East Prussia: a place of reconciliation, of fantasy and of hope

By Max Egremont

Why would an Englishman write a book about East Prussia? It is at the furthest point of Europe to my home country. It is a country that, on a modern map, does not exist.

May I explain the start of my fascination? This began in a hotel room in Munich some twenty four years ago, when I watched a television programme about the German settlements in central and Eastern Europe. The programme started with the northern crusades and went on from there. Here was a world about which I knew almost nothing – although I studied, and had written about, European history. This seemed to me to be a place of great consequence which we in Britain, with a few scholarly exceptions, had not taken enough trouble to understand.

I read more, learning about the changes and the people, about the pressures and the psychology. These, I thought, made the atmosphere of what was once East Prussia. It seemed to me that the change from Königsberg to Kaliningrad was a remarkable experiment that involved not only the absorption of the Prussian and German city into the Soviet Union but an attempt to make a complete break with the past.

How possible is such a break?

When I first visited here in 1991, I felt as I came out of the railway station, as I glimpsed what were then the ruins of the cathedral from a bus, as I had my first sight of what I believe is still called the Monster, that I had arrived at a very strange place. As an Englishman, I felt once again overcome by my insularity. We have been isolated from so much of the turmoil of continental

Europe. How could I understand the upheavals that had taken place here? Was it arrogant of me even to try?

I felt that I must start by reaching not only beyond what had happened in 1945 but beyond nationality.

The twentieth century German poet Johannes Bobrowski, who grew up in what was German East Prussia and Lithuania, wrote of ancient natural movements across a vast landscape. Bobrowski looked back to Sarmatia, to a partly mythical world that had stretched from the Vistula and the Danube to the Volga and the Caucasus until the Goths arrived at the start of the Christian era. This was a region where nomads and hunters wandered across a vast landscape, worshipping its trees, forests and rivers.

Born in Tilsit, now Sovestk, in 1917, Bobrowski grew up with cultural variety. He met Jews, Lithuanians, Poles and Germans, particularly during his childhood visits to his grandparents' farm across the border in Lithuania. Later, as a German soldier on the eastern front, he saw an end to the acceptance of diversity when the Nazis led Germany into a twisted nationalism of racial superiority and contempt.

Yet Bobrowski knew also that the land would outlast what was happening. He knew that after the armies left the wolves would still cross the clearings: that the snow, the thaw and the short intense summers would still come. The names of the towns and villages might change. But the land would stay – marked by history but also absorbing it.

When the Russian poet Josef Brodsky came to Kaliningrad in the 1960s, he wrote that the trees still whispered in German, even in the rebuilt centre where, after the war, the Soviets tried to create a communist utopia on ruins made by British bombs.

Isn't history merely fantasy if it does not respect a complex, varied past? The complexity and richness should not be oversimplified or reduced by crude nationalism. Kristijonas Donelaitis was a great eighteenth century poet who lived in Tollmingkehmen (now Chistye Prudy) as a pastor. He preached in German and Lithuanian, which was tolerated under Prussian rule. Donelaitis prompted Lithuania's literary renaissance. His most famous poem evokes the abrupt changes of the Baltic seasons as a violent disruption of fantasy:

"The sun came up further and woke the world

Mocked the work of the cold winter and threw it into ruin.

Melted the ice and the fantasy built by frost..."

So the land and its seasons bring reality.

To an insular Englishman, this part of Europe is, at first, hard to penetrate. Boundaries are vague, names can deceive. Some towns and villages in the Kaliningrad district (or Oblast) have three possible names: 'My Lithuania!' Adam Mickiewicz writes, at the start of the long poem that became a nineteenth century battle cry of Polish nationalism.

Johannes Bobrowski recalled the Teutonic Knights and the northern crusade that brought Christianity and conquest of the original pagan Prussians. One thinks also of the multi-ethnic Polish-Lithuanian empire, a dominant power in late medieval Europe, to whose King the Prussian Duke Albrecht paid homage in the sixteenth century.

This history of people mingling, of identities trying to survive conquest, tells of tolerance and anxiety, of cruelty and heroism. It tells us, I think, much about the fear that haunted those who felt themselves to be isolated on the edge of Europe. East Prussians had this anxiety for since the time of the northern

crusades a myth had grown. This, it was thought, is where western civilisation ends.

Prussian and German East Prussia was a series of contradictions. It was a recruiting ground for the old officer corps, the home of the Junckers, whose ancestors had followed the northern crusaders east and lived in a partly-feudal world until the Second World War

Yet East Prussia was a haven for the persecuted: for Jews escaping Russian pogroms, for Protestants expelled from Salzburg or from France, for harassed German low church sects: the country also of Kant and Herder, philosophical opponents of militarism and of conquest. Neither philosopher accepted the simplicities of nationalism. What is a nation, Herder asked? "A great wild garden full of bad plants and good."

East Prussia was a point where European history changed. Immanuel Kant's philosophical revolution – which bridged the enlightenment and romanticism – began in Königsberg. Kant was international. He knew French and English and admired the Scottish philosopher David Hume. He read *The Critique of Pure Reason* to his great friend the English merchant Joseph Green. Although Kant never left East Prussia his works were known throughout Europe. He became a Russian citizen from 1758 until 1762 – when the Russians occupied Königsberg. Russian officers came to his lectures.

The battle of Eylau, which took place 206 years ago, was where Napoleon faltered in his attempt to dominate Europe. It was the Russians who checked him, under a General of German origin. The Prussians fought there. Far-off Britain was in alliance with Russia and with Prussia.

To the writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, German East Prussia couldn't be forgotten. His time there at the end of the war, as an officer in the Red Army, gave him a glimpse of a previously unknown west. He thought that a key

moment had happened in East Prussia – a "nodal point" (as he called it) in European destiny. To Solzhenitsyn, the August 1914 campaign, when the Russians invaded East Prussia and were defeated at Tannenberg, presaged not only the eventual collapse of the Germans – by encouraging their hubristic attitude to the war - but also an intensification of the Russian despair that led to the revolution of 1917.

Solzhenitsyn came again to Kaliningrad in the summer of 1967, in search of atmosphere for his series of novels about the First World War and the revolution of which the first volume is *August 1914*. He wanted to see where his father had fought in that fatal campaign – and to revisit where his own artillery battery had been in 1944 and 1945.

The land, however, had been divided after 1945; so some of the battlefields were now in the new Poland and he could not cross the border. But the towns and villages and once well-drained fields of what had been north-eastern East Prussia hadn't lost the solid feel that Solzhenitsyn recalled from twenty years before; nor, in spite of its gutted centre, had Kaliningrad. In the tomb of Kant and the old German houses, the novelist sensed centuries of proud history and bourgeois care.

The land had always been a place of movement and variety. German East Prussia had been largely agricultural, with some industry in Königsberg which was also a great port. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, with declining employment on the farms, many East Prussians went west in search of work in the rapidly growing industrial parts of Germany. There were always minorities: Poles, Lithuanians and, in Konigsberg, a prosperous Jewish community. Baltic trade brought the world to Königsberg. British merchants settled there, providing some of Kant's table companions. Part of the port of London became identified with traders from Königsberg.

When in 1945 the south-western part of East Prussia joined the new Poland, Poles could think that they were entering somewhere that, in the German and Prussian times, had contained a big Polish minority, referred to by the last German Emperor as "our Poles". The Soviet occupation of Königsberg and the north was different. The renaming of the city – in July 1946 – symbolized more than Russification. Kaliningrad meant the transformation of what the new rulers saw as a Prussian militaristic bastion into a Soviet utopia.

Soviet citizens were encouraged to settle in the new zone, the Kaliningrad Oblast. They were given a free journey, the promise of a home and a period free of tax. Many who came were war widows with children; often they were so shocked by their first glimpse of the ruins that they wanted to leave without getting out of the train. In 1946, some within the new Russian authority thought that the huge destruction made rebuilding impossible, that the ruins should be left as a memorial to the dead of the Great Patriotic War. Stones and bricks were carted off to be used in the repair of other Soviet cities.

Königsberg had symbolised Christian conquest. The nineteenth century fortifications had preserved the sense of a mythical siege. Now a new symbolism took root - that of a heroic place, the final victory: a hard-won fortress against capitalism and the west. Kaliningrad must become a revolutionary utopia. It should represent the last defeat of Prussian militarism. But the graves of Russians had joined those of Prussians and Germans and Poles. The soil, and the city's history, held the dead of several nations.

The first post-war German visitors arrived in the late 1980s, after communism's end. The past had survived in their memories. Some were determined to help to bring about a tactful resurrection. So in the early 1990s, two processes, I feel, began in Kaliningrad - a rediscovery of Prussian history and an acceptance of Russian identity.

The Soviets had thought of making the ruined cathedral, site of the tombs of Grand Masters of the Teutonic Order and the first Dukes of Prussia, into a mass grave for the Red Army troops killed in the storming of Königsberg. Now, however, the brick gothic building was restored. The cathedral had been saved partly by Kant's tomb which the Russians respected. Miraculously this tomb with its neo-classical canopy had also survived the huge, destructive British air raids of 1944.

Thus did the great Prussian philosopher ensure the resurrection of one of the largest sacred brick buildings in Europe, the symbol of a faith in which he did not really believe. It is ironic. Kant did not like nostalgia. He denied that there had ever been a golden age. But he was in favour of international reconciliation. To bring together Königsberg and Kaliningrad is one of his achievements.

Nostalgia is powerful. The poems of Agnes Miegel make a beautiful fantasy of what once had been. To Marion Dönhoff, writer, journalist and East Prussian aristocrat, the past also seemed beautiful but now out of reach. One must love the land without possessing it. This is, I think, a realistic view of loss.

Is it the best kind of reconciliation? Surely Kant would have approved of it, with his feeling for internationalism. Kaliningrad is now the most western part of Russia. But evidence of its German and Prussian past is all around us, not least in the determination of occasions like this to bring people together. Is it too optimistic to feel that we have reached beyond fantasy to reconciliation and to hope?