

Newspaper Report on the Plight of the Emsland Region (May 5, 1929)

Abstract

Even before the onset of the economic crisis, devastating poverty had taken hold in some regions of Germany that had fallen behind the rest of the country in terms of economic development and infrastructure. Most of these economically underdeveloped areas were in the eastern part of the country, but they also included the Emsland in northwestern Germany, a moor and heath area that belonged to the province of Hanover and was dominated by agriculture. A peculiarity of this region was the so-called *Heuerlingswesen*, which had existed since the seventeenth century and was essentially a form of serfdom. Agricultural laborers who did not own land, called “*Heuerlinge*,” rented a house and a piece of land from a farmer and in return had to work on his farm. This system continued in the Emsland until 1960. This article on living conditions in the Emsland appeared in the conservative *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* in May 1929. It was written by Franz Kunzendorf (1883-1968), an editor and author of satirical poems, who, in the spring of 1929, had taken part in a fact-finding tour of the Emsland organized by the District President of Osnabrück to draw attention to the abominable living conditions there. In November 1919, an “Association of Christian *Heuerleute*” had been founded in the Catholic-dominated region, an interest group that tried to improve the working and living conditions of the landless inhabitants of the Emsland. In cooperation with the Social Democrats, the association ultimately succeeded in getting a law passed that protected tenants from arbitrary short-term terminations. However, as this report shows, the association was unable to achieve any significant improvements in living conditions, which had given rise to shockingly high numbers of tuberculosis infections. Kunzendorf’s comment that the conditions in the Emsland resembled those in “the dilapidated Polish villages” east of the German border reflects the widespread anti-Polish sentiment of the time, which was significantly exacerbated after Germany had to cede a large part of its eastern territory to Poland after the First World War. Not until 1951, however, did the Emsland get the help that it needed, when West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer’s administration implemented its “Emsland Plan.”

Source

Emslandnot!

From our special correspondent

Osnabrück, in May

Unfortunately, it is only too well known that complaints about neglect and increasingly untenable conditions are being sent to the government headquarters in Berlin from Germany’s distressed areas. The actual existence of these conditions is just as well known. Every German is familiar, if not from personal experience, then from hearsay and reading, with the hardship in the eastern border regions, as well as the poverty in the Waldenburg region and in the Erzgebirge. Yet the general public, particularly in the eastern half of the country and especially in Berlin, had hardly heard of the plight of the Emsland. This is why people were surprised and somewhat incredulous when, a few days ago, the Reichstag emphatically demanded aid from public funds for the culturally neglected Emsland.

Even the geographical location and geological structure of the Emsland are likely to have been quite unclear to a large part of the German population. It therefore seems appropriate to say a few explanatory

words about it: The Emsland, which belongs to the province of Hanover, comprises five districts with a total area of around 392,999 hectares and a population of 171,000. It is bordered to the north by East Frisia, to the east by the Free State of Oldenburg, to the south by three Westphalian districts and to the west by the Dutch province of Groningen. Its population consists mainly of small farmers, whose main asset used to be a well-developed livestock breeding business, and the so-called *Heuerleute* [hired hands], local farm workers who have a certain patriarchal relationship with their employer, the farmer, a relationship based on an almost cashless reciprocal service. A large part of the Emsland, namely 75,000 hectares, is still covered with moor and heath today.

The purpose of a two-day survey tour, which took place at the instigation of the Osnabrück Chamber of Industry and Commerce and was attended by a number of representatives of the major German press, including President Noske, Osnabrück District President Dr. Sonnenschein and the district administrators of the five Emsland districts, was to show the public the soil conditions of this uncultivated land and the housing conditions in the dwellings of the small rural owners and the *Heuerleute*. This sightseeing tour led from Osnabrück through the districts of Hümmling, Aschendorf, Meppen, Lingen and Bentheim. It also took us into neighboring Holland and, in an alarming way, dispelled the view that had emerged here and there that the explanations previously given to the press in words and photographs might have been at least in part exaggerated. In fact, very few of the participants on this trip would have imagined conditions in this far north-western corner of the country similar to those found on the other side of our eastern border in dilapidated Polish villages. The living conditions of the peasants and hired hands often defy even the most primitive hygienic requirements and can, without exaggeration, only be described as not fit for human habitation. Some of the people live in houses that threaten to collapse over their heads, with roofs covered with heather that have caved in in many places, allowing wind and rain to enter unhindered. According to reports from the local police authorities, around 3,500 families in the Emsland are inadequately housed. "Inadequate" is a very mild term for these miserable huts, whose most striking feature are the so-called "Butzen," low built-in sleeping cupboards with no access to air or light, ideal breeding grounds for tuberculosis, which is widespread in the Emsland. In one of the farmhouses visited, the parents, two sons aged 19 and 15 and six daughters from age 21 down to a three-month-old infant, were sleeping in two such narrow cupboards. In the district of Aschendorf there are still 747 houses with 1599 such sleeping cupboards, and in the district of Bentheim there are still over 800. The local authorities are making serious efforts to eliminate these sources of infection. For the removal of these sleeping cupboards and their replacement with bedsteads, payments of 100 marks are offered by the district, the municipalities and the state insurance office. The justification for this emergency measure is evident in the number of fatal cases of tuberculosis: in the district of Meppen alone, there were 15 tuberculosis deaths per 10,000 inhabitants in 1925, while the average number in Prussia was 10.93 per 10,000 inhabitants. It is perhaps understandable that a population that has grown up under such conditions is apathetic and indifferent to improvements in their living conditions and would hardly do anything of its own accord to replace these undignified conditions with better ones. But the leading and responsible authorities, above all the energetic President of the Osnabrück Government, are quite rightly of the opinion that, for reasons of hygiene and culture, benefits and improvements simply must be imposed on this population, which has lagged considerably behind the neighboring areas in physical and mental terms.

What applies to the housing conditions in the Emsland also applies to the population's diet, to the inadequate agricultural development of these seemingly endless expanses of land, to road construction and water management, as well as to transport conditions in general: rock bottom conditions everywhere, the like of which can hardly be found elsewhere in Germany.

The diet of the rural population is extremely poor, with potatoes and porridge being the daily fare for large sections of the population. The sides of bacon hanging from the rotten ceiling beams in their living rooms cannot hide this fact; they represent a family's dietary requirements for the whole year. The

standard of living, especially among the small farmers and hired hands, is far below the average of the rest of the German population. The soil, insofar as it does not have to be reclaimed from the moor, consists mainly of very sandy or loamy grassland, the cultivation value of which has been worsened by the monoculture of growing rye, which has been repeated for centuries, and can be slowly remedied by applying considerable work and money, especially for artificial fertilization. The water management conditions in the Emsland are no less unfavorable. Not only the river Ems, but also the other smaller watercourses are for the most part still in an unregulated state. Because the existing drainage ditches are unable to absorb and drain the large quantities of water in this rainy region, major flooding frequently occurs in spring and fall, often resulting in the complete loss of the green fodder harvest.

Regarding the traffic conditions: The location of the Emsland region between other administrative districts, some of which are part of foreign states, resulted in major deficiencies in terms of transport policy. Due to the unfavorable soil conditions, the municipalities are underperforming and unable to spend large sums on the construction of roads, which is why 112 municipalities in the Emsland are still without paved roads today and can only reach the nearest country road on sand and moorland paths, which become completely impassable in rainy weather, as the participants in the tour were able to see for themselves. It has happened that bodies of the deceased had to remain in their homes for weeks because road conditions made it impossible to transport them to a cemetery. The situation is particularly bad in this respect in the district of Hümmling, which has neither a railroad station nor even one kilometer of provincial road. In the district of Meppen, 46 percent of all communities are still without any connection to a paved road. In addition to all these problems, there are the unfavorable climatic conditions, although the overall climate is mild. Yet even in the warmest summer months, the moor and sandy soils favor the occurrence of night frosts, so that hardly a month of the year remains completely frost-free.

When you set foot across the Dutch border, the neglect of the German Emsland is revealed in an almost shameful way. Certainly, the higher population density on the Dutch side may have contributed to the fact that the reclamation of the land, the construction of canals and paved roads began earlier there, on either side of which pretty settlements were built, testifying to the prosperity of their inhabitants. The Bourtangter Moor, which stretches from the Emsland far into Dutch territory, has been completely cultivated on the other side of the German border, while on the German side it is a melancholy, gloomy wasteland from which human enterprise has wrested arable land only here and there. One does not need to get upset about the fact that only recently an anti-German Dutch newspaper coined the nasty phrase that culture stops on the other side of the Dutch border. It is also pointless to ask who is to blame for the desolate conditions in the moorlands of the Emsland. Generations and changing territorial governments are partly responsible for the fact that this naturally poor land has not been economically developed as it could have been. Therefore it is pointless to look back to the past, but it is urgently necessary to get a picture of the present conditions in the Emsland and then to realize that things will have to change there in the near future. Without going into the saddest details, we have described here in broad strokes how things look in the Emsland. What must be done to help this German region and its inhabitants in their time of need will be described in another article.

Franz Kunzendorf

Source of original German text: *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, morning edition, May 5, 1929, p. 5.

Available online at:

<https://www.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/newspaper/item/50OVT0505FLDXONRJWUSUMZQFG5MVQTU?issuepage=5>

Translation: GHI staff

Recommended Citation: Newspaper Report on the Plight of the Emsland Region (May 5, 1929), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-5403>> [March 16, 2026].