The Changing Status of German Farm Labor in the Interwar Period

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DURING THE LAST FIFTY YEARS the status of the German farm workers has undergone a transformation in three different stages. In the first stage, during the imperial regime, the employer-employe relation in eastern Germany still showed feudal traces although the development from status to contract was well under way. In the second stage, the period of democracy, all legal remnants of feudalism were wiped out, the farm worker was included in all labor laws, attempts were made to abolish differences between his status and that of the industrial worker. In the third period the Nazis, by stressing the public character of the work, reversed the former trend and inaugurated a development from contract to status.

The labor-management situation in German agriculture has differed decidedly from that in industry. This is true for all countries but was especially pronounced in Germany because of the late abolition of serfdom and the way in which liberation was achieved. The abolition of serfdom, which was not completed before the middle of the nineteenth century, left Germany as to land tenure divided into two distinct parts: the land east of the Elbe where large estates prevailed, and the south and west with mostly small and middle-sized peasant holdings. The Elbe formed an agrarian and cultural frontier. A serious labor problem existed only in the east where the landed aristocracy maintained many feudal traditions while labor considered itself part of the modern working class.

In the regions of small farming the distinction between farmer and worker was not clear cut. The small farmer could be a worker intermittently. There was no social gap between those who employed and those who provided labor. In fact, the peasant was the most hard working laborer. Twenty-two per cent of all German farmers worked without any help whatsoever and 60.8 per cent only with the help of family members. Not more than 17.2 per cent of all farms hired labor, according to the census of 1925.[1] Children continued to work after school on their parents' farm for ten to fifteen years in return for their keep and pocket money. The peasant and his family worked harder than the farm worker, frequently earned less, but found compensation in their independence, their

social status, their attachment to the soil. They found themselves emotionally bound to their holding by a tie amounting almost to devotion and maintained it for the family even under the most unfavorable conditions. Sales took place only under extreme pressure.

The two million hired workers could be grouped into several main types. More than half of them were farm servants, a large part of whom were employed on family farms. Servants came largely from the peasant class and returned to it through marriage, heritage or settlement. The second largest group were wage hands, either with or without property. They were either deputatists, *i.e.* workers bound by yearly contracts, who received their wages only partly in cash, partly in a plot of land, dwelling with stable, livestock, potatoes, milk, fuel, etc. Or they were seasonal workers who lived in villages near the estate and went out to work during the season. Some were owners of small holdings which did not produce enough to give them a living and who went out for work, leaving cultivation of their own land to their wives and children. In some parts of the south industrial workers took on farm work during long harvest vacations. A third group, migratory workers, moved from one part of the country to the other during the season.

In sections of Northwest Germany the Heuerling system prevailed. Heuerlings were laborers with small holdings who leased land and paid the rent in the form of labor. There were about 30,000 of them before Hitlerism.

The large estates in the East had to rely on a class of landless farmhands, the former serfs, whose land had been bought by the feudal lords during the long drawn out process of liberation. Up to the middle of the nineteenth century they had received a large part of their wages in shares of the crops. This created a community of interest between employer and worker. It meant greater independence, less work, but proletarization when, during the latter part of the nineteenth century, shares were displaced by wages paid in money and definitely fixed wages in kind. With the breaking up of the community of interest the workers began to feel personally dependent, especially since the landholding class regarded them as servants. Until late in the nineteenth century the estate owner constituted the police power and applied the poor law. He controlled the worker's daily life through the school, the church and domination of the local and district community.

[1] *Statistik des Deutschen Reichs. Volks-, Berufs- und Betriebszählung vom 16. Juni 1925.* Vol. 410, Berlin, 1929, p. 9.

The wording of contracts was oppressive. They included regulations concerning family life and prohibition of subscription to socialist papers. Hours were long; wages lagged considerably behind those in industry; housing was poor; education unsatisfactory. Everything that makes life worth living was withheld from the eastern farm workers. A wide breach existed between them and the estate owners, most of whom belonged to the aristocracy. Although population is dense in Germany, these eastern workers lived remote as in a far away colony. Landlessness and isolation were their characteristics in distinction from those in other parts of the country who could mingle with people of similar social standards. Preservation of obsolete laws—due to the political power of the Junker class—made improvements difficult, if not impossible.

The Flight from the Land

WITH THE GROWING INDUSTRIALIZATION of Germany, from the Seventies of the nineteenth century on, the agricultural segment decreased. This phenomenon which appears in all industrializing countries, took on special features in Eastern Germany. Here not only the surplus population migrated to the towns, but migration became flight from the land and especially a flight of eastern laborers. They either went to Western and Central Germany or emigrated overseas. This rural exodus became so detrimental to the Eastern estates that they began to resort to foreign labor. 436,000 foreign workers were employed in German agriculture at the outbreak of the First World War.[2]

The democratic government which had come into power after the revolution of 1918 made serious attempts to abolish feudal privileges and semi-feudal institutions by reform of the electoral system, dissolution of fideicommissa, and abolition of the manorial local government. Although Socialists were for some months alone in power, and later remained the strongest party, no attempt toward breaking up of large estates was made. To aid the small landholder and thus increase this class would in Socialist opinion perpetuate private property, a contradiction to Marxian doctrine. And the great majority of German workers were orthodox Marxists. However, the farm worker's status was to be improved. Three days after coming into power the revolutionary government announced the abrogation of all laws which had hampered organization and strikes in agriculture. A new protective law was passed and farm workers were included in all progressive labor laws enacted during the democratic era: concerning col-

[2] *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich,* 1915, p. 416.

lective bargaining, works councils, labor courts, arbitration, etc. They had already been included in social insurance during the Imperial period.

Freed from all former restrictions, unionization spread in the East while (due to lack of class distinction) it did not spread to the districts of small holdings. A Socialist union organized about 7 to 8 per cent of all farm workers in Germany (131,000) in 1927; a Christian union (organizing mostly Catholic workers) 3 to 5 per cent (80,000). Although officially insisting on their rights to strike, both unions practically refrained from using it after the revolutionary period had come to an end and economic conditions seemed to be stabilized.

The democratic government offered settlement opportunities to the farm worker and succeeded in setting up 57,500 settlements during the short period of its regime. Thus agricultural labor made great gains during the period of democracy. The relics of serfdom had been swept away. Farm labor participated in the general increase in labor's rights and standards. Wages improved, hours were shortened; houses were made tolerable, education spread, public health institutions were provided. Foreign workers were replaced by German workers. Trade unions represented farm workers in many public bodies and political parliaments. *E.g.*, in the Supreme Labor Court a farm worker functioned as lay judge. At the outbreak of the Nazi revolution the process of improvements had not been completed. Prejudices of centuries could not be wiped out in fourteen years. Besides, improvements were hampered by the increasing economic emergency of big estates. Wages of farm workers did not reach those of industrial workers. Protective laws were difficult to enforce. Village life still lacked variety. In spite of settlement possibilities the lack of prospects for the future still caused some feeling of inferiority. The democratic powers were aware of these shortcomings and were ready to meet them with all democratic means at their disposal.

Nazi propaganda failed to win large support among farm workers or big estate owners although it had been successful in some parts of the country in winning the peasants. This was true for those regions where economic disaster had already resulted in some kind of peasant war before that time. In the Province of Schleswig-Holstein open revolts had broken out in 1928, five years prior to the Nazi revolution. Attacks on tax collectors and courthouses had occurred. In this province the Nazis attained 63.8 per cent of the rural vote in July 1932. Heberle[3] who made a special study of the election results, writes that only three rural groups still stood outside at that time: the owners of large estates, the richest farmers and part of the working class.

In their appeal to the farm workers the Nazis had promised them a share in output, shortening of hours, settlement opportunities, no wage earning by wives, no Polish workers, and pension funds. Of these promises none was fulfilled: the worker's wages did not increase considerably although some inequities were abolished; his hours were prolonged; even before the war women had to work harder, and pensions were not increased. The worker had no chance to settle in his own country and the threat of foreign workers' competition increased tremendously. And yet his status had changed, partly to the better and partly to the worse. I shall restrict myself to the period of peace because it offers a clearer picture.

Changes under Naziism

To take the achievements first: The glorification of the peasant and the farm worker as superior to the industrial population, the constant praise of their being rooted in the soil and of their national culture may have decreased the feeling of inferiority of the rural population. In the Nazi hierarchy peasants and farm workers together with soldiers were to become the group of highest prestige. The leisure time organization, Strength through Joy, provided vacation trips and hiking tours in which farm workers took part. The worker's prestige was enhanced by making him participate in the Reich Peasant Day, in fairs and other celebrations. Groups were taken to party conventions and to Olympic games. Theaters and movies went on tour to remote villages. Village community evenings brought entertainment. A special section, Beauty of the Village, saw to it that swimming pools were established, stadiums and shooting galleries built. The village inn was to assume a cheerful appearance. School buildings and railway stations were to become models of beauty. Fences had to be repaired and dung heaps transferred. The village lime tree and soldiers' monument were surrounded with beautiful fences. Signposts were designed by craftsmen whom party membership transformed into artists. Village life was made more attractive by the revival of old customs such as peasant dances and harvest festivals. To be sure, beautification consisted in some cases only in the application of blue and pink paint to dilapidated buildings. Paint was brushed over the wooden gate railings where posters announced "Trespassing forbidden."

But in general, those undertakings which were actually carried out deserve praise and should become a model for other countries. However, they benefited only the workers who were working in or near peasant vil-

[3] Rudolph Heberle, "From Democracy to Nazism: A Regional Case Study on Political Parties in Germany," 1945, p. 56.

lages. Hardly any beautification or revival of folks dances and plays were carried out on big estates in the east.

A definite change to the worse had taken place in the chances for independent ownership. It was the secret longing of most farm workers to acquire some land of their own and become independent farmers. When the Nazis denomadized the soil, *i.e.* when the Hereditary Farm law in 1933 prohibited sale, subdivision and permanent lease of peasant farms (up to 325 acres), the farm worker as well as the younger peasants' sons were left out in the cold. They could no longer acquire peasant farms. A class barrier had been erected. Furthermore, the original plan to divide large estates and thus give settlement opportunities to the landless workers was not carried out. The fight which broke out within the party between the defenders of the old program who wanted small farms and dense population, and those who demanded an increase of staple foods in order to attain some self-sufficiency of food supply, was decided in favor of large and medium sized holdings. Thus the landless worker of the east remained without a farm and without hope of ever acquiring one.

The Nazis wanted to denomadize the farm worker just as they had done it with the farm land. Their attempts to do this took varying forms. The government wanted an increase in work leases, a transformation of the landless worker into a Heuerling. He then would feel like an owner, they thought, and not abandon his land. However, no progress could be made in this direction because the short growing seasons in the east did not warrant scattering labor over small areas.

Another attempt to bind the worker to the soil aimed at enlarging his wages in kind in proportion to those in cash. With deputate land that he could till in his spare time he would become attached to the land, would work longer hours and become interested in efficient farming. Class feeling would thus be overcome. Although the Trustees of Labor who issued collective rules for farm labor were instructed to increase wages in kind, the statistics of 1938 reveal that there had been no change from the pre-Hitler period. The reason may have been that efficiency could be stimulated better by incentive cash wages.

Migratory agricultural workers were compelled to take all-year-round employment on farms while the government provided seasonal help by several more or less compulsory land services. In addition monetary stimuli were provided. The rural population was offered the privilege of transforming marriage and furnishing loans into gifts if husband and wife remained in farm work for some years. Farm workers remained nearly tax

free before the war. Children allowances paid by the government meant a considerable improvement for the standard of living of large families, and German farm workers have large families.

While all these stimuli did not restrict the worker's freedom to move, this was done by the very crude means of tieing the worker to the land in 1934, when unemployment in the cities was much larger than in the country. Employment of those who had done farm work during the last three years was prohibited in non-agricultural occupations. Dismissal of former farm workers from industrial work could be ordered. This freezing of farm workers to the land aroused deep resentment and was certainly not appropriate to inspire enthusiasm for farm work. In November, 1936, mobility was restored because the government was afraid of frightening youth away from agriculture and because industry began to need manpower.

Labor reacted to its regained mobility by flight from agriculture without precedence. Between 1936 and 1938, about 1.8 million farmers and farm workers[4] (out of a total of 9.3 million) left the farms. Within two years German agriculture lost 16.7 per cent of its laborers.[5] The exodus was not restricted to the East; the centrally located State of Saxony lost one-third of its farm hands, the southern State of Wurttemberg 17.4 per cent of its farm population. These tremendous losses resulted in greater exertion of those who remained and—since mechanization could not progress as quickly—in a decrease of output. In March 1939, *i.e.* before the outbreak of the war, immobilization had to be resorted to again.

Concerning the employer-employe relation as such, it is well known that the Nazis abolished trade unions and works councils and replaced collective agreements by government dictation. The collective rules, ordered by government officials, were not less favorable than collective agreements would have been. They were strictly enforced. In fact, the social honor courts, set up by the regime to protect the honor of the worker as well as of the employer, were used prevailingly to prevent misuse of authority and exploitation of the worker. The trustees were advised to use these courts for forcing employers to improve housing conditions, for punishing those who provided insufficient or unsuitable food. The courts intervened in cases which could not be punished in other courts. Frequently mentioned

[4] Guenther Pacyna in *Nationalsozialistische Landpost*, March 3, 1939. The census of 1939 recorded a loss of 1.45 million as compared to 1935; however, the exodus was larger since alien workers and girls who served a compulsory year in agriculture, were included in the census figures.

[5] *Wirtschaft und Statistik*, 1940, No. 23, pp. 538–9.

was a case in which a farmer refused to drive the seriously ill children of his worker to the hospital. Although these courts intervened only in few cases, they may have acted as a deterrent; especially to those who did not stay in good favor with the party. On the other hand, workers who knew that their employer was in good standing in the party never would have complained.

Protective laws and social insurance remained essentially unchanged.

Serfs of the State

THUS I COME TO THE CONCLUSION that the Nazis made great efforts to improve the prestige of the farm workers and to remove subserviences which may have remained from feudal times. The farm worker was glorified as a German worker, in pictures, books, movies and on the stage. However, the worker who was tied to farming found himself in some kind of new dependency. He was a free worker in relation to his employer, a serf in relation to the State. The employer acted as a functionary of the State and was supposed to be paternalistic to his workers. Long term contracts, which workers were compelled to conclude, point in the same direction as do severe punishments of breaches of contract and of unjustified absenteeism. In distinction from medieval feudalism, the worker was not a fixture to the particular farm, not dependent on the master he happened to have, but was bound to obtain official consent for exchanging his employer. By means of a work book the government watched every worker and controlled every change of a job.

The worker had gained in status by the levelling down of higher classes and the creation of a lower class, composed of Jews, "enemies of the State" and foreign workers. However, as production soldier—to use a Nazi term—he could not lose the feeling of inferiority. The soldier, the engineer, the skilled industrial worker proved more indispensable for the preparation of war. The flight from agriculture shows that the farm workers considered themselves an underprivileged group.

The worker's standard of living did not deteriorate because the government felt responsible for keeping labor as a valuable instrument of production in good physical condition as well as in good morale. Controlled in his work, the worker was not free in his personal life. But control of income, of mobility and living and loss of freedom were not characteristic of only one class in Nazi Germany. It was the fate of the nation.

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