

Descent of the *Sonderweg*: Hans Rosenberg's History of Old-Regime Prussia

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Considering that the future of Germany depends on this generation now coming of age, to which I too belong, one could become a pessimist.

From a letter of Hans Rosenberg, age 21,
to Friedrich Meinecke, 2 September 1925.¹

Pietätsgrenzen werden bei der Wahrheitssuche nicht respektiert werden können.

Hans Rosenberg, 1967.²

BEFORE Hans Rosenberg reached his thirtieth year, the National Socialist seizure of power, abetted and applauded by disproportionate numbers of his contemporaries, drove him into exile. Many years later he wrote of the “curiosity and anxiety” he felt toward the catastrophe of German fascism, which had “disfigured and bismirched the wrinkled historic face of my native land beyond recognition,” giving it “the most sordid and brutal expression in its entire past.” Rosenberg’s effort to comprehend this outcome led him to the history, not of the National Socialist movement and dictatorship, but of the Prussian state and its “political aristocracy.” These were, in one way or another, the subjects of all his mature works, and especially of his book, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy: The Prussian Experience 1660–1815*.³ Of all arguments deriving the preconditions and triumph—

1. Quoted in Heinrich August Winkler, “Ein Erneuerer der Geschichtswissenschaft: Hans Rosenberg 1904–1988,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 248, no. 3 (1989): 532, and in Gerhard A. Ritter, “Hans Rosenberg 1904–1988,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 15 (1989): 284.

2. Hans Rosenberg, *Grosse Depression und Bismarckzeit: Wirtschaftsablauf, Gesellschaft, und Politik in Mitteleuropa* (Berlin/West, 1967), 58.

3. Hans Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy: The Prussian Experience 1660–1815* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958) hereafter *BAA*, Quotations, *ibid.*, 229, 109. On generational cohorts in Weimar Germany, see Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik: Krisenjahre der klassischen Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main, 1987).

though not the identity—of Nazism from the structures and dynamics of Prussian history, this was the most influential.

Rosenberg's scholarship reverberates with a moral and ideological passion heightened by the involuntary emigré's just grievance. In 1977, when he returned to permanent residence in Germany, he accepted an honorary degree from the University of Bielefeld, on his own behalf and in the name of other anti-Nazi German refugees in the United States, "as a symbolic act of intellectual reparation" (*Wiedergutmachung*). On the same occasion, he reaffirmed his lifelong refusal "to confuse historical objectivity with indifference, agnostic neutrality or absence of judgment."⁴ Throughout his career he intended his scholarly work to challenge those who would surround the German past with "pious boundaries," and in his rhetoric and imagery, as in his arguments, he aimed for radical effects. For example, on the cover of the paperback edition of his book on Prussia there stood, against a background of Prussian blue, a black row of hulking figures, identical and featureless except for their pointed boots and hangman-like hoods. These Prussian myrmidons heralded the coming of the "hideous apocalyptic horsemen" of nazism, "the monstrous new barbarians." In 1977, he recalled with satisfaction, of the reception of the book in West Germany, that "the approach and the results of my investigation aroused uneasiness and emotional discomfort." In attacking "the hydra of the Prussian myth," he had struck a vital nerve of the conservative intellectuals and politicians whose responsibility for Germany's crimes and misfortunes he so sternly intoned.⁵

Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy was Rosenberg's first major publication since 1943–44, when *The American Historical Review* ran his lengthy article, "The Rise of the Junkers in Brandenburg-Prussia, 1410–1653." The rigors of life as an emigré professor had brought his pen,

4. Hans Rosenberg, "Rückblick auf ein Historikerleben zwischen zwei Kulturen," address delivered in Bielefeld on 2 November 1977, in Hans Rosenberg, *Machteliten und Wirtschaftskonjunkturen: Studien zur neueren deutschen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1978), 11–23, quotation from 23, 19; see also 13.

5. Quotations from *BAA*, 229–30, 234, and "Rückblick," 20. The paperback edition of *BAA* appeared in 1966. It was identical in text and pagination to the first edition, with the exception that Rosenberg omitted from it the hardcover version's "Postscript," 229–38. The postscript's commentary on the linkage between Prussian traditions and Nazism, and its angry censure of the conservative and restorationist tendencies of post-1945 West German historiography, make it a valuable document for the purposes of the present article (which cites the first edition throughout the text below). In 1977, Rosenberg defended the "combative and polemical undertones" of the original book, and especially the postscript, but held that the latter's exclusion in later issues was justified because it had been "superseded," presumably because of progressive developments among the younger generation of historians in West Germany; "Rückblick," 20–21.

impressively busy during his early career in Germany, to a near standstill. But the book on Prussia, apart from lifting him in 1959 from Brooklyn College to Berkeley, advanced him, by broad consent, to the forefront of the interpreters of what Friedrich Meinecke, Rosenberg's eminent mentor, had famously (if ethnocentrically) called the "German catastrophe." These were rich returns on the research project Rosenberg had conceived during World War II, which he had described in a letter of 1946 to Meinecke as "my scholarly and ideological contribution to the restructuring"—or even, as one citation of this document has it, "'democratic' restructuring"—"of Germany."⁶ In 1977, Rosenberg remembered how, after the entry of the United States into the war against Germany, he arrived at the "audacious decision to take on the task of a comprehensive social history of the preindustrial Prussian-German ruling elites." At war himself with the German past, Rosenberg planned the "analysis" (*Sezierung*) of the "authoritarian power-triad"—the east-Elbian noble landlords (or Junkers), the Prussian bureaucracy, and the aristocratic army officer corps. By maintaining into the age of "industrial mass society" their own "elite positions in the social hierarchy of rank, honor, and prestige," as well as in the political apparatus of the power-state, these privileged and interlocking groups had assured the "perpetuation [*Verewigung*] of preindustrial values" in German society. "Filled with a

6. Rosenberg to Meinecke, 6 May 1946, quoted by Gerhard A. Ritter, "Rosenberg," 292. In Winkler's citation of this passage, fuller than Ritter's, the word "democratic" does not qualify "restructuring"; Winkler, "Ein Erneuerer," 541. Hans Rosenberg, "The Rise of the Junkers in Brandenburg-Prussia, 1410–1653," appeared in *The American Historical Review* 49, nos. 1–2 (1943–1944): 1–22, 228–42. Friedrich Meinecke, *Die deutsche Katastrophe: Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen* first appeared in 1946 and, in English, in 1950 (Boston).

On Rosenberg's life and career, intellectual formation, political and philosophical convictions, and scholarly accomplishments, see his own accounts in "Rückblick" and BAA ("Postscript"), as well as in his introductions to Hans Rosenberg, *Politische Denkströmungen im deutschen Vormärz* (Göttingen, 1972 [reissued essays of 1929–1931]), 7–17, and Hans Rosenberg, *Die Weltwirtschaftskrise 1857–1859* (Göttingen, 1974 [reissue of original edition of 1934]), v–xxv, Ritter's and Winkler's articles of 1989 (cited in n. 1, above) are the best secondary accounts, but also valuable are Gerhard A. Ritter, ed., "Vorwort," in *Entstehung und Wandel der modernen Gesellschaft: Festschrift für Hans Rosenberg zum 65. Geburtstag* (Berlin/West, 1970), v–x; Hans-Ulrich Wehler, ed., "Vorwort," *Sozialgeschichte Heute: Festschrift für Hans Rosenberg zum 70. Geburtstag* (Göttingen, 1974), 9–21; Otto Büsch, "In Memoriam Hans Rosenberg, 1904–1988," *Jahrbuch für die Geschichte Mittel- und Ostdeutschlands* 37 (1988): 523–28; Ernst Schulin, ed., *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg (1945–1965)* (Munich, 1989), 20–22, 270–72; and Hanna Schissler, "Explaining History: Hans Rosenberg," in Hartmut Lehmann and James Sheehan, eds., *An Interrupted Past: Refugee Historians in the United States after 1933* (Cambridge, 1991). For a critique of Rosenberg's analytical method, focused on his treatment of business cycles, see Geoff Eley, "Hans Rosenberg and the Great Depression of 1873–1896: Politics and Economics in Recent German Historiography, 1960–1980," in Geoff Eley, *From Unification to Nazism: Reinterpreting the German Past* (Boston, 1986), 23–41.

sense of superiority and sanctifying old-established barriers of social rank and class," they ended their careers—"the incarnation, so to speak, of [Germany's] historical handicaps"—by helping "decisively" to ruin the Weimar Republic and raise the Nazis to power.⁷

As he said in 1958 of National Socialism, alluding to the West German conservatives of the 1950s who minimized the depth of its roots in German history, "I could not accept the naïve and shallow view that this frenzied outburst was but a tragic accident or, at most, only a fatal aberration which started after Bismarck's dismissal." The crucial problem, he had thought, was how Nazism had been possible "in long-term perspective" (*säkularer Sicht*).⁸

This is the question that yielded the *Sonderweg* thesis, or the argument that German history followed a centuries-long special and separate course of development culminating, pathologically, in nazism. It differs from the more benign question of the uniqueness and individual virtue of German culture and history, which inspired countless hymns of praise and self-congratulation in the age of prefascist German nationalism, from Herder to Spengler. Nor is it the same question as that of the structural and ideological divergence of Imperial Germany from its western neighbors and competitors that, in varying degrees, troubled Max Weber, Otto Hintze, Ernst Troeltsch, and Friedrich Meinecke. The *Sonderweg* thesis arose in the shadow of nazism and its horrors, as a structurally oriented, chronologically long-range and (in West German practice) antinationalistic and self-critical effort to explain them. Though Hans Rosenberg was not the first historian to undertake such an analysis, the arguments of his book on Prussia and his studies of the old-regime Junkers (like the forward-looking deductions he drew from those works) proved so forceful and convincing, both during and since the 1960s, that he must be reckoned among the most influential early proponents of the *Sonderweg* thesis.⁹

7. Quotations from "Rückblick," 19.

8. Quotations from BAA, 229, and "Rückblick," 21. In BAA, 235, n. 8, Rosenberg criticized Gerhard Ritter especially harshly for apologetic treatment of German conservative traditions. In the mid-1960s Ritter threw his considerable weight against a German translation of Rosenberg's book; see Wehler, ed., *Sozialgeschichte Heute*, 17.

9. See, for its historiographical analysis and citation of the literature (as well as for its high assessment of Rosenberg's contribution), Jürgen Kocka, "German History before Hitler: The Debate about the German *Sonderweg*," *Journal of Contemporary History* 23 (1988): 3–16. For a discussion of the *Sonderweg* problem from a different but related angle, see Gerald D. Feldman, "The Weimar Republic: A Problem of Modernization?" *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 26 (1986): 1–26. On nationalist elements in German historiography, see George C. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*, rev. ed. (Middletown, Conn., 1983) and Bernd Faulenbach, *Ideologie des deutschen Weges: Die deutsche Geschichte in der Historiographie zwischen*

The implications of *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy* for a long view of modern German history were evident to its most eminent reviewers, but they shrank from embracing them. Hans Herzfeld, one of Rosenberg's few highly placed supporters in the early postwar West German historical guild, acknowledged in a lengthy review published in 1962 that the book, "proceeding from the fact that modern totalitarianism has so far [!] triumphed only in the formerly absolutist lands of

Kaiserreich und Nationalsozialismus (Munich, 1980). On post-World War II developments, see Winfried Schulze, *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft nach 1945* (Munich, 1989). A very influential version of the *Sonderweg* argument was presented by Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (New York, 1967 [German original, 1965]).

On the debates triggered by the *Sonderweg* thesis as argued in the work of Hans-Ulrich Wehler and his colleagues, and synthesized in Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Das deutsche Kaiserreich, 1871–1918* (Göttingen, 1973), see the arguments and literature presented in David Blackburn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984), as well as Hans-Ulrich Wehler, "Historiography in Germany Today," in Jürgen Habermas, ed., *Observations on "The Spiritual Situation of the Age": Contemporary German Perspectives* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984 [German original, 1979]), 221–59. Also useful are Robert G. Moeller, "The Kaiserreich Recast? Continuity and Change in Modern German Historiography," *Journal of Social History* 17, no. 4 (1984): 655–83; James N. Retallack, "Social History with a Vengeance? Some Reactions to H.-U. Wehler's *Das deutsche Kaiserreich*," *German Studies Review* 8, no. 3 (1984): 423–50; Roger Fletcher, "Recent Developments in West German Historiography: The Bielefeld School and Its Critics," *German Studies Review* 8, no. 3 (1984): 451–80; Richard J. Evans, "The Myth of Germany's Missing Revolution," *New Left Review* 149 (1985): 67–94; and Charles A. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 100–120.

The *Sonderweg* thesis, because it derives National Socialism from the weakness of liberal-democratic political institutions in Germany, corresponds to the interests of philosophical and ideological liberals. The conservative nationalist position, as argued for example by Gerhard Ritter in *Das deutsche Problem* (Munich, 1962 [first edition, 1948]), rejected this approach, on historicist grounds and because it opposed judgment of German developments by liberal teleologies and Western norms. Marxist historiography has treated the relationship between liberalism and industrial capitalism either as a temporary connection typical of the age of bourgeois revolution or, more subtly, as entirely contingent on prevailing political culture. In this perspective, the only indispensable condition for capitalist development is the clearing away of legal, institutional, and other structural impediments to industrial growth and the private accumulation of capital, which can be effected by various political means other than parliamentary liberalism. This condition having been met in Germany through the foundation of the Bismarckian Empire, arguments concerning a German *Sonderweg* only obscure the unhappy circumstance that fascism is one potentiality of bourgeois society. Still, since radical fascism (in the form of National Socialism) occurred only in Germany, neither conservative nor Marxist historians can avoid offering their own "special path" arguments. In the "classic" literature, see Friedrich Engels, *The Role of Force in History*, ed. Ernst Wangermann (New York, 1968); for the Marxist-Leninist approach, see Joachim Herrmann et al., *Deutsche Geschichte in 10 Kapiteln* (Berlin/East, 1988); on the Frankfurt School's approach to fascism, see Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Boston, 1973); for recent Western Marxist analysis, see Eley and Blackburn, *Peculiarities of German History*, passim, and Geoff Eley, "What Produces Fascism: Pre-Industrial Traditions or a Crisis of the Capitalist State?" *Politics and Society* 12, no. 1 (1983): 53–82.

continental Europe, poses with penetrating sharpness the question of the ongoing legacy to the German catastrophes of the twentieth century of earlier Prussian and German history.” But Herzfeld concluded by skeptically questioning “how far back, and in what degree of strength, the developmental inevitability [leading to those catastrophes] can be dated,” and how decisively earlier German history determined “the developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which lay outside the sphere of German motivations”—references, presumably, to industrialization and widening popular political mobilization. Gerhard Oestreich’s cool but not unbenevolent appraisal found that Rosenberg, in treating the sociopolitical structure of old-regime Prussia as “an essential precondition of the possibility of National Socialist rule in Germany,” drew the age of absolutism “into dubious nearness to totalitarianism.” Yet, in Oestreich’s view, “the decisive upheaval in the social structure, the phenomenon of industrialization and the ideology of nationalism, in other words, the problems of change in society and economy in the individual states of the nineteenth century,” were “much more influential” than the absolutist legacy. Rosenberg’s linkage of old-regime Prussia and the Nazi regime “threatens to lead to a new myth of eternal autocracy.”¹⁰

But by the end of the sixties such criticism, which left unspecified—and so still mystified—the relationship between Prussian history and German fascism, retreated before the triumphant advance in West Germany of “critical social history.” This movement consolidated historiographical ground won domestically against the conservative old guard of the 1950s by the circles around Karl Dietrich Bracher and Fritz Fischer. It also embraced the powerful postwar American arguments deriving the tragedy of “German exceptionalism” from the “failure of liberalism,” in the explanation of which Rosenberg’s argument often played a weighty part—though not an indispensable one (as witness Leonard Krieger’s *German Idea of Freedom*). In 1970, Gerhard A. Ritter wrote in the introduction to the first of Rosenberg’s two *Festschriften*, both of which were influential displays of the new “social history of politics,” that the master’s work showed how “in some sectors one must trace the roots of

10. Hans Herzfeld and Wilhelm Berges, “Bürokratie, Aristokratie, und Autokratie in Preussen,” *Jahrbuch für die Geschichte Mittel- und Ostdeutschlands* 11 (1962): 282–96, quotations from 284, 288–89; Gerhard Oestreich’s review appeared in the *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 52 (1965): 276–81, quotations from 277–78. Other reviews were brief and, though respectful of Rosenberg’s accomplishment, more or less critical of his arguments. See *American Historical Review* 64, no. 3 (1959): 646–47 (W. M. Simon); *Journal of Modern History* 31, no. 4 (1959): 362–63 (Reinhold A. Dorwart); *German Life and Letters* 12 (1959–60): 235–36 (Peter Paret); *Historische Zeitschrift* 191 (1960): 212–13 (Fritz Terveen).

Germany's special and faulty development [*Sonder- und Fehlentwicklung*] back to the Middle Ages." Rosenberg's book on Prussia, in demonstrating "the strength both of the official class, merging or connecting itself ever more closely with the feudal aristocratic elements, and of bureaucratic class-ideology, offers an explanation for the very fateful weakness of the liberal forces in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany." In Rosenberg's second festschrift of 1974, self-confidently entitled *Sozialgeschichte Heute*, Hans-Ulrich Wehler acclaimed Rosenberg's *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy and Autocracy* as "one of the most important postwar contributions to the discussion of German special development [*Sonderentwicklung*] and its burdens."¹¹

The criticism levelled in the late 1970s and 1980s at the *Sonderweg* thesis, though not aimed directly at Rosenberg, called his bolder theses into question. The West German *Historikerstreit* ("historians' debate") subsequently shifted attention to twentieth-century questions empirically distant from his work.¹² Nevertheless, in the aftermath of his death in 1988, Rosenberg's eminence in postwar historiography stood beyond doubt. Heinrich August Winkler's eloquent tribute in the *Historische Zeitschrift* concluded that "the thesis of the 'German special path' received from Rosenberg, even if he never employed the concept, its specifically social-historical shape, and through him decisively formed a whole generation of German and American historians." Though Rosenberg shared with Werner Conze and Theodor Schieder, among scholars of his own generation, the distinction in postwar Germany of sparking historians' interest in "social-science theory and methods," it was "the 'critical,' resolutely liberal approach, aimed at emancipation from the burdensome legacy of the authoritarian state, that was—leaving aside the methodologically 'conservative' Fritz Fischer—his alone." Dismissing the critics of *Sonderweg* theory, Winkler defiantly declared that Rosenberg's arguments had been neither effectively refuted nor replaced by "historically more penetrating explanations of the 'German catastrophe.'"¹³

11. Quotations from Ritter, "Rosenberg," v, viii, ix; Wehler, ed., *Sozialgeschichte Heute*, 16. Characteristic of Wehler's views on the German Empire was his mis-citation of Rosenberg's book of 1967 as "Grosse Repression und Bismarckzeit"; *ibid.*, 19, n. 3. Leonard Krieger, *The German Idea of Freedom: History of a Political Tradition* (Chicago, 1957).

12. Rudolf Augstein, et al., "*Historikerstreit*": *Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung* (Munich, 1987). For analysis of the debate and references to the now extensive literature in English, see Peter Baldwin, ed., *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians' Debate* (Boston, 1990).

13. Winkler, "Ein Erneuerer," 529–56, *passim*; quotations from 551, 553. Winkler found the *Sonderweg* thesis set forth in Rosenberg's *Habilitationsschrift*, Hans Rosenberg, *Rudolf Haym und die Anfänge des klassischen Liberalismus* (Munich, 1933), as well as in all his

The hinge upon which Rosenberg's analysis of the Sonderweg turned was Prussian absolutism, the subject of *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy*. If this book was, as Rosenberg claimed, a study in "social history," it was in the sense that it focused on the social composition of the governing elites of the Kingdom of Prussia as they were transformed and realigned through the rise of the absolutist regime. At a higher level it was a sociological history, for Rosenberg presented his study of Prussia, with appropriate references to Max Weber, as one instance of "the bureaucratization of the modern world."¹⁴ Rosenberg's concern with the strengthening of bureaucratic structures and the consolidation of an aristocratized corps of executive officials transcended Weberian fears that the modern bureaucratized state would block or corrupt the liberal-democratic self-government of civil society. Although Rosenberg's reading of German history to 1933 found those fears well justified, far grimmer was the way in which government by authoritarian bureaucracy, born in the absolutist era, issued in the "totalitarian dictatorships" of modern times, with their capacity to "become barbarous when they make organized lawlessness, brute force, and irrationality parts of 'normal' government."¹⁵

This connection of bureaucratization to totalitarianism was the link Rosenberg forged, to the indignation of his conservative critics, between Prussian absolutism and National Socialism. However, if the centralization and magnification of state power by bureaucratic means were universal tendencies, how was the radical fascist outcome in Germany alone to be explained? Rosenberg conceded that, "because of their aristocratic-oligarchic traditions and their strong vested interests," it had nowhere been easy in modern times to "turn the bureaucratic manipulators of unaccountable upper class government into public servants, representative of the freely expressed will of 'the people' who make up the State."

subsequent works; Winkler, "Ein Erneuerer," 533–34, 542–43. In other eulogies, Otto Büsch, "In Memoriam," 524, honored Rosenberg as the "most significant cofounder" of the school "of 'the critical history of society'" Ritter, "Rosenberg," 299, acclaimed Rosenberg, especially on account of his *Grosse Depression und Bismarckzeit*, as "the exemplar and mentor of the 'critical' social history that established itself at the end of the 1960s and thought of itself as 'historical social science.'" On the Fischer controversy, see the symposium in *Central European History* 21, no. 3 (1988): 203–43.

14. BAA, viii, 2.

15. BAA, 2. With such words as "barbarous" and "irrational" Rosenberg alluded to the crimes of National Socialism. So far as I have discovered, he never wrote plainly of the Nazis' murder of the Jews, or of other groups of victims. Leaving aside its psychological functions, such reticence, not untypical of well-educated German and German-Jewish survivors of his generation, seems to display a deep reluctance to associate "the State"—with its idealist attributes of reason and morality—with bloody savagery.

In Germany, where—as also in Russia—this transformation failed to occur, the results were “bleak” and “tragic.”¹⁶

Yet Rosenberg, whose book is a formidable (though now outdated) display of comparative-historical analysis, held that “in the basic direction of development under the Old Regime, Hohenzollern Prussia moved in harmony with the other absolute polities of Europe.” By this he meant, first of all, that absolutist Prussia, like its counterparts elsewhere, had simply been a variant of the “aristocratic monarchy” from which in Europe the “transition from feudal to bureaucratic forms of political organization” proceeded. The springboard into dynastic absolutism was everywhere the *Ständestaat*, or the rudimentarily parliamentarized postfeudal territorial state in which, as Rosenberg thought, the nobility dominated the princely regime through the power of the purse.¹⁷

The nobility’s co-sovereignty in the state reflected “the vitality of the ancient aristocratic societies,” whose primacy in the European social order, and capacity for adaptive survival into modern times, were explanatory factors of surpassing importance in Rosenberg’s thinking. This was so much the case that Rosenberg offered no deep-structural analysis of the movement in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from the *Ständestaat* to the system of dynastic absolutism, emphasizing instead—where he undertook any explanation at all—a shift in the balance of power between ambitious princes and privilege-laden aristocrats to the temporary advantage of the former. In the Brandenburg-Prussian case, it was the “Great Depression of 1618–1650”—that is, the Thirty Years’ War—that so weakened the nobility as to allow Frederick William, the Great Elector, to breach the noble estates’ political defenses, at the price of a compromise widening the landlords’ powers over their village subjects, and to press forward toward the militarized and bureaucratized Prussian “power-state” (*Machtstaat*) of the eighteenth century.¹⁸

Scorning conservative-nationalist “Borussian” historians’ glorification of the thoughts and deeds of the Hohenzollerns, Rosenberg focused on the socially variegated (and well-rewarded) new officialdom that took up

16. BAA, 24, viii.

17. BAA, 23, 19. Cf. also 11.

18. On the “Great Depression of 1618–1650,” Ritter, “Rosenberg,” 292. For views challenging Rosenberg’s (and F. L. Carsten’s) on the role of the noble estates in the emergence of absolutism, see Ronald G. Asch, “Estates and Princes after 1648: The Consequences of the Thirty Years’ War,” *German History* 6, no. 2 (1988): 113–32, and William W. Hagen, “Seventeenth-Century Crisis in Brandenburg: The Thirty Years’ War, the Destabilization of Serfdom, and the Rise of Absolutism,” *American Historical Review* 94, no. 2 (1989): 302–35. On Carsten, see n. 19, below.

the challenge of absolutist state-building. Though influential anti-absolutist aristocratic elements entrenched in the common law courts long opposed the new bureaucrats, it lay in the interest of both groups, in a social order governed by aristocratic values and in a political order in which high bureaucratic office conveyed great prestige and profit, to join together in an alliance, admitting the nobility to the inner corridors of state power and the new state servants, through marriage or nobilitation, to the ranks of the landed gentry. This fusion of elites occurred during the reign of Frederick the Great (1740–1786), and at the expense of the monarchy, whose “real power,” Rosenberg argued, “gradually declined” after 1750. At Frederick’s death, control of the state reposed in the hands of the “political aristocracy,” comprising the “bureaucratic nobles of ascent,” the “bureaucratic nobles of descent,” the “independent landed nobility,” and “the new professional estate of dependent [but noble-born] army officers.”¹⁹

19. BAA, 109, 148. Rosenberg argued (*ibid.*, 169), though without evidence, that Frederick II promoted an aristocratic resurgence in government “because he came to fear the power of the royal servants.”

On Prussian historiography, see Jürgen Mirow’s useful study, *Das alte Preussen im deutschen Geschichtsbild seit der Reichsgründung* (Berlin/West, 1981); Otto Büsch and Michael Erbe, eds., *Otto Hintze und die moderne Geschichtswissenschaft: Ein Tagungsbericht* (Berlin/West, 1983), especially the contributions by Dietrich Gerhard (3–18), Otto Büsch (25–41), and Peter Baumgart (60–77); and, although it is not strictly a historiographical study, Otto Büsch, ed., *Das Preussenbild in der Geschichte: Protokoll eines Symposions* (Berlin/West, 1981), especially the contributions of Hans-Ulrich Wehler (27–31), Francis L. Carsten (53–63), and Peter Baumgart (“Epochen der preussischen Monarchie im 18. Jahrhundert,” 65–96).

It would overburden the present essay beyond measure to test Rosenberg’s analysis in detail against the subsequent scholarly literature, the more so since much of the specialist literature on Prussian history published in West Germany since the 1950s, heavily stamped by methodological and political conservatism, has tended to pass over the argument of his book in silence. See, for example, Gerd Heinrich, *Geschichte Preussens: Staat und Dynastie* (Frankfurt am Main, 1981), whose extensive bibliography omits *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy*.

Rosenberg himself was not an exemplary citizen of the republic of letters. He made no effort to debate interpretations in conflict or competition with his own. Especially egregious was his dismissal, with only the most perfunctory of citations, of the formidable scholarship of his fellow refugee, Francis L. Carsten, notably Carsten’s *Origins of Prussia* (Oxford, 1954), whose Whiggish argument contrasts interestingly with Rosenberg’s views. In his recent (and still Whiggish) *History of the Prussian Junkers* (Brookfield, Vt., 1989 [German original, 1988]), Carsten pays Rosenberg the compliment of endorsing his arguments on aristocratic dominance within the political system of Prussian absolutism.

For an interesting challenge to Rosenberg’s argument, stressing the advance under Hohenzollern absolutism of economic development and bourgeois talent, see C. B. A. Behrens, *Society, Government, and the Enlightenment: The Experiences of Eighteenth-Century France and Prussia* (New York, 1985). Respectful of Rosenberg’s views, but modifying them, is Wolfgang Neugebauer, “Zur neueren Deutung der preussischen Verwaltung im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert,” *Jahrbuch für die Geschichte Mittel- und Ostdeutschlands* 26 (1977): 86–128.

In the Prussian Reform Era (1807–1820), the upper bureaucracy completed its escape from monarchical arbitrariness. This it had already partially achieved in law through promulgation of the General Law Code of 1794, instituting life-tenure for higher civil servants, and in ideology through embrace of the doctrines of neo-humanist *Bildung*, “which proved”—as Rosenberg wrote in one of his many flights of antiquated rhetoric—“an inexhaustible spring of energy and fortitude in effecting [the university-trained officials’] mental and moral emancipation from the tutelage of royal omniscience.”²⁰ The Stein-Hardenberg reforms replaced the atrophied system of dynastic absolutism with a robust but pernicious bureaucratic absolutism. As the price of their victory over the crown, the upper civil service made “far-reaching concessions to the landed aristocracy,” most notoriously in the peasant emancipation but also in the army reforms and the creation of ultraconservative representative institutions dominated by the noble class. “Under bureaucratic absolutism, the Junkers regained, in effect, though in altered forms, the substance of the *Ständestaat* privileges which had been expropriated from them in the age of royal dominance.” Just as in the seventeenth century dynastic absolutism had arisen, as Rosenberg believed, from a princely compromise with the nobility, so “bureaucratic absolutism, too, came to rest on a working alliance with the large landowners.” This alliance served to perpetuate “rulership by aristocratic elites . . . and to hold down and to divert liberal and democratic movements.” In this way, the Reform Era’s principal outcome was “the strengthening of the authorita-

With varying emphases, Rosenberg’s fundamental arguments on the tripartite relationship of nobility, bureaucracy, and princely power under the Prussian old-regime—that is, from the late Middle Ages to the early nineteenth century—are integrated into the analyses, more many-sided than Rosenberg’s, of Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1800–1866: Bürgerwelt und starker Staat*, 3rd ed., (Munich, 1985); Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 1, *Vom Feudalismus des alten Reiches bis zur defensiven Modernisierung der Reformära 1700–1815* (Munich, 1987); and James J. Sheehan, *German History 1770–1866* (Oxford, 1989). Supportive of Rosenberg’s perspective are Hanna Schissler, *Preussische Agrargesellschaft im Wandel: Wirtschaftliche, gesellschaftliche, und politische Transformationsprozesse von 1763 bis 1847* (Göttingen, 1978); Hans-Jürgen Puhle and Hans-Ulrich Wehler, eds., *Preussen im Rückblick* (Göttingen, 1980); and Robert M. Berdahl, *The Politics of the Prussian Nobility: The Development of a Conservative Ideology 1770–1848* (Princeton, N.J., 1988). More critical is Heinz Reif, “Der Adel in der modernen Sozialgeschichte,” in Wolfgang Schieder and Volker Sellin, eds., *Sozialgeschichte in Deutschland: Entwicklungen und Perspektiven im internationalen Zusammenhang*, 4 vols. (Göttingen, 1987), vol. 4, *Soziale Gruppen in der Geschichte*, 34–60.

Barrington Moore, Jr., joined Rosenberg’s high estimate of the historical weight of the Prussian Junkers with F. L. Carsten’s and Max Weber’s in his *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, 1966).

20. BAA, 188.

rian rule of both the bureaucratic elite and the landed aristocracy.”²¹

In the end, Rosenberg judged the age of dynastic absolutism far less important for its transformative effect on state structure and power than for its revitalization of the Junkers, of whom he goes so far as to say that, during Frederick II’s reign, they “took possession, under the leadership of the bureaucratic nobility, of the newly built halls of central government.” It must have been a moment of truth for Rosenberg when he encountered the view expressed in 1799 by his own ideological forebear, the liberal Königsberg Professor Christian Jacob Kraus, that the Prussian state, “far from being an unlimited monarchy,” was but a “thinly veiled aristocra-

21. BAA, 222, 226–27. While subsequent interpretations of the Reform Era stand in Rosenberg’s debt, they invest the ruling bureaucracy with an independence of the nobility’s interests much greater than he allowed, and with a modernizing or liberalizing function he was loath to acknowledge. See Reinhart Koselleck, *Preussen zwischen Reform und Revolution: Allgemeines Landrecht, Verwaltung, und soziale Bewegung von 1791 bis 1848* (Stuttgart, 1981), as well as Rosenberg’s enlistment of Koselleck’s arguments on behalf of his own in Hans Rosenberg, *Probleme der deutschen Sozialgeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main, 1969), 103; Jonathan Sperber, “State and Civil Society in Prussia: Thoughts on a New Edition of Reinhart Koselleck’s *Preussen zwischen Reform und Revolution*,” *Journal of Modern History* 57, no. 2 (1985): 278–96; Barbara Vogel, ed., *Preussische Reformen 1807–1820* (Königstein/Taunus., 1980). For critiques both of Rosenberg’s and Koselleck’s positions, see Matthew Levinger, “Hardenberg, Wittgenstein, and the Constitutional Question in Prussia 1815–22,” *German History* 8, no. 3 (1990): 257–77.

Rosenberg frequently acknowledged the influence upon him of Eckart Kehr, whose work—together with that of Alfred Vagts and a small number of older German historians under the Weimar Republic—encouraged his turn toward social and economic history inspired by liberal-democratic commitments; see BAA, 206; *Politische Denkströmungen*, 12–13; *Weltwirtschaftskrise*, 10; “Rückblick,” 14. Rosenberg’s debunking and demystifying approach to the history of the Prussian state and its ruling elites undoubtedly bears Kehr’s stamp, but Kehr was less interested in emphasizing the Junkers’ primacy than Rosenberg was. Kehr rather sought, in Social Democratic fashion foreign to Rosenberg’s liberalism, to emphasize the complicity between Prussian authoritarianism and German capitalism. Nor was Kehr much concerned with the German *Sonderweg*, in part because he did not live to witness the history of the Nazi dictatorship, but in part because he, in harmony with Marxism then and now, was more interested in the common features, both political and socioeconomic, of nationally organized capitalist systems. But Kehr certainly shared, and probably helped inspire, Rosenberg’s harsh criticism of reactionary Prussianism.

Most relevant to Rosenberg’s work in the context of the present article was Kehr’s “Zur Genesis der preussischen Bürokratie und des Rechtsstaates: Ein Beitrag zum Diktaturproblem,” first published in 1932 and reprinted in Hans-Ulrich Wehler, ed., *Moderne deutsche Sozialgeschichte* (Cologne/Berlin, 1968), a very influential collection of articles (including two of Rosenberg’s). On Kehr, see Hans-Ulrich Wehler, ed., “Einleitung,” in Eckart Kehr, *Der Primat der Innenpolitik: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur preussisch-deutschen Sozialgeschichte im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin/West, 1965), 1–29, and Gordon A. Craig’s introduction to Eckart Kehr, *Economic Interest, Militarism, and Foreign Policy: Essays on German History* (Berkeley, 1977), vi–xxi, as well as, in the same volume, Kehr’s “Modern German Historiography,” 174–88. Toward nondogmatic Marxism, it might be added, Rosenberg’s attitude was friendly; see *Weltwirtschaftskrise*, xxi; *Probleme der deutschen Sozialgeschichte*, 110, 116.

cy,” which “rules the country in undisguised form as a bureaucracy.”²²

As for the state itself, Hohenzollern absolutism made it “more machine-like, more authoritarian.” It created a “military police” regime, inaugurating “a more advanced stage of organized coercion.” Rosenberg scorned the “ clichéd legend” of the eighteenth-century Hohenzollerns’ “socially just monarchy.” Grudgingly, he conceded that the “modernized dynastic state” brought about “a rather superficial rationalization of state management by means of imperfectly centralized administrative and military *étatisme*.”²³ He refused to trace the liberal ideal of government under law (the *Rechtsstaat*) to Frederick II’s policies, and for the problematic of enlightened absolutism Rosenberg had no words at all, apart from the fulsome praise he showered on Samuel von Cocceji, Frederick II’s minister of justice. Cocceji’s reforms, even if they favored the nobility, worked, among other things, “to transform justice into an expeditious and honest public service.” Although the bourgeois-born minister unresistingly rose to “neo-Junker” status, Rosenberg celebrates him as a kind of anti-Frederick, whose plans for a separation of executive and judicial authority, had they been realized, would have created a “constitutionally limited government representative of the political will of the high judiciary and the landed aristocracy.”²⁴

22. BAA, 143, 150, 201. On the European plane, Rosenberg pronounced dynastic absolutism a “passing phenomenon,” important primarily for bequeathing the administrative structures it pioneered to the modern world; *ibid.*, 13. But Frederick II, in reestablishing through the provincial *Landschaften* structures of limited local representation of the nobility’s interests, “sponsored . . . a partial restoration . . . of the old territorial *Ständestaat*”; *ibid.*, 169. The former judgment is an underestimation, the latter an exaggeration; see Peter Baumgart, ed., *Ständetum und Staatsbildung in Brandenburg-Preussen* (Berlin/West, 1983). Rosenberg occasionally doubted whether the nobility in state service—the *Landräte*, for example—regarded themselves principally as representatives of aristocratic interests, and only secondarily as servants of the state; see BAA, 163.

23. Rosenberg also conceded that dynastic absolutism entailed a “limited broadening of the social base for recruiting governmental personnel,” while “shifting the foundation of public affairs from ‘private’ to ‘public’ law”; BAA, 168. Preceding quotations: BAA, 19, 42; *Grosse Depression*, 194, n. 188a; BAA, 46.

24. BAA, 128, 133, and 123ff. Rosenberg’s treatment of Cocceji was his only tribute to the Prussian state’s championship of enlightened reform, though he offered no explanation of Frederick II’s support for it. He might have pursued the interpretive possibilities presented by Henri Brunschwig, *La crise de l’état prussien à la fin du XVIIIe siècle et la genèse de la mentalité romantique* (Paris, 1947), a work he cited. Cf. Hubert C. Johnson, *Frederick the Great and His Officials* (New Haven, 1973); Ingrid Mittenzweil, *Friedrich II. von Preussen* (Berlin/East, 1980); Günter Birtsch, “Friedrich der Grosse und die Aufklärung,” in Oswald Hauser, ed., *Friedrich der Grosse in seiner Zeit* (Cologne/Vienna, 1987), 31–92; Charles Ingrao, “The Problem of ‘Enlightened Absolutism’ and the German States,” and Eberhard Weis, “Enlightenment and Absolutism in the Holy Roman Empire: Thoughts on Enlightened Absolutism in Germany,” *Journal of Modern History* 58, Supplement, (1986): 161–97; and Diethelm Klippel, “Von der Aufklärung der Herrscher zur Herrschaft der Aufklärung,” *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 17, no. 2 (1990): 193–210.

But far mightier than enlightened reformers and aspiring philosopher-kings were “the immobilizing forces of the preabsolutist past,” that is, the social privileges and the pretensions to political primacy of the noble class. Prussian absolutism marks the first stage of the German *Sonderweg* because the strengthening and rationalization of the state that it brought about worked to the advantage, not of the enlightened middle class or society at large, but of the nobility, so reconstituted and reinvigorated under absolutism as to succeed in recovering, together with a fraternal and aristocratized bureaucracy, its old-accustomed political dominance within the state. In short, absolutism modernized and amplified the Prussian nobility’s oppressive domination of society (*Junkerherrschaft*).

Consequently, while in France—for reasons unspecified—the Revolution cleared the way for the attainment of “precious individual liberties,” in Prussia an authoritarian bureaucracy “prevented the imposition of legal and political checks from below.”²⁵ Prussian absolutism had been marked by such “deviations from general European trends” as ultra-centralized executive power, fusion of civil and military authority, an “excessive militarization of social life,” and the emergence of “Prussian Puritanism,” that is, of Pietism, which Rosenberg summarily threw together with the “political docility and social quietism of orthodox Lutheranism.” Faced after 1789 with the challenges from abroad of liberal reforms and plebeian revolution from below, the Prussian state capitalized on these deviations, and on the “hideous spirit of fearful obedience to authority” and “deplorable lack of *Zivilcourage*” that were their social-psychological consequences, to stifle liberal-democratic opposition and to steer toward Prussia’s “far graver detachment from the West” in the nineteenth century. This manifested itself in an “alienation” from the forms and values of “Western” politics, in the maintenance of an “irresponsible central executive, the adoration of state power,” the influential “irrational teachings of German Romanticism,” and the “ominous new trend” of state-mystifying German Idealism.²⁶

Otto von Bismarck, a “select bureaucrat,” mobilized this legacy to perpetuate “illiberal attitudes” and “aristocratic patterns of status, class, and political hierarchy” into the industrial age. Worst of all, he accomplished this through a “dishonest compromise with liberal ideals,” presenting himself as a “*Herrenmensch* with democratic gloves” while pursuing conservative ends behind the screen of German nationalism. The “dubious gift” of the Second Empire which Bismarck presented to the “hypnotized German people” only widened the gulf separating

25. BAA, viii, 231.

26. BAA, 22–23, 41.

Germany from the West. But the Prussian ruling elites could not so easily master the new “age of the masses,” whose political participation in the Bismarckian system was, because distorted by manipulation from above, “irresponsible.” The privileged minority’s “increasingly frantic determination” to maintain its power in the face of the “levelling tendencies of industrial democracy” drove it, between the 1870s and the 1920s, from “aristocratic” to “plebeian conservatism,” and finally to its alliance with Hitler, in the absence of which “the National Socialists would not have been so widely accepted by the bewildered Germans”—that is, by “the restive and directionless mass of the people”—“and could not have inflicted such ghastly injuries upon mankind.”²⁷

Such in 1958 was Rosenberg’s charting of the *Sonderweg*, which the argument of *Grosse Depression und Bismarckzeit* (1967) only etched more deeply into the historiographical terrain. His menacing picture of the Prusso-German “political aristocracy’s” fateful influence invested the question of their power with a degree of importance overshadowing even the problem of understanding the origins and character of National Socialism. Rosenberg himself was so fixed upon the historic role of the conservative elites that, despite his penchant for elaborate sociopolitical characterizations of ideological and interest-group movements, he never offered one of the Nazi movement itself, but rested content with having adumbrated its resentment-laden right-wing populist appeal in the anti-Semitic and nationalist enthusiasms of the 1870s and 1880s.²⁸

Beyond the explanations of the aristocratic governing class’s persistence in power conveyed by his analysis of absolutist elite-regrouping, Rosenberg’s approach directs attention to two long-term social-historical factors: the bourgeoisie’s political weakness, and the Junkers’ economic strength. In Rosenberg’s view, absolutism in no way depended on the rise of early capitalism, although it derived strength from the absorption into its bureaucratic ranks and mercantilist enterprises of bourgeois talent—“superior roturiers” and “gifted subalterns”—and bourgeois capital.²⁹ Despite its inequalities and cyclical injustices, Rosenberg viewed capitalism itself as a positive force, productive and beneficial so long as it functioned (before the Keynesian age, at least) in a self-

27. Quotations from *BAA*, 24–25, 230, 232–34.

28. *Grosse Depression*, ch. 3, *passim*. In *BAA*, 230, Rosenberg described the Nazis as “tamers” of the restive and directionless mass of the people.” For examples of Rosenberg’s talent for compendious definitions of social groups and movements (and even of his own qualities) see Rosenberg, *Probleme der deutschen Sozialgeschichte*, 87; “Rückblick,” 12; *Machteliten und Wirtschaftskonjunkturen*, 60.

29. Quotations from *BAA*, 59, 150.

generating, laissez-faire way. But Prusso-German economic policies, both under eighteenth-century absolutism and the Bismarckian Empire, directed capitalist development into protectionist, étatist channels perpetuating the political subordination—and encouraging the social “feudalization”—of the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie.³⁰

As for the educated or professional bourgeoisie, Rosenberg assigned them an important role as civil servants in the process of absolutist state building. He cataloged their numbers and rank relative to their noble-born colleagues with an appetite for detail that baffles—and wearies—the modern reader. One wonders why the question seemed so important, considering that the fate of the successful commoners in state service was ascent into the ranks of neo-Junkerdom and that, before they rose so high, their bourgeois identity, or so Rosenberg argued, contributed nothing distinctive to the structure of Prussian absolutism. As his characterizations of neo-humanist *Bildung*, romanticism, and idealism show, Rosenberg’s understanding of social and political history tended to reduce cultural and ideological influences to veils of naked class and power interests. Enlightenment rationalism, like Pietist Protestantism, he passed over in virtual silence. Despite their bourgeois qualities, they were neither anti-aristocratic nor anti-absolutist and liberal in any unequivocal way. To dwell upon them raised the risk of greatly complicating his analysis by lending weight to the historical importance of enlightened absolutism, including Frederick II’s version of it, and so acknowledging the progressive, rationalist, and reformist side of the Prussian state tradition in the eighteenth and nineteenth century that won the backing of so many of the educated and propertied bourgeoisie, especially when paired in the nineteenth century with a commitment to German unification. It was, after all, the Janus-faced character of the Prussian state—incorporating *both* class-bound power and enlightened modernism—that made its role in modern German history so problematical and, ultimately, dangerous.

But if any subject rankled and antagonized Rosenberg, it was the failure of high intellectuals in the nineteenth century to resist the siren call of aristocratic Prussia and the romantic-idealist arguments with which its ideologists justified its historic mission. His early essay (1930) on theological rationalism and “vulgar liberalism” in the pre-1848 years defended

30. BAA, 16, 18–19, 49; *Grosse Depression*, 78–79, and passim; Hans Rosenberg, “Zur sozialen Funktion der Agrarpolitik im Zweiten Reich,” in Rosenberg, *Probleme der deutschen Sozialgeschichte*, 76–77 and 51–80, passim. On the problem of bourgeois “feudalization,” see David Blackbourn and Richard J. Evans, eds., *The German Bourgeoisie: Essays on the Social History of the German Middle Class from the Late Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Century* (London, 1991).

these intellectual offspring of the Enlightenment, abandoned though they had been by the mandarins, as pathways toward modern liberal democracy. He condemned, in an analogy with capitulation to nazism, the nineteenth-century “liberal-national” historians’ embrace of Bismarckianism as a “voluntary submission to power [*freiwillige Gleichschaltung*], idealistically justified.”³¹ Reflecting upon his apprenticeship to Friedrich Meinecke, he recalled his youthful ambition to replace the “aristocratic” with a “democratic” history of ideas, and into his old age he paid homage to “the values of enlightenment and humanism,” identifying himself with “the civilized individual hungry for enlightenment [*aufklärungshungriger Kulturmensch*].”³²

Rosenberg offered no explanation for the high susceptibility, from the seventeenth century to 1933, of capitalists and intellectuals to social and ideological “feudalization.” But if, by accommodating themselves to the Prussian regime, they succumbed to worship of the golden calf, it was principally because the bourgeoisie, like more subaltern groups, were victims of the hegemonic power of the aristocratic elites. Once again, as in the case of the Nazi seizure of power, the analytical trail leads to the Junkers’ door. From this perspective, there must have seemed no more important task for the historian interested in the German *Sonderweg* than the book Rosenberg conceived during World War II under the title of “The Prusso-German Junkers: A History of a Social Class.”³³

Although Rosenberg never wrote this book, he addressed the problem of the Junkers in nearly all his postwar publications, and devoted the final energy of his career to one of his most formidable works, the lengthy essay of 1978 entitled “Die Ausprägung der Junkerherrschaft in Brandenburg-Preussen, 1410–1618.” This was a new version in German of his “Rise of the Junkers” of 1943–44, analytically much deeper and empirically richer than the original, but otherwise true to its general argument and convictions. In it, Rosenberg traced the transformation of the late medieval noble classes in the Mark Brandenburg and the Prussia of the Teutonic Knights. In the fifteenth century a class of “barbarous” robber barons and mercenary adventurers, they turned in the sixteenth century to an unwarlike life of “prospering businessmen” (*prosperierenden Wirtschaftsmenschentum*). Amassing large landed estates, in part through aggressive appropriation and enclosure of village land, they depressed

31. Hans Rosenberg, “Theologischer Rationalismus und vormärzlicher Vulgärliberalismus,” first published in the *Historische Zeitschrift* (1930), in *Politische Denkströmungen*, 18–50. Quotation in text from *Probleme der deutschen Sozialgeschichte*, 52.

32. Rosenberg, *Politische Denkströmungen*, 10; “Rückblick,” 12.

33. Ritter, “Hans Rosenberg,” 292–93. In “Rise of the Junkers,” 242, Rosenberg bluntly concluded that “the Junkers outwitted the German liberals and democrats of the nineteenth century.”

the tributary peasants into brutalized serfdom and bondage, securing for themselves an ample supply of unpaid labor. Bypassing local merchants to sell directly on foreign markets the products of their estates and the villagers' surplus, which they managed to wrest into their own hands, the Junker landlords beggared the local bourgeoisie, while driving the common people into "abject poverty and helpless apathy." By the eve of the Thirty Years' War, the landed gentry had fastened upon the now united principality of Brandenburg-Prussia an iron economic grip ensuring their social and political predominance, despite the ensuing rise of absolutism, into the twentieth century.³⁴ While Rosenberg's analysis of the legal-jurisdictional and economic preconditions of the Junkers' emergence as estate-owning entrepreneurs and landed gentlemen is impressive, more interesting in the present connection are the social and psychological aspects of his argument. Before their conversion to "instrumentally rational methods," "civilized negotiations," and "legally binding compromises," the Junkers were members of a "warrior society" in which "robbery, plunder, murder were not 'crimes' but rather a 'socially sanctioned' [*standesgemässer*] standard of manliness and psychic self-satisfaction." In the words of Norbert Elias, whose work Rosenberg also admiringly cited in *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy*, "pleasure in torturing and killing others was great, and it was a socially permitted pleasure."³⁵

In the sixteenth century, the "law of the fist" (*Faustrecht*) grew "dysfunctional." But although they redirected their energies into peaceable agriculture, the Junkers never lost their feudal aggressiveness and pretensions to unbridled authority in their local bailiwicks. Instead they invested these qualities in their entrepreneurial lives, pairing them to newly developed talents for "rational profit-mindedness" (*rationales Rentabilitätsdenken*) and "efficiency-heightening" (*Effizienzsteigerung*). Rosenberg concluded that "the symbiosis of autocratic patrimonial authority and commercialized feudal business enterprise" as it operated in the Junkers' estate-economy (*Gutswirtschaft*) was the defining characteristic of the

34. Hans Rosenberg, "Die Ausprägung der Junkerherrschaft in Brandenburg-Preussen, 1410–1618," in *Machteliten und Wirtschaftskrisen*, 24–82. Quotations in text from *ibid.*, 76–77, and BAA, 49. For perspectives critical of Rosenberg's arguments, see William W. Hagen, "How Mighty the Junkers? Peasant Rents and Seigneurial Profits in Sixteenth-Century Brandenburg," *Past and Present* 108 (1985): 80–116, and Edgar Melton, "Gutsherrschaft in East-Elbian Germany and Livonia, 1500–1800: A Critique of the Model," *Central European History* 21, no. 4 (1988): 315–49. Supportive of Rosenberg's emphasis on the landed nobility's economic dominance, but critical of Rosenberg's appraisal of the Junkers' political hegemony, is Peter-Michael Hahn, *Struktur und Funktion des brandenburgischen Adels im 16. Jahrhundert* (Berlin/West, 1979).

35. "Ausprägung," 32, 36, 47; BAA, 72, n. 25.

political lordship (*Gutsherrschaft*) they exercised in the east-Elbian countryside. This legal-economic domination, against which the rural common people stood practically helpless, reached its high point in the eighteenth century, but remained potent through the nineteenth century. Not until 1927 were its last vestiges—the Junker estates' separate status as administrative communes and police districts—abolished in law.³⁶

The case of the Junkers demonstrates that “a rational mentality and way of life geared to economic gain were very compatible indeed with aristocratic class morality and customs.” Though he stopped short of categorizing them as capitalists, Rosenberg credited the old-regime Junkers, as he did their nineteenth-century successors in his influential article of 1958 on the “pseudodemocratization” of the east-Elbian landlords, with an impressive capacity to profit handsomely from opportunities opened to them—both in production and trade—by capitalist development in Europe (and, later, at home). And in their role as “creative-destructive” commercial entrepreneurs, they earned Rosenberg’s grudging recognition as “‘modernizing’ landlords.”³⁷

In Rosenberg’s vision of early modern Prussian-German history, it was not the bourgeoisie that ascended to the position of a hegemonic class, but rather the Junkers. Rosenberg applied to them the Weberian vocabulary associated with capitalist development and *embourgeoisement*: sublimation of irrational behavior in disciplined, economically productive, profit-seeking pursuits, and socioeconomic rationalization, innovation, and modernization. But while Enlightenment teleology, which Rosenberg was inclined to embrace and defend, paired bourgeois ascent

36. Quotations from “Ausprägung,” 27, 61–63. In Rosenberg’s view, the villagers’ efforts at self-defense alleviated seigneurial oppression only minimally; *ibid.*, 74ff., and *Grosse Depression*, 151.

37. Quotations from “Ausprägung,” 76, 78. Rosenberg credited the Junkers themselves with their transformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries into maximizing landlords. But he emphasized the role of progressive-minded bourgeois managers of crown estates in the eighteenth century with setting standards that the landed nobility then followed. The importance of bourgeois entrepreneurship in large-estate agriculture in the nineteenth century was even greater; see, apart from BAA and “Ausprägung,” Hans Rosenberg, “Die Pseudodemokratisierung der Rittergutsbesitzerklasse,” in Wehler, ed., *Moderne deutsche Sozialgeschichte*, 287–308.

Although Rosenberg acknowledged the economic and political liberalism of many east-Elbian estate owners in the period from the late eighteenth century to 1848, it did not harmonize well with his larger arguments and he offered no explanation of it; see *Grosse Depression*, 75ff. Cf. the analysis, which addressed Rosenberg’s dilemma, by Herbert Obenaus, “Gutsbesitzerliberalismus: Zur regionalen Sonderentwicklung der liberalen Partei in Ost- und Westpreussen während des Vormärz,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 14, no. 3 (1988): 304–28; also James Retallack, “‘Ideology without Vision?’ Recent Literature on Nineteenth-Century German Conservatism,” *Bulletin, German Historical Institute London* 13, no. 2 (1991): 3–22.

with political liberalization and advancing social peace and reason, in Prussia the “modernization” Rosenberg attributed to the Junkers and the noble-dominated absolutist state perpetuated aristocratic despotism, aggression, and exploitation of the weak. State service brought forth “the ceaselessly efficient, rationally tempered modern ‘vocational man’ (*Berufsmensch*),” who—in a phrase popularized by Werner Sombart—“did not work in order to live but who lived in order to work.” His emergence in the Prussian context would do nothing to strengthen bourgeois civil society, but Rosenberg’s rhetoric strongly suggests that his qualities would find their application under German totalitarianism.

Collectivist Prussia made a remarkable contribution to the creation of this new species of thoroughly disciplined man, activated by quasi-moral compulsions and chained to a large-scale apparatus and thus to the collective pursuit of objectified, utilitarian tasks. In line with the conception of the bureaucratic state as a machine, man himself was destined to become an automaton.³⁸

In a sense, Rosenberg’s interpretation of the long-term course of modern German history can be thought of as the rise, out of feudal violence and disarray, of an authoritarian anti-bourgeoisie. The result was a form of modernization—or, if that term is unacceptable, of capitalist development—that was repressive and coercive rather than benign and liberating. Although the structures of bourgeois modernity duly emerged, the unbroken political dominance and socioeconomic egotism of the aristocratic Prussian elites deformed and corrupted them. Above all, this occurred in the realm of politics, where Bismarckian methods substituted demagogic pseudodemocracy for liberal self-government, and in the sphere of the capitalist economy, where the agrarian conservatives’ pressure-group tactics and supporters in government replaced the healthy working of the market with a reactionary social protectionism. But, in Rosenberg’s view, it also shaped the cultural realm, through a kind of *trahison des clercs*. The high intellectuals, turning to “aristocratic” aestheticism and obfuscations, abandoned the Enlightenment, “the mightiest pillar upon which modern life rests.”³⁹

38. Quotations from *BAA*, 89–90. Rosenberg harnessed to his own enterprise not only Weber’s and Elias’s arguments, but also Gerhard Oestreich’s emphasis on the social discipline imposed by absolutism. See Gerhard Oestreich, *Geist und Gestalt des frühmodernen Staates* (Berlin, 1969). Cf. Winfried Schulze, “Gerhard Oestreichs Begriff ‘Sozialdisziplinierung in der frühen Neuzeit,’” *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 14, no. 3 (1987): 265–302. On this and other, broader issues, see James Van Horn Melton, “Absolutism and ‘Modernity’ in Early Modern Central Europe,” *German Studies Review* 8, no. 3 (1985): 383–98.

39. Quotation from Rosenberg, “Theologischer Rationalismus,” 48. Cf. “Rückblick,” 13–14.

In 1925, Rosenberg confided in a letter to Meinecke that having lived as a student in southern Germany made him aware, “and not without satisfaction, of how much I am a Prussian and a Protestant.” In January 1933, a week before Hitler’s installation as German chancellor, Rosenberg, newly appointed to a professorship at Cologne University, delivered his inaugural lecture on “The Epochs of Political Liberalism in Germany.” His early scholarship concerned itself primarily with liberal thought and politics in the nineteenth century, especially in the Kingdom of Prussia. His parting gift to pre-World War II German historiography was a massive work of documentation and commentary centered on Bismarck’s struggle with the Prussian liberals in the constitutional conflict of the early 1860s.⁴⁰

These details illustrate the point that Hans Rosenberg was himself, from his earliest years, a deeply engaged Prussian-German left-liberal, heir to the anti-Bismarckian and strongly anti-Junker tradition of the nineteenth-century progressives. The defeats that German liberalism had suffered, at the hands of the aristocratic Prussian monarchy in the revolution of 1848–1849 and in the age of Bismarck, as well as subsequently in the collapse of Weimar, burdened him very greatly, both ideologically and personally. It is hardly surprising that, in his efforts to comprehend the German catastrophe, his thoughts fixed upon the Prussian Junkers and their political representatives. In the nemesis of the Prussian-German liberals he saw the nemesis of the German nation.

Instead of withering in the spreading shadow of the rising bourgeoisie, the principle of aristocracy had spread its roots in nineteenth-century German society, bringing forth a new “ruling class” composed of “an aristocracy of birth, an aristocracy of rank, an aristocracy of money, and an aristocracy of intellect.” Though he never analyzed the period 1914–1933 in detail, he was confident that it had been this ruling class, “the better people” who “for generations sat in the driver’s seat,” whose support for “the hideous apocalyptic horsemen” accounted for the final tragedy of the Nazi regime. How far he judged that support to have extended beyond the late-Weimar maneuverings and machinations of the circles around Papen and Hindenburg he never said, but that he drew no clear distinction between “plebeian conservatism” and such “folkish” movements as National Socialism leaves conceptual room for a deeper

40. Quotation from Winkler, “Ein Erneuerer,” 531. On Rosenberg’s inaugural lecture, the text of which appears not to have survived, see Ritter, “Rosenberg,” 289. See also Hans Rosenberg, *Die nationalpolitische Publizistik Deutschlands: Vom Eintritt der Neuen Ära in Preussen bis zum Ausbruch des Deutschen Krieges. Eine kritische Bibliographie*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1935).

implication of the Junkers in the Hitlerian outcome.⁴¹

Like other bourgeois liberals, Rosenberg was stung by the thought of the Prussian aristocracy's pretensions "to ingrained human and social superiority." Of the entry of the term *Junker* into the polemical vocabulary of nineteenth-century liberals, he wrote that the word "implied, above all, the provocative display of social arrogance, plus intellectual narrowness, blended with a materialistic conception of social ethics based on the principle that might supersedes right and reasoned discussion." Notably missing from this moralizing definition are the passionately debated ideological and constitutional issues that divided liberals and conservatives in nineteenth-century Prussia.⁴² In *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy*, Rosenberg peppered his text with ironical references to the alleged deficiencies, in Junker eyes, of the "illborn," "lowborn," "immodest' commoners." They were "parvenus" and "men of 'poor extraction'" or "defective background," "a vile bourgeoisie," branded by the nobility with an "irritating and humiliating" stigma.⁴³

In 1943 Rosenberg described the Junkers as a "persistent and domineering force" in modern German history. "They have always been there. They are still there." At his hands they acquired a timeless quality rendering their behavior in one century almost interchangeable with that in another. The fifteenth-century bands of robber barons were akin to the conservative cartels of the late nineteenth century, both predatory "children of [economic] distress" (*Kinder der Not*). The sixteenth-century Junker landlords were, like their successors in Bismarckian and Weimar Germany, "big agrarians" (*Grossagrarien*), crushing their bourgeois competitors through "their political striking power as an organized pressure group." The "Junker-Parliament" of 1848 was the precursor of the Agrarian League (*Bund der Landwirte*) of 1893. Throughout their history, they were captives of their "lust for power" and "dogged practitioners of *Realpolitik*," combining claims to social-elite status "with the unappetizing role of ruthless, insatiable pursuers of their political-economic interests, a collective role of astonishing historical constancy," which until their destruction as a class in 1945 "proved to be a phenomenon of the 'longue durée.'"⁴⁴

41. Quotations from BAA, 229, and Rosenberg, "Pseudodemokratisierung," 288. In the latter essay (301), he described the Junker conservatives under the Bismarckian Empire as "demokratisierte Reaktionäre."

42. Quotations from BAA, 183; Rosenberg, "Rise of the Junkers," 2.

43. Quotations from BAA, 65–66, 68, 73, 81, 147.

44. Quotations from "Ausprägung," 32, 78, 80; "Rise of the Junkers," 1, 241; "Pseudodemokratisierung," 299. Rosenberg charged the Prussian aristocracy collectively with moral corruption, from late-medieval gangsterism to early-modern bribe taking and diversion of public monies into their own pockets, and to cynicism and immorality in their

In the Junker class Rosenberg located the source of authoritarianism and “military fetishism” in German history.⁴⁵ It lay in their power to command in their workers and subordinates, even after they had abandoned the cane whip of the old regime for more “‘democratic’” methods in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, “unconditional obedience” and “an inner feeling of subjection.”⁴⁶ Their struggle under the German Empire and the Weimar Republic against the “democratization of society,” their efforts “bordering on neurosis” to uphold their sagging social status, drove them to a plebeianized conservatism aimed at recruiting, in support of their narrow class-interests, the rural common people and the petty bourgeoisie, stricken with “outbursts of nervousness” by such terrors of modern capitalism as Rosenberg’s “Great Depression” of 1873–1896. During the Wilhelminian years, the Prussian conservatives’ “appeals to irrationality and dark impulses had fateful moral, social-psychological, and ideological side effects,” representing a “heavy burden” for the future. In other words, their success in turning the “little man” against his own interests prefigured the Nazi’s demagogic handiwork.⁴⁷

Rosenberg was an unvarnished epistemological realist. He condemned the conservative idealist tradition of German historiography, which he found still vital after 1945 in such figures as Gerhard Ritter, as the hostage of “romantic concepts, ambiguous absolutes, cryptical political abstractions, nationalistic excesses, and an appeal to irrational and emotional forces.” Associating himself with “a more ‘western’ approach,” he confidently described his subject matter as “historical reality” and his practice as “the empirical”—or “social”—“history of reality” (*Wirklichkeitsgeschichte*).⁴⁸ Consistent with these views was the dichotomy of

demagogic politics under the Bismarckian Empire; “Ausprägung,” 32, 55, 58–59; “Pseudodemokratisierung,” 304; BAA, ch. 5, *passim*.

45. BAA, 41.

46. “Pseudodemokratisierung,” 296. In sixteenth-century East Prussia the Junkers “inoculated” their village subjects with “veneration of authority” (*Obrigkeitsfrömmigkeit*) and, in general, brought them “to heel” with the help of the Lutheran clergy; “Ausprägung,” 48.

47. Quotations from Rosenberg, “Zur sozialen Funktion,” 63–64, 72–73; *Grosse Depression*, 68, 72, where he also argued (152) that in the 1870s and 1880s the centuries-long expansion of east-Elbian estate land at the expense of peasant landholdings reversed itself, suggesting—though he does not clearly draw the conclusion—that a material basis had emerged for the political alliance of Junkers and peasant farmers sealed in the *Bund der Landwirte* and *Reichslandbund* in the period 1893–1933. Cf. William W. Hagen, “The German Peasantry in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century: Market Integration, Populist Politics, Votes for Hitler,” *Peasant Studies* 14, no. 4 (1987): 284–88 and 274–91, *passim*.

48. Quotation from BAA, 235; *Probleme der deutschen Sozialgeschichte*, 143; *Politische Denkströmungen*, 7; “Rückblick,” 18. Cf. “Ausprägung,” 25–26.

reason and irrationalism which he detected at work in the historical process. It was the function and responsibility of historical thought to enable the “civilized individual” to carry out “his citizenly obligations reasonably [*vernunftgemäß*], without irrational infidelities [*irrationale Seitensprünge*].”⁴⁹ As the Enlightenment philosophers had insisted before him, the path of unreason was the path of violence, barbarism, and the benighted past.

Such untroubled commitments distance Rosenberg from the present age, even though his scholarship and vision of the German *Sonderweg* still resonate widely, by way of his own writings and those of his numerous students, among German and Anglo-American historians. But the brave claim that his works aim to offer, as he said of *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy*, “a sober, unfalsified picture of historical reality” (*Realgeschichte*) appears now, at a distance of one or two generations, not only philosophically naive (or arrogant) but also empirically unacceptable.⁵⁰ Above all, Rosenberg magnified out of all proportion the baleful and pernicious historical agency of the Prussian nobility. In counter-Hegelian fashion, he transformed the Junkers into the conceptual embodiment of authoritarianism and injustice in modern German history. This entailed, among other things, the reduction of the Prussian state, until the time of Bismarck, to an executive committee of the aristocracy.⁵¹

But a crude class analysis of the state is no more persuasive in Rosenberg’s work than it was in Marxist-Leninist dogmatism.⁵² In *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy*, its effect was to mystify the source and character of princely power when exerted against the wishes of the landed nobility. To avoid this outcome, Rosenberg grounded state policy whenever possible in Junker interests (while exaggerating the aristocratic character of high officialdom). Where state action tended to undermine noble strength, as Frederick II’s judicial reforms and manor-village rent-arbitration program did, Rosenberg minimized its effects or ignored it.⁵³ Although he was a practiced economic historian, he summarily dismissed as ill-conceived and ineffectual the eighteenth-century Prussian

49. *Weltwirtschaftskrise*, xxv.

50. “Rückblick,” 21.

51. Rosenberg ratified the self-congratulatory couplet associated with Junker reactionaries: “und der König absolut, wenn er uns den Willen tut”; BAA, 152.

52. See Klaus Deppermann, “Der preussische Absolutismus und der Adel: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit der marxistischen Absolutismustheorie,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 8, no. 4 (1982): 538–53.

53. On officially arbitrated registers of peasant rents and seignorial obligations, see William W. Hagen, “The Junkers’ Faithless Servants: Peasant Insubordination and the Breakdown of Serfdom in Brandenburg-Prussia, 1763–1811,” in R. J. Evans and W. R. Lee, eds., *The German Peasantry: Conflict and Community in Rural Society from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (London, 1986), 71–101.

government's policies of state-guided industrial and commercial growth, despite their political importance and long-term significance for capital formation both public and private. Rosenberg could not recognize that in this respect the Prussian monarchy acted as an engine of *embourgeoisement*, although he acknowledged that the influx of bourgeois talent into absolutist service, including leasing and management of the extensive crown estates, induced the aristocracy to improve their education and rationalize the management of their estates.

Rosenberg's analysis of the rise of bureaucratic absolutism in the late eighteenth century and its triumph in the Prussian Reform Era is similarly one-sided in its emphasis on the emergence of an administrative nobility bent on maximizing its own power and privileges, and making damagingly reactionary concessions to the Junker landlords to do so. Here, as in the case of monarchical absolutism, Rosenberg underplayed the crucial importance of political factionalization within the governing establishment, and of the ideological debates that structured it. In his studies of old-regime Prussia, Rosenberg carried his social reductionism so far that, despite his youthful interest in the intellectual history of German liberalism, subjective consciousness—whether religious, philosophical, or political—lost all independent functions.

In his articles on the preabsolutist rise of the Junkers and on their “pseudodemocratization” in this nineteenth century, Rosenberg displayed a keen awareness of restructuring processes within the noble class. But in *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy* it was the nobility that transformed the monarchy, rather than the absolutist regime reshaping the Junkers through its drive for economic and political power. Granting some validity to his point, Rosenberg's emphasis upon late eighteenth-century “noble reaction” nevertheless left unexplained the readiness of most of the Prussian landed nobility to come to terms with peasant emancipation and the conversion it entailed to capitalist agriculture based on wage labor. Convinced as he was of the “passive compliance of the masses” in the rule during “aristocratic ages” of the “governing elites,” it never occurred to him, despite much evidence in the published sources from which he worked, that popular insubordination and protest figured in the breakdown of monarchical absolutism, as it did also in its seventeenth-century rise.⁵⁴

54. Quotations from BAA, 231. On the corporate nobility's policy toward peasant emancipation, see Klaus Vetter, *Kurmärkischer Adel und preussische Reformen* (Weimar, 1979) and Hartmut Harnisch, “Vom Oktoberedikt des Jahres 1807 zur Deklaration von 1816: Problematik und Charakter der preussischen Agrarreformgesetzgebung zwischen 1807 und 1816,” *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, Sonderband, (1978): 231–93. On the relationship between village protest and state policy, see the arguments and literature in Hagen, “Junkers' Faithless Servants” and “Seventeenth-Century Crisis in Brandenburg.”

These remarks should not be misunderstood as saying that the Junkers require exoneration from the charges Rosenberg levelled at them. Undoubtedly they contributed many a heavy stone to the building of the *Sonderweg*, and it is a challenge to think of any respects in which their presence as a class in German history, especially in the period 1871–1945, was not a burden. Yet, by the turn of the century Otto Hintze and other leading historians of the generation before Rosenberg had already replaced their predecessors' nationalist glorification of Prussian history with a more balanced, detached, and "realistic" account that did not shrink from criticism of aristocratic egotism. Their work encountered no serious opposition from Nazi publicists, whose reception of the Prussian legacy was in any case halfhearted. It may therefore have been an overdramatization for Rosenberg to declare, in 1958, that "the hydra of the Prussian myth is not yet dead," even if the work of Gerhard Ritter, Walter Hubatsch, and other West German scholars sometimes descended to apologies for the Prussian tradition no less irritating than the anti-Prussian crudities of Marxist-Leninist historians in the German Democratic Republic.

Nevertheless, although on the empirical level Rosenberg's boldest arguments—where they have not come altogether unraveled—require serious qualification, his studies of Prussian absolutism and of the Junkers will long have a strong claim to be read, both for their keenness of insight and sharpness of detail and for the passion of their indictment of Prussian-German authoritarianism and defense of liberal values. Yet it is an irremediable flaw in Rosenberg's work that his fixation upon the legacy of aristocratic-monarchical Prussianism confined the other collective actors on the German stage to largely passive roles as powerless, suborned, manipulated, and deeply wronged victims. Moreover, the massive weight Rosenberg assigned to preindustrial structures in the genesis of the "German catastrophe" reduced the conflicts generated by the rise of urban-industrial capitalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to mere epiphenomena of fascist pathology. The premodern aspects of National Socialism undoubtedly require just appreciation, but its modern qualities are yet more important, since the present age still stands in their shadow.

The resentments Hans Rosenberg felt as a bourgeois democrat toward the defeat at conservative hands of nineteenth-century German liberalism filtered his vision of the history of old-regime Prussia. As his work shows, the frustrations of thwarted liberalism lived on in German historiography, creating a *Sonderweg*-thesis that stands as evidence, in the intellectual-ideological realm, of the importance of the historical experience it seeks to describe. To reject it now on the grounds that it

represents the sort of positivistic master narrative that postmodern thought has succeeded in undermining is to ignore the distinction between historical interpretations that reflect—and bear upon—present-day interests, on the one hand, and historical things-in-themselves, on the other.⁵⁵ Rosenberg was right to problematize the German “special path,” for only in Germany did the tensions of modern history, long-term and short-term alike, give rise to radical fascism. But his explanation, magnifying to Wagnerian proportions the misfortunes worked by the aristocratic Prussian governing elites, could only fully convince where the wounds of German liberalism still ached and the willingness failed to confront the illiberal potential of urban-industrial capitalism.

In the present day, German unification holds out the promise of fulfilling the liberal project of 1848, but the Enlightenment’s hope for the pacification of the West under the reign of reason, where not suspect, remains visionary. Under this divided constellation the road to German fascism will need remapping, as one *Sonderweg* among others, if not as the track to the end station of German history that Hans Rosenberg took it to be—and that, not so long ago, it actually was.

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55. Cf. Peter Jelavich, “Contemporary Literary Theory: From Deconstruction Back to History,” *Central European History* vol. 22, nos. 3 and 4 (1989): 374–80, and Peter Baldwin, “Social Interpretations of Nazism: Renewing a Tradition,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 25 (1990): 37 and 5–37, *passim*.