

Diligent Bureaucrats and the Expulsion of Jews from West Prussia, 1772–1786*

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Recent historiography of Prussia has maintained that the dominant narrative of its infamous militarism has overshadowed essential aspects of a history that was far more complex.¹ This objection is not entirely new. It draws, for example, on the research of those German historians who after 1945 sought to rehabilitate Prussia's reputation by highlighting its good sides, such as an incorruptible, law-abiding civil service and a tolerant attitude to religious minorities. Emphasis on Prussian militarism, they argued, had obscured the history of important traditions that gained particular momentum during the late eighteenth century.² This influential counter-narrative has gained new momentum since the 1980s. As a result, the demonization of Prussia as a military state whose idiosyncrasies left a distinctly negative mark on the German Empire and facilitated the rise of the Nazi regime has been replaced by a more favourable re-evaluation of its history.

More positive views of Prussia, however, reflect an uneasy mix of selective highlighting and traditional interpretations. This combination is particularly evident in the historiography of the Jewish experience during the reign of Frederick the Great. For instance, several recent studies have deepened our understanding of the Prussian bureaucracy in the eighteenth century.³ Yet, few have interrogated the remarkably positive assessment of the Prussian administration and its role in the Jewish policies of Frederick the Great. Given the centrality of this traditional assessment for histories of eighteenth-century Prussia as a relatively tolerant state, its reappraisal appears overdue.

Frederick the Great's policies towards the Jews were discriminatory even by contemporary standards.⁴ His Revised General Privilege for the Prussian Jews of 1750 provided, above all, for the economic exploitation of wealthy Jews and the expulsion of all others.⁵ Jews in Prussia were subject to even harsher restrictions than many of their

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¹See C. Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (London, 2006), p. xxi; M. Leibetseder, 'Alltag zwischen Konflikt und Toleranz: Beobachtungen zur Konfessionspolitik Brandenburg-Preußens im 18. Jahrhundert', *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung*, 41, 2 (2014), pp. 231–60, here p. 231.

²See G. Metzler, *Der Staat der Historiker: Staatsvorstellungen deutscher Historiker seit 1945* (Berlin, 2018), pp. 67–71, 205–10.

³See R. Straubel, *Zwischen monarchischer Autokratie und bürgerlichem Emanzipationsstreben* (Berlin, 2012); H. M. Sieg, *Staatsdienst, Staatsdenken und Dienstgesinnung in Brandenburg-Preußen im 18. Jahrhundert (1713–1806)* (Berlin, 2013).

⁴See T. Schenk, 'Das Emanzipationsedikt—Ausdruck "defensiver Modernisierung" oder Abschluss rechtsstaatlicher Entwicklungen des "(aufgeklärten) Absolutismus"?', in I. A. Diekmann (ed.), *Das Emanzipationsedikt von 1812 in Preußen: der lange Weg der Juden zu 'Einländern' und 'preußischen Staatsbürgern'* (Berlin, 2013), pp. 23–76, here p. 34.

⁵See D. Vital, *A People Apart: A Political History of the Jews in Europe 1789–1939* (Oxford, 2001), p. 64.

contemporaries in other parts of early modern Germany. Even so, historians have by and large persisted in arguing that progressive aspects of the Prussian legislature under Frederick the Great constituted a decisive precondition for a reform process that led to the granting of almost equal civil rights to the Jews in the Edict Concerning the Civil Status of the Jews in the Prussian States of 1812.⁶

Traditional historians such as Otto Hintze interpreted the edict as a landmark in a reform process that had already begun in the later eighteenth century.⁷ More recently, scholars have rejected such views. In his 1987 *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, Hans-Ulrich Wehler claimed that the Stein-Hardenberg reforms, including the edict of 1812, were primarily a reaction to the events of 1806 and less the result of long-term changes which originated in the eighteenth century or even earlier.⁸ However, even more recent studies, such as those by Wolfgang Neugebauer, have demonstrated that late eighteenth-century Prussian society was already characterized by ‘an astonishing degree of change and mobility’.⁹ Such findings seem to confirm the traditional narrative of late eighteenth-century Prussia as a relatively tolerant state that developed progressive policies towards the Jews.¹⁰ Such views typically rest on the two following assumptions.

First, since the early twentieth century, scholars have highlighted the progressive influence of the administration on policies towards the Jews in late eighteenth-century Prussia. German-Jewish historians such as Selma Stern and Ismar Freund portrayed Prussian officials as remarkably tolerant.¹¹ Stern argued that they opposed discriminatory policies towards the Jews and intentionally delayed their implementation.¹² Because they conceived of themselves as agents of a paternalistic welfare state, she claimed, government officials acted as an ‘enlightened counterpart to the despotic and capricious policies of Frederick the Great’.¹³ Thus, ‘they were able, where an appeal to tolerance or reason was of no avail, to point out the economic activities of the Jews and their great benefits to the state’.¹⁴ Stern further maintained that Prussian officials often showed an understanding and even sympathetic attitude towards the Jews in their jurisdictions. Such attitudes, she claimed, were the result of the officials’ Enlightenment humanism and their training in natural law theories and mercantilist economics, both taught at German universities at the time.¹⁵ As a result, Stern asserted, Prussian bureaucrats ‘repeatedly attempted to combat the king’s stubborn and unjust position in the Jewish question’.¹⁶

⁶For an introduction to the historiography of the subject see A. Bruer, *Geschichte der Juden in Preußen (1750–1820)* (Frankfurt/Main, 1991), p. 12.

⁷O. Hintze, ‘Preußische Reformbestrebungen vor 1806’, *Historische Zeitschrift*, 76 (1896), pp. 413–43.

⁸See H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*. vol. 1: *Vom Feudalismus des Alten Reichs bis zur defensiven Modernisierung der Reformära, 1700–1815* (Munich, 1987), p. 397.

⁹W. Neugebauer, *Zentralprovinz im Absolutismus: Brandenburg im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2001), p. 172.

¹⁰See J. Schoeps, ‘Von der Untertanenloyalität zum Bürgerpatriotismus: Preußen, die Juden und die Anfänge des Identifikationsprozesses zu Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts’, in Diekmann, *Das Emanzipationsedikt*, pp. 6–21, here pp. 8–10.

¹¹See I. Freund, *Die Emanzipation der Juden in Preußen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Gesetzes vom 11.3.1812*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1912).

¹²See S. Stern, *Der preußische Staat und die Juden, 1671–1786*, 3 vols (Tübingen, 1971).

¹³*Ibid.*, vol. 3, part 1, p. 10.

¹⁴S. Stern-Taubler, ‘The Jews in the Economic Policy of Frederick the Great’, *Jewish Social Studies*, 11, 2 (1949), pp. 129–52, here p. 151.

¹⁵See Stern, *Der preußische Staat*, vol. 3, part 1, pp. 17–18.

¹⁶Stern-Taubler, ‘The Jews in the Economic Policy of Frederick the Great’, p. 151.

Secondly, previous historians have generally tended to equate the Jewish community in Berlin with the Prussian Jews as a whole. Emphasizing the development of the Jewish Enlightenment, the increasing interrelations between Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals and the economic success of a few wealthy Jews, historians have not sufficiently acknowledged that Prussia at the time was far from being a unitary state.¹⁷ Despite its increasingly centralized bureaucracy, municipalities and regional administrations retained a considerable amount of autonomy, and the central authorities issued innumerable decrees for particular provinces, regions and districts. The common focus on the Jews in Berlin has thus overshadowed the very different situation of those in other parts of Prussia. As research by Tobias Schenk demonstrates, much of Prussia's Jewish population became impoverished in the last third of the eighteenth century and their economic exploitation by the Prussian state reached its peak.¹⁸ Meanwhile, thousands of Jews in what became West Prussia in 1772, after the First Partition of Poland, faced mass expulsions, ordered by Frederick the Great personally.

In the fourteen years before the king's death in 1786, the Prussian administration expelled between 9,000 and 10,000 Jews from the new province. This was the first systematic expulsion of Jews from Prussian lands since the sixteenth century and the largest before 1933.¹⁹ While historians have known about this episode at least since the publication of Max Bär's study of West Prussia in 1909, they have not adequately incorporated it into the history of the Jews in Prussia.²⁰ To this day, it remains largely unexamined.²¹

It is easy to see why. The episode was equally inconvenient for several influential groups of scholars. First, Borussophile historians in nineteenth-century Germany mostly followed Frederick the Great's self-description as the 'bringer of civilization', in the form of a modern and well-organized state that replaced the relatively underdeveloped, anarchic and—in Frederick's view—downright barbaric land of Poland.²² The immediate expulsion of thousands of Jews from West Prussia hardly corresponded with the widely accepted accounts of Frederick's supposedly benevolent policies towards

¹⁷ Among more recent studies on the Jewish Enlightenment see D. Sorkin, *The Transformation of the German Jewry* (Oxford, 1987); S. Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment* (Philadelphia, 2004); D. Bourel, *Moses Mendelsohn: Begründer des modernen Judentums* (Zurich, 2007). On interrelations between Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals see D. Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin* (New Haven, 1988); H. L. Lund, *Der Berliner 'jüdische Salon' um 1800: Emanzipation in der Debatte* (Berlin, 2012). On economically successful Jewish families in Berlin see S. M. Lowenstein, 'Jewish Upper Crust and Berlin Jewish Enlightenment: The Family of Daniel Itzig', in F. Malino and D. Sorkin (eds), *Profiles in Diversity: Jews in Changing Europe, 1750–1870* (Detroit, 1998), pp. 182–201.

¹⁸ See T. Schenk, *Wegbereiter der Emanzipation? Studien zur Judenpolitik des 'Aufgeklärten Absolutismus' in Preußen* (Berlin, 2010), p. 23.

¹⁹ See W. W. Hagen, *Germans, Poles, and Jews: The Nationality Conflict in the Prussian East, 1772–1914* (Chicago, 1980), p. 46.

²⁰ See M. Bär, *Westpreußen unter Friedrich dem Großen*, 2 vols (Publikationen aus den Preußischen Staatsarchiven, 83 and 84, Leipzig, 1909).

²¹ In her popular biography of Maria Theresa, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger recently called the 1744 expulsion of several thousand Jews from Prague the last mass expulsion of Jews in the early modern period. She does not mention the expulsion of some 9,000–10,000 Jews from West Prussia after 1772. See B. Stollberg-Rilinger, *Maria Theresia: die Kaiserin in ihrer Zeit. Eine Biographie* (Munich, 2017), p. 636.

²² See T. Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia* (London, 2015), p. 287.

the inhabitants of the new province.²³ Such views persisted well into the twentieth century. During the 1930s and 1940s, German scholars including eminent figures such as Theodor Schieder and Werner Conze reiterated nineteenth-century visions of Germany's civilizing mission in the East, for which the Jews constituted a 'disruptive factor'.²⁴ These statements hardly differed from the much-quoted utterances of Frederick the Great some 150 years earlier.

After 1945, German historians usually chose to avoid the issue. Confronted with arguments for a German *Sonderweg* (German Exceptionalism), they were careful to maintain the narrative of Prussia's good sides.²⁵ Yet, traditional views persisted as well. German historian Walter Hubatsch, for example, claimed in 1973 that Frederick the Great's aim for West Prussia was 'to turn those who lived there "into human beings and useful members of the state"' in the full sense of these words as understood in the age of Enlightenment'.²⁶ He did not mention the expulsion of Jews from the province. Owing mainly to Prussia's role in the 'complicated prehistory of National Socialism', however, its history received relatively little interest from German historians of the postwar generation.²⁷ Research on Prussia's former eastern territories in present-day Poland remained particularly scarce throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

Secondly, Jewish historians in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Germany stressed more positive aspects of modern German-Jewish history to maintain the narrative of a 'German-Jewish symbiosis' in which late eighteenth-century Prussia played an important part as a starting point for the 'success story' of Jewish Emancipation in modern Europe.²⁸ This historiographical tradition had a decisive influence on scholars such as Selma Stern. Facing the rise in anti-Semitism in Germany during the 1930s, she explicitly understood her work as a 'plea for a reasonable symbiosis between Germans and Jews'.²⁹ Her wish to produce scholarly work aimed at influencing the present time had a profound impact on her portrayal of the Prussian administration under Frederick the Great.

As a result, few of these earlier accounts mentioned the expulsion of Jews from West Prussia.³⁰ Even fewer discussed their implications.³¹ Some even disputed that they took

²³See Ernst Graf zur Lippe-Weißfeld, *Westpreussen unter Friedrich dem Großen. Nach urkundlichen Quellen bearbeitet* (Thorn, 1866), pp. iii–iv.

²⁴See G. Aly, *Macht, Geist, Wahn: Kontinuitäten deutschen Denkens* (Frankfurt/Main, 1999) pp. 165–6.

²⁵On the *Sonderweg* thesis see J. Kocka, 'Germany before Hitler: The Debate about the German Sonderweg', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23, 1 (1988), pp. 3–16.

²⁶W. Hubatsch, *Frederick the Great of Prussia: Absolutism and Administration* (London, 1973), p. 189.

²⁷H.-J. Puhle, 'Preußen: Entwicklung und Fehlentwicklung', in H.-J. Puhle and H.-U. Wehler (eds), *Preußen im Rückblick* (Göttingen, 1980), p. 41, cited in Metzler, *Der Staat der Historiker*, p. 208. See also W. Neugebauer, *Preußische Geschichte als gesellschaftliche Veranstaltung: Historiographie vom Mittelalter bis zum Jahr 2000* (Paderborn, 2018), pp. 543–616.

²⁸W. Benz, 'The Legend of German-Jewish Symbiosis', *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 37 (London, 1992), pp. 95–102; A. Herzog, 'Zur Problematik deutsch-jüdischer Geschichtsschreibung', *Menora*, 1 (1990), pp. 209–34.

²⁹Stern, *Der preußische Staat*, vol. 3, part 1, p. xi.

³⁰Tim Blanning's recent biography of Frederick the Great does not mention the expulsions; see Blanning, *Frederick the Great*. The influential study on the history of European Jewry between 1780 and 1815 by Raphael Mahler mentions the expulsions of Jews from West Prussia but does not discuss them in any detail. They are explained solely with the anti-Semitism of Frederick the Great; R. Mahler, *A History of Modern Jewry, 1780–1815* (London, 1971), p. 341.

³¹The two most notable recent exceptions are M. Jehle, "'Relocations'" in South Prussia and New East Prussia: Prussia's Demographic Policy towards the Jews in Occupied Poland 1772–1806', *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 52 (2007), pp. 23–47, and Schenk, *Wegbereiter*, p. 13.

place at all, despite conclusive archival evidence.³² Selma Stern, for instance, conceded that expulsions took place but argued that they were primarily the result of Frederick the Great's private hostility towards the Jews. By claiming that the majority of the Prussian administration rejected the king's measures in West Prussia on both utilitarian and humanitarian grounds, Stern was able to preserve the narrative of a tolerant Prussian state, despite its anti-Jewish policies. She touched only briefly on the situation of the Jews in West Prussia and described government measures in a remarkably apologetic tone. While she mentioned that Jews had to leave the province after 1772, she avoided speaking of expulsions, gave no numbers and highlighted objections by the responsible administrators.³³

Today, Stern still counts as one of the most influential historians of German Jewry. Her seminal work, *Der Preußische Staat und die Juden* (The Prussian State and the Jews), has provided the basis for virtually all research on the Jews in early modern Prussia since the publication of the final volume in 1971. Recent historiography has begun to complicate the traditional history of the Jews in late eighteenth-century Prussia. Tobias Schenk noted that research on the Jews in Berlin has long overshadowed the often very different situation of those in other parts of Prussia.³⁴ Hans-Jürgen Bömelburg highlighted the particularly repressive policies enacted towards the Jews in West Prussia.³⁵ Even so, Stern's depiction of the Prussian administration, reiterated by historians throughout the twentieth century, remains mostly unquestioned.³⁶

This article challenges the traditional portrayal of the administration in late eighteenth-century Prussia by examining the actions of three officials involved in the expulsion of Jews from West Prussia. Based on archival research in Germany, Poland, Israel and the United States, the essay suggests that the strikingly positive assessment of the Prussian bureaucrats and their role in the Jewish policies of the time needs significant revision.

I. Frederick the Great and the Jews in West Prussia

As a result of the First Partition of Poland in 1772, Prussia annexed most of the territory formerly referred to as Royal or Polish Prussia (see the map in Fig. 1). The new province was named West Prussia because of its geographic location west of the historic Duchy of Prussia, now renamed East Prussia. A narrow stretch of land on both sides of the Netze (Polish: Noteć) river, on the southern border of the new province, also fell to Prussia, and was now called the Netze District.

³²Most recently in W. Bringmann, *Preußen unter Friedrich Wilhelm II (1786–1797)* (Frankfurt/Main, 2001), p. 224.

³³See Stern, *Der preußische Staat*, vol. 3, part 1, pp. 27–42.

³⁴See Schenk, *Wegbereiter*, pp. 30–2.

³⁵See H.-J. Bömelburg, *Zwischen polnischer Ständegesellschaft und preussischem Obrigkeitsstaat: vom Königlichen Preußen zu Westpreußen (1756–1806)* (Munich, 1995), pp. 422–45.

³⁶Stern's portrayal is reiterated in P. Baumgart, 'Absoluter Staat und Judenemanzipation in Brandenburg-Preußen', in P. Baumgart, *Brandenburg-Preußen unter dem Ancien Régime: ausgewählte Abhandlungen*, ed. F.-L. Kroll (Berlin, 2009), pp. 461–85, here p. 461; M. Breuer, 'Frühe Neuzeit und Beginn der Moderne', in M. Breuer and M. Graetz (eds), *Deutsch-jüdische Geschichte in der Neuzeit*, vol. 1: *Tradition und Aufklärung, 1600–1780* (Munich, 1996), p. 147; J. Heil, 'Bedingte Toleranz: der Preußische Staat und die Juden', in M. Drechsler (ed.), *Preußens Toleranz: zur Integrität von Minderheiten in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Berlin, 2002), pp. 75–88, here p. 87. G. Heinrich, "'... man sollte itzt beständig das Publikum über diese Materie en haleine halten": die Debatte um "bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden", 1781–1786', in U. Goldenbaum (ed.), *Appell an das Publikum: die öffentliche Debatte in der deutschen Aufklärung, 1678–1796* (Berlin, 2004), pp. 813–95, here p. 827.

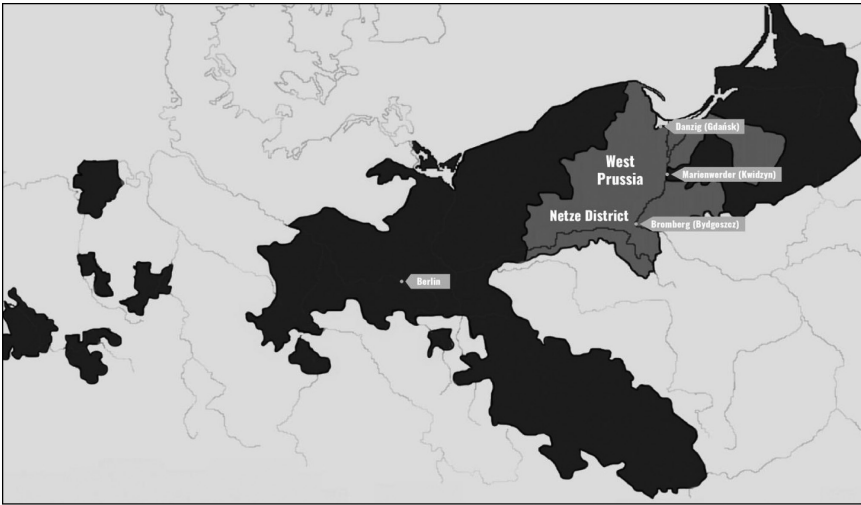


Figure 1: Prussian territories in 1772, including West Prussia and the Netze District.

For centuries, these territories had belonged to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, home to the highest concentration of Jews in the early modern world (see Fig. 2).

	Total population	Estimated number of Jews	% of total population
1500	7.5 million	30,000	0.4
1650	10 million	450,000	4.5
1775	10 million	750,000	7.5

Figure 2: The Jewish population in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, 1550–1750. Figures from I. Bartal, 'The Establishment of East European Jewry', in J. Karp and A. Sutcliffe (eds), *The Cambridge History of Judaism: vol. 7: The Early Modern World, 1500–1815* (2019), p. 229.

Jews had first settled in Poland in the late fifteenth century, invited by successive Polish kings. Roughly from the middle of the sixteenth century onwards, the Polish nobility was able to increase its political, economic and social power in the Commonwealth as a result of its prosperity stemming from the grain trade that took place along the Polish rivers via Gdansk to western Europe.³⁷ Many Jews settled in towns established and often essentially owned by the Polish nobles along the rivers. Jewish trade connections vis-à-vis protection from the nobles generated a mutually beneficial situation, which was a primary reason for the relatively secure and privileged living conditions enjoyed by Jews in early modern Poland-Lithuania.³⁸ They faced economic opposition and religious hostility, but on the whole they were far more secure from expulsions than, for instance, their coreligionists in the Holy Roman Empire.

³⁷ See A. Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia: vol. 1: 1350–1881* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 9–39.

³⁸ See J. Goldberg, *Jewish Privileges in the Polish Commonwealth: Charters of Rights Granted to Jewish Communities in Poland-Lithuania in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Jerusalem, 1985).

Moreover, Jews in early modern Poland-Lithuania enjoyed rare privileges.³⁹ In particular, they were allowed to practise a comparatively vast number of trades and crafts. In many areas of Polish trade, Jews were even able to establish a central position for themselves. By the 1770s, Jewish merchants handled three-quarters of Polish exports and one-tenth of imports. The inner-Polish grain trade to the port cities on the Baltic Sea was in large part controlled by Jews. About a quarter of all merchants in Poland-Lithuania were Jewish. The Polish retail trade was almost exclusively in Jewish hands. Moreover, one out of seven artisans in the western parts of Poland was Jewish, but in certain towns the proportion was much higher. Jews worked in various crafts, as carpenters, locksmiths, blacksmiths, tailors, brewers, butchers and bakers.⁴⁰

After 1772, the Prussian administration rapidly undermined the economic and social hegemony of the Polish nobility, which was so important for the Jews in Poland-Lithuania.⁴¹ Initially pursuing a ‘normative policy of integration’, they only gradually took the social and political particularities of the province into account.⁴² On one hand, this course of action had severe consequences for the Jewish communities, which had to renegotiate their privileges with the new authorities. On the other hand, Prussian officials soon realized that the significant presence of Jews in many occupations and their sheer number in the new province called for policies that differed from those pursued in the Prussian heartland (see Fig. 3).

While Prussian Jews had to reside in towns subject to excise tax, those in the new province lived mostly in the countryside, namely in small towns or villages owned by the Polish nobility. Prussian bureaucrats soon noted the large number of Jews in their new jurisdictions with astonishment. In 1773, a few months after the annexation, Fiscal Counsellor Johann Rembert Roden described his experiences in the Netze District: ‘Here, I have to deal with so many Jews that I am totally bewildered’.⁴³

	Estimated population	Estimated number of Jews	% of population
Brandenburg	1,115,000	8,000	0.7
West Prussia	400,000	3,600	0.9
Netze District	160,000	16,000	10

Figure 3: The Jewish population in Brandenburg, West Prussia and the Netze District, 1772. Figures from Stern, *Der preußische Staat*, vol. 3, part 1, p. 40; Bömelburg, *Zwischen polnischer Ständegesellschaft und preussischem Obrigkeitstaat*, p. 423; Bruer, *Geschichte der Juden*, p. 148.

³⁹See A. Teller, ‘Telling the Difference: Some Comparative Perspectives on the Jews’ Legal Status in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Holy Roman Empire’, *Polin: Studies in Polish History*, 22 (2010), pp. 109–41.

⁴⁰See B. Weinryb, *Neueste Wirtschaftsgeschichte der Juden in Russland und Polen* (2nd edn, Hildesheim, 1972; 1st edn, 1934), p. 25.

⁴¹See J. Ganzenmüller, *Russische Staatsgewalt und polnischer Adel: Elitenintegration und Staatsausbau im Westen des Zarenreichs (1772–1850)* (Cologne, 2013), pp. 376–8.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 382.

⁴³Mahler, *History*, p. 342.

The king's interest in the new province was primarily economic. In a letter to his brother Henry in June 1772, he stated, 'it is an excellent and advantageous acquisition, both for its strategic position and financial resources'.⁴⁴ Elsewhere he wrote,

the biggest advantage of our portion is commercial. We become the masters of everything Poland produces and imports; and the greatest advantage of all is that, as we become masters of its grain trade, so we shall never again be exposed to the threat of famine.⁴⁵

Three disastrous harvests in 1770, 1771 and 1772 and an ensuing Europe-wide hunger crisis had made Frederick's long-held plan to gain control over Poland's grain production more pressing than ever.⁴⁶ Moreover, Frederick was convinced that the new province would enable him to attain control over Polish trade. He considered Poland to be 'the most important customer for Prussian-manufactured goods and a source for Prussia of much-needed raw materials'.⁴⁷ Above all, much of Poland's immense grain production now passed through Prussian territory on its way along the Vistula river to the Baltic Sea. Thus, soon after the annexation, he gave an order to boost economic development in the province by draining swamps, building canals and roads and offering financial help for the establishment of local manufacturing.⁴⁸

Frederick's policy towards the West Prussian Jews was partly the result of his economic objectives in the province and partly a consequence of his private aversion to them. Probably a deist himself, the religious affiliations of his subjects were of marginal interest to him. He conceived of the populace mainly as a conglomerate of corporations of differing economic utility.⁴⁹ His writings provide ample evidence of his disdain for the Jews. It was not grounded in a religious anti-Judaism but based on his firm belief in their harmfulness to the state, a prejudice informed by common contemporary stereotypes. However, Frederick's disregard for the Jews became secondary whenever he could exploit them for the economic advantage of the state—particularly in the new province.

Two months before Prussia, Russia and Austria signed the partition contract, Frederick had already outlined what would become the general guideline for the years up until his death in 1786. In an instruction to the new authorities in West Prussia dated 7 June, he determined,

Beggar Jews from the countryside and the cities must be removed successively and without impetuosity. Wealthy Jews and Jewish traders shall be equipped with letters of protection, which they must duly request. They shall be resettled especially in those small towns along the River Netze to conduct trade along the border to Poland.⁵⁰

⁴⁴Cited in Blanning, *Frederick the Great*, p. 294.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶D. Collet, 'Hungern und Herrschen: umweltgeschichtliche Verflechtungen der Ersten Teilung Polens und der europäischen Hungerkrise 1770–1772', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 62 (2014), pp. 237–54, here p. 237.

⁴⁷Stern, *Der preußische Staat*, vol. 3, part 1, p. 134.

⁴⁸Stern-Taeubler, 'The Jews in the Economic Policy of Frederick the Great', p. 136. See also D. Blackbourn, 'Conquests from Barbarism: Taming Nature in Frederick the Great's Prussia', in C. Mauch (ed.), *Nature in German History* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 10–30.

⁴⁹See M. Graetz, 'From Corporate Community to Ethnic-Religious Minority, 1750–1830', *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 37 (1992), pp. 71–82.

⁵⁰Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin (henceforth GStA), I HA, rep. 7B, no. 30, fasc. 8, fol. 22.

The order was in the spirit of the General Privilege of 1750. In short, it permitted residence under royal protection for Jews in possession of at least 1,000 thalers' worth of property. Accordingly, most Jews would have to leave the new province. The General Directory forwarded the order to the West Prussian chamber in Marienwerder and Franz von Brenckenhoff, the interim governor of the Netze District from 1772 to 1775, demanding its immediate implementation.

II. Franz Balthasar von Brenckenhoff

Previous historiography has emphasized the emergence of a new type of bureaucrat in late eighteenth-century Prussia, university trained and from a middle-class background.⁵¹ Franz Balthasar von Brenckenhoff (1723–1780) did not belong to this group. He was born on 15 April 1723 in a small town near Halle to an ennobled cavalry captain in the Saxon army and did not attend a university or receive any other higher education. After working for two decades in the service of the prince of Anhalt-Dessau, he became Fiscal Counsellor in the Prussian General Directory in return for his services for the Prussian army during the Seven Years' War.⁵²

Although, or perhaps because, Brenckenhoff was an outsider with no previous role in the Prussian administration, the king entrusted him with the economic restoration of two provinces, Pomerania and the New March, after the end of the war in 1763. While never given ministerial rank (his final title was Supreme Fiscal War and Domain Counsellor), Brenckenhoff obtained nearly unlimited authority in these provinces, coming under the king's directive alone. This kind of administrative arrangement was unusual but not unique during the reign of Frederick the Great, who wished to gain more direct influence over important provinces by bypassing regulatory bodies such as the General Directory. Brenckenhoff thus enjoyed complete authority over the chambers in both Pomerania and the New March.

Frederick was content with Brenckenhoff's work, in particular with his establishment of new manufactories and the cultivation of the marches around the River Warthe.⁵³ In 1772 Brenckenhoff was therefore ordered furthermore to oversee the economic development of the newly acquired Netze District. Among his primary responsibilities was the construction of a canal near the town of Bromberg (Polish: Bydgoszcz), which after its opening in June 1774 connected the rivers Vistula and Oder via the Netze.⁵⁴ With merely 600 inhabitants, Bromberg was the largest town in the area and in 1775 became the seat of a chamber deputation responsible for the administration of the Netze District. Before that, from 1772 to 1775, no single person except the king had more influence on the policies towards the local Jews than Brenckenhoff.

⁵¹ See Stern, *Der preußische Staat*, vol. 3, part 1, pp. 11–13; Sieg, *Staatsdienst*, p. 125.

⁵² See August Gottlieb Meißner, *Leben Balthasar Schönberg von Brenckenhof, Königlich Preußischer geheimer Ober-Finanz-Kriegs- und Domainenrath* (Leipzig, 1782), pp. 39–42; R. Straubel, *Biographisches Handbuch der preußischen Verwaltungs- und Justizbeamten 1740–1806/15* (Munich, 2009), pp. 134–5.

⁵³ B. von Knobelsdorff-Brenckenhoff, *Eine Provinz im Frieden erobert: Brenckenhoff als Leiter des friderizianischen Retablisements in Pommern, 1762–1780* (Cologne, 1984).

⁵⁴ August Carl Holsche, *Der Netzedistrikt. Ein Beytrag zur Länder- und Völkerkunde mit statistischen Nachrichten* (Königsberg, 1792), pp. 96–7.

On 16 November 1772, five months after Frederick had issued his decree, the General Directory informed Brenckenhoff about the king's plans for the expulsion of most Jews from the new province.⁵⁵ Soon after, Brenckenhoff dutifully reported that he had thus far proceeded according to the king's wishes:

As soon as I can bring a Christian trader or artisan to the area, a Jew is put out of business. That way I have already been able to send a large number of Jews, who were no longer able to feed themselves, out of the region.⁵⁶

Brenckenhoff had quickly realized that the Jews held central positions in the local trade. Accordingly, he arranged for the expulsion of a Jewish family only when a Christian family came to the province instead. Christian settlers, often less skilled or entirely unskilled, were settled in the region to replace successful Jewish traders and artisans. Brenckenhoff and the local administration accepted foreseeable economic losses caused by this policy. The only relevant criterion was that of each person's religion. On the one hand, since the policy increasingly impeded the economic development of the region, its continuation over the following years demonstrates that anti-Jewish sentiment overruled economic considerations. On the other hand, the practice prevented large-scale expulsions, because the settlement of Christians in the province progressed slowly.⁵⁷ As long as Brenckenhoff considered the settlement of a Christian family to be a requirement for the eviction of each Jewish family, the number of expelled Jews would remain relatively low.

Meanwhile, however, the West Prussian chamber in Marienwerder published a decree that would lead to a much faster implementation of the king's demands. It stipulated that all Jews in West Prussia and the Netze District were required to either prove possession of 1,000 thalers' worth of property or leave the province within two months. Those with more limited means who were still residing in the province after the time limit were to be expelled by force. Re-entry without permission was punishable by several months of imprisonment or branding and immediate deportation.⁵⁸ Around the same time, the chamber in Marienwerder listed merely thirty-six of some 2,200–3,200 Jewish families in the Netze District as owning enough property to remain in the province.⁵⁹ The immediate effect of this publication is discernible in the numerous panic-stricken petitions from Jewish communities and in the published decrees ordering the 'strictest punishments' for Jews who misreported their property to the Prussian authorities.⁶⁰

In a subsequent report to the king, Brenckenhoff noted that the decree had led to a 'general confusion' among Jews in the district.⁶¹ However, he did not criticize the plan to expel most Jews from the area. Instead, he merely objected to the short time span of two months in which Jews with less than 1,000 thalers' worth of property had to

⁵⁵ Archiwum Państwowe w Bydgoszczy, Bydgoszcz (henceforth APBY), no. 344, fol. 3.

⁵⁶ GStA, I HA, rep. 7B, no. 30, fasc. 8, fol. 40.

⁵⁷ See Bömelburg, *Zwischen polnischer Ständegesellschaft und preussischem Obrigkeitsstaat*, p. 435.

⁵⁸ GStA, I HA, rep. 7B, no. 30, fasc. 8, fols. 19–20.

⁵⁹ APBY, no. 344, fol. 62. Estimates based on the contemporary median family of five.

⁶⁰ Usually the punishment was immediate expulsion. APBY, no. 344, fol. 14. Many Jews also attempted to circumvent expulsion by conversion. See Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem, HM2010, fol. 4.

⁶¹ GStA, I HA, rep. 7B, no. 30, fasc. 8, fol. 40.

leave the province. He argued that this regulation would negatively affect the region and its non-Jewish inhabitants. Above all, the local Jewish communities owed a total of 61,218 thalers to local nobles and Christian communities. Brenckenhoff stressed that they would not be able to repay their debts in such a short period.⁶² Furthermore, he argued that the sudden expulsion of almost all Jews from the area without their replacement with Christian settlers ‘would turn many towns, in which half or even two-thirds of the population consists of Jews, into wastelands’.⁶³ Instead, he proposed to immediately expel only Jews with less than 100 thalers’ worth of property and grant those with between 100 and 1,000 thalers more time so they could sell their houses to Christian settlers and thereby pay off their debts.

Brenckenhoff’s arguments convinced the king, who agreed to a three-month extension of the original time limit for Jews in the Netze District, but only for those in possession of property worth more than 300 thalers.⁶⁴ Until 1775, Brenckenhoff repeatedly managed to postpone the expulsion of Jews with property worth between 300 and 1,000 thalers, arguing that the measure would have disastrous economic consequences for the region.⁶⁵ Reluctantly, the king repeatedly agreed to postpone their eviction for the time being. Jewish ‘beggars’ with less than 300 thalers were to be expelled immediately.

This vocabulary points to an often-ignored aspect of the policies enacted against the Jews in late eighteenth-century Prussia: many of the so-called ‘beggar Jews’ were no such thing. Families with 200–300 thalers’ worth of property often owned houses and livestock, meaning that they were financially better off than most of the population, Jewish or Christian, anywhere in eighteenth-century Germany or Poland. The word choice shows that the discriminatory character of the Jewish policies in eighteenth-century Prussia affected officially used terms and definitions. Put simply, Jews in Prussia were considered either one thing or the other: wealthy and thus useful or beggars and therefore useless and potentially harmful to the Prussian economy. This dichotomy becomes particularly evident in the terms ‘Jewish scum’ (*jüdisches Kropp*) and ‘prowling scum’ (*herumtreibendes Kropp*), used simultaneously for so-called Jewish beggars, and in Frederick’s continual emphasis on the necessity to ‘eradicate [*ausrotten*] the great number of these useless Jews’ in the new province.⁶⁶

In his attempts to postpone the expulsion of Jews from the Netze District, Brenckenhoff also invoked the legal situation in the new province. In several reports, he emphasized that there was as yet no legal basis for any decision regarding the Jews in West Prussia and the Netze District.⁶⁷ Previous historiography has often referred to the General Privilege of 1750 as a piece of legislation for all Prussian Jews. However, it did not become mandatory law in Silesia or in any of the new territories acquired

⁶² APBY, no. 344, fol. 63.

⁶³ Publication from 1 Mar. 1733 in GStA, I HA, rep. 7B, no. 30, fasc. 8, fol. 40.

⁶⁴ Order to Brenckenhoff from 25 Apr. 1733; printed in Bär, *Westpreußen*, p. 195.

⁶⁵ Report dated 2 Dec. 1774, GStA, I HA, rep. 7B, no. 30, fasc. 8, fol. 265.

⁶⁶ In the dialect spoken in late eighteenth-century Brandenburg ‘Kropp’ or ‘Kroppzeug’ did not translate to ‘crop’. Instead, it had a strongly pejorative connotation and rather meant ‘scum’ or literally ‘residue’. See GStA, II. HA. Abt. 9, tit. LXVI, sect. 1, no. 1, vol. 1, fols. 6–7; GStA, I HA, rep. 7B, no. 30, fasc. 8, fol. 40; APBY, no. 344, fol. 72. Citation of Frederick: APBY, no. 344, fol. 70.

⁶⁷ See GStA, II. HA. Abt. 9, tit. LXVI, sect. 1, no. 4, vol. I, fol. 2; GStA, I HA, rep. 7B, no. 30, fasc. 8, fol. 265.

through the three Partitions of Poland. In West Prussia and the Netze District, the edict merely provided a point of reference, and the Jews in these areas were not within its legal scope. As a result, Jews in the new province did not automatically become Prussian subjects. To do so, Prussian Jews had to obtain a letter of protection in accordance with the existing laws. But in the new province no such laws yet existed. The Prussian administration first had to prepare separate General Privileges for the different local Jewish communities. As early as August 1773, Frederick sanctioned a remarkably lenient Privilege for the Jews in the suburbs of Gdansk, because he had quickly realized their utility for his plans to redirect the Baltic trade from the Polish town to his territory. However, between 13,500 and 18,500 Jews in the Netze District and the remaining territories of West Prussia did not receive such recognition, and technically they did not become Prussian subjects until 1806.⁶⁸

Throughout the 1770s and beyond, other officials in West Prussia and the Netze District adopted Brenckenhoff's arguments. They suggested waiting for a 'final regulation' before taking further steps since there was not yet any legal basis for determining who qualified for a letter of protection. As far as the currently existing law went, strictly speaking all of the Jews would have had to leave the province, since there was not yet a legal basis for obtaining these letters, and no Jew was allowed permanent residence in any of the Prussian lands without one.⁶⁹

The responsible authorities, however, agreed with the fact that only a few wealthy families would eventually be able to obtain such protection in the new province. They regarded all others as foreigners who would ultimately have to leave. This attitude is recognizable in the hundreds of tables that officials produced throughout the 1770s to assess the number of Jews in the new province. Those with less than the required amount of property were not even listed, nor were their numbers estimated.⁷⁰ For the Jews the result of this policy was twofold. The officials' insistence on waiting for a comprehensive regulation meant that many Jews could stay for the time being. However, they could have been in little doubt about the precariousness of their situation.

Furthermore, problems highlighted by Brenckenhoff persisted much longer than anticipated. The replacement of Jews with Christian settlers only slowly gathered momentum. By 1776, about 1,000 Christian families had settled in the new province, not nearly enough to replace the number of Jews already expelled.⁷¹ Moreover, most Jewish communities in the Netze District remained unable to pay off their debts.⁷² Thus, some officials began to suggest a 'piece by piece relocation' over several years.⁷³ Throughout the 1770s, however, no final agreement was reached as to which approach should be pursued in West Prussia and the Netze District. As a result, the policies towards the Jews differed from one region to another. Jews in the suburbs of Gdansk lived under relatively mild and secure conditions. At the same time, those in the Netze District and the

⁶⁸See Bömelburg, *Zwischen polnischer Ständegesellschaft und preussischem Obrigkeitsstaat*, pp. 425–7.

⁶⁹GStA, II. HA. Abt. 9, tit. LXVI, sect. 1, no. 4, vol. I, fol. 2.

⁷⁰See APBY, no. 330, fols. 15–6.

⁷¹See Jehle, "Relocations", p. 28.

⁷²See GStA, II. HA. Abt. 9, tit. LXVI, sect. 1, no. 4, vol. III, fol. 276.

⁷³See APBY, no. 348, fol. 22 and no. 344, fol. 59; GStA, II. HA. Abt. 9, tit. LXVI, sect. 1, no. 4, vol. II, fols. 140–2; GStA, I HA, rep. 7B, no. 30, fasc. 8, fols. 21–2.

remaining parts of West Prussia faced arbitrary measures, large-scale expulsions and forced resettlements from the countryside to towns subject to excise tax.⁷⁴

The lack of a coherent policy framework in most parts of the new province resulted in inconsistent and often chaotic measures being put in place by the Prussian officials. In some cases they postponed expulsions while in others they pushed for swift procedures. By 1780, the Prussian administration had expelled at least 6,000 Jews from the province. Between 5,000 and 10,000 Jews had so far managed to stay.⁷⁵ Even so, the constant uncertainty made life for Jews in these regions unpredictable and often unbearable. At least a few hundred Jewish families emigrated from the province without immediate force from the Prussian authorities. Ironically, however, the lack of a legislative framework that had caused this uncertainty in turn often provided the grounds for postponing further expulsions.

What do Brenckenhoff's actions tell us about his attitude towards the Jews? It is essential to understand that his main task was to further the economic development of the region. Economic and demographic considerations thus motivated his arguments. He supported the discriminatory policy of replacing Jews with Christian settlers. Yet, he tried to keep the economic damage to a minimum by preventing the eviction of Jews without their replacement. Moreover, it is crucial to note that he had to reconcile opposing tasks. Much of his career depended on his ability to further the economic development of the region, for which the local Jews were indispensable. Likewise, it was his task to carry out Frederick's drastic demands for their expulsion. Hence, Brenckenhoff's policies towards the Jews in his jurisdiction resulted from his efforts to reconcile both tasks. He begins virtually all his reports to the king fervently announcing the recent removal (*Wegschaffung*) of further Jews from the area and then presents his reservations about immediate large-scale expulsions.⁷⁶ At no point, however, did Brenckenhoff ever criticize the fact that the vast majority of Jews would eventually have to leave the Netze District. Stern's argument that he (or other officials following his views) employed economic arguments primarily to mitigate the negative consequences of the king's policies for the Jews is therefore untenable.⁷⁷

In his last initiative in the region, Brenckenhoff oversaw the establishment of a chamber deputation in Bromberg.⁷⁸ When it began its work in 1775, Brenckenhoff no longer had any authority over the Jews in the Netze District. Yet, his tendency to view Jews primarily in dialectical categories of utility and replaceability remained characteristic for the West Prussian administration. The next section demonstrates that isolated attempts to frame Jewish legislation according to anything but these categories met with vigorous resistance from the king and most of his officials.

III. Carl August Schroeter

In comparison with Brenckenhoff, Carl August Schroeter (1738–1804) was a relatively minor official with much less political influence. Nonetheless, his role in the expulsion

⁷⁴ GStA, II. HA. Abt. 9, tit. LXVI, sect. 1, no. 4, vol. II, fol. 4 and vol. III, fol. 45.

⁷⁵ Bär, *Westpreußen*, p. 24.

⁷⁶ See GStA, I HA, rep. 7B, no. 30, fasc. 8, fol. 40; APBY, no. 348, fols. 93–4, and no. 344, fol. 75.

⁷⁷ See Stern, *Der preußische Staat*, vol. 3, part 1, pp. 18–20.

⁷⁸ Bär, *Westpreußen*, p. 252.

of the Jews from West Prussia and the Netze District is equally instructive, although for different reasons. While Brenckenhoff's attitudes and arguments were representative of most officials in the new province, Schroeter was an exception; and while Brenckenhoff's proposals regarding the Jews were largely implemented, Schroeter's were not.

The son of a local councillor in Magdeburg, Schroeter studied law in Halle between 1755 and 1757. He became a civil servant after serving for nine years in the Prussian army. From 1775 to 1802 he was a councillor in the chamber deputation in Bromberg, responsible for the administration of the extensive district surrounding the town of Crone (Polish: Wałcz) in the Netze District. He never had any personal contact with the king and only indirectly corresponded with the central authorities in Berlin, via the president of the chamber deputation in Bromberg. Yet, unlike many who worked in the West Prussian administration during the 1770s, Schroeter readily fits the description by traditional historiography of a new type of bureaucrat emerging in eighteenth-century Prussia. Schroeter was not a noble but received a university education from an important centre of Enlightenment thought in mid-eighteenth-century Germany. Natural law and mercantilist theories were central elements of his studies in Halle.⁷⁹

Previous historiography has highlighted the significance of natural law theories for the development of new arguments for both religious toleration and increasingly secular state conceptions.⁸⁰ From the second half of the seventeenth century onwards, these theories profoundly influenced political and economic theory in Prussia and other German states. Diethelm Klippel has distinguished between an 'older' and a 'younger' German natural law tradition. He argued that exponents of the latter tradition, such as Immanuel Kant, advocated individual rights with proto-liberal arguments from the 1780s onwards. Before that, scholars such as Samuel Pufendorf, Christian Thomasius and Christian Wolff focused mainly on the rights and responsibilities of the state, claiming that a ruler has no right to interfere with the religious beliefs of his subjects. Instead, they argued, a subject's usefulness to the state should be the primary criterion for assessing his or her value. Thus, Klippel maintains, the economic productivity of Catholics and Jews gradually became more crucial in the eyes of Prussian administrators than their religious inclinations.⁸¹

Mercantilist theory in its specifically Prussian form of cameralism constituted another essential part of the university education for an increasing number of prospective state officials in the late eighteenth century.⁸² Its primary aim was to enable administrators to maximize state revenue. This was critical to ensure the steady supply of necessary means, first for military expenditures and secondly for an expanding welfare state.⁸³ In its emphasis on the welfare state, cameralism was closely tied in with natural law theories.

⁷⁹See Straubel, *Biographisches Handbuch*, p. 910; K. Tribe, *Governing Economy: The Reformation of German Economic Discourse, 1750–1840* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 23–5.

⁸⁰See D. Klippel, *Politische Freiheit und Freiheitsrecht im deutschen Naturrecht des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Paderborn, 1976), pp. 78–9; M. J. Fritsch, *Religiöse Toleranz im Zeitalter der Aufklärung: naturrechtliche Begründungen—konfessionelle Differenzen* (Hamburg, 2004), pp. 7–9.

⁸¹See Klippel, *Politische Freiheit*, pp. 8–10.

⁸²See Tribe, *Governing Economy*, p. 8.

⁸³See M. Rothbard, *An Austrian Perspective on the History of Economic Thought*, vol. 1: *Economic Thought before Adam Smith* (Aldershot, 1995), p. 492.

It was because of these theories, previous historiography has argued, that Prussian administrators placed primary importance on economic policies and staunchly supported notions of a paternalistic welfare state.⁸⁴ Others maintained that the Prussian bureaucracy became increasingly autonomous in the eighteenth century. Officials gradually developed a self-image as ‘state servants’, in contrast to the previous conception as ‘royal servants’. According to the new understanding, what was best for the state could contradict the demands of the monarch—a distinction of great potential significance for the officials’ actions towards the Jews.⁸⁵

By the end of the eighteenth century, more than fifty per cent of Prussian administrators in senior positions had received a university education. Gradually, a degree became a prerequisite for many offices.⁸⁶ Although officials in the highest positions remained mostly nobles throughout the eighteenth century, the increasing emphasis on higher education made administrative offices more attainable for the educated middle classes.⁸⁷ This was especially true for relatively minor positions including that held by Schroeter. Hence, it seems reasonable to assume that theories of natural law and cameralism influenced the attitudes of individual Prussian officials. However, changing attitudes did not necessarily result in the implementation of specific legislation. Schroeter, for instance, held remarkably progressive views, yet they had little effect on the policies towards the Jews in his jurisdiction.

As a councillor in the Netze District, Schroeter was responsible for the registration of those Jews who were wealthy enough to be eligible for letters of protection.⁸⁸ For this purpose he compiled dozens of long lists with information about properties, professions, number of children and marital status. He thereby acquired knowledge about the local Jewish communities that was rare among officials in the province. At the same time, shortly after it began work in 1775, the chamber deputation in Bromberg reported to Berlin that the ‘final regulation of Jewish matters’ in the area could soon begin. Remaining issues, namely the debts of Jewish communities, would be resolved promptly, the chamber claimed. In its response dated February 1776, the General Directory in Berlin instructed Bromberg to prepare a General Privilege for the Jews of the Netze District. The task was delegated to Schroeter. Over the following months he submitted several proposals and finally, in April 1777, a complete draft.

As Schroeter’s proposals indicate, he attempted to pave the way for legislation that to some extent accommodated the Jews. He frequently adopted arguments brought forward by delegates of the Jewish communities. Furthermore, his suggestions were informed by his knowledge about the cultural particularities and organizational structures of these communities.⁸⁹ For example, he gave a detailed account of the role of kosher meat in Jewish culture to explain the need for further toleration of Jewish butchers in the area.⁹⁰ Since he provided no additional arguments in this case, he presumably

⁸⁴E. Hellmuth, *Naturrechtsphilosophie und Bürokratischer Werthorizont* (Göttingen, 1985), p. 56.

⁸⁵See *ibid.*

⁸⁶See R. Straubel, *Beamte und Personalpolitik im altpreußischen Staat* (Berlin, 1998), pp. 8–10.

⁸⁷See Sieg, *Staatsdienst*, p. 133; H. Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy and Autocracy: The Prussian Experience, 1660–1815* (Cambridge, 1958), pp. 83–5.

⁸⁸See APBY, no. 334, fols. 7–10; Further examples: *ibid.*, fol. 123.

⁸⁹See e.g. a report by Schroeter dated 25 Nov. 1776, in which he refers to the arguments of Joseph Sockoloff, a Jew from the town of Wirsitz; APBY, no. 334, fols. 7–10. For further examples see: *ibid.*, fols. 121–2.

⁹⁰APBY, no. 335, fol. 483.

considered the reference to Jewish dietary laws sufficiently convincing (which turned out to be a mistake).

Moreover, Schroeter's arguments are informed throughout by mercantilist economics and natural law theories. Stressing the central position of the Jews in many crafts and trades in the region, he recommended the suspension of discriminatory regulations and the abolishment of special taxes for Jewish communities. Much in the spirit of a paternalistic welfare state, Schroeter drafted a General Privilege that would be acceptable for most Jews in the area while emphasizing the need to further their economic utility for the Prussian state. If accepted, his suggestions would have drastically decreased the number of further expulsions.

In April 1776, Schroeter suggested a required minimum property of 200 thalers for all Jews living west of the River Netze. Those living on the small strip of land between the river's eastern banks and the border with Poland would only be required to prove 100 thalers' worth of property, because of their important role in the cross-border trade with Poland. Without alterations, Schroeter's superiors forwarded the proposal to Berlin. In a reply from the General Directory, the figures were raised significantly: 1,000 thalers for Jews in the area west of the Netze, while those living on the eastern side of the river had to prove possession of only 500 thalers because of their 'evident utility in the trade with Poland'.⁹¹

In its response, the General Directory criticized Schroeter for not 'adequately preparing' his lists.⁹² More precisely, the officials in Berlin considered the number of Jews eligible for protection much too high and argued that it had to be decreased.⁹³ Schroeter's subsequent efforts to reduce the effects of this policy remained mostly unsuccessful. For instance, his proposal that several Jewish families from the surrounding countryside be resettled in Baldenburg was rejected by the General Directory, which stressed the 'sufficient number of Jews' already in the town.⁹⁴ No longer permitted to reside in the countryside and simultaneously forbidden from settling in local towns or in other Prussian provinces, these Jews had no other option than to emigrate. In some cases, however, the General Directory suspended existing provisions for economic reasons. When Schroeter emphasized the remaining debts of the Jewish community in the town of Exin, the administration in Berlin permitted special arrangements.⁹⁵

During the following months, the General Directory gradually increased the pressure on Schroeter. In a rescript dated 27 February 1777, the king himself commented that he had already extended the time limit for a final regulation of Jewish matters in the district several times over the previous years. He demanded that the responsible officials resolve the issue as speedily as possible.⁹⁶ Schroeter submitted his draft version of the General Privilege less than two months later, on 17 April 1777. Shortly after, the General Directory demanded significant alterations to the text. The limit for letters of protections remained at 1,000 thalers west and 500 thalers east of the Netze. To push

⁹¹ See APBY, no. 331, fols. 413–7, cited in Bömelburg, *Zwischen polnischer Ständegesellschaft und preussischem Obrigkeitsstaat*, p. 440.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ See *ibid.*

⁹⁴ APBY, no. 335, fols. 265–9.

⁹⁵ See *ibid.*

⁹⁶ See *ibid.*, no. 334, fol. 341.

for a further-reduced property minimum in the east, Schroeter emphasized that the ancestors of many local Jews had lived in the area for centuries.⁹⁷ The officials in the General Directory simply deleted this paragraph, perhaps anticipating that this line of reasoning would not impress the king. Instead, the revised draft focused exclusively on the central position of the local Jews in the trade with Poland and Russia. It now highlighted that these Jews had exported an estimated 222,765 thalers' worth of goods in the previous year alone.⁹⁸

The to-and-fro between Bromberg and Berlin continued for more than two years. On 5 January 1780, the General Directory finally sent a draft version of the General Privilege to the king. He immediately rejected it, above all because he did not agree with the high number of Jews set to remain in the area.⁹⁹ The chamber deputation in Bromberg estimated that of the 9,863 Jews still in the province, 4,430 would yet have to be expelled, while 5,433 could remain.¹⁰⁰ However, in a rescript from 7 June 1780, Frederick stated that he would not accept more than 2,000 Jews remaining in the district.¹⁰¹ Schroeter's efforts towards more lenient legislation went unheeded.

In the following years, Prussian policies in West Prussia and the Netze District entered a new phase. Now, even purely economic considerations became increasingly powerless against the aim to decrease the number of Jews in the region. In the early 1770s officials such as Brenckenhoff had already been promoting anti-Jewish measures such as the replacement of Jews with Christian settlers. After 1780 these tendencies intensified, and officials such as Johann Friedrich von Domhardt pursued policies that more actively promoted the eviction of the remaining Jews from the province.

IV. Johann Friedrich von Domhardt

The Jews played only a minor role in the extraordinarily long career of Johann Friedrich von Domhardt (1712–1781). Nonetheless, his work had a lasting effect on the Jews of West Prussia and the Netze District. The son of a domain tenant from Anhalt who migrated to East Prussia in 1724, Domhardt took over his father's lease at the age of nineteen. Like Brenckenhoff, he never attended a university, but he soon attracted the attention of Frederick William I with his successful efforts to improve farming on his domains. In 1735, Domhardt became acquainted with the crown prince, on whom he left a positive impression. When Frederick became king in 1740, he praised Domhardt as 'an ideal state official' on account of his diligence, sound judgement and ability to handle difficult tasks, even under challenging circumstances.¹⁰² Soon after his accession, Frederick appointed Domhardt a royal counsellor and in 1746 made him president of the Gumbinnen chamber in East Prussia (then still simply known as 'Prussia'). Sixteen years later, in 1762, Domhardt also became president of the second East Prussian chamber in Königsberg.

⁹⁷ See *ibid.*, no. 335, fol. 417.

⁹⁸ See *ibid.*, no. 335, fol. 471.

⁹⁹ See Stern, *Der preußische Staat*, vol. 3, part 2, no. 1594.

¹⁰⁰ See *ibid.*, no. 1593.

¹⁰¹ See Bär, *Westpreußen*, pp. 391–3.

¹⁰² Ernst Graf zur Lippe-Weißenfeld, 'Domhardt, Johann Friedrich von' (article), in *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliographie*, vol. 5 (Leipzig, 1877), pp. 325–6. See also Graf zur Lippe-Weißenfeld, *Westpreussen*, pp. 22–3.

The king was so content with Domhardt's work that he ennobled him in 1771 and spoke of East Prussia as the 'best-preserved province' in the kingdom.¹⁰³ A year later, Domhardt became governor of West Prussia in addition to his offices in Gumbinnen and Königsberg. In this new position, he supervised the work of both the West Prussian chamber in Marienwerder and the chamber deputation for the Netze District in Bromberg.¹⁰⁴ Domhardt enjoyed almost unlimited authority in West Prussia, coming under the direction of the king alone. According to Hubert C. Johnson, he 'wielded the authority of a viceroy over a tremendous land mass, acknowledging no superior other than the king'.¹⁰⁵

Domhardt was at first little concerned with the Jews in his new jurisdiction. This disregard was not despite but because of his high office. Details concerning the Jewish communities in the Prussian regions were usually the remit of relatively minor officials such as Schroeter. Domhardt was the first official to receive Frederick's outline for the Jewish policy of the new province in June 1772, but being accountable for everything that happened in East and West Prussia, he did not concern himself with such a seemingly minor issue for long. He simply forwarded the order to the chamber in Marienwerder and reported to the king that it had begun to 'prepare everything necessary for the expulsion of all poor Jews from West Prussia'.¹⁰⁶ However, as has been shown in the previous sections, the policies towards the Jews in the new province did not progress as anticipated, remaining instead inconsistent and confused throughout the 1770s. Eight years later, by January 1780, after Frederick had rejected the proposed General Privilege for the Jews in the Netze District, the issue had grown big enough to land on Domhardt's desk again.

This escalation happened at an already difficult time for Domhardt. In the years before 1780 he had experienced several career setbacks.¹⁰⁷ First, in 1775, he had had to fight off serious accusations of corruption. Then, three years later, the king had rebuked him multiple times for instances of allegedly uneconomic and inefficient management of the two provinces.¹⁰⁸ Now, in early 1780, Frederick also expressed his discontent with the hitherto poor implementation of his orders regarding the Jews in West Prussia and the Netze District. For this he blamed Domhardt.

The king was well-known among officials for his peremptory orders, often garnished with contemptuous remarks, but Domhardt must have been concerned by the almost caustic tone of the rescript he received from Frederick on 17 January 1780.¹⁰⁹ In it, the king ordered Domhardt to prepare as soon as possible a comprehensive report on the current situation of the Jews in the province. He expected Domhardt to explain how he intended to implement the Jewish policies that the king had already determined eight

¹⁰³Graf zur Lippe-Weißenfeld, 'Domhardt', pp. 325–6.

¹⁰⁴See K. Forstreuter, 'Domhardt, Johann Friedrich von', *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 4 (Berlin, 1959), p. 66.

¹⁰⁵H. C. Johnson, *Frederick the Great and his Officials* (New Haven, 1975), p. 203.

¹⁰⁶GSa, II. HA. Abt. 9, tit. LXVI, sect. 1, no. 1, vol. I, fol. 45.

¹⁰⁷See Friedrich Ernst Jester, 'Biographie des Oberpräsidenten von Domhardt', *Beiträge zur Kunde Preußens*, vol. 1 (Königsberg, 1818), pp. 20–2.

¹⁰⁸See Straubel, *Biographisches Handbuch*, p. 220. See also J. Erich, *Johann Friedrich von Domhardt. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte Ost- und Westpreußens unter Friedrich dem Großen* (Berlin, 1899).

¹⁰⁹For Domhardt's report see APBY, no. 340, fols. 194–6 and GSa, II. HA. Abt. 9, tit. LXVI, sect. 1, no. 4, vol. II, fols. 140–2.

years before. Less than two weeks later, on 26 January 1780, Domhardt submitted his report, addressed to Frederick directly. It includes a passage that has been cited numerous times in studies of the Jews in eighteenth-century Prussia:

The total number of all Jews to be expelled constitutes almost half of all [remaining] Jews in West Prussia. There is justified concern about the negative consequences [of the expulsion] for the land. It is known that the Jew does not fulfil all his obligations as a subject and that he contributes nothing to the protection of the land. Also, it cannot be denied that an unusually high number of them, who feed on usury and defraudation, will become a burden for the rest of the state. Thus, it is indeed necessary to reduce their number. However, I cannot approve of the sudden expulsion of these people. His Majesty has thus far made his reign memorable through the toleration of all religions. A sudden expulsion, however, would contradict not only the general feeling of humanity but especially those noble attitudes.¹¹⁰

On the basis of this statement, previous historiography has portrayed Domhardt as a prime example of those Prussian administrators who, influenced by natural law theories, mercantilist economics, humanistic ideals and compassion, actively attenuated the detrimental effects of the king's policies towards the Jews. Yet, this interpretation of Domhardt's remarks is problematic.

First, the cited passage should be read with an eye to its recipient. Biographical studies of Frederick the Great have suggested that he actively promoted a particular persona throughout his life.¹¹¹ Even while crown prince, Frederick began to pride himself on his progressive statements on religious toleration, for which Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire admired him.¹¹² Mainly on account of his public display of tolerant attitudes, he was soon called a *roi philosophe* by writers and intellectuals, a title that he treasured. Domhardt must have known that Frederick relished his reputation. He had been in regular contact with the king since he first met him as crown prince in 1735, and after the annexation of West Prussia in 1772 the two met regularly during Frederick's annual inspection tours to the province.

When Domhardt noted that Frederick had 'so far made his reign memorable through the toleration of all religions', his words do not necessarily tell us anything about his private convictions. The purpose of his report to the king was not to outline personal opinions on matters of philosophical interest. Instead, its specific aim was to persuade the king to reconsider his extreme demands regarding the immediate expulsion of Jews from West Prussia and the Netze District. Furthermore, Domhardt's appeal may have been not to the king's compassion, as previous historians assumed, but to the king's ego.¹¹³ Given Domhardt's situation, it is certainly possible that he considered it expedient to recall to the king's mind the positive appraisal that Frederick had previously received from literary elites for his tolerant statements. Moreover, the remainder of the passage reveals the usual economic considerations and contemporary prejudices against Jews, rather than compassion. Like Brenckenhoff before him, Domhardt

¹¹⁰Stern, *Der preußische Staat*, vol. 3, part 2, no. 1268; Baumgart, 'Absoluter Staat', pp. 461–4.

¹¹¹See A. Pečar, 'Friedrich der Große als Autor: ein Plädoyer für eine adressatenorientierte Lektüre seiner Schriften', in M. Kaiser and J. Luh (eds), *Friedrich der Große—eine perspektivische Bestandsaufnahme. Beiträge des ersten Colloquiums in der Reihe 'Friedrich300' vom 28./29. September 2007*, 2007, http://www.perspectivia.net/publikationen/friedrich300-colloquien/friedrich-bestandsaufnahme/pecar_autor (accessed 28 Nov. 2018).

¹¹²See F.-L. Kroll, 'Das Problem der Toleranz bei Friedrich dem Großen', in Kroll (ed.), *Das geistige Preußen: zur Ideengeschichte eines Staates* (Paderborn, 2001), pp. 11–30.

¹¹³See Baumgart, 'Absoluter Staat', pp. 461.

entirely approved of the Jews' ultimate 'resettlement' and merely opposed immediate wholesale expulsion.

Secondly, it seems reasonable to assume that Domhardt wanted to avoid any further reproach from the king. Yet, he also was aware that the king's demands, above all the immediate expulsion of roughly 8,000 more Jews from the province, would have dire economic consequences. Hence, Domhardt knew that he had to present a solution which was both feasible and acceptable to the king. As a result, he proposed several long-term measures against the Jewish population that would, he hoped, obviate the need for immediate expulsion.

Among these proposed measures was a restrictive regulation on Jewish marriages. Domhardt argued that this would ensure a natural decrease in the number of Jews in the region. According to the General Privilege of 1750, Jews in the Prussian heartland already had to obtain a marriage certificate (*Trauschein*) before a rabbi could marry them. After 1772, officials in the new province attempted to regulate Jewish weddings in accordance with the 1750 decree. Thus, Jews in West Prussia and the Netze District were now expected to obtain a certificate and pay a fee if they wanted to marry. No such requirement had previously existed under Polish rule. The concept of civil marriage did not exist in Poland-Lithuania.

Now, in January 1780, Domhardt proposed that on top of the existing fee for a marriage certificate, it should become mandatory for Jews to arrange for the settlement of a Christian family in the new province and provide financial means to support that family's residence for up to three years.¹¹⁴ It is highly probable that he knew that traditional Jewish communities of Poland-Lithuania strictly forbade extramarital sexual relations. Thus he argued that the Jewish population would not increase further through reproduction outside the institution of marriage.¹¹⁵ At the same time, the anti-Jewish policy of replacing expelled Jews with Christian settlers was progressing more slowly than anticipated. Prussian officials were desperately trying to bring more Christian settlers into the sparsely populated region. Domhardt now proposed to limit the Jewish population and increase the Christian population with a single measure.

His proposal was promptly implemented.¹¹⁶ Thus, from 1780 onwards it was part of the official Prussian policy to impede Jewish marriages to decrease the number of Jews in West Prussia and the Netze District. In a letter to the General Directory, the chamber deputation in Bromberg stated the rationale behind this policy as bluntly as possible: 'If the Jews are not able to marry in the province, the birth rate will inevitably decline, and they will eventually die out [*aussterben*]'.¹¹⁷ For the following fifteen years, Jews in West Prussia and the Netze District had to arrange and pay for the settlement of a Christian family to obtain a marriage certificate. Frederick's grandson Frederick

¹¹⁴See Stern, *Der preußische Staat*, vol. 3, part 2, no. 1599.

¹¹⁵On marriages in the Jewish communities of eighteenth-century Poland-Lithuania see J. Goldberg, 'Die Ehe bei den Juden Polens im 18. Jahrhundert', *Jahrbücher zur Geschichte Osteuropas*, 31 (Wiesbaden, 1983), pp. 481–515, here pp. 490, 496; J. Katz, *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1992), pp. 160–7; S. Lowenstein, 'Ashkenazic Jewry and the European Marriage Pattern: A Preliminary Survey of Jewish Marriage Age', *Jewish History*, 8, 1–2 (1994), pp. 155–75.

¹¹⁶See APBY, no. 340, fol. 197.

¹¹⁷Report by the West Prussian chamber deputation in Bromberg to the General Directory in Berlin from 24 Aug. 1795 in GStA, Abt. 9, tit. LXVI, sect. 1, no. 4, vol. 4, fols. 182–3.

William III eventually repealed the decree in 1795, mainly because the measure did not have the anticipated effect. Instead, an increasing number of Jews in the region lived and reproduced outside of wedlock.¹¹⁸

Frederick was content with Domhardt's report. In his reply on 9 September 1780, couched in a surprisingly cordial tone, he conceded that the 'removal' of thousands of Jews from the province was not 'a work of one day, and thus could only be achieved gradually'.¹¹⁹ Already chronically ill in 1780, Domhardt died on 20 November 1781. The anti-Jewish policies that he helped push to a new level persisted, however, until 1806, when the French occupation of Prussia during the War of the Fourth Coalition (1806/7) temporarily disrupted the Prussian plans for the restructuring of the province.¹²⁰

V. Conclusion

In a report dated 23 November 1765, the Prussian General Fiscal Counsellor Friedrich Benjamin d'Anières (1736–1803) wrote on the situation of the Jews in the Prussian lands:

Now, thank God, at least in our provinces the persecution [of Jews] has stopped, and it is considered not only useful but also appropriate to give the persecuted a place in our country. The religious hatred is not extinguished, but it has decreased a lot and is considered a vice by reasonable people. [...] As to the question whether the Jews are useful or harmful, it is well known that a truly harmful subject should not be tolerated in the country at all and that a subject that is harmful only by accident shall be set up in such a way that best promotes the general welfare.¹²¹

According to much previous historiography, d'Anières' views were characteristic for large parts of the administration in late eighteenth-century Prussia.¹²² Others have argued that such attitudes anticipated later debates on the Jews' ability for 'civic improvement' initiated by another Prussian administrator, Christian Wilhelm Dohm (1751–1820), in 1781.¹²³ The findings of this article suggest that both arguments are problematic.

First, previous research on West Prussia and the Netze District has overstated the extent to which officials objected to the restrictive Jewish policies of Frederick the Great. Secondly, instances of resistance within the administration were mainly motivated by political, economic and demographic objectives or even careerist pursuits that had little to do with the Jewish communities. Thirdly, the Prussian administrators did not merely adhere to economic principles, or even to ideals of tolerance and humanity. Instead, their actions towards the Jews were also influenced by anti-Jewish sentiment.

Neither Brenckenhoff nor Domhardt objected to the ultimate expulsion of the majority of Jews from the new province. Economic and careerist considerations motivated

¹¹⁸Decree by Frederick William III dated 15 Oct. 1795 in *GStA*, Abt. 9, tit. LXVI, sect. 1, no. 4, vol. 4, fol. 208.

¹¹⁹Rescript from 9 Sept. 1780, printed in Stern, *Der preußische Staat*, vol. 3, part 2, no. 1605.

¹²⁰See Jehle, "'Relocations'", p. 30.

¹²¹Stern, *Der preußische Staat*, vol. 3, part 1, p. 26.

¹²²See T. Schenk, 'Generalfiskal Friedrich Benjamin Loriol de la Grivillière d'Anières (1736–1803): Anmerkungen zur Vita, Amtsführung und Buchbesitz als Beitrag zur Erforschung preußischer Judenpolitik in der zweiten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts', *Aschkenas*, 17 (2007), pp. 185–223.

¹²³See Heinrich, "'... man sollte itzt'", p. 828; W. C. Seifert (ed.), *Christian Wilhelm Dohm: über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden. Kritische und kommentierte Studienausgabe*, 2 vols (Göttingen, 2015).

their efforts against immediate evictions on a large scale. Yet, the widespread policy to replace Jews with Christian settlers was motivated by anti-Jewish objectives that even trumped economic plans for the region. Domhardt's later proposal for the restriction of Jewish marriages further demonstrates the centrality of such thinking among Prussian officials in the new province. In any case, officials such as Brenckenhoff and Domhardt did not aim at mitigating the adverse effects of Frederick's policy on the Jewish communities. Neither the lenient and relatively benign views of d'Anières nor the utilitarian and humanistic arguments of Dohm are identifiable in the actions of these two officials.

This is not to say that such attitudes did not exist at all. The case of Schroeter shows that natural rights theories, mercantilist economics and humanistic ideals did indeed have some influence on individual Prussian officials. However, it also indicates that previous research tended to overstate the impact these theories had on actual policies. On one hand, Brenckenhoff and Domhardt, the two officials with the most authority over the new province between 1772 and 1786, had no university education. There is little to suggest that natural law theories or mercantilist economics informed their decisions. Moreover, the policy of expulsion and replacement stood in stark contrast to these theories.

On the other hand, attempts at a more lenient policy towards the Jews by the university-educated Schroeter remained ineffective, partly because the king himself largely dictated the policies in West Prussia and the Netze District. Both Brenckenhoff and Domhardt held special offices that enabled the king to bypass the General Directory and the regional chambers. Because Frederick could influence policies in the new province more directly than in the Prussian heartland, there was even less room for resistance to his plans for the Jews in the region. If at all, officials managed to amend specific orders only with great difficulty. In the end, only economic arguments could change the king's mind. The general direction of Frederick's policies never changed between 1772 and 1786.

The progressive side of Prussia, to which historians have repeatedly referred, undoubtedly existed. In late eighteenth-century Berlin, small but growing circles discussed Enlightenment ideas of toleration and liberty. Some Jews even managed to become part of this socio-economic and cultural elite. West Prussia and the Netze District were, however, a different world. Their Jewish inhabitants had little in common with, say, Henriette Herz or Moses Mendelssohn. Yet they all lived in the same state under the same regime.

'Let our toleration be known to every man. Let our charity expand, not only towards Christians of every denomination but towards Jews and Pagans' appeals the protagonist of Friedrich Nicolai's novel *The Life and Opinions of Sebaldus Nothanker*, published in Berlin in 1773.¹²⁴ In the same year, delegates of the Jewish communities in West Prussia and the Netze District sent dozens of petitions to the Prussian authorities, afraid that most of their members would soon have to 'wander around the world with their wives and children'.¹²⁵ Yet, they declared,

¹²⁴Friedrich Nicolai, *The Life and Opinions of Sebaldus Nothanker*, vol. 2 (London, 1798; first published in German in 1773), p. 384.

¹²⁵GStA, I HA, rep. 7B, no. 4319, fols. 121–2.

we are fortunate enough to live in a state where your Excellency exerts the strictest justice. Therefore, we are fully convinced that—above all, out of love for humanity—you will not fail for a moment to bring justice to these poor and unfortunate people.¹²⁶

The Prussian officials shelved these petitions after they had marked them with the abbreviation ‘a.a.’, for *ad acta*. No response was ever issued.

Abstract

Historiography has repeatedly highlighted the mitigating influence of the Prussian administration on Frederick the Great’s oppressive policies toward the Jews. Scholars have argued that officials frequently opposed the king’s discriminatory legislation and intentionally delayed its implementation. These actions, they claimed, were influenced by the Enlightenment humanism of the Prussian administrators and their training in natural law theories and mercantilist economics, both taught at German universities at the time. Such descriptions are central in the influential narrative of late eighteenth-century Prussia as a remarkably tolerant state that developed relatively lenient policies towards the Jews. This article challenges the traditional portrayal of the Prussian administration by examining the actions of three officials involved in the expulsion of several thousand Jews from the province of West Prussia between 1772 and 1786. It argues that the remarkably positive assessment of the Prussian bureaucrats and their role in the Jewish policies of the time needs significant revision. First, previous historiography has overstated the extent to which Prussian officials objected to the king’s discriminatory policies. Secondly, occasional instances of resistance from within the administration were mainly motivated by political, economic and demographic objectives or even careerist pursuits that had little to do with the Jewish communities. Lastly, the Prussian administrators did not merely adhere to economic principles or even to ideals of tolerance and humanity. To a significant extent, their actions were also influenced by anti-Jewish sentiment.

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¹²⁶ *Ibid.*