

**Christopher Clark. *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Fall of Prussia
1600-1947***

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Any account of Prussian historical identity and its legacy in modern Germany is a difficult and contentious undertaking. This has much to do with the loaded associations that swirl around the word Prussia and its sinister counterpart “Prussiandom,” but it is also because of the origin of the Prussian state itself. As Christopher Clark writes in *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia 1600-1947*, his wonderful history of this extinct European power, Prussia vindicates the view that states are not natural formations but “contingent, artificial creations.” Clark frequently reminds us that the kingdom of Prussia had no natural boundaries, and that there was no specifically Prussian culture, language or cuisine. Prussia was a patchwork, consisting of disparate ethnic and cultural groups spread over wide-ranging and not always contiguous territories. Prussian identity was thus “curiously abstract and fragmented.” Even the name Prussia assumes a “contrived quality.” It referred not to the heartland of the Hohenzollern dynasty, which was centred on Berlin and the Mark Brandenburg, but to the remote duchy on the eastern Baltic that the dynasty acquired in the seventeenth century and which remained for a long time cut off from the rest of the lands.

The idea of Prussia was manufactured, and Clark’s book traces this process throughout its many stages. What, then, was Prussia? Apart from Frederick the Great, the Hohenzollern monarchs were on the whole incapable of channelling the patriotic fervour of their subjects. In an increasingly heterogenous kingdom the one institution that all Prussians had in common was the state. The ideal of the state represented rational, impartial legal authority, which, theoretically at least, treated its subjects indiscriminately

whether they were Pole or German, Protestant or Catholic. Minority languages and customs were tolerated, and to an extent encouraged. Clark argues that the virtues of Prussian cliché – punctuality, loyalty, honesty, thoroughness, precision – can only be understood as secondary and in service to the higher ideal of the state. The idea of Prussia emanated from the top down, rather than from regional identification, and consequently struggled to foment a strong sense of belonging amongst the citizenry.

In putting forward such an account, Clark successfully disentangles the Prussian state from the German nation. Although Prussian statesmen exploited German nationalist aspirations in bringing about the Empire, Clark contends that Prussian history should not be read as culminating in the telos of the *Kaiserreich* or its Nazi aberration; rather, “Germany was not Prussia’s fulfilment... but its undoing.” It was only after the foundation of the Empire that German became the official language in Prussia and unsuccessful attempts were made to “Germanise” its eastern populations. Clark argues that such policies were external to the traditions of the multi-ethnic Prussian state, but testament to the ascendancy of German nationalism. Prussia as a European power in its own right came to an end even as its history was retroactively appropriated as a part of the greater German story, a task which the Nazis later enthusiastically undertook.

This gave rise to the even more amorphous notion of “Prussiandom,” which, the Nazis proclaimed, was not confined to the geography of Prussia, but was a set of worthy attributes defined by loyalty, obedience and unshakeable will, common to the German people as a whole. However, the Nazis did not have a monopoly on the Prussian legacy, and almost two thirds of the conspirators involved in the failed plot to assassinate Hitler in 1944 came from the Prussian officer corps. They invoked a different version of “Prussiandom,” drawing on the example of the Prussian general Yorck, who, without consulting his king, had defected from the French to the Russians following Napoleon’s defeat in the Moscow campaign. For them “Prussiandom” meant a transcendent sense of duty that could make particular treasonable acts permissible. Clark certainly does not diminish the role played by Prussians in the crimes of the Third Reich, but his point is that both of these rival Prussian myths were equally selective and instrumental. It was precisely because it was so abstract that “‘Prussiandom’ was up for grabs.”

Clark’s intention in writing *Iron Kingdom* was to avoid rehearsing the polarities between enlightened Prussia and its militaristic dark side, emphasising the “Janus-headedness” of the kingdom which informs much of its historiography. Such accounts, he claims, are “too neat” and diminish important complexity. In this Clark has succeeded admirably. He has deliv-

ered a book that will become the standard general history of Prussia, not only due to its breadth, but also its readability and ability to surprise.

Iron Kingdom is highly recommended.

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