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0521431832 - Pietism and the Making of Eighteenth-Century Prussia  
Richard L. Gawthrop  
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## *Introduction*

Prussia was in many ways an anomaly among eighteenth-century European states. Though in 1740 it ranked only tenth in land area and thirteenth in population, its army was the fourth largest in Europe and was qualitatively the best. The Prussian state's ability to assemble, drill, and maintain this disproportionately large force was all the more remarkable in view of the backwardness of the economy compared to those of most of its political rivals. Prussia's surprising military prowess was, moreover, only the most obvious manifestation of its unusually effective state institutions. No other polity of the *ancien régime* had the internal cohesion needed to survive the type of ordeal that Prussia endured during the Seven Years' War (1756–63), when it withstood assaults from the Austrian, French, and Russian armies. This feat shows the extraordinary strength of the Prussian state with particular clarity, since the combined populations of the coalition members fighting Prussia in that war outnumbered the Prussian total by more than fifteen to one.

As Frederick the Great (1740–86) himself observed, during the reign of his father Frederick William I (1713–40) Prussia “became the Sparta [of the North] . . . our customs no longer resembled those of our ancestors or our neighbors.”<sup>1</sup> Specifically, what gave the Prussian state its special character was the primacy of utilitarian considerations and the unparalleled emphasis on the conscientious fulfillment of official duties. Whereas in other European capitals monarchs reigned over court establishments characterized by ostentatious luxury, the Prussian kings wore military uniforms and promoted an official ethic of parsimony and frugality.<sup>2</sup> While most

<sup>1</sup> Frederick II of Prussia, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. J. D. E. Preuss, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1846), 234.

<sup>2</sup> For examples and further implications of this ethic, see C. B. A. Behrens, *Society, Government and the Enlightenment: The Experiences of Eighteenth-Century France and Prussia* (New York, 1985), 80f. The principle of parsimony extended into the management of Prussian state

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eighteenth-century aristocrats had come to view a commission in the armed forces as a sinecure or as a stepping stone to a position at court, the Prussian landowning nobility, the Junkers, demonstrated a deep, collective loyalty to the ethos of military service.<sup>3</sup> The Prussian bureaucracy was likewise committed to much higher standards of honesty and efficiency than its European counterparts. Its effectiveness was responsible not only for Prussia's ability to mobilize its resources for military enterprises but also for the state's ability to respond to emergencies in civilian society. In the European-wide subsistence crisis of 1739–42, for example, the Prussian state distributed grain through its magazine system with so much success that the Prussian mortality rate was significantly lower than that of any other areas of Europe affected by the famine.<sup>4</sup>

The distinctiveness of the Prussian state institutions was widely recognized – and often applauded – by contemporaries. The state's commitment to improving the material lives of its subjects, as well as a policy of religious toleration unusually broad for that time, gained for the Prussian regime the approval of many German intellectuals, who proclaimed Prussia as the prototypical “Enlightened despotism.”<sup>5</sup> King Frederick's connections with the leading French *philosophes* gave this image European-wide currency. Nor did the admiration for eighteenth-century Prussia die with the Enlightenment; a body of opinion in revolutionary France regarded the Prussian polity as so “progressive” that it had no need for the type of revolution that had overthrown the *ancien régime* in France and other parts of Western Europe.<sup>6</sup>

Accounting for the quality, and strength, of eighteenth-century Prussia's state institutions has challenged historians ever since. This

finances as Prussia, until the 1790s, was the only major European state to carry no long-term debt. See James C. Riley, *International Government Finance and the Amsterdam Capital Market, 1740–1815* (Cambridge, 1980), 101, 109.

<sup>3</sup> Even an important Marxist historian acknowledges that they were “perhaps the most devoted and disciplined aristocracy in Europe.” Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, 1974), 225.

<sup>4</sup> John D. Post, “Climatic Variability and the European Mortality Wave of the Early 1740s,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 15 (1984): 19–20. According to Behrens, the Prussian state's performance in the famine of the early 1770s was similarly exceptional. See Behrens, *Society, Government and the Enlightenment*, 182.

<sup>5</sup> For an account of the broad, though not entirely uncritical, support Frederick enjoyed among the German intelligentsia, see Behrens, *Society, Government and the Enlightenment*, 176–85.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Droz, “Diskussionsbeitrag,” in Otto Büsch, ed., *Das Preussenbild in der Geschichte: Protokoll eines Symposiums* (Berlin and New York, 1981), 98.

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historical problem has been a particularly significant one for our own century, when the German state directly descendent from Frederician Prussia twice nearly achieved hegemony in Europe. A number of explanations for the initial “rise of Prussia” have been proposed. Perry Anderson, for example, sees the Junkers’ post-1713 accomplishments as Prussian officers and bureaucrats as resulting from entrepreneurial abilities developed through managing estates and exporting grain to Western European markets.<sup>7</sup> Another aspect of the situation, the Prussian state’s ability to dominate society and enforce its commands, is often interpreted as being a replication, on a “higher” level, of the authoritarian lord–serf relationship characteristic of East Elbian society.<sup>8</sup> The motivation behind the aggressive state-building program has most frequently been attributed to the extremely competitive international political environment of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe in combination with the Hohenzollerns’ need to defend non-contiguous territories extending over seven hundred miles from the Rhine River to the Lithuanian frontier.<sup>9</sup> That the Prussian state did indeed become powerful enough to carry out this mission was, according to the most widely held view of the matter, the result of uncommonly effective leadership by a series of Hohenzollern electors/kings who together reigned for a period extending for almost one hundred and fifty years.

A critical examination of these proposed explanations shows, however, that some other factor must be considered in order to account for the transformation of Prussia, in the early to mid-eighteenth century, from a principedom comparable in rank to Saxony or Bavaria to a state able to compete within the circle of great European powers. Granted that the Junkers possessed managerial acumen,<sup>10</sup> it is by no means self-evident why a sig-

<sup>7</sup> Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, 263.

<sup>8</sup> As, for example, in Otto Büsch, *Militärsystem und Sozialleben im alten Preussen, 1713–1807: Die Anfänge der sozialen Militarisierung der preussisch-deutschen Gesellschaft* (Berlin and New York, 1962), 72.

<sup>9</sup> This view has long been a central tenet of nationalist German historiography, summarized by the formulaic phrase *Primat der Aussenpolitik*. But the critical importance of the competitive European state system for the internal “modernizing” transformations of European societies is now widely recognized by proponents of a wide range of theoretical perspectives. Thus Perry Anderson emphasizes the role of seventeenth-century Swedish expansion in the development of what he calls the “Eastern variant” of European absolutism. Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, 198–202.

<sup>10</sup> This may be a generous assumption as I am aware of no studies that have empirically established this finding.

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nificant portion of that group, in an action without parallel among the other comparable elite nobilities of East Central Europe at that time, suddenly opted for careers in the public sector. Nor can one take for granted a simple continuity between the characteristically Prussian ethos of blind obedience and a supposedly preexisting tradition in Prussian society of subordination and deference; for recent research is finding that early modern German peasants, even East Elbian serfs, were assertive defenders of their communal rights.<sup>11</sup> A closer look at the Hohenzollerns' security needs, moreover, reveals that, while their far-flung territories were vulnerable to attack, particularly from Sweden in the mid-seventeenth century, this threat had all but vanished by the early 1720s, precisely the moment when Frederick William I was building up the Prussian army to unprecedented levels. As for the importance of leadership from above, the usual emphasis in historical accounts on the personalities and policies of the Prussian rulers obscures the crucial issue of how they were able to gain support for their initiatives from society at large, particularly the Junkers. For it could not have been immediately apparent to the nobility that the radical changes being introduced by the Hohenzollerns were in the best interests of that hitherto traditionalistic landholding elite.

In this book I shall argue that what galvanized Prussian society in the early eighteenth century, what enabled the above factors to come fully into play, was an essentially cultural phenomenon: the propagation and pervasive acceptance of an ideology of unconditional service to the state.<sup>12</sup> This Prussian ideology came, of course, to exercise a fateful fascination for the modern German intelligentsia and, to a considerable extent, the German people as a whole. The full extremism of this mentality is captured by the historian Hans-Jürgen Puhle, who describes Prussianism as “the one-dimensional, often quite monomaniacal instrumentality, which was defined as ‘state interest’ and . . . which demanded, and increasingly also sought to achieve, often in an inhuman and repulsive way,

<sup>11</sup> William W. Hagen, “The Junkers’ Faithless Servants,” in R. J. Evans and W. R. Lee, eds., *The German Peasantry: Conflict and Community in Rural Society from the 18th to the 20th Centuries* (London, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> Thus proponents of this Prussianism, especially in the early decades of this century, would speak lyrically of a “feeling of commonality,” of a willingness of individuals to “sacrifice themselves for the whole,” of that great “inner freedom,” that “freedom in obedience, which has always characterized the best exemplars of Prussian discipline.” These phrases are taken from Oswald Spengler, *Preussentum und Sozialismus* (Munich, 1920), 31–32.

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the subordination to itself of all other purposes and expressions of life [*Lebensäußerungen*].”<sup>13</sup>

Those contemporary writers and observers of eighteenth-century Prussia who were not bedazzled by its efficiency and military successes likewise used strong language to describe the oppressive atmosphere of internal control that resulted from the attempted organization of an entire society on the basis of this state-service ideology. Thus Lessing in 1769 characterized Prussia as the “most enslaved country of Europe.”<sup>14</sup> To a surprising extent, however, modern historians have tended to underestimate the importance of this ideologically based political culture for that society. To be sure, the relationship between Frederick the Great’s ideas on the nature of kingship and the political theory of the Enlightenment has been well explored. Much has also been written on the controversial question of how faithfully Frederick adhered to Enlightenment precepts in the actual governing of his kingdom.<sup>15</sup> And there has been a great deal of polemical comment on the effect of the Prussian ideology on subsequent German history.<sup>16</sup> But with few exceptions historical writing on Prussia has not focused directly on the central place of this ideology in the creation and successful functioning of eighteenth-century Prussia as a political system.

Perhaps the key reason for this neglect has been an understandable preoccupation with the consequences for nineteenth- and twentieth-century German history of Prussia’s state institutions and political culture. In light of the politically charged nature of the historiography on Prussia, it is only to be expected that modern ideologies have strongly influenced the research strategies and interpretive orientations in this field – to the detriment, paradoxically, of the ideological component of early modern state building. Thus, on the one hand, most Marxist historians have assumed that the

<sup>13</sup> Hans-Jürgen Puhle, “Preussen: Entwicklung und Fehlentwicklung,” in H.-J. Puhle and H.-U. Wehler, eds., *Preussen im Rückblick* (Göttingen, 1980), 14.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Hans Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy: The Prussian Experience, 1660–1815* (Boston, 1958), 41.

<sup>15</sup> For a balanced discussion of the historiographical controversy over enlightened despotism, see Charles Ingrao, “The Problem of ‘Enlightened Absolutism’ and the German States,” *Journal of Modern History*, 58, suppl. (December 1986): 161–80.

<sup>16</sup> Two books that appeared in Germany during the great revival of interest in Prussian history in the early 1980s show how divergent assessments of the Prussian ideology can be. For an unabashed apologia, see Berthold Maack, *Preussen: Jedem das Seine* (Tübingen, 1980). For a very critical perspective, see Christian Graf von Krockow, *Warnung vor Preussen* (Berlin, 1981).

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Prussian state arose in order to serve the class interests of the landowning Junker aristocracy, thereby excluding in an *a priori* way any independent role for ideology in the formation and maintenance of the Prussian political system.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, bourgeois historians have generally followed the lead of the nationalistic “Prussian Historical School” of the late nineteenth century in its concentration on reconstructing in great detail the development of Prussia’s military and bureaucratic institutions. Since the members of the Prussian school themselves never doubted the legitimacy of the Prussian state-building effort, the historiography they spawned has systematically failed to stress the need of the eighteenth-century Prussian polity for an ideology powerful enough to justify the unusual demands it was placing on all its subjects, nobles and commoners alike. Even postwar historians who have little sympathy for German nationalism or militarism have not been able to overcome this particular legacy of the Prussian School.<sup>18</sup>

Another influence at work here has been the tendency of historians, especially since World War II, to concentrate on the reign of the more sympathetic and articulate Frederick the Great and neglect that of his father, the dictatorial, fanatical, and seemingly “simple-minded” Frederick William I.<sup>19</sup> It was under the leadership of the latter, though, that a process of rapid institutional and social change produced a state system whose essential features remained intact until the Prussian military defeat at the hands of Napoleon in 1806.<sup>20</sup> Since it is during such dynamic periods of state formation that the importance of ideology is often most clearly evident, the relative lack of recent scholarly interest in the reign of Frederick William I has further contributed to the present inade-

<sup>17</sup> For a critique of this assumption and the literature based on it, see Klaus Deppermann, “Der preussische Absolutismus und der Adel: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit der marxistischen Absolutismustheorie,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 8 (1982): 538–53.

<sup>18</sup> I am thinking here of perhaps the two most important postwar works on eighteenth-century Prussia: Büsch, *Militärssystem und Sozialleben* and Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy*.

<sup>19</sup> The characterization “simple-minded” is Behrens’s: “In his simple-minded fashion Frederick William I . . . established the administrative foundations of Prussian absolutism.” See Behrens, *Society, Government and the Enlightenment*, 56. This sentence captures perfectly the difficulty historians have had in accounting for the creative inspiration behind a political and social system that was in many ways more efficient and “modern” than any of its contemporaries – as Behrens herself would be among the first to claim.

<sup>20</sup> The element of continuity in the institutions of the Prussian state from the reign of Frederick William I to 1806 was so strong that in his structural–functional analysis of old-regime Prussia Otto Büsch was able to treat the entire period as one entity without undue distortion. See Büsch, *Militärssystem und Sozialleben*.

quate understanding of the origins and functional significance of the Prussian ideology.<sup>21</sup>

The work of the German historian Carl Hinrichs, however, has constituted a notable exception to this trend. Beginning in the 1950s, Hinrichs advanced the thesis that the origins and development of the Prussian state-service ideology can best be interpreted in the context of the Lutheran Pietist movement.<sup>22</sup> Especially in *Preussentum und Pietismus* (1971), Hinrichs identified important links between Pietism and some of the major institutional changes carried out by Frederick William I. But despite Hinrichs's professional eminence and the absence of any significant critique of his work, historians have shown a strong, almost instinctual resistance to accepting the full implications of his thesis.<sup>23</sup>

This reluctance to acknowledge the full impact of Pietism on the Prussian state stems in part from two deeply ingrained stereotypes that have prevented many people from conceiving of Lutheran Pietism as capable of playing such a dynamic political role. One of these has been the reputation of Lutheranism in general for political passivity and submissiveness to state authority.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Lutherans' willing subordination to the state in all worldly matters has long

<sup>21</sup> Though as a result of the work of the Prussian Historical School Frederick William I's significance is widely recognized, albeit in a general way, no complete, full-scale, scholarly biography has yet appeared in any language. The authoritative life begun by Carl Hinrichs takes the story only up to his ascension to the throne in 1713. Hinrichs, *Friedrich Wilhelm I., König in Preussen: Eine Biographie*, vol. 1 (Hamburg, 1941). One-volume postwar works in German, such as those by Gerhard Oestreich and Heinz Kathe, have been based on already existing research. Oestreich, *Friedrich Wilhelm I.: Preussischer Absolutismus, Merkantilismus, Militarismus* (Göttingen, 1977); Kathe, *Der "Soldatenkönig," Friedrich Wilhelm I., 1688–1740: König in Preussen* (Cologne, 1981). The last book-length treatment in English is Robert Ergang, *The Potsdam Führer: Frederick William I, Father of Prussian Militarism* (New York, 1941). Possible connections between the personality of that king and the psychological roots of the Nazi regime may very well have discouraged in-depth probing by German and perhaps other scholars. The *Resonanz* that the character of Frederick William I can still find among the German public was demonstrated, however, in the late 1970s, when the reissue of Jochen Klepper's long literary biography of Frederick William, *Der Vater: Roman eines Königs* (Munich, 1977), became a best-seller in the Federal Republic.

<sup>22</sup> See Carl Hinrichs, *Preussen als historisches Problem: Gesammelte Abhandlungen*, ed. Gerhard Oestreich (Berlin and New York, 1964); and his *Preussentum und Pietismus: Der Pietismus in Brandenburg-Preussen als religiös-soziale Reformbewegung* (Göttingen, 1971).

<sup>23</sup> For an example of an uncritical acceptance of Hinrichs's ideas, which yet remain unintegrated into the systematic account given of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Prussia, see Hannsjoachim W. Koch, *A History of Prussia* (London and New York, 1978), 80–81.

<sup>24</sup> Laurence Dickey, in his recent work on the Protestant roots of Hegel's political philosophy, has encountered these same preconceptions. For his forceful criticism of the notion of alleged Lutheran political passivity, see Dickey, *Hegel: Religion, Economics, and the Politics of Spirit, 1770–1807* (Cambridge, 1987), 8–11.

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been alleged as a major distinguishing factor between the German path of development and that of the “West,” where Calvinism and influences from the radical Reformation have presumably served to prepare the way for modern capitalism and democracy.<sup>25</sup> This characterization of the Lutheran church has been so taken for granted that even a scholar as fine as Leonard Krieger simply dismissed the possibility of any Lutheran influence on the origins of the modern German political culture.<sup>26</sup>

The other stereotype pertains to the Pietist movement specifically. To this day the term “Pietism” unfailingly evokes an idea of quietistic spirituality unconcerned with politics and dedicated to the cultivation of a mystical inner life. This view of Pietism as otherworldly had already become firmly established by the end of the nineteenth century, when it was given even more credibility by no less a social theorist than Max Weber. In his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber acknowledged that Lutheran Pietism shared some of the qualities of “inner-worldly asceticism,” whose importance in English Puritanism he so strongly emphasized. But Weber’s final verdict on Pietism was that it lacked the doctrine of predestination, or some equivalent theological inducement, for the exercise of the “constant self-control” that made the Puritans’ striving for external signs of grace so purposeful and efficacious. Weber further contrasted the supposedly mystical “emotionalism” of the Pietists with the “rationality” of the Puritans, concluding that Pietism was therefore less able than its English counterpart to contribute to the process of building the modern world – or, in Weber’s own terminology, to furthering the process of “rationalization.”<sup>27</sup>

In addition to having to overcome the effects of these deeply ingrained assumptions about Lutheran Pietism, Hinrichs’s thesis has also been burdened by the shortcomings of his own exposition of that

<sup>25</sup> The consensus behind this interpretation within the early twentieth-century German academic world was so broad that it included both those, such as Ernst Troeltsch, who wanted Germany to become more “modern,” i.e. more like the “West,” and those of more strongly nationalist conviction who desired to preserve the alleged uniqueness of the German way. See Fritz Fischer, “Der deutsche Protestantismus und die Politik im 19. Jahrhundert,” *Historische Zeitschrift*, 171 (1951): 73–76.

<sup>26</sup> Leonard Krieger, *The German Idea of Freedom: History of a Political Tradition* (Boston, 1957), 5–6.

<sup>27</sup> For Weber’s views on Pietism, see Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York, 1958), 128–39. For a critique of Weber’s analysis of Pietism, see Richard L. Gawthrop, “Lutheran Pietism and the Weber Thesis,” *German Studies Review*, 12 (1989): 237–47.



thesis. *Preussentum und Pietismus*, by far the most important work on the subject, was published posthumously and is a collection of essays rather than a systematically developed argument. Consequently, there are a number of aspects of the relationship between Pietism and the state-building efforts of Frederick William I not discussed by Hinrichs, notably the influence of Pietism on the Prussian bureaucracy. Even more significantly, Hinrichs does not address the issue of defining the nature of Frederick William's spirituality, which is crucial in determining the extent of the Pietist role in the transformation of Prussian society carried out by that king. For though the Pietists were prominent in many of the socializing institutions through which the doctrine of state service was inculcated, the king was the initiator, "the boss," the driving force behind the campaign to propagate this ideology. If, as some church historians have maintained, Frederick William was not a Pietist, then it is not difficult to argue either that the impact of Pietism was fairly limited or that Frederick William I merely used the Pietists to help him achieve objectives that had little or nothing to do with Pietism.<sup>28</sup>

This study seeks to overcome the various barriers that have limited the impact of Hinrichs's thesis. One way it does so is by providing the historical framework needed to illuminate the full significance of Pietism in the making of eighteenth-century Prussia. The aim of the first three chapters of this book, for example, is to clarify the relationship between the state building of Frederick William I, on the one hand, and the policies pursued by his two immediate predecessors, Frederick William the Great Elector (1640–88) and Frederick III(I) (1688–1713), on the other. The outcome of this comparison is crucial for the overall argument of this work. For if the achievements of Frederick William I's reign were essentially an elaboration upon those of the pre-1713 era,

<sup>28</sup> Recent works by Gerd Heinrich and Mary Fulbrook show just how significant – and how unclarified – the issue of Frederick William I's relationship to Pietism remains. Thus Heinrich questions "whether in Francke's lifetime the still small Pietist group in the state assumed an equal level of spiritual leadership [with the king] or whether it merely stimulated or supported the monarchs." Heinrich, *Geschichte Preussens: Staat und Dynastie* (Frankfurt/Main, 1981), 187. Similarly, Fulbrook, while acknowledging that after 1713 Prussia "differed from other absolutist states" as a result of the "'puritanism' and asceticism of the Prussian court" and while seeing this orientation of the court as contributing to "the development of a close relationship between precisionism [i.e. Pietism] and absolutism," does not attempt to account for the "puritanism" of Frederick William I and his entourage. Fulbrook, *Piety and Politics: Religion and the Rise of Absolutism in England, Württemberg and Prussia* (Cambridge, 1983), 167.

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when the Pietists were *not* a major force in the Hohenzollern lands, then Pietism simply could not have been that crucial a factor in the process that ultimately produced Frederician Prussia.<sup>29</sup>

But if, in fact, there were fundamental discontinuities between the regime of Frederick William I and those of his predecessors, then the factors responsible for the successes of the latter would probably not account for the accomplishments of the former. I intend to show that such discontinuities did exist and that the Brandenburg-Prussian state between 1640 and 1713 differed in degree but not in kind from other seventeenth-century German territorial states. This preliminary analysis is crucial because it solidifies the argument that the crucial factor that made Prussia so different from its “ancestors and neighbors” was introduced into the Prussian polity during the reign of Frederick William I. And it was this element of discontinuity that also enabled Frederick William’s regime to break through the constraints that would have inhibited further development of state power if the basic policies pursued by the Great Elector and Frederick III(I) had been continued.

Yet this new element, the characteristically Prussian sense of duty in serving the state, could not have been created *ex nihilo*; it had to appeal to cultural values already present in the German cultural milieu. Stereotypes about Lutheranism derived from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century experience notwithstanding, neither Reformation Lutheranism nor the Lutheran orthodoxy of the seventeenth century was inclined, theologically or politically, to endorse an ethic that placed an ultimate value on action for the good of the state. The middle chapters of the book serve the purpose of explaining how a works-oriented spirituality capable of undergirding such an ethic emerged from orthodox Lutheranism. After describing how in the seventeenth century a subjective, discipline-oriented piety became increasingly prevalent within the Lutheran tradition, I shall concentrate on the culmination of this trend, the Lutheran Pietist movement, which made its appearance in the

<sup>29</sup> As will be discussed below, the impression conveyed by most scholarly accounts is one of continuity, especially in the all-important relationship between the Junkers and the monarchy. Yet the foundations for this view are weak indeed. For a persuasive refutation of much of the conventional wisdom concerning the reign of the Great Elector, see William W. Hagen, “Seventeenth-Century Crisis in Brandenburg: The ‘Thirty Years’ War, the Destabilization of Serfdom, and the Rise of Absolutism,” *American Historical Review*, 94 (1989): 302–35.