

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION
LECTURE 24
PRUSSIA AND GERMANY

"In politics one cannot establish a plan for a long time ahead and then follow it blindly. The statesman is like a wanderer in the woods, who knows the direction of his march, but not the point at which he will emerge from the forest."
—Otto von Bismarck

"Bismarck's main distinguishing feature was that he went along with the forces of change in order to keep them in hand. Most moderate men are soft: it is the radicals, the revolutionaries, who are hard and ruthless. Bismarck was a hard moderate. He was utterly ruthless and cynical in the methods which he employed, and he employed them for the most cautious and limited aims."
—A.J.P. Taylor.

"His awareness of a world animated by the constant clash of competing forces made Bismarck sensitive to the possibility of exploiting their mutual antagonisms for the benefit of his own cause. Usually he sought the middle ground between conflicting interests, the point from which alliance with either was possible. By attaining and preserving freedom of choice between opposed interests he was often able to bring them into an equilibrium of mutual frustration. The position for which he constantly strove was that of the fulcrum in a balance of power. By seizing the position of greatest mobility, he maneuvered others into those of least latitude. Sometimes Bismarck's alternatives were actually successive stages from which he hoped to pass toward the achievement of a desired objective. His first move was often but a modest beginning from which he hoped to progress toward a hidden goal of more drastic character."
—Otto Pflanze.

1. PRUSSIA VS. AUSTRIA, 1866

It was the classic Bismarckian moment. Bismarck had succeeded in isolating his adversary diplomatically. He had supported the Russians against a Polish rebellion in 1863, thus gaining a friendship with Russia that would last for almost thirty years. Like Cavour before him, he had made a secret deal with the French Emperor Napoleon III that ensured his freedom of action, and to this he had added a deal with the recently united Italy so that the Austrians would have to worry about a second front. And he maneuvered the Austrians into starting the war after wearing out their patience in a series of quarrels over the formerly Danish duchies of Schleswig and Holstein. For years (since 1815) Prussia had been subservient to Austria, and many of the Junkers—the conservative landlord class that dominated Prussia—actually approved of that subservience. They feared the liberal nationalists in their own country, and identified with the interests of the conservative Habsburg dynasty as much as they did with their own Hohenzollerns. Bismarck's double achievement was to separate nationalism from liberalism, and conservatism from legitimism (identification with the existing balanced of dynastic forces). Bismarck would learn how to combine nationalism with conservatism, and the war with Austria would help him to achieve that new combination.

The war between Austria and Prussia lasted only seven weeks. The administration of the Austrian army was deficient; its commanding generals were timid; its troops were trained in outmoded shock tactics in a period when battles would be won by superior firepower. The Prussian infantry had the new "needle-gun," a breech-loading rifle that fired farther and more rapidly than Austrian rifles. And the Austrians were deficient in railway transport as well: the Prussians could mobilize more quickly and the Austrians were unable to bring reinforcements to the battle of Königgrätz, which, with 450,000 men deployed, was one of the largest battles of the modern era.

Bismarck opposed his King's wishes for heavy annexations of Austrian territory and a triumphal march on Vienna because those punishments would prolong the war and increase the risk of intervention by other powers (particularly the French). While he regarded war as a legitimate instrument of policy, he believed that it was important to avoid raising up permanent hatreds: "Not even the king has the right to subordinate the interests of the country to his own feeling of love or hatred towards the foreigner." He saw no point in inflicting needless punishment on Austria, for that would only serve as a barrier to future possibilities for cooperation. Austria was forced to recognize its permanent separation from Germany, to pay a small indemnity, and to cede Venetia to Italy. All of northern Germany was now under Prussia's control.

2. WHAT WAS PRUSSIA?

But what was this Prussia and how did it transform itself from the weakest of the great powers to the strongest in the second half of the nineteenth century? And why was Germany divided into as many as 38 states as late as the middle of the nineteenth century?

Let's take the second question first. Like Italy, Germany in the late medieval and early modern periods saw precocious urban development on the one hand (towns on the trade routes of the North Sea and the Rhine River), and the development of a supranational institution—the Holy Roman Empire—on the other. The Holy Roman Empire was a legacy of the Middle Ages, and its elective character helps to account for its weakness and for the large number of city-states that persisted through the early modern period. The combination of empire and city-states has always been inimical to the development of the nation-state. The opening up of the Atlantic trade routes damaged German commerce and weakened the German middle classes in the early modern period, while the Reformation introduced a lasting religious division, sealed by the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) of the seventeenth century. That war had a catastrophic impact on Germany, devastating its trade and cities, and annihilating a third of the population. But one German state—Prussia—was able to recover and assert itself more quickly than the others. Yet Prussia was perhaps the least German of the German states, just as Piedmont, which played the leading role in the unification of Italy, was more French in its culture than Italian.

One of the imperial Electors was the Elector of Brandenburg, a frontier state in the sandy wastes of northeastern Germany. But until the eighteenth century it

was hardly a German state at all. "Lying east of the Elbe," A.J.P. Taylor writes, "on lands re-conquered from the Slavs since the eleventh century, its people were mainly converted Slavs, and even the names of the great nobles often betrayed a Slav origin." The name Prussia was bestowed by the Emperor upon his loyal supporter the Elector of Brandenburg in 1701; it was the name of an extinct Slavic tribe. The sprawling estates of the Electors of Brandenburg, the Hohenzollerns, became the nucleus of "Prussia." But we should remember that when the Hohenzollerns finally acquired a royal title, it was attached not to Brandenburg, which lay within the Holy Roman Empire, but to Ducal or East Prussia, which lay outside it. The Hohenzollerns owed their rise to the Hapsburgs, but would eventually become the Hapsburgs's rivals for supremacy in central Europe.

The Hohenzollerns, a wealthy South-German family, had purchased Brandenburg from the Emperor-King Sigismund for 400,000 Hungarian guilders in 1417. The principal asset of Brandenburg, as we have seen, was that its margrave was one of the seven or eight electors who chose the Holy Roman Emperors. Brandenburg itself was a congeries of self-governing territories over which the Hohenzollerns at first had little control. So their task was the construction of a strong state in the absence of favorable conditions. Conversion to Protestantism helped, by giving the Hohenzollerns a card to play against the Catholic Hapsburgs. By imposing stiff excise taxes and a cantonal system for recruiting troops, the Hohenzollerns created the basis for a powerful army. And shrewd marriage alliances helped as well, shifting that large Baltic province called Ducal (later East) Prussia (more than 300 miles from Berlin) from Polish to Hohenzollern control.

Brandenburg was originally a sandy, marshy, windswept land, a paradise for cabbage and potatoes, but not very promising in any other respect. In the early seventeenth century it was the least impressive of Germany's larger states, bankrupt, mortgaged, and under-populated, with a miserable capital city (Berlin) built of wood. Yet its rulers, the Hohenzollerns, had learned two important lessons from the experience of Swedish occupation during the Thirty Years' War: the urgent need to build an army strong enough to resist invasion, and the administrative example of coercive Swedish tax collection in defiance of the protests of local Estates. The Hohenzollerns effected an alliance that confirmed the landowning classes in all their social and economic privileges in return for their supporting royal power and ceding control over taxation.

The Great Elector Frederick William was the real founder of this upstart power. The armed forces that he had at his disposal when he assumed the throne in 1640 were a motley crew of mercenaries recruited and led by colonels who were independent entrepreneurs. They were inefficient and disorderly, often wasting the land they were supposed to defend, and they were detested by the Great Elector's subjects, whose Estates strongly objected to supporting them financially. Frederick William purged the unruly elements from the army, set up a rudimentary general staff, and appointed a general war commissioner, thereby undercutting entrepreneurial commanders and persuading officers to think of themselves less as speculators and businessmen than as servants of the state.

In addition to building a new army, the Great Elector took the first steps towards convincing his subjects that it was their duty and in their interest to support it. This he did by quid pro quo arrangements, like the bargain he struck with his Brandenburg Estates in 1653, by which, in return for the necessary financial support for the army, he made a sweeping grant of power to the great landowners who had in the past objected to the army. He transformed their feudal titles to their lands into contracts of absolute ownership, recognized them as the only class entitled to acquire estates, and gave them the right of absolute control over their peasants. Moreover, he recognized the Junkers as his agents in local affairs with judicial rights in their districts.

The standing army made Prussia valuable as an ally, and this increased the Elector's maneuverability. Even as early as the end to the Thirty Years' War, he had been able to secure for Prussia the eastern half of Pomerania. By intervening in the Northern War between Sweden and Poland (1655-60), and by allying himself with both sides and betraying both, he was able to remove the last vestiges of Polish sovereignty in East Prussia. In 1675 he won a decisive victory over the Swedes and cleared them off the Pomeranian coast. He combined cold-blooded realism with impressive diplomatic skill. His ambitions were restricted to the gaining of such territory as would not provoke an immediate attack by other powers. To achieve this aim he deliberately set out to base his power on the army, and in a very real sense it was the Prussian army that created the state.

The Prussian nobility (the Junkers) came to regard military service as its natural profession: the army made possible a perfect collusion between the ruler and the nobility. As Prussia expanded, the Junkers as a group could feel confident that the state would further their economic interests by providing scope for their advancement either as officers, civil servants, or landowners. The Prussian bureaucracy was one of the first great modern civil service systems in Europe, dominated at the top by nobles, but recruited largely from the most able and ambitious bourgeois, and animated by devotion to the state. Military strength and administrative efficiency went together. It was a system that was impregnated with militarism and based upon a rigid social stratification.

The German words for duty (*Pflicht*) and the service it involves (*Dienst*) were crucial in this culture, rather than such terms as liberty and happiness. At the root of this culture was a Protestant religious tradition called Pietism. The Great Elector's grandson Frederick William I (reigned 1713-1740) was a devoted disciple and patron of the Pietists. Salvation for them did not manifest itself as the Lutherans believed in a single experience of conversion, but by a life lived continuously in accordance with the divine will, eschewing all worldly vanities and dedicated to the service of the community and particularly to the poor. Whereas the Catholic Church preached that the poor were the beloved of God and that the rich were redeemed by charity, to the Pietists poverty was an evil to be cured by education and by providing the poor with work—a task which they saw involved increasing trade and manufactures. This tradition helped to shape the stern and conscientious characters of the early Prussian kings, who regarded themselves as the state's dutiful servants.

The Prussian king held in his hands a great deal of power. Much of his revenue came from excise taxes and his own vast "domain" of land: in any case there was no dependence on representative bodies for revenue. His bureaucrats were not venal officials who had bought their offices but royal nominees who could be dismissed if they were inefficient or corrupt. (Here was a huge advantage over the French.)

In 1914, the great German historian Otto Hintze summarized the differences between the French and Prussian nobilities as follows: "It may be said that the Prussian nobility has proved itself in the course of time better than the French, which was never drawn by the Crown into the service of the state to the same extent as happened in Prussia; rather, as a dangerous rival to the power of the King the French nobility was systematically forced into a passive, useless life that ruined it. Even as rural landowners the French nobles lived off their revenues and so did not possess the power which managing their own estates might have given them, so that everyone naturally regarded them as superfluous and inconvenient. In Prussia the nobles were the chief champions of the Crown, and their historical importance was due to the fact that they were protagonists of a monarchical state ethos that subsequently extended among the middle and lower classes."

3. FREDERICK THE GREAT

Frederick the Great (reigned 1740-1786) is famous for his military achievements: seizing the rich province of Silesia at the beginning of his reign from the Austrians and holding on to it in a series of grinding wars. But he was equally active in the economy, which he believed must be tightly controlled by state directive: existing manufactures must be protected; foreign artisans must be encouraged to set up manufactures of products which Prussia had been purchasing abroad. By fixing market grain prices and confirming the landlord's hold over his men, by protecting him from foreign imports, and by being a consistent purchaser on the army's behalf, the state gave security to the Junkers.

Frederick was entitled to be called "the Great" because he doubled the size and population of his kingdom during his lifetime, mostly at the expense of Austria, relying on a combination of ruthless administrative efficiency and military genius. He survived the Seven Years' War (1756-63) against a coalition of three Great Powers (Austria, France, and Russia), with only Britain as an ally. He was the most successful European commander in the century before Napoleon, able to defeat larger forces by sending one part of his army to confront the enemy, while the other marched at high speed to a flank, and took the enemy by surprise from an oblique direction when he had lost the opportunity to change alignment.

Frederick, as a man of the Enlightenment, spoke and wrote by preference in French. He was certainly not a German nationalist. But he consolidated the culture of bureaucratic and military efficiency, and the cult of the state, that would become important ingredients in the Prussian ethos that would eventually capture German nationalism for its own purposes. Everywhere in early modern Europe state-building and revenue-extraction were associated with the

construction of armies (and navies), but nowhere was this more true than in the case of Prussia.

Prussia was poor, sparse in resources and population, and without easily defensible frontiers. Security required a standing army large in proportion to the size of the population. In a country possessing little commerce and urban life the state was compelled, if the financial burden of the army were to be borne, to play a positive role in raising the productive capacity and the living standard of the population. The government might be authoritarian, but it would enforce laws fairly: it would be a *Rechtsstaat*, and the king would be "the first servant of the state."

Frederick's seizure of Silesia from the Habsburg Empress Maria Theresa in 1740 first gave Prussia an industrial region, and the Prussian share in the partitions of Poland linked up Brandenburg with East Prussia and brought more Polish peasants to be exploited. The Prussian bureaucracy was designed mainly to channel resources efficiently to the army, and Berlin had the atmosphere of a military town. The bureaucracy discouraged individual initiative and rewarded conformity, but it also had high professional standards: university training and state examinations were required. And eighteenth-century Berlin also welcomed Protestant (Huguenot) and Jewish refugees who brought their entrepreneurial talents to the country and helped to make the city a center of the Enlightenment.

4. AFTER FREDERICK

The essential feature of the Prussian state was the bargain between the Hohenzollern dynasty and the aristocratic landlord class, the Junkers, who agreed to staff the army and bureaucracy in return for confirmation of their social and economic privileges. They combined a rigidly authoritarian ethos of state service with a ruthlessly entrepreneurial (capitalist) attitude toward their estates, which they managed actively themselves. Prussia and its Junker elite could easily have been wiped off the map by Napoleon in 1806, but Tsar Alexander I intervened to save them.

In 1815, as we have seen, Prussia received the Rhineland as compensation for Alexander's annexation of much of Poland. There were only 10 million Prussians, as opposed to 30 million French and 30 million subjects of the Austrian emperor. But the Rhineland sat atop Europe's richest supplies of coal and iron. And by adopting free trade within Prussia in 1818 and extending it to most of Germany through the Zollverein (Customs Union), the Berlin government began the process of co-opting economic liberalism while maintaining authoritarian control over the levers of political power. It was a process that Bismarck would bring to a state of perfection.

The shock of defeat in 1806 produced a wave of reforms in Prussia, spearheaded by progressive aristocrats and enlightened army officers. Those reforms played some part in the mobilization of forces that finally overwhelmed Napoleon in the years after his catastrophic invasion of Russia. Meanwhile, the Congress of Vienna created a German Confederation of 39 states, dominated by Austria and Prussia, with Austria as the senior member of this condominium. Although these

two great powers cooperated with each other in the years before 1848, the Prussians jumped ahead economically with their Zollverein, from which the Austrians were excluded. This economic dynamism, combined with the legacy of Prussia's military, bureaucratic, and educational reforms, gave Prussia the edge over Austria in the competition for modernization. To be sure, liberalism in Prussia was throttled by Frederick's less than distinguished successors, but with the growth of commerce the middle classes in Prussian and the other German states began to awaken from their sluggish and conservative small-town mentality.

The revolutions of 1848 produced modest constitutional gains for Prussian liberals, while Austria's traumatic experiences generated a period of reaction. In 1850 Austria, backed by Russia, blocked Prussia's attempt to create a political union of the northern German states. Prussia, in turn, represented by Otto von Bismarck, blocked Austrian attempts to centralize the German Confederation under Austrian control. And Prussia remained aloof when Austria sought help in its war against France and Piedmont in 1859-60. With Austria devoting so much of its energy to repressing nationalist revolts in Hungary and Italy, Prussia was able to modernize its infrastructure more rapidly and effectively than its senior partner. And with Bismarck in charge from 1862, their partnership would soon be dissolved.

5. BISMARCK AND *REALPOLITIK*

Bismarck was born in 1815 in a part of Brandenburg occupied by the French during the Napoleonic wars. His father was a Junker and a poor manager of his estates; his mother's family were bureaucrats rather than aristocratic landowners. After eight wretched years of managing the family estate and seducing peasants' daughters—unlike Cavour he never tried to take the lead in agrarian improvements—Bismarck married a pious woman, underwent a religious conversion, and entered state service as a diplomat at the age of 36. His religion amounted to a conviction that he was doing God's work in keeping Prussia strong. An outspoken conservative, he seemed to be the ideal choice to negotiate with the Austrians after the revolutions of 1848. But the Austrians refused to treat Bismarck and Prussia as their equals in the 1850s, and Bismarck began to plot against them. He got along much better with the Russians in St. Petersburg, where he was sent as ambassador in 1859.

His great chance came in 1862, when the Prussian king had reached an impasse over army reform with his parliament. Bismarck saw the opportunity to smash the German liberals and the Austrians at the same time, to link domestic and foreign politics. Like Cavour, he understood that politics was the "art of the possible," and preferred a patient strategy that enabled him to delay decisions until the last minute and to preserve alternatives at each juncture: "to use every square on the chessboard." Tactical flexibility, disingenuousness, skill in maneuvering his opponents into impossible positions—these were typical aspects of his style. There was no master plan to unify Germany. His goal was to improve Prussia's position in north Germany and by doing this to reduce liberal pressure upon the Prussian crown. The essence of his *Realpolitik* was his willingness to change direction in order to adjust to the limitations imposed upon

him by circumstances at any given moment, without losing sight of the goal of increasing Prussia's power.

Bismarck used the quarrel with Denmark over Schleswig-Holstein to frustrate the liberal German nationalists, to ensnare Austria, and to shore up his own position. He understood from the beginning how victories in international relations could enable him to reshape domestic politics to his advantage: in other words, how he could exploit nationalist passions to defeat his liberal critics. His goal against Austria was not quite as simple as Cavour's—to gain an ally, start a war, and gamble on a favorable outcome—but to go to war only if necessary, to keep it limited, to prevent outside intervention, and to control the outcome. He saw himself as one player among many in European international relations, pursuing his overall goal with limited means, by exploiting opportunities and cornering his opponent. It's roughly true to say that Bismarck is to Prussia as Cavour was to Piedmont, but Cavour died almost immediately after unification had been achieved, whereas Bismarck, as we will see, would have almost three decades to shape the new Germany.

That new Germany, as we will see, was pseudo-democratic. Bismarck gave it universal male suffrage, but he rigged the system by dividing the electorate of adult males into three groups according to the taxes they paid. The least numerous first tier elected as many deputies as the more numerous middle tier and the vast third tier. And within the new Germany, Prussia, by far the largest and most powerful of the German states, would call the tune.