

ROBERT-HERMANN TENBROCK
A HISTORY
OF GERMANY

Translated from the German
by
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Chapter Nine

BRANDENBURG — PRUSSIA

Modest Beginnings

The Brandenburg Electorate lay in the colonial regions. Its roots reached back to the time when medieval Germany was at the zenith of its power and Germany proper had arrived at the eve of its first flowering of culture. Its destiny was determined by the law of the colonist whose every day signified a new conquest of his environment. Only when men who combined tradition with a spirit of initiative streamed into the Brandenburg Mark from the overpopulated West did it begin to take on more of the western character. Differences still remained, however. The cathedrals, which were built here as in the West, were the fruit of the same architectural inspiration, but the material used, brick, gave them their own distinctive character. Its cities were to a great extent cultural and commercial centres, but for many long years continued to be island in an alien environment which was regarded as culturally backward. Also the peasant colonist from the old country felt himself superior to his Slav compeers; the feeling of superiority over subordinates was here far more strongly developed than would ever have been possible in the West. The more the empire in the course of the Middle Ages subjugated the East and converted it into the most important settlement area for its excess population, the more strongly and inevitably it evolved the special character of a colonial territory.

All this was even more true of Prussia, the state of the Teutonic Order, in which the conqueror class was united in addition by vows of chivalry and religion. Though this meant in the first place greater emphasis on the Christian message, it cannot be overlooked that the sword was just as important an instrument for spreading the gospel as the word of God and the plough. The Teutonic Knights did not just set out to erect churches, monasteries and cities, and to preach Christianity; they were also men who took it for granted that they, or at least their community, had a right to acquire possessions and

wealth. The cities and the German nobility, by now completely assimilated with the old population, combined with Poland to resist the exercise of this "right". The Order was looked upon as a foreign intruder and lost its independence to Poland.

The conversion of the electors of Brandenburg and of the Teutonic Knights to Protestantism was of far-reaching significance for the Orders' territory. The religious knights became secular lords who sought to extend their properties till they were large enough to support both present and future generations. The agricultural productivity of the areas east of the Elbe was not, generally speaking, comparable to that of west Germany. The Brandenburg Electorate was known in the Middle Ages as the "Holy Roman Empire's Sand-Pit". The peasant's holding had to be considerably larger than in the West, if the land was to support the owner and his family. The gradual oppression of the small peasant by the large landowner made considerable progress during the 16th and 17th centuries, and the reduction of the free peasant class to almost complete serfdom reached an even more advanced stage than in the West. Emigration to the West, if only in small numbers, started as early as the 17th century. Like the other territorial rulers in Germany the Brandenburg electors had the greatest difficulty in breaking the resistance of the landlords and of the influential families in the cities to the assertion of their sovereign claims in the electorate and, after 1618, in ducal Prussia. There was no notable change in this respect until late in the 17th century. In their endeavours to establish the sovereignty of the crown both at home and abroad the Hohenzollern rulers of Brandenburg were, of course, acting completely in accord with the spirit of their age. Their efforts were, however, to prove of grave significance because they were directed for more than a hundred years towards an area that knew far less the restraint of long tradition than the empire west of the Elbe and the Saale. Where difficulties arising from tradition or people were concerned, the Hohenzollern of Brandenburg and Prussia had the advantage over their peers in other parts of the empire.

Organisation and Discipline

When Frederick William I, the "Great Elector", ascended the Brandenburg throne in 1640, his land and Germany were still in the throes of the Thirty Years War. Although the original nucleal territory of Brandenburg was not at the centre of the European struggle, it still bore

deep scars inflicted by the war. The Brandenburg possessions on the Rhine and in Westphalia (Cleve, Mark and Ravensberg) were situated far from Berlin, while Brandenburg and the former state of the Teutonic Knights, ducal Prussia, were separated by territory ruled by the latter's overlord, the King of Poland. The finances of the small state were in disorder and the nobility met the elector's efforts for improvement with determined resistance. Frederick William, however, was consumed by the ambition to transform his needy land into a principality which could worthily take its place alongside the other German states. Following the example of France he ruthlessly broke the resistance of the nobility, who had obstructed him especially in his plans for new taxes. With the larger state income he created a small standing army. At the Westphalian Peace Conference he successfully advanced his considerable territorial claims, without however acquiring Hither Pomerania, a fertile land with numerous harbours. Instead he acquired in the west Kammin, Minden, Halberstadt, and finally (1680) Magdeburg and Halle. This facilitated communication between the tribal territory and the western possessions.

From now on, Frederick William did all in his power to remain neutral for as long as possible in the disputes between the great powers, and to intervene only at the last moment on the side likely to win. He did not hesitate to change sides twice in the war between Sweden and Poland. Indeed his conduct during that war won him the elevation of Prussia from a Polish fief to a sovereign duchy, which he now completely incorporated into the Brandenburg state, and his own investiture as independent duke of Prussia. When Louis XIV took up arms against the Netherlands some years later, Frederick William lined up with the Habsburg emperor against France and Sweden. At Fehrbellin his army inflicted the first defeat on the Swedes, until then considered invincible. Still the hoped-for price of victory, western Pomerania, did not materialise. Without more ado the elector deserted his allies and went over in 1679 to the camp of Louis XIV, who assured him financial assistance. As a *quid pro quo* Frederick William promised him his vote at the next imperial election. But even this alliance did not bring him the coveted Hither Pomerania, although, true to his treaty obligations, he refused the emperor all help for the liberation of Vienna from the Turkish threat. The break with France did not come till 1685, one reason certainly being Frederick's disapproval of the expulsion of the Huguenots by Louis XIV after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. The refugees were granted asylum in his land, since he realised their value as skilled craftsmen and tradesmen. Descendants of these

French emigrants have played a not inconsiderable role in the history of Prussia.

At the end of his life Frederick William entered on a league with the emperor. They came to an agreement about Silesia: the elector did not press his title to the Silesian territories and received Schwiebus in their stead.

Frederick's expenditure on his army, which he brought by the end of his reign to the imposing number of 36,000 professional soldiers, demanded a political economy furthered and guided by the state in the spirit of the mercantile system. The cornerstone of the economy was the royal domains, which the Elector reorganised and placed under loyal officials. He sought to overcome the natural poverty of the soil by settling Dutch colonists and experts, and by cultivating potatoes and tobacco, reclaiming the Havel, Oder and Warthe marshlands, and erecting factories for glass and iron. His efforts here were not without some success. He built a canal from Silesia to Berlin and opened a postal service between Königsberg and Cleve in order to strengthen the links between his subjects and the capital. Although Frederick William was not altogether successful in centralising the entire administration of the state in the hands of the ruler after the model of France, Brandenburg was to be numbered among the well-administered territories at the end of his reign. The estates, which still exercised certain sovereign powers both in the central government and in the various parts of the territory, had allowed themselves to be persuaded to surrender their political rights voluntarily. In exchange, the nobility received an extension of their rights over the subject peasants. On his death Frederick William left as his proudest heritage to his successor a standing army which commanded respect. On its maintenance he spent many times more than what other states of his day, for example France, expended on their troops. This orientation of the state to military needs—an orientation, which the Great Elector also bequeathed to his successor—concealed dangers to which the young state might one day succumb to its own undoing.

To the Great Elector's immediate successor, Frederick III (1688—1713), however, the external prestige of his country was more important than its internal stability. For this reason he strove to acquire the title of king. In 1701 the emperor granted him the right to designate himself Frederick I, "King in Prussia". Königsberg became the city where all Prussian kings were crowned.

The real founder of the centralist state of Brandenburg-Prussia was Frederick William I (1713—1740), the "Soldier King". He consistently

followed in his domestic and foreign policy the political course on which the Great Elector had set the Brandenburg state. His goal was to exalt the power of the Brandenburg-Prussian state centralised in the person of its ruler. The monarchy, the army, and his officials were all epitomised in him. He aimed to make his officials the indisputable and undisputed pillars of the Brandenburg-Prussian state.

Electors Frederick William had abolished the political privileges of the nobility, when, in line with the other absolutist states, he conceded them a special economic status. King Frederick William I now restricted this, too. From 1717 onwards the properties of the knights were subject to tax. Although this did not imperil the privileged economic position of the nobility's lands in Brandenburg-Prussia, it made the nobility even more dependent on the king.

More decisive was the administrative reform he carried through. The state had two sources of revenue, the royal domains and taxes. In 1713 he united both under the General Directory and articulated the entire administration from top to bottom on the principle of individual responsibility. The officials for this work he recruited only from the ranks of the nobility.

The administrative reform abolished all the privileges still possessed by the estates or the cities. It gave the nobility a new position, for service as a royal official was proclaimed honorary service for king and state. The economic basis of the nobles who had become officials continued to be their property, whose possession the king guaranteed. The financial independence and the high standards which the king developed in his bureaucracy (after all it was an honour to serve in it) assured the Prussian official a position of great respect for a long period of his history.

Frederick William geared the state to the army to an even greater extent than the Great Elector. At the end of his reign the standing army was 83,000 strong. The country was divided into recruiting districts. Only journeymen and the sons of serfs were liable to conscription; other citizens were spared because of their importance to the economy. The soldiers were billeted on the burghers; the captains received a sum of money in advance with which they were to provide for their company. Frederick William drew his officers almost exclusively from the nobility, for whom army service was made attractive by grants of privileges and decorations.

With the exception of a late intervention in the Great Northern War, Frederick William hardly took any active part in foreign politics. His relations with the emperor remained good until 1739.

When Frederick William died in 1740, the yearly income of his state amounted to seven million thalers, of which five million were devoted to the army; the state exchequer contained eight million thalers.

Frederick William created a state that occupied a special place among the states of Germany and Europe on account of its honest, conscientious officials and its army with a corps of officers all with the same social background. This achievement was only possible because the king, also in his private life, subordinated everything to the needs of the state. Devotion to the state he regarded as a religious duty, which he imposed upon himself from a deep sense of responsibility. He demanded the same attitude from his subjects. In this way Frederick William prepared Brandenburg-Prussia to become a great power, a status to which the country's natural resources could not possibly have raised it. From the reign of Frederick William onwards there developed in the Brandenburg-Prussian state, especially in the army and civil service, certain "typically Prussian" qualities, such as unconditional devotion to duty, precision and punctuality, implicit obedience to all orders of superiors, the will to be effective and to avoid mere empty show. In addition to these undeniably positive attributes, however, the danger easily arose that all human activities were subordinated to the state, that the state stultified until it was nothing more than a soulless machine. Prussia has several times succumbed to this danger in the course of its history. A large part of later German history has been occupied with coming to grips politically, militarily and intellectually with the state created by Frederick William and the particular spirit to which it gave birth.