



175 Years after the European Revolutions of 1848/49: An Analysis of Prussian Politics during the Revolution in a European Context

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Abstract

This article discusses one of the most essential research in the context of the European Revolution of 1848/49 on the occasion of its 175th anniversary, based on an article by Ries (2023). Especially it places Canis' (2022) extensive work on the politics of the Prussian government in the revolutionary years 1848 to 1850/51. The article follows a political history approach and critically discusses the new research results on Prussian politics during the revolution. Until now, Prussian politics has been viewed primarily from the perspective of the counter-revolution. Canis takes a new approach by viewing Prussian politics as an integral part of the revolution, thus relocating the revolutionary process. Despite some one-sidedness and ideological distortions, Canis succeeds in taking a new look at the overall events of the German Revolution. For the first time, the Prussian Union policy is presented as an integral part of the revolutionary complex and interpreted as an alternative state course of action to the revolutionary path 'from below'. This shows us a new perspective on the revolution in general, and it shows us that the revolution in Germany did not end in 1849, as is usually assumed, but extended well into 1850.

Keywords: *Counterrevolution, Democratism, German Dualism, Liberalism, Revolution, European, Germany, Prussia*

1. Introduction

To this day, the revolution of 1848/49 is one of the most important events in European history of the 19th century. According to Christopher Clark's latest study (Clark, 2023), it represents a "particle accelerator" that reveals and dynamizes all political, social and cultural processes as if in a burning mirror. The revolution that began in France in February 1848 affected all Central European countries (with the exception of England and Russia) and led to a massive upheaval. Even if it failed in the end, it was not without consequences. The founding of nation-states in Italy and Germany in the second half of the 19th century can largely be traced back to the revolutionary upheaval that wanted exactly this. Freedom and unity were the two most important slogans of the revolution, which aimed at a constitutional state with more participation rights and more basic social rights in all European countries. Even in countries where a constitution exists (like France), participation rights should be expanded. Therefore, the revolution of 1848/49 is considered the decisive "epochal threshold to modernity" in European history (Hachtmann, 2002).

Due to the enormous relevance of the revolution, historical research began immediately after the revolution, and this interest continued until the end of the 20th century. Historical and political science approaches have been tested and have repeatedly produced new aspects and perspectives on the revolution. In recent years, research interest in the 48 Revolution has waned somewhat. It was assumed that the revolution had been thoroughly researched. 175 years after the European Revolution of 1848/49 outbreak, it is worth asking about the latest research findings and perspectives. On the 175th anniversary a fundamental contradiction between historical policy and historical research can be observed (Jung, 2023): While the state and official authorities are showing great interest in commemorating the revolution and, above all, in highlighting democratic traditions in terms of historical policy, the revolution no longer arouses the same

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interest in historical research as it did on previous anniversaries. This may be due to a certain research fatigue or over-research (almost all topics of the revolution have already been looked at), but also to a pleasant resistance of science, which does not want to and should not bow to every new political trend.

There are inglorious exceptions (Bong, 2022), but overall, there are no longer any fierce disputes about the political significance of the revolution, as there were between East and West Germany on the 125th anniversary in 1973 and again in 1998, the 150th anniversary year, in the dispute over the marginalization of democrats in the revolution (Hahn, 1999). Overall, it must be said that German and Anglo-Saxon history remained rather quiet in the 175th anniversary year of the revolution. A few works on the apparently still new research field of women and gender relations in the revolution (Bleyer, 2022) and Engehausen's work (2023) on the first German parliament, St. Paul's Church, as a "workshop of democracy" pave the narrow path of current revolutionary research, which has recently been widened somewhat and extended to Europe by Clark's (2023) comprehensive account. It is, therefore even more pleasing that Konrad Canis's book on Prussia in the year of the revolution, which we are discussing here, is a comprehensive, source-saturated monograph based on his research, which was published a year before the anniversary and which deserves to be acknowledged here because it casts a new light on the German revolution as a whole. This is important not only for 19th-century German history but also for Europe and, above all, as a counterpoint to Christopher Clark's "European perspective" on the revolution.

2. Objectives of the Study

The article aims to open up a new perspective and a new angle on the European and in particular the German revolution of 1848/49 and above all on the role of the Prussian state in Germany. It is at the same time as a critical statement on Prussian politics in the 19th century. The research results are relevant for European history and for European studies of the 19th century because they no longer view the state side as separate from the social side, but show an interaction process that can also be considered for other European countries.

3. Methodology

This book review is based on my own research on the revolution of 1848/49, which was summarised in an anthology (Ries, 1999). More recent book publications and newspaper articles have now been included and compared with the new publication under review. In addition, the reviewed book is placed in the context of the new publications of the 175th anniversary and, at the end, is also compared with the standard work by Christopher Clark. Most the literature is written in English and German. The limitation of this article is that it refers to a single (albeit crucial) aspect of the German Revolution of 1848 and, because of its specificity, is difficult to generalize to other countries. Nevertheless, certain generalizations can be made, which will be discussed at the end of the article.

In terms of methodology, the following article takes a primarily political-historical and state-historical approach. This is mainly due to the book under discussion, which follows this approach. However, both social-historical and cultural-historical methods are used for critical scrutiny in order to expand and supplement the political-historical findings. Only through this methodological expansion can the image of Prussia during the revolution be adequately captured.

4. Results

4.1 About the Author and the New Publication

Konrad Canis, born in 1938, academically socialized in the GDR and specializing in the history of Prussia in the 19th century, has presented a voluminous study on the role of Prussia in the 48 Revolution. Prussian politics for the period from the March Revolution of 1848 to the end of the Prussian or Erfurt Union

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in 1850/51 has never been presented in such a comprehensive and detailed way. Canis has therefore, certainly written a standard work that will not soon be superseded and that offers new perspectives on the complex events from 1848 to 1850. Nevertheless, precisely because of this, some points of criticism are appropriate.

4.2 Book Review

The main thesis of the book is a strong continuity argument: the 48 Revolution merely accelerated a reform process of the Prussian state that had already begun in the Vormärz, especially since the 1830s, which was based on an upper-middle-class aristocratic alliance that sought a "policy of agreement" with the reform-oriented parts of the Prussian establishment and steered it into constitutional waters. This "cross-class" agreement was more successful after the outbreak of the March Revolution, as the basic anti-revolutionary attitude of the German bourgeoisie, which had existed since 1793, became even stronger. Together with the reform-minded part of the nobility and some conservatives, the bourgeoisie thus entered a congenial, i.e. revolution-preventing alliance. The aim was to turn Prussia into a constitutional state through reform. The braking moment of this upper middle-class aristocratic reform constellation was the Prussian King Frederick William IV, who for Canis was without reservation "a romantic, self-righteous, dogmatic, psychopathic absolutist" (p. 347), who was not prepared for any reforms and certainly not for a constitutional state. The Prussian Union policy, to which almost half of the book is devoted, is the continuation of a reform policy that already existed in the pre-revolutionary period with a different, namely German political, character. This, above all, was the effect of the 48 Revolution: it brought the idea of unity and the constitutional idea to the fore and fed it into the ongoing reform process. To my knowledge, this is the first time that the so-called Imperial Constitutional Campaign of summer 1849 has been presented as an integral part of Prussian Union policy, not - as one might think - as a contradiction, but as a complement. Prussia had recommended itself as the protector of the small and medium-sized states through the partly unlawful military suppression of the 'second' revolution (because it was carried out without a request for help) and advertised its Union policy in this brutal way. The fact that this failed in the end was primarily due to Austria's intransigent stance and fierce resistance, which, with Russia's backing, imposed the Olmütz Punctuation on Prussia in the fall of 1850, which Canis interprets openly. In contrast to many interpretations, he does not see this as the sole "disgrace of Prussia". But the story goes even further: in his outlook, Canis presents the Prussian Union policy as a blueprint for Bismarck's founding of the empire with bold but also short-circuited analogies, thus closing the circle to the main topic of his book.

The book offers a wealth of individual insights into Prussia's power structures and dynamics, which Canis knows inside out. His undisputed hero is Friedrich Wilhelm Count of Brandenburg, who took office on November 1, 1848, and was largely responsible for Prussia's German policy. Joseph Maria von Radowitz, who is known as the spiritus rector of Union politics, takes a back seat in Canis' work. Brandenburg is the Bismarck avant la lettre and only fails due to the circumstances, which in the revolutionary period of upheaval appeared too unstable domestically and too dangerous in terms of foreign policy to implement a small German solution under Prussian rule. Otto von Bismarck, whom Canis portrays remarkably uncritically, found himself in a better starting position after the Crimean War and the beginning of the Italian independence movement, and at the same time, created the freedom that Brandenburg still lacked through three wars. Canis even relates the imperial constitution and the almost identical predecessor constitution of the North German Confederation to the Erfurt Union Constitution, which is also said to have served as a model. By and large, this is the main message and main line of this large-scale study, which works with remarkable rigor and discipline on the continuity thesis of a Prussian state that was always ready for reform and reform-oriented.



4.3 Criticism of the new research results

Now, to the points of criticism: The main objection is to a relatively too harmonious image of Prussia, which has been softened by reform. There is hardly any mention of the oppressive and surveillance state that Prussia had become since the Carlsbad Decrees of 1819/20 and continued to develop into the 1840s. Canis is primarily interested in the politics of agreement between the two "upper classes" (p. 411) - the very concept of class is skewed for this period. In doing so, he focuses above all on the one from the Rhineland economic bourgeoisie (such as David Hansemann, Ludolf Camphausen, Gustav Mevissen et al.) and parts of the reform-liberal Prussian nobility, who attempted to modernize the Prussian state evolutionarily. The obstacles, which weighed heavily and rightly gave the Prussian state its conservative, even reactionary image, were marginalized or rather reduced to the king's person. The obstacles that weighed heavily and rightly gave the Prussian state its conservative, sometimes even reactionary image, tend to be marginalized, or rather, they are deflected onto the person of the king, who appears larger than life in the portrayal. You don't have to be a fan of Frederick William IV, but the picture painted years ago by David E. Barclay and Dirk Blasius and Christopher Clark in his Prussia book is much more nuanced than this one-sided reading. The fact that the king resigned himself to the constitutional conditions is probably now a consensus. The same applies to the Austrian State Chancellor Clemens Prince von Metternich, who, in the words of Canis, sought "a total return to the old": "[...] the omnipotence of absolutist state power in order to rule out a revolution in the future" (ibid.). Again, one does not have to be a friend of Metternich and share the almost contradictory image of Wolfram Siemann, who sees Metternich as the great reformer and "European", but one would have wished for a little more differentiation, especially as Siemann's biography of Metternich appears in the bibliography. One cannot shake off the impression that an old GDR view is still virulent: Canis argues, so to speak, in favor of Prussia (because it was in a brotherhood of arms with Russia) and at the same time against the king, who came from the wrong "class"; the same applies to the rather positive image of Bismarck, which was already astonishing in the Ernst Engelberg biography from 1985 and whose view of the revolution 'from above' is repeated here at length. The dark sides of Bismarck's politics, which certainly exist and which Johannes Willms overemphasized in his biography of Bismarck ("Demon of the Germans"), are not addressed at all. The result is a distorted image of Prussia as a great reforming state, which, since the annexation of the Rhineland at the Congress of Vienna, was given the 'mission' of uniting and modernizing Germany. Unfortunately, this old Borussian legend also shines through in this innovative and convincing book.

What is most surprising, however, is the relative indifference and detachment towards the revolutionary movements, especially towards the lower classes' protest. There is hardly a word about the peasant revolution and the final liberation of the peasants, and hardly a mention of the urban protests that strongly impacted politics. Rather, the revolution as a whole sometimes appears to be a troublesome pressure from below, which is undermining the agreement policy of the "upper classes" and hindering their successful progress.

This becomes particularly clear in the case of the military suppression of the Imperial Constitutional Campaign by Prussian troops in the Bavarian Rhine Palatinate or in Baden, which Canis treats exclusively under the aspect of the "German policy of the government [...] under the sign of military operations" (p. 309) and completely ignores the "state terror" that the Prussian state organized here and which even liberal-conservative West German historians did not conceal. Canis makes no mention of the fact that the brutal and unlawful suppression of the Imperial Constitutional Campaign by Prussian troops initially and above all represented a contradiction to the German political propaganda of Union politics and, at the same time, its decoration as a policy primarily motivated by power. Thus, a relatively homogeneous and stringent picture of Prussian politics is drawn, which ignores all breaks and contradictions and looks for a common thread in



the Berlin headquarters. The focus is on the fact that Prussia pursued a "constructive policy against the revolution", i.e., it absorbed and appropriated the national political impulses of the revolution to put forward and implement its alternative proposals. Canis conceals the fact that this was pure power and hegemonic politics, which - come what may - was whipped through (see the imperial constitution campaign), or rather he puts it aside relatively benevolently. Everything is trimmed to "agreement" in a double sense: agreement 'internally' through the alliance of the upper-middle-class aristocratic functional elite with parts of the establishment and agreement 'externally' through the concrete formulation of Union policy, which began with the circular dispatch of January 23, 1849, and was addressed to the princes and not to the parliaments - in other words, an agreement was reached exclusively at the dynastic level. Canis paints hardly any scratches on the picture of the upper middle-class aristocratic agreement with the state. One would have wished the book a little less ideology and a little more openness to the "past future" (Reinhart Koselleck).

4.4 The New View of the 1848/49 Revolution as a Social Process

Despite all the criticism, however, one thing must be made clear: Here, for the first time and for good reason, Prussian Union policy is described as an integral and constitutive part of the overall revolutionary complex! This is a new and different view of the revolution, which scholars will have to deal with in the future. The revolutionary phase in Germany thus extends from the spring of 1848 to the late autumn of 1850 and does not end - as is now the consensus in research - with the fall of the fortress of Rastatt in the summer of 1849. This is a very important, if not the most important, finding of this book and, to a certain extent, outweighs the objections. Canis has succeeded in presenting a different side of the 48 Revolution, which has so far been given far too little attention in our primary focus on the purely revolutionary events or has been relegated to the field of post-revolutionary history: to describe the state reactions, alternative concepts of action and processes of appropriation by the rulers as part of a revolutionary-reformist conflict, thus significantly expanding the overall picture of the revolution. Prussian Union politics is complex; it intensified in the middle of the revolutionary events, indeed in the actual peak phase (end of January 1849), the all-decisive phase of the German revolution, and shows an alternative path to the Paulskirche. For this reason, Frederick William IV's rejection of the imperial crown in April 1849 was not, in fact the end of the revolution, but rather the logical consequence of a Prussian policy of unity, which began at the latest with the unsuccessful "Radowitz Mission" to Vienna in March 1848 and ended abruptly with the Olmütz Punctuation at the end of November 1850. The Prussian Union policy interacted with the revolutionary events was spurred on and accelerated by them and only took shape as a result; it was not a "peculiar aftermath" of the revolution, as Thomas Nipperdey characterized it in his magnificent first volume of German history - reflecting the consensus of research at the time.

With its Union policy, Prussia wanted to place itself at the forefront of the German unification movement in its unique way and pursue its German policy. If one takes the Union policy, as Radowitz and the king had been pursuing it to some extent since the beginning of the revolution, seriously - as Canis does - then some of the actions and reactions of the Prussian state during the revolution also come to light in a different light. For example, Frederick William IV's famous dictum of March 21, 1848: "Prussia will henceforth be absorbed into Germany", can be interpreted not only as a sedative pill and a baseless promise to buy time but also as a serious statement in the sense of a Prussian-led unity policy, which had been in the establishment's pipeline for some time. Although Canis is aware of these plans, he fails to seriously examine the king's statement. Unfortunately, for him, it remains just "further" evidence that testifies to "a totally groundless confusion" on the part of the king, "a new sign of the monarch's blatant incompetence and weakness in action" (p. 31). Frederick William IV was certainly fickle and erratic and lost interest in the



Union policy in the end, but at times, he was also the promoter of this alternative path to unity, which certainly had certain chances of realization (the situation in 1870/71 was not so completely different, especially regarding the European power constellation). The Union policy ultimately failed due to resistance from Austria, which could not accept a shift in power towards Prussia, especially as it had emerged stronger from the counter-revolution, which was particularly brutal in the Habsburg Monarchy. From the late summer of 1849, the Prussian Union's chances of realization dwindled visibly and from then on, the king also began to waver. The "Union crisis" (p. 325 ff.), i.e. the end of the Union, was in the offing.

5. Conclusion and Further Perspectives

As important as it is to focus on the Prussian Union and to place it in the context of the system of coordinates of the revolution, it must also be clearly stated that the Union policy was an anti-revolutionary and anti-democratic attempt at unification by the Prussian state, which wanted to take advantage of society's aspirations for unity and freedom in order to strengthen its own position in Germany. The Union policy was Prussia's first visible attempt to pursue a national policy and to place itself at the forefront of the re-foundation of Germany. The revolution provided Prussia with the fodder for this new policy. Future research will, therefore, have to deal with the question of whether and to what extent Prussian Union policy belongs to the revolutionary events (as Canis presents it in his monograph) or rather to the history of the counter-revolution, which found its congenial continuator in Bismarck. When Prince Bismarck, later Prussian Prime Minister, who would bring about the unification of Germany, said in his famous so-called "blood and iron" speech during the Prussian constitutional conflict at the end of September 1862 that "the great questions of the time" would not be decided "by speeches and majority resolutions", but "by iron and blood", he was exactly on the line that Prussia had previously taken in the revolution.

However, whether the Prussian Union politics was a "constructive" attempt to continue the revolution by other means, as Canis's title suggests, remains to be seen and seems to me rather questionable. If, in recent years, we are so keen to relativize the failure of the revolution and prefer to talk about the successes, i.e. the 'successful failure' of the revolution, as Christopher Clark is now doing for the European perspective, then after Canis' study we must also ask ourselves what 'success' we are talking about. After all, it was above all a success of the counter-revolution, to which the Prussian Union policy throws a spotlight, and as far as the European networking of the revolution so loudly claimed today is concerned - Clark now also provides evidence of this - the European networking of the counter-revolutionary powers is clearly more obvious than the few, very sporadic, and selective communication networks of the revolutionaries across national borders. Rather, 1848/49 shows - much like the Congress of Vienna in 1815 - that a Europe of states, in the conservative sense, or the "legitimizing Europe" (Gollwitzer, 1964) was emerging and not the democratic, participatory Europe that men like Guiseppe Mazzini had been preaching and trying to realize since the 1830s. Like 1815, 1850 was a success for the conservative and state-legitimizing idea of Europe, in which democratic rights of co-determination hardly played a role. Incidentally, this is the heavy burden that Europe still must bear today! It doesn't help to keep pointing out the European dimension of the revolutionary events and tying up every loose thread. After 1850, we were further away than ever from a democratic Europe. This can be read from Canis's study without the author commenting on it. In a way, Canis' work can also be read as a counter-project to Clark's 'Europeanized' history of 1848. The national constellations were very different in the various parts of Europe. The dynamics of the overall events can only be adequately understood and the interactions analyzed if one also closely looks at the different regional and national conditions and preconditions for conflict.



To summarise once again and return to our starting point, we have, as far as the German-speaking world is concerned, to abandon the idea of a short, brief revolutionary year 1848/49 - an idea that focuses too much on the revolutionary awakening and does not perceive the counter-revolutionary actions of the state or states as an integral part of the revolutionary complex. The state's reactions are just as much a part of the revolution as social actions. To have shown this is the great merit of Konrad Canis' work. In this respect, the revolutionary process in Germany did not end in the summer of 1849, but it extended into the autumn of 1850. If we now add Christopher Clark's thesis that the entire revolutionary process began as early as 1847 with the Swiss "Sonderbundskrieg", then we will have to think anew about the key dates of the so-called European Revolution of 1848/49. This seems to be one of the most important insights from the 175th anniversary year of the 48th revolution.

In the rather controversial anniversary year, the book by Canis (2022) introduced a new important aspect, namely a reassessment of the role of Prussia. But despite all the praise, his position can be criticised because it paints too positive a picture of Prussia. As Ries (2023) has already shown, Prussia's role in the revolution should be viewed rather critically, namely not as a "constructive" attempt to steer the revolution in the "right direction" but rather to block the revolution once and for all. If we look for the role of Prussia in the revolution, as Canis recommends, then we must realise that Prussia only found its own role in the process of German unification in the revolution. 1848/49 is a significant turning point in Prussian history because from this point at the latest, a special position becomes clear that Prussia will consistently pursue in the future. The revolution clearly demonstrated to the Prussian state that it was needed in the historical development of Germany.

The fact that the first German parliament, the Paulskirche in Frankfurt, was able to agree relatively quickly and unanimously on the Prussian king as the "German Emperor" and leader of German unity clearly demonstrates the great importance Prussia played in the revolution. The fact that the Prussian king then rejected the imperial crown and thus contributed significantly to the failure of the revolution was not due to his reactionary and outmoded basic attitude, as Canis depicts, but rather to his anti-democratic and anti-parliamentary attitude towards the process of German unification. The Prussian king was not averse to taking on the leading role in the German unification process as early as 1848/49, only in a different way than the revolutionaries envisioned. Two different ideas of unification - one dynastic and one parliamentary - clashed in the revolution. This can be read from Canis' comprehensive study, even if the author himself does not make this his main focus. Canis' merit is that we need to think again about the role of Prussia in the revolutionary process and, ultimately, also in the protracted process of German unification. In the relatively unspectacular 175th anniversary year of the revolution, this is a welcome and remarkable boost to innovation for future research.

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