

# Lifestyle and Expenditures of a Public Servant's Family in Berlin (1889)

## Abstract

---

In Imperial German society, higher public servants enjoyed considerable (and probably increasing) esteem. But frequently their incomes did not keep pace with what was required to maintain a standard of living commensurate with their social status. This report focuses on the bourgeois virtues of thrift and industriousness, both of which were regarded as essential in securing the prosperity and prestige of a Berlin official's family.

## Source

---

The second household under consideration is that of a public servant—one from the old school, I should add. Anyone who knows representatives of this circle will also be familiar with the stellar qualities to be found in this house: an untiring capacity for work, an iron sense of duty, and a devotion to the state's ideas, even when complete agreement with the predominant political views of the ruling powers of the day is impossible. Even if, alongside these good qualities, some unpleasant idiosyncrasies might arise, such as a certain stiffness in conduct, and occasionally even a bureaucratic arrogance, this is not the rule and only seldom diminishes the value of those merits that are undeniable. [...]

Less obvious at first glance is the domestic efficiency that distinguishes the majority of public servants to this very day. Although their salaries have risen, this growth has not kept pace with the average increase in the standard of living among other occupational groups, which were able to reconcile the greater needs with higher incomes. A public servant with a university education belongs to the upper ranks of the middle classes and is thus obliged to maintain a proper outward appearance. Therefore, today, he really needs considerable moral strength to meet all of the demands on him, and he and his wife must have a great talent for economizing, so that their situation does not end up in hopeless disarray.

The head of the house, whose economic life I wish to describe in the following passage, possesses, together with his hard-working wife, all of the attributes that guarantee a well-ordered household. Life is utterly domestic; luxury has no part in it. Their flat is quite far away from his office, because only in the outskirts of the suburbs can one find somewhat larger apartments at a barely affordable price anymore; a comfortable horse-drawn trolley line facilitates transport. The flat is on the fourth floor and consists of two bedrooms, a combined living and dining room, a "parlor," and a small room for the head of the household, where his wife also spends time during his absence. The furnishing, purchased some twenty years ago, is tasteful and simple—perfect cleanliness constitutes the greatest adornment. The wife commands the art of upkeep, which is a great virtue. Apart from the parents, the family is made up of two boys aged 12 and 13 years and a 19-year-old daughter. The latter has completed her teaching diploma and has been trained as a flower painter on the side. The girl, though not an artist in the strictest sense, has talent and taste. She paints beautiful tendrils on folding fans, baskets, vessels made of glass and porcelain, thus earning about 300-400 marks for about four hours' work a day. That is also the reason why nothing has been entered for her in the budget below. With the money she earned, she covered the cost of clothing and shoes; in 1889, she deposited 90 marks into a savings bank; and she also pays for her colors and other supplies, etc. She also takes great pleasure, however, in delighting her parents and siblings with little gifts and inviting her girlfriends several times a year to a "ladies' afternoon coffee party" with cake and mousse gâteau.

The family's amusements are as simple as one can imagine. Yet they are flavored with the cheerfulness of the housewife, a buoyant native of the Rhineland, who has passed down a good deal of her blithe nature to her children. On nice days, the family takes walks; in the summertime, they make three to four outings to the surrounding area; sometimes they go to the Zoologische Garten<sup>[1]</sup>, the concert hall, or, very seldom, to a theater. In the evenings, reading out loud is a frequent after-dinner pursuit. Socializing with familiar, closely acquainted families does not impose any great expense, and there is only one party thrown per year—it is one of the well-known “feedings,” the highlight of which is the moment when the last guest is led down the stairs by the maid-of-all-work.

With rare exception, the family clothing is always made at home; only coats and jackets are bought off the rack. The hardest trick is keeping the boys' garments in order. If possible, the father's jacket and trousers are handed down to the eldest son as a matter of course, and sometimes even from him to the youngest one. [...]

A paid summer vacation is out of the question. A lady related to the head of the household owns a little urban estate in Silesia, however; and this is where the father and daughter, or mother and sons stay for a few weeks each year. On holidays, this elderly lady also sends small amounts of money to members of the family, with whom she is very taken, or she enriches the pantry with an agreeable bounty of fruit, poultry, or sausages.

The pub hardly plays a role in the gentleman's life. Only once a week does he meet with an association of peers that pursues more serious goals than the quenching of thirst. In order to economize, he has almost completely given up smoking. These facts suggest why the amount he has fixed for himself is so low, and why, still, less than half of it is used in some months.

The following is an excerpt from the annual budget (1889):

--	Marks
Income including interest from 9,000 marks	5,450
--	
Expenses:	
Apartment (incl. rent)	1,225
Heating	140
Lighting	45
Food (170 marks per month)	2040
Laundry	45
Maid-of-all-work (10 marks a month, is always hired in the countryside)	120
Servants' health insurance	6
Clothing and shoes:	--
-for the lady of the house	85.50
-for the head of the house	17
-for the boys	95
School fees	240
School books, exercise books, nibs, etc.	24.75
Pocket money:	
-50 pennies a month for each boy	12

---

-10 marks a month for the lady of the house	120
-15 marks a month for the head of the house	180
--	--
Taxes as well as widow's insurance	254
New purchase of dishes, etc.	28.75
For improvement of damaged household utensils, broken locks, etc.	16.20
Sewing supplies, etc.	31.85
Christmas and birthdays	152.50
Associations	40
Newspapers	26
Postage	9.15
Physician and pharmacy (incl. 6 bottles of wine containing quinine and iron)	76.30
Some legal works	27
Charity expenses (associations, collections)	46
Savings deposits, 5 marks quarterly for each child since birth	60
Reserve of 5 marks deposited every month	60
Horse-drawn trolley	82.50
Amusement (once to Potsdam, once to Erkner, twice to the zoo, sums for boys for school outings, one visit to the theater)	62
Annual party	82.50
Total in marks	5,450

There are quite a few incomes in a similar bracket (between 5,000–6,000 marks) that are not absolutely secure and also subject to fluctuation. That applies to the so-called free professions and to many of those in commerce and industry. On account of income fluctuations, it is much more difficult to fix budget amounts. Many of these families, however, are in a more favorable position because their social rank allows them a much more modest social manner. The amount for apartments is lower and education also requires fewer funds. An artisan or small merchant, middleman, etc., earning 6,000 marks has a much better chance of amassing capital than a member of the upper classes ever does—even those who practice the utmost thriftiness. He is then able to expand the field of his enterprises and increase profits, provided he takes skillful stock of the circumstances.

All of that falls by the wayside with respect to most intellectual occupations. Public servants, teachers, preachers, writers, and artists who are not extraordinarily fortunate may very well reach higher incomes gradually, but they almost always consume that income. The result is that in these circles, as a rule, an accumulation of considerable wealth is out of the question; such inheritance as they do leave their loved ones can usually only consist of a good education.

## NOTES

[1] Berlin's zoo—trans.

Source: Otto von Leixner, *1888 bis 1891. Soziale Briefe aus Berlin. Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der sozialdemokratischen Strömungen*. Berlin, 1891, pp. 172–80; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and

---

Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, pp. 344–48.

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: Lifestyle and Expenditures of a Public Servant's Family in Berlin (1889), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-555>> [May 19, 2024].