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Iron Kingdom: The Rise And Downfall Of Prussia, 1600-1947



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

Christopher Clark begins his survey of Prussian history with the death of his protagonist - the State of Prussia - at the hands of the Allied powers after WW II. He then proceeds to develop the reasons for that destruction. In doing so, he follows Prussia's growth from its swampy Brandenburg heartland to a continental power and threat to world peace. The story of this rise and fall has value for students of strategy and national security, as well as armchair historians interested in modern Europe. Strategists will recognize many facets of their discipline throughout this well-documented book. The Hohenzollerns, Nuremberg burgraves, purchased Brandenburg in 1417 for prestige. Burgrave Frederick paid a king's ransom in gold to become one of seven electors of the Holy Roman Emperor. As electors, the Hohenzollern were influential among the 300-odd sovereigns owing fealty - if not always paying loyalty - to the Habsburg emperor in Vienna. The position - and Hohenzollern ambition - eventually led Prussia to contend with Vienna for leadership of the German nation. Success came in 1871 - and meant the elimination of Prussia as an independent state. Along the way, Prussian rulers developed the tools of state necessary to match their ambition. The Great Elector played the game of diplomacy well, protecting his non-contiguous realm from encroachment by the great powers while strengthening it economically with Protestant immigrants. Frederick William II, the Soldier King, built a formidable army and a bureaucratic and economic structure to support it. His son, Frederick the Great, used that army to boost Prussia into the ranks of great powers. The student of national security will learn how Frederick's successors squandered his gains.

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