

Ordinary Prussians. Brandenburg Junkers and Villagers, 1500-1840

Review Number: 351

Publish date: Monday, 1 September, 2003

Author: William Hagen

ISBN: 521815584X

Date of Publication: 2002

Price: £75.00

Pages: 691pp.

Publisher: Cambridge University Press

Place of Publication: Cambridge

Reviewer: Karin Friedrich

It is refreshing to be told by William Hagen that 'refractoriness and insubordination proved to be Prussian virtues'.(p. 645) This statement would not be surprising about nineteenth-century Prussian working-class culture, but it is about early modern nobles and peasants. This work is full of such iconoclastic approaches, which the author presents in a captivating, entertaining and yet scholarly manner. The expression 'peasants' (as well as 'serf' and 'serfdom') is banned from this book from the very start, and rightly so. Hagen convincingly demonstrates that rural subjects, even though burdened by labour dues and bound to land and farm through a myriad of individualised, complicated contracts and legal agreements, also possessed strong property rights, legal entitlements, a strong will of self-defence and litigiousness, and were light-years away from the caricature of the passive, miserable, tortured, pitiable and exploited creatures which traditional historiography – either of the Marxist or the liberal persuasion – has hitherto painted. Similarly, Hagen ends up destroying – against his own intention at the outset of his research, as he admits – the image of the Brandenburg-Prussian Junker as a militarised, obedient servant of his king, who exercised traditional paternalist seigneurialism over their subjects. Instead Brandenburg noble landlords were part of the European mainstream through technical and managerial innovation, a healthy sense for profit-making, and an insight in the necessity of tapping into the know-how of non-noble, capitalist estate administrators.

In the future it will be necessary to think again when we imagine rural life east of the Elbe. Thus Peter Blickle, in his latest book on peasant freedom in Upper Germany ([1](#)), will have to revise his perception of an exploited, pressed and slave-like peasantry in Brandenburg, Mecklenburg and Schleswig-Holstein, whose miserable existence he contrasts with the contractual relationship between peasants and landlords in the Swiss cantons. His idea of peasant resistance and successful strife for freedom (through the accumulation of 'freedoms' in the plural) will have to be extended to the east.

Bill Hagen's book has implications reaching far beyond its immediate objective of providing a dense narrative of the *longue durée* of village and manorial life of the manor of Stavenow in the Prignitz district of Brandenburg from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. The whole work is deeply marked by the influence of a school of agrarian historians in Potsdam around Jan Peters, inheriting the positive tradition of the former GDR's emphasis on social and agrarian history, but also tapping into *Alltagsgeschichte* (everyday history), material culture, institutional culture and mentality. If one more effort was needed to finally put the now tired, but still influential theory of a special German path of history (*Sonderweg*) to rest, it is this book.

No longer will it be possible to speak categorically about Prussian society as economically backward, militarised and enserfed; a society that supposedly missed out on the European agricultural revolution of the eighteenth century. Instead, it discloses a world where the nobility had an intense working relationship with the ambitious and competent members of the bourgeoisie (or better 'commoners'), as well as the 'ordinary' people in the villages. Although this is a microhistorical case study, based on the rich archives of one estate, preserved by generations of landlords from several noble Brandenburg families, the conclusions are so significant that it is impossible to assume that the conditions of village and estate life in Stavenow were so exceptional that they did not find some reflection in other Brandenburg-Prussian estates.

The author starts by slaughtering a few holy cows: the paradigm of the 'second serfdom' frequently presented in the literature on Europe east of the Elbe finds no confirmation in Hagen's research, as the estates east of the Elbe never experienced the strain of 'first serfdom', imposed on most of medieval western Europe. In contrast to the rebellions which broke out in densely populated southwestern Germany in 1525, underpopulated Prussia and Brandenburg were spared such trouble, because village farmers and labourers in the sixteenth century were badly needed and could therefore usually negotiate favourable contracts with their lords. Hence there were no incentives to rebel, since lords of the manor had every reason to value and treat their labour force well. The East Elbian farmers' trade-off was therefore to be 'less free but not so poor'. From among the voices of farmers, labourers, cottagers, millers, pastors, estate administrators, lawyers, state officials, and the lord or lady of the manor, emerges the picture of a society which was not worse, and sometimes better off than its allegedly more affluent, modern, capitalist and personally free counterparts on the British Isles, in France – or closer to home – the more intensely-researched southwest of Germany. Hagen stresses that the labour duties to be performed unpaid (up to three days per week) never triggered manor-village tensions before the economic crisis of the Thirty Years' War (1618-48), which devastated large stretches of territory. Even then, landlords – following their self-interest – tried to help farmers resettle by restocking their farms, exempting them from rent and other payments for a limited time, but making demands on their labour, which naturally presented the most valuable asset in times of underpopulation. Again, the farmers were in a strong bargaining position, which they used in turn to press their demands and limit their burdens.

Hagen deals with the sixteenth century and the economic crisis of the seventeenth century in his relatively brief first chapter (pp. 26-68), introducing all the villages then belonging to the Stavenow estates under the noble Quitzow family, who, after the Thirty Years' War had ruined them, had to sell the estate to the barons von Blumenthal, at first typical representatives of a nobility favoured at the court of the Great Elector, yet later settling in Stavenow as provincial aristocrats. The second chapter traces the changing fortunes of this family, which oversaw heavy investment in and the post-war reconstruction of the estate, facing at the same time increasing interference from a centralising state and its ever higher tax demands. Confronted with strong resistance among villagers in 1700-1702, during a dire period of crop failures and poor harvests, it was only after the sale of the estate to the von Kleist family in 1717, and a thorough, government-backed restructuring and redistribution of villagers' lands and holdings in 1723, that the Stavenow estates recovered from crisis.

The chronological narrative is then interrupted by two chapters, one a highly original treatment of village identities in social practice and law, the other an economic analysis of villagers' daily bread: village farm incomes, living standards and lifespans. Together they give us a glimpse into a network of kinship focused around subjects' property rights, marital customs, dowries, funeral arrangements and retirement provisions, as well as farmers' operating costs, taxes, incomes, living standards, mortality and material culture (including food, furniture and cash, details of which are found in inventories), which few other historians of early modern Prussia have ever made accessible to us in English or German.⁽²⁾ The results are indeed, as the author claims, 'at odds with persistent popular and scholarly images of "pre-modern peasant society" and "east-Elbian serfdom"'. (p. 278) Stavenow villages consisted of medium and large family farms, which displayed a surprising degree of longevity, as many generations of the same families managed to secure for themselves not inconsiderable material assets and rewards.

The most eloquent revision of still-influential stereotypes, however, is Chapter five on the 'Kleists' good fortunes' – a brief history of the 'family strategies' and management of Stavenow from 1717 to 1806, later complemented by two chapters on the policing of crime and the enforcement of rent and other duties by the estates' lordships. At first, this glance at the 'other side of the coin' of rural life at Stavenow reveals – without any partisan pro-noble bias to stem the usual anti-noble tone of much historiography on Prussian noble-subject relationships – seems to confirm textbook images. The Kleists are typical of Prussia's eighteenth-century service nobility: among nine brothers, eight faithfully served in the army as officers. The other picture painted here of the Kleists, however, was that of a hard-nosed clan of businessmen, including a very competent businesswoman – Frau von Kleist had to run the estate after her husband Joachim's death, from 1737 until her own death in 1758. Crucially, to their help came a succession of some highly talented commoner lawyers and estate administrators, usually in service for many years, if not decades, who enforced their lordship's labour and rent regime, mediated in conflicts, punished insubordination, negotiated money-lending and borrowing, suggested retirement settlements, drew up inventories and statistical tables, and communicated with state officials and tax collectors.

Tough bargaining, the imposition of higher rents and commutation fees (which made it possible for farmers to give up one or more days of compulsory labour in favour of cash payments), and greater demands on their services (such as wood-haulage, transport and construction work), sparked active and passive resistance and boycott. One example is particularly telling: Since king Frederick II had introduced an edict in 1740 which enabled subjects to turn directly to royal courts and justice, patrimonial courts on the estate had lost some of their authority and power. In the 1760s, several villagers petitioned the king to abolish the 'novelties' of wood-haulage and other duties which Major von Kleist wanted to force upon them. The farmers protested against coercive measures, such as imprisonment and corporal punishment of subjects who had resisted Kleist's demands. A royal commission was sent to investigate the claims, and although it upheld Kleist's rights to demand such services in principle, the Royal Supreme Appellate Court forced Kleist to lighten the farmers' burdens and refrain from corporal punishment. Farmers fought back with surprising consistency and endurance, and the need for royal intervention clearly damaged Kleist's authority in the eyes of his subjects. Thus farmers proved to be neither passive nor particularly obedient subjects, but just as insistent upon the extension of their rights and economic self-interest as their lordship.

Hagen dedicates a whole chapter to a period of particularly acute conflict between Major von Kleist and several particularly rebellious villagers and village-mayors during the late 1780s, which resulted in the negotiated and government-mediated *Urbarium* of 1790, laying down the exact amount of rent and the extent of services due to the lord, as well as the definition of the farmers' 'iron stock' – their material possessions on the farm which could not be taken from them. The author's willingness to sift through all of these appeals, counter-appeals, negotiations, complaints, minutes recorded by the estate managers and family lawyers, as well as court documents, results in a magnificent insight into a world hitherto presented to us by generalisations about peasant passivity and exploitation, noble ruthlessness and ideological resistance to pragmatism. It blows such older interpretations apart, without giving in to the temptation to idealize noble landlordism or present farm life as some *heile Welt* scenario. On the basis of particularly plentiful and complete source material, Hagen succeeds in painting eighteenth-century manor-village existence in the richest colours and details. Every niche of village life is filled with life and tangible individual stories: about pastors and schoolmasters – and their struggle for receiving their subsistence from villagers; about village mayors with their 'fragile authority' (p. 454), often torn between their support for fellow villagers and their duties to collect taxes and recruit soldiers among them; about millers and their relatively comfortable lifestyle; about less well-off sextons, blacksmiths and tailors; about head-ploughmen, hunter-foresters, threshers, livestock herders, lodgers, and manorial servants, at the bottom of the social ladder and with more unsettled lives. Yet occasionally there are signs of upward mobility among them, and even the poorest were never cast out into utter misery and destitution, although, as Hagen admits, 'hard times were worse for them'.(p. 422)

The last chapter is particularly valuable for students of the nineteenth century, as it revises some of the

myths concerning the Reform Era. Stavenow was sold in 1808 to Baron von Voss, a typical Prussian bureaucrat and minister of the reform and post-reform era, who after 1815 rose among the anti-reform nobility to the position of vice-president of the State Ministry and the Royal Council of State. Like Kleist, he was hit by strikes and unrest among the farmers, especially during the years when the Napoleonic wars left large areas of Prussia occupied and exhausted. Again, patterns repeated themselves, as Voss – despite his rather conservative political stance – proceeded to introduce wide-ranging innovations in agricultural techniques, experimented with new seeds and a regime of rationalised and efficient management, once more with the help of a non-noble estate manager. The greatest challenge to Voss's ownership of Stavenow was the reform legislation of 1807-10 which abolished labour duties and established personal freedom of farmers through freehold conversions. Again it was not paternalism, but strong business interests which guided the negotiation on both sides, between Voss and his former subjects, who had to compensate their lord for all or part of their 'iron stock', if they sat on hereditary or life tenure, and lost part of their arable and meadows, often in return for the use of seigneurial woodlands and other rights.(pp. 627-9) Not all villages agreed easily to such compensation demands, and in most cases, state officials had to mediate. Yet, perhaps surprisingly after all the bad press nobles have received for making their 'fortune' out of peasant misery, the great majority of Stavenow farms survived as freeholds, and the few that failed were smallholders who then sold their farms to outsiders. In the long term, farmers profited from emancipation, and by the mid-nineteenth century, some farmers' household inventories contained obvious signs of middle-class comfort, such as a sofa, a wall-clock and an umbrella.(p. 644)

Such results sit badly with the idea of Prussian rural life's economic and ideological backwardness, which, of course, says nothing about Prussian nobles' political attitudes. It is their actions which tell the story of a fully developed market economy and a 'multi-class' society, where each member pursues his or her own interest – hardly different from other European societies. In fact, one of the most impressive outcomes of this microhistory is the strong rights-oriented legal culture of the Brandenburg countryside, promoted both in patrimonial, local courts, as well as by royal and state institutions. Misery, poverty and violence all are kept within limits which make life endurable and for some – not all at the top of the heap - even comfortable. Hagen is therefore right to argue for a new definition of *Untertänigkeit*, one that is less emotive and pejorative than hitherto available to historians.

There are, however, a few difficulties for the reader of this magnum opus. Although the frequent subdivision of chapters by headings makes the reading of over 650 pages less daunting, a case for reducing the bounty of cited examples, sometimes even the repetition of cases in the light of different themes, can be made. Students will probably find the length and density of this book too frightening, which is a pity, for some passages should be made obligatory reading for all students of German history, to overcome the caricature of Prussian rural and Junker life which they are fed by the great majority of English-language textbooks.

A small, more formal criticism is the author's choice of speaking about the Prussian Junkers as 'gentry'. The English gentry's structure and role is so unique that it should not be borrowed for the analysis of another noble society in Europe, since it conjures up misleading comparisons. One British historian's works, which has led the way in revising the stereotypical idea both of 'absolutism' and of the 'militarization of Prussian-German society' in the eighteenth century, have unfortunately been ignored. Peter Wilson's article challenging Otto Büsch's thesis of 'social militarization' is conspicuous by its absence from the bibliography. (3) Finally, considering the wealth and length of the book, the three-and-a-half page index seems rather slight, although one can understand why farmers' or village names do not feature.

I do hope, however, that Hagen's own prediction that his book might have 'far-reaching implications for German history' is accurate. Until more studies of this sort correct the stereotypical view of early modern and nineteenth-century Prussia, we can just hope that other publishers and universities, against the pressure of 'market-driven' publishing programmes (i.e. yet more books about the Nazis), syllabi and efficiency measures will allow scholars to dedicate such thorough and enduring efforts to the history of society and 'ordinary men'.

Notes

1. Peter Blickle, *'Von der Leibeigenschaft zu den Menschenrechten'. Eine Geschichte der Freiheit in Deutschland* (Munich: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. An exception is Ralf Pröve and Bernd Kölling, eds, *Leben und Arbeiten auf märkischem Sand. Wege in die Gesellschaftsgeschichte Brandenburgs 1700-1914* (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 1999), as well as works by Heide Wunder and Jan Peters.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Peter H. Wilson, 'Social militarization in eighteenth-century Germany', *German History* 18:1 (2000), 1-39.[Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/351#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/1637>

[2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/>