

An Iron Kingdom? History and Legacy of the Prussian Expansion

13 July – 07 August 2026

CATEGORY History & Culture

COURSE STRUCTURE

You will receive a total of **45 hours of academic lessons** (one lesson equals 45 minutes; 15 hours per week). Lessons will comprise lectures, group work, discussion sessions, and excursions.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

HUWISU courses are grouped into different time tracks. Your course will take place in **Track C**

Tuesday: 1.30 pm – 3.00 pm & 3.30 pm – 5.00 pm
Wednesday: 1.30 pm – 3.00 pm & 3.30 pm – 5.00 pm
Friday: 9.00 am – 10.30 am & 11.00 am – 11.45 am

COURSE LANGUAGE

This course is taught in **English**, including the readings. For the understanding of the texts and the discussions in class, a language-level of B2 (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) is required.

TARGET GROUP

Undergraduate students of all subjects with an interest in German history and culture.

CREDITS & CERTIFICATES

Participants will receive **6 ECTS** credit points and a certificate if they attend regularly (at least 80% attendance), participate actively and fulfil all course assignments. Additionally, six weeks after the end of the course a Transcript of Records is issued by Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. All courses are accredited according to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

In addition to the academic program, you are invited to **join our cultural and social program**. We offer a fine selection of interesting activities that aim to give you an unforgettable stay in Berlin. Through excursions, social gatherings, and sport activities, you have the opportunity to get to know the city, the university, and to meet students from all parts of the world. **Costs for these offers are included in the program fee**. Below, you find examples of previously offered cultural activities. You will be informed about the respective cultural program shortly before the start of the program via email as well as during the course period.



POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL GUIDED TOURS

- Federal Chancellery (*Bundeskanzleramt*)
- German Parliament (*Bundestag*)
- House of Representatives (*Abgeordnetenhaus*)
- Topography of Terror exhibition
- Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office

CULTURAL GUIDED TOURS

- Kreuzberg Tour
- Museum Island (*Museumsinsel*)
- Berlin Cathedral (*Berliner Dom*)
- Daytrip to Potsdam
- Exhibitions

SOCIAL GATHERINGS

- Welcome Session
- Beach Volleyball
- Farewell Get2gether

EXPECTATIONS & POLICIES

Preparation for lively discussions in the classroom: Be on time, have at least the required readings completed, and points in mind for discussion or clarification.

Assignments: Complete all assignments according to the specified requirements on the schedule including handing them over to the lecturer.

Commitment in class: Pay particular attention to the lecturer and respect differences of opinions (classmates', lecturers').

Academic guidelines: Comply with academic integrity policies (such as no plagiarism or cheating, nothing unethical) especially the academic honor code and the student code of conduct.

Attendance policy: No unexcused absences are permitted. Students must follow teachers' instructions to catch up on missed work – to excuse absence please contact the HUWISU office.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Set in the shadow of the reconstructed Prussian City Palace, this course will give an overview of the history, the legacy and the memory of the "Iron Kingdom". It will embed Prussia into the history of both Germany and Europe more broadly – explaining the continuous rise of this entity by looking at its geopolitics, as well as its geography, economy, military, religion, science and culture.

We will follow the development of Prussia from a small duchy beyond the Eastern periphery of the Holy Roman Empire to one of the most powerful kingdoms at the center of Europe. Much of European history since the Thirty Years' War can indeed be understood as a function of this "Prussian Expansion", a fateful development that upended the traditional balance of power and ultimately led to the creation of a monster at the heart of Europe: Imperial Germany, hell-bent on acquiring the great power status it thought it deserved. But there is another, less tragic story that can also be told about Prussia: One of enlightened culture, of world-renowned education and universities, of state modernization and democratic rights that resonates until today. Between Königsberg, Potsdam and Berlin a particular worldview took shape that was both distinctly Prussian, German and cosmopolitan. Humboldt University was the center of this "Berlin Classicism", but we will look for this legacy (and how it is remembered) in other parts of the Prussian capitals as well.

COURSE OBJECTIVES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- describe Prussian political and social history since the 17th century
- understand the history of Europe as a function of that expansion
- embed Prussian history into German history more broadly
- contextualize remnants from the Prussian history of ideas present in Germany today
- analyze modern narratives and collective memory in Berlin regarding Prussia

READINGS

Required:

Reading materials will be available via Moodle during the course.

Suggested:

Christopher Clark: *Iron Kingdom. The Rise and Downfall of Prussia*, Penguin 2007.

Brendan Simms: *Europe. The Struggle for Supremacy*, Penguin 2014.

Peter Wilson: *The Holy Roman Empire*, Penguin 2017.

Heinrich August Winkler: *Germany. The Long Road West*, Oxford 2006.

ASSIGNMENT INFO

In order to gain 6 ECTS, you are required to attend class regularly, read all assigned texts, hold a brief presentation (20 min) and most importantly: to participate actively in our discussions. The topic of your presentation will be decided during our first class meeting. In addition, you ought to hand in an essay of at least 2.000 words as follow-up work of the course.

The final grade will be composed by evaluating the in-class presentation (30%) and the essay (40%). Active participation during class discussions will be taken into account as well (30%). A minimum of 80% class attendance is required.

Full ECTS points will only be awarded if all of the mentioned components are fulfilled.

YOUR INSTRUCTOR

Dr. Christian E. Rieck is an Associate Professor at the Chair of War Studies at the University of Potsdam. He is a Visiting Professor at University College Dublin and also teaches at the interface between international relations and contemporary history at Universidad Rey Juan Carlos in Madrid, as well as at Humboldt University in Berlin, his alma mater.

He is a frequent guest lecturer at universities around the world, most recently at the University of Western Australia in Perth, the University of Buenos Aires and RSIS in Singapore. After studies of law, politics and economics in Bayreuth, Seville and at HU Berlin, he earned a postgraduate degree in Latin American Studies at the University of Oxford. Further studies in Venice, Hamburg and at the European University Institute followed. He holds a PhD in Diplomatic History from the University of Potsdam.

Previous posts include research and policy work at Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in Berlin, at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies GIGA in Hamburg, as well as a Carlo Schmid Fellowship at the United Nations in Mexico City. He was a Visiting Fellow at the United States Studies Centre of the University of Sydney in 2025.

COURSE SCHEDULE

A detailed syllabus containing the concrete topics, research questions, readings and assignments for every class will be made available online before the start of the course.

The course will include three field trips to Prussian historical sites in Potsdam and Berlin.