator, police president, or high official, translated the habits of landlordly or seigneurial domination into the state’s realm. Junker authority perpetuated and spread the mentality of the subject or Untertan—a term originally describing feudal vassals, including villagers subordinated to noblemen—throughout Prussian-dominated Germany, which by 1871 encompassed most of the German Empire.  

Thus the most deep-rooted and influential interpretation of modern German history leads directly to the Junkers’ doorstep. Historians have shown how, in the aftermath of the French Revolution of 1789, but especially after 1871, the Prussian nobility and their intellectual partisans raised their voices against democratization in Prussia. They occupied strongholds at court, and in army and state administration, and dominated powerful conservative political parties and pressure groups. The Junkers’ weighty influence on economic policy, from seigneurialism’s abolition in the early nineteenth century to tariff protection after 1879 and ruthless special-interest lobbying in the Weimar Republic, is a well-told story.7

Yet, except for old-fashioned genealogical and literary works often bathed in sentimental or apologetic light (which falls too on the great novelist Theodor Fontane’s pages), the modern historical literature on the Prussian nobility as estateowners and seigneurial village overlords is sparse, though in the hands of present-day historians in Germany it is experiencing efflorescence. The classic English-language political histories, written in the liberal spirit in World War II’s aftermath and dealing sternly with the Junkers, have little to say about them as country gentry. The shelves remain empty of archivally based English-language studies, though important historiographical and synthetic works have recently appeared.8

Apart from stressing the Prussian nobility’s political power, the historical literature assumes that a prime avenue of “Junker domination” (Junkerherrschaft) ran from manor-house to village, and thence via internal migration to burgeoning nineteenth- and twentieth-century towns. Thus the Prussian subject mentality radiated widely through modern Germany. Yet if studies of the Junkers in their rural setting are scant, the Modern World (Boston, 1966). Still influential syntheses underpinning the Sundevall argument are Francis L. Carsten, The Origins of Prussia (Oxford, 1954) and Hans Rosenberg, Imperialism, Aristocracy, and Autocracy: The Prussian Experience, 1660–1815 (Boston, 1958). Cf. F. L. Carsten, History of the Prussian Junkers (Brookfield, VT, 1993 [German original: 1988]) and Walter Gotthilf, Die Junker: Adel und Bauern im deutschen Osten (Gütersloh, 1957).


works on the rural common people living in east-Elbian Prussian vil-
lages are rarer still, though older local histories retain value and schol-
ars in the German Democratic Republic carried out important
research. More recently, the east-Elbian nobility’s and villagers’ life on
the land, and their complex and conflictual relationship, have been
themes of a Max Planck Society research center established, following
German reunification in 1990, at the University of Potsdam – the Prussian
Versailles. Its members have written and continue to produce innova-
tive monographs. I have benefited from working with them, and the
pages below are in part conceived as a contribution to a common proj-
et. The Max Planck Institute of History in Göttingen has also gener-
ated research on west and south German agrarian society of major
significance which, together with important related studies in English,
 informs the present work.9

9 The Max-Planck-Gesellschaft Arbeitsgruppe in Potsdam, directed by Professor Jan Peters, bore
the name “Östliche Gutsverwaltung als sozialhistorisches Phänomen” (“East-Elbian
Manorial Lordship as Social-Historical Phenomenon”). Its work, and that of colleagues
engaged in similar projects elsewhere in central and eastern Europe, appears in the following
important, large-scale collective volumes: Jan Peters, ed., Konflikt und Kultivierung in
Gutsverwaltungsgesellschaften. Über Resistance and Herrschaftserhalten in bäuerlichen Formen des frühen
Nurzeit, Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte (hereafter: EMPIRG), vol.
cxx (Göttingen, 1995); Jan Peters, ed., Gutsverwaltung als soziales Modell, published as Beilage 18 of the
Historische Zeitschrift (hereafter: HZ) (Munich, 1995); Jan Peters, ed., Gutsverwaltungsgesellschaften
im europäischen Vergleich (Berlin, 1997); Axel Lübke, Thomas Rudert, and Maritza
Schatkowsky, eds., Historie und Eigen-Sinn. Festschrift für Jan Peters zum 65. Geburtstag (Weimar,
1997). Among Peters’ own works, especially relevant to the present study are “Eigenwillig und
Widerstand im Alltag. Abwehrverhalten ostelbischer Bauern unter Refeudalisierungdruck,”
Neuholland (Weimar, 1994), co-authored with Lieslott Enders and Hartmut Harmsch; see also his essays
in the above-cited edited volumes, and articles cited below. Among Enders’ works, see espe-
cially Die Uckermark. Geschichte eines karlmarkischen Landes von 12. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert (Weimar,
1992). Harmsch’s important works are cited below. A valuable study of nineteenth- and twen-
tieth-century historiography on east-Elbian agrarian society is Heinrich Kaae, Die
Gutsverwaltung. Thüringengeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Agrarwesen im östlichen Raum (Berlin, 1995).
Written with the support of the Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte in Göttingen were the follow-
ing important microhistorical studies of the south and northwest German regions: David Warren
Sabean, Power in the Blood. Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany (Cambridge,
1984); David Warren Sabean, Property, Production, and Family in Neuholland, 1700–1870 (Cambridge
1990); David Warren Sabean, Kinship in Neuholland, 1700–1870 (Cambridge, 1993); Jürgen
Schlumbach, Lebensläufe, Familien, Hoft. Die Bauern und Handwerker des Ostthüringischen Kirchspiels Zehn in
proto-industrieller Zeit, 1765–1886. EMPIRG, vol. cxv (Göttingen, 1994); Hans Medick, Höllen und Über-
leben in Lüchow 1673–1990. Lokalgeschichte als Allgemeine Geschichte, EMPIRG, vol. cxxvi (Göttingen,
1997). Similarly important and innovative are the microhistorical works of Silke Göttchen, „Alle für einen Mann ..” Lebenswelt und Widerständigkeit in Schleswig-Holstein im 18. Jahrhundert (Neumünster, 1995); Rainer Beck’s study of Bavaria, Unterfahrung. Ländliche Welt vor Anbruch der Moderne (Munich, 1995); and historical anthropologist Palle Christiansen’s A Manorial World. Lord, Peasants and Cultural Distinctions on a Danish Estate 1750–1910 (Copenhagen, 1996). On other relevant German literature,
including from the German Democratic Republic, see discussion and citations in Hagen, “Descent
In the older literature, east-Elbian villagers appear as their noble lordships’ victims, coerced into silent submission and demoralization. Like the Junkers, they straddle the German historical stage as one-dimensional figures, even caricatures. In Hans Rosenberg’s righteous words, they suffered at their landlords’ hands “legal and social degradation, political emasculation, moral crippling, and destruction of [their] chances of self-determination.” The absolutist Prussian rulers “confirmed and enlarged” the Junkers’ “customary fiscal, economic, and social privileges and [their] de facto freedom to tyrannize the tillers of the soil and the rural craftsmen...” In consequence, the basic social institution of agrarian Prussia, peasant serfdom, increased in severity until the latter part of the eighteenth century: “Abject poverty” and “helpless apathy” were the common people’s fate. In F.L. Carsten’s widely accepted formulation, the founder of Prussian absolutism used “the Junkers’ class interests to win them over to an alliance with the crown...” The peasant-serfs were too down-trodden to revolt, and anyhow they were more oppressed by their [Junker] masters than by the government.

But just as other social classes, along with ethnic and religious groups, are ceasing to figure in modern thinking as homogeneous bodies possessing one or another set of essentialized characteristics, so is time past due for a nuanced depiction in the English-language literature of the east-Elbian countryside’s inhabitants that does not strip them of their capacity to act in their own interests and self-defense. Here the Potsdam school’s work on east Elbia, and the historical literature in both German and English on west and south German rural society, offer inspiration. Especially vital, in view of the central role of the Sonderweg,” “Village Life in East-Elbian Germany and Poland, 1400–1800,” and “Capitalism and the Countryside in Early Modern Europe: Interpretations, Models, Debates,” Agricultural History 62 (1988), 13–47. Other recent English-language works on south and west Germany are cited below.

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assigned the subject mentality in modern German history, is the study of east-Elbian villagers, for it was this large population that originally embodied, in historians’ view, Prussian authoritarianism’s defects. They most thickly populate the following pages, though much in evidence also are their noble lordships and the many other social groups, privileged and unprivileged, who inhabited the Prussian countryside. Fundamental is the question of subordination and insubordination toward seigneurial authority in the villagers’ lives. This aligns the book with the strongest post-1945 trend in worldwide studies of village society, emphasizing resistance and rebellion against higher powers. 22

