



# Forgotten Land: Journeys Among the Ghosts of East Prussia

*Max Egremont*

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## **Forgotten Land: Journeys Among the Ghosts of East Prussia** Max Egremont

Until the end of World War II, East Prussia was the German empire's farthest eastern redoubt, a thriving and beautiful land on the southeastern coast of the Baltic Sea. Now it lives only in history and in myth. Since 1945, the territory has been divided between Poland and Russia, stretching from the border between Russia and Lithuania in the east and south, and through Poland in the west. In *Forgotten Land*, Max Egremont offers a vivid account of this region and its people through the stories of individuals who were intimately involved in and transformed by its tumultuous history, as well as accounts of his own travels and interviews he conducted along the way.

*Forgotten Land* is a story of historical identity and character, told through intimate portraits of people and places. It is a unique examination of the layers of history, of the changing perceptions and myths of homeland, of virtue and of wickedness, and of how a place can still overwhelm those who left it years before.

## **Forgotten Land: Journeys Among the Ghosts of East Prussia Details**

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Author : Max Egremont

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## From Reader Review *Forgotten Land: Journeys Among the Ghosts of East Prussia* for online ebook

### Rebecca says

Moving series of accounts (of individual, events and places) mainly concentrating on the history of east Prussia from the early twentieth century through to its absorption into Poland and Russia post World War Two. Some of the narrative does jump around a bit and some of the stories are more relevant than others, but overall I found it to be an interesting account of a place and a piece of history that has largely been forgotten.

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### Adam says

I am happy that I won this book for free through Goodreads First Reads contest!! I love history but don't know a lot about Prussia so I was hoping to learn a bit more about the geographic area, the people, and their history. I found myself opening up to the pain and plight of those affected by war and fully engaged with their circumstances. Loss is terrible but having to live through the worst of times and perhaps wondering how you will survive another day really hits at the heart of such suffering. War is never kind, and to the survivors of war, nothing will ever be the same.

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### Stephen says

This was a real curate's egg of a book. The broad sweep of the history was interesting and the author did a very good job of depicting the landscape, culture and feeling of the place. But, and it's a pretty big but, his insistence on reintroducing us to characters, families and places every other chapter was incredibly annoying and, even more annoying, was his habit of putting emotions and words into the mouths and minds of people he never met.

Still, I'd love to visit the place, even if it has gone to wrack and ruin.

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### Lisa says

Stopped after five chapters, as I did not get on with the author's rambling, meandering style. One minute he's visiting an elderly East Prussian in modern Germany, the next he's on a tale about some facet of the history of East Prussia, with a smash cut to 1945 at some point. Also, the author can't quite make up his mind which names to use- the old, the modern, or the English- and consequently rarely names a place without giving a second name in parentheses. This would be fine upon a first mention, but he continues the practice, as though concerned a reader won't recall that the Frische Nehrung is the Vistula Spit even though it was mentioned in the previous paragraph. I've too many books on my to-read list to soldier through this one, despite the nuggets of East Prussian history it does contain.

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## Jake Goretzki says

I've had this one on the pile for a year or so and got down to it while I was ill with flu (having a massive jones for something sentimental and 'nostalgic' and in a state incapable of dealing with fiction). Biographical note: some of my lot are originally from that neck of the woods, give or take the odd few hundred kilometres. The very words 'Bernstein' and 'Bernsteinstrand' for some reason send me into a bit of an ecstasy.

It's a pretty likable, idiosyncratic piece, combining biography, history and travel writing. Its main focus is the territory in the 19th and early 20th century which it does through the experiences of a handful of standout figures (e.g. Kaethe Kollwitz, Marion Doenhoff and various other aristocrats), as well as present day voices (e.g. the guy who runs the Koenigsberg museum is Duisburg). I especially enjoyed the sections on Thomas Mann and Kaethe Kollwitz (big fan of both of them). I want to go and see Thomas Mann's gaff now.

Of course it's morbidly fascinating too. That Tannenberg monument sounds like an abomination. If I were in the area, I'd have to go and have a look at the grassed over remains. Equally, as with anything in the shadow of the Nazi experience, any evocation of the-time-before-that can feel sweetly sentimental. But let's not forget why there isn't an East Prussia any more. Obviously. He doesn't, though can be a little over-charitable sometimes.

It does hit a few bum notes. Ultimately the tale of Walter Frevert (naturalist writer and, oh, also just happened to run Hermann Goering's hunting estate and hang out with him quite a lot) does get its sorry ending, but until you reach that (in the epilogue), I found myself wanting Egremont to show a little more disapproval of the man. Sure, he loved stags and trees. But you did say 'Goering', didn't you? Jesus.

I was also a bit baffled by the place given to Sir Alfred Knox (British diplomatic and all round pompous Edwardian prick) in the story. Sure, he went to East Prussia a few times – but he's a bit tangential to the subject (especially when we start on the Russian Civil War). If I'd have been editor, I'd have snipped him out.

Anyway. Flawed, but touching and well written.

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## Fiona says

I'm quite exhausted by this book and I feel quite mean giving it just 3 stars. Egremont has written an in depth history of East Prussia, focusing mainly on WWI and II. He relates this history through the lives of various people who lived through these times, many of whom will be famous in their homelands of Russia, Germany, Poland or Lithuania but who were unknown to me and mainly, if I'm frankly honest, of little interest. What did I learn?

I learned that in the 13c, the Teutonic Knights - the German Order of Chivalry - were given a papal blessing

to go on a crusade to Eastern Europe, a crusade just as brutal as those in the Holy Land and aimed principally at the pagan Prussians. Their symbol, the Black Cross, would be seen on German tanks and planes 6 centuries later.

I learned that the barbarism visited upon civilians in WWII against civilians was much worse than I had realised, particularly by German and Russian troops and often against their own people.

I learned that in 1945, SS troops marched 7,000 survivors of concentration camps across 30 miles towards the Baltic shore, shooting those who fell along the way, only to herd them onto a beach and drive them into the Baltic. Only 15 are known to have survived.

I learned that there is a Russian enclave lodged on the Baltic coast between Lithuania and Poland. I didn't know it was there.

Egremont writes well and in an easily read style. I found this book very repetitive, however. I enjoyed reading about the early history of Prussia as my knowledge and understanding of it was minimal. It was interesting to learn how Prussia had become involved in both wars but the level of detail was just too much for me. That explains my rating but I wouldn't argue with others giving it 4 or 5 because it's really down to just how interested you are in the subject.

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### **Gabriele Goldstone says**

I've read a view books about East Prussia, including biographies by Marion Dönhoff and Hans Lehndorff, a novel by Ernst Wiechert and histories by Andreas Kossert, among others. What made Max Egremont's book stand out was that it was written by an outsider, a non-Prussian and I appreciated his point of view. Yes, the book was a bit confusing, as it flitted between present and past, followed characters, dropped them and then picked them up again. However I felt this was an appropriate style for a confusing place and time. Yes it was part history, part travelogue and it was immensely fascinating. It's only strengthened my resolve to journey amongst those East Prussian ghosts. Perhaps I'll find clues to my own mother's confusing teenage years. And I sure did appreciate the enclosed map with locations identified by both past and present names.

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### **Mary Warnement says**

More like the land about to be forgotten. Egremont has interviewed a small selection of survivors of the post-WWII diaspora and their descendants as well as a few Russian, Polish, and Lithuanians who now live in former East Prussia with a sensitivity to the perspectives of each. These memoirs combined with his own research and travels make for engaging read. I wish I'd know about the Museum to the City of Koenigsberg when I was in that area, not that I would necessarily have been able to make it to Duisburg.

Those interviewed seem chosen somewhat at random. Obviously, survival, a willingness to talk, or the fact that one published one's memoirs were factors. I'm not sure Kathe Kollwitz's experiences really tell the story. I enjoyed reading about her, but I connect her with Berlin. Yes, she was born there but she left in her teens to study art in Berlin and Munich and lived most of her life in Berlin.

East Prussia, and Koenigsberg especially, were always on the edge of Germany, and now it seems one the edge of memory.

Is the word "vetriebene" only used for Prussians?

4 "For Germans, however, East Prussia is a memory--one that they can shape into myth and regret, fading perhaps but still a reminder of how they once were, in what their forebears thought as their country's (and civilization's) most eastern redoubt. A place of reconciliation, of fantasy or of hope: perhaps, after its last painters, this is now East Prussia's destiny."

320 "Soon Allenstein, Rauschen and the Kutsche Nehrung, even Koenigsberg, will be strange names on sepia photographs hung up for the tourists in Polish or Russian hotels or needing explanatory footnotes in history books; soon that wordless sense of what they meant to those who lived there--how they really looked or felt--will be gone, after the deaths of the last people who knew them.

322 Egremont ends with the words of Klaus Lunau, who may be the last living who knew the old Prussia. Klaus enjoys, even in his 80s, swimming in the Baltic and advises: "You need to learn, he says, when to let yourself be carried along rather than struggle against the relentless grey water: also when precisely to kick free, when to strike out or to make for home." Or be swept over by the wave of History.

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### **Thomas says**

This is a beautifully written, if a bit disjointed, historical travelogue of East Prussia, until the end of the 2nd world war a part of Germany but now divided between Poland and Russia. It is a region which has lived through some interesting times, no more so than in the first half of the 20th century. It is the story of this period and its aftermath which the author tells through the personal histories of some of its natives. It does jump around a bit and I found myself quite often having to go back through the book to check who someone was but if you like books on modern European history or the two world wars it's worth a read.

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### **Greg Thiele says**

This book provides a view of East Prussia and the pain that accompanied its loss after World War II. The history of East Prussia is related episodically, with the author going into greater detail as this history intertwines with the lives of several of the people that he describes in the book. This led to a somewhat disjointed story, with people discussed and then dropped, only to be reengaged later on in the book. While I found it slightly distracting, this style fit with the author's attempts to describe different aspects of loss: loss of family members, loss of lands and ancestral homes, the loss and pain of memories.

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### **Dagezi says**

Read on a two day train trip home from Atlanta. This sort of hovers on the border between three and four stars. Four stars for me because I've been sort of obsessed with the idea of East Prussia since I figured out that Kaliningrad used to be Konigsberg once upon a time. Probably three stars for those without an existing interest in the material. Also, it has to be said, Egremont writes rather strangely, unlike anything else I've read. For one thing, the same terms are defined over and over and over and over. Every time we see the german words for the Curonian Spit (a prominent regional landmark)--so often that I can spell them from memory despite not really speaking German anymore: Kurische Nehrung, they are glossed "Curonian Spit." This happens not two or three times, but twenty or thirty or more. The same is true for all sorts of other place

names and specialized terms. Second the narratives of different characters tend to wander across chapters. (Much of the content of the book appears to be Egremont's evocative and mostly compelling summarizing of a number of postwar German memoirs on East Prussians' memories of their former homeland). In many cases no attempt is made to connect these bits and pieces. For example, Agnes Miegel, Hitler-loving poet, crops up in a number of chapters and each time it is like the first time we have ever met her. The same is true for Michael Wiest (the end of whose story we read first close to the book's beginning, the beginning at the end) who, after we already know he is Jewish is revealed to be... Jewish. This systematic lack of connective tissue is so widespread and so obvious as to appear to me to be an intentional rhetorical strategy-- a performative enactment of the blurring and mythic temporalities of memory. If you can get past it (I could with some effort), there is a lot to like here. I found the passages on the Tannenberg memorial particularly revelatory. I can see where other might not be able to let this sort of dottiness slide, however.

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### **Margaret Sankey says**

By now, I think I am a connoisseur of Lost Cause People--CSA or Jacobite or evicted and their various coping mechanisms from demagoguery to soppy nostalgia, so this is a nice addition to the collection. Egremont, a British writer, tracks down remnants of the Prussian diaspora from after 1918 and 1945, from bitter, die-hards who turned to anti-Communism, rare liberals who embraced West Germany's resurgence, the grandchildren who want statues and grave markers for the families killed by the Red Army, local town hall museums and their careful politics and bossy donors, the second German consul in Kaliningrad (who mainly brokers deals with the licensed BMW plant and Russian oligarchs these days), descendants of the Dohna-Schlobitten family and increasingly touristy nostalgia restaurants in Berlin like Marjellchen (where I once had Masurian Jugged Hare and a little too much Kartoffel Schnapps).

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### **Pedro Plassen says**

Before reading, I was with the expectation this would be more about the present generation, how it dealt with the memories and the reality of a land lost to war. In this case the book goes through the stories of those that gave name to the great households of East-Prussia but, also, dwells on the horrors inflicted on the common folk by the second world war and its aftermath. I was quite surprised to see, presently, these areas are not so remote and locked out, as one would expect (particularly Kaliningrad) and a thriving German tourism exists and is actively promoted. As a descendent with the dream of visiting my grandparent's land this is certainly good news.

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### **Astrid says**

A library patron recommended this to me. Pomerania, where my dad's family is from, is actually not East Prussia but West Prussia, but I figured I should read it anyway. It started out fine, there was certainly a lot of research done and lots of people make an appearance here, including Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Kaete Kollwitz. The problem is that some of those descriptions are too "fictional" for a book of nonfiction. When he talks about someone standing in the middle of the room, staring at the wall and contemplating whatever, how the hell does he know that? There are lots of end notes, but nothing is marked, so it looks like he just made that up. I don't like nonfiction books that do that. Also, I had trouble figuring out whether he was in WWI or WWII, because it just kept shifting back and forth and all over the place. There were way too many people mentioned, over and over again, different time periods and places. It was just too all over for me. I

can't say it was dry, it was relatively easy to read, but my brain just had problems distinguishing between all the places, people and time periods. People who love fiction would most likely really enjoy this book.

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## **Mir says**

The title said it all. A history into the forgotten land of East Prussia. The land of Teutonic Knights, Immanuel Kant and once the intellectual city of Europe. Reminiscences of memories of those longing for their homeland. The turbulence past, the insight details of chronology of events that lead to its present shaped indeed give you a better understanding of what is East Prussia.

A question arises will Germany make a claim against Kaliningrad Oblast which is isolated from the rest of the Russian Federation with similar storyline of annexation of Crimea by the Russian?

Highly unlikely but history always repeated itself and whose side of story will prevails. A question to ponder.

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