The Political Role of the Peasantry in the Weimar Republic

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THE English word "peasantry" today evokes visions of humble tillers of the soil who dwell in hovels which they share with their families, pigs, goats, and sheep. But translated into German, "peasantry" becomes *Bauernschaft,* a term which for at least a century and a half has carried an emotional connotation of professional pride. All agrarian producers, whether they cultivate a five-acre plot or a thousand acre estate, belong to the *Bauernschaft* which sets them off from the rest of the nation. Yet until the end of World War II very distinct class lines existed within the *Bauernschaft* and divided German farmers into roughly two groups, *Gutsbesitzern* — (proprietors of estates) and *Bauern* (peasants).[1] To avoid confusion, "peasantry" will refer hereafter only to the latter, while "farmers" will apply to all German landowners.

By the turn of the last century approximately one-fourth of Germany's total population was engaged in agriculture,[2] but the nature and size of farms as well as methods of production varied from region to region. The differences were most pronounced between East and West. In eastern Germany where a handful of Prussian Junkers owned over 40% of the available land,[3] vast grain-producing estates predominated and hindered the development of a strong and independent peasantry. Although serfdom had been legally abolished a century earlier, the political and economic influence which the Junkers continued to exert over the peasants of their districts remained strong. West of the Elbe the situ-

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[1] For the sake of simplification this division leaves out the 200,000 *Grossbauern* who owned more land than most of the peasants, but less than the owners of estates. The omission may be justified by the relatively small number of German *Grossbauern.*

[2] *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich,* XLIX (Berlin, 1930), 7, 23, 57.

[3] Max Sering, ed. *Die deutsche Landwirtschaft,* Berichte über Landwirtschaft, Neue Folge, Sonderheft 50 (Berlin, 1932), 237, 697.

ation was different. Most peasants of northwestern, central, and southern Germany, with their regional pride, traditional independence, and conservative ways owned their land outright, although some degree of tenancy still existed in certain localities.[4] The size of their land ranged generally from ten or twelve acres to rarely more than fifty,[5] and whereas the estates in the East raised mostly grain and a few other cash crops such as beets and potatoes, a typical peasant in the West depended for his income mainly on some form of animal husbandry.[6]

The agricultural policy of the German Empire was unduly influenced by the Junkers whose political weight was quite disproportionate to their numbers. One of their chief economic interests was to keep grain prices high, if need be through protective tariffs. In 1879 they had attained the desired grain protection, and when Bismarck's successor Caprivi decided to lower tariffs again, the Junkers accepted this challenge by organizing the Farmers' League (*Bund der Landwirte*) in 1893. Working closely with the Conservative party, under Bülow, this pressure group eventually succeeded in having high grain tariffs restored. To be sure, tariff rates were also established for commodities other than wheat and rye, but protection ultimately favored the Junkers over the peasants because the latter, who depended to a large extent on the sale of animal products, suffered a decided disadvantage from high grain tariffs which raised the price of feed.[7] Surprisingly enough, peasant resistance opposing such a trend remained insignificant.[8] In most Protestant regions, even outside of Prussia proper, the Farmers' League was able to establish branches and to convince the local peasants of the blessings of protective tariffs. It was considerably more difficult for the League to obtain a foothold in the predomi-

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[4] *Ibid.*, p. 238.

[5] August Skalweit, *Agrarpolitik* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1923), pp. 199-205.

[6] Alexander Gerschenkron, *Bread and Democracy in Germany* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1943), pp. 26-27; Sering, *Landwirtschaft,* pp. 239, 929-931.

[7] For the role of the Junkers in pre-war Germany see Gerschenkron, *op. cit.,* pp. 19-88, especially pp. 25-27, 73-75, 83. Hugo Reinhofer, *Geschichte des deutschen Bauernstandes* (Graz-Leipzig, 1925), pp. 407-410, quotes the appeal of the Junker Rupprecht-Ransern which precipitated the founding of the Farmers' League and which contains the famous passage: "Wir müssen aufhören zu klagen, wir müssen schreien!"

[8] Gerschenkron, *op. cit.,* pp. 75-76.

nantly Catholic South where a number of peasant leagues and unions (*Bauernbünde* and *Bauernvereine*) developed in the 1890's, some of which were created primarily to offset the influence of the East Elbian pressure group.[9] Yet the majority of the German peasantry followed the lead of the Junkers whose ulterior motives they rarely detected and who posed with great skill as the spokesmen of all German farmers.[10]

Tariffs and pressure group tactics lost their meaning during World War I. Cut off from outside food supplies, Germany had to fall back on her own resources. As the war dragged on, difficulties of supplying the nation with food multiplied and agriculture had to assume a large share of responsibility. Shortages developed everywhere. Labor was scarce and became scarcer as the western trenches and the eastern steppes took their toll. There was a lack of feed, fuel, fertilizer, draft animals, machines, and equipment.[11] Gradually the mood of sullen weariness which by 1916 had gripped large segments of the nation also affected the farm population. The normal cleavage which had always existed between city and country grew into bitter hostility under wartime conditions. While starving city people charged farmers with hoarding food supplies for themselves and their stock, farmers complained that they had to go hungry in order to feed the cities.[12] An additional grievance was the ever-tightening war economy with controls, food requisitions, and a bureaucracy whose task it was to make farmers comply with intricate and irksome government regulations.[13] Finally, there was the disparity of price policy. Ceiling prices had been established for all commodities, but while those of manufactured goods were raised in 1916 to levels which permitted a profit, agricultural prices were held at a bare minimum.[14] By 1918 most Ger-

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[9] Wilhelm Mattes, *Die bayerischen Bauernräte* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1921), pp. 36-45.

[10] Gerschenkron, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-76.

[11] Sering, *Landwirtschaft,* pp. 14-16.

[12] *Die Ursachen des deutschen Zusammenbruches im Jahre 1918. (Das Werk des Untersuchungsausschusses der deutschen Verfassungsgebenden Nationalversammlung und des deutschen Reichstages),* 4. Reihe, Vol. V, 40, 102, 108-9; Vol. VI, 217, 220-1. (Hereafter cited as *Ursachen, . . .*).

[13] *Ibid.,* V, 145, 210. Arthur Rosenberg, *Die Entstehung und Geschichte der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt/Main, 1955), p. 91.

[14] *Ursachen,* V, 145. Sering, *Landwirtschaft,* p. 16; Rosenberg, *op. cit.,* p. 91.

mans, the peasantry no less than the urban population, began to yearn for a speedy peace.[15]

When the revolution broke out in November, 1918, the peasants responded to it in much the same spirit as the rest of the nation. Those in the army welcomed it because it meant an end to the trenches, to misery, death, and privation. Most important of all, it meant the return home to family and farm. Not a single troop contingent recruited from rural areas opposed the revolution, and many peasant soldiers took an active part in it although few of them were either socialists or Spartacists; they merely wanted to see an end to the war.[16] Inside Germany, with the exception of one state, the rural population adopted generally a passive attitude to the political upheaval. Despite their discontent during the last war years, revolutionary enthusiasm was alien to them, though they, too, welcomed the end of fighting and the prospect of normal times ahead.

Only Bavaria differed substantially from the general pattern.[17] In this overwhelmingly Catholic state, where the peasantry constituted 65% of the population, resentment against the oppressive war economy had been particularly pronounced. Controls, requisitions and snooping officials were deemed by the Bavarian peasants to be mere devilish contrivances explicitly thought up by Berlin to make life difficult for them. Other factors added to their ugly mood. Casualty rates had been disproportionately high among the Bavarian farm boys who made excellent fighters but were educationally unfit for less hazardous duties. Tension mounted after the defection of Bulgaria at the end of September, 1918, and during the dissolution of the Habsburg state in October. Hitherto the Bavarians had been relatively safe from any direct threat of war, but now their region faced possible invasion from the southern and southeastern fronts. Growing panicky, they blamed the Emperor for their misfortunes, accused their own monarch, King Ludwig III, of being a pawn of Berlin, and began to call for the abdication of both as the fastest way to obtain an end to hostilities.[18] Feelings ran so high that dur-

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[15] *Ursachen,* IV, 115, 125-6, 263-4.

[16] Rosenberg, *op. cit.,* pp. 277-8.

[17] For a brief account of Bavarian events see Werner G. Zimmermann, *Bayern und das Reich* (Munich, 1953), pp. 13-47.

[18] *Ursachen,* IV, 125-9, 205, 307, and 262-4; VI, 133-4, 141-2, 238-241, 361; Erich Eyck, *Geschichte der Weimarer Republik,* Vol. I. (Zürich and Stuttgart, 1956), 83. Mattes, *op. cit.,* pp. 52-3.

ing the first week of November conservative Bavaria was in the forefront of the revolution in which segments of the peasantry took an active part. Politically naive, but determined to put an end to slaughter, hunger and regimentation, the left wing of the Bavarian Peasant League joined with workers and soldiers at Munich in support of Kurt Eisner, who, during the night of November 7-8, deposed the Wittelsbach dynasty and proclaimed a Bavarian republic. Peasants' councils were formed as the basis, together with workers' and soldiers' councils, of the new government.[19]

But Bavaria's initial enthusiasm for revolution died nearly as fast as it had arisen, especially among the peasants whose artificial alliance with the workers soon broke down. Tired of disorder and newfangled, barely understood institutions, the peasants found no attraction in red flags, radical theories, and innumerable councils. They reverted to their blue-white sympathies and ingrained conservative ways.[20] While the Bavarians had been the first to depose their king, they were to be also the first to agitate for restoration of the monarchy.

A look at the German scene in November 1918 reveals, therefore, that the peasantry played no significant or special role in the revolution. Their attitude was largely determined by the situation in which they found themselves when the collapse began: if in the army, they participated as much or as little as their fellow soldiers of middle class or worker origin: if at home, they tended to be observers rather than participants. Wherever they did take an active part they were carried along by the war-weary mood of the masses whose exasperation with the defunct old order they largely shared. Nowhere did they dominate the course of the revolution, not even in Bavaria where initiative and leadership came from the workers and soldiers in the cities while the peasantry functioned as bewildered, though irate, supporting actors.

The limited and unsensational part which the German peasantry took in the collapse of the Empire contrasts sharply with that of their Russian counterpart during 1917. Russia, a predominantly

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[19] For a detailed study of the peasant councils see Mattes, *op. cit.* See also Zimmerman, *op. cit.*, pp. 15, 16 (n. 17), 22-30; Rosenberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 242-4; Heinrich Ströbel, *The German Revolution and After* (New York, n. d.), pp. 154-5; E. O. Volkmann, *Revolution über Deutschland* (Oldenburg, 1930), pp. 41-3.

[20] Mattes, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-10; Rosenberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 336, 341.

agrarian state, harbored a large and discontented peasantry whose hunger for land had plagued every Russian government since the Edict of Liberation. When the March revolution broke out, the peasants began to seize the land which they had coveted for so long. The rural uprisings, which generally proceeded independently of events in St. Petersburg and Moscow, facilitated the overthrow of the Provisional Government by Lenin's Bolsheviks.[21] The revolts in the interior crippled food supplies and transportation, while the Russian army, already affected by defeat and radical propaganda, disintegrated rapidly under the eyes of its commanders as many peasant soldiers deserted to partake in the seizure of land back home.[22]

By comparison, conditions in Germany did not lend themselves to a large-scale rural revolution. The peasants in the army and within the country constituted a minority in an industrialized state, and land hunger was no vital German issue. If it had been, the course of the revolution might have taken a more radical turn.[23] Recent scholarship has pointed out that failure to break up the Junker estates in the East proved disastrous to the Weimar Republic. Although plans involving redistribution of land existed as part of a contemplated settlement program, expropriation, for several reasons, was never seriously considered. The acute food shortage at the end of the war; unwillingness of the Majority Socialists to embark on such a radical solution in the face of extremist demands from Independents and Spartacists; and, last but not least, the absence of pressure for such a move on the part of the peasants, all combined to spare the Junkers who hardly surprised the world by their ingratitude in years to come.[24] Finally, whereas the uprisings of the Russian peasants represented a primitive but vehement de-

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[21] John Maynard, *The Russian Peasant and other Studies* (London, 1947), p. 75.

[22] William H. Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution 1917-1921,* rev. ed. (New York, 1952), pp. 242-53.

[23] Gerschenkron, *op. cit.,* pp. 93-4. Gustav Stolper, *Deutsche Wirtschaft 1870-1940* (Stuttgart, 1950), pp. 115-6. For a divergent view on the question of land hunger see Otto Braun, *Von Weimar zu Hitler* (New York, 1940), pp. 65-66.

[24] Gerschenkron, *op. cit.,* pp. 92-5; Werner Conze, "Die Weimarer Republik," *Deutsche Geschichte im Überblick, ein Handbuch,* ed. by Peter Rassow (Stuttgart, 1953), p. 630; John Bradshaw Holt, *German Agricultural Policy 1918-1934* (Chapel Hill, 1936), pp. 36-47, 81-8. Cf. Braun, *op. cit.,* pp. 51-66.

nial of the state as such,[25] in Germany the peasantry with the rest of the nation accepted Ebert's Majority Socialist government which then seemed to offer the only guarantee of preserving the state in the face of threatening anarchy. Yet in accepting the republic, many peasants obeyed the need of the moment rather than conviction. Once the hardships of war faded away before the drab, factious atmosphere which followed in the wake of defeat, the peasants like many urban middle class Germans began to look back at the monarchy with nostalgia.[26] Toward the new state they adopted an attitude of reserve, favored the political parties on the right over those on the left, and in the main directed their attention to their long-neglected farms.

Circumstances in the immediate post-war period proved difficult but not entirely unrewarding for German agriculture. Four years of war-imposed deficiencies had left their mark, and the returning farmers found the soil exhausted from lack of fertilizer, buildings and machinery in a state of disrepair, and stock frequently reduced to a few animals. At the same time, the country depended more than ever on its farmers. The Allied blockade, which was not lifted until July 1919, kept food supplies at a minimum, and shortly after it was finally lifted Germany had to cede fifteen per cent of her agrarian land under the terms of the peace treaty. In order to cope with the acute food crisis the government retained wartime controls on the distribution of food supplies, a measure the farmers bitterly resented. The controls notwithstanding, the food shortage proved a blessing in disguise to agriculture. As demand exceeded supply, prices for farm products climbed sharply. The situation improved even further with the onset of the monetary inflation which made industrial goods cheaper in relation to agricultural prices, thus temporarily reversing the previous trend. Generous credits to farmers were readily available, and loans were repaid in debased currency. Whoever was able to look beyond the bounds of his manure pit utilized this windfall to repair damages, replenish stock, and buy new machinery. By the time the inflation had reached its apex most German farms were free of debt. Then the tide turned rapidly. When the mark was stabilized toward the end of 1923, all cash money was virtually wiped out overnight, and whoever had sold his harvest prior to stabilization was without

[25] Maynard, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

[26] Rosenberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 361, 381.

working capital. To carry on at all, two choices were open to the farmer; he either had to raise short-term loans at high rates of interest, or had to sell whatever surplus he could spare at sacrifice prices. The brief agricultural boom was over.[27]

After stabilization of the currency, Germany's agrarian economy underwent a steady and gradually accelerated decline which reached a state of acute crisis by the end of the decade when the world-wide financial depression merged with the slump in agriculture. The war and its after-effects had upset economic stability in most Western countries, but Germany as a defeated nation was particularly vulnerable. When the Dawes Plan terminated the stress and strain of the immediate postwar years and initiated a period of temporary German prosperity, agriculture failed to benefit by it. Stabilization not only delivered German farmers to the mercy of the banks, but also increased operating costs. Added to this was an acute "scissors crisis," the beginnings of which had been present, off and on, as early as the war years. Agricultural prices, although above prewar level, remained steadily below the industrial price index. The farmer was forced to pay proportionately more for clothes, machinery, and equipment than he took in from selling his own products.[28] The "boom" of the Locarno Era, which benefited manufacture and industry, stimulated also a mounting migration of farmhands to the urban factories, leaving farmers with a reduced labor supply and increased wage payments. By far the most serious difficulty was the combination of taxes, social welfare payments (*Soziale Lasten*), and interest rates on loans, mortgages, and related debts. Even during the relatively rare times when agricultural prices were high, a substantial number of German farmers operated at a loss because profits from the sale of their products were eaten up by their multiple financial obligations.[29]

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[27] Conze, *op. cit.*, p. 634; Gerschenkron, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-6, 107-9; Skalweit, *op. cit.*, pp. 360-5; Sering, *Landwirtschaft,* pp. 40-1, 49; Holt, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-9; Hans Schlange-Schöningen, *Am Tage danach* (Hamburg, 1946), p. 45; August Winnig, *Das Reich als Republik 1918-1928* (Stuttgart-Berlin, 1928), p. 281.

[28] Sering, *Landwirtschaft,* pp. 60, 74-5, 88-96; Heinrich Getzeny, "Was geht in unserem Bauerntum vor?" *Hochland,* XXVII (October, 1929), 14; Franz Oppenheimer, "Grundprobleme der deutschen Landwirtschaft," *Krisis, ein politisches Manifest,* ed. by Edgar Müller (Weimar, 1932), pp. 162-3.

[29] Sering, *Landwirtschaft,* pp. 42-60; Max Sering, *Germany under the Dawes Plan* (London, 1929), pp. 184-92; Käthe Bauer-Mengelberg, *Agrarpolitik in Theorie, Geschichte und aktueller Problematik* (Leipzig-Berlin, 1931), pp. 181-2, 206-18; Getzeny, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

The plight of the farmers was real enough, and largely due to factors beyond their control; but not entirely so. German agriculture was slow to adopt modern methods of operation, and few farmers recognized the advantages of "rationalization" processes which, if applied, enabled even indebted holdings to wrest a profit from the land.[30] The peasants, moreover, suffered from lack of unity and a domineering Junker class, two handicaps which were closely interrelated. Agricultural pressure groups re-emerged soon after the armistice, following a period of wartime inactivity. Most formidable among them was the Farmers' League. The League had been temporarily decimated by the revolution but recovered rapidly and on December 1, 1920 was instrumental in founding a new organization, the *Reichslandbund*.[31] Despite the new name, the *Landbund* looked suspiciously like the old League. East Elbian Junkers controlled it and established local organizations in most rural areas with a Protestant population. The *Landbund* was politically ultra-conservative, supported the Nationalist party east of the Elbe, and the People's party in Central Germany, where a milder political climate prevailed.[32] The various peasant organizations revived likewise. As before the war, they were strongest in the South and had scattered support in northern and central regions. Their influence on agricultural policy remained limited, however, and virtually ceased after 1928 because of their inability to agree on a common policy in the face of an acute agricultural crisis.

Regional and religious loyalties usually proved stronger than economic necessity. Thus the Peasant Unions (*Bauernvereine*) in the South were by and large Catholic and supported the Center Party or, in Bavaria, the Bavarian People's party.[33] In contrast, the Schleswig Holstein Peasant Union was without religious ties and originally decidedly liberal, both on the economic and political

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[30] Getzeny, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-1; Sering, *Landwirtschaft*, p. 55; Jan Bargenhusen, "Grüner Tisch und Grünes Feld," *Die Weltbühne*, XXVII/I (May 12, 1931), 689-92.

[31] *Schulthess' Europäischer Geschichtskalender, 1920,* Part 1 (Munich 1924), pp. 23-4, 308.

[32] Jan Bargenhusen, "Die Grüne Front," *Die Weltbühne*, XXVI/I (December 31, 1929), 8-11. Gerschenkron, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

[33] Bargenhusen, "Die Grüne Front," *Die Weltbühne*, XXVI/I (March 18, 1930), 420.

levels.[34] The Peasant League (*Bauernbund,* later *Deutsche Bauernschaft*), with its stronghold in Bavaria, had democratic leanings, was anticlerical, and at the same time subscribed to a narrow Bavarian particularism.[35] Had all these organizations combined to offset the growing preponderance of the *Landbund,* and had they then made an alliance with the urban consumers to guard their common interests against Junker monopoly of agricultural policy, the peasants might have fared better than they did. Experience could have taught them that they had always suffered whenever they gave the Junkers a free hand, but although some peasant organizations successfully resisted many *Landbund* policies, others remained indifferent and allowed the East Elbians to set the course and keep the wheel.[36] The peasantry had cause to regret this attitude once the familiar question of higher tariffs again became an issue. From 1925 to 1929, moderate protection covered most German farmers and, in contrast to the prewar period, took into account the fact that the small and medium farms raised a greater percentage of livestock than the eastern estates.[37] This arrangement, a compromise between peasants and Junkers, broke down toward the end of the decade.[38] When world-wide overproduction of food threatened the German market with cheap overseas imports, the trend toward disproportionately high protection of the influential grain producers was resumed. Yet even before this stage was reached, farm income in general declined, foreclosures and forced sales occurred at an alarming rate, and by 1928 the total indebtedness of German agriculture was close to ten billion marks.[39]

Up to this time the peasants had been patient. Being sober,

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[34] Rudolph Herberle, *From Democracy to Nazism* (Baton Rouge, 1945), pp. 42-3, and 43-70, *passim.*

[35] Bargenhusen, "Die Grüne Front," *Die Weltbühne,* XXVI/I (March, 18, 1930), 421-3.

[36] *Ibid.,* pp. 422-3: cf. Holt, *op. cit.,* p. 98; Gerschenkron, *op. cit.,* p. 127.

[37] Gerschenkron, *op. cit.,* pp. 113-24; Holt, *op. cit.,* pp. 107-10. Support of the peasants vis-a-vis the grain interests came from a parliamentary majority that ranged from the Social Democrats to the People's Party: see Holt, *op. cit.,* p. 108.

[38] Gerschenkron, *op. cit.,* p. 117.

[39] Holt, *op. cit.,* pp. 137-9. For a more detailed survey of agricultural indebtedness and forced sales see Sering, *Landwirtschaft,* pp. 46-60. It should be noted that this indebtedness was the result of financial obligations which had been largely incurred *after* stabilization of the mark in 1923-1924; *ibid.,* p. 49.

conservative people who were not normally given to violence, they had always relied on their farm organizations and the ballot to protect their economic interests. The parties of their choice, depending on the region, ranged from the Catholic Center to the German Nationalists, while the parties on the left had nothing to offer them. Now the mood of the peasantry began to change. As the agricultural situation deteriorated rapidly and farmers could tell from the calendar when their debts would eat up their property, their patience came to an end.[40] Turning their backs on pressure groups and parties they resolved to help themselves. The storm broke in January 1928 in Schleswig-Holstein where the peasants formed a spontaneous, non-political mass movement which they called *Landvolk* (country folk).[41] They held protest meetings and drew up a list of grievances and demands which were sent to the government. The tone of the demands was threatening, went beyond purely economic matters, and expressed anti-republican and anti-semitic sentiments.[42]

Throughout the summer of 1928 the province simmered with a spirit of unrest, and in the fall came the first overt acts of rebellion. In November, when officials came to the village of Beidenfleth in order to impound one ox each from the peasants Kock and Kühl whose taxes were in arrears, the neighbors blew the firehorn

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[40] Walter Luetgebrune, *Neu-Preussens Bauernkrieg* (Hamburg-Berlin-Leipzig, 1931), p. 13.

[41] Literature on this subject is as plentiful as it is polemical, because a number of young German nationalist writers embraced the cause of the *Landvolk* movement. Apart from Luetgebrune's book (he was a well-known nationalist lawyer), the following accounts are informative: Albrecht Erich Günther, "Die Schwarze Fahne," *Deutsches Volkstum,* XII (May, 1930), 335-42; Friedrich Hielscher, "Der Bauer steht auf," *Deutscher Aufstand, die Revolution des Nachkriegs,* ed. by Curt Hotzel (Stuttgart, 1934), pp. 211-17; Friedrich Wilhelm von Oertzen, "Bomben in Holstein, der Grosse Landvolk Prozess," *Im Namen der Geschichte! Politische Prozesse der Nachkriegszeit* (Hamburg, 1934), pp. 79-101; Richard Schapke, *Aufstand der Bauern* (Leipzig, 1933); Jürgen Schimmelreiter, *Unter der schwarzen Landvolkfahne; die Landvolkbewegung im Kampf für Deutschlands Befreiung* (Munich, 1929); Herbert Volck, *Rebellen um Ehre. Mein Kampf für die nationale Erhebung 1918-1933* (Gütersloh, 1932), pp. 301-466. In addition, Ernst von Salomon's *Die Stadt* (Berlin, 1932) and *Der Fragebogen* (Hamburg, 1951), pp. 220-259, *passim;* Hans Fallada's *Bauern, Bonzen und Bomben* (Berlin, 1931); and Bodo Uhse's *Söldner und Soldat* (Paris, 1935), *passim,* although all written as novels, capture the atmosphere of the *Landvolk* movement admirably.

[42] Hielscher, *op. cit.,* pp. 212-213; Luetgebrune, *op. cit.,* pp. 14-19, 27, 44-5; Schimmelreiter, *op. cit.,* pp. 4-12, 17-18.

and obstructed seizure of the oxen by force.[43] The Beidenfleth incident gave the signal for revolt in Schleswig-Holstein where the old battle cry "rather dead than slave!" [44] echoed all along the coast. The black flag of mourning became the banner and symbol of the *Landvolk* movement which soon spread beyond the provincial limits to Hanover, East Prussia, Pomerania, Silesia, and even Austrian Tyrol.[45] Schleswig-Holstein, however, remained its center. Led by two prominent local farm owners, Hamkens and Heim, and supported by a number of young nationalist revolutionaries, including Ernst von Salomon, the peasants refused to pay taxes and obstructed officials who came to collect them or tried to impound cattle. They held secret meetings, but also demonstrated in public. They boycotted towns which did not support their cause, and finally began to blow up public buildings, particularly finance offices. Great care was taken not to cause any human casualties, and the damage was restricted to real property.[46] Nevertheless, the nightly explosions were unnerving and caused serious concern to the national government. Unrest prevailed well into 1930 when the *Landvolk* movement was submerged by the National Socialist tidal wave.

The *Landvolk* movement was more than a symptom of rural unrest generated by an acute crisis; it was a declaration of war by the peasantry on the Weimar Republic. Hitherto only the Junkers among German farmers had openly and persistently opposed the republic, but theirs was the hostility of a caste deprived of its former political power and glory. Now the peasantry began to join the ranks of opposition, spontaneously, angrily, and at first without any clear ideas as to aim and direction. Viewed superficially, it seemed that their growing antagonism was motivated entirely by their often desperate plight. Yet their dissatisfaction had not grown up overnight. It represented a general protest, stemming from a deep-seated feeling of suspicion which had its roots in the past, although it came to a head over immediate issues in a time of economic stress. Most German peasants had accepted the republic in

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[43] Schapke, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-5; Luetgebrune, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-40.

[44] Luetgebrune, *op. cit.*, p. 60; A. Georg Kenstler, "Bauernnotwehr und Landvolkkampf," *Blut und Boden,* I (January, 1931), 28.

[45] Schapke, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-1, 81-8, 93-4, 100-103; Anon., "Unter der schwarzen Fahne Florian Geyers," *Blut und Boden,* II (February, 1931), 66-8.

[46] Oertzen, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-5; Bruno von Salomon, "Bomben und Republik Schutzgesetz," *Blut und Boden,* VIII (August, 1930), 358-61; Luetgebrune, *op. cit.*, pp. 192-3.

1918, but they had done so without enthusiasm. After the brief upheaval at the end of the war their fundamentally conservative outlook returned as they resumed their accustomed ways of life. The new state appeared to them lifeless and bloodless, its administration impersonal, cumbersome, remote. While the local administrators before the war had been men the peasants knew, they now tended to be strangers, city people appointed from Berlin who lacked the ability to win their confidence. Peasants who voiced their grievances to such officials complained that they were told to change their working habits, to adopt agricultural rationalization, to switch from potatoes to barley, from hogs to dairy cows, from manure to fertilizer, and they did not like it.[47]

Agrarian mysticism with its glorification of *Bauerntum* which had always played a part in their thoughts and actions rebelled against the impersonal ways of the modern state. Formerly the peasants had considered themselves an organic part of the nation, proud of their tradition and their work; now the republic wanted to turn them into farming technicians and fetter them to its bureaucratic machine.[48] Added to this were long-standing regional resentments. Schleswig-Holstein's peasantry had had no love for Berlin since Bismarck's day,[49] and Bavaria's anti-Prussian particularism was proverbial. Finally, latent anti-socialist and anti-semitic sentiments which were traditional in many areas of rural Germany re-emerged with alarming vehemence.[50] The Berlin government was equated with Jews and Reds, and the financial scandals involving the Barmats and Sklareks added water to the mill of bigotry.[51] In this respect it was less than helpful that "liberal" journals ridiculed the German farmers whose economic dilemma

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[47] Sentiments such as these are expressed in most accounts that were written during this period. See especially the following: Günther, *op. cit.*, pp. 336-42; Wilhelm Hamkens, "Das bündische Reich auf bäuerischem Grund," *Blut und Boden,* II (February, 1931), 56-9; Kenstler, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-8; see also Ernest von Salomon, *Die Stadt,* pp. 10-13, 46-7.

[48] Heberle, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-53, and *passim;* Luetgebrune, *op. cit.*, p. 22, and *passim;* Schapke, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-15; August Winnig, "Der Acker spricht!" *Blut und Boden,* VIII (August, 1930), 357-8.

[49] Heberle, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-31, 40-1.

[50] Luetgebrune, *op. cit.*, p. 20; Gerschenkron, *op. cit.*, p. 17; Schimmelreiter, *op. cit.*, pp. 24, 28; Theodore Abel, *Why Hitler came into Power* (New York, 1938), pp. 291-4.

[51] Schapke, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-6.

they refused to take seriously.[52] In brief, long-smouldering antagonisms held by the peasantry came into the open at the end of 1928 and merged with their pertinent economic grievances.

The spirit of revolt which permeated many German regions, coupled with the need to present a common front *vis-a-vis* trade, industry and labor unions, jolted the leading farm organizations into action. In March 1929 the *Landbund,* together with the *Deutsche Bauernschaft* (formerly *Bauernbund*), the *Vereinigung der christlichen-deutschen Bauernvereine* (Association of Christian-German Peasant Unions), and the *Deutsche Landwirtschaftsrat* (German Agricultural Council, the central organization for all chambers of agriculture) formed an agrarian super-pressure group which they called the *Grüne Front* (Green Front). Although created with the intention of giving added weight to German agriculture as a whole, the Green Front developed into a tool of the *Landbund* which determined the policies of the new organization and in which the interests of the Junkers generally won out over those of the peasants. Despite bitter disagreements which soon arose within the Green Front, it constituted a powerful influence throughout the last years of the republic, especially when it began to interfere with affairs of state.[53]

The *Landvolk* movement and the formation of the Green Front were both indicative of the discontent which had affected large segments of Germany's rural population by 1928-1929. Other developments in the countryside also testified to an increasing concern over the mounting agrarian crisis. Peasants in Central Germany, who had formerly given their support and votes to the People's party, founded a party of their own in 1928, the *Christlich-nation-*

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[52] See for example Anon., "Landvolk in Not," *Das Tagebuch,* X, Heft 5 (February 2, 1929), p. 192, which carries the motto "Wir müssen schreien, schreien, schreien!" and which ends with this verse:

Das ist die ewige Not der Zeit,
Das ist die Zeit der ewigen Not,
Das ist die Not der ewigen Zeit
Das ist die ewige Zeit der Not!

[53] Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik,* 2nd enl. ed. (Stuttgart, 1957), p. 207; Gerschenkron, *op. cit.,* pp. 134-5; Eyck, *op. cit.,* II, p. 323; Bargenhusen, "Die Grüne Front," *op. cit.,* XXVI/I, Nr. 7 (February 11, 1930), 232; *ibid.,* March 18, 1930, 420-3; Bargenhusen, "Grüner Tisch und grünes Feld," *op. cit.,* XXVI/II, Nr. 52 (December 23, 1930), 957-9.

ale Bauernpartei (Christian-National Peasants party). Although it never became very effective, it did spread beyond Central Germany in 1929, competed in elections for farm votes, and had moderately nationalist leanings.[54] Implicit in all this heightened activity among the various farm groups was an intensified spirit of opposition to the government and a tendency to join forces with the extreme political right. This was vividly demonstrated in 1929 during the referendum against the Young Plan when the so-called "Freedom Law," which was jointly sponsored by Nationalists and National Socialists, received a preponderance of rural votes.[55]

Although Junkers and peasants alike made the republic the scapegoat for all their woes, and although the Green Front represented nominally their common interests, they were in fact deeply divided over economic and political issues. Their economic disagreements centered primarily on high grain tariffs and the *Osthilfe* legislation. In 1929 the Reichstag began to raise grain tariffs, and from then on continued to raise them periodically until their level stood high above the world market price, to the detriment of the peasants.[56] Once again the old Junker dictum of "we must cease to complain, we must yell" bore fruit, and the East Elbians, working through the Nationalist party and the Green Front, got what they wanted.[57] In fairness to them it must be said that they were desperately in need of protection since their estates in the East were by and large in deplorable straits. The effects of the agrarian depression coupled with widespread inefficiency on the part of many land owners east of the Elbe had burdened the estates with proportionately higher debts than smaller farms elsewhere in the Reich.[58] When high grain tariffs alone proved insufficient to meet

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[54] *Schulthess', 1928,* p. 71; Bargenhusen, "Die Grüne Front," *op. cit.,* XXVI/I, Nr. 7 (February 11, 1930), 233-4. For additional indications of agrarian discontent see *Schulthess', 1929,* pp. 8, 13, 152, 162, 167.

[55] Carl Joachim Friedrich, "The Agricultural Basis of Emotional Nationalism," *Public Opinion Quarterly, I* (April, 1937). 50-61; *Schulthess', 1929,* p. 152. Minister for Food and Agriculture, Dietrich, stated in a broadcast on October 18, 1929, that the peasant organizations were opposed to the referendum (see *ibid.,* p. 192). The outcome showed that even if Dietrich's information was correct, the rank and file of the peasantry seemed unaffected by the official attitude adopted by the farm organizations.

[56] Gerschenkron, *op. cit.,* pp. 133-45; Bargenhusen, "Die Grüne Front," *op. cit.,* XXVI/I (April 1, 1930), 513-7.

[57] Cuno Horkenbach, *Das Deutsche Reich von 1918 bis heute,* Jahrgang 1931 (Berlin, n.d.), pp. 140, 143, 156, 277.

the situation, the government stepped up its aid to the Junkers by means of the *Osthilfe* laws. These consisted of an intricate network of financial aid measures the intention of which was to protect the debt-ridden estates in the East from foreclosure, and to pump new life into the exhausted agrarian economy. The subsidies and related expenses alloted to the *Osthilfe* amounted to several million marks annually.[59] Coupled with these laws were provisions to subdivide for settlement purposes any estates that were beyond financial redemption, a measure which the Junkers tried hard to obstruct, and which played a part in the dismissal of Brüning as well as of Schleicher when each tried to implement it.[60] The peasants, for obvious reasons, opposed both higher grain tariffs and *Osthilfe,* but to no avail. Disappointed, they began to turn their backs on the Green Front because their own organizations within it had become captives of the *Landbund.* With the realization that their economic pressure groups had failed them, the peasants began to survey the political stage in search of more effective allies.[61]

The peasants faced a difficult choice because the political scene was complex and confused. The Christian-National Peasants party was unable to attract their votes and remained a splinter group.[62] The People's party had long since ceased to get farm support, and while the Center party and Bavarian People's party retained the loyalty of most Catholic rural areas they carried no strength wherever Protestantism predominated. The Nationalist party, once a stalwart champion of many Protestant farmers, had come to favor business and industry over agriculture after Hugenberg seized control of the party. Throughout 1929 the Nationalists were shaken

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[58] Sering, *Landwirtschaft,* pp. 46-54; Oppenheimer, *op. cit.,* p. 162; Otto Diez, "Bauernnot ist Volkes Not," *Zeitwende,* VII (2nd part, 1931), 300-01; Gerschenkron, *op. cit.,* p. 149; Bauer-Mengelberg, *op. cit.,* pp. 210-11.

[59] For more extensive information on *Osthilfe* legislation see *Horkenbach, 1931,* pp. 59, 113, 345-6, 354-5, 375; *ibid., 1932,* pp. 47, 102. Also Schlange-Schöningen, *op. cit.,* pp. 45-61; Bauer-Mengelberg, *op. cit.,* pp. 237-9; Holt, *op. cit.,* pp. 157-8, 161-2; Gerschenkron, *op. cit.,* pp. 150-1. Cf. Magnus Freiherr von Braun, *Von Ostpreussen bis Texas* (Stollhamm, Oldbg., 1955), pp. 213-6.

[60] Holt, *op. cit.,* pp. 157-9; Schlange-Schöningen, *op. cit.,* pp. 67-8, 69-73; Bracher, *op. cit.,* pp. 505, 511-22, *passim;* Stolper, *op. cit.,* p. 116; Magnus v. Braun, *op. cit.,* pp. 219-224.

[61] Schapke, *op. cit.,* pp. 90-1.

[62] *Ibid.,* p. 91 Bargenhusen, "Grüner Tisch und grünes Feld," *op. cit.,* XXVI/II (December 23, 1930), 958.

by severe inner conflicts in which the agricultural question played its part. When the Treviranus group left the party in December of that year, the secessionists and the Hugenberg wing fought for months for the support of all the traditionally conservative forces which both groups hoped to rally behind their respective political banners.[63] The resulting confusion affected particularly the German farmers. The *Landbund* began to split; some local groups remained loyal to Hugenberg, others joined the secessionists who in turn tried hard, though largely in vain, to rally the peasants along with the anti-Hugenberg forces. The bulk of the peasantry, bewildered and angry, drifted for a while from splinter group to splinter group and eventually sought refuge with the only party whose agricultural program was daring and comprehensive enough to appeal to them — the Nazi party.[64]

The agricultural platform of the NSDAP had suffered for years from ambiguity. Point 17 of the official Nazi program called for "unremunerative expropriation of land for the commonweal." This was not exactly a suitable incentive to win farm votes, but until the inception of the agrarian crisis Hitler's main efforts remained concentrated on the cities. In April, 1928, however, he interpreted Point 17 to mean that his party had never planned the expropriation of the German peasant; the controversial article was, he said, directed against Jewish real estate speculators. Hitler then gave the peasants two years to think this over, and in March, 1930, the NSDAP published a detailed agrarian program which promised the peasants not only redress of their present grievances, but also a place of honor within the nation.[65] Publication of the program was well-timed, and its contents helped to break down the hitherto suspicious attitude of the peasants *vis-à-vis* a party which expressed socialist proclivities even in its hyphenated name. They may have recalled that Hitler had always spoken in laudatory terms of Ger-

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[63] A very comprehensive and recent account of these developments is in Bracher, *op. cit.*, pp. 309-22, esp. 310-11, 320-22; 324 (incl. notes 154, 155); 327-9, 331, 336, 348-53.

[64] *Ibid.*, pp. 353, 365, n.4; Bargenhusen, "Die Grüne Front," *op. cit.*, XXVII/I (January 13, 1931), 46-9; Gerschenkron, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

[65] Konrad Heiden, *Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin, 1933), pp. 252-5; Walter Oehme and Kurt Caro, *Kommt "Das Dritte Reich"?* (Berlin, 1930), pp. 77-82; Hermann Schneider, "Unser täglich Brot; Lebensfragen der deutschen Landwirtschaft," *Nationalsozialistische Bibliothek*, XIX (Munich, 1930), 26-32; Holt, *op. cit.*, pp. 181-3, 185-8.

many's peasantry, of blood and soil, of a *Volksgemeinschaft* in which the peasants would be the backbone of society rather than slaves of "Jewish-Capitalist exploiters." Many desperate and exasperated peasants drew new hope from the program and promises of the Nazis, a party whose previous record of agricultural legislation was pure because it was barren. In the national election of 1930, when the National Socialists made sensational gains, an impressive number of votes came from the Protestant rural regions of northern and central Germany as the peasantry began to rally behind Hitler.[66]

It is hardly surprising that this trend continued for the last two years of the republic. Where else could the peasants have gone but to the Nazis? They had lost confidence in the government and in the agricultural organizations and the old political parties on which they had depended for so many years. Now, as they watched grain tariffs soar upward and new *Osthilfe* laws proclaimed by emergency decrees while their own pleas went unanswered, they could visualize their precarious economic existence completely ruined by the double squeeze of one-sided tariff protection and mounting indebtedness. Had they formed a common front earlier, and then sought an alliance with the urban consumers, their dilemma in the early 1930's might have been forestalled. But regional, religious and even economic differences and jealousies had blocked the first solution, while deep-seated distrust of the cities had blocked the second. Thus they joined the radical movement of the right, and thereby boosted Hitler's position in his bid for power.[67]

As the peasants weakened the republic from below by giving their votes to the man who was resolved to destroy it, the Junkers began their assault from above by intriguing against the Brüning

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[66] Charles P. Loomis and J. Allen Beegle, "The Spread of German Nazism in Rural Areas," *American Sociological Review,* XI (December, 1946), 724-34; Holt, *op. cit.,* pp. 179-81; Heberle, *op. cit.,* pp. 21-2, and *passim;* Gerschenkron, *op. cit.,* p. 146.

[67] Growing support of the NSDAP by German farm groups in general manifested itself also in the Reichstag where delegates representing agricultural interests joined the "National Opposition" during the Brüning era. The *Landbund* also participated in the Harzburg Front demonstration in October 1931, and in the 1932 presidential election openly endorsed Hitler's candidacy. See Bracher, *op. cit.,* pp. 384-5, 387, 390, 394, 409, 413, 421, 469, 477; *Horkenbach, 1931,* p. 301; *ibid., 1932,* pp. 44, 61, 86.

cabinet.[68] The sordid story is too well known to be recounted here. Granted that the machinations of the East Elbian interest groups were not solely responsible for the fate of the last genuinely republican chancellor, they were nevertheless a formidable factor in swaying old President Hindenburg to dismiss his "Brother Jonathan" in favor of the aristocrat, von Papen.[69] The fall of Brüning's government marked the beginning of the end, and not much more need be said about the role of the peasantry during the stages of final dissolution. Peasant and Junker, each in his own way, had contributed to undermine democracy and parliamentary institutions. What followed after April, 1932, was merely a prolonged death struggle. Papen's cabinet of barons found no more favor with the peasantry than had that of his predecessor. With the exception of the Catholic southern German regions, the farmers gave their support overwhelmingly to Hitler in the Reichstag election of July 31, 1932.[70] In September, Papen dissolved the new Reichstag, and called new elections for November 6. This time the outcome was less impressive for Hitler, but although his party lost two million votes, the northern and central rural districts remained faithful to him. Once again only Catholic farm districts remained aloof from the Nazi spell.[71]

The Papen cabinet was doomed, despite Hitler's setback, and a reluctant General von Schleicher became chancellor. The general proved more inept on stage than off, and before long succeeded in alienating every major interest group, including the Green Front. His last and only hope rested with the old president whose frequent stays at Neudeck had exposed him more than ever to the influence of his estate-owning neighbors. Although this was known to Schleicher, he embarked in January, 1933, upon a feud with the *Landbund* when its leaders charged him with neglecting the in-

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[68] Political behavior of the East Elbian estate owners during the last two years of the republic varied widely and thus defies exact analysis. Some joined the Nazis, others remained in the Nationalist Party (Bracher, *op. cit.*, p. 514). It can be assumed, however, that unlike the peasantry most Junkers who went over to National Socialism did so in the expectation that power would fall eventually to them rather than to Hitler.

[69] For the most recent comprehensive account see Bracher, *op. cit.*, pp. 511-26. Cf. Conze, *op. cit.*, p. 660, and Magnus von Braun, *op. cit.*, pp. 217-19, for a dissenting viewpoint.

[70] Holt, *op. cit.*, p. 180; Loomis and Beegle, *op. cit.*, p. 732.

[71] Bracher, *op. cit.*, pp. 645-56, esp. pp. 647-8.

terests of agriculture.[72] In addition, the Junkers suspected Schleicher's hand behind a series of Reichstag committee investigations into alleged misuse of *Osthilfe* funds by the recipients. Here, as on earlier occasions, interference by the agrarian interests was only one contributing factor within a wider network of intrigues, but its effect on the course of events was far from negligible.[73] Deeply disturbed and agitated by the numerous complaints and denunciations he received concerning his chancellor, Hindenburg was easily induced to withdraw his protective shield from the general. The road was free for Hitler's Third Reich where the peasants were showered with praise and honored at the annual Bückeberg festivals, but also made to increase food production for another war in which many of them were to shed their blood to conquer foreign soil that they were destined never to till.

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[72] *Ibid.*, pp. 696-8, 703; *Schulthess', 1933,* pp. 11-14; Schlange-Schöningen, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

[73] Bracher, *op. cit.*, pp. 706, 712, 718; Eyck, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 565-7, 576-8. Cf. Otto Meissner, *Staatssekretär unter Ebert-Hindenburg-Hitler* (Hamburg, 1950), pp. 264-6; and Magnus von Braun, *op. cit.*, pp. 261-2.