



Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947

By Christopher Clark

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In the aftermath of World War II, Prussia--a centuries-old state pivotal to Europe's development--ceased to exist. In their eagerness to erase all traces of the Third Reich from the earth, the Allies believed that Prussia, the very embodiment of German militarism, had to be abolished.

But as Christopher Clark reveals in this pioneering history, Prussia's legacy is far more complex. Though now a fading memory in Europe's heartland, the true story of Prussia offers a remarkable glimpse into the dynamic rise of modern Europe.

What we find is a kingdom that existed nearly half a millennium ago as a patchwork of territorial fragments, with neither significant resources nor a coherent culture. With its capital in Berlin, Prussia grew from being a small, poor, disregarded medieval state into one of the most vigorous and powerful nations in Europe. *Iron Kingdom* traces Prussia's involvement in the continent's foundational religious and political conflagrations: from the devastations of the Thirty Years War through centuries of political machinations to the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire, from the enlightenment of Frederick the Great to the destructive conquests of Napoleon, and from the "iron and blood" policies of Bismarck to the creation of the German Empire in 1871, and all that implied for the tumultuous twentieth century.

By 1947, Prussia was deemed an intolerable threat to the safety of Europe; what is often forgotten, Clark argues, is that it had also been an exemplar of the European humanistic tradition, boasting a formidable government administration, an incorruptible civil service, and religious tolerance. Clark demonstrates how a state deemed the bane of twentieth-century Europe has played an incalculable role in Western civilization's fortunes. *Iron Kingdom* is a definitive, gripping account of Prussia's fascinating, influential, and critical role in modern times.

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Editorial Review

Review

The story of Prussia is one that has been told many times, but seldom as intelligently, elegantly and interestingly as it is here. Christopher Clark has written a monumental history of a state that started from small beginnings as the Mark of Brandenburg, grew in size, violence and pretensions, and ended up being destroyed forever in 1947, when the victorious Allies decided they had had enough of this troublesome phenomenon...The bulk of a fascinating text, littered with intriguing detail and wry observation, focuses on this transformation in the 200 years from the bloody Thirty Years War in the 17th century (which cost Prussia half its population) to the creation by the Prussian nobleman Otto von Bismarck of a German Empire in 1871...Clark has written a masterly synthesis of [the] many disparate strands in a long and ultimately forlorn history. (Richard Overy *Daily Telegraph* 2006-08-12)

Iron Kingdom, is a triumph of scholarship and imagination. This is a big book in every sense--at almost 800 pages, it's not one to slip in your briefcase for the train--but it zips along in a manner that belies its weight. In part this is because Clark writes so elegantly. This is history in its "grand sweep," but his vivid sketches of characters, places and events lighten the narrative. Yet for all its entertainment value, *Iron Kingdom* is at heart an unflinching engagement with one of Europe's most complex and far-reaching political and cultural entities, spanning four centuries of history and, he suggests at the end, even beyond. (Richard Aldous *Irish Times* 2006-08-26)

Clark's book, a survey of Prussian history from 1600 to 1947, is well-written, even sometimes sprightly, although it is hard to make easy reading of matters such as Pietism or the administrative reforms of the Baron Stein. *Iron Kingdom's* triumph lies in a narrative structure that is even more impressive than the mass of detail that forms it; and one feels secure in the hands not only of a scholar but of a humane and fair interpreter of history. (Max Egremont *The Spectator* 2006-09-02)

To account for the rise and tumultuous extinction of Prussia is to explain how contemporary Europe came to assume its current form. It is a vast, Zeppelin-sized historical challenge; but it is also one to which Christopher Clark rises triumphantly, piloting his enormous subject through the best part of four centuries, traversing en route most of the continent of Europe, and carrying the reader with him on a bracing and exhilarating ride...For sheer range and intellectual horsepower, this book ranks as the best history of Prussia currently available in any language. However, more than that (and here it beats its German rivals hands-down), it is written with a literary finesse and narrative elan that establish its author as one of the finest writers of history at work in Britain today. It is a virtuoso performance. (John Adamson *Sunday Times* 2006-09-03)

It is only by contrary example that this book may remind us how miserable some hastily written products of the recent "history boom" have been. Clark is not one to swagger over the dead, secure in the knowledge that they cannot answer back. Instead, this is a well-informed and fair-minded historical investigation, written by a man who is plainly fascinated by the changing circumstances under which lives are lived and decisions made. One of the pleasures of this book is to watch Clark weighing the undeniable otherness of the past and resisting any tendency to convert it into a costume drama. (Patrick Wright *The Guardian* 2006-09-09)

You couldn't have the triumph and the tragedy of Prussia better told. Christopher Clark has a voracious appetite for detail and a tart turn of phrase. His study of Prussia, from beginning to end, vividly paints one of

the big pictures of European history. (Peter Preston *The Observer* 2006-08-13)

Iron Kingdom is not just good: it is everything a history book ought to be. The research is scholarly but never obtrusive, the prose sprightly but never flippant, the judgements bold but always sound...The nemesis of Prussia has cast such a long shadow that German historians have tiptoed around the subject. Thus it was left to an Englishman to write what is surely the best history of Prussia in any language. (Daniel Johnson *Sunday Telegraph* 2006-08-06)

Many states have been conquered, partitioned, occupied, "ended" and even destroyed. Prussia is unique in that it was formally abolished by decree of the British, American, French and Soviet victors in February 1947, after it ceased to exist in any meaningful sense...Christopher Clark begins *Iron Kingdom*, his history of "the rise and downfall of Prussia," with this famous decree, but his remarkable book is not another exorcism, nor an uncritical celebration. He provides a sophisticated yet accessible account of how a middling German dynasty manoeuvred its way into the European pentarchy of powers. (Brendan Simms *The Independent* 2006-08-18)

This book ranks as the best history of Prussia currently available in any language... It is a virtuoso performance. (John Adamson *Sunday Times* 2006-09-03)

Iron Kingdom, Christopher Clark's stately, authoritative history of Prussia from its humble beginnings to its ignominious end, presents a much more complicated and compelling picture of the German state, which is too often reduced to a caricature of spiked helmets and polished boots. Prussia and its army were inseparable, but Prussia was also renowned for its efficient, incorruptible civil service; its innovative system of social services; its religious tolerance; and its unrivaled education system, a model for the rest of Germany and the world. This too was Prussia--a tormented kingdom that, like a tragic hero, was brought down by the very qualities that raised it up. Mr. Clark, a senior lecturer in modern European history at Cambridge University, does an exemplary job. A lively writer, he organizes masses of material in orderly fashion, clearly establishing his main themes and pausing at crucial junctures to recapitulate and reconsider. Prussia, a self-invented artifact right down to its name, demands the kind of careful demythologizing that it receives from Mr. Clark, who gently but insistently exposes the flaws in most of the received wisdom about his subject. A result is an illuminating, profoundly satisfying work of history, brightened by vivid character sketches of the principals in his drama. (William Grimes *New York Times* 2006-09-27)

This book can...be read for sheer pleasure...It is the pleasure of discovery that Christopher Clark offers in this account of the rise and fall of Prussia...Prussia was much more than its wars, but without its wars it would not have been Prussia, and they and their protagonists (Mr. Clark's Bismarck is priceless), origins, conduct, and consequences occupy a large part of this excellent book, which scholars of Germany and Prussia will want to ponder very carefully, and which many an unencumbered reader will simply enjoy. (Edward N. Luttwak *New York Sun* 2006-09-27)

A massively impressive history of Prussia that surely takes its place as the definitive history of this much-maligned state. Elegant, entertaining, nicely illustrated and full of arresting characters, this is a terrific book. (Dominic Sandbrook *Daily Telegraph* 2006-12-09)

From the military and agricultural innovations of Frederick the Great to nineteenth-century high academic politics to Bismarck's social-security system, this magisterial and remarkably well-written history of Prussia traces back to the eighteenth century the region's surprisingly tolerant and intellectually rich culture. Clark, a Cambridge historian, suggests that the world is poorer for Prussia's absence. (Benjamin Healy *The Atlantic* 2006-12-06)

[An] enthralling, shrewd, and sparkling narrative...Clark's immensely learned, judicious, and entertaining book provides a definitive general narrative of its subject for our times...Clark's achievement is substantial. (R. J. W. Evans *New York Review of Books* 2007-09-27)

This beautifully written and brilliantly argued longer study will reward scholars, students, and educated laypeople who invest the time to read it...[A] riveting narrative. (C. Ingrao *Choice* 2007-08-01)

[A] valuable book...[Clark] shows how complicated the history of Prussia really was, and how exciting were the contrasts in its history between religious tolerance and intolerance, enlightenment and obscurantism, centralized power and regional particularism, the rule of law and ruthless authoritarianism...Prussia and its army were full of contradictions, and Clark analyzes them astutely in his book, which is certainly the best recent history of Prussia...[A] masterpiece in which charming anecdotes and serious intellectual analyses mix comfortably with political and military history and descriptions of cultural and social phenomena...Clark's book seldom becomes dull, owing to the elegance of its style and the colorfulness of some of its powerful characters. (Istvan Deak *New Republic* 2008-03-12)

Review

Chris Clark's new history of Prussia trumps all existing accounts. It commands four centuries of complicated history with extraordinary assurance. Its clear and confident argumentation, illuminating concreteness of detail, and sheer richness of texture make it the ideal general history. (Geoff Eley, author of *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society*)

About the Author

Christopher Clark is Senior Lecturer in Modern European History at St. Catharine's College, University of Cambridge. He is the author of *Politics of Conversion: Missionary Protestantism and the Jews in Prussia 1728–1941* and *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, and the coeditor of *Culture Wars: Catholic-Secular Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe*.

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