

1990

Commentary: Honor and Martialism in the U.S. South and Prussian East Elbia during the Mid-Nineteenth Century

Edward L. Ayers

University of Richmond, eyers@richmond.eduFollow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/history-faculty-publications>Part of the [History Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Culture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ayers, Edward L. Commentary of "Honor and Martialism in the U.S. South and Prussian East Elbia during the Mid-Nineteenth Century." In *What Made the South Different?*, edited by Kees Gispén, 40-48. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990.

This Response or Comment is brought to you for free and open access by the History at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Commentary / Edward L. Ayers

Without a second and unarmed, I have no inclination to offer a fundamental challenge to Professor Bowman's argument or his character. In fact, he has served us well by focusing on honor, martialism, and dueling as indices of comparison between the antebellum planters and the pre-1848 Junkers. I would like to build on the wealth of detail he has provided to help clarify the larger comparison between the South and Prussia, a comparison that has consumed so much of our energies over the last decade.

We might begin by distinguishing more carefully among the three related phenomena Professor Bowman discusses, for each tells us something different about the two societies we are trying to understand. Better than most things we could examine, dueling assumed recognizably similar forms in both the South and Prussia, was considered a signal institution of both regions, elicited considerable contemporary comment, and evolved in ways that allow us

to use it as a barometer of the planters' and Junkers' sense of themselves. On the other hand, while martialism provided much of the impetus and context for dueling in Prussia, the southern attraction for martial values had only a brief opportunity to attach itself to a powerful military establishment. As a result, southern martialism necessarily remained more a cultural predisposition than an entrenched way of life. Honor, the larger culture in which both dueling and militarism were embedded, was more than the sum of its parts; it remains, after many studies, an elusive, complex, and problematic concept.

Besides breaking the topic down into distinct components, I would also like to set it in motion in a way that Professor Bowman did not attempt. One of the most challenging things about comparative history is that our targets are more likely than not moving at different speeds and maybe even in different directions. I would like to use that challenge as an opportunity to examine change rather than merely to freeze two societies in time in order to compare some essence they may or may not have shared over several decades.

Let me begin with a brief sketch of the evolution of the Junkers that will take us somewhat beyond Professor Bowman's focus. The landowners of Prussia experienced many hard times from the fifteenth century on, as they were buffeted by the vicissitudes of commercial agriculture, by an unstable political environment, by devastating military defeats, by a restive peasantry. Fortunately for the Junkers, though, in the eighteenth century they joined in a tight alliance with the state, which they served as officials and as officers. They survived as a class through all the vicissitudes of the nineteenth century, in fact, largely because they were so deeply attached to the state, an attachment that grew stronger in the face of the challenges of the new century.

After the defeat of the Prussian-led army by Napoleon at Jena in 1806 and the attendant end of serfdom and beginning of free trade in land and estates, the Junkers maintained their strategic position in the military. As increasing numbers of civil positions went to

better-educated commoners, the Junkers of Prussia channeled their poorly educated sons into the military in astonishing proportions. Even as the Junkers' economic power dwindled in the early decades of the nineteenth century, their sons found proud sanctuary in the army. As one observer wrote in 1846, "when he gets a small beard, when the epaulettes for the first time flourish on his shoulders, when the plume for the first time waves from his head, when the soldiers in all corners present arms, how should he not feel that he is predestined to represent a 'higher being' in this world?"¹

After 1848 the Prussian nobility saw further erosion of their ancient power over the rural folk among whom they lived and held on to their position in the army even more tenaciously. In the turmoil, the Junkers championed the army as the only true guarantor of order and justice; because the revolution left much of the old order intact the Prussians were able to dominate the powerful army in the 1860s and 1870s as they had in the 1830s and 1840s. Moreover, when the Junkers made an economic comeback in the last third of the nineteenth century they cultivated their self-consciously archaic ways, aided by the weight and privilege of their noble titles. Even as young noblemen took middle-class wives, they assimilated the commoners into the ethos of the military, "feudalized" them (creating a topic of much discussion in the society pages of American newspapers along the way, who were outraged that so many of our best young women were opting for marriages to desiccated European noblemen). The military schools of Prussia, meanwhile, dwelt on honor and military virtues at the expenses of other teaching.

History, in other words, seemed to be running backward east of the Elbe: industrialists were becoming ennobled and the ideals of the Enlightenment eroded even as the Junkers were becoming ever more deeply engaged in the international capitalist market. Perhaps the greatest testimony to the growing gap between an eroded personalism on the estates and a continued tradition of personal honor came late in the century; in those years, nearly two

million rural laborers left the Prussian provinces and the Junkers turned to distinctly non-feudal, transitory, imported labor—yet the landlords preserved their traditional place in the Prussian bureaucracy and in the military. In 1900, 61 percent of its officers were noblemen, and the higher the officer the more likely he was to be of the oldest and most honorable families. In other words, honor seemed to inhere far more in modern bureaucratic and military structures than in archaic relationships between estate owners and their workers.

The contrasts with the history of the southern planters are striking. The well-known analogies between the postwar planters and the Junkers have been drawn because of their reactionary domination over an agricultural region during an era when the larger society was undergoing rapid industrialization. This brief sketch makes it clear that the Junkers had far greater success in adapting the new social order to their ideals and purposes than the postwar planters could even have hoped. After emancipation, the planters saw no further concerted attack on their plantations, but in every other facet of life they saw a precipitous and steady erosion of their power and influence. Once southern lawmakers granted planters the power of the lien in the 1870s, the landlords asked for little else from their state and national governments other than to be left alone. They were. Despite a few sentimental and overtly nostalgic novels and songs, the cultural power of the planters evaporated in the New South; the tides of change were on the side of the town dwellers, with their attachment to the emerging mass culture and mass economy of Gilded Age America. The sons and daughters of the planters married into the families of merchants and professionals and moved to town—not the other way around. The tiny professional army of the United States, the army that southerners still associated with their defeat, offered small refuge. The churches saw a new differentiation by class as well as by race, as common people created their own congregations, out of the reach of the planters.

The evolution of the planters and the Junkers across the nine-

teenth century shows, in other words, how intimately the planter class's power and identity were tied to slavery, not merely the plantation or even to race. The planters, unlike the Junkers, enjoyed no important role in the national government or military, no hereditary nobility, no ties of sentiment to a monarch. When slavery was gone, the planters had no other institution in which they could find refuge.

The history of dueling is the clearest example of this cultural dimension of class domination and testifies to the deep differences between the two landholding classes. Let me briefly trace the evolution of dueling in their societies. It seems that the heyday of the southern duel came in the 1830s and 1840s, here on the cotton frontier. Yet the practice fell under steady and increasing attack, and the 1850s may well have seen a decline in the practice. We see relatively little evidence of dueling in the Confederacy, as the elective officer corps undermined some of the rationale for dueling and as Christian soldiers such as Lee and Jackson clearly stood above the practice. The postwar years saw a steady diminution of dueling, even though a few famous conflicts appeared among the other kinds of violence that quickly became synonymous with the New South. Within a generation after Appomattox, the southern duel was a thing of the past.

Not so in Prussia. There, the duel flourished during the same decades it flourished in the antebellum South—and then continued to flourish, even as Germany experienced some of the most rapid industrial growth in Europe. In fact, as Bowman points out, dueling actually spread from the military and the university to politics after the reforms of 1848, when an elected assembly was established. As a recent account observes, “duelling continued to be practiced on quite a substantial scale in Protestant Prussia, not only among students but also among army officers, officers of the reserve, civilian aristocrats and impeccably bourgeois professionals such as doctors, dentists and apothecaries well into the twentieth century.”² The mention of students in this passage is significant, for the universities of the South had nothing like the dueling

societies of Germany. As the century drew to a close, as ritualized dueling and scarred cheeks proliferated in German universities and as the universities overtook the army as the major disseminator of dueling in Prussia, southern universities rushed instead to adopt football, with its more diffuse and flamboyant (and in the early years of the sport in what was to become the SEC, deadly) use of the violent impulse and quest for collective honor.

Why the difference? Why the persistence of the duel in Prussia and its atrophy in the South? It seems clear that, as the Prussian Road analogy argues, both the planters and the Junkers were in some ways anomalous classes, taking their identity from their local privilege and power while remaining in tension with the larger structures of their nation states. Early in their histories, both relied on the whip and the gun to control their subalterns, even as both spoke in a language of paternalism and noblesse oblige. Both subsequently had to contend with upheavals of labor and politics, and both found their values challenged by the spokesmen of liberal democracy. Both had to trim their ambitions to fit national political realities over which they had limited control.

The major difference is that the more extreme Prussians, with all their heavy baggage of manners and power, were better able to adapt to change than the planters, with their carry-on bag of tradition (a bag that contained evangelical Protestantism and ideals of representative government as well as traditions of domination). The death of the duel in the South reveals how little integrity and weight the planters had outside of slavery. While antebellum politics had in many ways turned around slavery, the planters had no special body in the national government—as did the Prussians—they could use to harness or soften the change that swept over them. Southerners hardly dominated the United States Army in the decades after their defeat, and even if they had the army was of little cultural importance in America.

Such institutions were vital—and this is the key—for in both the South and in Prussia honor was not some naive holdover from a “traditional” culture. Instead, it was something that had to be self-

consciously constructed and maintained. That it could be maintained even in the face of industrial capitalism is made clear by the German experience; modernity was not some unitary substance, some all-encompassing and internally consistent ethos that triumphed over everything in its path. But without the sense of confidence and common identity fostered by some institution more exclusive and ennobling than sharecropping or a motley Democratic party, the planters could not muster the energy for dueling, could not maintain a proud and bristling honor. And could not dominate the New South culturally or ideologically.

Which brings us to a final twist. The Junkers managed to lend the ancient values of honor a new, if temporary, lease on life, leading the dentists and pharmacists of Prussia to the dueling ground. That would seem to suggest that the Junkers were a dominant reactionary class in modern Germany, a class that lent much of its style and many of its values to the Germany of the twentieth century. Indeed, the notion that Germany followed a unique, and tragic, path to industrial capitalism, a path tortuously winding through authoritarianism and archaic militarism, a path that began in Prussia, has become an article of faith—and the foundation of a whole genre of southern history. The notion of that Prussian Road was part of a critical wave of historiography emerging after World War II that sought to counteract the conservative tradition of modern German history that dissociated the Third Reich from earlier eras of German history. As such, it served a salutary and noble purpose. But in the 1980s a new and influential revisionist school in German history has expressed skepticism about applying an implicit model of “modernization” drawn from American social science and an idealized version of British and French history to every other country in the world. As a leader in this revision puts it, “I have become more skeptical over the years about the version of continuity in modern German history that relentlessly catalogues the malign role played by pre-industrial elites and institutions. . . . We hear too much about the Germany of the spiked helmet and too little about top-hatted Germany, . . .

too much about the power of a pre-industrial elite and too little about the effects of capitalism in structuring German society and politics.”³ This revisionist school seeks a broader vision of Germany’s path to Hitler, one that does not allow the easy solution of blaming it on the Junkers, one that does not stop large parts of history. We do not have to accept all its arguments and implications (and I do not) to see that it throws the concept of the Prussian Road into doubt even as it applied to Germany.

Just as revisionists want to stress the role of groups other than Junkers in modern German history, so do I think our focus on the power of the planters obscures how much else was going on in the postwar South, how many other groups played their role in making the New South what it was, good and bad. Our fixation on the postwar planters obscures, most importantly for the discussion at hand, the recognition that honor was not the planters’ exclusive preserve. Honor was not merely “ambivalent,” as Bowman would stress, it was multivalent, highly inflected. It had powerful meaning to groups other than those at the top of the social order. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, honor died from the top down in the New South—where druggists and dentists never thought of dueling (the very idea sounds like one of Faulkner’s satires). Honor apparently stayed alive, though, among the black communities of the urban South and among the mountain communities of Appalachia. Both these groups lived in a world increasingly integrated into America’s state and economy, but in the late nineteenth century took many of their values and actions from one another rather than from the mass society. And part of those values included the honor-driven but less stylized violence that was always far more common in the South than in militaristic Prussia. I believe honor was created anew in segregated Southern neighborhoods and in mountain hollows as well as in the Prussian military and fraternities. By the end of the nineteenth century, the planters and Junkers were among the least likely groups in their societies to be engaged in personal violence.

In sum, the comparison of the Prussian and Southern experi-

ence with honor and dueling suggests that we abandon some of the snug teleological conceptions of economy, class, and culture that so often distort comparative history. Neither the planters nor the Junkers were simple preindustrial classes, but constantly negotiated among contradictory demands and aspirations, modern and archaic; more than this, neither the New South nor post-1848 Prussia were mere holdovers from an older age, drifting through history. As unfortunate as it may be, it seems that the violence of honor was not merely the product of some discredited fragment within otherwise progressive societies, but changed its form and substance with dismaying ease in societies deep in the change of the nineteenth century. When we set comparative history into motion, the enterprise becomes even more challenging and disconcerting—and maybe that is the way comparative history can serve us best.