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DiveRgences

Nous sommes définis par les lignes que nous décidons de traverser ou d'accepter comme frontières

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Spot the Difference

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A SHORT historical quiz: Which state:

(1) Arose after a holocaust in which a third of its people were destroyed?

(2) Drew from that holocaust the conclusion that only superior military forces could ensure its survival?

(3) Accorded the army a central role in its life, making it "an army that had a state, rather than a state that had an army"?

(4) Began by buying the land it took, and continued to expand by conquest and annexation?

(5) Endeavored by all possible means to attract new immigrants?

(6) Conducted a systematic policy of settlement in the occupied territories?

(7) Strove to push out the national minority by creeping ethnic cleansing ?

For anyone who has not yet found the answer: it's the state of Prussia.

But if some readers were tempted to believe that it all applies to the State of Israel – well, they are right, too. This description fits our state. The similarity between the two states is remarkable. True, the countries are geographically very different, and so are the historical periods, but the points of similarity can hardly be denied.

THE STATE that was respected and feared for 350 years as Prussia started with another name: Mark Brandenburg. (Mark: march, border area). This territory in the North-East of Germany was wrested from its Slavic inhabitants and was initially outside the boundaries of the German Reich. To this day, many of its place names (including Berlin neighborhoods, like Pankow) are clearly Slavic. It can be said: Prussia arose on the ruins of another people (some of whose descendants are still living there).

A historical curiosity: the land was first paid for in cash. The house of Hohenzollern, a noble family from South Germany, bought the territory of Brandenburg from the German Emperor for 400,000 Hungarian Gulden. I don't know how that compares with the money paid by the Jewish National Fund for parts of Palestine before 1948.

The event that largely determined the entire history of Prussia up to World War II was a holocaust: the 30-years war. Throughout these years - 1618-1648 - practically all the armies of Europe fought each other on German soil, destroying everything in the process. The soldiers, many of them mercenaries, the scum of the earth, murdered and raped, pillaged and robbed, burnt entire towns and drove the pitiful survivors from their lands. In this war, a third of the German population was killed and two thirds of their villages destroyed. (Bertolt Brecht immortalized this holocaust in his play, "Mother Courage".)

North Germany is a wide open plain. Its borders are unprotected by any ocean, mountain range or desert. The

Prussian answer to the ravages of the holocaust was to erect an iron wall: a powerful regular army that would make up for the lack of seas and mountains and be ready to defend the state against all possible combinations of potential enemies.

At the beginning, the army was an essential instrument for the defense of the state's very existence. In the course of time, it became the center of national life. What started out as the Prussian defense forces became an aggressive army of conquest that terrified all its neighbors. For some of the Prussian kings, the army was the main interest in life. For a time, the soldiers and their families constituted about a quarter of the Berlin population. An old Prussian saying goes: "Der Soldate / ist der beste Mann im Staate" – the soldier is the best man in the state. Adulation of the army became a cult, almost a religion.

PRUSSIA WAS never a "normal" state of a homogenous population living together throughout the centuries. By a sophisticated combination of military conquest, diplomacy and judicious marriages, its masters succeeded in annexing more and more territories to their core domain. These territories were not even contiguous, and some of them were very far from each other.

One of those was the area that came to give the state its name: Prussia. The original Prussia was located on the shores of the Baltic Sea, in areas that now belong to Poland and Russia. At first they were conquered by the Order of Teutonic Knights, a German religious-military order founded during the Crusades in Acre - the ruins of its main castle, Montfort (Starkenberg), still stand in Galilee. The German crusaders decided that instead of fighting the heathens in a faraway country, it made more sense to fight the neighboring pagans and rob them of their lands. In the course of time, the princes of Brandenburg succeeded in acquiring this territory and adopted its name for all their dominions. They also succeeded in upgrading their status and crowned themselves as kings.

The lack of homogeneity of the Prussian lands, composed as they were of diverse and unconnected areas, gave birth to the main Prussian creation: the "State". This was the factor that was to unite all the different populations, each of which stuck to its local patriotism and traditions. The "State" – Der Staat – became a sacred being, transcending all other loyalties. Prussian philosophers saw the "State" as the incarnation of all the social virtues, the final triumph of human reason.

The Prussian state became proverbial. Demonized by its enemies, it was, however, exemplary in many ways – a well organized, orderly and law-abiding structure, its bureaucracy untainted by corruption. The Prussian official received a paltry salary, lived modestly and was intensely proud of his status. He detested ostentation. A hundred years ago Prussia already had a system of social insurance – long before other major countries dreamed of it. It was also exemplary in its religious tolerance. Frederick "the Great" declared that everyone should "find happiness in his own way". Once he said that if Turks were to come and settle in Prussia, he would build mosques for them. Last week, 250 years later, the Swiss passed a referendum forbidding the building of minarets in their country.

PRUSSIA WAS a very poor country, lacking natural resources, minerals and good agricultural soil. It used its army to procure richer territories.

Because of the poverty, the population was thinly spread. The Prussian kings expended much effort in recruiting new immigrants. In 1731, when tens of thousands of Protestants in the Salzburg area (now part of Austria) were persecuted by their Catholic ruler, the King of Prussia invited them to his land. They came with their families and possessions in a mass foot march to East Prussia, traversing the full length of Germany. When the French Huguenots (Protestants) were slaughtered by their Catholic kings, the survivors were invited to Prussia and settled in Berlin, where they contributed greatly to the development of the country. Jews, too, were allowed to settle in Prussia in order to contribute to its prosperity, and the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn became one of the leading lights of the Prussian intelligentsia.

When Poland was divided in 1771 between Russia, Austria and Prussia, the Prussian state acquired a national minority problem. In the new territory there lived a large Polish population that stuck to its national identity and language. The Prussian response was a massive settlement campaign in these areas. This was a highly organized effort, planned right down to the minutest detail. The German settlers got a plot of land and many financial benefits. The Polish minority was oppressed and discriminated against in every possible way. The Prussian kings wanted to "Germanize" their acquired areas, much as the Israeli government wants to "Judaize" their occupied territories.

This Prussian effort had a direct impact on the Jewish colonization of Palestine. It served as an example for the father of Zionist settlement, Arthur Ruppin, and not by accident – he was born and grew up in the Polish area of Prussia.

IT IS impossible to exaggerate the influence of the Prussian model on the Zionist movement in almost all spheres of life.

Theodor Herzl, the founder of the movement, was born in Budapest and lived most of his life in Vienna. He admired the new German Reich that was founded in 1871, when he was 11 years old. The King of Prussia – which constituted about half of the area of the Reich – was crowned as German emperor, and Prussia formed the new empire in its image. Herzl's diaries are full of admiration for the German state. He courted Wilhelm II, King of Prussia and Emperor of Germany, who obliged by receiving him in a tent before the gate of Jerusalem. He wanted the Kaiser to become the patron of the Zionist enterprise, but Wilhelm remarked that, while Zionism itself was an excellent idea, it "could not be realized with Jews".

Herzl was not the only one to imprint a Prussian-German pattern on the Zionist enterprise. In this he was overshadowed by Ruppin, who is known today to Israeli children mainly as a street name. But Ruppin had an immense impact on the Zionist enterprise, more than any other single person. He was the real leader of the Zionist immigrants in Palestine in their formative period, the years of the second and third Aliyah (immigration wave) in the first quarter of the 20th century. He was the spiritual father of Berl Katznelson, David Ben-Gurion and their generation, the founders of the Zionist Labor movement that became dominant in the Jewish society in Palestine, and later in Israel. It was he who practically invented the Kibbutz and the Moshav (cooperative settlement).

If so, why has he been almost eradicated from official memory? Because some sides of Ruppin are best forgotten. Before becoming a Zionist, he was an extreme Prussian-German nationalist. He was one of the fathers of the "scientific" racist creed and believed in the superiority of the Aryan race. Up to the end he occupied himself with measuring skulls and noses in order to provide support for assorted racist ideas. His partners and friends created the "science" that inspired Adolf Hitler and his disciples.

The Zionist movement would have been impossible were it not for the work of Heinrich Graetz, the historian who created the historical image of the Jews which we all learned at school. Graetz, who was also born in the Polish area of Prussia, was a pupil of the Prussian-German historians who "invented" the German nation, much as he "invented" the Jewish nation.

Perhaps the most important thing we inherited from Prussia was the sacred notion of the "State" (Medina in Hebrew) – an idea that dominates our entire life. Most countries are officially a "Republic" (France, for example), a "Kingdom" (Britain) or a "Federation" (Russia). The official name "State of Israel" is essentially Prussian.

WHEN I first brought up the similarity between Prussia and Israel (in a chapter dedicated to this theme in the Hebrew and German editions of my 1967 book, "Israel Without Zionists") it might have looked like a baseless comparison. Today, the picture is clearer. Not only does the senior officers corps occupy a central place in all the spheres of our

life, and not only is the huge military budget beyond any discussion, but our daily news is full of typically "Prussian" items. For example: it transpires that the salary of the Army Chief of Staff is double that of the Prime Minister. The Minister of Education has announced that henceforth schools will be assessed by the number of their pupils who volunteer for army combat units. That sounds familiar – in German.

After the fall of the Third Reich, the four occupying powers decided to break up Prussia and divide its territories between several German federal states, Poland and the USSR. That happened in February 1947 – only 15 months before the founding of the State of Israel.

Those who believe in the transmigration of souls can draw their own conclusions. It is certainly food for thought.

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