

The Changing Depiction of Prussia in the GDR:
From Rejection to Selective Commemoration

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1. Introduction

On March second, 1947, a statement appeared at the very bottom of the second page of *Neues Deutschland*, the official newspaper of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany. The statement would have been easy to overlook; the text was crammed into a small space by reducing the font size from that of normal newspaper print, and the headline was not as large or bold as others on the page. That headline read: “Auflösung des Staates Preußen.”¹ Below, in miniscule typeface, Law No. 46 of the Allied Control Council was reprinted, though it had gone into effect five days earlier, when it was signed in Berlin on February 25th. Thus the citizenry of the Soviet Occupation Zone was informed of the dissolution of the once great state of Prussia, without ceremony, and certainly without mourning.

The publication of this notice reflects well the official stance on Prussia in the Soviet Occupation Zone and the early German Democratic Republic, characterized by erasure and silence. Fast forward now to 1987: on January 24th *Neues Deutschland* published an altogether different sort of article on Prussia. In recognition of the 275th anniversary of Frederick II’s birthday, historian Ingrid Mittenzwei wrote a balanced and

¹ “Auflösung des Staates Preußen,” *Neues Deutschland*, March 2, 1947.

relatively positive assessment of the Prussian king, which took up nearly a full page.² This was no anomaly: since the seventies publications on Prussia had been growing in frequency and popularity. Furthermore, the restoration of the Lindenforum in Berlin made the capital city's Prussian history visible, even celebrated, once again. The "rediscovery of Prussia" in the public sphere reached its culmination in 1986, the 200-year anniversary of Frederick II's death, with the popular exhibition "Friedrich II. und die Kunst" in Sans Souci park.

What can account for such a complete reversal on the subject of East Germany's Prussian history? The German Democratic Republic was a Marxist-Leninist, socialist state with close political ties to the Soviet Union. Prussia, on the other hand, carried (and to an extent still carries today) associations of militarism, conservatism, a reactionary aristocratic ruling class, and even proto-fascism. How, then, was Prussia assimilated into the GDR's Marxist-Leninist view of history? Furthermore, how was the depiction of Prussia in the GDR used to support and shape a unique East German identity? These are the questions that this thesis will explore, through the analysis of East German publications, films, and public events related to Prussian history and especially the mythos of Frederick II.

Literature on the subject of Prussia in the GDR is mostly limited to chapters and articles within books on broader topics, and is especially scarce in publications since the start of this century, though both Bärbel Holtz and Wolfgang Neugebauer of Humboldt University have written articles on Prussian historiography in the GDR within the last decade. Mary Fulbrook's 1999 book *German National Identity after the Holocaust* makes

² Ingrid Mittenzwei, "Glockengeläut verkündete die Geburt des Prinzen," *Neues Deutschland*, January 24, 1987.

several mentions of Prussia in regards to the GDR, though there is no chapter dedicated to the topic; hers is the only English literature on the subject I have found. Maoz Azaryahu's book *Von Wilhelmplatz zu Thälmannplatz. Politische Symbole im öffentlichen Leben der DDR*, published in 1991, contains a few sections dedicated to the topic of specifically Prussian symbols. Of books published since Germany's Reunification, the only ones dedicated solely to the topic of Prussia in the GDR are Hans Alexander Krauß's 1993 *Die Rolle Preußens in der DDR-Historiographie*, and a 1997 publication of the *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* called *Der Wandel des Preußenbildes in den DDR-Medien*, which is notable for its use of film rather than historical writing as a subject of analysis.

During the time of two Germanies, a few West German historians took an interest in their eastern counterparts' view of Prussia, such as Peter Meyers, author of the 1983 study *Friedrich II. von Preußen im Geschichtsbild der SBZ/DDR*, which focuses on historical writing and history lessons in East German schools. As early as 1964, in the West German work *Besinnung auf Preußen*, Fritz Kopp contributed a chapter on *Preußen und die SED*. In the late years of the GDR, there was growing self-awareness on the part of East German historians. This resulted in publications such as *Erbe und Tradition in der DDR. Die Diskussion der Historiker*, edited by Helmut Meier and Walter Schmidt, in 1989, in which a number of historians treat the subject of Prussia in detail or in passing.

These publications provide plenty of material on the GDR's scholarly publications on Prussia, but to my knowledge no work has yet attempted to synthesize the analysis of historiography, media, and public symbols and events in one work. The narrow historiographical focus of most existing scholarship provides only a limited view

into the GDR's concept of Prussia. Most historical publications would not be read by the average East German citizen; newspapers and films, however, were regularly consumed, which is why the bulk of my work rests on the analysis of these sources. These products, made for mass-consumption, are meant to both entertain and instruct: the latter is especially true in the case of state-controlled media. By examining the depiction of Prussia in newspaper articles, film, and public works, one can come nearer to seeing what the citizen of the GDR saw. Though their thoughts, for the most part, can only be the subject of surmise, what can be inferred with greater certainty is what the regime wanted citizens to think by presenting them with a carefully considered image of history.

2. *Chronology and Context*

The development of the view of Prussia in GDR historiography can be divided into three main phases.³ For the purposes of this thesis, they are divided thus: 1945-1951, 1951-1973, and 1973-1989. These dates should not be considered set in stone; the characteristics of one phase will inevitably bleed across the division into another to a certain extent. While 1945 and 1989 are self-evident choices, 1951 and 1973 happen to be where the most clear divisions fall in the body of evidence I have collected. Were other evidence to be taken into consideration, these dates could certainly shift a year or two. The chronology is by no means arbitrary, however; the divisions roughly correspond to other developments in the history of the GDR which, while they should not

³ Other scholars give slightly different dates and divisions; cf. Peter Meyers, *Friedrich II. von Preußen im Geschichtsbild der SBZ/DDR* (Braunschweig: Georg-Eckert-Institut für internationale Schulbuchforschung, 1983), 78; Bärbel Holtz, "Das Thema Preußen in Wissenschaft und Wissenschaftspolitik in der DDR," in *Das Thema Preußen in Wissenschaft und Wissenschaftspolitik des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Wolfgang Neugebauer, (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2006), 332.

be assumed to be the exclusive cause of historiographical shifts, nevertheless provide context for the changing depiction of Prussia.

In the 1950s, before the official recognition of the GDR as its own state, the SED was still interested in achieving national unity in one common, socialist Germany—their Western neighbors simply had not yet overcome the penultimate, capitalist phase of history.⁴ At the same time, the groundwork was being laid for the East German *Nationale Volksarmee* in response to the rearmament of West Germany. These circumstances may account to an extent for the rehabilitation of Prussian generals of the 1813-14 *Befreiungskriege*, most notably August von Gneisenau and Gerhard von Scharnhorst, which was already evident in 1952.⁵ These “German patriots” could be heroes and examples not only for the whole German nation, divided though it was,⁶ but also for a new East German army, given the reforms the Prussian generals brought about and their support of the Russian-Prussian *Waffenbruderschaft* against Napoleon. According to communist politician Fred Oelßner, a socialist army, like that of the Soviet Union, had nothing to do with militarism;⁷ the Prussian generals, considered models for the new socialist soldier, were likewise rid of their earlier association with “Prussian militarism.”

With the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 came a new sense of stability for the East German regime. This can be taken as a halfway point of the middle phase, after which the interpretation of Prussian history continued to grow more flexible. Later in that decade, the commencement of *Ostpolitik* served as a catalyst for this process. The

⁴ Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 134.

⁵ Maoz Azaryahu, *Von Wilhelmplatz zu Thälmannplatz. Politische Symbole im öffentlichen Leben der DDR* (Gerlingen: Bleicher, 1991), 136-137.

⁶ Azaryahu, *Politische Symbole*, 137.

⁷ *Ibid.*

international recognition granted to the GDR in the treaties of the early 1970s solidified the existence of two separate German states. On the part of the SED, this also led to an attempt to solidify the distinct identities of two separate German nations.⁸ The new concept of the nation was predicated on class, rather than ethnicity,⁹ thereby widening the divide between the FRG and the GDR.¹⁰ The GDR's search for a unique national consciousness corresponded, somewhat ironically, with the appropriation of an ever broader swath of German history in the last phase of the GDR.¹¹ In the late 70s, previously marginalized figures such as Martin Luther become the subject of new discussions and even celebrations.¹² In the 1980s this extended most notably to Frederick the Great, and had the GDR not ceased to exist, there were indications that even the conservative founder of the German Reich, Otto von Bismarck, may have enjoyed a similar renaissance of public commemoration.¹³ Laying claim to more of German history was not incompatible with forging a specifically East German identity, however. Presenting the GDR as the inheritor of the whole of German history strengthened the SED's claim to cultural, and by extension political, legitimacy.¹⁴ Furthermore, the appropriation of history was not carried out with a blind eye to the moral values of socialism; while certain cultural artifacts were depoliticized in order to be reincorporated into the public sphere, historians and politicians were acutely aware of the distinctions between positive and negative elements of history, which were to be drawn with a

⁸ Fulbrook, *National Identity*, 20. This shift also roughly corresponds to Erich Honecker's replacement of Walter Ulbricht as General Secretary of the SED in 1971.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ As Fulbrook notes, the official East German view of the GDR as a separate nation was not necessarily shared by the East German citizenry. Fulbrook, *National Identity*, 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹² Azaryahu, *Politische Symbole*, 143.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁴ Cf. Fulbrook, *National Identity*, 89-90.

nuanced hand. In the historical field, this manifested itself in the debate over *Erbe* (heritage or legacy), which stemmed from the whole of German history, and *Tradition*, which stemmed from socialism.¹⁵

The acknowledgment of Prussia's place in the *Erbe* of the GDR and the celebration of its heroes can be ascribed to a number of developments. One is the growing economic instability of the GDR in the 1980s, which could have made greater cultural stability appear all the more desirable.¹⁶ Historian Maoz Azaryahu surmises the opposite in attributing the recognition of Prussia to the relative stability of the GDR under the leadership of Erich Honecker,¹⁷ by which one must assume Azaryahu means the earlier part of Honecker's regime and the adoption of "consumer socialism," though this occurred well before the most marked developments in the treatment of Prussia.

Another factor to consider is the changing historiography in the West, with which the East saw itself to be in competition. The FRG also went through different phases in its perception of Prussia, the most notable event in its development being the well-attended exhibit *Preußen—Versuch einer Bilanz* in Berlin in 1981.¹⁸ The 1980s saw a surge in the "heritage industry" far beyond the two Germanies, however; thus the GDR was participating in an international trend as well.¹⁹

¹⁵ See Helmut Meier and Walter Schmidt, eds., *Erbe und Tradition in der DDR. Die Diskussion der Historiker* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1989).

¹⁶ Fulbrook, *National Identity*, 89, 133.

¹⁷ Azaryahu, *Politische Symbole*, 144-145.

¹⁸ Azaryahu, *Politische Symbole*, 145; Fulbrook, *National Identity*, 90.

¹⁹ Fulbrook, *National Identity*, 90. Fulbrook cautions against viewing the correlation of events as causation: "Although one can see functionality for a GDR 'national legitimation' of developments such as the *Tradition/Erbe* debate, one must nevertheless ask whether the function *explains* these developments" (ibid., 134).

Keeping this historical context in mind, this thesis will focus on how the image of Prussia was constructed for viewing by the East German citizen, rather than engaging in a debate about why this construction changed as it did.²⁰

3. *The Geschichtsbild in the GDR*

3.1 *What is a Geschichtsbild?*

First it is necessary to understand the concept of the *Geschichtsbild*. A common English translation would be “image of history,” though literally it is more akin to “history-picture.” In reality it is an all-encompassing term for a complete conceptualization of history, which holds a certain theoretical and historiographical viewpoint. Wolfgang Schlegel gives multiple definitions for the word; one is historical-political and material, and relates to the content of history and the evaluation of historical events, persons, and eras.²¹ This definition is relevant to historical works and exhibitions and how they present their subject matter. Another definition is philosophical-technical, and defines a *Geschichtsbild* as a philosophical concept, concerned with the driving forces, form, and goal of the historical process.²² We will first concern ourselves with this definition in order to explore the sanctioned socialist theory of the historical process that held sway in the GDR.

²⁰ Ibid., 134.

²¹ Wolfgang Schlegel, *Geschichtsbild und geschichtliche Bildung als volkspädagogische Aufgabe* (Weinheim: Julius Beltz, 1961), 102.

²² Ibid.

3.2 *The Function of the Geschichtsbild in the GDR*

The *Geschichtsbild* of the GDR was above all determined by a Marxist-Leninist interpretation of history. The primary element of the Marxist-Leninist view is historical materialism. The historical materialistic theory was first articulated by Marx and Engels, and takes the position that history is pushed forward first and foremost by economic, not philosophical, forces. This progress takes the dialectic form of contradicting interests and forces: a thesis is opposed by an antithesis, resulting in a synthesis of the two, which is met by a new antithesis; and so the process repeats.²³

In his work on Frederick II in the *Geschichtsbild* of the GDR, Peter Meyers lists the promotion of the historical materialistic view and dialectical thinking as two important functions of the *Geschichtsbild* in the GDR.²⁴ A dialectically grounded interpretation of history is linear and progressive, and therefore also relates to the future; the dialectic will continue and culminate in the fulfillment of Socialism's historical mission with its final victory over Capitalism. The *Geschichtsbild* therefore must make that historical mission clear, thereby prescribing certain attitudes and behaviors for the citizen which will support the achievement of that goal. This is closely tied to another function of the *Geschichtsbild*: to provide citizens with a sense of purpose in their lives. That purpose, of course, was to contribute to social progress.²⁵

It was equally important that the *Geschichtsbild* clarify the role of both the working masses and of significant figures in the historical process. Though these might seem contradictory to each other, especially considering the emphasis placed on the

²³ Karl Mielcke, *Historischer Materialismus: Die Lehren von Karl Marx* (Stuttgart: Klet, 1960), 5.

²⁴ Meyers, *Friedrich II.*, 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

people at large in socialist ideology, famous individuals could also provide specific examples of behavior, both negative and positive, from which the people could learn.²⁶

Lastly, the *Geschichtsbild* needed to prepare the citizenry to confront enemy ideology.²⁷ The socialist citizen must be ready for the fight against class enemies—primarily the capitalist USA and FRG. For this the citizen needed to be armed with an understanding of both the reactionary and revolutionary tradition in German history. The GDR was seen as the inheritor of the revolutionary tradition, while the FRG was considered the inheritor of the reactionary tradition. Citizens of the GDR had to understand the role this double-line had played in German history, so that they would be prepared for the socialist struggle in the future.

The ultimate goal of the *Geschichtsbild* in the GDR was therefore the education and motivation of the citizen. According to Meyers, “das Geschichtsbild soll dem Bürger die Begründung dafür liefern, daß sich die historische Mission der Arbeiterklasse in der DDR verwirklicht und erfüllt hat.”²⁸ The role of the historical discipline, therefore, was to develop this *Geschichtsbild* and support the goals of citizen education within this school of thought. This was a decidedly political role, though historical research became increasingly independent in the later GDR.²⁹ According to socialist ideology however, it was the historian’s duty to serve the stability of society.³⁰ They should not simply have a disinterestedly scientific goal, but rather they should provide legitimacy to the socialist

²⁶ Ibid., 18. As Meyers notes, in 1967 historian Joachim Streisand judged Bismarck and Frederick II to be negative examples.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 20.

²⁹ Wolfgang Neugebauer, “Preußen als Forschungsthema in der DDR und in Polen,” in *Das 17. Und 18. Jahrhundert und Große Themen der Geschichte Preußens* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2009), 105.

³⁰ Meyers, *Friedrich II.*, 22.

society,³¹ which in the FRG was viewed as a violation of the desired impartiality of academia,³² although it might be argued that this West German “impartiality” is also a historical construct.

4. *Prussia’s Changing Role in the Geschichtsbild of the GDR*

For each phase of GDR history, I will first examine publications by historians to outline the dominant historiographical view, supplemented where appropriate by newspaper articles, followed by public events, such as demolitions, restorations, and exhibitions, and lastly, films.

4.1 *1945-1951: The Post-War Period*

4.1.1 *Historiography and Publications*

In the Soviet Occupation Zone and early GDR, the prevailing theory of German history was the “Misere,” or misery, concept. This concept held that the Prussian-dominated history of Germany since the period of reform in the early 19th century up until the “Trümmerfelder” of 1945 had become “eine einzige Misere.”³³ The reason was reactionary Prussianism.³⁴ According to Bärbel Holtz, “Deutsche Misere und Preußen wurden insgesamt gleichgesetzt.”³⁵ In his 1946 publication “Irrweg einer Nation,” the German communist politician and journalist Alexander Abusch wrote of the two lines of German history: the reactionary and the progressive, the latter of which could have

³¹ Holtz, “Thema Preußen,” 330.

³² Meyers, *Friedrich II.*, 25.

³³ Holtz, “Thema Preußen,” 333.

³⁴ A work by two Moscow historians, Efim Pavloviè and Ilja Preis, titled “Marx und Engels über das reaktionäre Preußentum,” which had been published in 1942, was translated into German in 1946 (*ibid.*). These historians would be writing in a Stalinist vein during the Second World War.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

offered an alternative course for the country.³⁶ In Abusch's view, the reactionary line that had won out up until that point was comprised of Prussia and its accompanying militarism. This two-pronged theory, as described, was prevalent throughout the history of the GDR,³⁷ and Prussia's journey in the *Geschichtsbild* was largely a matter of shifting, at least in part, from the negative line to the positive one. In this early phase however, Prussia was consigned wholly to the negative line.

This unqualified condemnation of Prussia as Germany's plight is evident in newspaper publications surrounding the dissolution of Prussia in early 1947. Two articles in *Neues Deutschland*, "Preußen gestern und heute" and "Preußen in der deutschen Geschichte," appearing on January 21st and March 1st respectively, characterized Prussia as a military colony of Brandenburg:³⁸ a territory conquered and ruled by knights who carried out a ruthless campaign of expansion at the expense of the German people.³⁹ Prussia was portrayed as the ultimate enemy of Germany, acting ever contrary to the interests of the people in order to preserve power in the hands of the few and, in good Marxist-Leninist fashion, conspiring with capitalist imperialists and industrialists to oppress the masses and pursue aggressive military policy.⁴⁰ According to "Preußen in der deutschen Geschichte," Frederick II's Seven Years War was "eine Glanzleistung dieser preußischen Politik gegen Deutschland," after which Prussia continued to seek great-power status at the expense of the German proletariat.⁴¹ There grew the "menschenfeindliche Bund zwischen dem preußisch-deutschen Militarismus

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Alfred Lemnitz, "Preußen gestern und heute," *Neues Deutschland*, January 21, 1947.

³⁹ Ibid.; Karl Obermann, "Preußen in der deutschen Geschichte," *Neues Deutschland*, March 1, 1947.

⁴⁰ Lemnitz, "Gestern und heute"; Obermann, "Deutsche Geschichte."

⁴¹ Obermann, "Deutsche Geschichte."

und dem kapitalistischen Imperialismus, der sich die ganze Welt zum Schlachtfeld erkor,⁴² and which would end with the misery of the *Trümmerfelder*. The line of continuity from Prussia to the Third Reich is clearly drawn: “Die preußische Expansionspolitik wurde zum wesentlichen Inhalt der Bestrebungen des vom Monopol- und Finanzkapital getragenen Faschismus,⁴³ states Lemnitz; “das Hitlerreich und der zweite Weltkrieg sind die Ergebnisse der Verpreußung [Prussianization] Deutschlands⁴⁴ is Obermann’s unequivocal conclusion.

The solution was clear to the *Neues Deutschland* writers: Prussia must be dissolved. The March 1st article, which was published shortly after this was achieved, makes the point that this solution had been put forward by the founders of Communism in the previous century: “Die Rolle Preußens in der deutschen Geschichte klarlegen, hieß für Marx und Engels den Weg zu weisen zur Überwindung der Misere der deutschen Geschichte, d. h. zur Auflösung Preußens in Deutschland.”⁴⁵ By severing itself from the negative line of German history, the GDR would be free to forge a new path for the nation, grounded in the revolutionary, rather than reactionary Prussian, line: “die Auflösung Preußens verschafft Deutschland die Möglichkeit einer neuen Zukunft.”⁴⁶ This was not a *fait accompli* with Control Council Order No. 46, however. As “Preußen gestern und heute” points out, “Es ist [...] nicht die territoriale und die staatsrechtliche Auflösung, die vor einer Wiederkehr der preußischen Reaktion sichern, sondern die soziale Umwandlung.”⁴⁷ The new socialist policies and structure of the GDR would

⁴² Lemnitz, “Gestern und heute.”

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Obermann, “Deutsche Geschichte.”

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Lemnitz, “Gestern und heute.”

guide its citizens in this societal transformation. There remained the threat of the West, however, where society had not been rid of the Prussian “Misere,” despite the de jure dissolution of the state. Thus the two prongs of German history continued, one line embodied in each half of the country. Both articles make clear that though the old Prussian lands of the GDR had been rid of Prussianism, the FRG had fully inherited the Prussian reactionary tradition.⁴⁸ Therefore, “Vielmehr sind die altpreußischen Länder” (the GDR) “[...] Musterbeispiele der demokratischen Erneuerung des deutschen Volkes zu werden.”⁴⁹ The historical mission of the GDR was to uproot all traces of reactionary Prussianism, not only within its borders but beyond, so that one day all of Germany would be progressive and democratic.⁵⁰ Prussia’s position in the *Geschichtsbild* of the GDR at the time is neatly portrayed in the concluding statement of “Preußen in der deutschen Geschichte”: “Dem Beschluß der Auflösung Preußens muß [...] die wirkliche Zerstörung der Grundlagen des Preußentums in ganz Deutschland folgen.”⁵¹

4.1.2 Public Symbols and Events: The fate of the Berliner Stadtschloss

It was not enough to erase Prussia from the map, however. The most prominent reminders of Hohenzollern Prussia had to be erased from view as well. Thus it was that, a full five years after the war’s end, the Berliner Stadtschloss, former residence of Prussian kings and German Kaisers in the heart of the capital city, was consigned to demolition. The palace had been extensively damaged by Allied bombs during the war,⁵²

⁴⁸ Lemnitz, “Gestern und heute”; Obermann, “Deutsche Geschichte.”

⁴⁹ Lemnitz, “Gestern und heute.”

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Obermann, “Deutsche Geschichte.”

⁵² Alexander Holland, Marc Schnurbus, and K. Marie Walter, *Das Berliner Schloss: Die Geschichte des Berliner Schlosses* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 2004), 42.

but the skeleton of the main dome still stood above the surrounding ruins; “In dem Trümmermeer von 1945 war es wie ein Symbol, daß wenigstens die größte und bedeutendste Architektur der Stadt einigermaßen über den Krieg gekommen war.”⁵³ In the immediate post-war period a future life for the palace seemed more than possible, as the White Room, which had survived the war intact, served as an exhibition space as early as 1945.⁵⁴ Until 1948, architectural, artistic, and historical exhibitions were housed in the White Room, though discussions of partial or full demolition were already underway in political circles. The most common argument for demolition was that Berlin, like Moscow, should have a military parade square in the center of the city;⁵⁵ the Stadtschloss was in the perfect location, and there were no fitting preexisting open spaces. More politically symbolic reasons lay behind the demolition arguments, however; Heinrich Starck, the KPD mayor of Friedrichshain and Assistant Councilor for Building and Housing, called the palace “ein Symbol einer für uns nicht mehr tragbaren Zeit.”⁵⁶ Proponents of preservation and reconstruction hoped that the palace exhibitions would help their cause by demonstrating the modern potential of the building and separating it from its undesirable historical associations,⁵⁷ and for a while it seemed that total demolition could be avoided.⁵⁸ Even Starck changed his view after learning the true artistic and cultural worth of the building.⁵⁹

⁵³ Wolf Jobst Siedler, “Das Schloß lag nicht in Berlin,” in *Das Schloss?: Eine Ausstellung über die Mitte Berlins*, eds. Kristen Feireiss and Wilhelm von Boddien (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1993), 14.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁶ Nikolaus Bernau, “Der Ort des Souveräns,” in Feireiss, *Das Schloss?*, 75.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵⁸ Karl Rodemann, *Das Berliner Schloss und sein Untergang* (Berlin: Tauber, 1951), 10-11. Varying plans for the destruction or preservation of different sections of the palace, most notably the *Eosanderportal* and the *Schlüterhof*, were proposed as late as the first half of 1950 (*ibid.*).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

In 1949, however, the cause of preservation received a heavy blow. On the 4th and 5th of October scenes for the Russian film “Die Schlacht um Berlin” were filmed in and around the palace, resulting in yet further damage; the staged shelling shattered more than 200 windows and destroyed a cherubic statue group, and Soviet soldiers vandalized the interiors as well.⁶⁰ As the permission for this film shoot shows, political forces were pushing hard for demolition. Those supposedly responsible for the care of monuments did more harm than good; “sie faßten ihr Amt lediglich als politische Aufgabe auf, um die Standbilder zu beseitigen, die Herrscher, Staatsmänner oder Generäle darstellen, oder die das Andenken an die Toten ehrten, die ihr Leben für Preußen oder Deutschland geopfert hatten.”⁶¹ In the socially renewed and democratized GDR, honoring the memory of Prussia was entirely unallowable.

No official of the SED held this stance more firmly than the leader of the Party himself, Walter Ulbricht. While there were many ostensible reasons to support the demolition of the Stadtschloss, such as lack of funds and materials, Ulbricht’s personal attitude towards the Hohenzollern residence did not go unnoticed; Wilhelm Zaisser and Rudolf Herrnstadt, members of the SED Politburo, claimed that Ulbricht had always hated the palace as a symbol of the old Germany;⁶² that is, of Prussia. Art historian Gerhard Strauß clearly outlines this ideological view of the palace in his published theses entitled “Was ist das Berliner Schloss?”:

Bei seiner Entstehung:

Ergebnis des Repräsentationsbedürfnisses des sich zentralisierenden preußischen Absolutismus, dessen Hausmacht seit dem Dreißigjährigen Kriege vergrößert wurde im Bündnis mit oder gegen dem deutschen Kaiser, mehr mit als gegen ausländische Staaten und nie im Interesse des deutschen Volkes und seiner

⁶⁰ Bernd Maether, *Die Vernichtung des Berliner Stadtschlusses* (Berlin: Arno Spitz GmbH, 2000), 55.

⁶¹ Rodemann, *Untergang*, 10.

⁶² Siedler, “Nicht in Berlin,” 15.

nationalen Existenz, sondern immer in demjenigen der eigenen Hausmacht, die zudem ihre Untertanen bis zur Leibeigensklaverei ausbeutete und schon während des Schloßbaues Akkordarbeit verlangte.

1950:

Symbol des völligen Verfalls jener feudalistischen und imperialistischen Macht, die es einst hatte entstehen lassen. In deren Untergang es dann ähnliche Wunden erhielt wie das ganze deutsche Volk.

Schlußfolgerung:

Das deutsche Volk, das erstmalig in seiner Geschichte durch seine Majorität für seine Majorität handelt, hat das Recht, seiner Hauptstadt Berlin ein Antlitz zu geben, das der neuen Phase seiner Geschichte würdig ist.⁶³

Strauß applies the same logic to the Berliner Stadtschloss as journalists had used in their evaluation of all of Prussian history. The palace was a symbol for all of Prussia's absolutist, imperialist, feudal abuses of power, its anti-German, anti-proletarian policies; it was a stain that had to be removed in order for the democratization of German society to be complete. The outward appearance of the new, socialist Germany had to match the inner shift of society to the progressive line of history.

Ulbricht's influence on city planning, especially in Berlin, rose sharply in late 1949,⁶⁴ and the prospects for the survival of the Stadtschloss declined. In the end, the most radical option for the future of the palace won out: on August 23rd, 1950, it was decided that the palace would be completely destroyed. Nothing was to be saved. As a *Neues Deutschland* article from August 26th, 1950 claimed, the Stadtschloss "soll uns nicht mehr an unrühmlich Vergangenes erinnern."⁶⁵

Officially, the demolition of the palace was not an act of erasure. Rather, it was a key step in the reconstruction of Berlin. The abovementioned article from August 26th is titled "Deutschlands Hauptstadt ersteht neu: Der Lustgarten soll bis zum 1. Mai 1951 ein

⁶³ Rodemann, *Untergang*, 15.

⁶⁴ Maether, *Vernichtung*, 57.

⁶⁵ "Deutschlands Hauptstadt ersteht neu," *Neues Deutschland*, August 26, 1950.

neues Gesicht erhalten”; the focus is on the new and improved appearance of the city center, not on the destruction of the historic palace. Ulbricht firmly established this stance in his speech for the Third Parteitag of the SED on the 22nd of July, only a month before the final decision on demolition. He spoke strongly of the need for reconstruction efforts to adhere strictly to administrative plans, and referred to the rebuilding of Berlin (referred to as the “Hauptstadt Deutschlands”) as the most important task of the new republic. The area of the Berliner Stadtschloss was to play an essential role in this project: “Das Zentrum unserer Hauptstadt, der Lustgarten und das Gebiet der jetzigen Schloßruine, müssen zu dem großen Demonstrationsplatz werden, auf dem der Kampfwille und Aufbauwille unseres Volkes Ausdruck finden können.”⁶⁶ The new face of the Lustgarten was framed as a positive and necessary change appropriate to the new character of Germany.

While articles extolling this “Wiederaufbau” were common, any actual discussion of the fate of the Stadtschloss was noticeably lacking in the eastern part of Germany. Though there was extensive and vocal opposition to the demolition, the debate was not publicized except in the West. On September 7th, the very day after the demolition process had begun, an article titled “Planmäßiger Aufbau unserer Städte” appeared in *Neues Deutschland*; it referred to the destruction wrought by barbaric Anglo-American air raids, but not to the destruction occurring at that very moment, five years later, in the heart of Berlin. Yet again, reconstruction was framed as an opportunity for cultural expression in the new Germany.⁶⁷ Unlike in 1947, at the time of the dissolution of Prussia, erasure was now accompanied by silence—or rather by purposefully distracting

⁶⁶ Rodemann, *Untergang*, 11.

⁶⁷ “Planmäßiger Aufbau unserer Städte,” *Neues Deutschland*, September 7, 1950.

noise. The population of East Berlin lacked both information and an effective mouthpiece: architectural critic Nikolaus Bernau asserts, “Hinzu kam vielleicht noch die für Berlin spezifische ‘Traditionslosigkeit,’ welche die Zerstörung des Schlosses förderte.”⁶⁸ Preserving tradition would mean preserving a piece of the past, but the past was shaped by the Prussian state. The Stadtschloss was an “imperialistisches Zeichen preußischen Militarismus,” and accordingly, the memory of the palace itself became taboo.⁶⁹ On May 1st, 1951, the Lustgarten was renamed “Marx-Engels-Platz,”⁷⁰ and the erasure of this symbol of the Prussian past was complete.

4.1.3 *Film: Die blauen Schwerter*

Released in late 1949, *Die blauen Schwerter* was one of the first period films by DEFA, the *Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft*, to appear in East German theaters. The officially approved *Geschichtsbild* of the GDR is clearly reinforced in the film, unsurprisingly, as it was made by a state-run studio. The dominant view of Prussia as an oppressive state of militarism and enforced subservience, ruled by a wasteful and self-aggrandizing monarch, is recreated on the screen in *Die blauen Schwerter*, even though the film depicts early 18th century Prussian history, before its rise to the status of European power with one of the most effective and feared militaries in existence.

The titular blue swords refer to the trademark of Meissen porcelain, the first porcelain to be produced in Europe. The film tells the story of Johann Friedrich Böttger, who is largely accredited with discovering the secret of porcelain manufacture in 1708 while in the service of Augustus II the Strong, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland.

⁶⁸ Bernau, “Ort des Souveräns,” 76.

⁶⁹ Feireiss, *Das Schloss?*, 9.

⁷⁰ “Lustgarten wird am 1. Mai Marx-Engels-Platz,” *Neues Deutschland*, April 27, 1951.

The story starts, however, in Berlin in 1701, in the Prussia of King Frederick I. The monarch is introduced when he receives a scheming monk, Laskari, who claims to know the secrets of producing gold. If Laskari's apprentice, Böttger, can successfully demonstrate this act of alchemy, the king will pay Laskari generously and keep Böttger in his service.

The scene opens with Frederick I sitting on his ornate throne in a spacious and richly decorated, though mostly empty, throne room. An architect and an advisor are presenting plans for a new building—perhaps a palace. The king has a complaint about the plans: “Sechs Pilaster auf jeder Seit, aber warum nicht zwölf?” When the advisor raises an objection due to the already inordinate costs of construction, Frederick ignores him, adamantly repeating the question “Why not twelve?” He then exclaims, “Höher! Höher! Wir haben den Wunsch da schon zwei mal geäußert!” The advisor again attempts to caution his monarch, but the king turns his head away in irritated distraction. His last hurried words to the architect as Laskari is being shown in are: “Wir wollen das größer haben.” The Prussian king's obsession with the grandiose thus established, the stage is set for Laskari's tempting offer. Laskari, serene and hypnotic, entrances him easily; the king's eyes shine greedily as he impatiently demands guarantees.

After Laskari leaves, Frederick schemes with another advisor—this one apparently more important and closer to the king. As they stroll across the throne room, a scene is revealed of two artists working on a life-sized model of the king. Frederick bemoans the fact that it costs 4000 thalers “unsere Person für die Ewigkeit zu behalten. [...] Diese Sachen kosten heute unheimlich.”

The portrayal of a monarch as self-centered, vain, and prone to superfluous spending in a production by a socialist state-sponsored film company is far from surprising. Augustus II is portrayed with all of these qualities as well; yet, the depictions of the Prussian and Polish monarchs do differ, and the contrast is telling. The scenes at Augustus' Dresden palace are filled with a reckless decadence that is lacking in the Prussian court, for all its profligacy. Though his throne room itself is an opulent setting, Frederick I's extravagance remains for the most part off screen. We never actually see him spending his money or indulging. Augustus II, on the other hand, plays cards, drinks in excess, and enjoys the company of women. The *mise-en-scène* around Augustus tends to be visually over-abundant; in contrast to the bright and airy Prussian court, the shots look dark and cluttered with glittering ornaments and rich textures, from the murals spanning entire walls to the Polish king's luxurious fur coat that dwarfs his unimpressive frame.

The monarchs represent different forms of excess and abuse of wealth and power. Prussia is wasteful and self-aggrandizing, but not debauched. Rather, order and at least the outward appearance of restraint prevail. This is emphasized by the military character of the state. Though it is not yet the Prussia of the Soldier King or Frederick the Great, the filmmakers have taken care to portray the expected military associations. It is mentioned early on that Prussia is involved in the War of Spanish Succession, which remains distant and yet present in the background for the Prussian section of the film.

Then there are the Prussian soldiers themselves, who pursue a hapless Böttger to Wittenberg. Tricked by Laskari, Böttger is unable to produce more gold for the Prussian king and is forced to flee. Believing that he is taking the gold for himself, Frederick

sends after him. A couple of Saxon peasants, surprised at the presence of Prussian soldiers in Wittenberg, comment suspiciously that perhaps they are there because of the war in a brief exchange that emphasizes the gap between the honest, simple workers and the military servants of the king's personal will. The Prussian soldiers are portrayed as blindly obedient; the officer in charge of the search is little more than a quickly angered automaton. When meeting with a Saxon official to request his cooperation, it becomes clear the officer neither knows nor particularly cares why he has been ordered to capture Böttger; he offhandedly tells the Saxon official that Böttger is wanted for "Giftmischerei oder so etwas." Once Böttger is caught, the officer loses his temper and yells intimidatingly in Böttger's face when he denies any wrongdoing, despite the fact that the officer has admitted he does not know exactly what his prisoner is accused of. Thus a Prussian officer from the year 1701, long before Prussia gained its association with the "Untertanengeist," is portrayed with all the stereotypes of a later age; he represents the perceived unquestioning obedience and violence characteristic of Prussia that was conceptualized as paving the way for the Third Reich. Together king and soldier reinforce the view of Prussia as an oppressive, feudal state, the enemy of the common man, governed with military rigidity.

4.2 1951-1973: Building a Socialist Society

4.2.1 Historiography and Publications

The fifties and sixties were characterized by the building of a socialist society. This involved the development of a national identity within the framework of socialism. After the rejection of history and heritage and the dominance of the "Misere" concept in

the earlier phase, a new, more patriotic view of German history was required. Though this reversal could be seen as contradictory, it was necessary; patriotism was essential to a nationally unified form of thinking that would value the progressive aspects of the national history. As early as 1952, Walter Ulbricht stated, “Das patriotische Bewußtsein, der Stolz auf die großen Traditionen unseres Volkes”—by which he means the allegedly progressive traditions—“beginnen sich zu entwickeln.”⁷¹ This development meant a partially more positive yet still strictly limited and discriminating evaluation of Prussia. For the most part, Prussia was still associated with the negative line of German history, which consisted of militaristic, capitalistic, reactionary and anti-proletarian elements and found its modern expression in the FRG, and yet little by little elements of Prussian history were integrated into the progressive line that led to the GDR. While symbols of the Prussian past still came under attack, a more nuanced depiction of Prussia was the norm by the seventies as reason was found to celebrate certain figures and periods from Prussian history.

This can be seen in the wide array of historical articles that appeared in *Neues Deutschland* over these decades. Some condemn Prussia as the cradle of militarism almost as harshly as in 1947, as in the 1961 article “Spaltung—Stammpolitik der deutschen Militaristen,” which includes a section titled “Preußen contra Deutschland” to emphasize the view of Prussia as the enemy of the German nation and people.⁷² The article also reiterates the interpretation of the FRG as the continuation of the Prussian state; it refers to the “Bonner Staat der klerikal-militaristischen Diktatur” as “ein

⁷¹ Fritz Kopp, “Preußen und die SED,” in *Besinnung auf Preußen*, eds. Harald von Koenigswald and Hans-Joachim von Merkatz (Oldenburg, Hamburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1964), 130.

⁷² Werner Müller and Günter Paulus, “Spaltung—Stammpolitik der deutschen Militaristen,” *Neues Deutschland*, August 2, 1961.

barbarisches Überbleibsel der ‘toten Vergangenheit.’”⁷³ Two years earlier, however, in 1959, *Neues Deutschland* published an article looking back on Berlin 50, 100, 150, and 200 years before, which ventured to call the first *Stadtverordnetenversammlung* of 1809, while not entirely democratic, “schon fortschrittlich.”⁷⁴ The assessment of Frederick II remained negative, criticizing the king for his exorbitant military spending on the Seven Years’ War (in 1759) while his citizens suffered in hunger and need. The 1909 struggle against the *Dreiklassenwahlrecht* was praised, however;⁷⁵ a split between reactionary ruling class and progressive citizenry was starting to be defined, a distinction which would become increasingly emphasized in historical writing over the next couple of decades.

In 1966 another anniversary was commemorated in the paper: one hundred years since the Prussian-Austrian War. What could have been a damning assessment of Prussia as the aggressor in a bloody if brief war was, however, a relatively restrained criticism that targeted Prussia, Saxony, and Hannover equally.⁷⁶ While these states’ actions were undoubtedly militaristic and anti-proletarian, the rhetoric used to describe them seems almost gentle in comparison to the earlier scathing historical analyses. There is a telling paragraph near the end of the piece: “Es besteht sicher kein Grund, Denkmäler zum Ruhme Preußens, Hannovers oder anderer deutscher Fürstentümer besonders zu pflegen. Aber wir sollten diese Zeugnisse nutzen, um vor allem der Jugend die Lehre der damaligen Ereignisse zu vermitteln.”⁷⁷ This call to preserve historical monuments as witnesses to the past without supporting their original political intent is both a reversal

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ H.B., “Berlin zwischen gestern und heute,” *Neues Deutschland*, December 25, 1959.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “Kaitzschhäuser und Langensalza,” *Neues Deutschland*, August 28, 1966.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

from the attitude that led to the demolition of the Berliner Stadtschloss and a foreshadowing of the position of the later GDR, which tended to view Prussian monuments as depoliticized pieces of culture.⁷⁸ The mention of Prussia alongside other former German principalities also evinces a view that placed Prussia on the same level as other pre-unification states: reactionary and yet unexceptional, and certainly not the sole bearer of fault for the rise of Fascism.

Nevertheless criticisms focused on Prussia alone were not uncommon, especially due to the attention Marx and Engels understandably paid to their state of origin. A 1968 article titled “Karl Marx zu Verfassungsfragen: Die ‘mäßige Freiheit’ der preußischen Verfassung” espoused Marx’s contempt for the Prussian constitution of 1848/50.⁷⁹ Marx himself had identified two different Prussias, however, similarly to the two-pronged theory: “das Preußen der Charte und das Preußen des Hauses Hohenzollern.”⁸⁰ While the Prussian monarchy was continually associated with the negative line of history, a potentially progressive political will as expressed in the *Charte* was also acknowledged within the Prussian state. *Neues Deutschland* then draws the connection to the present day: “In die westdeutsche Gegenwart übertragen heißt das: Es gibt zwei Verfassungen im Bonner Staat—die Verfassung der Millionäre und die Notstandsverfassung für die Millionen.”⁸¹ In the sanctioned view of the GDR, the FRG was apparently not only the

⁷⁸ For another early example of this view, see Heiner Schultz, “Schloß Cecilienhof—Besucher und Begebenheiten,” *Neues Deutschland*, July 18, 1970. While criticizing the construction of the expensive palace while the citizenry suffered during World War I, the palace, a memorial to the Potsdam Conference at the time, is presented as a desirable and educational tourist destination.

⁷⁹ Heinrich Gemkow, “Die ‘mäßige Freiheit’ der preußischen Verfassung,” *Neues Deutschland*, February 15, 1968. See note 34 above.

⁸⁰ Karl Marx, “Die Lage in Preußen,” in *Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels: Werke*, vol. 12, 615-616, quoted in Gemkow, “Preußische Verfassung.”

⁸¹ Gemkow, “Preußische Verfassung.”

inheritor of reactionary Prussianism, but directly mirrored the situation of Prussia a century earlier.

At the same time, certain Prussian names were starting to appear commonly as heroes of the German people along with a positive evaluation of the “bürgerliche Revolution” following the *Befreiungskriege*. The introduction of progressive ideals in Prussia was commonly attributed to Napoleon,⁸² but the German nation could not authentically express itself under foreign rule; it needed native progressive heroes, and according to the socialist *Geschichtsbild* it found them: “Aus den Trümmern der alten Monarchie erstanden in Stein, Scharnhorst, Gneisenau, Fichte und Wilhelm von Humboldt lebenskräftige Gestalten, welche die bürgerliche Revolution in Preußen eröffneten und die nationale Unabhängigkeit Deutschlands vorantrieben.”⁸³ In 1968 an extensive article on the progressive achievements of the statesman Karl Freiherr vom und zum Stein appeared in *Neues Deutschland*. He is portrayed as an opponent of the wasteful monarchy and a progressive thinker; Stein’s *Nassauer Denkschrift*, states the paper, has gone down in history as the basis for the Prussian reforms. Though Stein’s policy was admittedly focused on strengthening the political position of the bourgeoisie, he is characterized as a revolutionary for his efforts to include the entire population in the fight for independence; “Reformen sollen die Revolution auf friedlichem Wege vollziehen, die Volksmassen sollen so für den nationalen Unabhängigkeitskampf gewonnen werden,”⁸⁴ explains *Neues Deutschland*.

⁸² Helmuth Bock, “Ein Bollwerk der Reaktion stürzte,” *Neues Deutschland*, October 16, 1966; Helmut [sic] Bock, “Alle Kräfte der Nation werden in Anspruch genommen,” *Neues Deutschland*, July 13, 1968.

⁸³ Bock, “Bollwerk der Reaktion.” By Fichte the author is referring to Johann Gottlieb Fichte. For a similar list, cf. Bock, “Alle Kräfte.”

⁸⁴ Bock, “Alle Kräfte.”

The depiction of Stein as a progressive Prussian statesman contradicts the previously common characterization of all aspects of the Prussian government as reactionary and completely obedient to the monarchy. It also refutes the idea of “Preußen contra Deutschland”—certain elements of Prussia, at least, actually acted in the interests of the German people and a feeling of national unity.

The equation between Prussianism and Nazism was also disintegrating. Though the Prussian elite was not entirely exempt from blame for Hitler’s takeover,⁸⁵ a different view was reserved for the Prussian state itself. A 1968 article on the Communist Party in the Weimar Republic acknowledged the Prussian government as the “Hauptposition der Sozialdemokratie”.⁸⁶ not exactly the form of progressivism touted by Communism, but far from fascist. The article even implies that an alliance between the social-democratic Prussian government and communist leaders was the best hope for preventing the Nazis from assuming complete power; the interests of Prussia, an SPD stronghold, and the rising Nazi Party were diametrically opposed, and the *Preußenschlag* of 1932, orchestrated by the Nazi puppet Franz von Papen, was a serious blow to the anti-fascist cause. Nevertheless, blame is placed on the Prussian officials for failing to act swiftly and decisively enough, and the SPD alone is blamed for not cooperating more closely with the KPD (rather than the other way around).

In 1970 Günter Vogler and Klaus Vetter published their joint effort *Preußen. Von den Anfängen bis zur Reichsgründung*, an early comer in the wave of historical works on Prussia that picked up steam at the end of the decade. The book was reviewed favorably

⁸⁵ For instance: “Das Komplott des schwarzweißen mit dem braunen Geschmeiß zahlte sich für den Kronprinzen aus.” Schultz, “Schloß Cecilienhof.”

⁸⁶ “Der Kampf der Kommunistischen Partei in der Weimarer Republik,” *Neues Deutschland*, December 31, 1968.

by *Neues Deutschland*, which considered it a continuation of the “bedeutende Tradition progressiver Geschichtswissenschaft.”⁸⁷ More clearly than ever, this work, and the *Neues Deutschland* review, acknowledged a constantly growing progressive line within Prussian history. The book review, titled “Der Preußen-Legende ins Herz,” refers to the struggle between the two main lines of Prussian history, as presented in Vogler and Vetter’s book. One was, of course, the ever-reactionary ruling class of Junkers that led the way to capitalism in Germany. Under the other line, the “progressive Gegenkräfte,” are listed “Bauern, die sich immer wieder in Aktionen gegen ihre feudalen Ausbeuter zur Wehr setzten, die Aufklärer und bürgerlich Demokraten und schließlich die junge Arbeiterbewegung.”⁸⁸ The distinction between the reactionary and progressive lines is drawn with nuance: “Es wird unterschieden zwischen dem reaktionären Preußentum als einer politisch-sozialen Grundhaltung, dem preußischen Staat, der weitgehend, *aber nicht ausschließlich* vom reaktionären Preußentum geprägt war, und den Klassen, die im preußischen Staat lebten.”⁸⁹ The period of reforms, the “Befreiungskampf” against Napoleon, and the resulting “bürgerliche Revolution,” though “freilich eine Revolution von oben,” are listed as examples of progress,⁹⁰ which by this point had become the common view. Additionally, the era of Frederick II and the “Kampf um die Nationalstaatbildung 1862-1871” are acknowledged alongside the *Befreiungskriege* and the 1848/49 Revolution as “Wendepunkten” in German history brought about through Prussian influence; even this neutral recognition of what were usually considered eras marked by reactionary and militaristic policy is a new development. *Neues Deutschland*

⁸⁷ Joachim Streisand, “Das Preußen-Legende ins Herz,” *Neues Deutschland*, May 12, 1971.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid. (my italics).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

does not completely forego the warning against reactionary Prussianism, however; the article ends with the statement that this brand of Prussianism has found “100 Jahre nach der Reichsgründung in der BRD besondere Verbreitung.”⁹¹

In 1973 a *Neues Deutschland* article entitled “Das große Erbe der Barrikadenkämpfer” appeared, pointing to what was to become an increasingly important theme in GDR historiography: heritage. In this instance, the heritage of 1848 was being celebrated; the revolutionary spirit of the time was carried on and elevated, according to *Neues Deutschland*, by the worker’s movement.⁹² Though the article is critical of the reactionary bourgeoisie and the Prussian soldiers who put down the uprising, it highlights the growing emphasis on the GDR as the bearer of progressive German traditions and heritage, thus fulfilling the need for a patriotic view of German history that would give the citizenry a strong sense of national identity and purpose: “Die Revolution von 1848/49 war, ist und bleibt ein wesentlicher Bestandteil der revolutionären Tradition, in der unser sozialistischer Staat verwurzelt ist.”⁹³

By the early 1970s, the *Geschichtsbild* of the fifties had been altered drastically, especially in regards to Prussia. In a 1959 article criticizing a renewed interest in and approval of Prussian virtues in the FRG, a writer for *Neues Deutschland* expressed deep skepticism of a West German historian’s view that “auf sein ‘lebendiges Erbe’ kein deutscher Staat verzichten könne und dürfe”;⁹⁴ yet the truth of these words was becoming increasingly clear in the ensuing decades. By the last decade of the GDR’s existence,

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Helmut Bleiber, “Das große Erbe der Barrikadenkämpfer,” *Neues Deutschland*, March 31, 1973.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Dieter Fricke, “Ein waschechter Schoeps,” *Neues Deutschland*, December 16, 1959.

tradition and heritage, including that of Prussian origin, had been raised to new heights of esteem.

4.2.2 *Public Symbols and Events: The Neue Wache and the demolition of Potsdam's Garnisonkirche*

In 1960, the Neue Wache (New Guardhouse) on Unter den Linden was reopened after restorations as a “Memorial to the Victims of Fascism and Militarism.”⁹⁵ Three years later, the statues of the Prussian generals of the *Befreiungskriege* that had been removed in the early fifties were returned to their original locations in front of the Neue Wache.⁹⁶ While this seems an ironic choice for a memorial against militarism, it must be remembered that these Prussian generals had by this point been rid of their militaristic associations and canonized in the *Geschichtsbild* as heroes of the German people. As Fred Oelßner stated in 1952, when the rehabilitation of these generals was beginning, “Nicht alles, was Militär ist, nicht jede bewaffnete Macht hat mit Militarismus zu tun.”⁹⁷

Nevertheless, the demolition of historically and artistically significant buildings continued across formerly Prussian territories, even until the last years of the GDR. Other symbols of the Prussian past were not so easily divorced of unsavory associations. The program of erasure in the name of socialist development hit one city especially hard: Potsdam, which was widely regarded as having served “als Wiege des preußisch-deutschen Militarismus.”⁹⁸ The destruction of historical buildings in Potsdam reached its

⁹⁵ Azaryahu, *Politische Symbole*, 190.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁹⁷ *Neues Deutschland*, May 31, 1952, quoted in Azaryahu, *Politische Symbole*, 135.

⁹⁸ Heiner Schultz, “Schloß Cecilienhof—Besucher und Begebenheiten,” *Neues Deutschland*, July 18, 1970.

high point in the decade from 1958 to 1968,⁹⁹ with an especially high number of demolitions in the last year,¹⁰⁰ which included the leveling of Potsdam's famous Garnisonkirche.

Despite the more measured attitude toward cultural and historical monuments emerging at the time,¹⁰¹ saving some monuments proved essentially impossible to achieve in reality, especially when historical and contemporary political circumstance conspired against the buildings' defenders. The demolition of the Garnisonkirche, which had been built in the 1730s and was considered one of the finest examples of northern German Baroque architecture,¹⁰² saw just such a convergence of factors. The year 1968 was marked by the signing of a new, more restrictive constitution for the GDR (the "*sozialistische*" *Verfassung*), the threat of the Prague Spring in neighboring Czechoslovakia, and a number of important anniversaries: Ulbricht's 75th and Marx's 150th birthdays, and the 50th anniversary of the *Novemberrevolution* and the founding of the KPD, among others.¹⁰³ All these were circumstances that might encourage the state to reinforce its socialist doctrine with the decisive razing of buildings it considered to be on the wrong side of history. The "starke Konzentration politisch bedingter Abbrüche"¹⁰⁴ that year led historian Hans Berg to characterize 1968 as a "Geschichtshass geprägten Jahr."¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ Hans Berg, *Die Verlorene Potsdamer Mitte* (Berlin: self published, 1999), 3.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰¹ See notes 77 and 78 above.

¹⁰² Werner Schwipps, *Garnisonkirche Potsdam* (Berlin: be.bra-verlag GmbH, 2001), 118.

¹⁰³ Berg, *Potsdamer Mitte*, 2.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

The Garnisonskirche's unique history also worked against it. It had been the church of worship for the Prussian court and garrison in Potsdam,¹⁰⁶ but it was not until after the end of the monarchy in 1918 that the most infamous event in the church's long life occurred: the "Day of Potsdam" in 1933, when the *Reichstag* was opened under the leadership of newly appointed Chancellor Adolf Hitler at a ceremony in the Garnisonkirche.¹⁰⁷ The impact on the church's reputation is implicated in a 1970 *Neues Deutschland* article (on the subject of Prussian Crown Prince Wilhelm's palace Cecilienhof, also located in Potsdam): "Am 21. März 1933, dem schwarzen "Tag von Potsdam" saß Kronprinz Wilhelm neben Hindenburg in der Garnisonkirche."¹⁰⁸ This event was the manifestation of the "Komplott des schwarzweißen mit dem braunen Geschmeiß":¹⁰⁹ the symbolic handing over of power from the old Prussian elites to the Nazi Party in a ceremony meant to highlight the continuity between the past monarchical state and the new National Socialist government. In his speech to the gathered representatives, Hitler spoke of an "unverbrüchlichen Bündnis" between the Nazi movement and the historical Prussia.¹¹⁰ Afterwards, in the religious fashion characteristic of so many National Socialist ceremonies, Hitler entered the royal crypt alone and laid a garland on the coffin of Frederick the Great.¹¹¹

Perhaps, given the church's particularly odious associations from that day, demolition was inevitable. The Garnisonkirche was heavily damaged by Allied bombs and stood as a ruin until 1968; nevertheless, rubble was cleared away and a new chapel

¹⁰⁶ Schwipps, *Garnisonkirche*, 11. For more detail on royal and other usage of church, see Schwipps, "Schauplatz europäischer Geschichte," in *Garnisonkirche Potsdam*, 56-68; Schwipps, "Die Garnisonkirche im Wilhelminischen Deutschland," in *Garnisonkirche Potsdam*, 69-87.

¹⁰⁷ Schwipps, *Garnisonkirche*, 88-89.

¹⁰⁸ Schultz, "Schloß Cecilienhof."

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Schwipps, *Garnisonkirche*, 90.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

installed and used until 1966,¹¹² when the ruins were made off-limits by building authorities, ostensibly on grounds of safety.¹¹³ Proposals were put forward to secure the ruins and return them to their former use, or even to turn them into a memorial against war and militarism.¹¹⁴ The Politburo was resolved on demolition, however, and the final sentence on the fate of the Garnisonkirche was handed down that same year.¹¹⁵ As in the case of the Berliner Stadtschloss, there were protests from citizens and art historians in both the East and the West, but also as in the case of the palace, to no avail. The church was an unwelcome reminder of the “Geist von Potsdam,” which the SED considered “immer für das Entstehen der Hitlerdiktatur in hohem Grade mitverantwortlich.”¹¹⁶ In light of its perceived political meaning, the architectural value of the building was swept aside, as Ulbricht had indicated ten years earlier when he stated: “Wir müssen... klarmachen, dass wir ein sozialistisches Potsdam bauen und nicht eine Barockstadt.”¹¹⁷ Thus the artistic achievements of the historical Prussia were destroyed in the name of “sozialistischen Entwicklung.”¹¹⁸

The Garnisonkirche was demolished between May and June of 1968, unremarked upon by the press save for a brief announcement in the “Brandenburgische Neueste Nachrichten” on the 25th of June, two days after the conclusion of the demolition work.¹¹⁹ Thus the SED’s tacit policy of silent erasure of the Prussian past continued; it would take

¹¹² Ibid., 117, 122.

¹¹³ Ibid., 122.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Berg, *Potsdamer Mitte*, 5.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 4. Cf. Schwipps: “Vor allem ging es den Machhabern der DDR um die Beseitigung eines verhassten Symbols, darum, ‘dieses Symbol des preußischen Militarismus aus dem Gedächtnis der Bürger der Stadt zu tilgen,’ wie hohe Funktionäre es formulierten.” Schwipps, *Garnisonkirche*, 120.

¹¹⁷ Berg, *Potsdamer Mitte*, 5.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 2.

¹¹⁹ Schwipps, *Garnisonkirche*, 128.

nearly two more decades for the treatment of cultural artifacts to more closely match the changed rhetoric surrounding Prussian history.

4.2.3 *Film: Die gestohlene Schlacht*

The film *Die gestohlene Schlacht*, released in 1972, was a joint East German-Czechoslovakian production about the Prussian siege of Prague during the Seven Years' War. Its depiction of the Prussian forces and their leader, Frederick II, is in keeping with the historiographical take on Prussia at the time, with the prevailing militaristic associations and especially the negative evaluation of the Hohenzollern kings, yet the film is also indicative of changes to come. The Prussians are still characterized by rigidity and complete obedience to the king, and yet the tone is vastly different from the earlier *Die blauen Schwerter*. This can largely be explained by the fact that the film is a comedy; yet such a comedy could not have been made two decades earlier. The Prussian king and his officers, rather than being intimidating figures of authority, are laughable. The main character, a master thief named Käsebier, constantly outwits officers and king alike through practical pranks and disguises, thus undermining the order and discipline supposedly characteristic of the Prussian army.

The film opens with a sequence of shots showing both the baby Käsebier and the baby Frederick. Of course, as newborns, they look exactly alike; only their surroundings, a plain cottage on the one hand and a luxurious palace on the other, differ. This immediately underpins the socialist tenet of equality and the superficiality of class differences. Indeed, in wry form, the narrator tells the audience, over a shot of the

screaming baby Käsebier, to note the newborn's "Protest gegen dem preußischen Absolutismus."

When we first meet the adult King Frederick, he is with his generals in the camp before Prague, frustrated with their inability to take the city. As throughout the film, he is obsessed by military matters and conquest. He is depicted as a misanthropic, wizened commander who yells in his officers' faces in fits of temper: again, the violent Prussian military man. This is done to the point of caricature, however, so we cannot take the threat of this authoritarian king seriously. His fondness for the flute furthers the figure's absurdity; when Frederick picks up the instrument, one of his generals flips the battle plans over to reveal sheet music on the reverse side. With the music the king changes from vicious to weepy, embracing the same general in an apparent moment of emotional weakness. Though the king is a terror to his underlings, his gruff exterior hides a maudlin—but not soft—interior, which contradicts the idea of the self-controlled, austere Prussian character.

Frederick sends for Käsebier, who has a reputation as a clever criminal but has recently been sentenced to life in prison. The king wants the thief to help him infiltrate the city in return for his freedom. Glassenapp, the captain sent to retrieve Käsebier from jail, is an officious fool, and the soldiers he commands take their lead from him, as they are slow and lacking initiative themselves. Like the Prussian officer in *Die blauen Schwerter*, the captain and soldiers carry out their orders unquestioningly, but gone is the iron rigidity of character. Rather than being a tool of intimidation, Glassenapp's anger is a punch line every time Käsebier outsmarts him. He becomes more ridiculous with every indignant blow-up, because ultimately his own stupidity is to blame for letting the thief

slip through his fingers yet again. The soldiers under his command are equally clueless, but lack the captain's self-importance.

Having escaped his captors, Käsebier makes it to the Prussian encampment and surprises the king in a disguise; Frederick, rather than being angry or offended, is instead delighted with the thief's cleverness—he probably has some idea of his underlings' incompetence as well. This has the effect of putting Frederick on a similar level to our hero and making the king more relatable to the audience through the act of sharing a laugh at the expense of the officers. He is no longer the cold, distant figure of untouchable royalty that his grandfather Frederick I is in *Die blauen Schwerter*.

As in *Die blauen Schwerter*, another state provides a foil to Prussia: in this case it is Austria. The Austrians are stationed in Prague to stave off the Prussian offensive; just because they are fighting the Prussians, however, does not mean that they receive a favorable depiction. The Austrians are perhaps even more ridiculous than the Prussians. The soldiers are just as incompetent, if not more so, and the upper class, like the Saxons in the earlier film, are obsessed with luxury. The Austrian commander, Karl von Lothringen, complains of having to eat horse flesh—"ohne Salz!"—and is hyper-feminized (he dances ballet in the besieged city to pass the time). When Käsebier meets with Lothringen as part of the plan devised with Frederick, he taunts the Austrian: "Es wird Ihre Schuld vor der Geschichte sein, wenn Kultur und Geschmack von preußischen Säbel erstochen werden." This criticism of Prussia cannot be taken entirely seriously, however, as "Kultur und Geschmack" are being skewered by the film itself; in any case, at this moment we are not supposed to believe Käsebier's words completely, as he is engaged in an act of deception and manipulation.

Frederick II is also deceptive and manipulative, however. Käsebier soon discovers that the king has no intention of following through on his word to pardon him; rather, he plans to have him executed once he has fulfilled his purpose. The monarch, though less threatening than his predecessor in the *Die blauen Schwerter*, still has no real concern for his subjects. As he says in voice over as the camera surveys the troops aligned for battle, “Tausende von ihnen werden heute Abend fehlen. Doch wer ließe sich nicht gern für Majestät dezimieren?” This reflects the self-centered, careless throwing away of lower-class lives that was still the primary association with the Prussian monarchy at the time.

Though Frederick II retains these anti-proletarian qualities, his human fallibility, which provides quite a bit of comedy, also humanizes him to an extent. Such a depiction of a monarch, especially one as associated with military conquest as Frederick II, would not have been possible in the post-war period, when the explicit link between Prussia and fascism was so clearly drawn. Though laughter is far from praise, the comedic approach evinces an easing of the gravely serious view of Prussia as the root of all German evil, and furthermore hints at a plasticity in the portrayal of the great king that would be taken advantage of to a greater extent in the last stage of the GDR’s existence.

It is also worth noting that Frederick’s highest ranking officers, those whom he gathers for meetings in his tent and to whom he is inclined to give his brief shows of emotion, are not made villains in the film. They are, like their king, caricatures: in this case, of blindly loyal servants. They seem to believe in and depend on Frederick on a deep, emotional level, yet the potential insidious connection to the Führer cult that could be drawn here is never made explicit. The generals are never shown in violence, unlike

Glassenapp, who has to deal with Käsebier face to face. They are only laughable in their stoicism; one states on the eve of battle, in a moment of melodramatic chivalry, “Der Soldat fragt nicht; der Soldat handelt!” The generals could have very easily been made detestable figures of Prussian oppression, yet they remain harmless in their absurdity.

Another officer close to Frederick, his adjutant Krusemark, even evokes our sympathy; he is clearly terrified of his commander, overworked and underappreciated. When Käsebier gets him drunk and offers to copy out the orders the adjutant was given in order to falsify them, Krusemark welcomes the reprieve and thanks his new “friend” heartily. The next day, when the king discovers the changed orders, one cannot help but feel for the hapless adjutant, who promptly faints upon realizing his mistake. Ultimately, only Glassenapp can be said to be truly dislikable; he lacks even Frederick’s modest redeeming qualities.

Most telling of the film’s more nuanced take on Prussia, however, is a scene where Käsebier tries to convince a Czech girl, Katka, with whom he has fallen in love, to return to Prussia with him. He tells her, “Ich weiß, in Preußen ist der Himmel niedrig, und die Sonne klein,” but claims that with her it would all be different—the sky bluer, the grass greener, and the birds would stay. He explains that the birds leave in autumn and then come back, “aber dann kommt der Sommer mit seinem Kanonendonner, Luft ist dunkel von Pulverdampf und dann fliegen sie wieder fort.” Yet the birds always return, because “es ist ihre Heimat, weißt du, aber dann kommt der Sommer und es marschier wieder und so geht’s die Armee auch.” Just then the trumpet sounds to gather the troops, and Katka says gravely, “Hörst du? Der Sommer.”

The connection being drawn is between Käsebier and the birds: both are caught up in the cycles of the seasons, and both will always return to Prussia, because it is their home. The metaphor could be extended, though, to the relationship between Prussia and the GDR itself, and indeed this relationship is implied as Käsebier is the stand-in for the East German audience. Prussia is Käsebier's home, whether he likes it or not; he did not choose it, but it has an irresistible claim on him nonetheless. He cannot escape his past and the fact that he was born in Prussia; it is a part of who he is. So too for the GDR. No matter the ideological differences, it could not sever itself completely from its Prussian past. The heart of the GDR consisted of land that was once the heart of Prussia. The home of East Germans was once the home of Prussians, and dissolutions and demolitions could never fully erase that. The past has a claim on the present, and East Germans were starting to realize that they had to come to terms with this history rather than continually trying to refute its claim.

4.3 1973-1989: *The Rediscovery of Prussia*

4.3.1 *Historiography and Publications*

The seventies and eighties saw a broadening of public interest in Prussia¹²⁰ as well as increased leeway for historians of Prussian history.¹²¹ One area that relates both to the academic and public views of Prussia is that of historical books: not those written by historians for historians, but those written by historians for the public. Examples of such publications on Prussia with a wide appeal include Karl-Heinz Börner's 1976 study *Krise der preußischen Monarchie 1858 bis 1862* and the even more popular biography of

¹²⁰ Holtz, "Thema Preußen," 346.

¹²¹ Neugebauer, "Preußen als Forschungsthema," 105.

the “Soldatenkönig” by Heinz Kathe.¹²² After these came Ingrid Mittenzwei’s *Preußen nach dem Siebenjährigen Krieg* and Klaus Vetter’s *Kurmärkischer Adel und preußische Reformen*.¹²³

Most notable, however, was Mittenzwei’s biography of Frederick II, which appeared in 1979.¹²⁴ With this biography, according to Bärbel Holtz, neither the Hohenzollern king nor Prussia remained excluded from the *Geschichtsbild* of the GDR.¹²⁵ Mittenzwei emphasized the progressive aspects of Frederick’s reign¹²⁶ and highlighted the modernity of enlightened absolutism.¹²⁷ The biography was well received in both East and West Germany.¹²⁸ The recognition from the West was a sign that the goal of GDR historiography was becoming less “außerwissenschaftlich”; yet this does not rule out the possibility that even a balanced, more positive view of Prussia could have a political function in serving the legitimacy of the socialist system. Fritz Kopp wrote of the bibliography: “Ihre [Mittenzweis] Einstellung zu Preußen lockert und bereichert nur verfahrensmäßig, nicht aber grundsätzlich ihre leninistische Geschichtsdoktrin.”¹²⁹ This shows that a more generous view of elements of Prussian history previously associated with reactionism and conservatism (such as the Hohenzollern monarchs) did not necessarily contradict a socialist *Geschichtsbild*, as long as it held true to the proper Marxist-Leninist worldview. In fact, in the East Mittenzwei’s biography received praise

¹²² Bärbel Holtz indicates that 600 copies of Börner’s publication were printed, and that the second edition of Kathe’s biography reached 8,000. Holtz, “Thema Preußen,” 346.

¹²³ 750 copies for Mittenzwei; no enumeration is given for Vetter (ibid.).

¹²⁴ Holtz, “Thema Preußen,” 347.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ For a more detailed evaluation of Mittenzwei’s portrayal of Frederick II, see Meyers, *Friedrich II.*, 244.

¹²⁷ Holtz, “Thema Preußen,” 347. Cf. Mittenzwei, “Geburt des Prinzen,” *Neues Deutschland*, January 24, 1987: “Es gilt, das Wirken dieses Königs in seiner Zeit zu bewerten. Und hier bleibt als Urteil, daß er einige Schritte in eine Richtung tat, die den späteren Durchbruch zu neuen gesellschaftlichen Verhältnissen vorbereiten halfen.”

¹²⁸ Holtz, “Thema Preußen,” 347.

¹²⁹ Fritz Kopp, “Ändert die SED ihr Preußenbild?,” in *Deutsche Studien* XVIII (1980): 269-280, quoted in Meyers, *Friedrich II.*, 245.

from politicians in the highest positions; Hans Bentzien, the GDR's Minister of Culture from 1961 to 1965, judged the work in a 1991 interview as "eine alles in allem differenzierte Sicht auf den König und seinen Platz in der Geschichte."¹³⁰ Erich Honecker himself read the book and named it, in an interview with the English publisher Robert Maxwell, "eine Arbeit, die ich übrigens sehr schätze," although he would not "auf jeden Satz festnageln [...] lassen." He did not, however, see the biography as a breakthrough in the GDR's attitude towards Prussia; rather, he judged it to be "das Resultat unserer Haltung zum Erbe. Dazu gehört auch die Geschichte Preußens"¹³¹—not only the limited, progressive part of Prussia, but all of Prussian history. Concerning the attitude towards *Erbe* in the GDR, Honecker said:

Wir pflegen nicht allein revolutionäre, sozialistische Traditionen. Natürlich sind uns [...] das Erbe eines Thomas Müntzer und der revolutionären Kämpfe der Bauern des 16. Jahrhunderts, das Erbe der 1848er Revolution in Deutschland besonders kostbar. Vor allem gilt das für das Erbe der Klassiker unserer Weltanschauung, Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels, und die reichen Traditionen der deutschen und der internationalen revolutionären Arbeiterbewegung.

Wenn wir die geschichtliche Leistung von Martin Luther und Carl von Clausewitz würdigen, so stehen wir ganz in den Traditionen von Marx, Engels und Lenin, der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung und unserer Geschichte seit 1945. Keineswegs ignorieren wir dabei die Grenzen dieser und anderer Persönlichkeiten der deutschen Geschichte, ihre negativen Züge, ihr widerspruchsvolles Verhalten [...]. Es entspricht unserem Weltbild, die Geschichte in ihrem objektiven, tatsächlichen Verlauf, in ihrer gesamten Dialektik zu erfassen.¹³²

Thus an "objective" and nuanced view of German and Prussian history was, according to Honecker, an essential part of the Marxist view of history. All historical personalities and events must be taken into account, whether they had a positive, negative, or ambiguous effect on the course of history in relation to socialist goals. Only then, claims

¹³⁰ Hans Bentzien, "Der Ritt in die falsche Richtung," *blogsgesang.de*, January 18, 2012.

¹³¹ Robert Maxwell, *Erich Honecker: Aus meinem Leben* (Berlin: Dietz, 1980), 437.

¹³² Maxwell, *Aus meinem Leben*, 436.

Honecker, could the classic thinkers of Communism and their relationship with history be understood and the dialectical progress of history become clear. This understanding was meant to positively influence the actions of the citizenry in ways conducive to the aims of socialism by offering behavioral examples. Honecker saw the biography of Frederick II as a part of this objective evaluation of national history, and therefore as nothing astounding or new; nevertheless, his implicit claim that this attitude towards *Erbe* was and always had been self-evident in the GDR must be considered with skepticism. Others considered Mittenzwei's work a turning point, or at least an influential event, in the development of Prussia's depiction.¹³³

4.3.2 *Public Symbols and Events: The restoration of the Lindenforum and the exhibit at Sans Souci*

By 1980 the area around the central boulevard of Berlin (the Lindenforum), had already undergone major rebuilding efforts. The crowning moment of this project was the return of the equestrian statue of Frederick the Great to its original location on Unter den Linden that year. In 1950 the statue had been removed to a little-visited area of Sans Souci Park,¹³⁴ and then in 1961/62 was resituated in Charlottenhof Park. As the catalogue for an exhibit in Sans Souci on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the king's death explains, "die Erinnerung an die 'letzten Tage der Reichskanzlei' mit den Halluzinationen vom 'preußischen Wunder' des Zerbrechens der Antihitlerkoalition und dem Selbstmord vor einem Friedrich-Porträt" made it unimaginable to restore the statue

¹³³ For instance, Bentzien remarks that the biography was a reaction to the reevaluation of Prussia in West Germany. Bentzien, "Falsche Richtung."

¹³⁴ Rodemann, *Untergang*.

after the damage done to it by the bombs of the Second World War.¹³⁵ In fact, in June of 1950, before it could be removed, the statue was covered with straw mats on the occasion of a parade along Unter den Linden in order to make the shameful monument “unsichtbar.”¹³⁶ Given how scanty the cover provided by the mats was, their use seems more symbolic than anything; Frederick’s figure could still be clearly seen through the straw.¹³⁷

Three decades later this was obviously no longer a concern. Although the reinstallation had not yet occurred at the time, in the aforementioned interview Honecker referred to the return of the statue as the rounding out of the Lindenforum,¹³⁸ and in the same year ordered it to be done.¹³⁹ Speaking about the statue of Frederick and other Prussian figures around the center of Berlin, Honecker said: “Das alles sollte niemanden überraschen. In jedem der deutschen Lande gab es in der Vergangenheit Fortschrittliches und Reaktionäres, und die Standbilder wurden meist von berühmten Bildhauern geschaffen. Das ist ein Stück Kultur des Volkes.”¹⁴⁰

This attitude towards the monument as a “Stück Kultur” and a historical art object is mirrored in the 1986 catalogue “Friedrich II. und die Kunst.” The catalogue attributes the statue’s return merely to the rebuilding of the street itself, without addressing any potential political implications.¹⁴¹ The purpose of the catalogue was admitted to be simply artistic,¹⁴² and indeed the section on the equestrian statue mostly limits itself to

¹³⁵ *Friedrich II. und die Kunst*, ed. Generaldirektion der Staatlichen Schlösser und Gärten Potsdam-Sanssouci (1986), 63.

¹³⁶ Rodemann, *Untergang*.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Maxwell, *Aus meinem Leben*, 437.

¹³⁹ Bentzien, “Falsche Richtung.”

¹⁴⁰ Maxwell, *Aus meinem Leben*, 437.

¹⁴¹ *Kunst*, 63.

¹⁴² Joachim Mückenberger, forward of *ibid.*

discussing the aesthetic aspects of the piece.¹⁴³ Nevertheless it is noteworthy that nothing about contemporary politics and the monument is said, especially because the catalogue does remark on the original significance of the location: “Die Idee einer ‘Siegesallee’ erschien somit durch den exponierten Standort des Denkmals verwirklicht: Friedrich II. ritt auf hohem Roß vom Brandenburger Tor her kommend zum Schloß hin die Reihe der Helden-Standbilder ab.”¹⁴⁴ The implication of a “Siegesallee” towards the East did not escape the critics of Prussia who advocated the destruction of the statue in 1949.¹⁴⁵ To them the statue’s orientation was a metaphor for an anti-East and therefore anti-communist attitude. Despite—or perhaps because of—this observation, a political interpretation of Frederick’s return to Unter den Linden was lacking. Hans Bentzien said of this silence:

Es gab in DDR-Zeiten zu solchen durchaus brisanten Angelegenheiten kaum eine Diskussion, nie eine wirklich öffentliche Auseinandersetzung, in diesem Falle mit preußischer Geschichte. Was hätte man auch sagen sollen? Hätte man zugeben sollen, dass kurz nach Gründung der DDR einige ihrer führende Kräfte, quasi in Fortführung einer falsch interpretierten antifaschistischen Traditionslinie, für das Preußendenkmal keinen Platz mehr Unter den Linden sahen?¹⁴⁶

It is significant that the former Minister of Culture only said this after the Reunification of Germany. His statement proves problematic for the socialist *Geschichtsbild* and Honecker’s assertion of continuity in the East German attitude towards Prussian heritage. It is clear that Bentzien saw both the reinstallation of the statue and Mittenzwei’s biography of Frederick II as a sign of change in the view of Prussia. This change consisted of a silent rejection of the earlier hostile suppression of all things Prussian, even in regards to parts of history that had not already been adopted from the negative into the

¹⁴³ *Kunst*, 58.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Bentzien, “Falsche Richtung.”

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

positive line (as for instance, the Prussian generals had been). One could not, as Bentzien explains, contradict the founders of the GDR and their historical interpretation of Prussia. The result was that Prussia was severed from its political aspects and accepted wholly as a part of East German *Erbe*, because it had become impossible to fundamentally revise the evaluation of Prussia without determining the earlier attitude to be mistaken.

Another example of this “depoliticized” Prussia is the aforementioned exhibit in Sans Souci in 1986. Political implications of the art or of the exhibit itself were overlooked not only in the discussion of the equestrian statue of Frederick the Great but also throughout the entire exhibit. In the forward to the catalogue the General Director of the exhibit, Joachim Mückenberger, gives an altogether neutral portrayal of the monarch, neither too enthusiastic nor too critical. He acknowledges: “Auf die ganze historische Person Friedrich II. bezogen, sind wir uns der Einseitigkeit dieses Ausstellungsunternehmens bewußt. Diesen König insgesamt historisch zu werten, wäre ein anderes Vorhaben.”¹⁴⁷ The far simpler undertaking was to celebrate only culture and art. Although a somewhat critical comment on the character of the king appears here and there in the catalogue, the subject of his politics is completely avoided. Such an exhibit would have been unimaginable in the earlier GDR; in that period it was not permitted to admire the art of a reactionary regime.

4.3.3 *Film: Sachsens Glanz und Preußens Gloria*

Another heavily revised and differentiated depiction of the Hohenzollern king appears in the TV film *Sachsens Glanz und Preußens Gloria*, which appeared in 1985/87 and enjoyed considerable popularity within the GDR and recognition even beyond the

¹⁴⁷ Mückenberger, *Kunst*, foreword.

country's borders.¹⁴⁸ The film, which portrays events from 17th and 18th century history, is divided into three parts, the last of which is *Aus dem Siebenjährigen Krieg*. This section focuses on the conflict between Saxony and Prussia in the Seven Years' War through the eyes of both historical and fictional characters.

The dichotomy between Prussia and Saxony remains much the same as it was in *Die blauen Schwerter*—similar also to the dichotomy between the Prussians and the Austrians in *Die gestohlene Schlacht*. Saxony is decadent, wasteful, and governed by purely aristocratic ideals, while militaristic order reigns in Prussia; a major difference from earlier depictions, however, is that this militaristic order is no longer portrayed in a necessarily negative light.

The film establishes the luxurious atmosphere of the Saxon court in Dresden as a narrator explains Saxony's ambitions towards Silesia. It then cuts to Frederick II on the terrace of Sans Souci telling his chamberlain Fredersdorf of his own plans to seize Silesia. He declares, "Die Liebe zum Vaterland und zum Ruhme treibt den Menschen zum Heldentat." The claim is not absurd, however, as it would have been played in *Die gestohlene Schlacht*. Rather, Frederick speaks with a self-possessed confidence and authority that he maintains throughout the film. This is reflected in his physicality as well; Arno Wyzniewski, the actor who plays Frederick, appears taller and more upright than most who have portrayed the king, such as the iconic Frederick look-alike Otto Gebühr of Weimar and Third Reich cinema, and Herwart Grosse, who played the king in *Die gestohlene Schlacht*.

¹⁴⁸ See for instance the following *Neues Deutschland* articles: "Produktionen des DDR-Fernsehens im Ausland gezeigt," June 23, 1987; "Den Zuschauer teilnehmen lassen an ungewöhnlichen Schicksalen," August 7, 1987; "Fernsehfilme aus der DDR im Ausland gezeigt," November 4, 1987; "Attraktiver Filmroman um eine legendäre Liebesgeschichte," December 28, 1987.

The film is still implicitly critical of Frederick's militaristic policy, however. The film cuts from Sans Souci to the battlefield, where we see Prussian soldiers advancing. One is shot, and the camera stays on his still body as the others pass him by. It then cuts back to Frederick, uttering a famous quote of his: "Der Soldat muss einen Offizier fürchten mehr als den Feind!" Then, over a montage of superimposed battle sequences, the narrator describes Europe's surprise and disappointment at the war of aggression the self-proclaimed philosopher king had waged at the beginning of his reign. The narrator ends, by way of explanation or perhaps excuse, by explaining that Frederick acted according to the principles of *Staatsräson*, and assumed the role of "first servant of the State."

Early in the film, the main protagonist, the Swiss Max de Simonis, comes to Potsdam to offer his services to the king. The Gräfin von Lamas warns Simonis, who is optimistic at the prospect of working for the "Philosoph von Sans Souci," that this is not a decision to be taken lightly; Frederick, she says, considers betrayal or desertion as "höchste Verbrechen," to be "gnadenlos bestraft;" the film immediately cuts to a scene of a soldier being disciplined by running the gauntlet.

Nevertheless, Simonis maintains his positive impression of the king after receiving his assignment as a spy in the Dresden court. As Simonis rides through the city of Potsdam, which seems filled with more soldiers marching through the streets than civilians, the narrator tells the audience what Max is thinking: "Max de Simonis ist beeindruckt von diesem Herrscher, der alles für die Macht seines Staates tut. Die Armee ist der Garant seiner Herrschaft." But an army needs more than drills, the narrator points out—it also needs to be sustained, and so Frederick supports the development of

agriculture and business. The narrator frames the king as practically a progressive, remarking on his religious tolerance and the abolition of torture; Frederick welcomes farmers and craftsmen who elsewhere are persecuted for their beliefs, and would even abolish serfdom, if he were able to bypass his nobles. To Simonis, serving such a man seems “reizvoll und ehrenvoll,” even if his work will depend on deception.

The film never contradicts this favorable view of the monarch, and it manages to do so without blatantly ignoring the harsher, disciplinarian aspects of Frederick’s rule and character. When a Prussian lieutenant disobeys orders and goes to visit his fiancée, the Saxon noblewoman Pepita von Nostitz, his transgression is portrayed as the result of a lack of judgment and Pepita’s irresponsible seduction. When the lieutenant is found out, Fredersdorf pleads on his behalf for Frederick’s understanding; Frederick, as always, demands absolute order in his army. Letting the lieutenant go would set a dangerous example, and so the soldier faces the firing squad.

When we see Pepita crying over the death of her fiancée, she is surprisingly unsympathetic. Even as she declares her hate for the inhumane king of Prussia, she does not appear heartbroken enough for the lieutenant to have been a true love, thereby reinforcing the film’s implication that her own carelessness and naïveté are to be blamed for her fiancée’s death. Frederick was simply carrying out the law, which was well known to the lieutenant when Pepita convinced him to stay the night with her. The Gräfin von Nostitz, who is Pepita’s aunt and a Prussian sympathizer, tells Pepita as much and further justifies the king’s actions. She says, “Ohne diese strenge Subordination, würde Friedrich niemals erreichen, dass seine Ideen verwirklicht werden,” to which the Saxon colonel Olaf von Rosen replies that indeed, no army or state can exist without

discipline; but that discipline should come not from fear of punishment but rather “aus einer inneren Bereitschaft seiner Bürger und Soldaten.” The Gräfin scoffs however, and says that for that Saxony would need “ganz andere Bürger und Soldaten.”

This scene, perhaps more than any other, speaks directly to the intended audience. The “inner readiness” to serve the state that Colonel von Rosen calls for is meant not only for the Saxons of his time, but for contemporary East Germans. The citizens and soldiers of the GDR are the “ganz andere Bürger und Soldaten” who possess the qualities that the Saxon people of an earlier era lacked, presumably due to the lack of proper leadership. This sets up a framework in which Frederick II’s Prussia is further advanced towards the modern socialist state than Saxony. Only a patriotic, socialist upbringing can instill the proper form of “inner readiness” in the citizenry; however, the historical moment of the socialist state has not yet arisen in the 18th century. Until it does, Frederick’s goal-oriented discipline is preferable to the ineffectual leadership of the Saxon regime, which does nothing to impart a sense of duty to its citizens and soldiers. In this respect, Frederick was a necessary and, in the GDR’s linear conception of history, progressive step towards the ideal German state: a historical figure worthy of an elevated place in the *Geschichtsbild*.

Prussia’s superior leadership is emphasized through contrast with Saxony’s governance at every possible opportunity. August III of Saxony is a spoiled, whiny man of weak character; when forced to remove from Dresden to the fortress of Königstein, all he can do is complain that there is “keine Musik, keine Bilder, keine Jagd,” and when he hears Frederick has taken Dresden, the first thing he wants to know is what the Prussian king thinks of his art collection. Augustus could not possibly be any more opposite to

Frederick in every aspect. He cares nothing for the actual art of ruling; all political decisions are left to the scheming, self-serving First Minister Brühl. The relationship between Augustus and Brühl is also a stark contrast to that between Frederick and Fredersdorf. Brühl is a complete sycophant, obsequiously agreeing with every insipid opinion Augustus voices while he runs the kingdom behind the scenes; Fredersdorf often provides a voice of opposition to Frederick, but in the end has little effect on actual policy because the king always turns out to be right. The relationship between Frederick and Fredersdorf can be seen as a model of the SED's self image; ostensibly open to counsel, but never truly in need of it due to the wise governing hand at the very top.

Though Frederick's harshness is never glossed over, the Prussian king ends the film on the moral high ground compared to nearly every other character. Whenever he acts with what might be considered ruthlessness, the film presents it as justifiable. He drives his soldiers to exhaustion, but Frederick himself is shown dirty and nearly asleep on his horse as he leads his army on; he merely expects the same dedication from his subordinates. Brühl, not Frederick, is blamed for Saxony's downfall, even by the Saxon nobles themselves. Frederick allows his soldiers to loot and sack the minister's palace, but Brühl's despicable actions warrant the retribution—the narrator informs the audience that this plundering remained a unique occurrence in Frederick's reign. In one of the few scenes that provide an emotional identification with the cool and distant monarch, Frederick unknowingly gives one of his beloved greyhounds poisoned hot chocolate meant for him. The king, who a moment before had been in a rare moment of repose reading Plutarch's *Moralia*, looks on in concern as his pet whimpers and eventually lies

still. When the servant who attempted the assassination is sentenced to hang, the viewer is more sympathetic towards Frederick's outrage than the doomed man's fear.

Even when Frederick imposes a death sentence on Max de Simonis, who has been playing both sides in the war, he seems justified. By the time Simonis is shot trying to escape, the viewer has lost much of their empathy for his character. Against all warning, he has succumbed to his own ambition and betrayed the Prussian king. It is as if Simonis' time in the hedonistic atmosphere of Dresden corrupts him, and he becomes more and more selfish as the film goes on. Frederick is one of the very few characters who continue to act on principle to the end; he is consistent with his own rules.

Thus Prussia receives a rehabilitation through film that Saxony is denied. Though a few Saxon characters retain the audience's sympathy, it is mostly on a personal level of emotion, whereas Frederick earns the audience's respect. As Frederick is the representative of the Prussian state, that respect is extended to the historical Prussia, but not to the historical Saxony. The choice of title reflects this value judgment; a socialist state might admire the "Gloria" of the past, but certainly not the "Glanz" associated with the wealthy elite.

The film ends with the narrator informing us that Saxony will have to start anew. The narrator's last words are: "Aber Sachsens Glanz, und Preußens Gloria"—here the film cuts to a low-angle shot (which tends to imbue the subject with power) of Frederick against the sky with a golden Prussian eagle perched atop a structure in the background—"wirken vielfach gespiegelt und gebrochen in die Zukunft." This neutral assertion of the effects Saxony and Prussia had on the course of history reflects the era's general depoliticized view of heritage. Screenwriter Albrecht Börner's assertion that "Allerdings

hatten wir überhaupt keine ideologische Absicht, sondern eine künstlerische”¹⁴⁹ further echoes the separation of art from ideology symptomatic of Prussia’s treatment at this time. Though both the narration and the director avoid explicit political statements, the film speaks for itself. This is not to suggest that Börner was intentionally hiding a secret agenda; to the contrary, the fact that he would make and believe such an assertion reveals how fundamentally Prussia’s place in the *Geschichtsbild* of the GDR had changed.

5. *Conclusion: “Ein Volk sich seine Geschichte nicht aussuchen kann”*¹⁵⁰

The question remains why the view of Prussia changed so starkly. Why was Prussia integrated, at least superficially, into the *Geschichtsbild* of the GDR at all? Would it have not been far simpler always to suppress Prussia, and hold fast to the attitudes of the early GDR? The problem with this solution, however, would be that the traces of Prussia were still so evident. In the double-pronged theory of German history, the progressive tradition alone was not enough to yield a complete *Geschichtsbild*. The constant rejection of such a large part of the German people’s own history would offer little historical legitimacy. The foreword of the West German publication *Besinnung auf Preußen*, speaking generally of Germany’s relationship with its past, eloquently captures the dilemma:

Flucht vor der Vergangenheit also, aber sie bringt keine Befreiung; sie beschwört nur stärker eine größere Bedrohung herauf: Minderung der kulturellen Substanz; denn Kultur ist nicht als ein hier und jetzt Lebendiges zu verstehen ohne Zusammenhang mit dem Gewordenen aus der Geschichte. Kultur ist—anders als die Technik—auf die Auseinandersetzung mit dem geschichtlich Gewordenen angewiesen, denn sie ist nicht eine aus einem einzelnen Impuls entstandene Leistung, sondern organisches Werden aus Vergangenem und Gegenwärtigem,

¹⁴⁹ Rainer Waterkamp, *Der Wandel des Preußenbildes in den DDR-Medien* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 1997), 20.

¹⁵⁰ Ingrid Mittenzwei, quoted in Azaryahu, *Politische Symbole*, 144.

gleich ob das Gegenwärtige das Vergangene positiv oder negativ zu werten gewillt ist.¹⁵¹

“Cultural substance” is necessary for the claim of historical, and thereby political, legitimacy; it binds the past to the present and stakes out the communal space of the nation through its assertion of continuity. Culture cannot arise solely out of political *Tradition*, however—it arises “organically” from *Erbe*. Thus it is better to lay claim to as much history, and therefore culture, as possible; political legitimacy best arises from historical precedence.

Over the course of the GDR’s existence, the depiction of Prussia changed drastically from unconditionally negative to selectively positive. The attempt to claim the heritage of Prussian culture for the East German people necessitated the integration of significant elements of Prussian history into the *Gechichtsbild*, which earlier had condemned every trace of the Prussian past. Although the artifacts of Prussian culture stemmed from a mostly conservative historical context, they were, as Honecker said, simply portrayed as depoliticized pieces of heritage. That was the only way in which the GDR could tie itself more closely to its own past. Thus the East German citizenry could be offered a historically grounded identity without contradicting the socialist founding principles of the GDR.

¹⁵¹ Koenigswald and Merkatz, eds., foreword to *Besinnung auf Preußen*, 7.

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