

Christopher Clark. *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947.*
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Shortly after German reunification, the electorates of Berlin and Brandenburg rejected a proposed fusion of the two states. Before the referendum, though, some briefly speculated that a merged state perhaps should be called "Prussia" rather than "Brandenburg-Berlin." The idea never took flight, and the fact that it did not is suggestive about Germany attitudes to Prussia now. "Prussia," though legally erased a half-century earlier, still remained in German memory, but no one felt attached to a Prussian identity, as a Bavarian or Saxon would about his or her land.

Historians have paid a bit more attention to Prussia, of course. Whereas mid-century historiography portrayed Prussia as simply the home of German militarism and authoritarianism—one is reminded that Robert Ergang's biography of Frederick William I from these years was titled *Potsdam Führer* (1941)—since the 1980s Prussia has come to be seen less one-dimensionally. Puhle's and Wehler's edited volume *Preußen im Rückblick* (1980) suggested the need for some revision. The subtitle of Dietrich Orlow's study of Weimar-era Prussia, *The Unlikely Rock of Democracy* (1980),

went further to remind us that Weimar Prussia had a stable, functioning "Grand Coalition" for years and, given that it governed three-fifths of the country, proved an anti-Nazi bulwark until 1933. Synthetic treatments of Prussian history have also emerged, such as Philip Dwyer's two volumes, *The Rise of Prussia* and *Modern Prussia History* (2000). The latest of these, the book under review, the book under review, which takes full advantage of the last twenty years' research. His portrayal of Prussia does not necessarily give us a new master narrative of Prussian or German history, but he has produced a richly textured and softened picture of Prussia that does a great deal to undermine some older master narratives and indeed has implications for German history more generally.

It is worthwhile to mention how these master narratives often treated Prussia. The concept of a German *Sonderweg* relied on the idea of Prussian political backwardness as a primary source of Germany's political backwardness generally. In fact, it is not going too far to say that the German *Sonderweg* really was a Prussian *Sonderweg*:

Prussia's peculiarities became German peculiarities when Prussia became the core of a German *Kaiserreich*. The Prussian aristocracy obstructed Prussian democratization and retained control of the bureaucracy and the military, which in turn became the source of blockage for the progress of German democratization; Prussia's authoritarian tendencies in that aristocracy became the authoritarian traits of Germany as a whole. An even older variant of the *Sonderweg* is the longstanding stereotype of a militarist, authoritarian state, beginning with Frederick the Great. The old portrayal emphasized the logic of Brandenburg's geography: total vulnerability required a disproportionately large army to deter neighbors, which in turn required an efficient bureaucracy to mobilize both resources and manpower. This defensive system ultimately militarized the whole culture with its emphasis on order, obedience, and honor. Discipline and rigor facilitated Prussia's rise from a principality to a rival of Austria and ultimately to the cornerstone of the German empire. These master narratives were hardly straw men, given the rich scholarship they produced and continue to produce. To Clark's credit he does not treat these old portrayals as straw men, but his synthesis of more recent scholarship does provide a subtle but strong attack on these narratives.

Given how much these older master narratives relied on Prussian developments through the nineteenth century as a prelude to Prussian dominance, or as a part of an invincible ascent to that dominance, it is perhaps not surprising that Clark's work challenges older narratives most in describing these periods when Prussia was an autonomous state. In treating Prussia's geopolitical rise, for example, Clark does not see an inevitable Prussian movement from strength to strength in its rivalry with Austria within the German-speaking world; instead, he stresses its continued vulnerability within the larger European context, and how that vulnerability made for surprisingly timid behavior. Prussia relied especially on Russian sympathy and on the cooperation of other

powers. This placement of Prussia into a more European setting, rather than concentrating solely on its rivalry with Austria, is a useful corrective.

The role of Prussia's domestic political sentiments and institutions in its rise to German prominence also get put into a different perspective. Prussia never did become a real nation-state: as Clarke notes, it remained a collection of regions spread across the German-speaking world from the Rhineland to East Prussia, united through the monarch more than through a sense of Prussian identity. In this regard, it lagged behind other states in Europe. Indeed, the rise of German nationalism actually might have hampered the rise of a Prussian nationalism. Nor would Clark much dispute the notion that the creation of an efficient, honest bureaucracy and an outsized army helped assure Prussia's survival in the eighteenth century. He would dispute, however, whether these institutions would inevitably lead to Prussia's dominance in the German-speaking world and whether these institutions had as large an impact on Prussian culture and politics as their conventional portrayals suggest. On the one hand, he notes that the Prussian army in the first half of the nineteenth century was not as well-trained or as vaunted as its eighteenth-century counterpart; Prussia held more of an honorary status among Europe's great powers at this time. On the other hand, and perhaps for the same reason, Prussia's army dominated Prussian culture less during this period than in other periods.

Clark's description of Prussia's domestic developments, utilizing recent research in social and cultural history, provides a much deeper synthesis of Prussian life. While the older historiography portrays the aristocracy as a source and bulwark of Prussian, and German, authoritarianism in its defense of its agrarian roots, Clark portrays a more commercially-oriented aristocracy. Indeed, much of the aristocracy had already sold its land to bourgeois buyers in the early nineteenth century. Nor did it enjoy unquestioned dominance

literally in its own back yards: peasants regularly disputed aristocratic entitlements in court, rather than behaving subserviently. Other sections discuss women's history and the history of religious and ethnic minorities within Prussia, aspects that older historiographies undervalued. Throughout this section runs the theme that Enlightenment sensibilities influenced Prussian culture toward rationality and restraint as much as toward order. Discipline and rationality were supposed to exist together.

With the founding of the German Empire, Prussia was no longer as autonomous, and certainly other powers no longer treated it as sovereign, and thus many of the geopolitical parameters that governed its behavior disappeared and arguably became parameters for Germany instead. It becomes more difficult to treat Prussian developments distinctly from German developments, not only in politics but perhaps even in culture and economics, and perhaps for this reason, Clark shifts his emphasis. While he still discusses Prussian political developments, one now reads more discussion of how Prussia's heritage informed many of the actors on the Prussian political stage.

The Prussian tradition, it seems, was multivalent enough that its mortal political enemies could all easily draw upon some aspect of it in their battles with each other. The Nazis appropriated only the martial aspects of the Prussian heritage while studiously ignoring its Enlightenment heritage. Others, however, could draw upon that heritage, and to Clark's credit, he links such borrowings to the Prussian idea explicitly. Clark cites Otto Braun, the SPD Premier for Prussia until his government was dissolved in 1932, who managed to combine this Prussian legacy of rationality and duty quite easily with a passion for democracy. Likewise, though a great deal of the Prussian aristocracy was heavily involved with the Nazis, the aristocratic Kreisau circle of dissidents could as

easily call upon Prussian tradition and honor for decidedly anti-Nazi perspectives.

In a coda, Clark discusses the disappearance of Prussia after World War II. Prussia already had disappeared in all but name under the Nazis, who simply never took the time to legally abolish the Prussian state. The Allies did this in 1947, erroneously considering it the source of all of Germany's Nazi ills. Ironically and sadly, the Nazis "won" in this regard: they had succeeded in linking the Prussian heritage to their concerns, and Prussia went down with them. The Allies even made Prussia disappear geographically, as most of its territory became part of Poland or the Soviet Union, leaving little on which to base a heritage. The ethnic cleansing of the mid-1940s displaced millions of Germans from these territories to what remained of Germany. Perhaps most significantly, however, that base had apparently already disappeared in memory. As Clark very insightfully notes, the expellees did not identify themselves as Prussians, but as Königsberger, Silesians, and Pomeranians. In their later political activism, they agitated as German rather than as Prussian expellees. A Prussian identity apparently had died long before 1947, if it ever had had much substance at all.

Where, then, does this portrayal leave us? Much remains rightly unchanged in our perspective. Prussia was not a democratic state, for example; it still practiced the three-class voting system through 1918 and the upper echelons of the military and civil service remained exclusively male Protestant aristocratic clubs. But much has changed in our perspectives, too. The great virtue of Clark's work lies in its integration of decades of recent research into a new, much richer picture of Prussia. We had been working with a Prussian *Sonderweg* of sorts, an image of a large portion of Germany with its own historical and anti-democratic "peculiarities." If the idea of a Prussian *Sonderweg* now loses its currency to the degree that the idea of a German *Sonderweg* has, this will be

in no small part Clark's doing. Laymen and scholars alike will find much to appreciate in this masterful synthesis.

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