

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Otto Buesch. *Military System and Social Life in Old Regime Prussia, 1713-1807: The Beginnings of the Social Militarization of Prusso-German Society*. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1997. 128 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-391-03984-1.

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Thirty-five years after Otto Buesch first published his study on the origins of militarism in Prussian society, an English translation has finally appeared. In the interim, a great deal of work has been done to refine the views Buesch espoused as a young scholar.[1] However, these works, while they add a great deal, do not alter the basic premise of the book—that the military system which developed in Prussia became identical with the social order of the Hohenzollern monarchy, and that it was this process that led to the militarization of Prussian society (p. xiv).

The story is by now familiar. Military recruitment in Prussia was based on the “canton system” introduced in 1732; each regiment was allocated a district for recruiting in which all able-bodied men were obliged literally from birth to register on the cantonal rolls. Recruitment, then, was centered on and developed around Prussia’s agricultural population, creating not only an army disproportionately large for the size of the Prussian population, but a peasant way of life that was shaped and conditioned, like none other in Europe, by the contingencies of the state and the military. The peasant was even protected by the state (*Bauernschutz*) because of the importance of his production. This is the strong point of the book—Buesch analyses in detail the way in which every aspect of the peasant’s daily life was directly determined by his relationship to the military (p. 10).

The second half of the study deals with the integration of the nobility into the military system. Nobles were systematically enrolled in the army as officers and would serve for decades before returning to their estates. Even after release from the army, the noble would continue to serve the military as an administrator in the canton system. In return for their services the nobility were granted a number of concessions: they were given control over their serfs and over local government (pp. 91-93); they were given a monopoly of landed estates (a Junker could only sell his land to another Junker [p. 72]); they were

given cheap mortgages to repay the damages caused to their estates during the Seven Years War (p. 74); and finally, despite the rigidification of the system towards the end of the old regime, the noble officer could make his fortune in the regiment (pp. 75-88). Unlike France, where the nobility and the monarchy were competing forces for political power, the links between the monarchy and the nobility in Prussia became stronger. The crown was dependant on the Junkers for officers and civil servants; the Junkers were dependent on the monarchy for positions of power and privilege.

There are two comments I would make about the work as a whole; the first is a suggestion for further study and the second is a criticism. If Buesch’s work is important for its portrait of eighteenth-century Prussian rural society, it is also important for documenting the manner in which authority was unquestioningly obeyed (pp. 14-22). When the Junker eventually returned to the estate he brought with him old habits learned in the army. The peasant, in short, was subjected to the same discipline reserved for soldiers. Not only did the law allow Junkers to use the whip—“even in normal dealings with his subjects” (p. 23)—but the peasant/soldier was dealt corporal punishment by just about anyone whose status was higher. Even civilian subjects could be punished by the military in wartime (p. 26). Rural discipline, therefore, was based on the same notions prevalent in the army—“obedience, punctiliousness and subordination.” These concepts governed the peasant/soldier’s life and produced subjects conditioned to blind obedience. And obedience, after all, is one of the foundations upon which militarism is built and established. This is one of the most interesting concepts the book has to offer, but it is one that is only partially explored. As far as I am aware, discipline and punishment in eighteenth century Prussia and the manner in which it was transferred from the military to civilian life is an avenue that has yet to be studied (readers of this review will correct me on this point if I am mistaken).

Leaving aside the sometimes excessive claims of causality made by Buesch, there is only one serious flaw, and that is the total lack of regard for foreign policy. When speaking of Frederick William I's successful expansion of the army, Buesch grudgingly concedes that: "Considerations of power politics may have played a not inconsiderable role in this decision" (p. 16). Buesch prefers to seek the reasons for the expansion of the army in the domestic policies implemented by Frederick William I. The army was above all "the great fly-wheel with which he [Frederick William I] could put the entire economy on a new footing and realign the social structures of social classes in accordance with his own ideas" (p. 16). Surely, Buesch has turned the issue on its head. Foreign policy determined the manner in which Prussian society developed. The reforms of Frederick William I are a classic example of this, as are the reforms introduced after Prussia's disastrous performance at Jena-Auerstaedt in 1806-07.

One last comment on the translation by John Gagliardo; it is excellent. The only criticism of the edition I would make is that the original footnotes have for the most part been eliminated, as has the bibliography.

Any reader wanting further references will have to go to the original source, an annoyance that might have been avoided at minimal cost. Despite its age, however, the book still has a great deal to offer, not the least from a historiographical perspective. The style is far too inaccessible for most undergraduate students but it should be required reading for anyone dealing with Prussia/Germany in the eighteenth century.

Note:

[1]. Thanks to a number of historians we know much more about eighteenth-century rural Prussia. Edgar Melton and William Hagen have done work on the East Elbian manorial system. Thanks to Jan Peters, Hartmut Harnisch and Liselott Enders and William Hagen, it is now clear that wage labor played an important role in the Prussian countryside well before the reform era. More recently, Karin Friedrich has provided work on the development of the Prussian town.

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