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

Rudolf von Thadden

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*PRUSSIA: the history of a lost state*

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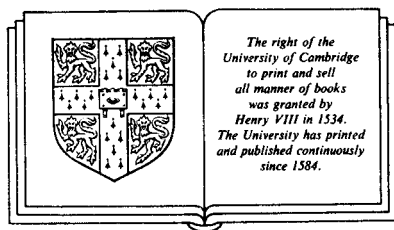
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*RUDOLF VON THADDEN*

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‘What it boils down to today is whether you are prepared to accept an historical reality, or whether you want to go on believing what you wish to. It is a fact that the victor powers, exploiting anti-Prussian feeling rife throughout the world, have now erased the name of Prussia from the map of European states. But there is currently no point in questioning the political wisdom of this action, or in asking whether it was justified . . . Now that we are subject to the victors’ authority, there can be no question of salvaging the concept of Prussia as a state. Given the general mood prevailing throughout the world, that would be a hopeless task in any case. At best, one can try to encourage historians to judge Prussia fairly, on the basis of the facts. For that, however, the political atmosphere has not yet been sufficiently cleansed of its poison. The whole disaster, which Nazi criminals inflicted upon Germany and the rest of the world, is being blamed on Prussia, regardless of the true facts. Thus, my dear Count, we shall have to be patient.’

(Otto Braun, in a letter dated 8.4.1947, written in Ascona to the former German National People’s Party (DNVP) deputy and *Reich* Minister of Agriculture, Count Kanitz.)

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## *Foreword*

It is forty years since the state of Prussia officially ceased to exist, and yet once more it has become a controversial topic. There are questions to be asked, not only because the subject-matter remains problematical, but also because opinions are highly divided as to how far Prussian history is relevant to us today.

What is not in dispute is the fact that this history *does* affect us, for in both the postwar German states there is a feeling that Prussia represents 'part of our history', that it has left its 'traces' on the road leading to our present<sup>1</sup>. Although neither the FRG nor the GDR regard themselves as actual successors to what was once Prussia, they each compete with one another in laying claim at least to its cultural legacy. The West Berlin Prussian Cultural Foundation is confronted by a constant stream of counter-claims by East Berlin.

There are further illustrations of how the Prussian past is still with us today. The major exhibition on Prussian history mounted in Berlin was burdened, more than any other historical exhibition of recent years, with expectations and anxieties extending beyond a purely academic framework. What was at issue here was not just style and quality of presentation. The driving forces and consequences of history itself were on trial. It was clear that some kind of evaluation would have to be attempted.

In strange contrast to this tangible sensitivity towards the subject of Prussia, however, its history is remarkably inaccessible. Apart from the usual difficulties encountered by everyone in search of past realities, here there are additional

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barriers, above all the fact that access to the East Elbian key regions of the Prussian State is so limited. With opportunities to explore the areas that were once Prussia so very restricted, it is extremely hard for us to advance our historical understanding. Again, access to Prussia's history is hindered by certain political considerations; Prussia was drawn more deeply than any other state into the abyss of nationalist megalomania, and also paid a higher penalty than the others. In order to reach the deeper strata of historical reality, one first has to clear some kind of path through the rubble.

This book therefore attempts to make Prussia's history more accessible. Starting with comparatively straightforward questions of periodisation and geographical location, it proceeds to examine Prussia's social structure, its political character, its relations with Germany, its relations with Europe and, finally, its church history. Particular attention is paid to the way in which these individual elements have changed during the various historical epochs. In this way, it should become apparent that there can be no definitive statements about 'the nature of Prussia' valid for all time; instead, there are specific characteristics and experiences changing through time, although of course certain dominant trends may also be seen to emerge.

As long as the state of Prussia existed, every generation and every social or political grouping was able to have its own experience of Prussia and its own appropriate response, ranging from enthusiastic appreciation to embittered rejection. No such opportunity is available to us today. Nevertheless, the final chapter of this book attempts to assess Prussia's current significance. The various perspectives of – and motives behind – a newly-awakening interest in Prussia are discussed, with reference also to the problems of historical awareness in postwar Germany. Prussia is approached here not just as an object of historical enquiry, but also as a focus of the problem of establishing one's historical identity.

Following on from a series broadcast on North German Radio



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(*Norddeutscher Rundfunk*) in 1979 (from which chapters one to four of this book are taken), all the chapter headings are formulated as questions. Correspondingly, the German edition is entitled *Fragen an Preussen* (Questions about Prussia), meaning questions addressing both the land and the people, questions helping us towards a better understanding of a state in which aspects of 'belonging' always played an important role. Beyond this, the particular nature of Prussia's demise necessitates certain questions: it was '*aufgehoben*', a word with three meanings given to it by Hegel in his interpretation of dialectical historical progress.

First, the Prussian State was 'dissolved', in the sense of 'abolished' '*aboli*', according to the English and the French text of the Decree passed by the Allied Control Council on 25 February 1947. Second, it was 'elevated' during the final phase of its history, raised to the higher level of the German *Reich*, inextricably sharing in its fate. Finally, it was 'preserved', retained as an unsuppressable element within our historical consciousness.

As an object of historical research, Prussia invites certain questions about itself; as a factor of political consciousness, it also invites certain questions; we must address these questions if we are to avoid running the risk of having no historical orientation to guide us through the post-Prussian age. Precisely because Prussia has been dissolved irrevocably and because there can be no question of its being restored, it can remind us that, when it emerges from the twentieth century, our world will have changed considerably from what it was when it first entered this century. Prussia can help us towards a better understanding of the serious message of history: there are very firm limits as to how much we can use it today, and yet there is still one thing that is worthwhile preserving, namely an awareness of the unique role played by Prussia in ushering Germany into the modern world.

## *Chronology*

- 1226 Proclamation of the Golden Bull of Rimini, authorizing the Teutonic Order to conquer and to proselytize the tribal land of the *Pruzzen*, east of the River Vistula.
- 1415 Mark Brandenburg passes, together with the Electoral title, to the House of Hohenzollern.
- 1466 Treaty of Thorn: the Order surrenders West Prussia to King Casimir of Poland, and the Grand Master recognises Polish sovereignty over East Prussia.
- 1506 University of Frankfurt/Oder founded.
- 1525 The Order's eastern lands around Königsberg become the secular Dukedom of Prussia, adopting the Lutheran faith.
- 1539 Introduction of the Lutheran Reformation in Mark Brandenburg.
- 1544 University of Königsberg founded.
- 1613 Prince Johann Sigismund is converted to Calvinism.
- 1614 Treaty of Xanten: Cleves, Mark and Ravensberg pass to Brandenburg.
- 1618 Brandenburg inherits the Dukedom of Prussia.
- 1648 Treaty of Westphalia: Brandenburg acquires part of Pomerania, the bishoprics of Halberstadt and Minden, as well as a claim to Magdeburg.
- 1660 Treaty of Oliva: Brandenburg acquires full sovereignty over the Dukedom of Prussia.
- 1675 Victory over the Swedes at Fehrbellin.
- 1685 Frederick William, the Great Elector, proclaims the Edict of Potsdam, offering sanctuary in Brandenburg to the Huguenots.
- 1694 University of Halle founded.
- 1700 Berlin Academy of Sciences founded.

- xiv      *Prussia*
- 1701      The Elector of Brandenburg is crowned 'King in Prussia'.  
 1720      Treaty of Stockholm: Stettin and the Oder estuary pass to Prussia.  
 1723      The General Directory is established as the highest administrative authority in Prussia.  
 1740/42    First Silesian War: Silesia is taken by Prussia.  
 1744/5    Second Silesian War.  
 1756/63    Seven Years War, concluded by the Treaty of Hubertusberg. Prussia retains Silesia.  
 1772      First partition of Poland: West Prussia (excluding Danzig and Thorn) and the Ermland are taken by Prussia.  
 1793      Second partition of Poland: Poznan, Danzig and Thorn pass to Prussia.  
 1794      Promulgation of the Prussian Legal Code.  
 1795      Third partition of Poland: territory around Warsaw and as far as the Niemen passes to Prussia.  
 1806      Defeat by Napoleon's armies at Jena and Auerstedt.  
 1807      Treaty of Tilsit: Prussia surrenders all lands west of the River Elbe, together with acquisitions from the second and third partitions of Poland.  
 1807/13    Era of Stein–Hardenberg reforms.  
 1810      Universities of Berlin and Breslau founded.  
 1814/15    Congress of Vienna: Prussia regains the province of Poznan and acquires Northern Saxony, together with Westphalia and the Rhineland as far as Saarbrücken.  
 1817      Establishment of Lutheran–Calvinist Union.  
 1818      University of Bonn founded.  
 1833      German Customs Union (excluding Austria) founded.  
 1847      United *Landtag* convened.  
 1848      Revolution in Berlin. A constitution is imposed.  
 1850      Treaty of Olmütz: Prussia renounces its policy of union with Germany.  
 1862      With conflict raging over the issue of a Constitution, Otto von Bismarck becomes Prime Minister of Prussia.  
 1864      War with Denmark over Schleswig Holstein.  
 1866      War with Austria for supremacy within Germany; Austria is no longer involved in the process of German unification. Hanover, Kurhessen, Nassau and Frankfurt/Main are acquired by Prussia.

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*Chronology*

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- 1870/71 War with France is followed by the founding of the German Empire. The King of Prussia is proclaimed German Emperor.
- 1878 Anti-socialist laws are passed, in an attempt to quash the labour movement.
- 1890 Bismarck is dismissed from office.
- 1914 Outbreak of the First World War.
- 1918 End of the monarchies in Germany. Prussia becomes a free, Republican state.
- 1920 Otto Braun becomes Prime Minister of Prussia.
- 1932 Anti-Prussia coup d'état by the *Reich* government: The last constitutional Prussian government, headed by Otto Braun, is deposed.
- 1933 National Socialist laws are passed to standardize (*gleichschalten*) *Reich* and *Länder*.
- 1939 Outbreak of Second World War.
- 1944 Assassination attempt upon Hitler.
- 1945 Following the conquest of Prussia's eastern territories by the Red Army, vast numbers of the German population flee. Those remaining are in subsequent years 'resettled' as decreed by the Potsdam Conference.
- 1947 The state of Prussia is formally dissolved by legislation passed by the Allied Control Commission.

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*Brandenburg–Prussian rulers since the  
 early seventeenth century*

Elector Johann Sigismund	1608–1619
Elector George William	1619–1640
Frederick William, the Great Elector	1640–1688
Elector Frederick III, from 1701 King Frederick I	1688–1713
King Frederick William I	1713–1740
King Frederick II, known as Frederick the Great	1740–1786
King Frederick William II	1786–1797
King Frederick William III	1797–1840
King Frederick William IV	1840–1861
King William I, from 1871 German Emperor	1861–1888
Emperor Frederick III	1888
Emperor William II	1888–1918

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## *Historical maps of Brandenburg–Prussia*

The maps depict the main features of Brandenburg–Prussia's territorial development. Accordingly, several details have been omitted, such as the temporary ownership of Neuchâtel in Switzerland.

*Map 1* The Electorate Brandenburg at the time of its acquisition by the Hohenzollerns in 1415. At the time of the Reformation, the New Mark (shaded dark grey) also became part of Prussia.

*Map 2* Brandenburg–Prussia at the time of the Great Elector (1640–88). The areas acquired during the Treaty of Westphalia are marked.

*Map 3* The Kingdom of Prussia at the time of Frederick the Great (1740–86). The additional areas which he acquired are marked.

*Map 4* Prussia during the reign of Frederick William II, showing the territories taken during the second and third partitions of Poland (shaded in dark grey).

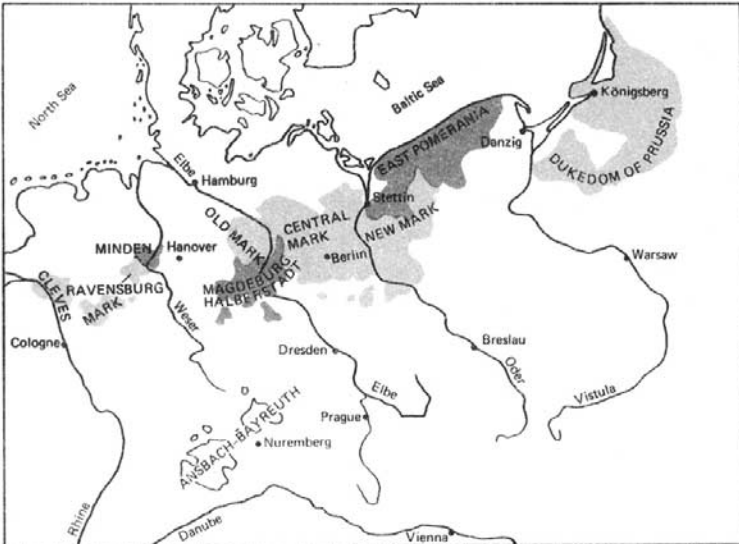
*Map 5* Prussia during the nineteenth century, following the Congress of Vienna (1815). The new acquisitions are marked.

*Map 6* Prussia at the time of the *Kaiserreich* 1871–1918. The territories acquired by Bismarck during the wars of unification are marked.

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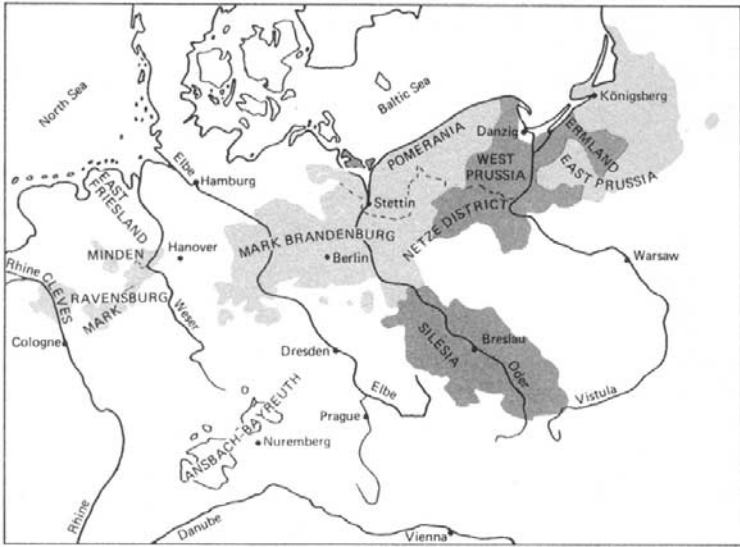


Map 1

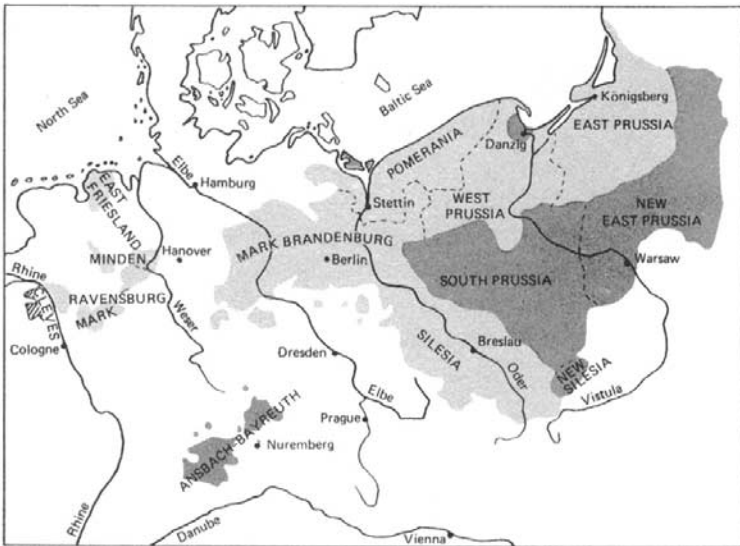


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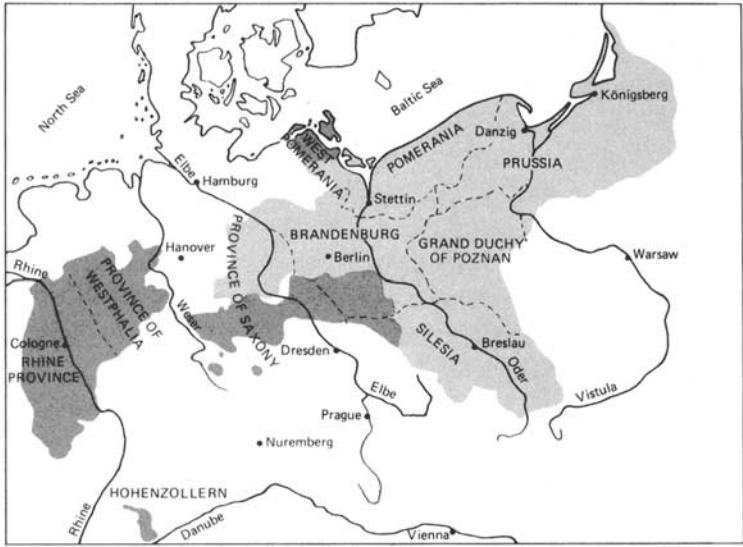
Map 3



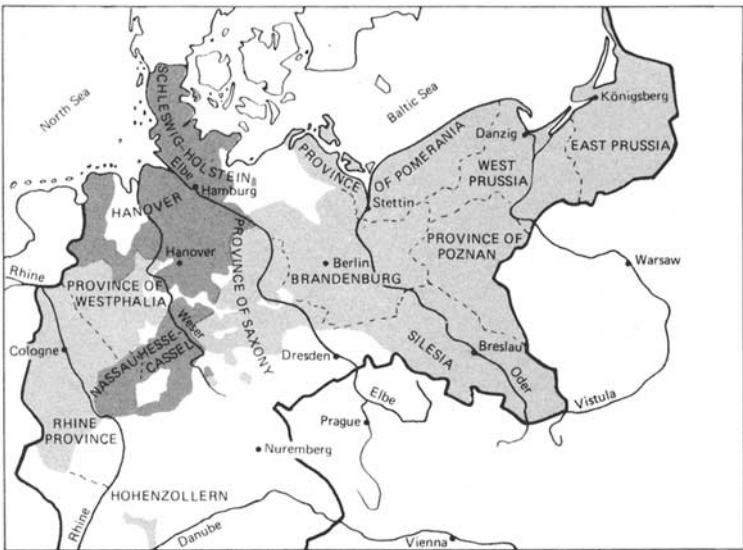
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Map 5



Map 6