

Rural Exodus in Germany (May 6, 1930)

Abstract

This article about rural flight in Germany appeared in May 1930 in the Catholic-leaning regional newspaper *Sauerländisches Volksblatt*, which served a rural, hilly region east of Cologne. In it, the unnamed author describes the migration of the rural population from the areas in eastern Germany in particular. The “rural exodus” in these regions, mainly the eastern provinces of Prussia, had already begun in the nineteenth century. It was largely due to industrialization, which started late in these areas, causing many workers to migrate to cities and industrial centers where wages were higher on average. The landowners east of the Elbe made up for the resulting labor shortage by requesting the recruitment of Polish labor migrants, who, however, were subject to strict immigration regulations and were not allowed to settle permanently. After the First World War, the Treaty of Versailles re-established the Polish state, to which former German territories were ceded, in particular the majority of the provinces of West Prussia and Posen. The author uses this article to primarily blame the new border demarcation for the rural exodus due to its negative impact on the eastern German economy. The widespread racist anti-Slavism of the time is clearly evident when the author urgently warns of a “Polonization” of the eastern German border areas due to Poland’s birth surplus.

Source

Rural Exodus in Germany

Depopulation of the East – Polish invasion – Collapse of agriculture – Increase in uncultivated land – Dying population

Since shortly before the war, we have observed a phenomenon that was previously unknown in Germany on such a scale: the rural exodus, a population shift between town and country, a regeneration of the urban population by the rural population. Today, the rural population forms the human reservoir of the cities, which cannot cover their own human needs. In any progressive country, this process is perfectly explainable and healthy. However, it is only healthy as long as the rural population is able to provide people without any loss of population. Today, however, the situation is such that we must speak of a rapid decline in the rural population, a rural exodus in the truest sense of the word.

What are the effects of this rural exodus and what are its causes? The danger of rural flight is twofold. It is of an economic and national political nature. Eastern Germany in particular is suffering from this danger. The East, by far the most sparsely populated, is economically extremely weakened by the consequences of the border demarcation and is also suffering from the national political pressure of the Polish invasion and the large Polish population surplus. Today, the rural exodus has reached such an extent that it is leading to a slow but uninterrupted bleeding of the German East. It is made even more difficult by the fact that the best, most resilient and most vital part of the population is thus removed from the country, leaving behind the old and the young.

German agriculture lost over one and a half million of its best workers due to rural flight. East Prussia lost 35,000 people a year: around 112,000 people emigrated from East Prussia between 1910 and 1925, while the smallest of the Prussian provinces, the border region of Posen-West Prussia, lost around 11,000 people in the same period. Around 8,000 people emigrated from West Pomerania in one year.

These figures show the extraordinary seriousness of the situation. At the same time, this migration of

peoples continues uninterrupted to an alarming extent even today. In East Pomerania, there are districts that lose over 1000 people in one year due to rural flight.

The rural exodus occurred in all agricultural districts of Germany. However, it predominates by far in the eastern provinces. Proof of this is provided by data from the journal *Wirtschaft und Statistik* [Economy and Statistics]. According to its data, and as far as can be determined from the most recent census, between 1910 and 1925, population decrease due to rural flight in the provinces was as follows

Saxony 31,891

Holstein 53,705

Hanover 16,227

Westphalia 14,026

Reg. district of Kassel 17,053

Freist. Saxony 92,138

Freist. Oldenburg 10,413

Freist. Bavaria 91,091

These figures show that emigration from the western provinces is considerably lower than from eastern and central Germany. While even the industrial provinces of Upper and Lower Silesia had a combined emigration of 71,764, the Rhine Province gained 40,296. This is a particularly clear indication of the move to the west. Berlin naturally accounted for the lion's share of immigration with around 34,000,000 people.

Why is the rural exodus so extraordinarily dangerous, especially for the East? The rural exodus means that farmers are no longer able to cultivate their land properly to the full extent. In the border region of Posen-West Prussia, for example, around 300,000 acres have not been properly cultivated due to a lack of agricultural workers. An enormous loss for the national economy! In East Pomerania, there is a considerable increase in uncultivated land. Numerous farmers introduce fallow farming and switch from intensive farming to extensive farming.

In addition to this economic failure, which affects the entire national economy, there is also the great national political danger. The East is the most sparsely populated region. While in Prussia we find an average of around 131 inhabitants per square kilometer, this figure is only 43 per square kilometer for the border region, 61 for East Prussia and 62 for Pomerania. This population composition is constantly being reduced by rural flight. In addition to this, there is a decrease in the birth surplus.

The Poles are moving into the gaps created by the rural exodus in the East and are filling these gaps two and three times over with their human material. Thus, the rural exodus and the economic decline of the German East are giving rise to the far-reaching danger that the East German border regions will become more and more Polonized. Today there already is a considerable Polish minority in border districts that were purely German until a few years ago.

The Polish population continues to grow. The great danger for the future is the Polish surplus population on the other side of the border, which is exerting ever-increasing pressure on the German borderlands that are becoming increasingly depopulated. Thus we have a blatant imbalance: increase in Polishness – decrease in Germanness. With the Polish population surplus, this pressure can eventually become unbearable.

In Germany, the birth surplus has fallen by over 40 percent since 1913. In 1927, the birth surplus in Germany was only 6.4 per 1000 inhabitants, whereas the western Polish regions neighboring Germany had a birth surplus of 18.3 according to the 1925 census! The Polish regions are significantly more densely populated than the East German borderlands. In addition, Poland artificially increased this population pressure by all possible means, thus securing its border areas and promoting the urge to expand.

The rural exodus also harbors great foreign policy dangers. If the rural exodus is not stopped, not only will the corridor be lost forever, but Germany will also have to retreat to the Oder line in the not too distant future. The Polish side is already demanding that the League of Nations take charge of the situation in eastern Germany, as a population density of 30 per square kilometer, as it exists in the flat countryside, was unworthy of a cultured European state. They demand that these territories be transferred to Poland so that economic life could resume there.

Wherein lie the deepest causes of rural flight? On the one hand, in the undeniable cultural poverty of the flat countryside, but on the other hand, and first and foremost, in the unprofitability of agriculture, which is also the cause for the often inadequate agricultural labor conditions. Although the unprofitability of agriculture is partly due to the general agricultural crisis, in East Germany it is primarily a result of the border demarcation, which has torn apart all the contiguous economic areas. It has not yet been possible to create new connections. Profitability in agriculture can only be restored by raising prices. This requires the creation of new transport routes, the restoration of the competitiveness of the East German economy and the protection of domestic production. It is misleading to assume that raising the price of agricultural products to a level that would guarantee profitability would result in an unbearable increase in the cost of living. According to the calculations of Professor Falke (Leipzig), an indisputable authority in this field, raising prices to restore the profitability of agriculture would only result in a 7% increase in the cost of living. This seems acceptable to us when set against the political and economic dangers of depopulating the East. According to Professor Falke, the birth rate of our people is already 9 percent below the minimum number required to maintain the population, so that from about 1955 onwards the population would shrink from year to year. Since the war, Germany has experienced the sharpest decline in the birth rate of all European nations. If this is not halted, we will become a dying nation. Restoring profitability is one way of averting the rural exodus; settlement is another. There is enough land available in the East for settlement without having to break up efficient large estates. The settlement system would be able to counteract the consequences of rural flight, particularly in terms of national policy, and provide a protective barrier against the Polish invasion.

The rural exodus is a question concerning Germany's fate, it is a German problem. Its impact is particularly severe in times of crisis. Therefore, even in times of crisis, measures must be taken to combat the rural exodus.

Source of original German text: *Sauerländisches Volksblatt*, May 6, 1930, p. 2.

<https://www.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/newspaper/item/PABPT5U6DWXIQB5FJT7ANB6XVCD6LH6S?issuepage=2>

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