Volume 17 Issue 22
Originally issued as D1

Global Journal of human-social science: D
History, Archaeology & Anthropology
Volume 17 Issue 1 Version 1.0 Year 2017
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

A Profusion of 'Special Paths': Unraveling the Concept of Sonderweg

By Cody Franchetti
Columbia University

Abstract- This short essay examines the notion of Sonderweg, which emerged as historiographers attempted to make sense of the creation of the Prussian Nation State from a handful of provinces within the Holy Roman Empire in the stunningly short compass of one generation, and its rise to prominence. The idea of Sonderweg was nonetheless doled out to a variety of characteristics of Germany's evolution, coiling together far too many aspects, ensuing confusion. The essay's task is to disentangle the hitch and provide the reader with a criterion for understanding as well as considering the plausibility of the fascinating yet often vague concept called Sonderweg.

Keywords: European history, Prussia, Holy Roman Empire, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe.

GJHSS-D Classification: FOR Code: 210399



Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:

© 2017. Cody Franchetti. This is a research/review paper, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/), permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

A Profusion of 'Special Paths': Unraveling the Concept of Sonderweg

Cody Franchetti

Abstract- This short essay examines the notion of *Sonderweg*, which emerged as historiographers attempted to make sense of the creation of the Prussian Nation State from a handful of provinces within the Holy Roman Empire in the stunningly short compass of one generation, and its rise to prominence. The idea of *Sonderweg* was nonetheless doled out to a variety of characteristics of Germany's evolution, coiling together far too many aspects, ensuing confusion. The essay's task is to disentangle the hitch and provide the reader with a criterion for understanding as well as considering the plausibility of the fascinating yet often vague concept called *Sonderweg*.

Keywords: European history, Prussia, Holy Roman Empire, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe.

I. Introduction

The concept of a German *Sonderweg* is one that needs a certain degree of unraveling before assessing its validity, for it has been used in various contexts to explain a variety of theses. It is thus crucial to distinguish its different meanings before considering its defensibility. Originally used in the early days of the Prussian Empire, the term arose from the pride felt by Prussians who looked back at their country's rapid rise to an imperial power from a small, scattered, agglomeration of Hohenzollern holdings immersed in the great territory of the Holy Roman Empire; in their understanding, *Sonderweg* was a 'special course', different from that of other European states, since in only a generation, from a non-entity Prussia ascended among the most prominent nation-states in Europe. (The word itself implies a Prussian exceptionalism, for *Sonderweg* is a coupling of the German *Sonder*—'special, particular'—and Weg—'path'.) Another definition for the concept of *Sonderweg* is tied to Prussia's bracing industrialization, which, by the late nineteenth century, secured Prussia into a manufacturing power and a war machine quite unrivalled in Europe. The latter two were a favorable call of the *Sonderweg* thesis. The other, more controversial and fatalistic use of *Sonderweg* is a teleological view of Germany's convergence to Nazism; this latest variant of the term was employed by German historiographers after 1945—a theoretic outlook that flourished particularly in the 1960s—in an effort to make sense of the horrors of the war, who sought in German history the elements that lead to Nazism.

Author: *Columbia University . e-mail:history@codyfranchetti.com*

II. Discussion

The first meaning of the *Sonderweg*, in my opinion, has a patent historical basis for it has manifest evidence. As Jurgen Kocka justly pointed out, "[the] *Sonderweg* is rooted in German historical self-understanding."[1] As such, we ought to regard it as much as possible from such a point of view to discover its justification: after a long-yearned-for liberation from Austria's thrall at last delivered by the Austro-Prussian war of 1866 and the resulting dissolution of the German Confederation, the satisfaction, the relief, the pride, the jubilation that filled Prussians in the early empire must be appreciated. The German Confederation had been a displeasing compromise for Prussia; although Austria had received a major blow with the abolishment of the Holy Roman Empire by the hand of Napoleon in 1806, the formation of the Confederation discontented Prussia, since during its whole duration Austria stifled Prussian nationalistic aspirations, in part due to Metternich's influence, which lasted until 1848, and, because Austria still had the prestige and supremacy of being an imperial power. But all changed in 1866. After the battle of Königgrätz, the century-old struggle with Austria was finally and unequivocally resolved in Prussia's favor. More crucially still, the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war just a few years later, the shattering defeat of France, the elevation of Prussia to her own imperial status in 1871 at Versailles—of all places—was an undeniable demonstration of Prussia's supremacy as the German states united under Prussian leadership and henceforth were known as Germany, whose inauguration with the Treaty of Versailles decked it in the most regal robes conceivable.

It was then that the idea of a *Sonderweg* first appeared; indeed, those looking back in the early days of Prussia's hegemony to its uncertain beginnings, saw Prussia's advance to be far brisker than that of any other European nation, whose history of consolidation from immemorial dynastic struggles to the creation of a state and eventually a nation, spanned, in some cases, almost a millennium. With respect to other German potentates, too, Prussia's different course was plainly evident: in 1701 the elector of Brandenburg Frederick III

[1] Kocka, p.10

© 2017 Global Journals Inc. (US)

was raised to 'King in Prussia' by the Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I in recognition of the former's aid in the wars of Spanish Succession. And although Prussia was the first electorate to be raised to kingly status, Saxony, Bavaria, and Hanover soon followed. That none of them even remotely experienced the dazzling future of Prussia provided a credible argument for those who believed in the *Sonderweg*.

The second implication of the *Sonderweg* is linked to Prussia's swift modernization. As stated earlier, Prussia's industrial and military might in the nineteenth century proceeded at a surprising pace, and thus, a 'special path' was more than plausible. But the concept of a '*Sonderweg* to modernity' is not as convincing; Georg Iggers pointed out, "This conception of a 'separate [German] path' *Sonderweg* to modernity […] oversimplifies the political and social development of the West in general and Germany in particular and fails to recognize that there is no one path to modernity."[2] Iggers's consideration is sound, for to posit one, sole path toward modernization is ill-contrived: Britain's equally astonishing industrialization occurred during a longer time span, proving that the paths to modernity are multifarious especially when keeping in mind that in the same period Britain was the only nation whose power stood with that of Prussia. The thrust and the engine for the astonishing pace of Prussia's commercialization, were the territories of Königreich along the Rhine, which ironically were a product of Metternich's efforts to keep Prussia weak, divided—a simple buffer state buffer state between its classic borders with Russia and a new border with France. On the other hand, as the Austro-Hungarian Empire focused on its eastern possessions, it increasingly became an agricultural territory, which hindered its industrialization. In relation to Austria, thus, the argument for a Prussian *Sonderweg* to modernity may have some validity. And yet, Robert Moeller raises a sound question: "has the Sonderweg been transformed into one path to capitalist development, hardly discernible from others?"[3] Moeller's point is compelling; and it seems that though Prussia experienced a peculiar path to industrialization, one could say that it was only peculiar inasmuch as each state had its very own distinctive path to modernity as well.

We must now address the 20th century thesis of the Sonderweg as a predestined trajectory to Nazism. The subject, naturally, is one that cannot be exhaustively treated here (or in any single monograph for that matter), yet a few considerations are opportune. Historians after 1945 sought for early tendencies that in their estimation lead to Hitler's National Socialism, looking back as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century: but too often even plain signs of patriotism were erroneously looked upon suspiciously as early sprouts of Nazism. Others rejected what seemed a teleological, even eschatological, view of the rise of Hitler's regime.

Historians who sought a '*Sonderweg* to totalitarism', might be tempted to start that path with one of the circle of Jena's most illustrious members, Fichte, who in 1807-8 delivered his *Address to the German Nation* in which he proclaimed that "Germans had a peculiarly important part to play, for they had retained their language untainted by alien influences […] They had shown their moral earnestness by the Reformation and were therefore best fitted to lead the regeneration of mankind."[4] But this slogan was formulated during the wars of liberation, at a time when Napoleon's invasion of Prussia urged a pervasive nationalist sentiment. Fichte's stance was not that of a radical: the budding pride and patriotism of any Prussian intellectual is easily understood if we take into account that until the eighteenth century, German was regarded a coarse and primitive language; and that only after the *Sturm un Drang* period (1770s) its language *and* culture acquired an equal footing with the rest of Europe by virtue of its unique contributions in all fields, ranging from music to literature, philosophy to classical philology, linguistics to hermeneutics bestowed by all German-speaking states to the rest of Europe.

However, it is true that in Prussia, nationalistic fervor grew into extremism all too soon. Though it is impossible to isolate exactly its turning, Fritz Stern, in trying to isolate the first wave of this frightening direction, referred to a current around 1860, which he termed 'Illiberalism', or, a cultural style of "obedience and the uneasy adulation of authority: it embodied the new faith in nationalism and the supreme value of the nation-state."[5] Stern's 'Illiberalism' makes a glaring appearance in Heinrich von Treitschke's writings. In a series of essays written in the 1870's, later collected under the title *Doctrine of German Destiny and International Relations,* an exalted and sinister tone emerges. In describing the importance of a powerful army, Treitschke's declares, "We have learned to recognize the moral majesty of war just in those aspects of it which superficial observers describe as brutal and inhuman."[6] In the next few chapters he stresses the importance of German colonization to counteract the neighboring "parasitic nations" because "all our neighbours, at some time or another, grew at Germany's expense […]"[7]; the idolatry of violence, the hatred of all foreigners, the obsession that the latter are an encroachment to one's security and stability are indeed proto-Nazi biases.

[2] Iggers, p.69
[3] Moeller, p.666
[4] Paraphrased thus by G.P. Gooch, p.17
[5] Stern, p.xxviii
[6] Treitschke, p.139
[7] Treitschke, p.236

© 2017 Global Journals Inc. (US)

But these, and many more examples, cannot support the idea of an uninterrupted path to Nazism. In other words, to think that totalitarism is engrained in Prussia's essence is parochial. In fact, in this regard Kocka's words in this regard are valuable: "Probably no serious historian would argue that the peculiarities of German history stressed by the *Sonderweg* thesis—late nation-building, illiberal cultures, blocked parliamentarization, etc.—led directly and necessarily to 1933. There is no doubt that many other causal factors were involved—from the consequences of the lost war to the person of Adolf Hitler."[8]

Where does this leave the *Sonderweg* thesis? In relation to this third meaning of it, Kocka again provides with an appropriate frame to view *Sonderweg*: "The *Sonderweg* thesis may help to explain why there were so few barriers against the fascist or totalitarian challenge in Germany. But the *Sonderweg* thesis is much weaker in explaining fascism as such and what happened after 1933. National Socialism was part of a European phenomenon, an aspect of a more general challenge to liberal democracy in the inter-war period."[9]

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, the validity of a German *Sonderweg* seems to me only arguable in its original meaning: after all, Prussia was the last, great European power to consolidate and the fastest to do so—though the recognition that, "in a certain sense, every country and every region has its own *Sonderweg*"[10] weakens the thesis even in this connotation. As to having a special path to modernity, though impressive, Prussia was not unique. Finally, to use the *Sonderweg* thesis to explain Hitler has a Hegelian whiff of predestination, which careful historians should beware of. Otherwise, history, as a purely a-posteriori explanation for not-so-hidden agendas, can be manipulated unfittingly and dangerously.

References Références Referencias

1. Gooch, G.P. *Studies in German History*. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1948)
2. Iggers, Georg G. *Historiography in the twentieth century from scientific objectivity to the postmodern challenge*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005)
3. Kocka, Jurgen. "German History before Hitler: The Debate about the German Sonderweg." *Journal of Contemporary History* 23 (1988): 3-16
4. Moeller, Robert G. "The Kaiserreich Recast? Continuity and Change in Modern German Historiography." *Journal of Social History* 17 (1984): 655-84
5. Stern, Fritz. *The Failure of Illiberalism: Essays on the Political Culture of Modern Germany.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992)
6. Treitschke, Heinrich. *Doctrine of German Destiny and of International Relations*. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1914)

[8] Kocka, p.11
[9] Kocka, p.25
[10] Jurgen Kocka, "German History before Hitler: The Debate about the German Sonderweg." Journal of Contemporary History 23 (1988): 3-16, p.10

© 2017 Global Journals Inc. (US)