

The Rural Landlord and “His” People (c. 1883)

Abstract

In his *Memoirs* (1936), Elard von Oldenburg-Januschau (1855–1937) draws upon his own experiences (c. 1883) to argue that the selection of obedient, resident farm laborers was essential for the successful operation of a large estate. This ultraconservative east-Elbian Junker, who was influential in the nationalist and antisemitic Agrarian League, brought the same proclivities seen in this excerpt to his political career as a Reichstag deputy. In a speech to the Reichstag on January 29, 1910, Oldenburg caused a furor when he voiced these autocratic sentiments with uncommon forthrightness: “The King of Prussia and the German Kaiser,” Oldenburg declared to the astonished House, “must be able at any moment to say to a lieutenant: Take ten men and shut the Reichstag.”

Source

The sorrows and distress of a farmer do not simply involve economic factors. They also depend in large measure on the question of workers. When I took over [the family estate of] Januschau in 1883, I had only non-resident workers. On all estates that have lacked a lord for several years, the question of workers will cause the most grievous distress to the eventual successor. This is what happened to me.

When I began running the estate, most of my workers spoke Polish. They were continuously switching from one estate to another. They easily became recalcitrant and were only too eager to leave the countryside for the city at the beginning of Chancellor Caprivi’s term in office [1890–1894]. This process of drastic demographic change, of migration to the cities, was fostered to a considerable degree by the mechanization of agriculture.

Certainly, there were benefits when agriculture acquired machinery that would, in short order and with minimal expenditure of effort, carry out tasks which, when done by hand, could have only been accomplished with greater effort and over a longer period of time. The speed of mechanization, however, reached such an extent that the individual farming operation was left helpless. The rapid advance of mechanization facilitated migration away from the countryside and into the cities. This resulted in something that had still been avoided in Bismarck’s time: the German worker was replaced by the Poles or Galicians pushing in [from the East].

The Agrarian League attempted time and again to make clear to the government how great the dangers of this development were for the economy, for popular customs and traditions, and for state security. We did not have much success in this.

On my estates, I managed to create a resident workforce. At the outset, I had to confront many a disobedient and unruly fellow; I had to enforce order and obedience with an iron fist. In the course of time, this strategy deterred the poor workers and attracted the good ones. To achieve this end, justice was my means.

As an officer, I had learned what justice amounts to; what can be expected from an individual treated fairly; and how fairness binds people of different stations even in times of distress. The farmhands’ quarters at Januschau were built according to my instructions. Very few of the farm-worker families I employed moved away; thus, today I have a pool of farmhands that I have known personally for decades, having watched most of them grow up in Januschau.

I have always believed that the secret to solving the question of workers in the countryside is maintaining fairness as a superior, and serving as a benevolent confidant in all situations. I inherited this secret from my father, who would tell me whenever he happened upon the subject of employees: “One day, when you run the operation yourself, remember one thing: in a pinch you might pretend not to be home when the Provincial Governor calls, but never do so to your people.”

So I introduced the rule that I would be available to my people at all times and concerning any matter. To be sure, I was not lenient; rather, I insisted that, on the estate, obedience was the highest principle. In this way, in the course of decades, a relationship based on trust developed between me and my people on all of my estates, the manifestations of which may seem rather odd to some Germans who do not come from the East.

But whoever knows the land and its people in the East, and whoever has learned to love both as I have, knows that behind the roughness of manners lies nothing but sincerity. Many a marital dispute was presented to me by my people, and I was able to mediate many of these quarrels, even though I did not make use of measures stipulated in the Civil Code; instead, I applied criteria that corresponded to the people’s very own horizon and sentiments.

Being an agricultural worker has always been one of the most secure forms of livelihood. According to longstanding tradition—which dates back much further than the recent establishment of those countless insurance schemes—the farmhand in the German East is provided for during old age. He or she is not chased from the farm but continues to live on the estate and receives a pension. The sons of the agricultural worker do not have to bother looking for work. They simply take the place of their father. In other words, they start out where their father left off.

Source: Elard von Oldenburg-Januschau, *Erinnerungen*. Leipzig, 1936, pp. 43ff. Available online at: <http://www.ub.uni-koeln.de/cdm/ref/collection/dirksen/id/281893>; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, pp. 188–89.

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