

ROBERT M. BERDAHL

The Politics of the Prussian Nobility

*The Development of a Conservative
Ideology, 1770-1848*



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**THE POLITICS
OF THE PRUSSIAN NOBILITY**

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CONSERVATIVE IDEOLOGY

1770-1848

ROBERT M. BERDAHL

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Although I am no longer at the University of Oregon, this book is a product of my years there. Whatever value it may possess is due to the support and stimulation of my colleagues in the history department at Oregon. They even tolerated my involvement in academic administration with good humor and charity. I want to thank above all Tom Brady, Richard M. Brown, Roger Chickering, Alan Kimball, and Stanley Pierson for all that I have learned from them. My secretary, Hazel Jones, not only typed the entire manuscript but also recognized how important it was that I find the time to work on it, so she organized my administrative duties in a way that made that possible. Her help was vital in every way.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AHR</i>	<i>American Historical Review</i>
<i>ALR</i>	<i>Allgemeines Landrecht für die Preussischen Staaten</i> . Hans Hattenhauer, ed., <i>Allgemeines Landrecht für die Preussischen Staaten von 1794</i> (Frankfurt a.M. and Berlin, 1970)
<i>FBPG</i>	<i>Forschungen zur brandenburgischen und preussischen Geschichte</i>
<i>HZ</i>	<i>Historische Zeitschrift</i>
DZA II	Deutsches Zentralarchiv, Abteilung Merseburg
PSK/B-D	Preussische Staatsarchiv zu Königsberg, now located in Dahlem
STAP	Staatsarchiv Potsdam

**THE POLITICS
OF THE PRUSSIAN NOBILITY**

INTRODUCTION

Measured by its capacity to endure, the Prussian nobility was the most successful nobility in the modern history of continental Europe. Throughout the long vicissitudes of its history, it displayed a remarkable ability to adapt to new circumstances in ways that ensured the continuation of its political force. In the seventeenth century, the Electors of Brandenburg-Prussia sought to increase their control over the far-flung territories of the state by limiting the power of the nobility; they disbanded noble assemblies and created a new bureaucracy to carry out their policies. The landowning nobility responded by consolidating its control over the rural population living on its estates. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the new bureaucratic elite and the old landowning nobility had reconciled their differences; the bureaucracy had absorbed many of the values and the ethos of the old nobility, while the sons of the old nobility found careers for themselves within the bureaucracy. The two elites, old and new, merged so that by the end of the eighteenth century the nobility again exercised inordinate power within the Prussian state.¹

Despite the transformation of German society wrought by the growth of cities and industry in the nineteenth century, the nobility continued to dominate political life in Prussia. Even after the creation of the German Empire in 1871, nobles exercised influence in government out of all proportion to their numbers in the society as a whole. Most of the top posts in the government, the diplomatic service, and the army were held by nobles until the collapse of the empire in 1918.² Only in 1945 was the influence of the nobility completely eliminated.

¹ This is the theme of Hans Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy The Prussian Experience, 1660-1815* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958).

² In 1910, of 11 members of the Prussian State Ministry, 9 were noble, as were 11 out of 12 provincial governors (*Oberpräsidenten*), 25 out of 36 chief officials of the govern-

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As a history of the politics of the landowning nobility in Prussia from late eighteenth century until the revolution of 1848, this book is, therefore, the study of a dominant social class. It is the study of how the landowning nobility coped with changes in rural social relations after the emancipation of the serfs in 1807, how it survived the agrarian depression of the 1820s by the development of capitalist agriculture, and how it constructed and refined a formal ideology justifying its continued domination despite these social, economic, and political changes. Throughout the writing of this book, I have tried to bear in mind E. P. Thompson's emphasis that class is "not a thing" but a "historical relationship." In this view, a social class cannot be dissected, measured, and analyzed in and of itself. Rather, class is a relationship or set of relationships that evolves historically; it happens in the social encounter of people engaged in producing the goods they require to live. "Class happens," Thompson writes, "when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born—or enter involuntarily."³

Because a dominant social class evolves only in relation to those whom it dominates, it is necessary to examine the various dimensions of that domination in order to explain class behavior. This book, therefore, proceeds from the assumption that the crucial fact in the experience of the Prussian nobility was its ownership of land and its direct involvement in the management of its landed estates. The noble estate and village provided the context for the encounter between the nobleman and the peasant. The nobleman's experience of domination was immediate and direct, personal and complete. This relationship with the peasantry over several centuries shaped the class consciousness of the nobility, providing the essential experience that defined,

mental districts (*Regierungspräsidenten*), and 271 out of 467 administrators of county government (*Landrate*). In the top ranks of the foreign service in 1914 were 8 princes, 29 counts, 20 barons, 54 ordinary nobles, and only 11 commoners. In the last decades of the empire, the percentage of nobles on the first rungs of the civil service ladder actually increased. See Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Das deutsche Kaiserreich, 1871–1918*, 5th ed. (Göttingen, 1983), 76. See also Nikolaus von Preradovich, *Die Führungsschichten in Oesterreich und Preussen, 1804–1918* (Wiesbaden, 1955), Lysbeth W. Muncy, *The Junker in Prussian Administration under William II, 1899–1914* (Providence, R.I., 1944), Lamar Cecil, "The Creation of Nobles in Prussia, 1871–1918," *AHR* 75 (1970) 757–95, Arno J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime* (New York, 1981), 181.

³ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Vintage ed. (New York, 1966), 9.

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for the nobility, the meaning of authority and thereby the nature of the state. Because the experience of domination was personal and immediate, it had to be justified in terms that were personal and private, in this case through an ideology that can best be described as paternalistic. Patrimonial rule, sanctified by the images of paternalistic concern, became the hallmark of the nobility's accepted mode of domination of the peasantry down to the end of the eighteenth century.

Pierre Bourdieu, who analyzed the form of domination characteristic of precapitalist societies, maintains that they require both "overt violence" (direct physical and economic violence) and "symbolic violence" ("euphemized," unrecognized violence) in order to maintain and reproduce their social relations. He writes the following:

There is an intelligible relation—not a contradiction—between these two forms of violence, which coexist in the same social formation and sometimes in the same relationship: when domination can only be exercised in its elementary form, i.e., directly, between one person and another, it cannot take place overtly and must be disguised under the veil of enchanted relationships, the official model of which is presented by relations between kinsmen; in order to be socially recognized it must get itself misrecognized. The reason for the pre-capitalist economy's great need for symbolic violence is that the only way in which relations of domination can be set up, maintained, or restored, is through strategies which, being expressly oriented towards the establishment of relations of personal dependence, must be disguised and transfigured lest they destroy themselves by revealing their true nature; in a word, they must be *euphemized*. . . . Because the pre-capitalist economy cannot count on the implacable, hidden violence of objective mechanisms, it resorts *simultaneously* to forms of domination which may strike the modern observer as more brutal, more primitive, more barbarous, or at the same time, as gentler, more humane, more respectful of persons.⁴

The central thesis of this book is that the Prussian nobility traditionally justified, or "euphemized," its domination of the peasantry by means of an ideology of paternalism, that this paternalistic model of social relations began to dissolve under the capitalistic transformation of agriculture at the end of the eighteenth century, and that the conservative politics of the nobility during the first half of the nineteenth century were determined by an effort to reestablish the lineaments of patrimonial rule and a paternalist ideology. The ideology of paternal-

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans R. Nice (Cambridge, 1977), 191

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ism contained the core assumption shared by the nobility about the nature of authority: that the family was the essential model of society, with all authority patterned after the stern but caring father. This meant that the essential relationships of superordination and subordination in society were private relationships, that is, relationships that were, like those of the family, personal and individual.

Put another way, it can be said that what Bourdieu calls the "symbolic violence" masking the nature of domination in precapitalist society became less necessary as capitalist relationships developed, for in a capitalist society social relationships were determined, reinforced, and reproduced by the force of the market. The "self-regulating market," to use Polanyi's phrase, created the objective mechanism for social domination; by depersonalizing the system of social relations, it rendered a euphemism based on notions of personal dependency, such as paternalism, both less necessary and less workable. The need for serfdom, both as a means of material production and as a means of social domination, began to disappear with the conditions that made possible and necessary the paternalist ideology justifying it. Reliance on the discipline of the market alone, however, threatened the traditional authority exercised by the nobility; as a result, the conservatism espoused by the nobility attempted to recreate the basis for personal authority at the same time that it initially criticized the emergent market society. The nobility was caught in the contradiction of participating in the advance of capitalist agriculture while trying to maintain a formal ideology that would retain precapitalist forms of domination. This contradiction was overcome only as conservatism gradually accommodated itself to the changed political and economic climate in the 1840s.

The argument here differs from other discussions of the origins of conservatism in Germany. In his fine essay on conservative thought, Karl Mannheim distinguished between "traditionalism" and "conservatism."⁵ Traditionalism, he maintained, is subjective; it is the natural, instinctive inclination to do things as they have always been done or to view things as they have always been viewed. Conservatism, on the other hand, is "conscious and reflective"; it is the decision to retain the old when given a choice of the new. "Conservative action," Mannheim wrote, "is always dependent on a *concrete set of circumstances*." My argument resembles Mannheim's in one important respect: it insists that conservatism is the elevation of traditional patterns of authority to a

⁵ Karl Mannheim, "Conservative Thought," in Kurt Wolff, ed., *From Karl Mannheim* (New York, 1971), 153, 157.

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conscious and formal level of articulation. Conservatism is the conscious effort to "naturalize," that is, to render traditional once again, existing or previous structures of authority. This is one of the reasons the metaphors used by conservatives are frequently organic, drawn from nature. My argument differs from Mannheim's in that I maintain that the "concrete set of circumstances" generating conscious conservative thought is specific to the experience of domination practiced and rationalized by the actions of the dominant class, in this case, by the nobles on their estates. Conservative political action in Prussia was an effort to retain a specific system of authoritative relations I have summarized with the term *paternalism*. In Mannheim's view, the "concrete set of circumstances" giving rise to conservative thought were broad "styles of thought" and "historical movements" such as the Romantic reaction to the rationalism of the eighteenth century. I have tried throughout this book to avoid the use of broad categories such as Romanticism, for I believe conservatism must be understood, in its fundamentals, as a political ideology defending the specific authority and class interest of the nobility.

Klaus Epstein's imposing study, *The Genesis of German Conservatism*, offers the most comprehensive examination of the eighteenth-century roots of conservative thought; had Epstein lived to complete the second volume of his study, there might not have been a place for my book.⁶ Nevertheless, my approach differs substantially from that taken by Epstein. His study is largely an intellectual history; it views conservative thought fundamentally as a response to the German Enlightenment. Even his treatment of political and social controversies in the 1790s operates largely at the level of intellectual discussion. Moreover, Epstein delineated three types of conservatives: "Status Quo Conservatives, Reform Conservatives, and Reactionaries." He then placed particular conservative thinkers somewhere along this spectrum. This is a common method for dealing with conservatism. Ernst R. Huber distinguished four types of conservatives in nineteenth-century Germany: *standisch* conservatives, social conservatives, national conservatives, and state conservatives. He stressed that the boundaries between these groups were fluid and that they frequently overlapped.⁷ Sigmund Neumann found three other types—romantic conservatives, liberal conservatives, and realistic conservatives—each of which corresponded roughly to a period of Prussian history in the nineteenth century.⁸

⁶ Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton, 1966)

⁷ Ernst R. Huber, *Deutsche Verfassungsgeschichte seit 1789* (Stuttgart, 1960), 2 331ff

⁸ Sigmund Neumann, *Die Stufen des preussischen Konservatismus Ein Beitrag zum Staats-*

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I have not found the use of such categories very helpful. The typologies employed frequently seem to be the product of heterogeneous criteria; little is delineated because the types usually overlap. One could construct an endless number of categories. In addition, because these definitions are "ideal types" constructed by the historian, to be measured by their deviation from some concept of the "real," the historian tends to impart substantive reality to the types themselves. Rather like a police portrait artist, the historian draws a composite portrait of a particular type, then searches for examples of the portrait in reality, assuming that the type itself explains the essence of the real object of study. It seems more useful to me to try to understand ideology as the result of the constant dialectical process between specific economic and social changes in which the nobility found itself enmeshed, on the one side, and the political situation in Prussia, on the other. I have tried to tie the development of conservatism closely to the social and political history of Prussia between 1815 and 1848. From that perspective, I hope this book contributes not only to our understanding of the history of Prussia but also to the analysis of the genesis of ideology.⁹

The reader should bear in mind several additional points. First, the analysis does not try to deal with all aspects of the nobility in the period prior to 1848. It does not, for example, deal with the army, and it discusses only incidentally the role of the nobility in the bureaucracy, in part because good studies of the army and the bureaucracy already exist. But more important, I maintain that the formative experience of the nobility was ownership of land.¹⁰ We shall be concerned with the people who exercised traditional domination, *Herrschaft*, and whose exercise of that *Herrschaft* shaped the predominant attitude of their class about the nature of authority. This is not to suggest that the

und Gesellschaftsbild Deutschland im 19. Jahrhundert (Berlin, 1930) For a recent treatment of conservatism in Germany and a good survey of the literature, see Martin Greiffenhagen, *Das Dilemma des Konservatismus in Deutschland* (Munich, 1971)

⁹ My approach owes much to Hans Rosenberg, "Die Pseudodemokratisierung der Rittergutsbesitzerklasse," in his *Machteliten und Wirtschaftskonjunkturen*, *Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft*, 31 (Göttingen, 1978), 83-101

¹⁰ Reinhart Koselleck's magisterial work, *Preussen zwischen Reform und Revolution* (Stuttgart, 1967), deals with much more than the bureaucracy, but it offers the best analysis of the Prussian bureaucracy in the period between 1815 and 1848. Koselleck's study is important to any work dealing with Prussian history during this period. John R. Gillis, *The Prussian Bureaucracy in Crisis, 1840-1860* (Stanford, 1971), begins with 1840, but he includes background material on the bureaucracy in the earlier period. On the army, see Gordon Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army* (New York, 1955), and Karl Demeter, *The German Officer Corps in Society and State, 1650-1945* (New York, 1965)

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Prussian nobility was, more than any other dominant class, completely homogeneous. Differences of view existed within it, and there were nobles who did not own or live on their estates. But those differences of view revolved not around whether the superior position of the nobility should be maintained, but around which strategies would best preserve its superiority. Some recognized earlier than others that patrimonial rule, with its euphemism *paternalism*, could not be sustained in the changing economic and political environment of the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s.

Second, it should be remembered that the history of the nobility and its experience of domination differed in the various eastern provinces of Prussia. Resistance to change was strongest among the nobility in the older provinces of Brandenburg and Pomerania. Agricultural modernization progressed more slowly in these provinces, and the nobility made a persistent effort to retain paternalistic images of its authority. In the seventeenth century the nobility of East Prussia had engaged in the most protracted fight against the centralized power of the prince; during the reform era after 1807, it guarded jealously its privileges and autonomy. But the social and economic development in East Prussia also differed from that in the other provinces. East Prussia had traditionally the largest class of freeholding peasants (*Kölmer*) in the monarchy; it was the most closely tied to the export of grain, especially to England, so the nobility developed early a strong orientation toward the market; because it was more dependent than the other provinces on the English market, East Prussia suffered most in the depression of the 1820s, when England enacted the Corn Laws, and the East Prussian nobility correspondingly became the strongest advocates of freedom of trade. Silesia had yet a different background and social complexion. Detached from Austria by Prussia in 1740, Silesia was Catholic; it possessed some of the richest and highest-ranking nobles in the entire Prussian state. The peasantry in Silesia, especially in the Polish-speaking regions of the province, was probably the most impoverished and brutalized in the state; peasant unrest occurred more frequently in Silesia than elsewhere in Prussia. In some regions of Silesia, cottage industry, especially linen weaving, provided the basis for the meager livelihood of the rural poor; the poverty of these weavers deepened in the nineteenth century as English cotton began to displace the demand for linen. All of these variations in development contributed to the political differences among the Prussian nobility. After 1815, the Prussian acquisition of the Rhineland introduced an entirely new dimension to the politics of Prussia, for the nobility of the Rhineland had never exercised the kind of control over the peasantry

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enjoyed by the eastern nobility, and the Rhineland became, in the nineteenth century, a center for Prussian commercial and industrial development.

Third, as the book proceeds, I concentrate increasingly on the political arena. The first three chapters deal with the social conditions surrounding noble domination on estates and the changes in social relations that began to develop in the late eighteenth century. Chapter 4 deals with the politics of the reform era, but primarily as the reforms changed, or threatened to change, the social position of the nobility on the land. With the reconquest of the government in the 1820s, both at the central and at the local level, described in chapter 6, the struggle for the preservation of noble authority moved into the political sphere. Chapter 8 returns to a discussion of the economic and social developments from the 1820s to the 1840s: then chapter 9 offers a detailed study of Prussian political conflicts and the efforts to preserve the nobility between the ascension of Frederick William IV to the throne in 1840 and the outbreak of the revolution of 1848. Chapters 5, 7, and 10 endeavor to illustrate the changing texture of conservative ideology as the nobility encountered economic, social, and political changes throughout the period. This shift of emphasis from the social to the political domain is also a reflection of the growing political consciousness and contestation in Prussia in the era before 1848. This study ends on the eve of the revolution of 1848. The revolution did not by any means end the dominant social and political role of the nobility; but, by introducing a constitution, a parliament, and political parties, it transformed the entire framework for the nobility's defense of its interests.

Finally, throughout the book, two German terms recur, *Herrschaft* and *Stand*. Although I hope that their meanings will become clear to the reader as the terms are elaborated in the text, some definition and clarification at the beginning may be helpful. *Herrschaft* is usually translated into English as "domination," and it has been used in this way here.¹¹ But the word *domination* does not convey the full range of meaning that is attached to the term. *Herrschaft* is more accurately translated as "dominium," although we also need to remind ourselves of the full meaning of that word. *Dominium* derives from the same Latin root as *dominare* (to rule), but it also shares a common origin with *domus* (house) and *dominus* (lord). *Herrschaft* means lordship, and al-

¹¹ See the article "Herrschaft" in Otto Brunner et al., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* (Stuttgart, 1972), 3: 1-102. My own understanding of *Herrschaft* was enhanced by conversations with David Sabeian and by his book *Power in the Blood* (Cambridge, 1984), 20-27.

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though, unlike its Latin equivalent, it is not related to the German word for house, the exercise of *Herrschaft* was always dependent on the ownership of a house on the land and the rule of a household. Otto Brunner stressed this aspect of *Herrschaft*: "Whoever had no house, but merely possessed individual pieces of land settled by persons paying rent, possessed no *Herrschaft*, no noble estate, but only 'estate revenues' " (*Gulten*).¹² *Herrschaft* was not an abstract authority but was always associated with a specific person who exercised lordship in a particular domain—a village lord (*Dorfherr*), the lord of an estate (*Gutsherr*), or the lord of the land (*Landesherr*). *Herrschaft* also contained the connotation of mutual obligations between lord and subjects. Those subject to *Herrschaft* were obliged to serve their lord obediently, while those exercising *Herrschaft* were obliged to provide their subjects with "protection and shelter" (*Schutz und Schirm*) and "advice and help" (*Rat und Hilfe*). Brunner cites the thirteenth-century southern German law book, the *Schwabenspiegel*, as reflecting the reciprocal responsibilities between the lord and his subjects: "We shall serve under the lord who protects us. If he does not protect us, we are no longer legally obligated to serve him."¹³ In its close association with the household headed by a *Hausvater* who ruled over his wife, children, and servants, and in its assumption of the mutuality of obligations, the concept of *Herrschaft* was closely linked with the ideology of paternalism.

From the late eighteenth century, the concept of *Herrschaft* was gradually emptied of its personal component, so that one spoke of the *Herrschaft* of the law or used the term for authority with fewer feudal overtones, *Obrigkeit*. The nobility strenuously resisted efforts to depersonalize the nature of authority or to render it more abstract, for the power of the nobility was based on the tradition of individualized, private, and personal control. Noble critics attacked the Prussian General Law Code of 1794 for referring to the king with the impersonal phrase "chief of state" (*Oberhaupt des Staats*). Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century conservative ideologists in Prussia struggled to retain the personal dimension of *Herrschaft*.

Stand, *Stande*, and *standisch* institutions and society are terms with no English equivalents, so I will use them in this study without translation.¹⁴ The term *Stand* was the primary means of social differentiation

¹² Otto Brunner, *Land und Herrschaft*, 5th ed. (Vienna, 1965), 255

¹³ *Ibid.*, 263

¹⁴ For an extended version of this discussion of *Stand*, see Robert M. Berdahl, "Anthropologie und Geschichte Einige theoretische Perspektiven und ein Beispiel aus der preus-

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in early modern Germany. The traditional triad of *Stände*—the nobles, peasants, and townspeople—remained the legal distinctions well into the modern period, repeated in the Prussian General Law Code of 1794. The term *Stand*, derived from the verb *stehen* (to stand), is used to describe a person's condition, as in *Zustand*, or marital status, as in *Familienstand*. The English phrase "status group" is not a good translation, for *Stand* lacks the notion of accessibility and relative social mobility usually associated with status groups; on the other hand, it implies more flexibility than caste. *Stand* suggests a kind of stasis, a relatively fixed and durable social order that was reinforced with such aphorisms as, "When each remains in his own *Stand*, all is well throughout the land." Or, "When each remains in his own *Stand*, all is ordered by God's own hand."¹⁵

Although sometimes it has been used to mean class, as when *Mittelstand* has been used to refer to the middle class, the concept of *Stand* is not the same as class.¹⁶ Max Weber distinguished between the two by suggesting that class is based on a cohesion of economic interests, whereas *Stand* is based on social privilege, a distinct style of life, and a certain notion of honor. Although Weber sometimes seems to suggest that "class society" supplanted "ständisch society" in the nineteenth century, the two concepts are not mutually exclusive categories; both can coexist in the same society.¹⁷ The fact that class seemed to become the predominant category for social differentiation in the nineteenth century does not mean that classes did not exist before; rather, the cultural veil provided by the notion of *Stand* could not be stretched to cover the economic interests of classes in a society in which social relationships were increasingly determined by the market. Although *class* and *Stand* are not synonymous, social classes were the soil in which the *Stände* originally took root. The *Stände*, which appeared all over Europe from the Middle Ages onward and which everywhere shared in the structure of domination, emerged from elements that

sisch-deutschen Geschichte," in Berdahl et al., *Klassen und Kultur Sozialanthropologische Perspektiven in der Geschichtsschreibung* (Frankfurt a M., 1982), 263–87

¹⁵ For some of the aphorisms related to *Stand*, see K. F. Wander, ed., *Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon* (Leipzig, 1876). A number of these kinds of expressions were contained in the primers used for schoolchildren. See Friedrich Eberhard von Rochow, *Der Kinderfreund Ein Lesebuch zum Gebrauch in Landschulen* (Brandenburg and Leipzig, 1776), in F. Jonas and F. Wierdecke, eds., *Friedrich Eberhard von Rochows sämtliche pädagogische Schriften* (Berlin, 1907), 1: 186.

¹⁶ On the discussion of the relationship between *class* and *Stand*, see Thomas A. Brady, Jr., *Ruling Class, Regime, and Reformation in Strassbourg, 1520–1525* (Leiden, 1978).

¹⁷ Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, ed. J. Winckelmann, 4th ed. (Tübingen, 1956), 1: 177–80, 285–314, 2: 531–40.

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controlled the productive forces of society—the church, the nobility, and the urban patriciate. The concept of Stand, from the outset, was tied closely to the system of Herrschaft.

The Stände emerged in a period when the institutions of Herrschaft were relatively undifferentiated. The distinction between state and society, characteristic of the modern era, did not exist. The Stände were not arrayed against the prince, “representing” the people before the institutions of the state. They were organized institutionally insofar as they shared in the rule; they represented, in real and symbolic terms, the structure of authority before the people. As Otto Brunner put it, “The Stände do not ‘represent’ the land, rather, they ‘are’ the land.”¹⁸ Thus, a ständisch assembly offered a public presentation of a Herrschaft that was in fact based on private relationships. In this situation, the “public” exercise of authority was fused with the “private.” This more or less complete fusion of course did not last beyond the seventeenth century, when the institutions of the modern state began to emerge. But the Herrschaft of the nobility continued to be a mixture of public and private authority, justified by the metaphor of paternalism, until the nineteenth century. During this period, the concept of Stand became an essential element in the cultural system; it provided a meaningful structure, elaborated in a network of symbols, through which one perceived and ordered one’s social world. It projected a hierarchical structure of society that was shaped by the social interest of the dominant classes and thus served to mediate and legitimize social and political domination.

These were the objectives of the politics of the Prussian nobility: to preserve the private and personal dimensions of Herrschaft, to preserve the hierarchical structure of society articulated in the symbols of the Stände, and to adapt to the changing economic circumstances and opportunities without at the same time losing the basis for cultural and political hegemony.

¹⁸ Brunner, *Land und Herrschaft*, 423.

NOBLE AND PEASANT: THE CONTOURS OF SOCIAL CLASS

THE NOBILITY

The Prussian nobility, which played so prominent a role in modern German history, was a landowning class. More than for any other aristocracy in Europe, the ownership and management of landed estates formed the core of its ethos. Its power as a class rested, to be sure, not only on its control of the land, but also on its domination of the important institutions of the Prussian state, especially the army and the bureaucracy. Nevertheless, throughout its long history, the Prussian aristocracy remained a landowning class, taking its identity, self-perceptions, habits of authority, and style of domination from its experiences as owner of noble estates. The sons of nobles went off to careers in the army and the civil service, but it was always assumed that, after the interlude of a few successful years, most would return to the family estates to live the remainder of their lives as squires. Even those nobles who attained the highest pinnacle of power within the state frequently continued to concern themselves with the minute details of the operation of their estates.¹ Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the preservation of the nobility's monopoly of landed estates was a cardinal principle of Hohenzollern policy in Prussia; for decades after that monopoly had been broken, the government worked to maintain a "gentry" class of large landowners considered to be the social foundation of the monarchy.² Indeed, it is no exaggeration to suggest that the attitudes and patterns of social relations that matured historically within the framework of the noble estate became the most important ingredient in what came to be called the Prussian spirit.

The Prussian aristocracy was, on the whole, neither splendid nor rich. It did not routinely send its sons on a grand tour of Europe to

¹ Otto von Bismarck, for example, who possessed a voracious appetite for land, was never too busy with official business to pay careful attention to the affairs of his estates, he often retreated for long periods from Berlin to his Pomeranian estate and referred to himself as "the country squire of Varzin." See Fritz Stern, *Gold and Iron: Bismarck, Bleichroder, and the Building of the German Empire* (New York, 1977), 97, 101-3, 290-91.

² See chapter 9.

broaden their education and gain a veneer of European culture; in fact, the Hohenzollerns discouraged young Prussian nobles from traveling abroad.³ It was better to send young noblemen to the cadet schools, where they were taught the habits of command that would serve them in the army and on their estates. Each province boasted a few noble families that were wealthy and controlled vast complexes of estates. Upper Silesia had perhaps the largest concentration of magnates—dukes, princes, and counts who owned more than 882,000 acres of land. The Prince of Pless, for example, owned more than 94,500 acres, whereas one branch of the Henckel-Donnersmarck family had almost one-third that amount.⁴ In Brandenburg, the estates of the Arnim-Boitzenburg complex totaled 81,900 acres; the Bredows owned 50,400.⁵ In East Prussia, the Dohnas, Finckensteins, and Schliebens held huge networks of estates. Many of these families lived in a grand style, built large and elegant manor houses, had ready access to the king, and occupied positions of influence and honor in the state generation after generation. But they were the exception. Amidst their lands were 420 noble estates whose total area was only 280,350 acres, an average of 667.5 acres.⁶ Throughout the monarchy, estates of 945 acres to 1,575 acres were most common; few exceeded 5,000. Some regions were overpopulated with nobles whose estates were little more than peasant homesteads. In South and New East Prussia—territories taken from Poland in the eighteenth century—the nobility impoverished itself through a policy of partible inheritance; in the nineteenth century, it became necessary to forbid the partitioning of any noble estate to less than 94.5 acres.⁷ A similar situation prevailed in Hither Pomerania, where a traveler reported late in the eighteenth century that “there are villages which are almost entirely composed of noble persons. Their noble estates [*Rittergüter*] are really peasant and

³ In his *Political Testament* of 1722, Frederick William I wrote the following “My successor must also grant only to very few of them permits to travel abroad, for first they must stand in your service” G. F. Schmoller, *Das Politische Testament Friedrich Wilhelm des Ersten, 1722* (Berlin, 1896). A translated excerpt is found in C. A. Macartney, *The Habsburg and Hohenzollern Dynasties* (New York, 1970), 310–22.

⁴ Georg F. Knapp, *Die Bauernbefreiung und der Ursprung der Landarbeiter in altern Teilen Preussens*, 2 vols (Leipzig, 1887), 1: 3; Helmut Bleiber, *Zwischen Reform und Revolution. Lage und Kämpfe der schlesischen Bauern und Landarbeiter im Vormärz, 1840–1847* (Berlin, 1966), 84.

⁵ For the holdings of the nobility in the Mark Brandenburg, see Heinrich Berghaus, *Landbuch der Mark Brandenburg und des Markgrathums Nieder-Lausitz* (Berlin, 1854–1856), 3 vols. The holdings of the Arnims and the Bredows are detailed in vol. 2, 327ff.

⁶ Bleiber, *Zwischen Reform und Revolution*, 84.

⁷ Freiherrn L. von Zedlitz-Neukirch, *Neues Preussisches Adels-Lexikon* (Leipzig, 1836), 1: 14–18.

half-peasant farms [*Kossätengüter*]. Their customs and style of life are not very different from those of the lower orders.”⁸

The older families among this Junker aristocracy descended from a socially and ethnically heterogeneous group that settled the colonized lands east of the Elbe River during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁹ As the term *Junker* indicates, some were descended from the “young noblemen” (*junk-herre*, *junc-herre*), the younger sons of nobles from western Germany who had migrated to the new lands of the east, and others from the native Baltic and Slavic landholders who had inhabited the area and had married among the German settlers; in the areas that became Brandenburg, they had been largely Germanized by the fourteenth century. The forebears of other Junkers were the *locatores*, the land developers, usually of peasant or burgher stock, who had engineered the migration of peasants to the colonized areas, acquired large estates, and gradually blended with the other landowning nobility. Still others were the heirs of military adventurers, the soldiers of fortune who had acquired their estates in exchange for military service. This motley assortment of landholders and petty tyrants originally displayed none of the class cohesion for which their modern descendants became famous; in the turmoil and disorder characteristic of a frontier region, they robbed and feuded with one another, some becoming powerful magnates by crushing the less fortunate squires around them one day only to fall victim to acts of treachery the next.

The emergence of Junker domination in northeastern Germany resulted from a complex process extending from the mid-fifteenth through the sixteenth centuries.¹⁰ During this period, the internal strife and the frequent feuds that characterized their earlier history

⁸ [Johann Heinrich Ulrich?] *Bemerkungen eines Reisenden durch die königlichen preussischen Staaten in Briefen* (Altenburg, 1779), 5 289

⁹ On this general theme, see F. L. Carsten, *The Origins of Prussia* (Oxford, 1954), 89ff., idem, “The Origins of the Junkers,” *English Historical Review* 62 (1947) 145–78, Otto Hintze, *Die Hohenzollern und ihr Werk* (Berlin, 1915), Hans Rosenberg, “The Rise of the Junkers in Brandenburg-Prussia, 1410–1653,” *AHR* 49, nos. 1, 2 (1943–1944) 1–22, 228–42. Rosenberg has completely reworked this earlier essay, not only introducing the findings of recent literature, but posing new questions that reveal his remarkable capacity for growth as a social historian over the thirty-five years that separate the two articles. See “Die Ausprägung der Junkerherrschaft in Brandenburg-Preussen, 1410–1618,” in his *Machteliten und Wirtschaftskonjunktoren*, 24–82. Gustav Aubin, *Zur Geschichte des gutsherrlich-bauerlichen Verhältnisses in Ostpreussen* (Leipzig, 1910). Walter Gorlitz’s *Die Junker* (Limburg, 1964) contains some interesting material but is primarily a popular account and too partial to the Junkers.

¹⁰ For the basis of Junker hegemony in Brandenburg and Prussia during the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, see Rosenberg, “Die Ausprägung der Junkerherrschaft,” 52–59.

declined and the hostility and fear that existed between the powerful "castle-residing" high nobility and the lesser squires abated. In the course of the sixteenth century, a sense of collective interest developed among the nobility, especially against the prince and against the towns.

The disintegration of princely authority in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries gave the nobility the opportunity to assert its power. The nobles of Brandenburg and Pomerania carved out for themselves broader legal jurisdictions over the local populations; they purchased from impecunious princes the control of castles, domains, and villages. In Brandenburg, the alienation of crown estates in order to obtain revenues began in the thirteenth century and lasted through the sixteenth century, reaching its high point during the reign of Joachim II between 1535 and 1571. Farther east, in Prussia, which had been settled and ruled by the Knights of the Teutonic Order, central authority disintegrated after the knights were defeated by the Poles in 1410. In 1453, the Prussian nobility was bold enough to defy the Order and support the king of Poland. The subsequent defeat of the Teutonic Order in the Thirteen Years' War ended its power; West Prussia was lost to Poland and Prussia itself was henceforth held by the Order in fief to the king of Poland. The extended period of warfare left the Order financially exhausted, forcing it to alienate much of its land to creditors and opening the way for the nobility to assert its independence.

The Reformation provided the nobility with new leverage over the local populations. The Lutheran teaching of authority and obedience may have aided the princes' power, but it also directly enhanced the position of the local nobles who dominated village life and who now obtained the *Patronatsrecht*, the right to appoint the village pastor. The nobility, and not just the princes, gained as well from the disposition of the church lands after the Protestant conversion of the territories. The dukes of Pomerania had to overcome the opposition of some Protestant Junkers who did not wish to share the acquisition of church property with them. Elsewhere, many of the church lands found their way into the hands of the nobility. In Brandenburg, Joachim II's chronic need for money gave the nobility the opportunity to acquire church estates; of the 654 church estates taken with the introduction of Lutheranism in 1540, 286 were owned by the nobility a decade later.

Finally, the emergent nobility was aided by the decline of the towns. Originally, the east Elbian towns were powerful, prosperous, and relatively independent. Many were allied with the Hanseatic League and able to extract broad concessions from the hapless princes: tax exemp-

tions, toll collections, and the important *advocata*, the right to try criminals, in some cases even nobles, in their own courts.¹¹ With the defeat of the Teutonic Order, the towns began to decline, a diminished population, the debasement of coinage, and the general insecurity of the times plagued these Baltic towns. Thorn and Elbing suffered severely during the Thirteen Years' War, and by 1467 Danzig had lost one-third of its population. In Brandenburg, the more aggressive Hohenzollern Electors began to abrogate urban liberties in the fifteenth century. In 1448, Frederick II forced the twin towns of Berlin and Colln to vow obedience to him, he deprived them of their self-government, and they were subsequently forced out of the Hanse. Similar concessions were wrung out of Salzwedel, Stendal, Frankfurt-on-the-Oder, and Neustadt, all were declared non-Hanseatic cities by 1525, a symptom of their decline. Similarly, the dukes of Pomerania restricted the urban liberties of Stralsund and Stettin, the two most important trading centers on the Pomeranian coast.¹²

The nobles were the prime beneficiaries of the decline of the towns. They had long chafed at the trade monopoly exercised by the town merchants over the export of agricultural produce, their demands for free trade consistently headed the list of grievances they drew against the towns. The Junkers lent their support to the Hohenzollern efforts against the towns. Eventually, they found it possible to sell their products directly to foreign merchants, bypassing the mediation of the local town merchants. The emergence of the Junkers at the expense of the towns and the subsequent isolation, decline, and exclusion of the towns from the political process became one of the major factors determining the nature of east Elbian society.¹³

The growing independence of the Junkers and the decline of the towns coincided with changing patterns of production on the noble estates. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, landlords and developers (*locatores*) had attracted peasants to the lands they were colonizing east of the Elbe by offering them greater independence than they enjoyed in western Germany. Most landlords granted the peasants hereditary tenure to their holdings, fixed their rental obligations, and demanded only a few days' labor service per year. Then, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the landowning nobility began to reverse this pattern and to impose heavier servile obligations on their peasants.¹⁴

¹¹ Carsten, *Origins of Prussia*, 92-100.

¹² *Ibid.*, 136-48.

¹³ Rosenberg, 'Rise of the Junkers', 6, 234-35.

¹⁴ There is an enormous literature devoted to the problem of the development of serf

The economic slump that struck western Europe in the fourteenth century relieved the population pressure that had pushed people toward the more thinly populated east. The flow of peasant settlers stopped. Wars, feuds, plagues, and crop failures also contributed to a population decline in the east until, by the end of the fifteenth century, hundreds of peasant holdings and villages stood deserted. Hans Rosenberg summarized the situation succinctly: "In the fifteenth century, the central economic fact facing the rent-receiving landlord and the managing estate proprietor [*Gutsherr*] was the abundance of land and the scarcity of labor."¹⁵ The Junkers responded to this problem by increasing the labor services of the peasants, binding them to the soil, and turning their own energies toward the management of their estates. Their growing political power facilitated this response. In exchange for the assistance rendered the princes in their struggle against the towns, the nobles gained broader jurisdiction over their estates (*Gerichtsherrschaft*), combining in themselves the authority of police, tax collector, magistrate, and judge.¹⁶

This response of the nobility to its labor shortage was also facilitated by the decline of the towns. In their prime, the towns had provided refuge for peasants who found life on the land too harsh. By the end

dom The best overall guide, in a comparative context, is by Jerome Blum, "The Rise of Serfdom in Eastern Europe," *AHR* 62, no. 4 (1957) 807-36. The earlier interpretation, which tied the rise of demesne farming to the declining military role of the eastern aristocracy, offered by Knapp, in *Bauernbefreiung*, has been largely rejected. F. L. Carsten, in "Origins of the Junkers," also disputes the view made by Rosenberg, in "Rise of the Junkers," 229, that large demesne farming, under a system that later came to be known as *Gutsherrschaft*, "was always there." Carsten's contention is supported by the evidence that there was a steady growth of demesne farming through the fifteenth century, see Siegfried Korth, "Die Entstehung und Entwicklung des Ostdeutschen Grossgrundbesitzes," *Jahrbuch der Albertus-Universität zu Königsberg/Pr* 3 (1953) 166-67. In his later article, Rosenberg draws a sharper distinction between *Gutsherrschaft*, by which he means the social and legal control of the estate and its villages by the noble lord, and *Gutswirtschaft*, with which he refers to the development of estate agriculture directed by the lord through the use of servile labor. The former developed much earlier, in some regions at the time of German settlement, whereas the latter was a result of the Junkers' response to the economic opportunities presented in the sixteenth century. See "Die Ausprägung der Junkerherrschaft," 59ff. Against the argument that *Gutsherrschaft* had Slavic origins, advanced by Heinz Maybaum, in "Die Entstehung der Gutsherrschaft im nordwestlichen Mecklenburg," *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, Beiheft 6 (1926), see F. L. Carsten, "Slavs in North-Eastern Germany," *The Economic History Review* 11 (1941): 67ff. See also Friedrich Lutge, *Geschichte der deutschen Agrarverfassung vom frühen Mittelalter bis zum 19. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1963), 118-45; Carsten, *Origins of Prussia*, 149-64; Hintze, *Die Hohenzollern und ihr Werk*, 108-111.

¹⁵ Rosenberg, "Rise of the Junkers," 230.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 232.

of the fifteenth century, the power of the nobles had grown to the point that they could usually compel the towns to return runaway peasants. Where their independence had been broken, as in Brandenburg and Pomerania, the towns could offer no help to the peasants sinking into serfdom. In Prussia, where the emasculated Knights of the Teutonic Order had allowed the towns greater latitude, the unhappy peasants were able to find sympathizers and supporters among the town guilds and commons; as a result, Prussia was the only eastern region that experienced a substantial rebellion during the general uprising of German peasants in 1525. However, the new grand master of the Teutonic Order, Albert von Hohenzollern, who was also the Elector of Brandenburg, quickly dissolved the Order and cooperated with the nobles in crushing the peasants. The new Prussian ordinances of 1526 confirmed the rise of the nobility over the towns and the peasantry; no longer could peasants leave their estates without the permission of the lord and find refuge in the towns.¹⁷

Economic hegemony went hand in hand with the administrative and political dominion of the Junkers. To the traditional *Gerichtsherrschaft*, the monopoly of legal jurisdiction over the peasants on his estates and villages, the noble landowner added *Gutswirtschaft*, the absolute control over the production of the estate through the domination of servile labor. With greater control over the peasantry, the landed nobility was able to exploit the favorable market for agricultural products that came with the economic upswing in western Europe during the sixteenth century. Previously, as the limited labor obligations demanded of the peasants indicated, estate productions were relatively restricted. Now, by increasing the labor obligations from as few as three, four, or six days per year to as many as two or three days per week, the lords expanded their estates and became major producers for the market. New lands were brought under cultivation, vacant peasant holdings were resettled, and occasionally peasant farms were seized and incorporated in the lord's estate. As one Pomeranian chronicler reported, "In previous years the noblemen have not been industrious and interested in agriculture; but recently this has changed, and the nobility has never been as rich as now."¹⁸ This social and economic system known simply as *Gutsherrschaft*—the cultivation of the estate land by the noble owner for his own profit, using the labor of serfs over whom he had complete legal jurisdiction—was securely established by the end of the sixteenth century.

¹⁷ Hintze, *Die Hohenzollern und ihr Werk*, 121; Carsten, *Origins of Prussia*, 151.

¹⁸ Cited in Carsten, *Origins of Prussia*, 54.

The system of Gutsherrschaft became the backbone of Junker power in Prussia for the next two centuries; it provided the noble estate owners with an interlocking control over the social, economic, and political matters immediate to the estate itself. Gutsherrschaft was the central experience of the Prussian aristocracy; it provided the framework and the institutions within which the aristocracy became the dominant class in Prussia and determined both the means by which agricultural commodities were produced and the context for the encounter between the classes involved in that production. Gutsherrschaft granted the aristocracy its primary experience of power, and that experience shaped the aristocracy's attitude toward politics long after the system of Gutsherrschaft had been modified or had disappeared. Not even the emergence of royal absolutism or the development of a state bureaucracy diminished the power of the noble landowner on his estate. In fact, beginning with the compromise contained in the Brandenburg Recess of 1653, the Hohenzollern rulers granted the nobility complete power over their serfs in exchange for the nobility's relinquishing its claims for checks on the central administration of the Elector. Gutsherrschaft molded the Prussian aristocracy in ways substantially different from most of the other aristocracies in Europe; binding them more closely to their estate, it caused noble landowners to see possession and control of land as essential to their preservation as a class.

It is in some respects an anomaly that control of the land should have assumed such real and symbolic importance in the perception of the Prussian aristocracy, for there were, in fact, numerous poor or landless nobles. Despite the efforts of the Hohenzollerns, especially Frederick II in the eighteenth century, to forbid non-nobles from buying noble estates and to ensure that all who were awarded titles of nobility were either granted an estate or had the means to obtain one, many nobles in Prussia by the eighteenth century were without land, largely because of the system of inheritance. By law, all the sons of a nobleman inherited their father's title, virtually assuring that the number of noblemen would always exceed the number of estates available. By 1800, for example, there were roughly 20,000 noble families in the eastern provinces (exclusive of the newly acquired Polish territories in which the nobility was so numerous).¹⁹ The most accurate count of the number of estates in these provinces yields slightly more than

¹⁹ Zedlitz-Neukirch, *Neues Preussisches Adels-Lexikon*, 1: 14-15; Reinhard Koselleck, *Preussen zwischen Reform und Revolution* (Stuttgart, 1967), 80, also cites this figure.

11,500—far fewer than the number of noble families.²⁰ Furthermore, when one considers that many noblemen owned more than one estate, the problem of landless noblemen becomes even more apparent. Statistics compiled by Fritz Martiny reveal that there were 658 adult noblemen living in the Kurmark of Brandenburg in 1800. Of these, 409 were classified as landowning vassals; 133 were vassals' brothers—blood relatives of the vassal: brothers, uncles, cousins, nephews; 116 were vassals' sons—sons or grandsons of the vassal. Twenty-seven percent (177 out of 658) were without land; more significant, however, is the fact that of those classified as vassals' brothers or vassals' sons 71 percent (177 out of 249) were landless. Most of these had sought positions in the military. Sixty-one percent of the vassals' brothers and 83 percent of the vassals' sons had military careers.²¹

That a substantial portion of the nobility was effectively severed from its connection with the land was also apparent in the fact that more than one-fourth of the nobles who owned estates did not live on them. Statistics from Silesia indicate that 26 percent of the noble landowners did not live on their estates.²² A study of the Kurmark reveals the same pattern. In 1800, of the 409 nobles listed as vassals, 29 percent (119) did not live on their estates. Of the 290 who did, only 31 percent (112) had always lived there; the rest had also pursued careers, usually in the military, that took them away from their estates.²³ Figures for all the eastern provinces, except for the new Polish lands, yield 3,829 noble families living on the land.²⁴ It is obvious that the dominion over their estates (*Herrschaft*), the cornerstone of noble priv-

²⁰ It is not possible to calculate precisely the number of noble estates. A list of the larger estates about 1800 shows that in the eastern provinces (exclusive of the new Polish territories) there were 5,424 noble estates with a tax value in excess of 5,000 talers. Actually, the total number was considerably larger, because assessments were frequently lower than the market value, the number of estates worth more than 5,000 talers was higher. Moreover, some large estates were subdivided for administrative or inheritance purposes, although they still remained a "unified possession" (*Besitzeneinheit*), with unified jurisdiction over the peasantry. Taking these factors into account, the total number of estates, based on the survey of Leopold Krug, was 11,566, still far fewer than the noble families in Prussia. See Leopold Krug, *Betrachtungen über den Nationalreichtum des preussischen Staates*, reprint of 1805 edition by Scientia Verlag (Aalen, 1970), 1 410. Koselleck's total is not entirely accurate, but the error is insignificant, *Preussen zwischen Reform und Revolution*, 672.

²¹ Fritz Martiny, *Die Adelsfrage in Preussen vor 1806*, Beiheft 35 to *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Berlin, 1938), table AI, insert in the back of the book.

²² Johannes Ziekursch, *Hundert Jahre schlesischer Agrargeschichte* (Breslau, 1927), 45–47.

²³ Martiny, *Die Adelsfrage*, 110–11.

²⁴ Krug, *Betrachtungen*, 1 455.

ilege, actually touched only a portion of those who possessed noble titles

The relationship between the nobility and the land changed in important ways in the course of the eighteenth century. In 1717, Frederick William I granted allodial title over their estates to the nobles in Brandenburg and Pomerania, the estates in East Prussia were made allodial in 1732.²⁵ This action dissolved the antiquated notion of the "feudal bond" (*Lehnsverband*) linking the nobility to the monarch. The military service owed by the vassal, a useless anachronism by the eighteenth century, was transformed into an annual tax paid by the nobles (*Lehnpferdgeld*). Because it eroded their privilege of tax exemption, nobles in the old Mark opposed the action. At the same time, however, the monarch renounced his traditional rights over the estates of his vassals (*Heimfallsrecht*), and noble families were given the freedom to dispose of their estates or draft their own inheritance contracts. The effects of this allodialization of the land were neither dramatic nor immediate, but they were significant. Under the feudal bond, the estate had been considered the possession of the noble family, those who were living and those who would possess it in the future. The individual who occupied the estate did not possess it, he could not arbitrarily sell it or encumber it with debt without the approval of the other members of the family. The estate was the property of the entire family, giving the family its name and, presumably, the basis of its noble distinction. It was not merely real property, but a trust, it was not merely the source of income, but the foundation of the aristocratic social order. Allodialization of estates made easier their sale and thus the breaking of the family link to the land that extended over generations.

After the allodialization of the estates, the nobility made an effort to preserve the ideal of family ownership. Various forms of entail (*Fideikommiss*, *Majorat*, and so on) were followed to prevent the alienation of the family estate, but their usage was uncommon before the middle of the nineteenth century. Inheritance contracts varied from family to family and inheritance custom and law varied from region to region, but the rule customarily acknowledged the claim of the eldest son to the estate and the rights of other children to a portion of the inheritance. In general, this was done by separating real property from movable property (*Absonderung des Lehns und Erbes*). Real property went to

²⁵ Victor Loewe, 'Die Allodifikation der Lehen unter Friedrich Wilhelm I,' *FBPG* 11 (1899) 341-74. Hintze, *Die Hohenzollern und ihr Werk*, 295-96. Zedlitz-Neukirch, *Neues Preussisches Adels Lexikon* 1: 6.

the eldest son; movable property was divided, according to a predetermined formula, among the heirs. Depending on the region, movable property could include farm equipment, livestock, and seed—items whose removal clearly reduced the value of the real property. By the eighteenth century, it was common for daughters to inherit their father's estate if there were no surviving sons. Otherwise, a daughter's inheritance was usually restricted to her dowry, marriage costs, and, in Pomerania, her mourning dress. A widow was generally entitled to a cash settlement equal to the amount she had brought into the marriage if her husband died before an heir was born; otherwise, she was assured an annual income and usually the right to live on the estate for the remainder of her life.²⁶

This system of inheritance endeavored to assure that all members of the family had the means to maintain themselves in a manner befitting persons of noble birth. Nevertheless, the system did not succeed in doing that and brought several unfortunate consequences. It provided the elements for frequent disputes and litigations over inheritances, not merely between siblings, but in some cases between widows and their sons. In addition, the financial burden imposed on estate owners by other heirs could often be met by dividing the estate or by mortgaging it in order to pay the cash settlements. Despite the obvious dangers the system posed, up to 10 percent of the estates in the Kurmark had been divided for inheritances by 1800. Usually the estate itself remained intact, whereas the services and rents of peasants were divided among the heirs. More common was the practice of paying the claimants with money borrowed against the estate. The high level of indebtedness of noble landowners during the last decades of the eighteenth century was probably not due primarily to inheritance claims, but nevertheless complaints were common. In 1775, Eberhard von Rochow lamented that it would be difficult to find an estate "that was not troubled with the inheritance debts of widows' payments and daughters' settlements, etc. . . . There are estates that scarcely yield 7,000 talers' income but have inheritance debts of 100,000 talers."²⁷

With the allodialization of the noble estates, daughters could inherit the family estates, and to prevent land from falling into the hands of

²⁶ For a discussion of inheritance practices and restrictions see Karl Friedrich Beneckendorff, *Oeconomia Forensis, oder, Kurzer Inbegriff derjenigen Landwirtschaftlichen Wahrheiten*, 8 vols (Berlin, 1775–1784), vol 4, see also Martiny, *Die Adelsfrage*, 21–22. Many of the histories of noble families, compiled in the late nineteenth century, contain testaments and wills, which describe inheritances. See, for example, Ernst Devrient, *Das Geschlechte Arnim* (Leipzig, 1914), part 1, "Urkunden", or Georg Adalbert von Mulverstedt, *Geschichtliche Nachrichten von dem altpreussischen Adelsgeschlecht von Ostau* (Magdeburg, 1886).

²⁷ Cited in Martiny, *Die Adelsfrage*, 19.

commoners, restrictions against noblewomen's marrying "beneath their Stand" were strict and generally enforced. Noblewomen could marry non-noble army officers, civil servants, and "respected, wealthy burghers and businessmen" without forfeiting their inheritance; however, if they married persons from lower categories of the common citizens, they lost all claims to the family estate and most of the rest of their inheritance.²⁸ Therefore, wealthier families created family foundations (*Stiftungen*), the proceeds of which were intended to provide a reasonable income for widows and unmarried daughters. Poorer families could send their daughters to the "noble cloisters" (*Adelige Fräulein Kloster* or *Frauleinstift*) established in each province to ensure that daughters of noblemen could maintain the standard of living and culture appropriate to their Stand. Many of these were medieval cloisters or convents that had been secularized during the Reformation; others were founded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to provide refuge and respectability for unmarried women.²⁹

The sons of noblemen were also forbidden to marry beneath their rank.³⁰ Nevertheless, these injunctions were always dealt with realistically; an ordinance of 1739, for example, permitted "an impoverished nobleman to assist his family through an unequal marriage with a person of low, but respectable, birth and exceptional wealth."³¹ How often noblemen married women of lower status for their money is difficult to say; it seems doubtful that many noblemen employed this strategy prior to the nineteenth century.

Marital alliances were a primary means by which the Prussian nobility, like all nobilities, sought to preserve and enlarge its landed property. Bitter conflicts, frequently resulting in the disinheritance of a disobedient son, developed when sons failed to marry in accordance with their fathers' wishes. Family feuds requiring the intervention of the prince sometimes resulted from broken marriage contracts. Although it is seldom possible to discern what property considerations, if any, impelled a particular marriage without a systematic examination of marriage contracts and inheritance settlements, an examination of

²⁸ On the marriage restrictions for noblewomen, see Beneckendorff, *Oeconomia Forensis* 4 363-77, Wolf-Gunther Bennecke's *Stand und Stande in Preussen vor den Reformen* (phil diss., Berlin, 1935), 18-23, also contains a discussion of marriage restrictions in relation to inheritance

²⁹ For examples of family foundations, see that of the von Ostau family, Mulverstedt, *Adelsgeschlecht von Ostau*, 73, or Siegm. Graf Dohna, *Aufzeichnungen über die Vergangenheit der Familie Dohna*, part 4, *Die jüngere Dohnas*, Heft A (Berlin, 1885), 50

³⁰ *Allgemeines Landrecht für die Preussischen Staaten*, 1/7 1/#30. Found in the edition of the text, Hans Hattenhauer, ed., *Allgemeines Landrecht für die Preussischen Staaten von 1794* (Frankfurt a M. and Berlin, 1970), 346

³¹ Cited in Bennecke, *Stand und Stande in Preussen*, 22

more than four hundred marriages in several noble families from about 1700 until about 1850 reveals significant aspects of the marriage strategies of the Prussian nobility.³² In some cases, it is clear that marriage alliances were formed exclusively by property interests. In 1727, for example, Friedrich Ludwig von Dohna-Lauck, excluded from the inheritance of his father's estates by primogeniture, could, because he was the oldest son of his father's second marriage, lay claim to the inheritance of the estates of Reichertswalde through his mother. His claim, however, was contested by Countess Isenburg, who had equally valid rights to the inheritance. To settle the dispute, Dohna married the countess, although, at forty-seven, she was seventeen years his senior. Georg Abraham von Arnim, heir of the vast Boitzenburg domain early in the eighteenth century and without sons, insisted that his daughter marry her cousin, also a von Arnim, in order that the Boitzenburg complex would pass to their son and remain in the family.³³ The relative frequency with which young girls, in their mid-teens, married men well over forty or the cases of men marrying their nieces and very young men marrying considerably older women suggest that inheritance considerations were the basis for many marriages.

In most noble families, especially in the very wealthy and high-ranking ones, the rate of intrafamily marriage was high. An examination of the Dohnas, one of the richest families of East Prussia, which bore the title count, reveals that of 177 marriages that can be identified within the family from about 1700 until about 1860, 22 were marriages in which both partners were Dohnas; an additional 12 were between Dohnas and identifiable relatives with other family names. Thus, 19 percent of the marriages were within the family. Moreover, a large number of marriages within the Dohna family during this period were made with a network of eighteen other families. During this

³² For examples of intra- and interfamilial conflicts over marriage contracts, see Peter-Michael Hahn, *Struktur und Funktion des brandenburgischen Adels im 16. Jahrhundert*, Historische und Pädagogische Studien, 9 (Berlin, 1979), 120–32. My statistics on noble marriages are drawn from a number of family histories, compiled in the late nineteenth or in the early twentieth century, which contained reasonably complete genealogical information on these noble families as well as important documents on their histories. The sample is, admittedly, limited, and it contains a certain bias, of course, in favor of those families who survived the pressures of the nineteenth century and were wealthy enough to hire someone to write their history. This means that the incidence of endogamy was probably higher among the sample than among the Prussian nobility as a whole. Nevertheless, I think the marital patterns suggested by this sample generally hold true for the entire Prussian nobility.

³³ Numerous similar examples can be cited. These are taken from Devrient, *Das Geschlecht von Arnim* 1, 519–26, and Dohna, *Familie Dohna*, vol. 4.