Prussian Governance

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Why was Prussia so important for the development of the German Empire? The answer to this question is to be found in its imprint on the formation of the Empire, and its continuing influence on key political questions. Reason enough, therefore, to take a closer look. Indeed, the historian James Retallack has written that ‘the survival of Prussia constituted one of Imperial Germany’s most important peculiarities’. He summed up the two most striking, albeit contradictory, tendencies of recent historiography about both the Empire and Prussia in a single phrase: ‘Both stories – the triumph of modernity and the long shadow cast by authoritarianism – are true’. The main thrust of research since the 1980s has been to stress processes of mobilization or even democratization rather than the survival of pre-modern elites, but recently it has also been pointed out that the authoritarian essence of the Empire persisted. If Germany was Janus-faced, then Prussia was the rear side of this face. And Prussia covered 65 per cent of Germany’s surface, albeit with great regional diversity.

How did the political system in Prussia work and how is its legislative record to be assessed? What was Prussia’s political role in the Empire? Did Prussia shape Germany’s political system and political culture in its own image or, conversely, did Germany infiltrate and change Prussia? Christopher Clark, author of the prize-winning study *Iron Kingdom*, clearly prefers the latter explanation: ‘Germany was not Prussia’s fulfilment … but its undoing’, he argues. In the wake of this book, following a change of political climate and as a consequence of new comparative studies, Prussia appears to have become normalized; it is no longer demonized or celebrated as a model state. For the present author, some of these revisions have gone too far. Prussia is neatly portrayed in light grey, with clear contours blurred. Comparative historians in particular, however, must delineate precisely which differences can be upheld, which continuities remained and which changes took place. New interpretations and approaches do not devalue well-known evidence or established opinions about Prussian governance completely, and currently fashionable cultural approaches which centre on discourses, representations and other hitherto unexplored questions must...

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1 In memoriam Emil Spenkuch (1917–2013).
not lose sight of the specific political context in Prussia. The abundance of literature should not end in general uncertainties.¹

The term ‘governance’ refers to the use of the structures of government, the socio-political make-up of its personnel and the legislative record over time. A research companion should delineate recent historiographical trends or controversies as well as indicate possible future research topics. In view of the limited space available, this chapter will concentrate on four specific areas. It will begin with Prussia’s constitution and formal role as the hegemonic state in the Empire, before looking at the profile of its leading personnel. A third part will look at its legislative record, the achievements and failures of an early interventionist state, while a fourth section will deal with those aspects of the political system and culture which have been the focus of much recent historiography. Some proposals for possible future research conclude the essay.

The Prussian Constitution and Prussian Hegemony in the German Empire

The Prussian Constitution of 1850, a royal imposition in the era of reaction, and unchanged in its politically important parts until 1918, set the tone. Although it guaranteed personal liberties and the rule of law, promising further constitutional progress via laws on such things as ministerial responsibility, it also accorded great power to the monarch. His prerogatives included all executive acts and appointments (article 44), foreign policy, Protestant church affairs, the supreme military command, and an absolute veto on all legislation. The diet (Landtag) had to approve the annual budget and all state laws, but executive decrees and the declaration of states of emergency or war were exempted (articles 63 and 111). Further restrictions resulted from a second chamber of appointed members, the Herrenhaus, 75 per cent of whom were conservative aristocrats. Had the liberal majority in the Landtag during the constitutional conflict of 1862–66 succeeded, Prussia would have taken a great leap towards parliamentary government. However, the foul compromise arrived at in 1866, Bismarck’s violent success in forging national unity, and the right-wing majorities produced by the three-class franchise, left the dominance of Prussia’s monarchy intact. The historian Martin Kirsch has argued that the Prusso-German case was normal when compared to most European countries, but his thesis is flawed for three reasons.² By ending his study around 1880, Kirsch does not consider the dominance which parliamentary majorities in many countries gained by 1914; by looking mainly at the text of constitutions, actual political practice is not scrutinized; the big societal quest for participation, the political mass market and the harsh exclusion of the Social Democratic part of the population are neglected. Prussia remained a constitutional state, but it did not proceed to a parliamentary system.³


The Prussian constitutional system prefigured the political constellation of the German Empire: any quest for parliamentary government was deterred, ridiculed and hindered by constitutional barriers. Professors of constitutional law even accorded complete state power to the monarch as the bearer of sovereignty. The few dissenting progressives were excluded from university chairs (Ordinariaten) in public law or history in Prussia. Most public leaders and scholars such as Gustav Schmoller and Otto Hintze internalized the view of the benign superiority of the Prussian Beamtenstaat. C.H. Becker, in the 1920s a famous liberal minister of culture, in a 1913 letter declared his preference for ‘enlightened despotism’ – because parliament ‘usually converts well-informed governmental policies into dilettante splits’. As Mark Hewitson has shown, Western parliamentary systems were denounced as ‘majority despotism’; corrupt regimes with poor records on social policy and slower economic progress. Prussia was the celebrated leader of German power, its administration was declared to be removed from special interests and objective (sachlich), and its constitution was seen to be dignified by success. In 1912 Professor Gustav Roethe vehemently denied that Prussia could merge into Germany, as it was the eminent rock resisting the flood of democracy.

The German Empire of 1871 was of Prussian descent and imprint, yet at the same time marked a compromise with the National Liberal movement and the federal states. The constitution allowed for the development of a gradually more powerful parliament, the Reichstag, although the chancellor and the imperial secretaries did not need a vote of confidence there. Based on an equal male franchise and the evolving political mass market, this national parliament gradually dwarfed state parliaments. But on the national level, too, sovereignty rested with the monarchs and their governments assembled in the secret federal council (Bundesrat). This institution was meant to mobilize states against centralization or the dominance of government through parliament. It could block every Reichstag initiative and sometimes did. Prussia commanded 17 out of 58 votes; usually supported by the smaller states, Prussia very rarely failed to win majorities. The Bavarian delegate, Count Lerchenfeld, recalled a de facto Prussian veto in military, tariff and tax questions. The Bundesrat had no bureaucratic staff. At first Prussian ministries prepared the laws, but as the imperial offices expanded they took over, and Prussia’s direct grip on national regulations loosened.

The Reichstag gained influence in three areas of legislation: codification reaching from economic matters to civil law; social policy; and the expenses incurred from army or naval expansion and colonialism. Yet the larger role for imperial secretaries of state (Reichsstaatssekretäre) depended on the assent of the chancellors who, except for three short periods (1873, 1892–94, 1918), also acted as Prussian minister-presidents. On the whole, the German constitutional system remained a dualistic arrangement of mutual veto powers: parliaments could block laws and executive expenditure, but governments could not be ousted by parliamentary censure. Very occasionally ministers were dismissed after defeats on the floor.

The German emperor was to be the Prussian king. Formally only a primus inter pares and chairman of the federal council, the emperor depended on his Prussian power base.


Based on their legal rights and even more on their prestige as creators of German unity, the Prussian rulers Wilhelm I and Wilhelm II defended the prerogatives of monarchy. Rulers in Baden, Bavaria, Hesse or Württemberg in the latter years of the Empire abandoned political interference and appointed ministers with affinity to Landtag majorities. The Prussian kings in their role as German emperors did not follow this trend, although after 1898 Wilhelm II had to give up the reactionary idea of abolishing the equal Reichstag franchise via a coup. The extra-constitutional status of the Prussian military and its dominance in Germany via the Prussian minister of war, commanding generals, and the central General Staff are a separate topic, but Prussia’s specific military tradition and culture undoubtedly left their imprint on Germany, from the now cherished institution of reserve officer to the highly risky Schlieffen plan.\footnote{Hartwin Spenkuch, ‘Introduction’ to Acta Borussica, N.F., Die Protokolle des Preussischen Staatsministeriums 1817–1934/38, vol. 8: 1890–1900 (Hildesheim, 2003), p. 12, lists the relevant literature on the idea of a coup. On the Prussian military, see Spenkuch, ‘Vergleichsweise besonders?’, pp. 283–90. Hans Ehler et al. (eds), Der Schlieffen-Plan. Analysen und Dokumente (Paderborn, 2006), pp. 117–60 (Gerhard P. Groß).}

The Personnel of the Prussian Administration

Prussia was a constitutional monarchy with the rule of law (restricted in notable exceptions) and public political debates, yet it was characterized by a strong bureaucracy with a high proportion of nobles and a decidedly conservative outlook. Thomas Nipperdey characterized it as ‘status-quo conservative’ as opposed to ‘reform-conservative’ in the imperial sphere. As there was no government by parties, the administration took the place of government; nearly all ministers had a bureaucratic background. The Prussian state ministry (Staatsministerium) acted up to the late 1890s quasi as the imperial cabinet, since secretaries of state met only twice under Bismarck and only a few times after 1900. It was not until 1896 that a decision of the state ministry allowed the secretaries to be present at topics dealing with imperial affairs. In 1914 Vice-Chancellor Clemens Delbrück proposed formal meetings of the state secretaries in order to end the lengthy exchange of written statements. By this time, several imperial secretaries had gained the right to be present and vote at the meetings of the Prussian state ministry. This was permanently established for the secretaries of the interior (1869), foreign affairs (1876), naval affairs (1898) and financial affairs (1908/14). It was the chancellor-minister-president who replenished the state ministry with imperial secretaries (Staatssekretarisierung).\footnote{Thomas Nipperdey, Deutsche Geschichte 1866–1918, vol. 2 (Munich, 1992), p. 487. Clemens Delbrück’s memo of 1914 is cited by Rauh, Parlamentarisierung, pp. 38–43. Hans Goldschmidt, Das Reich und Preussen im Kampf um die Führung. Von Bismarck bis 1918 (Berlin, 1931) provides relevant documents.}

The eight ministers were legally independent of the minister-president and controversial matters were decided by a majority vote in the state ministry. Between 1871 and 1890 Bismarck was the dominant figure and he pushed through the turn from a mildly liberal to a conservative course in 1876–79. This was accompanied by the dismissal of several ministers. From then on, Bismarck remarked, his capacity to have any minister dismissed by the emperor-king brought firm discipline into the cabinet. To Lady Emily Russell, wife of the British ambassador, the cabinet appeared as a ‘ministry of clerks … who do as they are told’. The authority of the minister-presidents after 1890 was smaller and crises over leadership, policies and individual personalities shattered the state ministry in 1892, 1894–95, 1897 and 1899–1900. In 1901 a Badenese diplomat noted the resurgence of an earlier endemic split
Zweiseelenwirtschaft in the state ministry. Indeed the division between reformist figures and a highly conservative faction ranged from the stressful duos Caprivi–Eulenburg in 1892–94 and Hohenlohe–Miquel between 1894 and 1900, down to the ministers refusing franchise reform in 1910 (Arnim, Rheinbaben, Moltke) and political reorientation in 1917 (Schorlemer, Loebell, Trott zu Solz). The ministries can be grouped roughly in two camps. Moderately pro-modern were the trade, public works and justice administrations, as were, depending on the ministers, in some periods the administrations of finance and education. The interior and agricultural ministries were always highly conservative.

According to the constitution, the king appointed and dismissed all state officials upon ministerial proposal. Bismarck proposed only reliable conservatives; in the 1890s Wilhelm II took an active role in selection, promoting Bernhard von Bülow and refusing various men. Thus, the state ministry remained a conservative council. Many highly placed officials were convinced that their position demanded complete loyalty to the monarch. This attitude, combined with a specific concept of (male) honour, made the ousting of ministers easier. In 1909 the long-term finance minister, von Rheinbaben, was insulted because Minister-President Bethmann Hollweg denied him the vice-presidency of the state ministry, and he submitted his resignation. He noted that this refusal had diminished his authority and thrown a shadow of distrust upon him. Bethmann had indeed deliberately overlooked this staunch conservative, but he convinced him to stay. Generally, a minister’s resignation after the defeat of an important bill was publicly camouflaged as being due to health problems or overwork. As compensation, the ex-minister received orders and honorary titles.

For decades, only a handful of active party politicians were appointed to ministerial office, or as provincial governors. The reform conservatives Achenbach and Friedenthal and the National Liberals Falk and Hobrecht had been active deputies when they took office in the 1870s. In 1887 the National Liberal party chairman Bennigsen was appointed governor, a compensation for his party’s entry into the alliance with the conservatives (the Bismarck Kartell). In 1890 the National Liberal deputy Miquel became finance minister, but he had cut his party links. Similarly, ex-deputy Möller headed the ministry of trade between 1901 and 1905. It was not until 1917 that the National Liberal caucus chairman Friedberg entered the state ministry as vice-president, and was joined by members of the Centre Party and the Progressives. The practice of appointing state officials of conservative hue as Prussian ministers meant a dissociation of parliamentary and administrative elites and, as observers around 1900 noted, it curtailed the need for political parties to act responsibly in the expectation of joining a future government.


In 1929, the young historian Eckart Kehr argued that, after 1879, the minister of the interior, Puttkamer, had given the Prussian administration a decidedly conservative outlook (the so-called Puttkamer Purge), thus blocking the way to liberal democracy. An influential article by Margaret L. Anderson and Kenneth Barkin in 1982 contested this interpretation. They were right in stressing the decade-long discrimination against Catholic officials, culminating in dozens of dismissals during the Kulturkampf, which were applauded by many National Liberals. But they overlooked the anti-liberal turn initiated by Bismarck as early as 1876 when he approved the founding of the German Conservative Party. After 1881 Puttkamer was the main protagonist of change in Prussia: liberal officials were not generally dismissed, but important positions were increasingly given to staunch conservatives only.

In 1881–82, Bismarck designated four moderate provincial governors for replacement, and several district governors were relocated. Of paramount importance was the method of selection for young jurists entering the state service as Regierungsreferendare. Since applicants were accepted by the district governors without any public or court control, this amounted to co-optation. Thus, in the 1880s the socio-political basis of men eligible for state service was restricted to certain social backgrounds. Connections – family, fraternities, reserve officer status – were important. Historians and contemporaries alike have called this procedure a system of pure patronage. Moreover, advocates of free trade as well as liberal-leaning landowners in the eastern provinces were no longer acceptable for state office; elected liberal mayors in towns and councillors in bodies of self-administration were denied confirmation by the ministry of the interior; judges had to be conservative. The government resumed massive pro-conservative electioneering and encouraged National Liberals to join electoral compromises with right-wing parties, while branding all others as enemies of the Reich.

Through a plethora of measures the political climate changed in the 1880s. The staunch conservative outlook of the Prussian state bureaucracy, encouraged by Puttkamer, was largely preserved thereafter. Proof of this is to be found in the protocol of a state ministry meeting in 1917: Minister-President Bethmann Hollweg urged his colleagues to stop appointing only conservatives to high offices and to choose more moderate National Liberals. Right-wing National Liberals could come close to conservative officials, but the German Conservative Party should not be equated with its British equivalent. Its steering committee was dominated by East Elbian nobles, the infamous Junker. They and their party clung to the idea of an authoritarian state and disdained liberalism, democracy and parliamentary government. They resented commerce and industry, cities and modern culture; from the 1860s they were open to antisemitism and after 1893 to radical nationalist or völkisch ideas. In sum, Prussian Conservatism meant the iron-clad preservation of the God-given hierarchies of monarchy, state, Protestantism and social order. In the 1920s, the völkisch outlook functioned as a bridge to middle-class National Socialism. After 1867 there was also a moderate conservative party, the Free Conservatives. Many bureaucrats, including Bismarck, sided with this group. But endorsing repressive laws since 1878, staying elitist, governmental and pro-employer, this
group lost popular support. The party’s championship of colonialism and imperialism did not stop its electoral decline.16

The chimera of governmental non-partisanship, rightly called the ‘grand delusion’ (Lebenslüge) of monarchical Prussia by Gustav Radbruch in 1930, becomes apparent when we scrutinize the administration. Statistics from 1910 reveal that the proportion of nobles amongst higher officials amounted to seven out of eleven ministers, eleven out of twelve provincial governors (Oberpräsidenten), 23 of 36 district governors (Regierungspräsidenten) and 55 per cent of county sheriffs (Landräte), concentrated in the eastern provinces. In military service as well as in the diplomatic corps, aristocrats had a near monopoly on the highest ranks such as senior general or first-class ambassador. There was only a 14 to 22 per cent share of aristocrats in the middle ranks of privy counsellors (Ministerialräte) and government counsellors (Regierungsräte), and less so in technical branches or the judiciary. Here Prussia came closer to the picture in the southern German states with markedly more non-noble and mildly liberal officials. A second important piece of information in the 1910 statistics concerns the social background of the 1,858 officials surveyed: 70 per cent came from families of officials, officers and big landowners; only 18 per cent had fathers working in commerce or industry; and 12 per cent in the professions.

With some fluctuations, nobles played a large role in the administration throughout the nineteenth century; this was secured by monarchical patronage and opinionated co-optation. From 1815 to 1918 over 70 per cent of the 120 Prussian ministers of state were old aristocrats or newly created nobles. Of 116 provincial governors in the same period, 61 per cent were old aristocrats, 10 per cent newly created nobles and 29 per cent of bourgeois origin. The fact that only eight Catholics and two men of Jewish origin who had converted to Protestantism served as Oberpräsidenten reflects the restricted nature of the juste milieu in the higher echelons. With regard to the proportion of nobles, their social outlook and conservative affiliations, an east–west division in Prussia existed. Moreover there were marked differences between Prussia and the southern German states. Here there were more Catholic and moderately liberal high officials. The exclusion of Progressives, Social Democrats and Jews from office was less harsh and the political culture less divisive. Constitutional reforms after 1900 succeeded. South German governments at least internally cautioned against illiberal measures proposed by Prussia.17

The state’s influence was enormously increased by the growth of public sector employment during the rise of the interventionist state. An estimated 2.7 million


government employees in 1907 included about 300,000 in the postal service and almost 600,000 in transportation, mainly for the state railways, of whom two-thirds were based in Prussia. At around 11 per cent of the total labour force, this was double that of Britain or the United States. And the state as the employer of these men and (rarely) women tended towards political regimentation. This could be achieved by controls of conduct and public voting for the Landtag, much less so in secret voting for the Reichstag after 1903. Numerous decrees admonishing public servants to support the governmental stance illustrate the desire for political regimentation, but also its incomplete success. Loyalty had to be gained by material rewards, and governmental employees, especially civil servants (Beamte), enjoyed comparatively large salaries and significant benefits. Their demands were pressed by active associations. The anti-republican stance of many higher officials during the turbulent Weimar years mirrored their comfortable well-off position before 1914 and their fear of loss of status.\(^{18}\)

The contrast to conservative state administration was municipal government. A law of 1853 intentionally formed it in the dualistic manner of constitutionalism (with a mayor above the council of representatives), instituted extensive state interference and limited the sphere of actions for the distrusted ‘communal republics’. Restricted local franchises – later occasionally intensified against Social Democratic or Catholic gains – assured the dominance of liberals. In their urban strongholds, liberal experts developed poor relief into welfare and social policies ranging from public health to labour exchanges and vocational education, thereby attempting to take the edge off social conflict. Social Democrats often went along with such reforms because of the beneficial effects for the population. After 1900, liberal-run cities and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) both endorsed urban consumer interests against the state administration and producers’ lobbies. The problems of industrialization and the big political controversies could not be remedied at a municipal level, but mayors and city administrations were often comparatively conciliatory. A city like Frankfurt am Main – with a local equal franchise and dominated by Progressives – was even monitored and admonished by state officials for its efforts to integrate Social Democratic organisations. Amongst the many foreign admirers of Prussian municipal administration, the renowned British author William H. Dawson felt urged to write: ‘that the state jealously guards its powers is to put the matter mildly’.\(^{19}\)

The socio-political composition of the Prussian administration has been documented by a host of regional biographical handbooks since the late 1980s. The same is true for the 433 (443 after 1906) deputies of the Landtag and the 397 seats of the Reichstag, of which 236 were

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Prussian. The handbooks contain data on thousands of individuals. Social composition influences the outcome, but a noble–non-noble positional analysis or statistics on the social origins of high-ranking officials are not fully sufficient to generalize about the performance of the Prussian administration. Further detailed studies of bills and administrative behaviour are desirable. Three basic assumptions seem generally accepted. First, Prussian administrations remained authoritarian, but managed infrastructural modernization. Its limits became evident during the war, although left liberals – and in 1913 the Centre Party politician Erzberger – criticized the administration as being paralyzing, petty and causing unnecessary conflicts. Secondly, during the imperial decades the conservative administration did not integrate the Social Democratic working class or ethnic minorities. Thirdly, people experienced an active paternalistic state, but were bereft of civic political education, which led to political despair when the democratic republic experienced a serious crisis after 1929.

The Legislative Record: Achievements and Shortcomings

The imperial period in Prussia was characterized by important early reform successes in self-government and public and private law, but setbacks and a block on reforms later on. Legislative achievements include the reform of county and provincial self-government (Kreisordnung, 1872; Provinzialordnung, 1875; Landgemeindeordnung, 1891), and laws on the administrative courts and competences (Landesverwaltungsgesetz, 1875/83). Minister Miquel’s tax and financial reform of 1891–93 was also a success, as it lessened direct taxes for the poor and produced (via four per cent maximum tax) higher revenues. But as a corollary, budget control of the Landtag was weakened, and the interdependence of tax and voting classes strengthened the three-class franchise.

On the other hand, there were several failures: a liberal bill on municipal administrative reform (Städteordnung) failed because of dissent between the two Landtag chambers (1875); a codification of primary school law, the Volksschulgesetz, could not be agreed on because of liberal–Catholic divisions (1892) and only an imperfect Schulunterhaltungsgesetz (1906) materialized. The imperial finance bill of 1909 (Reichsfinanzerform) was obstructed by Prussian conservatives because of a planned inheritance tax. In social policy and labour law, the leading role of the Prussian ministry of trade in the era of Theodor Lohmann and Minister Berlepsch up to 1896 was taken over by the Imperial Office of the Interior, led by Posadowsky-Wehner and Clemens Delbrück.22

20 Data collections with analytic introductions include: Dietrich Wegmann, Die leitenden staatlichen Verwaltungsbeamten der Provinz Westfalen 1815–1918 (Münster, 1969); Thomas Klein, Leitende Beamte der allgemeinen Verwaltung in der preussischen Provinz Hessen-Nassau und in Waldeck 1867–1945 (Darmstadt and Marburg, 1988); Horst Romeyk, Die leitenden staatlichen und kommunalen Verwaltungsbeamten der Rheinprovinz 1816–1945 (Düsseldorf, 1994); Bernhard Mann et al., Biographisches Handbuch für das Preussische Abgeordnetenhaus 1867–1918 (Düsseldorf, 1988); Bernd Haunfelder, Die Reichstagsfraktion des Zentrums von 1871 bis 1933 (Düsseldorf, 1999); idem, Die liberalen Abgeordneten des Deutschen Reichstags 1871–1918 (Münster, 2004); idem, Die konservativen Abgeordneten des Deutschen Reichstags 1871–1918 (Münster, 2010).


In the 1890s Prussia – or rather Wilhelm II, on the advice of reactionary court and military circles – attempted to push through repressive bills intended as an ersatz anti-socialist law, but a Reichstag majority could not be found for either the Sedition Bill (Umsturzvorlage, 1894–95) or the Hard Labour Bill (Zuchthausvorlage, 1899). Similarly, neither the Centre nor the National Liberal parties in the Prussian Landtag agreed to arbitrary paragraphs in the association law (Novelle zum Vereinsgesetz, 1897). These failures show that, even in Prussia, reactionary restrictions of civil liberties could not obtain parliamentary assent. Conversely, several relics of codification from the mid-nineteenth century dragged on for decades: the association law from 1850 to 1908; the ‘state of siege’ (Belagerungszustand) law from 1851 to 1918; the military penal code from 1845 to 1898; the regulations for domestic servants and rural workers (Gesindeordnung) from 1810/1854 to 1918; and separate rural estates (Gutsbezirke) existed as long as 1927. The citizenship law (Staatsangehörigkeitsrecht), effective from 1842 to 1913, facilitated discrimination against Poles and Danes and the expulsion of immigrant Jews. All these laws were most strictly executed in Prussia which pressed other German states to follow its example. In other areas, Prussia also defended its regulations against Reich interference: for example, regulations for associations and noble privilege (such as entailed estates) were exempted from the Civil Code of 1900 through its Introductory Act. The constitutional and socio-political status quo in Prussia was fiercely guarded and in these areas the responsiveness to societal demands was generally low.23

Three large conflicts in Germany originated in Bismarckian Prussia, with its strong state tradition and record of repression against political dissenters: the Kulturkampf of the 1870s; the anti-socialist law of 1878; and the intensification of anti-Polish policies after 1886/95. To attribute them to unspecified side-effects of the Empire misreads their genesis.24 Culture wars – controversies over school inspection, civil marriage and ecclesiastical orders between state and church, or liberals and Catholic organizations – were common in nineteenth-century Europe. But in Prussia it was Bismarck who decided to resort to state force in 1871–72, and he alone gave this up when entertaining new political priorities in 1878. He spoke of a joint Catholic and Polish rebellion against Prussia, a perception founded on a specific idea of state authority and his lifelong stance of fighting political opponents as deadly enemies of his Reich. Both attitudes formed part of Prussian political culture. In 1851 the provincial governor in Posen wrote about the eradication of Polish culture and in 1863 Bismarck called for full Germanization in the eastern provinces. The state ministry discussed measures in 1882–83, and in 1885 32,000 Poles and Jews without Prussian citizenship were expelled; in 1886 a colonization commission was established. Both steps were strongly criticized in the Reichstag. The Polish language was to be removed from schools, churches and cultural institutions. In 1895–96 the state ministry initiated further discriminatory anti-Polish measures leading up to the 1908 expropriation law against Polish lands, the high point of Germanization. Even in the age of nationalism, less brutal options existed, but Prussia’s governments did not choose them. Inadvertently such state actions encouraged the mobilization of Poles, Catholics and Social Democrats – but equally it contributed to their political pillarization and fostered confrontational features in Germany’s political culture. Prussia’s leaders were in need of political allies and sought an accommodation with right-wing nationalist groups. As these radicalized

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24 Clark, Iron Kingdom, pp. 575 f., 579, 582 f., contends that tolerant Prussian policies shifted mainly due to the nation-state after 1870. See also Wolfgang Pack, Das parlamentarische Ringen um das Sozialistengesetz Bismarcks 1878–1890 (Düsseldorf, 1961), pp. 76 ff.
and pushed for Germanization or even pre-emptive war, some ministers felt like the sorcerer’s apprentice, unable to curb the forces they had summoned up.  

More positively, Prussian policies in the area of science and education were generally successful, and today’s UNESCO World Heritage Site of Berlin’s museum island (Museumsinsel) took shape in this period, although it was as much the product of social forces as government policy. The multitude of actors in the cultural sphere could not be fully controlled by decrees, but in Prussia the Imperial Press Law of 1874 did not prevent censorship measures, numerous trials for lèse majesté, or attempts to curb naturalist theatre or impressionism and expressionism in the fine arts. After 1900 these efforts weakened or were counter-productive; market forces, cities and bourgeois patrons provided numerous niches for modern culture to take root. Convictions of journalists for lèse majesté decreased (1894: 720; 1908: 34). While Wilhelm II, most Prussian ministries and large parts of the public favoured historicism in the fine arts, the Prussian ministry of trade, imperial offices and municipal authorities often championed modernism.  

Scandals originating in Prussia (the Leckert-Lützow-Tausch scandal, 1896–97; colonial misdemeanours 1906–07; the Daily Telegraph Affair and Eulenburg scandal, 1907–08; the Zabern affair, 1913) undermined the prestige of the government and the monarchy. Some counter measures were taken, but the basic structures remained and the subsequent learning processes were not as unequivocal as to lead clearly toward democratization. On the other hand, governmental press offices like those organized by Puttkamer in 1882, and revived in 1894–98, lost out against a pluralistic press and could not effectively guide public opinion. In short, one can conclude that Prussia’s legislative record in the imperial era was decidedly mixed, and any judgement of it must remain ambivalent.

Continuities and Conflicts: Prussian Politics and Political Culture in Recent Research

In recent decades attention has been directed in particular at the following areas of political development in Prussia: the electoral and party system; rural government and regional variety; central government, conservative rule and Prussia’s role in the Empire. The predominant view is that Prussia mainly acted like a giant anchor, slowing down the intermittently moving imperial ship. Thomas Kühne has written the definitive study of the

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ignominious three-class franchise and has meticulously documented the electoral processes for the 443 Prussian constituencies. He found that public, indirect voting in non-urban areas differed from the urban, secret ballot: dependency on the locally powerful notables was widespread, political loyalty was given and material rewards were expected. A specific corporate outlook (Wahlkultur) characterized rural areas for long periods. The future deputy was not seen as a party politician, but rather as the agent of local interests in the Landtag. For the local opposition it was often difficult to campaign and find men willing to show their political allegiance as members of the electoral colleges. Turnouts remained low (18–32 per cent) and competition decreased (40 per cent of the constituencies in 1913 were uncontested and over 50 per cent of them were loyal to one party over decades). For Kühne, these facts suggest that the political mass market was contained and sedated. Even so, the run-off system often forced the parties to build electoral alliances.

This frequent co-operation between parties influenced their parliamentary behaviour too. For Kühne, three phases stand out: the all-liberal alliances rendering liberal majorities in the Landtag up to 1879; the Conservative–National Liberal cartel dominating from 1882 to 1898 over the informal anti-cartel of the Centre Party, Poles and Progressives; and the resurgence of the all-liberal alliances after 1898, now competing with the Conservative Party (dominant in the rural east) and the Centre Party (in Catholic areas). These trends contrasted with numerous regional variations: all German parties against Poles in Posen; cartels surviving in Schleswig-Holstein and Saxony; and local party leaders elsewhere building alliances on their own. There were persistent cleavages between the Centre Party and the National Liberals in the west, and left liberals and conservatives in Brandenburg, Pomerania, East Prussia and Lower Silesia. This is why the ‘three camps’ model of the late Karl Rohe – a ‘national’ camp of conservatives and liberals, a Social Democratic and a Catholic camp – cannot be applied to Prussia, at least until 1918. Generally, Progressives and Prussian conservatives were opponents. Social Democrats remained outlaws, even Prussian Progressives denying them their support in run-offs. Kühne’s innovative findings show that the political process was not just top-down. Nevertheless, Bismarck’s turn to the right and the governments’ pro-conservative stance thereafter, the sustained efforts to keep National Liberals in the cartel, and occasional governmental attempts at political realignment, all remain important.29

The three-class franchise was the cornerstone of conservative dominance in the Landtag and thereby the basis for their political power in the Empire. Liberal discontent led Chancellor Bülow to promise a franchise reform in 1908 at the height of the ‘Bülows Bloc’ nationally. After two years of postponements – due to the financial reform, Prussian bureaucratic obstruction and the unwillingness of Wilhelm II – Bülow’s successor, Bethmann Hollweg, finally faced up to the task. His rather restricted premises were, however, no substantial gains for Social Democrats, Poles or Progressives; assent of the conservatives; and to preserve the feasibility of both Conservative/Catholic and Conservative/National Liberal majorities in the Landtag. He rejected outright modernization via a direct and secret ballot as the Centre Party, National Liberals and Progressives preferred, but proposed a direct public ballot instead. In order to soften ‘plutocratic excesses’ – in 1903, 94 per cent of the electorate in Cologne, including the

district president, had voted in the third class – educated men were now to be placed in a higher class. However, the Centre Party formed an alliance with the Conservatives to limit the reform to the introduction of a secret ballot. This informal ‘blue-black’ alliance had existed in the Landtag since the 1890s and was based on both parties’ concern for rural interests, confessional schools and church rights. Ceding to a blue-black solution was unacceptable to Bethmann Hollweg, who aimed at the revival of a Conservative–National Liberal cartel. Unable to achieve this aim, the government withdrew the bill altogether and abstained from further initiatives for fear of renewed quarrels amongst the parties. In the same vein, the upper chamber (Herrenhaus), a bastion of conservative Junker, remained unreformed.

Underlying all of this were deep socio-political cleavages. The need to avoid gains for the SPD and Poles prevented the long-overdue redistribution of constituencies first established in 1860. In 1903 there were eight million inhabitants in 161 rural constituencies, while eight million urban voters lived in only 41 districts. Social Democrats boycotted Landtag elections until 1908 and in 1913 gained just ten of 443 seats, despite commanding a 28.4 per cent share of the votes (776,000). The two conservative parties won 200 seats on the basis of 16.8 per cent or 460,000 cast ballots, not least because roughly two million out of 2.7 million voters were crammed into the third class.30

Another instructive example for the immobility of the Prussian political system is the attempt to reform procedures in the regional administration between 1910 and 1914. Many political writers and some officials agreed in theory that the complicated administrative structures and slow procedures would benefit from decentralization. Urban liberals, moreover, wanted to diminish the rights of control and confirmation held by district governors and county sheriffs (Landräte) vis-à-vis the cities and towns. But a royal commission of high-ranking bureaucrats and professors was convened in vain, and the staunchly conservative minister of the interior, von Dallwitz, and high officials opted for no change. The immobility, even paralysis, in Prussia’s constitutional and administrative matters was not the result of deference from the people or perennial stasis. Rather it was the result of virulent antagonisms between separate active forces pulling in different directions. It was mobilization and divisive interaction that led to stalemate.31

One further characteristic aspect of Prussian administration which has recently been scrutinized is county administration by the Landräte. Using original documents, Patrick Wagner reveals an ambivalent situation. On the one hand, the local administrative monopoly of Junker power waned as farmers were admitted to the county council (Kreistag) and its executive committee (Kreisausschuss) after the 1872 reforms (Kreisordnung). The Landräte, often young men starting their bureaucratic careers, had the dual role of ‘developmental aide’ and ‘broker’, reporting local concerns to the state administration. The social basis of county administration was broadened and Landräte had to win over the rural elites; if the Landrat failed at this he was replaced. On the other hand, while the Landrat may have given the state a local presence, the Junker remained masters on their estates and to a large extent were awarded local offices, thus surviving on leased state power. Secondly, Landräte were invariably conservative and often noble, exerting influence over military recruitment, tax assessment and the distribution of permits, as well as engineering election victories for the conservatives. For, contrary to liberal


hopes, farmers and poor villagers did not support them, but voted conservative instead, motivated by a mixture of pro-tariff agricultural egoism, localism and social pressure from local notables. Similar examples of local state-building in alliance with large landowners can be found in other peripheral regions of Europe, such as Andalucía in Spain and southern Italy. In spite of incremental changes, Wagner concludes that a real democratization of rural Germany east of the River Elbe only arrived after 1918, with universal suffrage, the abolition of legal tutelage of employers over rural workers, and a Social Democratic government in Berlin. Nevertheless, the experience of tutelage and post-war economic problems led many politically inexperienced rural voters to turn to the radical right in the 1920s.32

This situation of simultaneous change and stasis in the rural east contrasted sharply with the situation in the densely populated western areas, where towns dominated and, of course, in the culturally vibrant big city, Berlin. The east–west division of Prussia is a fact recognized by contemporaries and historians alike. The Rhineland, Westphalia and Berlin were the industrial powerhouses of Prussia, yet political power was wielded by representatives of the rural areas. Traditional Prussian historiography dismissed all too quickly the animus, resentments and hidden resistance that persisted in the conquered provinces of 1815 (the Rhine Province, Westphalia and parts of Saxony-Thuringia) and 1866 (Hanover, Schleswig-Holstein, Hesse-Nassau) well into the imperial era. Their population – forcefully incorporated Muss-Preussen – could skip Prussian identity with the rise of a German Empire. These painful processes of integration still deserve further exploration. Even in the east, traces of separate regional identity can be detected, the more so if Catholicism, tradition, political quarrels and language differences coincided.33

Returning to the central government and the Landtag in Berlin, we have to start with Bismarck. He used Prussia as a counterweight to the unbending Reichstag, thus he predestined Prussia to a conservative course after 1879. Monarchy and constitution, franchise and administration were the prerequisites. After 1885 the two conservative parties regularly won over 200 of 433 (443) seats. The two liberal factions – in the 1870s majority parties – were stuck at about 120 deputies thereafter and, equally important, remained divided for decades. Though the moderate Centre Party after 1879 consistently gained over 100 seats, a liberal–Catholic majority was improbable in view of the confessional divide between lower middle class Catholics and elite Protestant liberals, and also because of fierce electoral competition between them in western regions.34 In any case, if such a coalition had existed it would have been unable to effect laws against the government, the king and the upper chamber. In Prussia, successive governments after Bismarck wanted to be supported by an alliance of the two conservative parties with the National Liberals as junior partner.

34 Thomas Kühne, Handbuch der Wahlen zum preussischen Abgeordnetenhaus 1867–1918. Wahlergebnisse, Wahlbündnisse und Wahlkandidaten (Düsseldorf, 1995), pp. 54 f. This volume is an extremely valuable reference.
When the Centre Party agreed to increased tariffs in 1879/1885 it was brought in from the cold by the government. From then on, the Centre took on the position formerly held by the National Liberals of helping to deliver government majorities for important bills. Even so, it was mainly the two conservative parties which were courted by the government. Neither the Centre nor the National Liberals were constantly close allies of the government; the middle classes did not rule in Prussia.

In the *Reichstag* the Centre Party held a crucial position as long as the government wished to avoid a left-wing majority of SPD, left liberals and minorities. In the *Landtag* a three-sided game was played. Here, Prussian governments had two types of majorities at their disposal: conservatives and (some) National Liberals; or conservatives and the Centre. By co-operating in this way, both of these parties had a bargaining position and could achieve concessions or rewards. These *quid pro quo* transactions between the parties were largely overseen by a government that profited from a deferential *Landtag*. Parliamentary questions were common here, but virtually no complete bills originated in the *Landtag*, and all party groupings tended to be less active than in the *Reichstag*. After 1900, the conservative faction leader Ernst von Heydebrand considered a blue-black alliance to be the best safeguard for the status quo. This combination left the conservatives’ bastions in the eastern countryside and the Centre Party’s strongholds in Catholic areas untouched and could stave off any constitutional change. Nevertheless, Margaret Anderson’s description of the constellation in Prussia’s *Landtag* before 1914 as crypto-parliamentary is wrong for two reasons: first, this contention overlooks the fact that the conservative seats were achieved on just 28 per cent (1893) or even 17 per cent (1913) of actual voters and much less of the eligible electorate; secondly, the system worked smoothly only as long as the government was conservative itself. A different majority could have led to constitutional crisis.35

Tensions between conservatives and the government were evident in four periods: in the formative years of the Empire, 1866–74; during Caprivi’s chancellorship, 1891–94; over the bill for the construction of the controversial Mittelland Canal in 1899; and in the aftermath of the imperial finance reform, 1909–14. Caprivi was ousted by conservatives and, despite their rejection of the canal, the government and Wilhelm II refrained from staging an electoral campaign against them. Several *Reichstag* elections from the 1870s to 1912 led to anti-conservative majorities, thus demonstrating the mutual dependency of government and the conservatives.

The challenges and threats for Prussian conservatives increased after 1890. Migration to cities in the west and the decline of agriculture relative to industry undermined their economic basis; a bad public image fuelled by their authoritarian stance and rural egoism persisted; popular movements like the Agrarian League and antisemitic groups became electoral competitors; Social Democracy and the trade unions were growing threats; so over time their number of seats decreased. After 1911–12 the leftward shift of the National Liberals and the Centre Party in the *Reichstag* isolated the Conservative Party. This helps explain why they defended their bastions in Prussia so fiercely; James Retallack has described it as a ‘siege mentality’. In the *Landtag*, however, Catholics and National Liberals did not take a similar turn to the left. Their respective right wings narrowly defeated the Progressives’ motion in favour of direct and secret franchise in May 1912 through abstention.

It was not unusual for Prussia’s conservative elites to take a stance against the Empire: this occurred during the 1890s, for instance, through the obstruction of several bills in the *Bundesrat*, and in 1914 with Count Heinrich Yorck von Wartenburg’s motion in the upper

35 Anderson, *Practicing Democracy*, p. 193. Taking this view, the *Herrenhaus* would have displayed full parliamentary rule, as governmental majorities generally prevailed. But this chamber was appointed, not elected.
chamber calling for an end to imperial interference in Prussian affairs. Conservatives had to rely on the five Prussian pillars which their party leader, Ernst von Heydebrand, referred to as a pentagram (1913): the two chambers of the Landtag, the army, the central bureaucracy and the Landräte. On many questions, the Prussian monarchy and the state ministry could be added to make a seven-pointed star. Germany could not be governed against Prussia, and after 1900 Prussia was politically backward when compared to southern German and many Western European states. In 1898 Minister-President Chlodwig zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst confided in his diary that southern liberalism could not overcome the rule of the strong Junker caste in Prussia, whose underpinnings were the monarch and the army. The National Liberal leader Ernst Bassermann, from Baden, complained in 1913 in a private letter how badly liberals had fared with decorations. For him the exclusion of deputies for ‘political impartiality’ meant that most decorations went to conservatives through their various administrative or court functions. He thought that political discrimination of this sort was unknown in southern Germany. And in retrospect the historians Gerhard Ritter (1922) and Fritz Hartung (1933) contrasted the class-ridden and divisive political culture in the north-east of the Empire with the casual ease with which social and political life was conducted in the south. Almost all of the twelve peculiarities of the German socio-political system put forward by Hans-Ulrich Wehler originated in Prussia.

Prussia remained a conservative bastion against parliamentarization and democratization for as long as the Prussian monarchy, military, three-class franchise and Conservative Party existed. It took war and revolution to remove them in 1918. New horizons were then opened up, yet the Prussian imprint on German political mentalities lingered on, with fatal effects.

Further Research Possibilities

With regard to sources, much has been done, but material worth editing can still be found. The papers of Minister of State Clemens Delbrück, recently discovered in Jena, will, for instance, be a basis for publication. Unpublished memoirs like those of district president Count Robert Keyserlingk (1866–1959), kept in a family archive, or deputy Alfred von Gossler (1867–1946), in the Bundesarchiv at Freiburg, would be worthwhile too. On the other hand, the correspondence of the Conservative Party leaders Heydebrand and Westarp, used by scholars such as James Retallack, seems to have been exhausted. The Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin contains still unexplored sources, government files as well as private papers. The published records of Prussian parliamentary sittings (Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Preussischen Abgeordnetenhauses) are indispensable; the corresponding minutes of the Reichstag are now accessible online.

The view from outside is documented richly in dispatches of German and foreign envoys to Prussia. A ground-breaking edition covering the British reports between 1816 and 1866

36 Wilfried Loth, Katholiken im Kaiserreich. Der politische Katholizismus in der Krise des wilhelminischen Deutschlands (Düsseldorf, 1984), pp. 205–20; Retallack, Notables of the Right, pp. 177 ff. (siege mentality); Kühne, Dreiklassenwahlrecht, p. 572 (abstention of Centre/National Liberals); Rauh, Parlamentarisierung, p. 51 (obstruction); Spenkuch, Herrenhaus, p. 507 f. (Yorck motion); Retallack, German Right, p. 396 (pentagram).


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will be continued into the imperial era. These reports generally cover not just diplomatic matters, but themes such as cultural transfers and mentalities. A different kind of external view is provided by the books and articles in which foreign travellers wrote about their perceptions of the Prussian polity; some of them are well known, but a systematic treatment is still lacking. German diplomats from Bavaria, Baden, Württemberg, Saxony, Hesse, Thuringia and Lübeck also observed imperial and Prussian politics in Berlin. Their reports — though differing in quality and already a cherished source for scholars in the past — still deserve selective publication, since only small parts currently exist in print. Conversely, the Prussian reports from other German capitals are a potential source for the interplay of the smaller federal states with Prussia, which remains an under-researched topic.

In political history, the volume analyzing the Prussian parliamentary system for the years 1867–1918, planned decades ago in the series *Handbuch der Geschichte des deutschen Parlamentarismus*, seems to need an energetic author; the volume for the years 1858–66 by Günther Grünthal will appear shortly. It would also be worthwhile to examine a shorter period, such as the years 1907–14. Such an analysis could offer a synthesis of domestic issues in Prussia and the Empire and be based on governmental documents, private papers and parliamentary transactions. Still missing are histories of two big parties. First, the labour movement in Prussia’s east (where the SPD had more than 100,000 members by 1914) is worth a book. Smaller local studies — along the lines of Raymond C. Sun’s dissertation on Catholic workers — are also desirable. Secondly, we need a detailed treatment of the National Liberal Party in Prussia for the years 1890–1914, following the examples of Wilfried Loth for the Centre Party and Alastair Thompson for the Progressives. For the nationally mixed eastern regions of Prussia, political history also has to develop a transnational perspective, as recently attempted by Mark Tilse.

Cultural approaches to political processes loom large on the current research agenda. An exploration of Prussian court society and politics under Wilhelm I — building on the distinguished work of John Röhl on Wilhelm II — would be rewarding. The scope should be widened to include the monarchy’s interaction with the population at large. Eva Giloi has focused on gifts to members of the royal family as one indicator of monarchical loyalty, discovering that they came overwhelmingly from the old provinces of Prussia, with the nobility and the professions being the most frequent donors. Public ceremonies such as monarchical jubilees, the state opening of parliament, funerals or national festivals can also


be explored further; a volume edited by Andreas Biefang demonstrated the potential of this approach.44

The interior administration vis-à-vis the governed population and their everyday interaction could be examined on the basis of governmental documents and newspapers. Here the narrow juridical viewpoint of traditional administrative history (Verwaltungsgeschichte) has to be transcended, to include popular responses and mentalities. Generally, the cultural approach to political and administrative history is promising, although a careful conceptualization is necessary.45 Regions or provinces have been covered widely in essay collections and monographs, but their systematic treatment would still offer new insights. The western provinces – Rhineland, Westphalia, Hanover, Hesse, but also Prussian Saxony (Thuringia) and Schleswig-Holstein – are much better researched than those in the east. Here studies based on archival sources have been rather scarce, but things started to change following the political upheavals of 1989–91. One potentially fruitful line of research concentrates on questions of nationality; in this vein important studies for East Prussia and Upper Silesia already exist. A second focus could be on state building and societal modernization, so far examined in Pomerania alone.46 For this approach a comparative European perspective would be useful. Additionally, it would make sense to look across the divides of 1871 and 1918. Fortunately, the provinces east of the River Oder can nowadays be explored in co-operation with Polish historians.

More generally, all areas of Prussian history could benefit from a transnational perspective, looking at issues such as: migration in all its forms; global economic interdependence; exchanges in education, the arts and sciences; and international networks, from the women’s movement to nature conservation. In this way the picture of Prussia may be diversified and revised. This is legitimate and only to be expected: the questions asked of the past, and the source base to be used, change with the generations. However, future researchers would do well to remember the famous remark of Karl Marx: ‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances of their own choosing, but under circumstances already existing, given and transmitted from the past.’47

In this sense the picture of Prussian governance is not as uncertain as some might suggest.


Suggestions for Further Reading

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