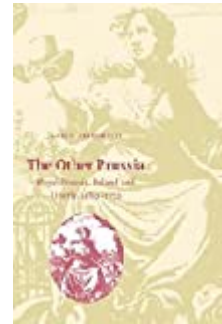




Karin Friedrich. *The other Prussia: Royal Prussia, Poland and liberty, 1569-1772.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. XXI + 280 S. 95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-58335-0.



Reviewed by Gudrun Gersmann

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K. Friedrich: The Other Prussia

The rise of the German Machtstaat and the demise and subsequent re-emergence of a Polish national state have cast a long shadow over Prussian history. In her impressive first book, Karin Friedrich seeks to expose the nationalist distortions of past historical writing and, in particular, rescue the 'other Prussia' from the relative obscurity imposed by its long incorporation in the Hohenzollern monarchy 1772-1918. At the heart of this endeavour is the attempt to recover and explain the formation of Royal (or Polish) Prussian identity, primarily from the perspective of the burghers of the province's three great cities: Danzig, Thorn and Elbing.

The theoretical questions raised by such a project are dealt with directly in the introductory chapter. Friedrich disputes the view that nationalism is solely the product of the French Revolution and the modern definition of popular sovereignty, and argues that early modern 'patriots' developed a sophisticated sense of identity. Here Friedrich follows Benedict Anderson and others who interpret national sentiment as an artificial creation, articulated as an idealised 'imagined community', primarily by a political and intellectual elite. However, she chal-

lenges two widely-held assumptions about nationalism. First, early modern patriotism did not differ greatly from modern nationalism since the latter is never truly a 'mass phenomenon', but is also fostered by a relatively narrow elite. Second, her findings on Prussian and wider Polish national sentiment do not support the customary distinction between 'western' and 'eastern' European forms of nationalism, in that Prussian identity was not the product of ethnicity, but clearly based on a political identification with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

This theme is pursued strongly throughout the book and used repeatedly to challenge and overturn previous judgements which Friedrich rightly believes have been overly influenced by nineteenth and twentieth-century national prejudice. The book opens with a sustained attack on the 'Germanisation' of Prussian history which echoes and extends the author's earlier condemnation of this trend in her recent contributions ('facing both ways: new works on Prussia and Polish-Prussian relations', in: *German History* 15 [1997], 256-267, and 'Politisches Landesbewußtsein und seine Trägerschichten im Königlich-preussischen Preußen', in: *Nordost-Archiv* NS 6,

[1997], 541-564). In discussing the Prussification of German history entailed by the Borussian myth of Hohenzollern Prussia's destiny to unite the German lands, she rightly identifies the Germanisation of Prussian history which drew a 'direct line' from the Teutonic Knights to the Hohenzollern dynasty. Continued by the subsequent tradition of Ostforschung, this interpretation constructed a false 'Prussian identity', supposedly based on the German origins of the Prussian burghers and the legacy of Teutonic rule. This continued the denigration of the Commonwealth's political system, begun by the Great Elector of Brandenburg in the later seventeenth century and intensified during the period of the late eighteenth-century partitions, and which involved symbolic violence such as the renaming of the annexed province as 'West Prussia' to imply a false unity of Hohenzollern domains. Polish historians do not escape criticism either, especially those who propagated an artificial cultural and historical homogeneity for the whole Baltic shore area. The firm conclusion from this is that early modern Prussian identity cannot be explained in terms of two rival processes of 'Germanisation' and 'Polonisation'.

The analysis of Prussian identity is located in the wider context of the Polish monarchy which secured direct control over the western half and overlordship over the eastern half after its defeat of the Teutonic Order in the Thirteen Years War (1454-66). The revolt of the Prussian estates against the Teutonic Knights in 1454 not only led to the recognition of the Polish king as their sovereign, but proved to be a pivotal event in the formation of Prussian identity since it forged a common bond, not just between Prussians and the Poles who had supported them, but also within Prussia itself between the burghers and nobles. The shared experience contributed to the special characteristics of Prussian identity and help account for its political, rather than ethnic basis. At the heart of Prussian identity was the affirmation of political ideals which were broadly compatible with those of the Polish monarchy and subsequent Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. These ideals provided the essential common ground that enabled the Prussians to become and remain members of the Commonwealth without sacrificing their own sense of themselves. In short, it was political assimilation, not cultural. Similarly, the break with Teutonic rule was a political act and not a rejection of 'Germanness' which in any case had not existed. Like the later Hohenzollern absolutism, Teutonic rule was rejected because it was regarded as arbitrary, alien and incompatible with the desire of the Prussian elite to manage its own affairs.

Prussian identity was underpinned by several peculiar social characteristics which were not disturbed by the transfer to Polish rule. Foremost among these was the relative strength of the Prussian towns which enjoyed full rights in the Prussian diet, at least prior to the later seventeenth century. Though the Prussian szlachta (nobility) regarded themselves as the 'political nation' like their Polish counterparts, they were both unable and largely unwilling to exclude the bigger cities from regional politics, primarily because the burghers retained relatively favourable property rights. These rights were enshrined in the province's legal code known as the Kulm laws (Kulmer Handfeste) which reinforced common identity because it applied to both social groups. A further factor was the relatively inclusive definition of the *ius indigenatus* restricting civil appointments to Prussian natives. Whereas the Poles restricted this to landowning noblemen of the third generation born in a province, the Prussians continued to include burghers as *indigena Prussiae*.

Prussian social cohesion was not permanent, however. Significantly, tensions emerged precisely where the differences between szlachta and burghers intersected with the controversy surrounding Prussia's relationship to the Polish monarchy. This reinforces Friedrich's argument that politics, not ethnicity, lay at the heart of Prussian identity, because what divided szlachta and burghers was not the preservation of any alleged cultural autonomy, but how best to safeguard their treasured liberty within the framework of the new Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth established in 1569. Whereas the szlachta came to see direct participation in the central assembly, or sejm, as the best means of ensuring representation of Prussian interests, the cities refused to participate. As Friedrich demonstrates convincingly, this boycott was not due to any reluctance to abandon 'German' culture, but a preference for representation through the vibrant Prussian diet and their direct relationship to the Polish crown. Though the nobility renounced those parts of the Kulm laws which hindered their accumulation of estates, they nonetheless remained active in Prussian politics and shared many of the burghers' beliefs about their place in the Commonwealth.

These beliefs are explored at length through the careful examination of numerous contemporary publications and manuscript sources describing Prussian history, laws and politics. As Friedrich notes, the emergence of early modern Prussian identity coincided with the growing importance throughout Europe of history and myth as the basis of national sentiment. Though Prussian writ-

ers incorporated elements of their German legacy, they blended a variety of other historical myths to support the idea that they had always ruled themselves except when under the 'foreign' oppression of the Teutonic Order. Significantly, these Prussian histories "never ignored the larger dimension of the wider Commonwealth" (p.78), as they also incorporated elements of the Gothic and Sarmatian myths underpinning Polish identity. This enabled the Prussians to identify with the wider Commonwealth as the ideal political community without sacrificing a sense of their own distinctiveness. The Prussians considered themselves part of a wider family of Sarmatian peoples sharing a common political system which balanced provincial autonomy with central power.

The rest of the work charts how these beliefs changed as the Commonwealth underwent a series of ever greater crises from the mid-seventeenth century. Though the Prussians shared a love of autonomy with the Cossacks, their sense of liberty was tempered with loyalty to the Polish crown and the political ideal of the Commonwealth, and they roundly condemned the Cossack revolt of 1654 which helped precipitate a series of devastating foreign invasions. The Prussian cities remained loyal throughout these, as well as the later Turkish wars which placed them under financial strain. Nonetheless, a key element of their traditional identity was undermined when the Great Elector gained full sovereignty for Ducal (East) Prussia in 1657 and began promoting a separate Hohenzollern Prussian identity, hostile to the Commonwealth and its values. Whereas Prussian identity had previously rested on the memory of resistance to Teutonic oppression, the new Hohenzollern identity not only promoted the superiority of absolutist rule, but implied that its benefits should rightfully be extended to the Royal Prussians. The latter had no intention of accepting this and joined their king in protesting at the Hohenzollern's acquisition of a Prussian royal title in 1701.

However, such demonstrations of loyalty were declining as Prussia suffered renewed foreign invasion as their new sovereign, Augustus II, plunged the Commonwealth into the Great Northern War (1700-21). Though the beleaguered burghers refused to support their king's enemies, the war widened the growing rift between them and the Commonwealth. This changing relationship was reflected in new ideas of Prussian identity which backed away from the earlier myths of a common pagan past and stressed instead the existence of an ancient Prussian state which had survived Teutonic rule and joined the Commonwealth as an equal partner. This new emphasis on Prussian distinctiveness was in part a reaction to

the fading charms of the Commonwealth which, far from embodying an ideal form of rule, now seemed a symbol of impotence and corruption. However, it was also a response to a more exclusive sense of Polishness which redefined the Sarmatians in narrower cultural and confessional terms, excluding German-speakers and Protestants. The new sense of Prussian distinctiveness found greatest support amongst the cities which helped frustrate attempts to reform the Commonwealth in the 1760s and in so doing, assisted in the demise of the framework which had preserved their autonomy for so long.

In addition to the clear and lucid reconstruction of Prussian identity, Friedrich contributes to a number of other debates. The recent rehabilitation of Augustus' reputation by a number of Polish historians is questioned by the clear evidence of the Prussians' distrust of his intentions and the damage inflicted by his policies on the crown's relations with the provinces. By contrast, his Hohenzollern contemporary, King Friedrich I, comes off rather better as Friedrich joins a number of scholars who have emphasised the importance of the new royal title to the emergence of Brandenburg-Prussia as a major power. Though secondary to the discussion of Royal Prussian identity, the analysis of that fostered by the Hohenzollerns breaks new ground and is a valuable contribution to our understanding of Prussia's place in German and European history. Finally, the findings reaffirm the flexibility of early modern thought as it is clear that phenomena like Neostoicism and Natural Law were easily accommodated within the values systems of the Commonwealth, despite their usual association with more authoritarian forms of government.

However, there are times when the understandable desire to refute earlier nationalist prejudice has unfortunate results. The primary focus on the three great cities of Danzig, Thorn and Elbing invites comparison with the more numerous free imperial cities in the contemporary Holy Roman Empire, or old Reich. This is offered on a number of occasions (esp. pp.63-70), but primarily used to demonstrate the distinctiveness of Prussian cities as a means of re-emphasising that their identity had little or nothing to do with adherence to a common German culture. This has meant that some similarities have been neglected. The fact that the political experience of imperial and Prussian towns might be similar does not invalidate the argument that their self-perception drew on different roots, but nonetheless does point to important parallels between the Reich and the Commonwealth. Though the Reich did not recognise a right of resistance, its whole political culture rested on a desire to resolve violence

peacefully and to balance the competing interests of its diverse members. The adherence of the imperial cities to this culture, and their persistent loyalty to the emperor who symbolised it, was thus broadly similar to the Prussian cities' belief that membership of the Commonwealth was the best safeguard for their own autonomy. These aspects are minimised in the discussion of German political theory which places undue emphasis on the authoritarian aspects in contemporary thought. Moreover, it is questionable whether the power of the Polish king to intervene in civic politics was greater than that of the emperor. It is true that no emperor appeared personally to negotiate a settlement to a local dispute like John Sobieski, but it is noteworthy that the latter failed to achieve a result. Seventeenth and eighteenth-century emperors had long since learnt to avoid such actions as likely to result in humiliating public defeats, and instead sustained their role as supreme judge through the network of imperial courts and commissions.

The comparison with German towns also suggests another issue worthy of attention. The focus on the three great Royal Prussian cities is fully justified given their role in Borussian accounts as supposed torchbearers of German identity. However, this has marginalised the place of the lesser towns in the account of Prussian identity. Like the imperial cities, Danzig, Thorn and Elbing were all integrated into a wider political sys-

tem, as well as cross-regional and international trade networks. It is thus understandable that their self-perception should reflect this relative cosmopolitanism. However, as Mack Walker has demonstrated for the eighteenth century, imperial cities were also 'home towns', where local loyalties played a role in defining identities (German home towns. Community, state and general estate, 1648-1817, Ithaca/London: Cornell UP 1971). Studies of later German national sentiment, such as Alon Confino's model work on nineteenth-century Württemberg, have also indicated that individual and communal identities displayed a complex matrix of often conflicting local, regional and national elements (The nation as local metaphor. Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and national memory 1871-1918, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1997). Such diversity is hinted at for early modern Prussia, but not fully explored, particularly in the case of local civic loyalty.

This does not detract in any way from the value of the work, which is already based on an impressive array of sources and displays a mastery of the topic across more than two centuries. The text is supported by a useful glossary, maps and a gazetteer of place names. It is altogether an important contribution to Polish and German history, as well as to our understanding of the place of identity in early modern European history.

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