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Review: Philip G. Dwyer, ed. *The Rise of Prussia, 1700-1830* (London and New York, 2000)

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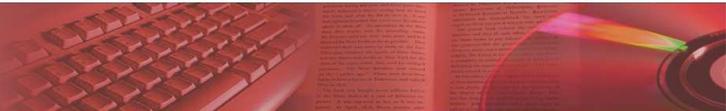
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Philip G. Dwyer, ed. *The Rise of Prussia, 1700-1830*. London and New York: Longman, 2000. xiv + 321 pp. \$67.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-29268-0.

Reviewed by Andre Wakefield

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Prussia always seems to be rising—not a bad trick for an officially dead and defunct state. Since the publication of William Fiddian Readdaway's 1904 classic, *Frederick the Great and the Rise of Prussia*, the place has risen at least a dozen times in English text. Moreover, German history syllabi are routinely structured around the logic of a Prussian rise and fall; even the "Internet Modern History Sourcebook" organizes many of its documents on enlightened despotism around the "decline of the Holy Roman Empire and the rise of Prussia."^[1] We are all familiar with this particular narrative by now: Prussia, a two-bit regional power in the early eighteenth century, becomes a major player on the world scene some decades later. Reasons are adduced: successful administrative and fiscal reform, spectacular military innovation, shrewd economic development. This volume, written as a companion to *Modern Prussian History, 1830-1947*, is no exception to the rule. For historians of Prussia, it is a tried and tested narrative strategy. By framing the history of Prussia as the prehistory of modern Germany, the subject takes on a special luster, as if we might glimpse the greatness and tragedy of later German history in its Prussian embryo. Of course, there is a flip side to the approach: other eighteenth-century states, like Saxony, Hanover or Bavaria, become the unfortunate miscarriages of German history.

The editor of this volume, Philip G. Dwyer, recognizes that he is not offering an entirely fresh narrative structure. "The story of Prussia's rise," he explains, "of its fall and its rise again is a familiar one" (p. 3). Rather, Dwyer claims that the "traditional" account of Prussia's rise needs to be modified and supplemented in light of recent research. The old things—religion, geography, centralization, fiscal reform, the army—still matter, but now the road to greatness looks bumpier than it once did. In fact, there is much good new material here, and the volume offers a nice mix of essays, some from long-recognized

experts in the field, others from a new generation of historians.

Rodney Gotthelf's contribution on Frederick William I, that fascinating and strangely neglected Prussian monarch, is especially welcome. Though he does not add anything in the way of original research here, his synthesis of English and German sources offers the best and most balanced account of Frederick William I that I have seen in English. We can only hope that he pursues this in the future, as we could certainly use a good English-language biography of the Soldier King.

Johan van der Zande's provocative piece on Prussia and the Enlightenment argues that we should discard altogether the notion of Enlightened absolutism, which "had nothing to do either with the Enlightenment as a moral enterprise or with the constitution of Enlightenment sociability" (p. 92). Thus, for example, he claims that we should separate the Enlightenment proper from the hardboiled state-building policies of Frederick II, since these policies were the vestiges of an older "unenlightened" age guided by "pre-Enlightenment ideas." This may be a convenient distinction in theory, but in practice it is difficult to maintain. That certain approaches to statemaking, like cameralism, had their origins in the seventeenth century by no means implies that these approaches were somehow antithetical to the Enlightenment project. Rather, fiscal policy was harnessed to and justified by "Enlightenment ideas" in ways that continually demonstrate the fluidity and permeability of the German Enlightenment. Moreover, the entire notion of a "Prussian Enlightenment" is problematic, as it forces van der Zanden into various difficulties, such as the need artificially to bracket off the Prussian universities in Halle and Königsberg from non-Prussian ones, like Göttingen and Leipzig. Nevertheless, his essay remains useful, as it provides a nice introduction to some of Prussia's major Enlighten-

ment figures.

Karin Friedrich's excellent contribution on the development of the Prussian towns deserves special mention. Friedrich suggests, quite rightly, that a renewed focus on "Polish Prussia," which has been largely ignored by western historians, challenges the one-sided view that many of us have become too comfortable with. "Prussian urban history," she writes, "needs to deconstruct the stereotypical image of smooth absolutist state-building on the one hand, and on the other the paradigm of a 'backward,' self-interested, defensive and stubborn burgher-society, naturally opposed to the intrusive centralized state" (p. 132). This seems exactly right, and it actually presents an implicit challenge to some of the other essays included in this volume.

There are other important contributions here. Topics traditionally at the center of Prussian history, like the Prussian military state and the reign of Frederick II, receive rock solid treatment from old hands Dennis Showalter and H. M. Scott. The rich essay on East Elbian Prussia by Edgar Melton elegantly synthesizes a mammoth literature. And Stefan Berger's piece on historiography offers a nice start to the enterprise. Moreover, the bibliographical essays and notes on "further research possibilities" at the end of the volume are helpful guides.

Seventeen years ago, T.C.W. Blanning offered up an explanation for the "*Preussenwelle*" of the early

1980s, which inundated the market with a seemingly endless flood of historical monographs, essays, exhibits and picture books on Prussia.[2] He located the causes of this great wave largely in the political commitments of historians like Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Hans-Juergen Puhle. These German historians, desperate to ward off Prussian nostalgia, hoped to cleanse Germany of the vestiges of its dangerous past. Today, standing on the other side of the political upheavals of the recent past, we are faced by a somewhat different conundrum; namely, why does Prussian history matter any more? To answer that question, historians of Prussia may have to start looking beyond the boundaries of their own subject.

Notes:

[1]. "Internet Modern History Sourcebook," <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook11.html>

[2]. T.C.W. Blanning, "The Death and Transfiguration of Prussia," *The Historical Journal*, 29:2 (1986): pp. 433-59.

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