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

William W. Hagen

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ORDINARY PRUSSIANS

This book gives voice, in unprecedented depth and immediacy, to ordinary villagers and landlords (Junkers) in the Prussian–German countryside, from the late middle ages to the nineteenth century. In their own words, preserved in the rich archives of the Brandenburg lordship of Stavenow, the trials and fortunes of everyday life come into view—in the family, the workplace, in many humble men’s and women’s private lives, in courtroom and jail-house, and under the gaze of the rising Prussian monarchy’s officials and army officers. What emerges is a many-dimensional, long-term study of a rural society, inviting comparisons on a world-historical level.

Amid current debates between skeptics and optimists, the book puts to a new test the possibilities of empirical historical knowledge at the microhistorical or ‘grass-roots’ level. But it also reconceptualizes, on the scale of Prussian–German and European history, the rise of agrarian capitalism, questioning views widespread in the economic history literature on the common people’s living standards. It presents massive new documentation on women’s condition, rights, and social roles. It challenges deep-rooted views on the triangular relationship between state, landed nobility, and village farmers in the history of Prussia, on which current understandings of authoritarianism in modern German history still depend.

WILLIAM W. HAGEN is Professor of History, University of California, Davis. His previous publications include *Germans, Poles, and Jews: The Nationality Conflict in the Prussian East, 1772–1914* (Chicago, 1980).

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This book is the harvest of long seasons of work, both in German archives and at home. The research in Germany was an education in many things besides puzzling out a myriad of provincial handwritings and centuries-old mentalities. Its funding flowed from the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung, which supported two stays in Berlin, lasting sixteen months altogether. Also essential to my work in Germany were short-term grants from the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst and annual faculty research grants from the University of California, Davis. In this country, I gained a year's leave to work on this project in the agreeable atmosphere of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, supported by grants from the Institute's School of Historical Studies, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the University of California.

Vital to my thinking about this work was cooperation with the research group on east-Elbian agrarian societies at the University of Potsdam, about which this book's introduction has more to say. The group's funding by the Max Planck-Gesellschaft benefited me through participation in its path-breaking conferences and resulting book projects, and through a grant supporting a four-month residency in 1994. Similarly important was my 1992–8 tenure as director of the Center for History, Society, and Culture at the University of California, Davis. This interdisciplinary program of research and graduate instruction in the historical social sciences was the crucible of the thinking about historical scholarship and method informing these pages. It helped me grasp more firmly, through reflection on other modes of approaching time-bound human experience, the great and irreplaceable strengths of the discipline of history, not as its past practitioners conceived them, but as they appear in contemporary light.

Among the many people whose professional services supported this project, I am indebted to the archivists and photocopyists of the

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Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, in former West Berlin, who upheld the highest standards of friendly efficiency and expertise. Christopher L. Brest expertly drew the map of the Stavenow lordship in its regional setting. Other maps and illustrations display the skills of UC Davis specialists. For invitations to present talks on this project (whether skeptically or assentingly received) I thank, in Germany, the Historische Kommission zu Berlin, the Freie Universität Berlin, Bielefeld University, and the Max Planck-Gesellschaft work group at Potsdam University; in Britain, the universities of East Anglia, Manchester, and London; and, in the United States, Cornell and New York University and the universities of Chicago, Michigan at Ann Arbor, and Oregon. Among those colleagues and friends who assisted my stays in Germany, discussed this project, and hosted me at their universities, I would like to remember here historians John Boyer, Thomas Brady, Otto Büsch, Geoff Eley, Lieselott Enders, Rolf Engelsing, Richard J. Evans, Hartmut Harnisch, Hartmut Kaelble, Edgar Melton, David Sabean, and Hans-Ulrich Wehler. For their friendly reception I thank Professor Peter Paret at the Institute for Advanced Study and all the participants in the Potsdam group, especially its director, Professor Jan Peters, and his associates Heinrich Kaak and Axel Lubinski. I am mindful of many others who have taken an interest in this work. My thanks also to Dr. Hamish Scott for encouraging me to submit this work to him and his colleagues for review for publication by Cambridge University Press, and to History Editor William Davies for steering it forward.

This book is, in part, a product of the post-1945 era of German division. The Stavenow lordship lay in a region that, before 1990, formed part of the German Democratic Republic. A stay there in the 1980s with hospitable Blüthen village pastor Karl Gross and his wife Gerlinde enabled me to hand-photograph the parish register, as well as Pastor Gross's laborious statistical analysis of it, and acquaint myself with the spirits of the locality, including those hovering around the lordship's ruins. On that trip I also met others who took an interest in Stavenow, among them schoolteacher Franz Giese, who wrote an unpublished history of Premslin village, of which, unfortunately, I never managed to obtain a readable copy. This and later post-1990 visits to Brandenburg's Prignitz district, along with numerous other travels in the east German countryside, have left me with a strong visual impression of the rural world which the pages below conjure up, and with a sense for the worthy people who embody its traditions now and for their predecessors, of

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whom I write in these pages. I would like to think they will recognize something of themselves in this book. After 1990 I worked briefly in the Brandenburgisches Landesarchiv in Postdam, and made copies of valuable unpublished photographs in the Perleberg Museum. From these and other sources more could be added to the present work, but the Geheimes Staatsarchiv's 728 Stavenow document files formed a mountain of evidence that required all available time and energy to scale and explore.

Though grateful for all help tendered in this enterprise, I bear responsibility for these pages' arguments and analysis. The friends and relatives who witnessed my labors distinguished themselves by their benevolence. Ulla, who lived it all, deserves a crown.

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CURRENCIES

1. The Reichstaler (Rt.) = 24 groschen (1 groschen = 12 pfennigs): early modern German silver-based money of account.
2. The Rhenish gulden (fl.) = 18 groschen: another early modern German money of account. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Brandenburg gulden = 18 groschen at 12 pfennigs = 24 Lübeck schillings.
3. The Brandenburg “current taler” (Courant Taler): real coinage minted from one “Imperial Mark” Of silver (234 grams) according to these proportions: pre-1667: 9 talers per Mark; 1667–90: 10.5 talers; 1690–1750: 12 talers; 1750–1821 and beyond: 14 talers. To 1738 the Imperial German Reichstaler numbered 10.5 talers to the silver Mark and after 1764 12 talers. From this money of account the coinages of the various German states more or less diverged, as the just-cited silver equivalencies of the Brandenburg taler show. The Brandenburg currency was temporarily devalued during the Seven Years War (8 talers Saxon = 3.5 current talers = 100:44). In 1821 Prussia revised its coinage, retaining the Brandenburg taler in the silver value established in 1750 and reconfirmed in 1764 (whereby 14 talers were struck from a 234-gram Mark of silver). But now the taler counted 30 “silver groschen” (*Silbergroschen*) rather than the previous 24.

AREAL MEASURES

1. The Brandenburg (*kurmärkischer*) *Morgen* (400 square German rods [*Ruten*] = 0.57 hectares = 1.4 Anglo-American acres): the standard areal measure until displaced in the late eighteenth century by the Magdeburg *Morgen* (180 square rods or 0.26 hectares = 0.62 acres). One hectare = 2.5 acres.

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2. The Brandenburg hide of land (*Hufe*) = 30 “large” (Brandenburg) *Morgen* = 17 hectares = 42.5 acres.
3. One German mile = 5 English miles.
4. The *Gebind* (*Verbind*) – space, approximately 7 feet, between upright timbers by which buildings were measured.

HOLLOW AND LIQUID MEASURES, AND WEIGHTS

1. The Brandenburg bushel (*Scheffel*) approximated 1.5 modern Anglo-American bushels and varied in weight by grain type and in volume (slightly) by region. Modern equivalents of eighteenth-century weights of the Berlin bushel of grain (similar or identical to that in use at Stavenow) were: rye: 40–5 kilograms (88–99 lbs); barley: 33–8 kg (73–84 lbs); oats: 24–6 kg (53–7 lbs). The bushel in use at Berlin markets retained virtually constant size in the years 1682–1868. After the metric system’s 1868 adoption, the previously prevailing Berlin bushel yielded to the “new bushel” with a hollow volume of 50 liters or 0.5 hectoliters; the earlier bushel held 55 liters.
2. Wagonloads, measured in *Fuder*: normatively, 1 *Fuder* = ca. 20 Prussian hundredweights (*Zentner*); 1 *Zentner* = 110 German lbs (*Pfund*) = 51.5 kilograms (113 lbs). The wider “manorial wagonload” carried a load (*Knechtsfuder*) twice as heavy as that borne by the narrower “villagers’ wagonload” (*Bauernfuder*).
3. The stone weight (*Stein*), measuring especially wool: the heavy stone weighed 22 German or English pounds, the light stone half as much.
4. 1 quart = 0.87 liter; 1 liter = 1.06 US liquid quarts; 1 barrel (*Tonne*) = 100 quarts = 87 liters = 92 US quarts or 23 gallons; *Oxschaft* (High German: *Oxhaupt/Oxhof*) = oxhead = (anno 1808) 180 quarts.