



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890
Causes and Effects of Emigration from Germany (1870s-1880s)

Between Bismarck's appointment as minister president of Prussia in 1862 and his departure from office in 1890, almost 3 million Germans left their country in search of a better life abroad. Many of them went to the United States. These emigrants included land-hungry peasants and workers from rural backgrounds, as well as artisans and shopkeepers hoping to make a new start. Between 1874 and 1879 emigration decreased somewhat, but after 1880 economic fluctuations fuelled the next and largest wave of emigration, which only began to subside in the mid-1890s.

This report by a British Royal Commission analyzes the causes and effects of German emigration. It highlights low wages, a lack of employment opportunities, and the decline of older industries as economic reasons for emigration, but political considerations – e.g., the attitude of the German government towards the Social Democratic movement – also played an important role. The attractiveness of the U.S. was enhanced when Germans contemplating emigration received upbeat letters or money transfers (remittances) from friends and relatives who were already there. Enticing advertisements by steamship companies only added to the allure. Like later advocates of German colonization, however, the authors of this report recognize that emigration also drained Germany of productive forces and potential military recruits.

Some indications have already been given of the causes which are at work in this vast migratory movement of the German population. The difficulty of distinguishing between the various factors, social, political, and economic, which combine to produce such a result, can scarcely be overestimated; but the immense preponderance of natives of the agricultural districts amongst the emigrants point to the defective conditions of agriculture as the main source of the discontent with home surroundings, which must always precede any migration of population. Putting for a moment this important factor on one side, due weight must be allowed to the social and political causes which combine to produce the result. Amongst these may be enumerated the attitude of the German government prior to 1890 towards the great body of German Socialists, and the discontent felt, at any rate in time of peace, with the German military system. The desire for a fuller life, and for the advantages offered by the towns, have drawn a vast number of the best and most intelligent of the laboring classes from the east of Germany to the west. "It is not so much the desire to obtain more money," says the last report of the East Prussian Association (*Ostpreusslicher* [sic] *Centralverein*), "which impels, at any rate, the unmarried people to emigrate. [. . .] It is much more the wish for an independent life, and for pleasures and amusements which here, in the east, we cannot offer to the country folk." But, as

Dr. Max Sering says, the cause lies even deeper, and must be sought in “the ideals of freedom and human dignity,” which have produced “a striving after a higher social status,” even independently of material advantage or of intellectual gain. The growth of education, and the enlightenment which the term of military service brings to the agricultural laborer, have helped to foster these social aspirations, and it is rare to find the children, even in Mecklenburg, where the conditions of labor are specially favorable, content to follow the calling of their fathers. This attraction attaching to the conditions of town life is exercised even more strongly by those of the United States, and it is fostered by the ceaseless efforts of rival steamship companies and their agents to present those attractions in glowing terms, and to minimize the cost and difficulties of transport. Further, the letters and remittances of friends and relations, who have already emigrated, produce a very great effect upon those remaining at home; and perhaps this has contributed as much as anything else to the increased migration. Nevertheless, as has been well pointed out by Herr Lindig, neither the efforts of unscrupulous agents, nor the representations of friends and relations, would have sufficed to induce such an immense number of persons to forsake their homes, if the economic condition of the German laborer had been satisfactory. Low wages, lack of employment, the decay of the lesser industries, and the too rapid influx of would-be factory-workers into the towns, combine to produce a state of things compared with which the United States appear to have everything to offer. As Professor von Philippovich has said, the tide of emigration can only be stemmed in states which seek “to make home home-like to the wanderers by raising their economic and social conditions.” On the other hand, the economic and political conditions of the countries to which the emigrants go may in the future be expected to exercise a still greater influence; and it is not improbable that the attitude now adopted by the United States toward immigration, combined with the increasing difficulty of obtaining land, may have a deterrent effect upon German emigration. For, in the main, this emigration is an agricultural emigration, and all writers on the subject are agreed that the dearest wish of the agricultural laborer in Germany is to become a landowner, on however small a scale. It is this desire, uniting as it does the economic, social, and political factors already distinguished, which is mainly responsible for the migration of population in Germany. Statistics have shown that there are two main districts from which the emigrants go – the south-west and the north-east. In the one case, the population has outgrown both the land supply and the supply of supplementary employment; in the other, the conditions of labor on the great estates render it more and more difficult for the laborer to emancipate himself from his state of servitude. [. . .] Even apart from the difficulty of securing a small plot of ground in a country of great estates, the agricultural laborer cannot, under existing conditions, acquire the purchase money even by years of saving; so that, as Dr. Lindig has said,

the agricultural question is first and foremost a question of wages. [. . .] The small receipts, and the impossibility of saving anything which can help him to rise in the social scale, causes the laborer to seek conditions which afford a better prospect. These he finds in factory labor at home, or in emigration to America, where wages are high and the price of land proportionately small; there he may hope to attain the goal of his ambition and to become independent, whereas here it is hard, indeed, even for the most skilled and most diligent, to save enough for the purchase money of a piece of land.

At the same time, it must be pointed out to those who regard small holdings as the universal and unfailing remedy, that of late a large number of small German proprietors have found themselves forced, by the continued depression of prices, to give up their holdings, and to emigrate. This is due largely to the poverty of the land which the great landowners had given for settlement, but it is a fact worthy of notice by the advocates of rural colonization.

To ascertain the exact economic effect of the migration of labor is, if possible, still more difficult than to determine its causes. On the one hand, the mother country gains by the settlement of lands which afford fresh markets for her products, and by the employment even over the seas of her surplus population. On the other hand, emigration beyond certain reasonable limits involves a drain upon the productive and military force of the country, and the relief afforded to the labor market may easily be neutralized by the presence of an excessive number of old men and children.

[. . .]

On the whole, it seems clear that though the eastern provinces suffer greatly from the drain upon agricultural labor, the inhabitants of more thickly peopled districts, and the representatives of the decaying small industries, would be in an even worse condition than at present were it not for the facilities afforded for migration.

Source: Royal Commission on Labour, *Foreign Reports: Germany*. London, 1893, pp. 98-99.

Original English text reprinted in Theodore S. Hamerow, ed., *The Age of Bismarck: Documents and Interpretations*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973, pp. 187-90.