

Prussian Junkers as Farmers and Huntsmen (1870s–1880s)

Abstract

In this passage from his autobiography *Von Rechts nach Links* [*From Right to Left*] (1937), the democratic and pacifist author Hellmuth von Gerlach (1866–1935) exposes the outmoded and authoritarian operation of large estates by unqualified Prussian Junkers, whose priorities focused on hunting, riding, and aristocratic representation instead of agricultural production. The son of a conservative Junker, Gerlach provides an insider's view of traditional rural society.

Source

The concern about hunting prompted great resistance against “inner colonization.”^[1] Everyone wanted to preserve his large estate in order to avoid having the hunting grounds reduced, even though the marginal lands could only be worked at a financial loss. One cannot begin to understand the conservative owners of large estates without realizing that hunting takes the foremost place in their lives. Life in the middle of nowhere was quite monotonous in the 1870s and 1880s, when there were neither cars nor radios and telephones. The only thing that helped was hunting. The lords devoted plenty of time to it, often more than to farming. In spring the hunting year started with the mating flight of the snipe and the mating season of the blackcock. After that followed the stag hunt. On July 1 the duck hunt opened; on August 15 the partridge hunt. Rabbits and pheasants followed. Starting on November 1, there was a continuous series of battues until mid-January. And once the dead season began in the middle of February, the hunters at least went ferreting for rabbits or shot birds of prey at night.

The hunt took precedence over everything else. If a farming community dared to refuse the big landowner his hunt, which he had usually received for a ridiculously low price—10 pennies per acre as a rule—he deemed it his sacred right to bully them with all means at his disposal.

Quite often, the lord of the manor even allowed his own agricultural operation to suffer in the interest of hunting. Not only did the surplus of game cause severe damage; even tilling and harvesting were unduly affected by concern for the requirements of the hunt.

In terms of their farming efficiency, the conservative lords of the manor were mainly well below average. For the most part, they had not studied agrarian science, either in theory or practice. First they became military officers, and when the old lord [the father] felt it was time to “step aside,” the young cavalry captain took over the paternal estate. He was used to claiming the considerable prerogatives of a Junker lifestyle and he was good at giving commands. He would not bring much more expertise to agriculture than that. Of course after a few years the entire scheme misfired. Now it was time to burn the candle at both ends. The debts would mount. Bankruptcy was imminent. The SOS call went out: “Please, dear patriarchal state, help!”

All Conservatives were thoroughly convinced that the state was obliged to provide the tariffs and special remittances [in the grain trade] that allowed even incompetent landowners on barren soil to survive. Their slogan was, “As much as possible from the state, as little as possible to the state!”

NOTES

^[1] An initiative pushed intermittently and without much success by both government officials and

nationalist groups in the Prussian east from the 1880s onward. This program foresaw the partial breakup of large Junker estates to allow the settlement of peasant farmers in German borderlands. The alleged aim was to counter the “threat” of Polish nationalism—ed.

Source: Hellmuth von Gerlach, *Von Rechts nach Links*, edited by E. Ludwig. Zürich, 1937, pp. 35ff.; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, pp. 189–90.

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