In concluding this work on rural history, William Hagen writes, "if [the study’s] implications for German history seem far-reaching, so they are meant to be" (p. 654). He does not exaggerate; in researching one Rittergut and its environs, he has discovered that much of what we thought we knew about rural Prussia simply did not fit his data. Hagen had described the Rittergut Stavenow before, in an essay entitled “The Junker’s Faithless Servants,” but Ordinary Prussians reinforces and extends his original assertions from a few decades to over three centuries.[1] The “faithlessness” of the villagers was apparently not a product of a given era, but an inherent characteristic of their lives. A world we thought was peopled with servile peasants and autocratic, pre-capitalist Junker backed by a repressive royal bureaucracy, instead had litigious farmers challenging Junker in sympathetic royal courts, Junker searching for ways to make estates more profitable, and a dense web of community ties operating with little reference to the Rittergut, much as they would have elsewhere in Europe. Given how much interpretations of Germany’s turbulent development rely on the political and economic backwardness of rural Prussia, discovering that Prussians were quite “ordinary” indeed has far-reaching implications for how we must interpret German developments.

It is worth noting the more critical assumptions that Hagen has challenged. First, in contrast to structural changes in “west Elbia,” conventional wisdom has portrayed “east Elbia” as a structurally dormant land of Junker-dominated estates.[2] "Peasants,” as convention calls them (Hagen rightly describes them instead as “farmers” or “villagers”), deferred to Lords, while Lords provided for “peasants” within fixed economic and legal relationships, which only the commercialization of agriculture or French Revolution-inspired reforms would challenge. But, Hagen notes, there was nothing dormant about Stavenow. One saw instead a “continual struggle for freedom of movement” within the Junker-farmer relationship, and not one of unilaterally imposed and unopposed changes. “The noble landlords wielded government-backed disciplinary and police powers, but whether these could be effectively and profitably applied depended on a constantly tested and renegotiated manor-village power balance. It was not a society in which those invested with lordship could rely on deferential obedience. Neither was it a patriarchal society in which villagers could count on their master’s good will. Nor was it a society so dominated by landlordly and absolutist coercion that common people could not defend themselves and gained advantages under propitious circumstances” (p. 122).

Likewise, the conventional wisdom has argued for a culture which reinforced and legitimized Junker dominance; the local church promoted obedience, as did the culture’s militarization, and local law-enforcement did the Lords’ bidding. But Hagen finds this not to have been the case, either. While the local clergy might enjoy respect due to the services which their Bildung could provide, not least assistance with eternal salvation, this did not translate into secular authority. Indeed, “pastors’ words carried little weight independent of such sanctions as lordship or state might marshal behind them” (p. 454). Curiously, as well, Hagen finds no evidence of overt militarization of the culture. Few of the nobles behaved or dressed martially and none left service reluctantly. "If they were the militarized Prussian nobility, most were not loath to lay down their swords” (p. 303). The villagers themselves seemed to care little for their military
experiences—“household inventories say nothing of military clothing or memorabilia” (p. 468), for example—suggesting that these were not valued enough to include.

Hagen also de-centers the Junker in the environment, arguing that historians have been too “junker-obsessed” to notice the village and its networks (p. 184). Much of Ordinary Prussians is a model exercise in Geertzian “thick description,” using court and Rittergut records, regarding the status and interactions of villagers ranging from the hired hands to the independent farmers to artisans, innkeepers, and estate-managers, and from children to the elderly. The patterns reveal a close-knit environment with some social mobility and property-fluidity, in which the Junker played less of a role than fellow villagers did. Indeed, as Hagen argues, these villagers “appear as community-bound and kinship-enmeshed family farmers more comparable than has been thought to their western European counterparts” (p. 183). Moreover, the more distant presence of the Junker gave him less leverage in efforts to extract more resources than one would have expected. The seigneurial authority of the Junker was well-defined, but conversely so were his limits; he could not demand more of his villagers than what was written without facing costly legal battles. His authority was not absolute and could not even avail itself of any religious legitimation, since (as Hagen shows) the clergy enjoyed less status in secular matters than one might have thought, too. In short, villagers experienced their Lords’ intrusions “unmediately as domination or overlordship (Obrigkeit)” (p. 591). It should come as no surprise, then, that villagers resisted as much as they did.

Hagen, of course, does devote his attentions to Junker-farmer conflicts. Here the reader is in for other surprises, for the Junker and their assistants had strikingly commercial mentalities, in contrast to the assumption of the historiography that tradition-oriented Lords engaged in mere confiscation from “their” peasants. Indeed, Stavenow was “a complex economic system with a large and expensive workforce, much valuable and vulnerable livestock, and big commodity sales [...]. Large-scale east-Elbian estates were more intricate and finely tuned than customarily supposed. Nor were they the expression alone of noble lordship, whether contested or not, but also of the technological and managerial strengths of an array of hard-working and able non-nobles [...]. Such an enterprise was a highly developed and, in the eighteenth century, rapidly evolving institution of early capitalism” (p. 333). Argument for the estate as a highly capitalistic institution also challenges various contemporary schools of thought. Marxist scholars, for example, would highlight both the role of market forces in dissolving a feudally-organized society and the role of the state in reinforcing Junker demands on their “peasants” to this end. Yet Hagen’s data suggest the reverse, that the Junker-farmer conflict facilitated the introduction of market forces and contractual relationships long before the 1806 Emancipation. The farmers, it seems, so resisted any attempts to change the seigneurial relationship—and the royal courts ruled in their favor often enough—that Junker and their estate-managers found it more productive to engage contractual labor than to intensify villagers’ obligations. For Stavenow, at least, the 1806 Emancipation merely assisted a process already underway.

Nonetheless, a great deal of the old paradigm remains standing, even after this work. While Prussians might have been “ordinary,” living in villages comparable to those elsewhere in western Europe, it nonetheless remains true that the Junker did also retain the commanding heights of the military and the bureaucracy, and did sit much closer to royal power than those villagers did. The villagers’ conflict with the Junker were defensive in nature, as well; they never challenged his rights to extract resources from them in principle, and so, the Junker did remain a major (if no longer central) player. Despite a surprisingly non-martial village culture, the army did still play a disproportionate role in Prussia, in comparison to elsewhere in Europe. In short, in the political structures from the Junker on “up,” our picture of early modern Prussia remains mostly the same. But Hagen has rightly pointed out the errors of overlooking the terrain “below,” of everyday life and conflicts between the Junker and his village neighbors.

Hagen concedes that he has studied only one estate, and not all of Prussia or even Brandenburg, but he argues convincingly that no reason exists to consider Stavenow or its inhabitants unique or anomalous, though a study of another estate would be necessary to decide. Nonetheless, students of later periods of German history, who have leaned confidently on rural backwardness as a partial explanation for Germany’s peculiarities, may find themselves rethinking matters. “If” Hagen notes, “politici-

ized Prussian agrarians of the ages of Bismarck and William II increasingly brandished demagogic ideologi-

cal weapons, including anti-semitism, they were doing so far more for radically modern reasons than as a mani-

festation of an unbroken tradition of ’junker domination’ (Junkerherrschaft).” Lamentably misguided though ru-

ral east-Elbian entry into Hitler’s camp was,” he con-

cludes, “it yields better to an interpretation focused on pop-

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ulist and nationalist mobilization, and conflicts within modern German society and politics, than one focused on survival into the twentieth century of pre-modern authoritarian structures" (p. 653). If such structures had taken heavy blows earlier in the eighteenth century, they will have little explanatory power for the twentieth.

Cambridge University Press has done a beautiful job on this book’s production, but has priced the hardcover edition at $100. One wishes fervently for a paperback edition since, with its rich mines of data and insight on rural political, economic, gender and social history, this will be an essential text for years to come.

Notes:


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