



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918
Depopulation of the Countryside (1900)

The explosive growth of cities corresponded with the rapid depopulation of the countryside. The search for a higher standard of living in the city drew people away from the laborious life of the peasant. Here, the author warns that country life must improve in order to prevent the decline of the agrarian sector. Like the reform movement in cities, the reform movement in the countryside sought to improve the daily lives of average Germans.

No lasting social reform is possible in the city, either, if the conditions in agriculture are not healthy. According to the law of lower pressure, which also applies to the economy, the freely mobile masses of people will always flow to where they hope to find the most favorable living conditions.

Any lopsided improvement in the living conditions of the urban population should therefore lead to an even stronger exodus of the rural population into the cities. But for the masses of city dwellers that would mean nothing other than an increased demand for living space, that is, higher land prices and rent increases, the creation or enlargement of the "industrial reserve army," which makes every lasting rise in the living conditions of the great masses of our population more difficult, if not impossible.

The frequent claim that the interests of city and countryside are in opposition is without justification. The ancient Biblical commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself" can be translated into the modern economy: "You shall love the estate of your neighbor as you love your own estate." Only if all the productive estates are doing well can lasting improvement be achieved and sustained in one's own. Only if our rural population is doing so well that there will be no excessive exodus into industrial towns is it possible to have high living standards for the urban population and thus an elevated economic life for the entire nation.

To this we must add the quite special national importance of a healthy rural population. It is the people's fountain of youth. About 28 million people still live in the countryside in Germany today, and it has never been seriously questioned – in spite of scattered attempts to do so – that vigor and discipline are present here to a higher degree than in the loud and exhausting bustle of our industrial towns.

While the classes of the economically self-employed are shrinking in many areas of industry, and more and more giant enterprises are united in few hands, in agriculture the medium sized and small farm is proving not only equal to the large farm, but in many respects even superior. The trends in industry thus find a counterweight in those in agriculture, which seems equally as important from a national and social standpoint, since it guarantees our nation a strong and economically independent middle class.

And one more aspect should be highlighted. Every nation has only one class of farmers. You can turn rural workers into factory workers. But it is very difficult to create a new rural population from factory workers. There is a disastrous mistake reflected in the words that a well-known liberal parliamentarian once said to me: "Let us first defeat this rural population, which is allied to the *Junkers*; then we will naturally establish a new agrarian people."

In Italy, following the downfall of Rome's last two great land reformers, the Gracchi*, the Italian peasant class was doomed. To this day, that is to say, in the course of more than 2,000 years, it has not been possible to create a new class of free peasants in Italy, and the entire economic life of a land so richly blessed by nature is suffering most grievously from this defect.

How, then, will the German land reform movement achieve and secure healthy conditions in agriculture? Its program demands that "the German soil be placed under one law, a law that promotes its use as a place for working and living and rules out any misuse. [. . .]"

Source: Adolf Damaschke, *Die Bodenreform. Grundsätzliches und Geschichtliches zur Erkenntnis und Überwindung der sozialen Not* [*Land Reform. Fundamental and Historical Observations on Understanding and Overcoming Social Hardship*]. Jena, 1900. This excerpt is taken from Part III: "Bodenreform und Agrarproblem" ["Land Reform and the Agrarian Problem"].

Original German text reprinted in Ernst Schraepler, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte der sozialen Frage in Deutschland. 1871 bis zur Gegenwart* [*Sources on the History of the Social Question in Germany. 1871 to the Present*], 3rd revised edition. Göttingen and Zurich: Muster-Schmidt, 1996, pp. 97-99.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

* The popular tribunes Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus (162-133 B.C.) and Gaius Sempronius Gracchus (153-121 A.D.) tried to stop the decline of the Roman peasantry by redistributing state property, most of which was, however, in the hands of the nobility. These generous attempts, however, were thwarted by the predominance of the aristocratic classes within the state. [Information provided in Ernst Schraepler, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte der sozialen Frage in Deutschland. 1871 bis zur Gegenwart*, 3rd revised edition. Göttingen and Zurich: Muster-Schmidt, 1996, p. 99.]