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978-0-521-10883-6 - Prussia: The History of a Lost State

Rudolf von Thadden

Excerpt

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# 1 \* *PRUSSIA: when was it?*

There are still several million people alive today who were born in Prussia, who grew up there and have first-hand recollections of many events in Prussian history. Yet this chapter asks a fundamental question as to the actual dates of Prussia's existence. It may perhaps seem obvious that Prussia's history extends to the threshold of our own day, almost close enough to touch. Equally, it may seem futile to seek the very beginnings of Prussia's history, for these are surely located – like those of most other countries – somewhere in the Middle Ages, beyond the bounds of what we call 'the modern age'.

It may be that we tend to shelve this question in favour of others we consider more important to our understanding of Prussian history. It may also be, however, that we shy away from it because of its sheer finality. In seeking to determine a beginning and an end to any given phenomenon, we presume it to be a completed process, spent or defunct. Can the same be said of Prussia's history? Is it all over and done with?

This basic question is actually highly complex. Any historian knows that a nation's history can be completed; Prussian history, however, is not so easily 'written off', for it retains a certain proximity to us today. Unlike the history of the Roman Empire, or that of the medieval Norman State in Sicily, Prussian history continues to exercise a direct influence on us today, forcing us to examine a number of issues of contemporary relevance. The wealth of recent publications on Prussia is in itself a good proof of this.<sup>1</sup>

Quite apart from the vexed question of objectivity *vis-à-vis* a

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relatively recent period of history, an attempt to determine Prussia's beginning and ending raises problems affecting people other than just professional historians. Are there such things as hard-and-fast rules for establishing beginnings and endings in history, or are these more or less arbitrary assumptions, full of historical prejudices? Prussia's history is an excellent illustration of how the decisions involved in periodisation are far from immaterial.

Let us start with the problem of pinpointing Prussia's beginning. Many historians equate this with the development of the Teutonic Order at the height of the Middle Ages, thereby including the colonisation history of what was later Eastern Germany.<sup>2</sup> They argue that the subsequent Kingdom of Prussia owed not just its name, but also its royal foundations, to the Teutonic land on the lower reaches of the River Vistula. Without the land originally inhabited by the *Pruzzen*, as the tribe was known, Prussia would never have acquired the name *Preussen*, nor would it have been able to exercise decisive influence from outside the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, founding a new monarchy in opposition to the Empire of Vienna.

But we must now ask whether there is any relationship of continuity between medieval Prussia and the modern Kingdom of Prussia? Are the two not only centuries apart but also worlds apart? Is there a genuine historical link between them, or is this merely an artificial projection, made with the benefit of hindsight? One does not have to be a particularly expert historian to sense the dangers of indulging in this kind of historical construction. To do so is not only to exaggerate the significance of just one part of the subsequent monarchy, but also to open the floodgates to all kinds of Prussian myths, not least that of Prussia's 'Eastern Mission'. Prussian history thereby acquires a certain emphasis which appears suspect, for example, to Polish observers.<sup>3</sup>

Other historians set the beginning of Prussia's history at 1415, when control of Brandenburg and, with it, one of the seven Electorates of the Holy Roman Empire, passed to the House of

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Hohenzollern. Supporters of this view argue that Prussia was a Hohenzollern creation;<sup>4</sup> neither its terrain nor its inhabitants comprised a natural entity that could have been judged to be the very basis of its history as a state. Hence, Bismarck's emphasis – in Chapter 13 of his *Reflections and Reminiscences* – on the great importance of dynasties, as opposed to tribes,<sup>5</sup> was intended partly as a comment on the Prussian state.

Apart from the fact that 1415 is simply one date in the history of Brandenburg, with no relevance to the history of the other regions later comprising Prussia, there is a further danger hidden in this argument. By focussing on the issue of dynastic rule, one tends to lose sight of both the country and the actual people concerned. Indeed, the historian may paint a quite misleading picture of reality when suggesting that forms of dynastic rule inevitably reflect every aspect of life in a given place at any particular time.

A third possible beginning to Prussia's history is the reign of Electoral Prince Johann Sigismund at the start of the seventeenth century, a period which brought several important changes to the nature of the Hohenzollern state.<sup>6</sup> Three notable events took place. First, in 1613 the ruling House's conversion to Calvinism; then in 1614 the acquisition of the western areas of Cleves, Mark and Ravensberg; and in 1618 the succession in the Prussian Duchy east of the Vistula. All three episodes had vital consequences. The conversion to Calvinism alienated the Hohenzollern rulers from their predominantly Lutheran subjects, thus paving the way for absolutism; the acquisition of Cleves, Mark and Ravensberg forged links between Brandenburg and the western regions of Germany, drawing interest towards an ambitious Holland; the succession in the Prussian Duchy eventually led the Hohenzollerns into the web of east European politics and on the road to power in the Baltic.

The significance of these events has never been recognised and expressed more clearly than by the first renowned chronicler of Brandenburg–Prussian history: King Frederick II, known to posterity as Frederick 'The Great'. In his famous *Memorabilia on the History of the House of Brandenburg* (*Mémoires*

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*pour servir à l'histoire de la maison de Brandebourg*) of 1751, he demonstrated an admirable grasp of essentials:

In my opinion, only the things that are worth preserving deserve to be written down. That is why I have skipped through Brandenburg's obscure origins and the reigns of the first Princes, since they have little to offer of interest. Works of history are not unlike waterways: they only start to become significant once they are navigable. Brandenburg's history only begins to get interesting during the time of Johann Sigismund, with his acquisition of Prussia, and the Cleves succession, to which he was legally entitled by marriage. It is only from this point onwards that the subject matter becomes meaty enough, so to speak, for me to get my teeth into it properly.<sup>7</sup>

This view, convincing though it may be, is bound to provoke objections. Like every attempt at periodisation, it has something rather arbitrary about it. Quite clearly, Frederick was judging history on the basis of one of his own pet interests – the consolidation of state-awareness (or what might today be termed 'political consciousness') amongst the populations of the scattered terrains under his rule. It was therefore only natural for him to start his history with the reign of the first Electoral Prince to extend Hohenzollern rule beyond the boundaries of the Mark Brandenburg.

Yet Frederick's attempt to demarcate the start of 'noteworthy' Brandenburg–Prussian history achieved only limited success. For those who lived after him, truly patriotic enthusiasm for the Prussian fatherland was generated not by the old legendary hero Johann Sigismund but, instead, by the figure of the first ruler to exude dynamism in both domestic and foreign policy, the Great Elector. To Fontane, the Great Elector marked the real beginning of Prussian history, the Prussians being 'a people whose traditions have barely advanced since the days of Fehrbellin'.<sup>8</sup>

The list of dates possibly marking the beginning of Prussia's history would not be complete without mention of the 1701 Coronation.<sup>9</sup> This is the point at which the name 'Prussia' first moved into the centre of the royal title, indicating the Electoral Prince of Brandenburg's claim to areas beyond his own immediate territory. Thereafter, Brandenburgers and Rhinelanders were also able to call themselves Prussians, expressing a common consciousness of belonging to one state.

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Naturally, some time had to elapse before the claim implicit in the royal title was actually fulfilled. Ultimately, it was the Seven Years' War and pride in the great King Frederick's achievements that finally bolstered a Prussian sense of community. The year 1701 had seen the formal prerequisites created, and it is therefore not unreasonable to regard the founding of the kingdom as the beginning of Prussian history proper.

It is, however, just as easy to advance several counter-arguments to this, notably the view that this is too radical a pruning of Prussia's past, leaving, in effect, little more than the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To exclude the seventeenth century is to tear up the all-important roots. Without the Empire's decline, and without the exhaustion – manifested in the Peace of Westphalia – of the old powers of Central Europe, Brandenburg–Prussia's ascent to the status of a new major power in Europe could never even have taken place, let alone be accounted for.<sup>10</sup>

A great deal depends, therefore, upon one's particular historical perspective. When looking at the local history of Prussia's important regions, one has to go right back to the height of the Middle Ages and examine Germany's colonisation of areas east of the River Elbe. If, in contrast, one is primarily concerned with the influence of Hohenzollern rule, then one will take its dynastic origins in Brandenburg and identify the various consistencies and inconsistencies in its pattern of development. If, again, one prefers to look at the emergence of the modern state in one of its purest forms – the rise of a new great power in Europe – then one will concentrate on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, treating the earlier ones as one would treat prehistory. Everything else is simply a matter of ideology.<sup>11</sup>

Establishing the origins of Prussian history poses quite considerable methodological problems from the outset. It is not any easier determining when it drew to a close – an equally important question which should not be neglected. It brings us into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, encroaching upon the very threshold of our own age. By and large there are four possible dates for the end of Prussian history: 1871, when the

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new German *Reich* was founded; 1918, when the Hohenzollern monarchy fell from power; 1932, when von Papen led a *coup d'état* against the Republican government of Prussia; and lastly 1947, when the Allied Control Council decreed the abolition of the Prussian state. Each of the four possibilities can be justified; each of them, however, conceals certain dangers, as we shall see.

The first option is undoubtedly the hardest to defend.<sup>12</sup> It is true that in 1871, at Prussia's instigation, a new German *Reich* was founded; but the state of Prussia continued to exist. Although important areas of jurisdiction were transferred to the *Reich*, Prussia was neither dissolved nor absorbed. On the contrary, debates persisted throughout the entire imperial period as to which of the two wielded the greater influence over the other, Prussia or Germany. Indeed, in many quarters – and especially abroad – it seemed as though the new German *Reich* was in fact just an enlarged version of Great Prussia (*Grosspreussen*). The Prussian Prime Minister was usually Chancellor of the *Reich*, too, and although from the 1890s onwards, non-Prussians occasionally climbed to the highest imperial offices, Prussians were still dominant in every respect. Prussian members of the *Bundesrat* needed no recourse to their blocking minority in order to emphasise Prussia's political weight.

Nevertheless, after 1871 Prussia enjoyed less political autonomy than it had done previously, when it was a totally separate state. With the creation of the *Reich*, new agreements had been entered into, and these had certain repercussions upon Prussian *raison d'état*. Above all, its populace had been drawn helplessly into a maelstrom of nationalism. Despite frequent assertions of Prussian individuality, there was a growing tendency for people to regard themselves simply as 'Germans'. As the Empire underwent novel processes of industrialisation and economic integration, greater social mixing with other parts of Germany ensued. By the end of the imperial period, Prussian particularism had little more than a formal, institutional existence.

Thus the second option appears more convincing. It sets November 1918 as a clear end to Prussia's history, the end of the Hohenzollern monarchy and thus the end of many areas of Old-

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Prussian influence.<sup>13</sup> The Weimar Republic ultimately continued the process of standardising the *Reich*, reducing the individual weight of earlier Federal States. Yet this theory overlooks the fact that – in spite of the above mentioned standardisation – individual states continued to exist as *Länder*, most notably Prussia, with its disproportionately large area. Although efforts were made by the constitutional lawyer Hugo Preuss to dissolve the Prussian state into provinces and to achieve a more equitable composition of the *Reich* on the basis of approximately equal-sized *Länder*, the National Assembly voted in 1919 for Prussia to remain just one independent *Land*.

This was not all. Prussia did not just survive into the Weimar Republic, it actually acquired new political weight of its own. With a social-democratic government, it enjoyed a measure of stability that was in stark contrast to the upheavals typical of *Reich* politics at that time. Furthermore, originally conservative in complexion, Prussia was now a bastion of the Republic, far better able to withstand attacks upon democracy than was the *Reich* as a whole.<sup>14</sup> For this reason, to conclude Prussian history with the fall of the Hohenzollern monarchy, stopping short of the Weimar period, would be foolishly myopic. It would be opting for a one-sided picture of the Prussian state as a profoundly conservative monarchy only, completely ignoring the Prussia that fathered so many intellectual traditions of the left.

Should we therefore choose the third option listed above, and view the collapse of the democratic experiment on the eve of Hitler's seizure of power as the end of Prussia's history? Was it not brought to a close on 20 July 1932, with Chancellor von Papen's dismissal of the last democratically-elected republican government in Prussia? Thereafter, there was nothing to stop Prussia, too, from being standardised (*gleichgeschaltet*) along Nazi lines.<sup>15</sup>

Undoubtedly, there are certain risks in determining Prussia's end on the basis of a legal technicality, the formal dismissal of the last democratically elected government. This event, wretched enough in itself, was followed by a crucial period in

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Prussian–German history. The term ‘Prussian–German’ is fully intended here, since no amount of reference to Prussia’s anti-fascist resistance can disguise the partly Prussian origins of Hitler’s imperialism. Had he not had the instruments of the German *Machtstaat* – itself so deeply influenced by the Prussian example – at his disposal, the Austrian Hitler would not have been able to pursue his pernicious plans quite as far as he did. There can be no escaping this fact, although this is certainly not to suggest that Prussia’s history be reduced to a prehistory of the so-called Third *Reich*.

Potsdam Day, when the elderly Prussian Field-Marshal von Hindenburg shook hands with the new Chancellor Adolf Hitler in the Garrison Church of Frederick the Great, is not only a date in German history. It is also a date in Prussian history.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it should be remembered that, in their constant observance of Prussian traditions, and in claiming Prussian virtues for themselves, the National Socialists actually kept Prussia alive. To take 20 July 1932 as the conclusion of Prussia’s history would, in effect, be an easy way of escaping our own history. Prussia’s role in Hitler’s Third *Reich* is an issue we cannot avoid.

There remains just the fourth, and final, possible conclusion to Prussian history; that suggested by the decree issued by the Control Council on 25 February 1947. On that day, Allied legislation formally dissolved the state of Prussia by striking it, as a legal entity, from the list of European states. The Allies wished Prussia to be held responsible for the aberrations of German history and to be condemned, above all, as the embodiment of militarism.<sup>17</sup>

Again, certain reservations arise, making these dates seem somewhat unsatisfactory. First, there is the problem of mere legal documents – already discussed with reference to 20 July 1932. We need recall only the period of German Idealism, when philosophers raised states – Prussia, especially – to the level of spiritual entities, and it is already difficult to believe that Prussia was eliminated with a single stroke of the pen. Secondly, it is possible that, on the day of the Control Council decision in 1947, the state of Prussia had in reality already ceased to exist,



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possessing only a modicum of territory. The majority of its east German land was by this time already owned by other states, whilst its central and west German provinces had in 1947 long been part of other German *Land* configurations. Prussia's official unity was already dead when the Allied Control Council pronounced its death sentence.

One final – and particularly crucial – reservation must be mentioned, concerning the realm of political consciousness. By the time it was officially dissolved on 25 February 1947, the Prussian state had long since faded from many people's political consciousness. The postwar German public was neither displeased nor delighted by the decree; at most, surprise was voiced that it had taken officialdom so long to catch up with history.<sup>18</sup>

We are thus faced with the peculiar phenomenon whereby this date too – relatively, the most plausible of all – represents a far from convincing conclusion to Prussia's history. As with the three other options, a sense of dissatisfaction persists, affecting not just the historian alone, with his abhorrence of ambiguity. We know full well that Prussia is dead and that it cannot be resurrected without being desecrated in the process.<sup>19</sup> Yet, without being able to indicate a precise date of death, we cannot give a satisfactory end to its history.

On balance, in attempting to date Prussia's history, we have not progressed much further than the writer Theodor Fontane. In his novel *Der Stechlin*, Pastor Lorenz remarks:

Looking back, we have three great epochs behind us – a fact we should never forget. The first – and perhaps the greatest – was ruled by the Soldier King. One cannot praise this man too highly. He was truly of his age and yet he was also ahead of his time. He not only brought stability to the kingdom, he also – more importantly – laid the foundations for a new age and replaced distraction, caprice and selfish ant-hill absolutism with order and justice. Justice, that was his best *rocher de bronze* . . . And then there came the second epoch, when a country which was dull both by nature and through its history, suddenly found itself shot through with genius. And then there came the third period, one which was not great and yet was also great. The country was wretched, suffering and half ruined. It was not genius that inspired the country at this time, but the people still shone with enthusiasm, with faith in a higher power, the power of the spirit, knowledge and freedom . . . And all that I have related encompassed a single century.<sup>20</sup>

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## 2 \* *PRUSSIA: where was it?*

It may seem strange that our historical approach to a country in which a large proportion of our older generation once lived should question where that country actually was. Surely it is perfectly obvious that Bavaria is in the south, Westphalia in the west, Thuringia in the centre and Prussia in the east of Germany? And does it not follow that this has always been the case?

One needs, perhaps, to look at the changing map of Europe during the twentieth century to remember just how mobile territories and boundaries can be. Poland's position after the Second World War was different to the one it had occupied before the war, and prior to the First World War it was not marked on any map at all. Prussia, on the other hand, comprised a considerable area until 1914, particularly in the north and east of Central Europe, shrank somewhat after 1918, and then in 1945 disappeared from the map altogether. It is thus far from futile to ask the whereabouts of any given country.

This is especially true when the size and shape of a country offer some indications as to its character, which they may well have influenced in some way. Geography constitutes the basis of social and agricultural structures, and may even affect a considerable amount of foreign policy. If, as in the case of large parts of France, a country enjoys good soil and a favourable climate, it can develop a strong agrarian economy with appropriate material aspirations. If, however, like Prussia east of the Elbe, it has mainly barren soil, then its predominant ethos is likely to be derived from the values of frugality and modesty.