

PRUSSIAN KNIVES DEFINED...MAYBE

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Have you ever had a child (or been the child) that plays the “Why?” game? Let me give you an example: CHILD: Why is the earth round? ADULT: (with pride) Because of a process called hydrostatic equilibrium, which causes objects of large mass to attract other masses to create a more efficient shape, namely a sphere. CHILD: but why? ADULT: (patiently) Because that’s how gravity works. CHILD: But why? ADULT: (suddenly realizing the trap) Uh...because gravity is a force that affects everything around us? CHILD: But why? ADULT: (angry now) Because if you don’t stop asking me stupid questions I’m going to punch you in the head.....CHILD: But w...



You get the idea. Recently, I had the opportunity to be that child with Bernard Levine, arguably one of the more knowledgeable authorities on historical “things that go cut.” And, while the subject wasn’t planetary masses and their effects on the universe, it was a subject that I am genuinely curious about, Prussian style butcher trade knives. Bernard was kind enough to sit down with me and patiently answer numerous questions relating to that topic.



And, spoiler alert: By the end of the conversation Bernard had not lost patience with me and hit me upside the head (although he probably had just cause). He did, however, shed a lot of light on the subject at hand.

For those of you not familiar with this particular style of knife, they are loosely referred to as Prussian knives, primarily due to the company, Heller Bros., who produced a large number of them around the turn of the Twentieth Century. There were many others of similar style produced by other companies or more correctly, stamped with other names, made around this time; but the GESETZLICH[GESCHUTZT] PRUSSIA stamped versions with the pewter-like crown on the handles are more common, hence the association.

On a side note, I currently have approximately 200 examples of these knives. They come in different blade lengths, have varied bolsters, different handle materials and slightly varied shapes. I have identified 39 various stamps, including Dixon Cutlery, Henry Sears, La Croix, Robt. Klaas and other lesser known markings.

When I started researching these knives, my first order of business was to define exactly what purpose a Prussian butcher trade knife served. The term “trade” knife was affixed to this item largely due to the fact that they were inexpensively manufactured, sold in bulk, usually by the dozen and marketed to the unsophisticated masses for trade purposes.

I understood the “trade” part. Like beads, firewater and other similar items, they have the attraction of being shiny and new and certainly look more valuable than they actually are (were). So the trade distinction was easy for me to accept.

The butcher knife association made me curious, so I cleaned one up and put it to work in my kitchen, chopping up vegetables, cutting chicken and other meats and assigning it general slicing chores. After several days of this, and several sharpening sessions, I deduced that, as a butcher knife, Prussian knives...well, suck.

The blade geometry leaves much to be desired, the point is either too far forward or too far backwards, depending on

the task you are attempting to perform; it is too thick for fine cutting; and too thin and light for chopping. In other words, it's pretty useless in the kitchen. And, even though the blades are mostly high carbon steel, their edge holding capabilities are only adequate (thanks, Wayne Goddard, for raising the bar so high with your blades that everything else seems wanting).

I have heard these knives referred to as "German hunting knives" as well. I do not hunt regularly, but I do camp and spent a fair amount of time in the wilderness. To my thinking, this means a hunting knife must be field expedient and able to perform a number of tasks under rough circumstances. With that in mind, I took a Prussian knife into the field and set up camp with it. As a fuzz stick maker, fire prepper and general camp chore tool, it performed surprisingly well. The handle was comfortable to hold; and with a thumb on the spine, it was easy enough to bear down on something to cut it. If the tip had more of a drop point configuration, it would have been more useful; but overall I was pretty satisfied with its performance.



I cannot attest to how efficiently it would serve to skin game, but one of my examples has a tag attached to it claiming that it "dressed a baby moose." The tag is dated 1923. So, there's that.

After spending numerous hours researching old catalogs and articles, speaking with knife historians and enthusiasts, testing and examining these knives, I feel I am no closer to defining them than when I started. Although there are several catalogs, clues and other evidence regarding Prussian style knives, their exact purpose and function seems lost to time.

As to their value, or what they're worth, if you believe some of the more questionable sellers on Ebay, they would have you believe that "rare" Prussian knives are worth upwards of \$150 +++. I disagree (nothing new there). I paid \$90.00 for one with a completely full blade (that is fairly unusual) and seemingly unused. I still feel the pain of that purchase, but I'm happy to have the example. I have also paid \$5.00 for quite a few of them. Most of the examples I have seen have (overly) sharpened blades and well-worn handles, which attests to the fact that they were probably used by their owners. For what, I have no idea.

The "cool" factor of these knives however, is off the charts; so I am inclined (regardless of Bernard's slightly disapproving head shake) to call them a trade knife and leave it at that. And, while they may not be worth a mint, they are worth owning one...or twenty.

For those of you who are interested in reading more about these knives, you can reference *Bernard Levine's April 2007 Knife World Article, WhutIzzit?*