

I Culture and politics: the Duchy of Saxe-Meiningen in the nineteenth century

It is a fact not altogether without significance that the reign of the present Duke began in the year 1866, which for ever put an end to the political importance of the minor German princes. A more dignified and useful occupation of the leisure thus granted to him could not well be imagined than the fostering of that refined spirit of art which is too frequently lost in the bustle and noise of the great centres of modern life.

The Times, 27 May 1881

DURING THE COURSE of its history the development of the town of Meiningen has been decisively influenced by fire. On 5 March 1908 the old theatre, which had been built by Duke Bernhard in 1831, was burnt out and destroyed.¹ The effect of this local disaster was to produce a wave of national sympathy for the little Duchy whose theatre had once captured the imagination of the whole country, given a word to its language, and had been the focus of attention in the theatre capitals of Europe, but of which little had been heard for two decades. As has happened so often at important moments in the history of the German theatre, thoughts turned once again to the idea of a national theatre, to be built in Meiningen, and to be financed by public subscription.² The proposal was not carried out because the Duke of Meiningen did not wish it. Instead he rebuilt the theatre very quickly from his own resources and with a local architect, *Hofbaumeister* Behlert. It is a fine building, and it is still in use today as the *Landestheater*, so that Meiningen possesses a theatre far superior to anything the uninformed visitor would expect to find in this small provincial town at the end of the main railway line.

The decision not to do in Meiningen what was later to be done at Stratford-upon-Avon did not stem from any failure of ambition on the part of the Duke whose energies, as a younger man, had taken his theatre company so far. Nor did it reflect any self-centred wish that the triumphs of the Meiningen Theatre should be exclusively associated with his reign and his name. It stems rather from a real understanding of the nature of his achievement, and the very special combination of historical, political, cultural, and personal circumstances which made it possible. The 'Meininger' are a phenomenon of the Germany of Kaiser Wilhelm I, the *Gründerzeit*, rather than of the later

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Wilhelminian epoch, ruled over by his grandson, Wilhelm II; their once-for-all success could not have been repeated, and the attempt to revive their past glories in the age of Reinhardt, whose work represents the renewal and further development of their tradition, could only have tarnished their reputation.

At the time of its greatest successes the Meiningen Court Theatre had acquired the standing of a national institution. In its journeys beyond the frontiers of the *Reich* it had assumed a representative status for German national culture, and at home it had frequently been held up as a model by advocates of reform in the German theatre.³ In its preservation of its base in Thuringia, its status as a court theatre, and its practice of descending upon the capital in the theatrical close season, it remained a consciously provincial enterprise, and the tension which this provoked is a recurrent theme in the critical reception of the Meiningen. Particularly evident in the discussion of the company in those cities such as Berlin, Vienna, London, Moscow, and Paris, which could lay claim to a certain reputation as major cultural centres and theatre capitals, the theme was subject to a full range of variations, from patronising irony, by way of amazement, to near outrage that the court theatre of a minor German duchy should presume to compete with the leading theatres of Europe on their home territory. That the ruling Duke himself – a dilettante! – should have played a leading part in the venture only made matters worse.

The happy combination of exactly the right individual talents – the Duke himself, his third (morganatic) wife, the former actress, Ellen Franz, and his stage-director, a Jewish actor from the middle ranks of the company, Ludwig Chronegk – was a major factor in the successes of the theatre and its tours; but this cannot be seen as the isolated success of a few gifted, but untypical or alienated individuals. From Albert, the Prince Consort, younger brother of Ernst II, Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and a cousin of Duke Georg II of Saxe-Meiningen, by way of the Dukes of Hessen-Darmstadt and Weimar, to King Ludwig II of Bavaria, the princes from the lesser German courts were enormously active and versatile in the contributions they made to the culture of industrial, bourgeois, late-nineteenth-century Europe. Moreover, standing somewhat above, though not entirely outside, the cultural institutions of the day, they often showed an astute insight and an unprejudiced eye when it came to the choice of collaborators, as is wonderfully clear from the example of Prince Albert and Joseph Paxton, the designer of the Crystal Palace.⁴ So striking are the contributions they made to this culture, in what we now recognise as its most characteristic form, that any investigation of an individual manifestation must begin by asking whether such contributions were not perhaps possible because of, rather than despite, the modesty of the amateur sources from which they sprang.

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The history of the Duchy of Saxe-Meiningen as an independent state goes back only to 1680, when the territories of Duke Ernst of Gotha were divided among his seven sons, the third of whom became Duke Bernhard I of Saxe-Meiningen. The Duchy survived the Napoleonic Wars under the regency of Duchess Marie, widowed on the death of Georg I in 1803; and in 1815 it took its place alongside other, mostly larger, sovereign states in the German Confederation (*Deutscher Bund*). At his coming-of-age in 1821 Duke Bernhard II Erich Freund began a reign of forty-five years; even this was, however, to be exceeded by that of his son, who ruled as Georg II from 1866 to 1914. In 1826 the Duchy experienced the only significant territorial expansion in its history; together with the neighbouring duchies of Saxe-Coburg and Altenburg it acquired a share of the Duchy of Gotha, which had been left without an heir on the death of Duke Friedrich IV. The Duchy of Saxe-Meiningen continued to exist within these new boundaries, but with progressively diminishing sovereignty, until 1920, when it was incorporated into the Weimar Republic as part of the province of Thuringia. Today, of course, the former Duchy lies within the German Democratic Republic, separated from what was neighbouring Saxe-Coburg-Gotha by the border with the Federal Republic.

Saxe-Meiningen was a small state covering some 2,500 km² but, from the point of view of communications, it was disadvantageously stretched out along the valley of the river Werra from Salzungen, in the north, to Eisfeld, in the south, with enclaves at Cambach and Kranichsfeld. It was not a prosperous area, being heavily wooded (over 40 per cent of the surface-area in the 1880s) and with a less-than-average amount of agricultural land in comparison with the *Reich* as a whole.⁵ In 1846 the population of the Duchy numbered 160,515, three-quarters of whom lived in rural areas, working mostly in forestry and agriculture; here feudal practices still prevailed widely, inhibiting the development of the already poor state.⁶ The other principal sources of employment were in ceramics (Henneberg porcelain), wood-working, and toymaking, but the Duchy did not have the resources to sustain a strong entrepreneurial bourgeoisie, nor to prevent significant emigration during the first half of the century.

Saxe-Meiningen therefore shared the weaknesses which afflicted most of the smaller German states at this time: isolation, poor internal and external communications, and the consequent absence of any significant commercial and political activity. The 1830s saw some first steps in the direction of economic modernisation and some improvement in trade and communications as the Duchy entered the Customs Union in 1834. This marked the beginning of an orientation towards Prussia, rather than the economically weaker and more feudal Austria, but such moves towards centralisation and, ultimately, unification were viewed with suspicion by the rulers of the smaller states within the German Confederation, for they saw them (rightly)

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as a threat to their independence and power. Liberal ideas began slowly to penetrate the Duchy, but, typically for this period, the centre of liberal activity was a cultural rather than a directly political organisation, the *Bibliographisches Institut*, which Carl Joseph Meyer transferred from Gotha to Hildburghausen in 1828. From here, and in collaboration with Friedrich Hofmann, later to be an editor of the middlebrow journal, *Die Gartenlaube*, Meyer began to publish an illustrated cultural journal, *Meyers Universum oder Abbildung und Beschreibung des Sehenswertesten und Merkwürdigsten der Natur und Kunst auf der ganzen Erde* (10 vols., 1833–43). Subsequently he was to become very well known for his great encyclopaedia, *Meyers Konversations-Lexikon*. He also became involved in the early industrial developments, which began with the exploitation of the coal and iron resources at Neuhaus. Meyer's political activities culminated in a 'Reform Address' directed to the Duke during the political unrest of 1848, but this did not achieve any lasting results.⁷

The reign of Duke Bernhard II saw the introduction of the railway to Saxe-Meiningen: a line was opened to serve the valley of the Werra in 1858; but it was not until 1870 that rail connections with the rest of Germany began to be developed. In 1874, the year of the first visit by the Meiningen Theatre to Berlin (and the tours would have been unthinkable without rail transport), a line was opened to Schweinfurth; ten years later a link was made with Erfurt, via Suhl, which brought Berlin considerably closer.⁸ The rapid industrialisation which took place in Germany during the two decades after 1850 brought other changes to the Duchy. By 1880 the population had risen to around 200,000, of whom just over 11,000 lived in the ducal capital, the *Residenzstadt* Meiningen itself, and the greater part of the working population was now divided almost equally between agriculture and forestry, on the one hand, and industry and mining, on the other. Commercial and industrial activity continued to be fairly limited in scale, and the years of world-wide recession, the late 1870s and the 1880s, saw no economic expansion within the Duchy.⁹

In the period between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 the citizens of Saxe-Meiningen led a politically passive existence, without much contact with the events of the world outside the boundaries of the Duchy. The revolutionary climate of 1848 produced a brief flurry of political activity, but the reforms agreed by Duke Bernhard either did not materialise, or, as in Prussia, were progressively withdrawn in the period of reaction in the early 1850s.¹⁰ Crown Prince Georg, however, now a young man of twenty-two, was serving as an officer in a Prussian Guards Regiment in Potsdam, and there he experienced the turbulent events at first hand. In a series of letters to his mother he wrote very excitedly about the dangers of the situation, especially the revolutionary threat to the monarchies. In early March he judged that it was already too late for the princes to

make any concessions; and in any case the notion of progress towards democratic government evidently did not commend itself to him:

if any [concessions] are made, then the people will want to continue and have more, and the *Plebs*, having assumed the task of implementing the will of the people, will gain so much power that eventually it will propose legislation, as has already happened in Paris.

Showing both his firm commitment to monarchical rule and his authoritarian nature, he urged the severest repressive measures in defence of what he believed to be a sacred cause:

I hope that the fullest force will be used mercilessly against the precious rabble . . . At the present time it is foolish to show indulgence to the rebels; if Paris had been bombarded and half the city reduced to ashes, that would have been better than the weakness, thanks to which the whole world might yet be overtaken by revolution.¹¹

Very soon Georg had an opportunity to put his resolve to the test by taking part in the military actions against the insurgents in Berlin; but, despite his son's desire to remain there and play an active rôle in the defence of the thrones, his father abruptly curtailed such involvement in Prussian affairs and ordered him home.¹²

This paternal restraint did not arise from any liberal inclinations on the part of Duke Bernhard. The idea of German national unity, which was very much in the air in 1848 and 1849, and which came to occupy a prominent place in liberal thinking in the following decades, did not have his support. Seeing in Prussia the greatest threat to the independence of the smaller states, he reacted with increasing antipathy to the policies of Bismarck, and looked with increasing sympathy towards Austria.¹³ Not so his son who, in 1849, had led a battalion from Meiningen on the Prussian side in the conflict with Denmark over Schleswig-Holstein; who continued to serve in the Prussian army; who, in 1850, had married a Prussian princess, Charlotte, a niece of King Friedrich-Wilhelm IV; and who, since his marriage, was spending a great deal of time at court in Potsdam. His growing insight into political developments made him – like his father – see the need for Meiningen to choose between the two major German powers as they moved inexorably into conflict; but the Crown Prince's letters reveal an understanding of the situation that is both more realistic, given the geographical and economic circumstances of the Duchy, and at the same time closer to the inclinations of its overwhelmingly Protestant population in its leaning to its powerful northern neighbour:

Nor do I believe that the small states will be able to choose their own politics if it should come to a regrettable war between Prussia and Austria . . . In this case, at any rate, Meiningen would not be able to take Austria's side, because it is too close to Prussia . . . It would therefore be in the political interest of Meiningen to do with good grace what it would have to do anyway.¹⁴

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These cautionary words were not heeded by Duke Bernhard, who allowed his son no influence on the politics of the Duchy before 1866; who protested as alliances, in the form of military pacts, began to be forged between Prussia and neighbouring territories, such as the Duchy of Saxe-Coburg under its liberal and pro-Prussian ruler, Ernst II; and who took a consistently pro-Austrian and separatist line in foreign-policy matters until 1866, when Austria and Prussia came into open conflict over the Schleswig-Holstein question. Among the Thuringian states, which constituted the 12th *curia* of the *Bundestag*, Meiningen alone voted for the Austrian proposal and in favour of mobilisation against Prussia. The Austrian proposal was, however, carried by the assembly as a whole, whereupon Prussia declared the Confederation dissolved.

In the war which followed the regiments from Meiningen were found a non-combatant rôle in garrisoning Frankfurt am Main; whereas the troops from neighbouring Saxe-Coburg and other parts of Thuringia fought on the Prussian side against the Hanoverians at Langensalza, where Duke Ernst II played a prominent and controversial part in the negotiations before the battle.¹⁵ In contrast, Duke Bernhard was obliged to flee with his government to the safety of Bamberg in Bavaria. Recognising the untenability of the isolated position into which his father was moving, Crown Prince Georg had, before the outbreak of hostilities, requested permission to rejoin the Prussian army; after the victory of the Prussians at Sadowa (Königgrätz), which, for all the rapidity with which it was accomplished, had not by any means been a foregone conclusion, Georg repeated his request:

Now that so and so many weeks have passed, and now that the situation has, from your point of view, become so hopeless, I am resubmitting my request to you to permit my entry into the Prussian army.¹⁶

Again the Crown Prince's request was refused, and Duke Bernhard, fearing his son's ambition, continued to exclude him from any involvement in negotiations with Prussia, although he finally, and reluctantly, attempted to make use of him as a mediator when it became clear that it was going to be difficult to save anything. In fact the King of Prussia and his Chancellor, Bismarck, refused to negotiate; in effect they treated Meiningen as a defeated enemy, demanding that the Duchy cede territory to Prussia and pay a financial indemnity. Finally Bismarck lost patience with Bernhard's unrealistic attempts to bargain for some last vestige of power from a position of weakness; Prussian troops were ordered into the town of Meiningen on 19 September 1866, and Bernhard was forced to abdicate in favour of Crown Prince Georg. The circumstances surrounding the abdication caused deep and lasting bitterness between father and son, and the breach was a decisive one. The situation, as Georg saw it, required the complete exclusion of his father's separatist voice from the councils of state:

I would be . . . ill advised to make you my principal adviser, dear Papa, for you detest the situation in which we North Germans now find ourselves after this great historical event;

and it did not allow for anything other than total political submission to Prussia:

We are now entirely in the power of Prussia. She will do with us as she pleases. It is hard to have to admit this, but it is completely true.¹⁷

The new ruler very soon began to see that he was not going to make his mark in the political sphere.

The peace treaty of August 1866, the Treaty of Prague, required Meiningen and the other Thuringian duchies to enter the North German Confederation (*Norddeutscher Bund*), which constituted one further step down the road to German unity under Prussian leadership. In his accession speech of 27 September the new Duke urged enthusiastic assent to the arrangements:

The German Confederation has been dissolved. It is necessary to secure a new basis for the political position of the Duchy and its relationship to the German fatherland. By its glorious victories, and by its intelligence and culture, Prussia has shown itself worthy to assume leadership in Germany. An alliance has been offered us, the interest of Northern Germany requires it. Let us enter this alliance joyfully.¹⁸

This speech echoes the Bismarckian sense of Prussia's mission to lead Germany to political unity, which, after the spectacular military success of 1866, had become something of a commonplace. Interestingly and characteristically – and this is not untypical of liberal sentiment during these years of political realignment – the new ruler of Meiningen justified his appeal to his people with special reference to the intellectual and cultural traditions of Prussia. Here remained a sphere within which there was still room for the unfolding of the creative energies of the Duchy.

A year later Georg II took up another of the great unifying themes of the day, the fear of hostile neighbouring powers, resentful and suspicious of Germany's increasing unity and strength.¹⁹ Such feelings may not have been directly inspired by Bismarck, but they were certainly exploited by the Chancellor with consummate skill in his foreign policy between 1866 and 1870. They found their fiercest expression in the outburst of patriotic fervour which greeted the declaration of war between Prussia and France in the summer of 1870, and further elaboration in the justification of the post-war annexation – supposedly for defensive purposes – of Alsace and parts of Lorraine. The war of 1870–71 was experienced as a great national event, for it united all shades of political opinion in the common cause; and it even brought the young Nietzsche back from the safety of neutral Basel to serve voluntarily as a medical orderly with the German armies.²⁰ Like so many poets, good as well as bad (though mostly the latter), Georg II made his personal contribution to the patriotic lyric which the war inspired; and like so many of his fellow princes who, as Moltke's staff-officer, Bronsart von

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Schellendorff, acidly observed, could so easily be spared by their fortunate principalities, he set out himself to follow the campaign.²¹

Georg's letters from the front indicate that he very much relished the sense of close involvement in the fighting, of having been under fire with his men; and he seems to have carried out his duties as commander of 32nd Regiment very conscientiously. Not only did he take part in the battles of the July and August *Blitzkrieg*, up to the Battle of Sedan, but he remained with his regiment for the more protracted and frustrating war in the provinces. He witnessed significant fighting in the Loire region, most notably a five-and-a-half hour battle for Châteaudun, which the French National Guards and *francs-tireurs* stubbornly defended against a full-scale attack; and he experienced the bitter winter of 1870–71. His letters to his second wife, Feodora, contain detailed comment on the progress of the campaign and the performance of the soldiers from Meiningen, whom he observed closely and judged critically; they are frequently illustrated with plans and drawings.²² Although he had his sketchbook with him – as indeed he did in Schleswig in 1849 – and although he could not but respond to his favourite subject matter, the dynamic scenes of battle with which he was confronted, it is quite clear that he took the historical and political aspects of the war very seriously, and that, like many friends and contemporaries, he felt that he was witnessing a

1 Georg II of Meiningen, Battlefield of Sedan, 1870.



dramatic turning-point in the history of the modern world. Of the battle of Sedan he wrote: 'This is indeed the finale of a terrible national combat, the curtain [*Aktschluß*] on an epoch-making action.' This was a subject to which he was to return in the early 1900s, when he recorded his own memoirs of the Franco-Prussian War.²³

In his renunciation of sovereignty and his eagerness to serve the new German *Reich*, Georg II displayed a realism which had its counterpart in the flexibility – many would call it opportunism – of the German liberal movement. In response to the military successes of the Prussian army, and the diplomatic and political successes of Bismarck, the liberals had very largely abandoned the opposition which had led to the constitutional crisis of the early 1860s. In the writings of the liberal right the emphasis now came to be placed firmly on unity, which had been imposed from above, at the expense of the libertarian ideals of the earlier period of German liberalism; theorists such as Baumgarten and Rochau now saw this as a period of sterile opposition and failure.²⁴ In giving explicit support to the national unity achieved by Bismarck's policies at this time they were joined by historians such as Droysen, Treitschke, and Sybel, and by literary historians such as Rudolf Haym, Julian Schmidt, and Wilhelm Scherer; and the change of direction is almost immediately reflected in the scholarly work of these men.²⁵ Among the organs through which such views were further propagated was the Berlin paper, the *National-Zeitung*, whose drama critic, Karl Frenzel, made extensive use of its columns to draw attention to the achievements of the Meiningen Court Theatre, and the monthly journal, the *Deutsche Rundschau*, edited by Julius Rodenberg, whose drama critic was also Karl Frenzel.²⁶

During the 1870s Bismarck governed with the support of the National Liberals. It is interesting to note just how closely the development of the Meiningen Theatre reflects the fortunes of this political grouping: its theoretical reorientation in the late sixties in preparation for its emergence as a national force in the early seventies, and its loss of momentum (in fact its virtual disintegration) at the end of the decade. It is a further indication of the thoroughly representative position of Saxe-Meiningen in the Germany of this period that the leading National Liberal parliamentarian and constitutional expert, Eduard Lasker, was returned to the *Reichstag* as deputy for the second constituency (Sonnenberg–Saalfeld) of the Duchy. He represented it from 1871 until his death in 1884, surviving the anti-liberal swing of the late seventies. His standing as a national politician, who did not reside in the Duchy and did much of his campaigning by proxy, did not adversely affect the loyalty of his constituents. In politics, as in the cultural sphere, Meiningen proved an effective base from which to gain a wider reputation.²⁷

This accommodation with the realities of Bismarckian Germany, combined with the ardent desire to participate in the life of the newly unified state as fully as possible, was not entirely free from a certain awkwardness. This is

just as true for the ruling Duke of Meiningen as it was for that intellectual – professional élite (*Bildungsbürgertum*) which was, by and large, represented politically by the National Liberals. Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, although a Swiss, can stand for many as an illustration of the equivocal position in which a number of writers of his generation found themselves in the later sixties and early seventies. A poet and novelist, and an almost exact contemporary of Georg II, whose historicist tastes and whose love of renaissance Italy he shared, Meyer saw himself forced in the 1860s to make a clear choice between the two national cultures in which he had grown up. He opted for Germany, disposing of his French library, writing poetry in support of the German cause, and moving close to the German nationalist circles around François Wille and Mathilde Wesendonck in Zurich.

During this period, however, Meyer experienced considerable discomfort in his relationship with his publisher, Haessel of Leipzig. He wrote apologetically of the crude '*Realpolitik*' which seemed to have come to dominate contemporary political life, and which is, of course, every bit as dominant in the actions of the ruthless characters who people the stories which Meyer was now beginning to publish with Haessel and in Rodenberg's *Deutsche Rundschau*.²⁸ The embarrassment which Meyer displayed in his relationship with the Saxon, Haessel, resembles the discretion which the Meiningen company displayed in withholding one of its most celebrated productions, Kleist's virulently nationalistic drama, *Die Hermannsschlacht*, from its non-German public. Such considerations were not, however, powerful enough actually to prevent either Meyer or the Duke of Meiningen from fully exploiting the popular appeal within Germany of such unscrupulous and energetic forgers of national unity as Jürg Jenatsch or Arminius.

The reservations about the morality of his heroes, which Meyer expressed directly in the private context, did find their way into his literary work. They are evident in the subtle and complex use of narrative perspective, by means of which Meyer prompts his reader to observe the doubts, hesitations, and compromises of a story-teller closely involved with the hero; and they are evident in the suspicious insight we are given into the psychology of the will to power, which frequently recalls the analyses of Meyer's contemporary, Nietzsche. The ambivalence between attraction to, and repulsion by, these heroes, however, remains unresolved.

Both of these aspects of Meyer's technique have parallels in the productions of the Meiningen Theatre. The former, the narrative distance, is echoed in the detachment with which the celebrated Meiningen crowd was presented as an object for observation, rather than as a group of people in whose excitement the audience was encouraged to participate directly; while the ambiguity of Meyer's approach to his characters has a counterpart in the remarkable and controversial production of Kleist's *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*, with the young Josef Kainz, who was already beginning to develop