



Brigitte Biwald. *Von Gottes Gnaden oder von Volkes Gnaden? Die Revolution von 1848 in der Habsburgermonarchie: Der Bauer als Ziel politischer Agitation.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996. 287 pp. DM 84 (paper), ISBN 978-3-631-48779-2.

Reviewed by Roy A. Austensen (Valparaiso University)

Published on HABSBUURG (November, 1996)

Austrian Farmers and the Revolution of 1848

Few, if any, of the consequences of the Revolutions of 1848 in the Habsburg Monarchy were as immediate and far-reaching in their effects as the *Bauernbefreiung*. As a result of the imperial patent of September 7, 1848, farmers in the Austrian lands were freed from their obligations to render “feudal” dues to their erstwhile noble and clerical lords in the form of forced labor (*Robot*) and tithes (*Zehent*). In addition, this reform produced a political revolution in the countryside by ending the judicial and administrative authority of the landed aristocracy and replacing it with the bureaucratic institutions of the imperial government. The long-term consequences were equally significant, especially as they produced economic as well as political winners and losers. The winners included the aristocratic land-owning families and clerical institutions that invested in modern farming methods and related industries. For them the elimination of the inefficient feudal relationships brought increased opportunities to modernize and expand their operations. Similarly, peasant farmers with larger land holdings were able to profit from the new relationships. On the other hand, landlords who lacked vision or were crippled by debt found it difficult to adjust to the new system, as did many small farmers and landless cottagers.

This study of what might be styled the “farm problem” in Austrian politics in 1848 was initially written as a *Diplomarbeit* at the University of Vienna under the supervision of Professor Andreas Moritsch, who contributed a brief introduction to the published version. The author indicates in the preface that her principal

purpose was to determine whether Austrian farmers were successful in gaining political influence and able to change and reform relationships and processes. In a subsequent chapter she also identifies sixteen questions that she proposes to address in an attempt to clarify “the extent to which the rural population took part in revolutionary events in pre-March and 1848 and how they attempted to make people aware of their demands” (p. 21). The author sees a special need for such a study because she believes that agrarian issues have long been neglected in Austrian historiography in favor of studies of the working classes, and she notes that there is a *Verein fuer die Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* in Vienna but no similar professional organization for the history of *Bauernbewegungen*.

The book is divided into eighteen chapters of varying lengths, beginning with a brief overview of previous research on the subject. This is followed by a chapter on the purpose of the study and the methods to be followed, including a brief discussion of the principal sources that were consulted. Subsequent chapters focus on the situation of Austrian farmers before 1848, the outbreak of the 1848 Revolution, the events of May 1848 and their impact on farmers, the situation in Bohemia and Galicia, propaganda for and against the farmers, imperial decrees, deliberations in provincial assemblies, the role of the Catholic Church, the farm problem in the *Reichstag*, the events of the autumn of 1848, the press and the liberation of the farmers, and the legends surrounding the activities of Hans Kudlich, the “hero” of the *Bauernbe-*

freierung.

In discussing the problem of historical research on issues relating to the rural populations of the various provinces of the Habsburg Monarchy, the author notes that historians face a number of difficulties. Some of the obstacles are common to pre-twentieth-century rural societies, in which there is a lack of written sources for the common people. In the case of Austria there is the additional problem created by the extensive documentation that was destroyed when the Palace of Justice in Vienna burned in 1927. For this study the author relied primarily on newspapers, pamphlets, handbills, and contemporaneous accounts. She also made some use of archival sources, including police reports and the petitions to the *Reichstag* from farmers in Bohemia.

The chapters dealing with the farm problem prior to 1848 and at the time of the outbreak of the Revolution in March of that year contain material that is well known and not especially in need of repetition. The author does make an important point in emphasizing that the problem was not new in 1848 and that the potential solutions had been discussed widely in the previous decades. Indeed, it was clear that many aristocratic landowners were prepared to accept changes that would benefit the peasant farmers. Bureaucratic lethargy in Vienna accounted at least in part for the delay in accomplishing any reforms in the rural order. On the other hand, the author's discussion of rural issues in Galicia and Bohemia in 1848 is of interest because she is able to illustrate the extraordinary diversity and complexity of the farm problem in the various provinces of the Monarchy. In Galicia the most obvious difference was the bitter legacy of the peasant uprising against the Polish nobility in 1846. Moreover, the continuing social tensions in the province were exacerbated further by the growing national consciousness among its Ruthenian inhabitants. In Bohemia the differences between Czechs and Germans complicated the issues, but the principal difficulty confronting reformers in Prague was the unwillingness of the government in Vienna to allow any provincial autonomy on the matter. This was especially frustrating to conservative federalists such as Count Leo Thun-Hohenstein.

By far the most original and useful parts of the book are in the chapters dealing with newspapers and propaganda. The author made a careful examination of a variety of publications from all sides of the issues: radical, moderate, and conservative. She also includes frequent and occasionally lengthy quotations from contemporary sources. Her principal conclusion is that 1848 was a revo-

lutionary year for Austrian farmers because it gave them an opportunity to bring their problems to the attention of a much wider public. Moreover, it became clear that it was not just a question of forced labor or payments to noble and clerical landowners but rather "the emancipation of an entire social class" (p. 121). At the same time, the widespread discussion of farm issues in the press in 1848 failed even to produce a unified movement among the farmers, not to mention the failure to achieve anything like farmer solidarity with other groups, such as workers or students. What the widespread discussion of the farm problem did accomplish was to convince both the members of the *Reichstag* and the government that farmers had to be freed from obligations that were hated, onerous, and outdated. The irony is that the majority of the farmers gave the credit for their liberation from *Robot* to the emperor rather than to their representatives in the *Reichstag*.

The author devotes considerable attention to the role of Hans Kudlich in the *Bauernbefreiung*. Kudlich was a representative from Silesia in the *Reichstag*, who achieved "hero" status as a result of the motion he made on July 26, 1848, calling for the liberation of the farmers. Biwald traces the development of a Kudlich "legend" that achieved considerable proportions by the end of the nineteenth century, including widespread celebration of his heroic deeds among German-American groups in the United States. These were exaggerated notions about Kudlich's historical importance, she argues; and she deplores even more the misuse of Kudlich's story by extremist groups in the twentieth century, especially nationalist groups who turned him into a proto-Nazi. The author views his role as having been quite modest overall and not at all significant in shaping the actual terms of the patent that emerged from the debates of the *Reichstag*.

Readers will likely find this book as frustrating as it is interesting. It is poorly organized and repetitious, and the author has inserted far too many lengthy quotations in the text. As a result, it is often difficult to follow the thread of her argument. In addition, the book is not an outstanding example of the printer's art. Words are erratically spaced and occasionally even run together. My favorite neologism created in this manner is "*nichtimentferntesten*" (p. 106). The illustrations of newspaper articles have been badly reproduced and are difficult to read. Although there is no index, the scholarly apparatus is adequate, including ample footnotes and a bibliography. This book is unfortunately less useful than it might have been with better organization and editing, but readers

with stamina will find that it contains many rewards for their perseverance.

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Citation: Roy A. Austensen. Review of Biwald, Brigitte, *Von Gottes Gnaden oder von Volkes Gnaden? Die Revolution von 1848 in der Habsburgermonarchie: Der Bauer als Ziel politischer Agitation*. HABS-BURG, H-Net Reviews. November, 1996.

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