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Wolfgang Neugebauer. *Zentralprovinz im Absolutismus: Brandenburg im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert.* Berlin: Berlin Verlag Arno Spitz, 2001. 222 S. EUR 30.00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-8305-0157-2.

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Wolfgang Neugebauer presents an erudite, thoughtful, and occasionally obtuse survey of Brandenburg history during the critical period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The transformation of Brandenburg from a relatively inconsequential territory to the central province within the burgeoning Prussian state was, as Neugebauer describes it, anything but straightforward, and throughout he emphasizes the fitful and remarkably regional character of change. Consistently, he challenges any easy assumptions about the nature of absolutism and its effects on the political and economic development of the Mark.

Neugebauer divides the book into five chapters: a prologue on the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries followed by two chapters each on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Already in the opening chapter, Neugebauer's structural approach to Brandenburg's history becomes apparent. Drawing heavily on administrative, political, and economic historical approaches, Neugebauer stresses long-term structural changes rather than any immediate impact of individual decisions or events. For instance, he recognizes the ascendancy of the Hohenzollerns in the Kurmark in the early fifteenth century but pointedly declines to ascribe to it any "epochal" significance in the development of the territory's governance. More important for Neugebauer in the fifteenth century was the growing role of the estates in the management of the electorate's finances. Other presumably epochal events, such as the Protestant Reformation, are put in the larger context of growing territorial authority in church governance in Brandenburg, a trend that Neugebauer dates back to the middle of the fifteenth century. Nor did the Reformation create an internal cohesiveness with the territory, as some have argued. Indeed, through the late-eighteenth century Neugebauer repeatedly cites the regional distinctiveness of Brandenburg, in particular the differences between the Neumark and the Kurmark, but also among the smaller regions that made up the Kurmark including the Altmark, Mittelmark, Prignitz, Ruppin, and Uckermark.

Neugebauer's discussion of Brandenburg during the first half of the seventeenth century opens with an analysis of the broader European crisis in Brandenburg. The electorate was poorly poised to deal with the economic, military, and political challenges of the time, and Neugebauer focuses on the administrative responses of the electoral government to these challenges. He downplays the significance of the Hohenzollern embrace of Reformed Protestantism. In place of a straightforward account of Brandenburg's shifting alliances and tumultuous experiences in the Thirty Years War, Neugebauer discusses these tangentially in terms of the development of privy

council, relationship to the estates, taxation, and attempts to re-organize the military. Many of these efforts were less than successful, but for Neugebauer they reflect "structural characteristics" that point toward a process of state building that clearly preceded the ascension of Friedrich Wilhelm I in 1640 and prefigured coming absolutist policies.

The heart of his analysis really begins with the state-building process after 1648. Neugebauer prefaces this discussion with a number of observations on Brandenburg's central European economic context, the effects of the Thirty Year War, and the decline of orthodox Christianity among the rural populace. Neugebauer repeatedly reminds the reader that these factors equally influenced Brandenburg's development alongside any individual measures undertaken by the Elector. To be sure, Neugebauer describes the process by which the Elector strengthened his authority within the territory by developing a standing army, extending the reach of existing territorial bodies, establishing new administrative authorities such as the Kriegs-Kommissariat, and imposing taxes that were beyond the control of the estates. Neugebauer allows that the constitutional position of the estates weakened considerably during the last half of the seventeenth century as Friedrich Wilhelm I and Friedrich III consolidated power, but he qualifies this carefully by pointing out the uneven success and limits of electoral authority.

With the crowning of Elector Friedrich III as King Friedrich I in 1701, the Electorate of Brandenburg was effectively subsumed into the new Prussian state, but it remained the central province from which Prussia was ruled. Consequently, the regions of the Mark retained a special status. Its position within Prussia shaped Brandenburg's governmental structures and economy in ways that gradually distinguished it from other central European territories. Berlin–as the governmental headquarters of the state–became the fastest growing major European city in the eighteenth century and exerted a powerful influence on outlying cities and towns, reshaping Brandenburg's traditional trade routes and urban economies to meet its needs.

Neugebauer describes the effect of absolutist policies on Brandenburg during the eighteenth century, which were most successful in remaking its military, reforming the judicial system, and promoting resettlement and agricultural reclamation projects. Even in these areas of profound change, however, Neugebauer cautions repeatedly against assumptions that these resulted solely from absolutist policies; rather–as for instance the case of judicial reform shows–he argues that they were also the product of internal changes within the traditional institutions of the province. Neugebauer further warns against confusing absolutist decrees with actual practices in Brandenburg, especially in the area of education or guild reform where the results were far more mixed than official edicts would suggest. In religion, Neugebauer discounts absolutist influence almost entirely and sees it as an area where the state was able to have little effect. Consequently, absolutism in Brandenburg emerges not as a monolithic force but as a set of policies working in tension with traditional institutions in Brandenburg, such as the estates, whose authority may have waxed and waned throughout the eighteenth century but never became irrelevant.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Neugebauer affirms the profound influence of Prussian state-building and the increasing gravitational pull of Berlin and other residence cities on Brandenburg's development. He argues that Brandenburg's administrative structures often became models for other Prussian provinces. In addition, the rural and urban populations were growing rapidly by the end of the century. In the countryside, the increase of the population undermined the existing social structures and encouraged mobility, often leading to a de facto if not *de jure* elimination of serfdom. At the same time, many of Brandenburg's rural estates passed from noble to bourgeois control. These demographic changes challenged tradition and led to pockets of unrest in Brandenburg–symptoms of coming crises in the nineteenth century. Furthermore Neugebauer identifies proto-reforms, as he terms them, which prefigure agrarian reforms in Prussia in the nineteenth century.

Neugebauer offers no formal conclusion to the book. Certainly his main themes on the persistence of traditional structures, the limits of absolutism, and its uneven if nevertheless profound effects on Brandenburg are clear throughout the book. But he leaves many questions open at the end of his discussion. One is the nature of Brandenburg itself. After it was dissolved as a sovereign entity with the formation of the Prussian state was it really a cohesive "central province"? In almost all examples from the eighteenth century, Neugebauer carefully distinguishes the Kurmark from the Neumark demographically and administratively. Brandenburg's distinctiveness might have been revealed more thoroughly through closer comparison with other Prussian provinces, especially centrally located territories like Magdeburg/Halberstadt that immediately adjoined Bran-

denburg. Another open question is the nature of absolutism. Neugebauer warns us sufficiently against facile assumptions, and he signals his skepticism by sometimes enclosing the word in quotation marks. But despite his many qualifications, he provides little clarity about the historical construct of absolutism in German or European history. Neugebauer is not just a regional historian, and indeed one wonders what he makes of absolutism in Brandenburg-Prussia in the context of other absolutist regimes elsewhere in Germany and Europe.

Neugebauer's explicit methodological focus on the structural dimensions of Brandenburg history leaves relatively little room in this compact book for narrative that would orient the reader to the broad outlines of major figures or events in Brandenburg history. In places, his approach seems particularly ill-suited to the topic at hand. His observations on religion lack the depth and insight he brings to other topics and are among the least helpful in the book. For instance, his broad claim of the decline in monotheism in the wake of the Thirty Years War warrants more convincing evidence than the contemporary anecdotal accounts he cites. Elsewhere he seems to misapprehend the controversies between the Lutheran and Reformed on church ritual. More surprising is Neugebauer's failure to engage the question of Pietism and the rise of absolutism in Brandenburg-Prussia, a topic pursued in detail in the literature on Brandenburg-Prussia during this period.[1]

While generally unsuitable as an introductory text, Neugebauer's extensive knowledge of Brandenburg historiography and its source material provide readers with rich veins of material to mine. Anyone exploring the regional history of Brandenburg will find his analysis, generous notes, and extended bibliography enormously helpful. One wishes, however, that more care had been taken in adapting Neugebauer's earlier contribution from a handbook on Brandenburg history to book form.[2] Aside from the amplified notes and an introductory chapter, much of the text itself remains virtually unchanged. A summative concluding chapter, a less constrictive regional focus, and perhaps an illustrative map or two would have made this work more accessible and useful to historians not engaged directly with Brandenburg.

Notes

[1]. Neugebauer briefly cites the work of Carl Hinrichs, *Preussentum und Pietismus. Der Pietismus in Brandenburg-Preussen als religioes-soziale Reformbewegung* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971), but makes no reference to his larger argument on Pietism and absolutism. Works by Klaus Deppermann, *Der hallesche Pietismus und der preussische Staat unter Friedrich III. (I.)* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961); Mary Fulbrook, *Piety and Politics: Religion and the Rise of Absolutism in England, Wuerttemberg and Prussia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Richard Gawthrop, *Pietism and the Making of Eighteenth-Century Prussia* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993) all raise the question of absolutism and Pietism but are not discussed or cited by Neugebauer, who sees only minimal connections between religion and absolutism.

[2]. Neugebauer's contribution appeared under the title: "Brandenburg im absolutistischen Staat. Das 17. und 18. Jahrhundert" in *Brandenburgische Geschichte*, ed. Ingo Materna and Wolfgang Ribbe (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995).

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