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CAN. \$29.00

Penguin History

Title lettering: Fredrick Marns  
Front cover photograph: G. Hasefeld/Deutsches  
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ISBN 978-0-140-29334-0

9 780140 293340

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# IRON KINGDOM

*The*

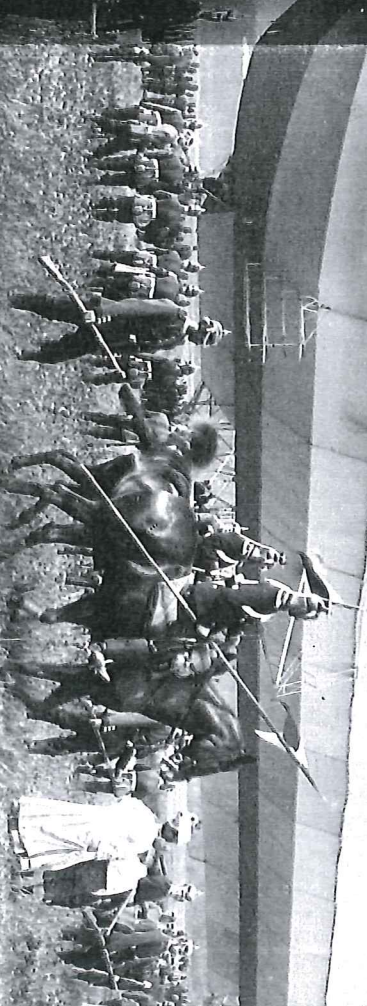
RISE and DOWNFALL

*of*

PRUSSIA 1600-1947

WINNER OF THE WOLFSON PRIZE FOR HISTORY

CHRISTOPHER CLARK





the Great's pre-empive strike of 1756 was refashioned into a 'German, even Pan-German' feat of arms.<sup>118</sup>

There was nothing especially novel about this conflation of the Prussian with the German past – the century since the Napoleonic Wars had witnessed the gradual nationalization of Prussia's most prestigious territorial symbols, from the Iron Cross to Frederick the Great and Queen Luise. Seen from this perspective, the history of Brandenburg Prussia was merely an episode in a grander German story, whose early chapters recalled the antique cadences of the Song of the Nibelungs and the twisted oaks of the Teutoburg forest, where Hermann the Cheruskian had once defeated the armies of Rome. It is a telling detail that the first German victory in the east, the envelopment and destruction of the Russian 2nd Army on 26–31 August, was not named after one of the obscure East Prussian locales – Grünfließ, Omuleföfen, Kucken – around which it actually took place but after Tannenberg, some thirty kilometres away to the west. The name was deliberately chosen in order to represent the battle as Germany's answer to the defeat inflicted by the Polish and Lithuanian armies on the knights of the Teutonic Order at the 'first' battle of Tannenberg in 1410, an event that predated the existence of the Prussian kingdom and called to mind the era of medieval eastern Germanic colonization.

Far from consolidating a distinctive Prussian state identity, the experience of war had a corrosive effect, accentuating the primacy of the German national struggle, while at the same time exacerbating anti-Prussian sentiments in the most recently annexed provinces. The warful trans-regional authorities and accelerating economic integration. It also heightened awareness of the nation as a community of solidarity by creating new relationships of interdependence: the damage and dislocation inflicted on East Prussia, for example, during the brief Russian occupation prompted a massive wave of charitable donations from across the Empire. Billeting, military service and the growth in nationally organized forms of relief and social provision all helped to deepen identification with the imagined community of all Germans. Even in Masuria, where attachments to the Hohenzollern state had traditionally been strong, 'the last traces of the pre-national Prussian identity fell prey to an all-German patriotism.'<sup>119</sup>

On the other hand, the war stimulated regionalist resentments, even among serving troops. The monitoring of letters from front-line soldiers revealed that denigration of 'the Prussians' was common among Rhinish, Hanoverian, Hessian and even Silesian troop units. The same applied to an even greater degree to Bavarian troops – their despair at the duration and course of the war found expression in frequent outbursts of rage against the Prussians, whose arrogance and 'megalomania' were supposedly prolonging the war. A Bavarian police observer summarized the attitude of Bavarian soldiers returning from the front on leave: 'After the war, we'll talk French, but better French than Prussian, we're sick and tired of that...' Other reports from 1917 warned of intensified 'hatred of Prussia' within the civilian population of the south.<sup>120</sup>

The most important Prussian legacy to wartime Germany was constitutional in character. The problem of the German military constitution became even more acute after the outbreak of war. On the day of mobilization, the Prussian Law of Siege of 4 June 1851 came into effect for the entire Empire. Under this antique statute, the twenty-four army corps districts were placed under the authority of their respective deputy commanding generals, who were invested with near-dictatorial powers. The parallelism of civilian and military chains of command that had sown tension in Alsace-Lorraine before 1914 and delivered such mayhem in South-West Africa was now extended to the Empire as a whole. The results were inefficiency, wastage and disorder as the 'twenty-odd shadow governments' fought it out with the civil administrations across Germany (except in Bavaria, where the district commands were subject to the authority of the Bavarian ministry of war).<sup>121</sup>

At the apex of the German state, too, the military leadership exploited the Prussian defects in the system to usurp the powers of the civilian administration. The key figures behind the challenge were two archetypal products of the Prussian military establishment: Paul von Hindenburg und Beneckendorff (born in 1847) hailed from a Junker officer family in the province of Posen and had attended the cadet schools at Wahlstatt and Berlin. Erich Ludendorff (born in 1865) was the son of an estate owner in the same province who had been trained in the Royal Prussian *Cadetten-Haus* at Plön, Holstein and the cadet school at Gross-Lichterfelde near Berlin. Ludendorff was a jumpy, nervous workaholic prone to violent mood swings. Hindenburg, by contrast,



was a towering, charismatic figure with bristling moustaches and an almost rectangular head, he radiated calm and confidence at all times. Ludendorff was the more brilliant tactician and strategist, but Hindenburg was the more gifted communicator. It was a supremely effective wartime partnership.<sup>122</sup> Hindenburg had already retired from the army at the age of sixty-four in 1911, but he was recalled when war broke out and sent to East Prussia to command the German 8th Army against the Russians. After a brief period of service in Belgium, Ludendorff was sent to East Prussia to work with Hindenburg as his chief of staff. After two major victories over the Russian 2nd and 1st Armies at the battles of Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes (26–30 August and 6–15 September 1914), Hindenburg was appointed supreme commander of German troops on the eastern front.

By the winter of 1914, a rift had opened within the German military command. Erich von Falkenhayn, Chief of the General Staff and a favourite of the Emperor, argued that the key to ultimate success lay on the western front and was determined to commit the bulk of German resources to that sector. By contrast, Hindenburg and Ludendorff, emboldened by the scale of their success against the Russians, believed that the key to a German victory lay in the complete destruction of the Russian forces in the east. On 11 January 1915, Hindenburg – in a move unprecedented in the history of the Prussian army – threatened to resign unless Falkenhayn were dismissed. The resignation was refused and Falkenhayn remained in post, but the two eastern commanders gradually undermined his authority, pressuring William II into allowing a restructuring of the eastern command that substantially diminished the position of the staff chief. In the summer of 1916, William finally bowed to the inevitable, dismissed Falkenhayn, and appointed Hindenburg Chief of the General Staff, with Ludendorff as his quartermaster general.

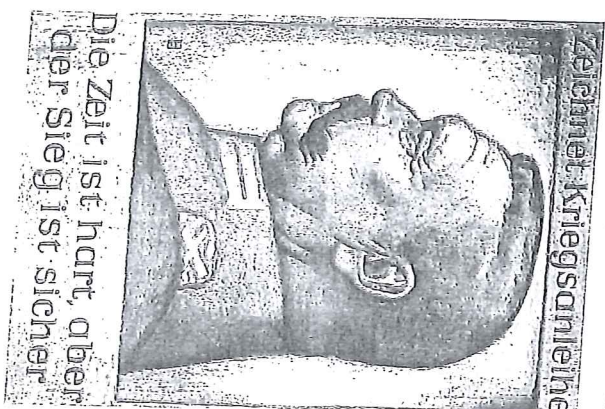
There was a popular dimension to this ascendancy of the military leadership. A cult unfolded around the thick-set general: his likeness, with the unmistakable rectangular head, was endlessly reproduced and exhibited in public spaces. 'Hindenburg statues', wooden colossi erected in town squares and studded with devotional nails purchased with donations to the Red Cross, sprang up across Germany. Hindenburg seemed to answer the longing felt in some quarters during the war for a Führer whose authority and power over friend and foe alike would be absolute and undiluted. In the words of one prominent industrialist,

what Germany needed in her darkest hour was 'the strong man, who alone can save us from the abyss'.<sup>123</sup> That neither William II nor Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg qualified for this role went without saying. Having acquired the most powerful military post in the Empire by means of blackmail and insubordination, Hindenburg and Ludendorff now proceeded to undermine the authority of the civil leadership. One by one, they forced the Kaiser to dismiss ministers and senior aides who appeared antipathetic to their objectives. Early in July 1917, when they learned that the chancellor was in the process of preparing a franchise reform for Prussia, the two men travelled by train to Berlin to demand Bethmann Hollweg's dismissal. At first the Emperor held firm: Bethmann remained in office and the Prussian franchise reforms were duly announced on 11 July. On the following day, in yet another spasm of insubordination, Hindenburg and Ludendorff telephoned their resignations to Berlin, insisting that they could no longer work with the chancellor. To save the Kaiser further agonizing, Bethmann resigned two days later. His departure marked a fundamental break in the political history of the Empire. Henceforth, the Emperor was largely at the mercy of the 'Siamese twins'. The military command intervened extensively in civilian life, introducing new labour regulations and mobilizing the economy for total warfare. Germany remained under what was effectively a military dictatorship until the last days of the war.

## A KING DEPARTS, THE STATE REMAINS

The last days of the Prussian monarchy were attended by bathos rather than tragedy. William II had been shielded by his entourage from the worst news about the collapse of the German offensive of 1918. He was all the more shocked to learn from Ludendorff himself on 29 September that defeat was inevitable and imminent. William's future as sovereign was now in question. During the last weeks of the war, the issue was increasingly widely discussed, especially after the censorship regulations were relaxed in mid-October. It acquired a heightened immediacy from the wording of the American note to the German government of 14 October, in which President Wilson referred to 'the destruction of





53. 'Buy War Bonds! Times are Hard, but Victory is Certain!' Poster designed by Bruno Paul, 1917.

every arbitrary power anywhere that can [...] disturb the peace of the world', and added ominously that 'the power which has hitherto controlled the German nation is of the sort here described. It is within the choice of the German nation to alter it.'<sup>124</sup> Many Germans inferred from this communication that only wholesale removal of the Prussian-German monarchy would satisfy the Americans. There was a swelling chorus of calls for the Emperor's abdication, and questions arose as to whether the monarch would be safe in the city of Berlin. On 29 October, William left the capital for the general headquarters at Spa. There were people close to him who argued that this was the only way to avoid abdication, and even that his presence at headquarters might revive German morale at the front and thus trigger a reversal of German fortunes.<sup>125</sup> In reality, however, like the fateful flight to Varennes of the captive King Louis XVI, the move to Spa dealt a drastic blow to William's prestige and that of his office.

During the last week of his reign, an atmosphere of unreality permeated the royal-imperial entourage. Far-fetched plans received serious attention, including one proposal that William should redeem the dignity of the throne by sacrificing himself in a suicidal attack on enemy lines.

## MERGED INTO GERMANY

The king spoke of marching back into Berlin at the head of 'his army'. But the military informed him that the army was no longer his to command. He then toyed with the various permutations of abdication – perhaps he could abdicate as Kaiser, but stay on as King of Prussia? But with revolution spreading across the cities of Germany, there was no mileage in this quixotic attempt to disentangle the two offices that had become so hopelessly muddled since the proclamation of the Empire. Political events soon outpaced and pre-empted the anguished deliberations at Spa. At two o'clock on the afternoon of 9 November, just as he was about to sign a statement abdicating the imperial, but not the Prussian throne, news reached the headquarters that the new imperial chancellor, Max von Baden, had already announced the Emperor's abdication of both thrones one hour before, and that government was now in the hands of the Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann. After some hours spent absorbing the impact of this momentous news, William boarded the royal train for Germany without having signed an instrument of abdication (he eventually did so in respect of both thrones on 28 November). When it became clear that a return to Germany was out of the question, the royal train changed course for Holland. Upon hearing that parts of the railway to the border had fallen under the control of 'revolutionaries', the royal party shifted to a small convoy of automobiles. In the early hours of 10 November 1918, William crossed the Dutch border and left his country for ever.

There is – if one takes the long view – something poignant in this sober Dutch conclusion to the story of the Hohenzollern monarchy. Elector John Sigismund's conversion to Calvinism in 1613 had been a homage to the robust political and military culture of the Dutch Republic. It was here that the young Frederick William found a safe refuge during the darkest years of the Thirty Years War, and it was from the Calvinist ruling House of Orange that he chose his wife. In later years, the Great Elector sought to remodel his patrimony in the image of the Republic. The dynastic link between the two houses was periodically renewed, notably in 1767 when William V of Orange married Princess Wilhelmina of Prussia, niece of Frederick the Great and sister of Frederick William II. The close family connection served as a pretext for Prussia's Dutch intervention of 1787, when Frederick William II led a small invasion force into the Netherlands to secure the authority of the House of Orange against the machinations of the French-backed Patriot