

**Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947*,  
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There is a current trend in German historiography which emphasizes the role played by regional and state-based history in the wider national story. Given the work done to date on Württemberg and other foci for studies of *Heimat* it was only a matter of time before Prussia, the sub-national community which dominated (and arguably largely defined) the German nation state during the first phase of its history, received the attention it deserved.

This said the history of Prussia is deserving of a very great deal indeed if it is to be treated well. Its complex constitutional and social history has been the nexus of all the great German historiographic movements of the past half century, and as such any scholar hoping to do justice to their task, needs first to have mastered a massive secondary literature. In *Iron Kingdom* Christopher Clark has achieved this admirably, and while never compromising the academic credentials of the work, has managed throughout to tell an interesting tale, accessible to the expert and layperson alike. Though not according with a simple narrative history model, Clark's account moves seamlessly between the different chapters and sections, dealing with important themes in a clear and lucid fashion. The book is also notable for avoiding the rather tired, teleological narrative thread of Prussia's 'inevitable' course towards Armageddon in 1914. Writing from a position outside the internecine wrangling of native German historiography, Clark shows that Prussia underwent periods of extreme weakness as well as power-political dominance, and that contingency played an important role in the unfolding of the state's own 'special path' through history (distinct from Germany's).

The early territorial and feudal wrangles of Medieval and Reformation Brandenburg are made clear almost as never before, with ample attention being paid to the role played by the Hohenzollern dynasty. The character portraits of early monarchs like Joachim II, Georg Wilhelm and Friedrich-

Wilhelm (the Great Elector), are vivid and revealing both of the personalities and historical significance of their respective reigns. In particular the treatment of the Great Elector's time on the throne is excellent, giving readers a real impression of the transformation of a petty principality ravaged by the Thirty Years War into a rising regional power. Importantly, the relationship between crown and people is never far from Clark's mind, preventing *Iron Kingdom* from lapsing into old fashioned 'Great Man' history. Indeed, Clark is careful to acknowledge the important roles played by 'Great Women' of the Hohenzollern court, especially Friedrich Wilhelm III's Queen Luise, who became something of the Princess Diana of her age (with all that entails). Similarly, the problem of Prussia's status as an agglomeration of different royal, ducal and ecclesiastical territories rather than a unified state is made apparent throughout. The complex task of incorporating the stories of different overlapping jurisdictions and communities into one coherent narrative is perhaps where Clark is at his most impressive.

As the account moves into the age of 'King in Prussia' Friedrich I, and his grandson Friedrich II (the Great), the contradictions which were to dominate the kingdom's history into the modern age start to become more apparent. Prussia, the centre of Enlightenment, relative religious tolerance and intellectual inquiry, is treated along with the parallel development of the semi-autocratic monarchy. The rapid rise and fall, and rise again of Prussia as an important military power in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is treated at both battlefield and socio-economic level, helping to explain how the successes of Friedrich the Great were not able to be replicated against Napoleon. The bureaucratic reforms instituted by Stein and Scharnhorst after the disastrous battles of Jena and Auerstadt (1806) receive ample attention, as Clark seeks to emphasise the incredible transformations wrought in a Europe shaken by French nationalism and ideas about popular sovereignty.

The attempts of Friedrich Wilhelm III to simultaneously drive reform and maintain royal supremacy make for interesting reading in the context of a kingdom transformed by the rewards of victory over France with territorial aggrandisement in the Rhineland. The new tensions associated with

assimilating regions exposed to the full forces unleashed by the French and (infant) Industrial Revolutions set up the later part of the book, as Prussia's emerging role as the leader of Germany in military, commercial and economic terms is explored. In particular the question of nationality dominates the account of post-Napoleonic Prussia, Clark dealing with the 'Splendour and Misery of the Prussian Revolution' (1848) and the impact of the Italian, Danish, Austrian and French wars in refreshingly original fashion. In a clever inversion of the old view of German history, Clark characterises the Seven Weeks War against Austria as an *anti-nationalist* rather than nation-building campaign; and Prussia being absorbed into Germany after the proclamation of the *Reich*, rather than the other way around. Clark argues persuasively that rather than being the culmination of Prussian history, the formation of Bismarck's empire was actually the kingdom's undoing.

In what is the first account of its kind in English, Clark continues the story of Prussia beyond the fall of the Hohenzollern kingdom, and into the advanced (almost radical) democracy of the Weimar period. This is the forgotten legacy of Prussia: a bastion of free-thinking libertarianism cut tragically short by the rise of Hitler and his regime of organised criminals. Clark is also keen to emphasise the manner in which Hitler and the Nazis reinvented Prussia for their own purposes. So successful was their appropriation and perversion of the 'old Prussian tradition', that for the Allies, the Second World War became partly a conflict to destroy the supposed evil core of Germany. The destruction of Prussia as a political entity was intended to erase this stain forever, the victorious allies of both Democratic and Communist persuasion expending vast efforts in thus making the world safe from future aggression. Churchill in particular, blamed the survival of 'Prussianism' for the carnage of the Third Reich, when in fact Prussia had been, and remained a centre of opposition to the National Socialists (a group originally Bavarian in origin). Prussian aristocrats were at the centre of the abortive 1944 attempt to topple the Nazi leadership, and in failing to assassinate their *Führer*, these unlikely champions of liberty may also have failed to save Prussia itself from the oblivion of post-war dissolution (the state was disestablished officially in 1947).

Allen Lane are also to be congratulated for the aesthetic aspects of the volume, the monotone cover design of a mounted *Uhlán* observing the flight of an early military aircraft absolutely appropriate to the story of a kingdom of massive contradictions: of constitutional backwardness mixed with industrial modernity; of militaristic conservatism mixed with a vibrant Social Democrat culture. *Iron Kingdom* is therefore an attractive, and attractively-written exposition of one of the pivotal states of European and world political history, and will no doubt remain a classic account for many years to come.

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