

A Traditionalist Pleads for a More Positive Memory of Prussia (October 21, 1978)

Abstract

When even the East German government began to promote a return to progressive Prussian traditions, the conservative journalist Günther Zehm called for a similar abandonment of stereotypes about Prussian militarism and authoritarianism in the Federal Republic and for a more open appraisal of Prussia's liberal and humanitarian legacy.

Source

In Search of Prussia

Good news from East Berlin: In the FDJ [Free German Youth] and in the student newspaper *Forum*, a campaign was started to rehabilitate (at least partly) the Prussian state and Prusso-German tradition. But the endeavor is not without its catches: only the “progressive strands” in Prussian history are to be acknowledged and “a counterweight to the FRG’s reactionary Prussia cult is to be created.”

Nevertheless, one can only agree with the *Forum*’s statement that the image of Prussia has long been unduly darkened by Bismarck’s struggle against the “revolutionary workers’ movement.” This shows a level of awareness that has yet to reach many social democratic circles in the West. These circles are presently marking “the hundredth anniversary of the Anti-Socialist Act” and are thereby indulging, once again, in the old clichés that leftists have always had with respect to Prussia.

The anti-Prussian cliché: entire dissertations have been written on this curious subject. An untiring coalition of socialists, ultramontanists [i.e., Catholics], and Munich-based caricaturists tinkered with its basic design after 1870, and in the end the horrifying image of a monocle-brandishing, dumbly grating “Prussian lieutenant” grew so much larger than life that its inventors themselves believed in it and identified Prussia with the caricature without a second thought.

And worse yet: even abroad, people started believing it. Later, it led the Hitler regime straight back to the “Prussianization of Germany.” When Germany’s defeat in the Second World War was on the horizon, Winston Churchill said that after the victory “Prussia” should be punished first and foremost and the other German states spared. In 1945, the Allied forces announced in a bombastic resolution that Prussia was finally eliminated. They hadn’t noticed that that state hadn’t existed since 1934. At that time, Hermann Göring, a Bavarian, had already done away with it on the orders of the Austrian Adolf Hitler.^[1]

So, it is high time to remember the history of Prussia and its productive role in the history of the German state and culture. It was a good and necessary idea for the Berlin Senate to decide to set up a large, objective exhibition about Prussia, and it can only be welcomed that the “GDR” now wants to follow suit. Anyone who wishes to track down “progressive impulses” will find that a wide and promising field opens up when researching Prussia.

For example, it was Prussia that led Germany as a whole out of the catastrophe of the Thirty Years War and gave it its unforeseen cultural heyday. Whereas Austria and the southwestern states long persisted in a Counter Reformation that had become sterile, Prussia reformed its internal structure in an exemplary manner. Torture, religious intolerance, pogroms against Jews—all of that was first abolished or outlawed in Prussia, long before it was in the rest of Germany. The victories of the Prussian kings created new pride and possibilities for identification with the nation. The universities in Halle and Königsberg

offered refuge not only to scholars expelled from Catholic states but also to those who had to flee Saxony's Protestant orthodoxy.

None of the major German intellectual schools would have even been possible without direct Prussian influence. Johann Joachim Winckelmann was a Prussian who created the new classicism. Romanticism emerged in Berlin and in "Prussianized" Jena. Classical German philosophy was almost the exclusive province of Prussian universities. Military reform (August von Gneisenau, Carl von Clausewitz), education reform (Wilhelm von Humboldt), new architecture (Johann Gottfried Schadow, Karl Friedrich Schinkel), new theology (Friedrich Schleiermacher), the revival of Eastern and Southeastern European national spirit (Johann Gottfried Herder)—Prussian sons and Prussian ideals, wherever one looks.

One can spend a long time debating whether the disastrous strains in German history that were becoming apparent in the late nineteenth century were in fact a consequence of "Prussianization" or perhaps more likely the result of Prussia's being pushed back and absorbed into the German Empire, an odd "revenge for Sadowa."^[2] It is a fact that even the declared enemies of Brandenburg repeatedly benefited from the Prussian spirit. Without the existence of Prussia, social democracy would never have had a glacis upon which to become so strong. And foreign socialists attested often enough to social democracy's Prussian discipline and Prussian, Kantian ethos. With all their polemics, the free-thinkers and radicals knew that they were protected by the rule of law, which was held in particularly high esteem in Prussia.

This should also be given particular emphasis when commemorating Prussia in both German states: Prussia was one of the first constitutional states [*Rechtsstaaten*] in Europe, furnished with an exemplary constitutional doctrinal tradition and a parliamentarianism that was in no way inferior to the contemporary French parliamentary system. Anyone who blindly rages against Junkerdom and "Prussian militarism" is not even getting at half of the truth. The influence of the Junkers and generals in Prussia never reached the same level as in Russia, or even in Austria-Hungary, primarily because of the idea of law, which this state supported from an early point in its history.

It did preserve the principles of corporative estates to a greater extent than France or England and, with them, numerous primary loyalties that liberalism was not able to dissolve. In retrospect, however, today this proves to be more of an advantage than a notorious example of "feudalism." Prussia can thus become a model for those seeking an intermediate path between the excesses of permissiveness and despotism.

NOTES

^[1] This refers to the National Socialists' dissolution of Prussia on account of its left-wing government during the Weimar Republic—eds.

^[2] Battle of Sadowa: Prussian victory over Austria in July 1866, ending the Seven Weeks' War (or Austro-Prussian War) and confirming Prussian hegemony over the German states—trans.

Source: Günter Zehm, "Auf der Suche nach Preußen," *Die Welt*, October 21, 1978. Republished with permission from the author.

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