

Cambridge University Press

0521815584 - Ordinary Prussians: Brandenburg Junkers and Villagers, 1500-1840

William W. Hagen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

Grand narratives, ordinary Prussians

The historical realm this book conjures up, though now mostly vanished from the western world, casts a long shadow. It was the agrarian regime of subordinate villages and powerful landlords, as old as Egypt. Into it, until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most Europeans and many North Americans were born, and only recently did it cease to be the prime site of life and death for the rest of humanity.

In this study it is also Prussia – in most minds, a vague and distant, troubling or even menacing concept. It is, more precisely, a Prussia that looms large in explanations of the unstable and violent course of modern German history: the Prussia of the landed nobility and their subject villagers, from the late middle ages to the nineteenth century. But from these pages an unexpected picture will emerge, both of villages and manors, state and society, soldiers and civilians. Some reigning views on German and central European history will fall out of focus, and a new passage will appear across the early modern European world to the twentieth century's much-debated modernity. This work is also an essay in historical envisioning amid present-day debates between philosophical pessimists and optimists, “constructivists” and “objectivists,” over the possibilities of historical knowledge. It aims also to illuminate in the mind's eye various groups of people invisible in histories of high culture and politics, or hidden behind conventionalized identities assigned them by modern social science. And, though this study's landscape is German, it communicates by many paths with the larger world.

Prussia was a north German state, embracing an array of provinces centered on Brandenburg, with Berlin as princely residence (map 1). From the fifteenth to the nineteenth century it expanded both to west and east, until it stretched from the Rhine river and the North Sea across the Baltic plains to Imperial Russia. Under the Hohenzollern dynasty, Brandenburg-Prussia emerged, plundered and ravaged from

Cambridge University Press

0521815584 - Ordinary Prussians: Brandenburg Junkers and Villagers, 1500-1840

William W. Hagen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Map 1 East-Elbian Germany in the eighteenth century

the great European conflagration of the Thirty Years War (1618–48), to become an archetypal “absolutist monarchy,” distinguished, admired, and feared for its large standing army. The landed nobility officered this force, while a mushrooming bureaucracy of mostly commoner origins collected royal taxes financing it. In the age of Frederick II, “the Great” (ruled 1740–86), Prussia laid claim not only to European major-power status, but to eighteenth-century Reason. Despite its imperfections, Frederick’s “enlightened absolutism” helped strengthen an emergent bourgeois civil society which, both in his day and in the nineteenth century, proved a hothouse of educational and cultural attainment and capitalist growth. These qualities, paired with military strength, supplied Chancellor Otto von Bismarck with the tools to hammer the numerous other German states, excepting defeated Austria, into the Prussian-dominated German Empire of 1871.¹

¹ The vast literature on pre-Napoleonic Prussia tends to offer a celebratory-nostalgic view (from conservative German pens) or a critical-condemnatory perspective (from left-liberal and Marxist authors, both German and Anglo-American). For bibliography and critique see William W. Hagen, “The Descent of the *Sonderweg*,” Hans Rosenberg’s History of Old-Regime Prussia,” *Central European History* (hereafter: *CEH*) 24 (1991): 24–50. A modern masterwork is Reinhart Koselleck, *Preussen zwischen Reform und Revolution: Allgemeines Landrecht, Verwaltung und*

Cambridge University Press

0521815584 - Ordinary Prussians: Brandenburg Junkers and Villagers, 1500-1840

William W. Hagen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

3

World War I destroyed this state, toppling the Hohenzollerns. Its successor was the democratic Weimar Republic of 1918–33, among whose many enemies were Prussian conservatives, especially those with ties to the prewar high bureaucracy, army officer corps, and large landowning class. Symbolized and even embodied in the second Weimar president and World War I field-marshal Paul von Hindenburg, Prussian conservatism was instrumental in crippling Weimar democracy and bringing Hitler and the National Socialists to power in 1933. Although Prussia had also been since the nineteenth century a stronghold of middle-class liberalism, working-class socialism and, later, communism, the Nazi avalanche crushed them.

soziale Bewegung von 1791 bis 1848 (Stuttgart, 1981). Cf. Jonathan Sperber, "State and Civil Society in Prussia: Thoughts on a New Edition of Reinhart Koselleck's *Preussen zwischen Reform und Revolution*." *Journal of Modern History* (hereafter: *JMH*) 57 (1985): 278–96. Valuable in English is C. B. A. Behrens, *Society, Government, and the Enlightenment. The Experiences of Eighteenth-Century France and Prussia* (New York, 1985). Cf. Reinhold Dorwart, *The Prussian Welfare State before 1740* (Cambridge, MA, 1971). Stimulating still is Henri Brunschwig, *Enlightenment and Romanticism in Eighteenth-Century Prussia* (Chicago, 1974 [French original, 1947]). The single-volume political-history classic in German is Otto Hintze's (not wholly uncritical) *Die Hohenzollern und ihr Werk* (Berlin, 1916), which should be supplemented by the strong recent scholarship displayed in Philip G. Dwyer, ed., *The Rise of Prussia: Rethinking Prussian History, 1700–1830* (London, 2001); the special issue on "Prussia from Rossbach to Jena," ed. H. M. Scott, *German History* (hereafter: *GH*) 12 (1994): 279–394, and Wolfgang Neugebauer, "Zur Staatsbildung Brandenburg-Preußens: Thesen zu einem historischen Typus," *Jahrbuch für brandenburgische Landesgeschichte* (hereafter: *JBL*) 49 (1998): 183–94. Valuable too is the five-volume catalog to the 1981 Berlin exhibition, *Preußen – Versuch einer Bilanz* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1981), especially vol. II: Manfred Schlencke, ed., *Preußen – Beiträge zu einer politischen Kultur* and vol. III: Peter Brandt, ed., *Preußen – Zur Sozialgeschichte eines Staates*. Useful is Wolfgang Menge and Emanuela Wilm, *So lebten sie alle Tage. Bericht aus dem alten Preußen* (Berlin, 1984). Measured is Rudolf von Thadden, *Prussia: The History of a Lost State* (Cambridge, 1987 [German original, 1981]). Vitriolic, and characteristic of widespread liberal opinion, is Hans-Ulrich Wehler, "Preußen ist wieder chic . . . Der Obrigkeitsstaat im Goldrähmchen," in H.-U. Wehler, *Preußen ist wieder chic . . . Politik und Polemik* (Frankfurt/Main, 1983), 11–18 and passim. Attractively presented is Hans Kathe, *Preußen zwischen Mars und Musen. Eine Kulturgeschichte von 1100 bis 1920* (Munich, 1993). Valuable perspectives from the German Democratic Republic are offered in Günter Vogler and Klaus Vetter, *Preußen: Von den Anfängen bis zur Reichsgründung*, third edn (Berlin, 1974) and Ingrid Mittenzwei and Erika Herzfeld, *Brandenburg-Preußen, 1648 bis 1789: Das Zeitalter des Absolutismus in Text und Bild* (Cologne, 1987). For a valuable study of the Prussia Reform Era (1807–19) and its aftermath, see Mathew Levinger, *Enlightened Nationalism. The Transformation of Prussian Political Culture, 1806–1848* (New York, 2000). Interesting popular treatments include Giles MacDonogh, *Prussia. The Perversion of an Idea* (London, 1994) and James C. Roy, *The Vanished Kingdom. Travels through the History of Prussia* (Boulder, Co., 1999). On Frederick II: Theodor Schieder, *Friedrich der Große. Ein Königtum der Widersprüche* (Berlin, 1983) and Ingrid Mittenzwei, *Friedrich II. von Preußen. Eine Biographie* (Berlin, 1983). On the Mark Brandenburg: Ingo Materna and Wolfgang Ribbe, eds., *Brandenburgische Geschichte* (Berlin, 1995). For the wider German context: Rudolf Vierhaus, *Deutschland im Zeitalter des Absolutismus, 1648–1763* (Göttingen, 1978); James Sheehan, *German History, 1770–1866* (Oxford, 1989); Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1800–1866. Bürgerwelt und starker Staat* (Munich, 1985); Lutz Niethammer et al., *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft in Deutschland* (Frankfurt/M., 1990); David Blackbourn, *The Long Nineteenth Century. A History of Germany, 1780–1918* (Oxford, 1997).

Cambridge University Press

0521815584 - Ordinary Prussians: Brandenburg Junkers and Villagers, 1500-1840

William W. Hagen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Many of Hitler's generals were Prussian aristocrats, and while some of them participated in the 1944 plot to assassinate him, at World War II's end the Prussian legacy, tied so intimately to German militarism, stood profoundly discredited. At the postwar 1945 Potsdam Conference, Truman, Churchill, and Stalin approved cession, mainly to war-terrorized Poland, of all the once-Prussian German lands to the east of the Oder–Neisse river line, but forty miles in Warsaw's direction beyond Berlin. The German population there largely fled before the Soviet army or was evacuated to German soil farther west. In 1947 the Allied Control Council in occupied Germany pronounced Prussia's death sentence in a decree abolishing it as a territorial concept and entity. Today there are few people still alive who would describe themselves as Prussians, unless they descend from the former far-distant Baltic province of East Prussia. The Hohenzollerns had once ruled most of the lands comprising the ill-fated German Democratic Republic (1949–90), but these regions, such as Brandenburg, have reverted to provincial identities that never ceased to be significant.

Such are the associations the concept of Prussia conjures up in most minds today, even in Germany itself. Inseparable from it are the qualities of loyalty, discipline, and order, which the state instilled in its inhabitants through the army, the state-dependent Protestant church, and schools. While, in the realm of stereotype and prejudice, Catholic Austria and south and west Germany sometimes evoke amiable disorder (*Schlamperei*), Prussia often summons the idea of unquestioning obedience, even “cadaver-obedience” (*Kadaver-Gehorsam*), a nineteenth-century epithet for Prussian army discipline. Above all, Prussia is linked to the idea of dominated subject, rather than self-determining citizen. The German word for subject is *Untertan*, and it looms large in these pages.²

² For a recent presentation of these images, see Lonnie R. Johnson, *Central Europe. Enemies, Neighbors, Friends* (New York, 1996), 111ff. Influential, though weakened by the premise that top-down disciplinization went unchallenged, is Otto Büsch, *Military System and Social Life in Old-Regime Prussia: The Beginning of the Social Militarization of Prusso-German Society, 1713–1807* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1997 [German original, 1962]). Extreme is Emilio Willems, *A Way of Life and Death. Three Centuries of Prussian-German Militarism. An Anthropological Approach* (Nashville, 1986). Peter Paret offers a realistic view of the pre-1806 Prussian army in *Törock and the Era of Prussian Reform, 1807–1815* (Princeton, 1966). A valuable synthesis is Dennis Showalter, “Hubertusberg to Auerstädt: The Prussian Army in Decline?,” *GH* 12 (1994): 308–33. For recent challenges to the social militarization thesis, see Peter Burschel, “Von Prügel und höherer Kultur. Über eine Quellensammlung zur Sozialgeschichte des preußischen Militärs,” *Forschungen zur brandenburgischen und preußischen Geschichte, Neue Folge* (hereafter: *FBPG-NF*) 3 (1993): 251–4; Ralf Pröve, “Zum Verhältnis von Militär und Gesellschaft im Spiegel gewaltsamer Rekrutierungen (1648–1789),” *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* (hereafter: *ZHF*) 22 (1995): 191–223. Useful, but also exaggerating the Prussian state's repressive apparatus, is Alf Lüdtke, *Police and State in Prussia, 1815–1850*

Cambridge University Press

0521815584 - Ordinary Prussians: Brandenburg Junkers and Villagers, 1500-1840

William W. Hagen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

5

There is no more widespread explanation of the modern German catastrophe than the argument that, between the French Revolution of 1789 and the National Socialist power-seizure in 1933, Germany failed to develop a democratic political culture based on morally autonomous citizens. Otherwise, the Weimar Republic's fall and widespread popular acquiescence in Nazi dictatorship and crimes would not have occurred. The prime impediment to democratization was the survival into the twentieth century of the Prussian monarchy and the conservative-authoritarian institutions it fostered and shielded. Though the 1848 Revolution bequeathed constitutional and parliamentary government to Prussia, and though the German Empire of 1871 rested on universal male suffrage, at the level of society and culture the Prussian lands remained, as this argument holds, a stronghold of the subject mentality. Its inhabitants deferred to those who "wore the king's coat" and harkened to the commands of "the state," a historical actor whose moral and civilizational role enlightened absolutism's defenders, and after them the philosopher Hegel, apostrophized.³

Many nineteenth-century German liberals, and not only Protestants, followed Hegel in placing trust in the progressive potential of the Prussian state, which one of them, the historian Friedrich Dahlmann, described in conservative pre-1848 years as "the magic spear which heals as well as wounds."⁴ Yet in the twentieth century this perspective grew unfamiliar. It is also usually thought that the industrial capitalism which came to flourish in Prussian Germany assumed harshly authoritarian forms, reinforcing the dominant political culture's anti-democratic tendencies. Bismarck's rebaptism of the Prussian monarchy in the ideological and psychological

(Cambridge, 1989 [German original, 1982]). Cf. Mary Lee Townsend, *Forbidden Laughter: Popular Humor and the Limits of Repression in Nineteenth-Century Prussia* (Ann Arbor, 1992).

³ The most forceful and authoritative formulations of this view flow from Hans-Ulrich Wehler's pen. See his *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich, 1871-1918* (Göttingen, 1973 [English translation, 1985]), *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, 3 vols. (Munich, 1987-95), and "A Guide to Future Research on the Kaiserreich?," *CEH* 29 (1996): 541-72, which marked another stage in a debate sparked by David Blackbourn's and Geoff Eley's neo-Marxist critique of Wehler's work in *The Peculiarities of German History. Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984). See Eley's reply, "Problems with Culture: German History after the Linguistic Turn," *CEH* 31 (1998): 197-227. Wehler drew inspiration from Max Weber, who expressed biting liberal criticism of the Prussian conservative elites in his essays, well known to social scientists, "Capitalism and Rural Society in Germany" (1906) and "National Character and the Junkers" (1917), in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford, 1946), 363-95. On intellectuals and the state, see Leonard Krieger, *The German Idea of Freedom* (Chicago, 1957) and Bernhard Giesen, *Die Intellektuellen und die Nation. Eine deutsche Achsenzeit* (Frankfurt/M., 1993).

⁴ Quoted by T. C. W. Blanning in "The Commercialization and Sacralization of European Culture in the Nineteenth Century," in T. C. W. Blanning ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Europe* (Oxford, 1996), 143.

Cambridge University Press

0521815584 - Ordinary Prussians: Brandenburg Junkers and Villagers, 1500-1840

William W. Hagen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

waters of nineteenth-century German nationalism, with its frustrated yearning for state unity and national prestige, yielded explosive effects, especially once ruthless war for European and world hegemony broke out in 1914. The spread in the war's aftermath of a vengeful right-wing extremism opened the path to mass murder and genocide whose execution depended on ordinary Germans' readiness to follow orders.

This is the basic story of the German *Sonderweg* or "separate path" to the misshapen and destructive modernity of National Socialism, rather than the comparatively benign modernity of the western liberal-democratic welfare state. The same argument holds that, among Prussianism's pillars, none was mightier than the nobility. This numerous class, whose scions – including Bismarck himself – figured so prominently in the government and army, was economically anchored in possession and self-management of large landed estates, occupying much of the agricultural land in Prussia's heartlands east of the Elbe river.⁵

The Prussian nobility emerged from German medieval eastward expansion. Because many of their founding members were west German noble families' sons, they came to be known, as they settled in the east, as "Junkers" (*Junker*), a contraction of the term "young lord" (*junger Herr*). Eventually, especially in the nineteenth century, the term Junker acquired strongly polemical and pejorative meaning, which it retains today, though the word has lost any contemporary referent. It evokes coercive and even brutal masters of landed estates and dependent villagers who, when clothed in the uniform of army officer, county administrator, police president, or high official, translated the habits of landlordly or seigniorial domination into the state's realm. Junker authority perpetuated and spread the mentality of the subject or *Untertan* – a term originally describing feudal vassals, including villagers subordinated to noblemen – throughout Prussian-dominated Germany, which by 1871 encompassed most of the German Empire.⁶

⁵ The *Sonderweg* argument is still pervasive at the textbook level (and in popular thinking). See Rob Burns, ed., *German Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (Oxford, 1995). It is usefully problematized as an interpretive approach in Mary Fulbrook, ed., *German History since 1800* (London, 1997); in Blackbourn's above-cited *Long Nineteenth Century*; and in Hermann Beck, *The Origins of the Authoritarian Welfare State in Prussia. Conservatives, Bureaucracy, and the Social Question, 1815–70* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1995); and persuasively challenged in Margaret Lavinia Anderson, *Practising Democracy: Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany* (Princeton, NJ, 2000).

⁶ On liberal and Marxist critiques of the Junkers, see Hagen, "Descent of the *Sonderweg*" and William W. Hagen, "Village Life in East-Elbian Germany and Poland, 1400–1800: Subjection, Self-Defense, Survival," in Tom Scott, ed., *The Peasantries of Europe from the Fourteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1998), 145–90. In the English-language literature, this perspective is familiar by way of Max Weber's above-cited essays, which helped shape Barrington Moore's influential argument in *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Lord and Peasant in the Making of*

Cambridge University Press

0521815584 - Ordinary Prussians: Brandenburg Junkers and Villagers, 1500-1840

William W. Hagen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

7

Thus the most deep-rooted and influential interpretation of modern German history leads directly to the Junkers' doorstep. Historians have shown how, in the aftermath of the French Revolution of 1789, but especially after 1871, the Prussian nobility and their intellectual partisans raised their voices against democratization in Prussia. They occupied strongholds at court, and in army and state administration, and dominated powerful conservative political parties and pressure groups. The Junkers' weighty influence on economic policy, from seigneurialism's abolition in the early nineteenth century to tariff protection after 1879 and ruthless special-interest lobbying in the Weimar Republic, is a well-told story.⁷

Yet, except for old-fashioned genealogical and literary works often bathed in sentimental or apologetic light (which falls too on the great novelist Theodor Fontane's pages), the modern historical literature on the Prussian nobility as estateowners and seigneurial village overlords is sparse, though in the hands of present-day historians in Germany it is experiencing efflorescence. The classic English-language political histories, written in the liberal spirit in World War II's aftermath and dealing sternly with the Junkers, have little to say about them as country gentry. The shelves remain empty of archivally based English-language studies, though important historiographical and synthetic works have recently appeared.⁸

Apart from stressing the Prussian nobility's political power, the historical literature assumes that a prime avenue of "Junker domination" (*Junkerherrschaft*) ran from manor-house to village, and thence via internal migration to burgeoning nineteenth- and twentieth-century towns. Thus the Prussian subject mentality radiated widely through modern Germany. Yet if studies of the Junkers in their rural setting are scant,

the Modern World (Boston, 1966). Still influential syntheses underpinning the *Sonderweg* argument are Francis L. Carsten, *The Origins of Prussia* (Oxford, 1954) and Hans Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy. The Prussian Experience, 1660-1815* (Boston, 1958). Cf. F. L. Carsten, *History of the Prussian Junkers* (Brookfield, VT, 1989 [German original: 1988]) and Walter Görlietz, *Die Junker: Adel und Bauer im deutschen Osten* (Glücksburg, 1957).

⁷ See Wehler's above-cited works; Hanna Schissler, *Preußische Agrargesellschaft im Wandel. Wirtschaftliche, gesellschaftliche und politische Transformationsprozesse von 1763 bis 1847* (Göttingen, 1978); Hans-Jürgen Puhle and Hans-Ulrich Wehler, eds., *Preußen im Rückblick* (Göttingen, 1980); Robert M. Berdahl, *The Politics of the Prussian Nobility. The Development of a Conservative Ideology 1770-1848* (Princeton, NJ, 1988). For an alternative perspective, and additional bibliography: William W. Hagen, "The German Peasantry in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century: Market Integration, Populist Politics, Votes for Hitler," *Peasant Studies* 14 (1987): 274-91.

⁸ Edgar Melton, "Gutsherrschaft in East Elbian Germany and Livonia, 1500-1800: A Critique of the Model," *CEH* 21 (1988): 315-49; "The Decline of Prussian *Gutsherrschaft* and the Rise of the Junker as Rural Patron, 1750-1806," *GH* 12 (1994): 286-307.

Cambridge University Press

0521815584 - Ordinary Prussians: Brandenburg Junkers and Villagers, 1500-1840

William W. Hagen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

works on the rural common people living in east-Elbian Prussian villages are rarer still, though older local histories retain value and scholars in the German Democratic Republic carried out important research. More recently, the east-Elbian nobility's and villagers' life on the land, and their complex and conflictual relationship, have been themes of a Max Planck Society research center established, following German reunification in 1990, at the University of Potsdam – the Prussian Versailles. Its members have written and continue to produce innovative monographs. I have benefited from working with them, and the pages below are in part conceived as a contribution to a common project. The Max Planck Institute of History in Göttingen has also generated research on west and south German agrarian society of major significance which, together with important related studies in English, informs the present work.⁹

⁹ The Max-Planck-Gesellschaft Arbeitsgruppe in Potsdam, directed by Professor Jan Peters, bore the name “Ostelbische Gutsherrschaft als sozialhistorisches Phänomen” (“East-Elbian Manorial Lordship as Social-Historical Phenomenon”). Its work, and that of colleagues engaged in similar projects elsewhere in central and eastern Europe, appears in the following important, large-scale collective volumes: Jan Peters, ed., *Konflikt und Kontrolle in Gutsherrschaftsgesellschaften. Über Resistenz und Herrschaftsverhalten in ländlichen Sozialgebilden der frühen Neuzeit*, Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte (hereafter: *VMPiG*), vol. cxx (Göttingen, 1995); Jan Peters, ed., *Gutsherrschaft als soziales Modell*, published as *Beiheft 18* of the *Historische Zeitschrift* (hereafter: *HZ*) (Munich, 1995); Jan Peters, ed., *Gutsherrschaftsgesellschaften im europäischen Vergleich* (Berlin, 1997); Axel Lubinski, Thomas Rudert, and Martina Schattkowsky, eds., *Historie und Eigen-Sinn. Festschrift für Jan Peters zum 65. Geburtstag* (Weimar, 1997). Among Peters' own works, especially relevant to the present study are “Eigensinn und Widerstand im Alltag. Abwehrverhalten ostelbischer Bauern unter Refeudalisierungsdruk,” *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (hereafter: *JfWG*) (1991/2): 85–103 and his contribution to *Märkische Bauerntagebücher des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts. Selbstzeugnisse von Milchviehbauern zu Neuholdland* (Weimar, 1989), co-authored with Lieselott Enders and Hartmut Harnisch; see also his essays in the above-cited edited volumes, and articles cited below. Among Enders' works, see especially *Die Uckermark. Geschichte einer kurmärkischen Landschaft vom 12. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert* (Weimar, 1992). Harnisch's important works are cited below. A valuable study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiography on east-Elbian agrarian society is Heinrich Kaak, *Die Gutsherrschaft. Theoriegeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Agrarwesen im ostelbischen Raum* (Berlin, 1991). Written with the support of the Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte in Göttingen were the following important microhistorical studies of the south and northwest German regions: David Warren Sabean, *Power in the Blood. Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, 1984); David Warren Sabean, *Property, Production, and Family in Neckarhausen, 1700–1870* (Cambridge, 1990); David Warren Sabean, *Kinship in Neckarhausen, 1700–1870* (Cambridge, 1998); Jürgen Schlumbohm, *Lebensläufe, Familien, Höfe. Die Bauern und Heuerleute des Osnabrückischen Kirchspiels Behm in proto-industrieller Zeit, 1650–1860*, *VMPiG*, vol. cx (Göttingen, 1994); Hans Medick, *Wäben und Überleben in Laichingen 1650–1900. Lokalgeschichte als Allgemeine Geschichte*, *VMPiG*, vol. cxxvi (Göttingen, 1997). Similarly important and innovative are the microhistorical works of Silke Göttsch, “*Alle für einen Mann . . .*” *Leibeigene und Widerständigkeit in Schleswig-Holstein im 18. Jahrhundert* (Neumünster, 1991); Rainer Beck's study of Bavaria, *Untertänning. Ländliche Welt vor Anbruch der Moderne* (Munich, 1993); and historical anthropologist Palle Christiansen's *A Manorial World. Lord, Peasants and Cultural Distinctions on a Danish Estate 1750–1980* (Copenhagen, 1996). On other relevant German literature, including from the German Democratic Republic, see discussion and citations in Hagen, “Descent

Cambridge University Press

0521815584 - Ordinary Prussians: Brandenburg Junkers and Villagers, 1500-1840

William W. Hagen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

9

In the older literature, east-Elbian villagers appear as their noble lordships' victims, coerced into silent submission and demoralization. Like the Junkers, they bestride the German historical stage as one-dimensional figures, even caricatures. In Hans Rosenberg's righteous words, they suffered at their landlords' hands "legal and social degradation, political emasculation, moral crippling, and destruction of [their] chances of self-determination." The absolutist Prussian rulers "confirmed and enlarged" the Junkers' "customary fiscal, economic, and social privileges and [their] *de facto* freedom to tyrannize the tillers of the soil and the rural craftsmen . . . In consequence, the basic social institution of agrarian Prussia, peasant serfdom, increased in severity until the latter part of the eighteenth century." "Abject poverty" and "helpless apathy" were the common people's fate. In F. L. Carsten's widely accepted formulation, the founder of Prussian absolutism used "the Junkers' class interests to win them over to an alliance with the crown . . . The peasant-serfs were too down-trodden to revolt, and anyhow they were more oppressed by their [Junker] masters than by the government."¹⁰

But just as other social classes, along with ethnic and religious groups, are ceasing to figure in modern thinking as homogeneous bodies possessing one or another set of essential(ized) characteristics, so is time past due for a nuanced depiction in the English-language literature of the east-Elbian countryside's inhabitants that does not strip them of their capacity to act in their own interests and self-defense. Here the Potsdam school's work on east Elbia, and the historical literature in both German and English on west and south German rural society, offer inspiration.¹¹ Especially vital, in view of the central role

of the *Sonderweg*," "Village Life in East-Elbian Germany and Poland, 1400–1800," and "Capitalism and the Countryside in Early Modern Europe: Interpretations, Models, Debates," *Agricultural History* 62 (1988), 13–47. Other recent English-language works on south and west Germany are cited below.

¹⁰ Hans Rosenberg, "Die Ausprägung der Junkerherrschaft in Brandenburg-Preussen, 1410–1618", in Hans Rosenberg, *Machteliten und Wirtschaftskonjunkturen. Studien zur neueren deutschen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1978), 82; Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy*, 45, 48; Carsten, *Origins of Prussia*, 275, 277.

¹¹ See Werner Trobbach's valuable synthesis (with extensive bibliography): *Bauern 1648–1806*, *Enzyklopädie deutscher Geschichte*, vol. xix (Munich, 1993). The above-cited *Peasantries of Europe*, ed. Tom Scott, offers the best recent account of European village society in its many national and regional forms. Among English-language monographs, apart from David Sabeau's above-cited works, see: Hermann Rebel, *Peasant Classes. The Bureaucratization of Property and Family Relations under Early Habsburg Absolutism, 1511–1636* (Princeton, NJ, 1983); Thomas Robisheaux, *Rural Society and the Search for Order in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, 1989); Peter K. Taylor, *Indentured to Liberty. Peasant Life and the Hessian Military State, 1688–1815* (Ithaca, NY, 1994); John Theibault, *German Villages in Crisis: Rural Life in Hesse-Kassel and the Thirty Years' War, 1580–1720* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1995); and David Luebke, *His Majesty's Rebels. Communities, Factions and*

Cambridge University Press

0521815584 - Ordinary Prussians: Brandenburg Junkers and Villagers, 1500-1840

William W. Hagen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

assigned the subject mentality in modern German history, is the study of east-Elbian villagers, for it was this large population that originally embodied, in historians' view, Prussian authoritarianism's defects. They most thickly populate the following pages, though much in evidence too are their noble lordships and the many other social groups, privileged and unprivileged, who inhabited the Prussian countryside. Fundamental is the question of subordination and insubordination toward seigneurial authority in the villagers' lives. This aligns the book with the strongest post-1945 trend in worldwide studies of village society, emphasizing resistance and rebellion against higher powers.¹²

Rural Revolt in the Black Forest, 1725–1745 (Ithaca, NY, 1997). See also the chapters on early modern Austria and south and western Germany by Rebel and Robisheaux, respectively, in Scott, *Peasantries of Europe*, 191–226, 111–44. For comparisons of Brandenburg-Prussian rural society with its counterparts to west and east, see William W. Hagen, “Der bäuerliche Lebensstandard unter brandenburgischer Gutsherrschaft im 18. Jahrhundert. Die Dörfer der Herrschaft Stavenow in vergleichender Sicht,” in Peters, *Gutsherrschaft als soziales Modell*, 178–96; Hagen, “Village Life in East-Elbian Germany and Poland, 1400–1800.” Cf. Joseph Gagliardo, *From Pariah to Patriot. The Changing Image of the German Peasant 1770–1840* (Lexington, KY, 1969).

¹² Widely influential is James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT, 1985). Cf. Forrest D. Colburn, ed., *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (London, 1989); Andreas Suter, “Informations- und Kommunikationsweisen aufständischer Untertanen,” in Peters, *Gutsherrschaftsgesellschaften*, 55–68. From the large general European literature, see Yves-Marie Bercé, *Revolt and Revolution in Early Modern Europe: An Essay on the History of Political Violence* (Manchester, 1987 [French original, 1980]). German historians, faced with interpreting the German Peasants' War of 1525 (probably the largest rural uprising in European history before the 1789 French Revolution) and many other early modern rural conflicts, have authored an important literature. See, apart from relevant above-cited works, Peter Blickle, *Deutsche Untertanen: Ein Widerspruch* (Munich, 1981); *The Revolution of 1525: The German Peasants' War from a New Perspective* (Baltimore, 1981 [German original, 1975]); and Peter Blickle, ed., *Aufbruch und Empörung. Studien zum bäuerlichen Widerstand im Alten Reich* (Munich, 1980). Cf. also the chapters relevant to Germany in Winfried Schulze, ed., *Bäuerlicher Widerstand und feudale Herrschaft in der frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart, 1980) and *Europäische Bauernrevolten der frühen Neuzeit* (Frankfurt, 1982). From the German Democratic Republic see, *inter alia*, Hartmut Harnisch, “Klassenkämpfe der Bauern in der Mark Brandenburg zwischen frühbürgerlicher Revolution und Dreissigjährigem Krieg,” *Jahrbuch für Regionalgeschichte* (hereafter: *Jb/RG*) 5 (1975), 142–72. Cf. William W. Hagen, “The Junkers' Faithless Servants: Peasant Insubordination and the Breakdown of Serfdom in Brandenburg-Prussia, 1763–1811,” in Richard Evans and W. R. Lee, eds., *The German Peasantry. Conflict and Community in Rural Society from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (London, 1986), 71–101.

For further contributions to the ongoing German debate, see Robert von Friedeburg, “‘Kommunalismus’ und ‘Republikanismus’ in der frühen Neuzeit? Überlegungen zur politischen Mobilisierung sozial differenzierter ländlicher Gemeinden unter agrar- und sozialhistorischem Blickwinkel,” *ZHF* 21 (1994): 65–91; Peter Blickle, “Begriffsverfremdung. Über den Umgang mit dem wissenschaftlichen Ordnungsbegriff Kommunalismus,” *ZHF* 22 (1995): 246–53; Robert von Friedeburg, “‘Reiche’, ‘geringe Leute’ und ‘Beamte’: Landesherrschaft, dörfliche ‘Factionen’ und gemeindliche Partizipation, 1648–1806,” *ZHF* 23 (1996): 219–65; Andreas Suter, “Regionale politische Kulturen von Protest und Widerstand im Spätmittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit. Die schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft als Beispiel,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (hereafter: *GG*) 21 (1995): 161–94; Andreas Würzler, “Das Modernisierungspotential von Unruhen im 18. Jahrhundert. Ein Beitrag zur Entstehung der politischen Öffentlichkeit in Deutschland und in der Schweiz,” in *ibid.*, 195–217; Luebke, *Rebels*.