



### Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918 Rural Hygiene (1902)

This report on the insufficiency of hygiene in rural areas illustrates the role that the state, industry, and civil groups played in “educating” workers about the importance of cleanliness in fighting disease. By providing public facilities for washing and bathing, cities apparently improved hygienic conditions and helped Germans become accustomed to new and better ways of living.

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In keeping with the milieu, it is not surprising that the sense of cleanliness among the inhabitants of villages is generally even less developed than it is among the urban population. With characteristic pithiness, proverbs reveal what the people think and feel. "Cleanliness is the most important thing," said the old woman, and put on a new shirt at Christmas" – this is how [Heinrich] Allmers's woman of the marshes sums up her hygienic creed in *Marschenbuch* [*Story of the Marshes*]. Or as a somewhat different version in some regions of northern Germany puts it: "Cleanliness is half of life; at Pentecost we turn the shirt we put on at Easter inside out." But it is probably the exception to find country folk who still share the view of the military recruit in Sonderegger\* who declared: "A person has to be rather dirty if he needs to wash himself every day." In this respect, as well, we can discern local differences caused by popular customs, economic conditions, and ways of life. For example, it would appear that the sense of cleanliness in the countryside is generally somewhat more developed in the south and the west than among the rural population in the north and especially in the east of Germany, where even with the usual ablutions a certain fear of water becomes apparent, and existing lake and river baths are little used. Perhaps it is the rarity of the bath which has led the midwife to being called "bath-mother" [*Bademutter*] or "bath-mommy" [*Bademuhme*] in the south Hannoverian dialect, because taking a bath or being bathed is an especially rare event, and very many rural folk no longer have the pleasure of a full bath later in life, unless they fall into the water by accident. Of the 6,500 braid-wearers that were recently counted in Prussia – I am referring to the matted braid [*Weichselzopf*], which is merely the result of uncleanness and a lack of care for the hair – the better part is found in the eastern provinces. The general report of the sanitation administration in the Kingdom of Bavaria for the year 1900 attributes the increase in skin diseases in the countryside, specifically, furunculosis and scabies, to this inadequate skin care. Thanks to the efforts of the German Society for Public Baths [*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Volksbäder*] and thanks to the actions of understanding municipalities, the need for bathing has found greater expression again in the cities in recent times, as a result of which new construction today, also of middle-class dwellings, often calls for bathing installations. In contrast to the cities, the countryside lacks virtually any opportunity for cultivating the sense of cleanliness. It is the exception to find in industrial districts public baths alongside factory baths.

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\* Referring to [Laurentius] Sonderegger, *Vorposten der Gesundheitspflege*, 4th edition. Berlin 1892.

Where an opportunity for bathing exists in the countryside, it usually remains limited to public river and lake baths, which are made serviceable for general use in the most primitive manner.

Source: E. Roth, "Die Wechselbeziehung zwischen Stadt und Land in gesundheitlicher Beziehung und die Sanierung des Landes" ["The Correlation between City and Country in Matters of Hygiene and Improving the Country"]. Lecture delivered at the 27th meeting of the German Association for Public Health, September 18, 1902, published in *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für öffentliche Gesundheitspflege* [*German Public Health Quarterly*], Braunschweig, 35, 1903, p. 102f.

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