

**ABSOLUTISM AND ITS LIMITS.
THE MONARCHY AND THE NOBILITY
IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PRUSSIA**

Dmitrii V. Sterkhov

N. I. Pirogov Russian National Research Medical University

Abstract. This article contributes to the ongoing debate about absolutism. Its primary focus is the relationship between the Hohenzollern monarchs and the Prussian nobility in the eighteenth century in terms of absolutism theory. It considers three major factors that set limits on the absolutist intentions of Prussian kings, and identifies regionalism as one of the most important factors. Secondly, it addresses the Prussian military system, which guaranteed the Prussian nobility the leading position in society, while emphasizing that this cannot be viewed entirely as a compromise between the Prussian aristocracy and the crown. Thirdly, it notes that the Prussian nobility never lost its representative rights and privileges. The political and social activity of the Prussian Junkers was centered in minor representative organs such as standing commissions, committees, and credit institutions. While the Prussian example does not invalidate the theory of absolutism, it helps to redefine this concept for Prussian and, by extension, European history.

Keywords: absolutism, Prussia, the House of Hohenzollern, regionalism, Frederick II, enlightened absolutism, nobility, cantonal system, representative organs, Seven Years' War.

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Correspondence to: Dmitrii V. Sterkhov. N. I. Pirogov Russian National Research Medical University, History of Medicine and Social Sciences & Humanities Department. 117997, Ostrovitianova st. 1, Moscow, Russia. E-mail: [enkiddu\[at\]mail.ru](mailto:enkiddu[at]mail.ru)

**АБСОЛЮТИЗМ И ЕГО ГРАНИЦЫ.
МОНАРХИЯ И ДВОРЯНСТВО В ПРУССИИ В XVIII ВЕКЕ**

Дмитрий В. Стерхов

Российский национальный исследовательский
медицинский университет им. Н. И. Пирогова

Аннотация. Статья посвящена изучению проблемы абсолютизма на примере Пруссии. В центре внимания находятся взаимоотношения между прусскими королями и прусским дворянством в XVIII в., которые в историографии обычно рассматриваются в контексте теории абсолютизма. В статье подробно рассматриваются три основных фактора, которые во многом ограничивали абсолютистские намерения прусских монархов. Самым важным являлся фактор регионализма, который не позволял королям Пруссии проводить единую политику по отношению к знати. Особое внимание уделяется прусской военной системе, которая гарантировала прусской аристократии лидирующие позиции в обществе и государстве, однако подчёркивается то обстоятельство, что прусская военная система не во всех аспектах являлась выражением компромисса между монархией и дворянством. Наконец, анализируется политика прусских королей в сфере сословного представительства. Данное исследование показывает, что, вопреки общепринятой точке зрения, прусское юнкерство в XVIII в. не потеряло свои сословные права и привилегии. Несмотря на прекращение практики созыва ландтагов, сословная деятельность прусского дворянства продолжилась в менее крупных органах, таких, как постоянные комиссии, комитеты, кредитные институты. Пример Пруссии позволяет взглянуть иначе на проблему абсолютизма.

Ключевые слова: абсолютизм, Пруссия, Гогенцоллерны, регионализм, Фридрих II Великий, просвещённый абсолютизм, дворянство, кантональная система, сословное представительство, Семилетняя война.

Absolutism has been one of the most debated concepts in historical research. The theory of absolutism was developed by German economist and historian Wilhelm Roscher, who was the first to distinguish three types of absolute monarchies: religious absolutism (sixteenth century), court absolutism (seventeenth century) and enlightened absolutism (eighteenth century) (Kunisch 1986, 180). This initial conception of absolutism came a long way from its initial general acclamation in the nineteenth and in the first half of the twentieth centuries (Henshall 1996, 25) to the total negation

of this phenomenon as such over the past few decades (Henshall 1992; Schilling 2008). Regardless of its controversial status among scholars, the idea of absolute monarchy persists in modern historical works, especially in terms of the eighteenth century, which is considered the epoch of “enlightened despotism” (Wilson 2000; Beals 2005).

Roscher based his theory of “enlightened absolutism” on the example of Prussia, which is traditionally depicted as a classical despotic monarchy along with Spain, France, Austria, and Russia. The origins of Prussian absolutism can be traced back to the rule of the Elector of Brandenburg and Duke of Prussia Frederick William (1640–88), also known as the Great Elector. The major features of Frederick William’s politics were centralization of the state administration, state control over financial affairs, formation of a standing army, and struggle with the privileges of Estates, most notably in East Prussia (Vogler and Vetter 1980, 40–41). Simply put, everything associated with absolutism can be found in the policy of the Great Elector.

These characteristic policies were continued by his successors. Frederick William’s son, the Elector Frederick III (1688–1713), crowned himself in 1701 as King *in* Prussia (the title was first applied only to East Prussia, but in the middle of the eighteenth century it transformed into King *of* Prussia, being extended to the entire territory of the Hohenzollern monarchy), thus founding the Prussian kingdom. Frederick III/I was even more “absolutist” than his father. For example, the Great Elector had planned to divide the territory of Brandenburg-Prussia among his heirs, including those born from his second marriage. His son flatly rejected this plan, issuing a decree in 1710 forbidding any partition of the Prussian state. Thus, Prussia finally became a hereditary monarchy. Frederick III/I also put an end to the practice of local Estate assemblies (*Landtage*); the last one convened in East Prussia in 1704. Further, the first Prussian king founded a sumptuous royal court as a part of his absolutist policy (Neugebauer 2001, 113–133).

Prussian absolutism reached its peak under Frederick’s son, Frederick William I (1713–40), who not only created an effective military organization (cantonal system), but also made further attempts to centralize the state administration and establish royal supremacy over the Prussian nobility. In some provinces, namely East Prussia, the local aristocracy suffered significant withdrawal of their political and financial privileges (Carsten 1985, 145). Prussian absolutism obtained its classical features under Frederick II, also known as Frederick the Great (1740–88) who serves as an ideal model of an “enlightened despot.” He had a firm grip on the reins of power and tolerated no disobedience, but at the same time considered himself the “first servant of the state” and the guardian and protector of the public interest.

While tempting to presuppose that eighteenth-century Prussia was a monolithic state in which every aspect of public life was strictly controlled

by the supreme power, a closer look at the Prussian political structure suggests otherwise. Both in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Prussia was nothing more than a collection of separate provinces loosely united by the figure of the sovereign. Even in the beginning of the nineteenth century, Prussia remained a conglomerate monarchy in which the dynasty and its small apparatus of officials and courtiers were the only unifying institution (Breuilly 2009, 270). Prussian kings used every reasonable endeavor to establish a uniform bureaucratic system over their territorial possessions, but such attempts remained mostly futile given the significant legal, religious, administrative, and social divisions among Prussian provinces. Moreover, since 1740 Prussia had acquired new territories (Silesia, East Frisia, West Prussia, Ansbach-Bayreuth) with a completely different status than that of the older territories (Kurmark, Altmark, Neumark, Pomerania, Cleves and Mark, Minden, Magdeburg, Halberstadt).

Prussian kings were very well aware of this regionalism, a fact that is reflected in their relations with the aristocracy of different territories. The nobility of the central provinces of the kingdom (Kurmark, Neumark, Uckermark) was reputed to be the most loyal to the crown. In his *Political Testament* (1722) Frederick William I praised these nobles as “the most allegiant of all” (Kathe 1978, 64). This benevolent attitude of the Prussian king was not unfounded. Although those nobles who were closest to the political heart of the Prussian kingdom were the first to lose their political rights, they accepted this fate without any complaints. In return, they gained some equally important privileges, such as the opportunity to occupy some of the most profitable posts in the central administration. Indeed, due to their location in the heartland of the Hohenzollern state, the Kurmark Junkers were constantly under the king’s eye and had no other choice but to be loyal and faithful (Hubatsch 1975, 160). On the other hand, without the support of the centrally located nobility, the Prussian kings would have hardly enjoyed success in their domestic and foreign policy.

The Prussian kings spoke just as favorably about the Pomeranian nobility. Frederick the Great in particular held the nobles of Pomerania in high respect. Giving his royal consent to the founding of a Pomeranian credit institution in 1780, the monarch wrote, “I want to help them because I love the Pomeranians as my brothers, no one can love them more than I do” (Schwenke 1911, 52). This affection was readily reciprocated by the Pomeranian nobility. The Pomeranian noble clans (von Puttkamer, von Podewils, von Schlieffen, von Tauentzien) eagerly served the Hohenzollern monarchs as officials and army officers. As such, the Pomeranian aristocracy was in a position to protect its privileges from the royal attacks if necessary. Thus, in 1717 Frederick William I ended the vassal relationships with the landed nobility and turned the former knightly fiefs into the full property of their owners (so-called allodialization of the estates). The traditional feudal bonds that linked the Prussian nobility to the

monarch were finally broken. Noble families gained the full freedom to dispose of their estates of their own volition, while the king renounced his traditional rights over his vassals' lands. In return, the nobles were obliged to pay annual taxes. This stipulation constituted a significant damage to noble privileges, as the nobility had always been exempt from taxation (Berdahl 1988, 23). As a result, the reform of allodialization met with resolute opposition from the Pomeranian nobility and was finally carried out in practice only in 1787 (Müller 2011, 108–110). Likewise, all attempts by Frederick the Great to improve the position of the Pomeranian peasants, to regulate their forced labor on the Junker lands, and even to abolish their enserfment proved futile. The Pomeranian nobles were probably the most successful in opposing any royal initiative that might have damaged their estate privileges.

The nobility of Halberstadt and Magdeburg also had good standing with the Prussian kings, but in some cases the aristocrats of these territories (von Plotho, von Alvensleben, von Schulenburg) could be even more wayward and capricious than the Pomeranians. The Estates of Magdeburg jealously guarded their right to appeal to the Imperial Court in Vienna over the head of their monarch, a privilege that the Prussian kings would have been glad to limit or abolish. In case of need, Magdeburg nobles availed themselves of this prerogative. For example, in 1717 Frederick William I decided to carry out allodialization in Magdeburg. Displeased by this royal initiative, the Magdeburg Estates addressed themselves to the Imperial Court in Vienna, thus bringing their quarrel with the crown far beyond the Prussian borders. The proceedings before the Imperial Court lasted for long eleven years and proved to be a lost cause for the Magdeburg Estates. Frederick William I eventually managed to impose his royal jurisdiction on the willful nobles, but was unable to destroy their will to resist (Klein 1964, 90).

The attitude of Prussian rulers toward the nobility of the western provinces, which became part of the Hohenzollern monarchy on the eve of the Thirty Years' War (1618–48), was highly negative. Frederick William I called the nobles of Cleves and Mark “dumb asses but malicious as the Devil” (Kathe 1978, 64). His son, Frederick the Great, also spoke in unkind terms of the Cleves nobility, condemning them as a “pack of stupid spiteful plotters” (Göse 2012, 108). All attempts to abolish the Estate diets and other forms of representation in Cleves and Mark met with failure. Proximity to the Netherlands promoted the consolidation of a specific regional consciousness among the Rhenish aristocrats, making them bitter and irreconcilable enemies of the Prussian central government in Berlin.

Relations between the Prussian monarchs and the nobility of East Prussia proved dramatic. The province that allowed the Electors of Brandenburg to raise their status and assume the royal title was, in fact, one of the most malcontent and troublesome of all Prussian territories. As was the case with the Cleves and Mark nobility, East Prussian aristocrats

were highly affected by their neighbor state, in this case the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, where the traditions of political representation were as strong as in the Netherlands. Seeing the example of the Polish gentry, who enjoyed remarkable privileges, including the right to elect the Polish king, the East Prussian nobility reacted badly to any attempts of the Hohenzollern kings to limit the political and financial liberties of the Estates. The proximity to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, combined with the vast geographical distance from the heartland of the Prussian kingdom, resulted in a special provincial consciousness; loyalty to the central government in Berlin was amazingly low. This lack of patriotism among East Prussian nobles was evident during the Seven Years' War (1756–63) when Russian troops occupied the province. The local gentry not only showed no resistance to the foreign military forces, but even swore an oath of loyalty to Russian Empress Elisabeth (Johnson 1975, 168). For their part, the Prussian kings responded with deliberate coldness and hostility. The Estate diets were not convened after 1704, the Estates lost control over taxes and expenditures. To add insult to injury, East Prussian Junkers were obligated to pay estate taxes, while the nobility of other provinces enjoyed an exemption from this obligation (Schwenke 1911, 47). In their privileges and prerogatives, the East Prussian nobility was limited to a far greater extent than the aristocracy of other Prussian territories.

The situation in Silesia (taken from Austria in 1740–41 by Frederick the Great) was uneasy. In Frederick's policy toward the Silesian nobility, the philosopher king took a carrot and stick approach. He abolished all local representative organs. The Silesian Estates lost their right to approve taxes as well as control over provincial expenditures; it was strictly forbidden to return to Austrian service; the Catholics who constituted a considerable part of the Silesian population were forbidden to serve as public officials; the connection of the province to Austria and the Holy Roman Empire was significantly broken, and the appeals to the Imperial Court in Vienna were discommended. The traditional Estates system was completely destroyed and replaced by the Prussian administration. The transformation of Silesian political and military structures undertaken by Frederick the Great was so unprecedented that some historians even speak of an administrative and territorial revolution that took place after the conquest of the province by the Prussian king (Conrads 2009, 376). At the same time, Frederick the Great did his best to ensure the social privileges and possessory rights of the Silesian nobility. The noble landowners were exempted from estate taxes and had practically absolute power over serfs. To enlist the sympathies of the Silesian nobility the king spent considerable amounts of money to help those aristocratic families whose estates had been devastated by the wars against Austria. Silesia also was the first province to receive a special credit institution (*Landschaft*), which was supposed to financially support the insolvent nobles. However, the relationship between the king and the

Silesian nobility, poisoned by the mutual distrust, remained tense and complicated.

It can be stated that there were striking differences in the status of noble corporations across different Prussian territories. The quantity and the quality of noble liberties and privileges differed from province to province. Here arises a logical question: can we speak of the “Prussian” nobility in eighteenth-century Prussia at all, as opposed to a “Kurmark,” “Silesian,” “Magdeburg,” or “Cleves” nobility? It remains an open question, but one thing is certain: regionalism prevented the Prussian monarchs from conducting a unified policy toward their noble subjects. This regionalism set apparent boundaries on Prussian absolutism and allowed noble corporations to distance themselves from the central government in Berlin. Moreover, unlike in France or Spain, the nobility in the border territories was not represented in the central administration. Thus, the Prussian kings could not bind the capricious aristocrats by distributing lucrative and honorable places at court. As previously mentioned, the royal court was founded in the beginning of the eighteenth century by the first Prussian king Frederick III/I, but his son and successor Frederick William I pared down the expenses of the royal household to a minimum, making service at the court totally unattractive for nobility (Neugebauer 2001, 62). Under Frederick the Great there were two courts: one in Potsdam where the king established his residence, and one in Berlin where Frederick’s estranged wife, Elisabeth Christine, remained. This situation of the “double court” caused certain confusion among the nobles (Trunz 2011, 115–116).

The Prussian kings found an absolutely unique way to domesticate the nobility by creating a specific military system that guaranteed the leading position of the Junkers in the Prussian society. In 1962 the German historian Otto Büsch published his famous monograph *Military System and Social Life in Old-Regime Prussia, 1713–1807*, which became a classic work on the social and military structures of eighteenth-century Prussia. Büsch was among the first to propose a theory according to which the Prussian military system created by Frederick William I and Frederick II can be regarded as a certain compromise between the Prussian nobility and the crown. Büsch noted that the Prussian officer corps was recruited exclusively from noble families; the percentage of commoner officers was extremely low. The Prussian Junkers had the sole birth right to order and command. In return for this privileged position in the army and society, the Prussian nobility waived its political rights to the monarch’s advantage. In general, the Prussian social structure of the eighteenth century can be represented as such: the peasantry was obliged to serve in the army as cannon fodder, middle city classes were exempted from compulsory military service and hence had no influence on public sphere, and the highest ranks in military and civilian service were reserved predominantly for nobles. Consequently the officer corps can be viewed as the ruling class of the Prussian society

(Büsch, 1962, 92–95). Büsch's conclusion was in many ways surprising. Having lost their political rights in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Prussian Junkers regained them in the middle of the eighteenth century thanks to their prerogative position in the military system (Büsch, 1962, 140–142, 163–165).

Was this alliance between the Prussian monarchy and the Prussian nobility as solid as we might think? Once again a closer look at this problem provides a different picture. Even though entitled to occupy the highest posts in the Prussian army, the Junkers were not so willing to complete military service. Only impoverished noble families from the central provinces (Kurmark, Uckermark) gladly sent their sons to the army, where they had a good chance to make a military career and increase their social status. Higher ranks of nobility were mostly disinterested in the military service and tried to escape this hard lot in every possible way. Particularly reluctant were East Prussian nobles who blankly refused to send their offspring to cadet schools. Frederick William I had to personally assign the sons of East Prussian aristocrats to this or that regiment and impel young nobles to join the military service. Frederick II harshly criticized the unwillingness of East Prussian nobility to serve in the army. In 1781 Frederick II declined a request from the East Prussian Estates, who wanted to establish a credit institute to support ruined noble families, with the following words: “They don’t serve and want to do nothing, so the King will do nothing for them” (Neugebauer 2001, 70–71). The nobility of the western provinces also showed no zeal for military service. The Silesian aristocracy was forbidden to join the Prussian army because of its disloyalty and pro-Austrian sympathies. Overall, the attitude of the Prussian nobility toward military service was not as positive as it might seem.

The cantonal system, introduced by Frederick William I in 1733, also gave rise to unfavorable criticism on the part of the nobility. This reform introduced a number of military districts or so-called cantons. Every regiment was assigned to a certain canton and recruited those who were eligible for conscription within its borders. The cantonal system provided many exemptions from the military service. In fact, only peasants were obliged to enter service as privates; the Prussian Army was a peasant army. As for nobles, they had a birth right to hold officer ranks; the noble officer was born to command an army of peasant soldiers. It would seem that the nobility should have been pleased with this reform, but in reality it was the only social class that fiercely opposed the cantonal system. In 1740 the Estates of different provinces lodged grievances (*gravamina*) and desires (*desideria*) addressed to Frederick II on the occasion of his ascension to the throne. They all contained urgent requests to abolish the cantonal system or to limit its implementation (Schmoller and Hintze 1901, 46–47, 69, 92, 119, 134, 146–147). The main reason for displeasure was the fear of noble landowners of losing their labor force, which could be used in the estates.

The nobles' private interests were much more important than the interests of the state. For a Prussian Junker, it was far more preferable for the peasant to work on his land and not serve in the army. Some landlords even offered passive resistance by concealing peasants from cantonal officers (Büsch, 1962, 90). The Prussian military system was not in every aspect a compromise between nobility and the crown.

In this regard, the cantonal system directly affected the major privilege of noble landowners: the right to exercise absolute power over their serfs. The principal form of land tenure east of the Elbe River was an immense estate owned by a landed aristocrat and maintained by serf peasants with few rights (*Gutsherrschaft*). Holding administrative, economic, and judicial power in his hands, the estate owner was the only source of authority for his peasants. Noble landowners quite fairly saw a rival in the state, which was withdrawing some of these subjects from the manorial system. Right after the introduction of the canton system in 1733, complaints rose about the behaviour of cantonal officers who interfered in patrimonial jurisdiction, forbade enlisted peasants to marry, and violated the landlords' rights over their serfs in many other ways. In 1746 the Kurmark Landtag quite openly disapproved of some officers who "went too far" when "they searched for servants throughout the canton on their own volition and take into their service even those who are not enlisted" (Göse 2000, 214–215). The nobles did not reject the cantonal system as such. Rather, they were more concerned about strict observance of their patrimonial rights, which they valued more than the interests of the state.

As for the state, it needed soldiers, but since the majority of soldiers were peasants, the government was compelled to protect them. The Prussian kings tried to take some timid measures in this direction. In 1749 Frederick II barred landlords from depriving peasants of their holdings and from illegally appropriating arable land and meadows (Büsch, 1962, 57). Still, it was a drop in the ocean. All attempts to improve the working conditions of peasants turned out to be futile. For example, the Prussian monarchs were unable to regulate the corvée labor. In some regions, such as Uckermark, the services of peasants on landlord estates reached six days per week. In other territories, such as Pomerania, they remained unlimited despite all the efforts of the government to issue edicts that would have obliged the nobles to limit them (Carsten 1989, 50). Prussian rulers even developed projects for abolishing the serfdom. Frederick II himself condemned it as a social malady, but these intentions remained within the scope of plans and wishes and were put into practice only during the Reform Era (1807–11).

Social predominance of the nobility was unshakable, but the political and representative rights of the Estates suffered significant losses. In the early eighteenth century, the practice of Estate diets (*Landtage*) died out, especially in the central and eastern provinces (Kurmark, East Prussia). The Estates lost their representative organs and consequently any political

influence. The provincial diets were convened on a regular basis only in some western provinces, such as Cleves, Mark, and East Frisia (Eimers 1983, 409–411). The role of provincial diets as organs of estate representation should not be overestimated. Even in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, when the Estates were strong enough to have some influence on political, military, or financial affairs, the provincial diets were still convened infrequently, and in some regions there were no strict rules or fixed frequency for their calling. The organization of a *Landtag* was a costly affair both for the Estates and the ruler (Lange 1981, 329). Much more effective was the work of Estate committees and standing commissions of deputies elected by the Estates. These minor forms of representative organs did not fade away and existed further on throughout the eighteenth century.

After the suspension of state diets, the activity of the nobility was concentrated in provincial committees and commissions. One of the most influential and well-known was the committee of the Kurmark, which was called *Kurmärkisches Kreditwerk* and served as a real estate bank. The Kurmark committee was an institution of financial administration. It supervised the liquidation of debts, dealt in credits, managed provincial taxes and revenues, and carried out many other fiscal functions. In Magdeburg there were two committees: the Minor Committee that managed finances and debts of the province, and the Greater Committee that dealt in credits and inspected the activities of the former. In 1716 Frederick William I dissolved the Greater Committee, thus excluding finance and credit from the competence of the Estates, but under Frederick the Great in 1787, the Greater Committee resumed its operations. The activity of the Minor Committee was never interrupted (Neugebauer 1983, 187–189).

Along with financial matters the committees and commissions had a voice in questions of law and justice. In their addresses to the young King Frederick II in 1740, the aristocrats of Magdeburg and Minden demanded to be consulted in case of any judiciary reforms. The Estates of Kurmark even demanded to convene a special representative organ that would have the right to take part in deliberations on any initiative in the legal sphere (Schmoller and Hintze 1901, 70, 87, 143). Unlike many other demands expressed by the Estates in 1740, these requests were partly respected by the Prussian government. Reforming the legal system of the Prussian kingdom in 1747–48, Grand Chancellor Samuel von Cocceji (1679–1755) closely cooperated with the Estates of Kurmark and East Frisia. In 1786 Frederick the Great issued a special decree demanding that Grand Chancellor Johann Heinrich von Carmer (1720–1801) take into account the opinion of provincial Estates and noble committees and commissions while working on the codification of the Prussian civil code promulgated in 1794 and known as the *General State Laws for the Prussian States* (Neugebauer 2009, 352–353). It should be noted that the highest offices in provincial

chamber courts were reserved only for persons of noble descent, so in any case the nobility exercised dominant influence on the judiciary system.

In addition to committees and commissions there was another representative organ at the provincial level, the so-called district council, or *Kreistag*. These councils existed parallel to the official local government administration, the War and Domain Chambers. Only noble landlords who possessed an estate in this particular district were allowed to participate in the sessions of district councils. Belonging to an aristocratic family was the crucial point. Those commoners who also possessed country estates (by an act of purchase, for example) were barred from involvement. Admission to the sessions of district councils was the privilege of noble landowners. The most important function of the district council was the election of a rural commissioner or *Landrat*. On the one hand, the *Landrat* was a governmental official. On the other hand, he was a candidate put forward by local noble estate owners. He was in charge of collecting property taxes, cantonment, and furnishing the army with supply. Of equal importance, he supervised the local police, took measures against epidemics, and saw to the repair and construction of public buildings. The *Landrat* usually was assisted by two coadjutors who were also elected by local landlords. In this manner, the *Landrat* was an intermediary between the state and the Estates and a counterweight to the official bureaucracy (Hubatsch 1975, 165–168). Electing of the *Landrat* was not the sole function of the district council. It also took control of district finances, taxes, public health and education, agriculture and trade, and savings banks and credit institutions. In some ways the district council was a much more important organ than the *Landtag*.

The attitude of the Prussian kings toward these local representative organs was contradictory. On the one hand, they did their best to bring them under the state control. Frederick William I deprived the district councils of their right to elect the *Landrat*. He had to be appointed by the king himself, but only from among noble landowners of the district (Birtsch 1983, 402). As mentioned above, the king also withdrew finance and credit from the competence of the Magdeburg and East Prussian estates. On the other hand, Prussian monarchs encouraged the nobility to take part in the local administration. In historical scholarship, Frederick William I is often represented as a martinet and despot, but in some cases he was much less “absolutist” than his entourage. In 1716 the king quite seriously contemplated the idea of convening a *Landtag* in East Prussia to discuss with the Estates the introduction of a property tax for noble estate owners. The king’s councilors eventually advised him against this undertaking (Neugebauer 2009, 312). The idea of noble representation was not totally alien to this austere and frugal monarch. However absolutist and even despotic Frederick William I might have been, his policy in no way shook the will of the nobility to protect its liberties. If we turn once again to the appeals

of the Estates to Frederick II issued on the occasion of his ascension in 1740, we see that the provincial nobility never forgot about its rights and privileges. The East Prussian Estates demanded the calling of the *Landtag* once every three years for discussing the most important matters. The Kurmark Estates advocated for their right to elect the *Landrat*, the Magdeburg Estates requested the restoration of the Greater Committee, and the Estates of the western provinces insisted on being entitled to manage taxes (Schmoller and Hintze 1901, 56, 72, 84, 143).

The policy of Frederick the Great toward the nobility was even much friendlier than that of his father. Though he had no intention to revive the practice of state diets, he was ready to restore some privileges to the landed aristocracy at the local level. Committees and commissions abolished by his father in some provinces resumed their activity. Landowners regained their right to elect a *Landrat*, albeit now the candidature had to be confirmed by the monarch. All of these procedures were greatly encouraged by Frederick, who wanted to decentralize some functions of local governments in favor of representative organs. These measures relieved the state from some burdensome duties and created a system of mutual control because Frederick did not put absolute faith and trust in his own officials (Johnson 1975, 59–60).

This strong tendency toward the protection of the nobility became more evident after the devastation of the Seven Years' War. In order to help those estate owners who were on the brink of the ruin, Frederick decided to create a special territorial credit institution or *Landschaft*, which functioned as a sort of a mortgage bank. Every noble landowner could obtain credit on property that amounted to half of his estate's value. The landlord received a mortgage bond that he could use at his discretion; he could sell it or pawn it. The obtained credit could be invested into the estate or be used for liquidation of debts (Büsch, 1962, 107). The first *Landschaft* was founded in Silesia since this province had witnessed most intensive war operations and was badly ravaged. In 1777, *Landschaften* followed in Kurmark and Neumark, and in 1781 in Pomerania. Frederick's nephew and successor, Frederick William II (1786–97), arranged new *Landschaften* in West Prussia (1787) and East Prussia (1788).

Territorial credit institutions encouraged the public activity of the Prussian nobility. In 1770 elections of deputies into the Silesian General Diet took place. The representatives of noble estate owners were convened to determine basic working principles of the provincial *Landschaft*. In spite of its purely economic functions, the Silesian *Landschaft* inevitably turned into the center of political interests for the landed aristocracy. Seen in this light, the *Landschaften* led to a revival of the nobility's political influence. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, they were acknowledged by authorities as independent organs of noble representation (Carsten 1989, 41).

How absolute was Prussian absolutism? This problem seems to be just as relevant today as a quarter of a century ago (Baumgart 1981, 89–105). An unambiguous answer cannot be given, but an analysis of the relationship between the Prussian kings and their nobility in the eighteenth century demonstrates that in our search for absoluteness in absolutism, we will always stumble across something non-absolute that contradicts this theory. It is difficult to decide whether we should redefine the concept of absolutism or reject it completely, but certainly the example of eighteenth-century Prussia provides evidence of a number of different social and political practices that cannot always be reduced to the notion of absolutism.

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About the author

Dmitrii V. Sterkhov, Candidate of Science (History), is Associate Professor with the History of Medicine, Social Sciences and Humanities Department, N. I. Pirogov Russian National Research Medical University (Moscow).