German History in Documents and Images

Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890
Urbanization of Village Life near Lübeck after 1870

This account documents the rapid architectural and socioeconomic changes that took place in a small village near Lübeck in northern Germany during the period of German industrialization. It describes the spread of factory labor, the expansion of urban infrastructure and mass housing, and even a reversal in the direction of the produce trade, which had started to flow from urban distribution centers into villages that had become more like suburbs. In this excerpt, the sense of spiritual and cultural loss in the midst of these transformations is balanced by the author's realistic acknowledgment of the profit motive and its power to accelerate change even in allegedly parochial settings.

Soon after the Franco-Prussian War and the political unification of the German states, a change set in. At first, the change was barely noticeable, because the substance of what had grown slowly over centuries was robust. In the first decade after the war, things did not look much different in the city and the village. But then the new tendencies caught on all the more rapidly and thoroughly. Each year brought further changes, and soon nobody could escape the new circumstances of life. Even in the village one felt the desire to build, something that was characteristic of those years. At first several large factories were built a little further upstream. Initially, they just sat there rather curiously, with their tall brick smokestacks in the middle of cow pastures. It was not long, though, before houses in the style of the factory were built right next to them [the smokestacks], and the green of the meadows disappeared underneath huge piles of coal, rubble, and garbage. Together with the factories came people to the village who had never been seen there before, except in their Sunday best as day-trippers. They were droves of workers – the kind who differ from rural and skilled tradesmen at first sight, because they had no training except for in a few mechanical tasks, because they felt no occupational spirit, because they belonged to that class which was subsequently called proletarians. Since the journey to the city was a long one, the need soon arose to create dwellings for these workers in the village itself. And because there was nothing suitable there, the first meager apartment houses were put up. Tall, bare, multi-floor buildings stood isolated in the middle of fields. Poor families lived there side by side in squalor, without any comfort; an unkempt, quickly dilapidating backyard adjoined directly. The space between the houses was teeming with children. But they were the children of a new population. The poverty of these people was different from the poverty of the

village farm worker; their dirt was different, everything was uglier and, in its ugliness, cheekier. The industrial workers seemed to be degenerate, even when they were doing well; if they were really poor, it seemed as though foul-smelling poverty was their natural element. The men were not brought up in the tradition of any particular occupation, the women were not housewives and mothers, and the children were little vagabonds who stole fruit from the gardens and trampled on the grain in the fields. Ash and refuse were scattered everywhere; in the middle of the germinating rye lay rusty tin cans, old enamel dishes, broken pots, and kitchen waste.

The multi-floor apartment buildings required special facilities for lighting, water, and the sewer system, because the concentration of so many people necessitates a degree of concern for public health. Therefore, these new houses were equipped with water and gas pipes. The entire village was dug up in order to gain access to the main pipes located further downstream. As soon as the pipes were laid, however, gas streetlights were tackled next. And then people soon became convinced that running water in the house was much more convenient than a pump in the courtyard, and that gas was more elegant than kerosene. The old villagers seized the opportunity and spoke about the progress of the age. They began thinking about whether they could not make better use of their property, which had increased considerably in value, and whether they should tear down their single-story town house and replace it with a tenement containing many apartments in multiple stories. The spirit of speculation was awakened. New roads had to be constructed to access these workers' tenements. Obviously they could only be built on the meadows and fields belonging to the farmers, just as the factories had already been erected on old pastures. Therefore, the land had to be bought from the farmers. And they understood the dawning era; they knew their math well enough to drive up prices. Since they also had influence in the community, they supported a policy promoting the settlement of new urban populations; wherever they saw any gain for themselves, they did everything in their power to convert their rural property into building land for houses and roads. Their really big harvest came in when they did not even have to grow grain anymore, namely, when the government drew up and then enacted the plan to build a central hospital in the vicinity of the village, an extensive complex of buildings and barracks, roads, housing for civil servants, gardens, and parks. The government actually bought numerous meadows and fields from the farmers for this purpose. The farmers had been relatively well-to-do before this point; now they became rich and did not really find anything appropriate to do with their riches. First they lost their occupation. Soon their stables only accommodated a few coach horses; the cattle were sold, because there were no pastures left; the granary remained empty, because there was nothing left to harvest. The farms lay idle and dead, all but a few farmhands had been dismissed, and the farm servants had been forced to look for work elsewhere, with the municipality or in the factories. The farmers themselves walked about their extensive estates, without knowing what to do with their time. But just as indolence gives birth to capriciousness, it

now occurred to the newly affluent farmers that they could and should act like fine gentlemen. They began feeling embarrassed about their peasant nature. It started out with them constructing residential buildings made of stone right beside their big thatched farmhouses. This was not a rural dwelling anymore but a villa, designed according to the latest architectural fashion by an urban architect who had just graduated from the polytechnic. Occasionally, this new house was put exactly where the living quarters in the old farm building had stood. The hall would remain, together with the barns, but the thatched roof was continued as a slate roof; beneath that all the comforts of modern living were spread out as much as possible. Of course, the separate villa was most popular of all, featuring palace windows, a flight of stairs, a loggia, columns, ornaments, a slate roof, and a tower. Around it the landscaper laid out an ornamental garden with winding gravel paths, tulip beds, and plenty of shrubbery. The fashionable green area displaced the old vegetable garden. If, after that, any piece of gardening space was left, it was parceled out and sold as building plots for new tenements. As a result of all this activity, tarred fireproof gables rose up steeply beside the villa of the suddenly prosperous farmer, and the old roofs thatched with straw appeared rather out of place. [. . .]

It did not take many years until the character of the village had changed profoundly. As the city began transferring larger and larger crowds of workers to the village, the little farming town turned into a suburb that increasingly coalesced with the city. In the past, the village had fed the city by supplying vegetables, milk, meat, and grain; now, conversely, the city had to support the village. Now the vegetable carts no longer drove from the countryside to the city; instead the greengrocers of the village obtained their produce from the city's markets. A horse-drawn trolley line was constructed; but ten years later it did not suffice anymore; so electric lines were put up, and the trolley cars were soon criss-crossing several lines at shorter intervals. They went past an uninterrupted row of houses, past shops and businesses with bright billboards, and small villas, for the number of those who were able to afford their own home increased every year. Where, in the past, the village inn stood at the location of the old toll barrier, several dance halls had opened their doors. On Sundays young workers gathered there, making a racket as they crossed the street from one dance hall to another. Soon the river did not look like a river any longer. People said and wrote that it had to be straightened. The banks were straightened and reinforced with solid stonewalls, which created the impression of passing through a canal. The old towpath was made into a posh residential street, and all the meadows were turned into building plots, because riverfront properties were much sought after. The docks were extended and laid out, allegedly because in the future a huge amount of traffic would have to be managed. The spit of land that had separated the river at the bridge and enriched the landscape was removed, making way for a boring harbor basin. All the more curious were a couple of barns with thatched roofs, which remained as if forgotten by time. However, there were no storks nesting on the roof ridge any longer: the commotion was too much. Everything assumed

an artificial urban character. The old peasant costume disappeared entirely. And, hand in hand with the attire, the language was urbanized as well. The northerly Low German was soon regarded as inferior, and it gave way to badly spoken High German. Everyone wanted to appear more educated than he actually was. [. . .]

Source: Karl Scheffler, *Der junge Tobias*. *Eine Jugend und ihre Umwelt* [*The Young Tobias: An Adolescence and its Environs*] (1927), new and expanded ed. Wiesbaden, 1946, pp. 29-33, 41-42.

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