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WORKERS IN WILHELMINE GERMANY

Germany during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was the scene of a remarkable industrial boom, during which it surpassed Great Britain as the greatest European industrial power. The Ruhr became Europe's most important heavy industry region, with its great complex of coal mines, foundries, and rolling mills. While a relatively small elite of entrepreneurs engineered this transformation, they needed hordes of workers to implement their designs and plans. What was it like to be the workers themselves in this period and age? What were their working conditions like? What political ideas did they have, or their spokesmen? How did they struggle against, as well as cooperate with, their employers? Four historical works about German workers in Wilhelmine Germany help answer this question, using varying methodologies, through different perspectives: Gerald Feldman, Army, Industry, and Labor in Germany, 1914-1918,[1] S.H.F. Hickey, Workers in Imperial Germany The Miners of the Ruhr,[2] David F. Crew, Town in the Ruhr A Social History of Bochum, 1860-1914,[3] and Richard J. Evans and W.R. Lee, eds., The German Family Essays on the Social History of the Family in Ninteenth- and Twentieth-century Germany.[4]

Feldman's Army, Industry, and Labor can be seen as the work which looks at workers largely through the eyes of the German political and entrepreneurial elite. It constitutes a history of the German home front during World War I, emphasizing the administration of the wartime economy and the interest group

[1](Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966).

[2](Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1985).

[3](New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

[4](London: Croom Helm, 1981).

politics surrounding the latter. The three main groups described by Feldman in continuous conflict were the top army commanders stationed at home, the business elite, and labor leaders, with the Reichstag and the wartime bureaucracies as the main arenas of conflict. He writes about German labor primarily "from the top down," in which the army and industry compete ferociously for the available manpower of Germany while attempting simultaneously to place restrictions on the latter's rights to change jobs. This work powerfully explodes the myth Germany during World War I had the economic and bureaucratic apparatus best suited for war, for we read of its leaders repeatedly admiring Britain's wartime home front organization (F., pp. 169, 206, 228, 369).

The key to Feldman's work is how two of these three major interest groups (labor and business, the former represented by the unions and the SPD) would use the army or other government bureaucracies to maneuver for advantage in trying to restrict the freedom of the other, using the war's exigencies as justification for such attempts. Both sides knew that despite inevitable denials by either that wartime measures were precedents for postwar relations that in fact they really were (F., pp. 237, 243, 442, 507). This particularly worried business, for because of the prevailing labor shortage power had shifted towards labor and its unions (F., p. 473). The imposition of workers committees that could tie management's hands in decision-making particularly worried businessmen, who had spent the whole prewar period fighting such union demands as collective bargaining. In the debate and bureaucratic maneuvering over the passage of the rather disastrous Auxiliary Service Law of December 1916, which Feldman traces out in minute detail, the SPD and its unions only accepted restrictions on job changing in exchange for the establishment of committees that included labor representatives in equal strength to that of management's. The supreme irony for industry concerning

the Auxiliary Service law was that it had originally wanted it in order to help it implement the Hindenberg plan for greater arms production through restricting workers' rights to change jobs, but by the time the bill had wound its way through the Reichstag, the bill had become mostly a vehicle for implementing union/SPD demands. The restrictions on job changing were rather theoretical, especially since workers who quit jobs without a leaving certificate that signified they had "good reasons" for doing so could still be hired by a new employer if they waited two weeks first. Furthermore, competition for labor was so intense between employers, especially those in war industry, they were often willing to look the other way about hiring workers without leaving certificates anyway.

The government, whether it be the army, the War Office, the Reichstag, or some other organ, sought wartime labor peace through declaring the policy of Burgfrieden. With its declaration, signified on labor's behalf by the SPD's approval of war credits in August 1914, there was to be complete unity of all German workers, businesspeople, farmers, civil officials, soldiers, officers, etc. against the enemy, and a truce concerning internal domestic strife. In fact, this declaration of Burgfrieden was a facade, for under the cover of "wartime necessity," impelled by wartime shortages and scarcity, each interest group fought ferociously to maintain or to improve its prewar standing, using the power of the government to accomplish its aims. The SPD and its unions signed on to support the war effort, which involved them getting in bed with the authoritarian-militaristic German establishment they loathed, but then insisted on a quid pro quo in return. Union leaders pledged to help authorities prevent strikes, yet would often use the strikes that did occur to pursue their own goals, such as organizing workers (F., pp. 79, 320, 333, 336, 375+, 508, 520). These leaders were thoroughly co-opted by the army, bureaucracy, and business elite, but insisted on something in return, for they knew they would lose all control over the

workers they were supposed to be leading if they did not continue to represent the rank and file's interests. For as we will see below, such leaders often had enough trouble calling or preventing strikes before the war began as it was.

Feldman's work traces the twists and turns of German home front politics in painstaking detail, including the enormous errors of the "Ludendorff dictatorship" in overestimating the resources Germany had when pursuing a policy of total victory in 1917-18. This book contains much on high German politics during this period, but often tends to focus on the second tier cabinet members and high level bureaucrats who controlled the administrative apparatus on the home front, especially those agencies involved in rationing. He draws excellent, interesting character sketches of the leaders in question, including Ludendorff, Hindenberg, Groener, Bauer, and Bethmann-Hollweg. While his work is rather dry in places, such as the detailed description of the origination and passage of the Auxiliary Service bill, this aspect is offset by the sociologically acute insights into Germany society during this period that he draws (compare F., p. 120). However, many of his best insights and descriptions on wartime Germany are covered in passing, such as how the mittelstand was gravely concerned by how its standard of living fell during the war more than industrial workers, signified by the clothes both groups wore becoming more similar (f., pp. 464-466). Some more analysis of such points would have stood his work in better stead. Nevertheless, he gives you an excellent feel for the chaos and bureaucratic disorganization that often reigned in Germany during the war, belying the image of great German military and home front efficiency that has grown up in this century.

Hickey's Workers in Imperial Germany concerns itself principally with the coal miners of the Ruhr, and is a rather different kettle of fish from Feldman's work, for it is a view of the miners largely from their own per-

spective: This work is clearly history written from the bottom-up. On the other hand, it is more like Feldman's in its methodological approach, for it largely eschews the charts of statistics and social science techniques that fill the pages of Crew's Town in the Ruhr. Hickey starts by describing the miners themselves and their material conditions and religious beliefs before moving to their strikes, trade union organizations, and politics. His work is praiseworthy for balancing well concern with politics yet describing everyday life effectively as well for the Ruhr's coal miners. Unlike such a work as E.P. Thompson's The Making of the English Working Class, Hickey describes the experience of work itself in striking detail, such as his use of quotes from miners themselves about their "hard and unpleasant" work (H., p. 111). His work is replete with acute analytical insights about why such and such existed or occurred, and his conclusion about the problems the unions and working class faced in becoming more organized is truly brilliant (H., pp. 290-296).

A key aspect of Hickey's work is composed of the reasons for and against solidarity among the miners as contrasted to the iron industry workers, which Crew also writes about extensively as well (C., p. 163+). Hickey (and Crew) describe how a lack of differentiation among miners in skill levels, especially between the unskilled and skilled, as compared to the iron workers, made collective feeling, as well as collective action, easier. The Ruhr's miners also had an unusual degree of feeling a loss in status due to earlier mining law reforms in which the Prussian state gave up day-to-day management of the mines, allowing owners almost complete managerial discretion. The growth in the size of the mines employing many hundreds of men (women did not work underground in the Ruhr) caused workers to have far less individual contact with employers than in the past when mines often employed only several dozen workers each, or fewer. Also, the miners often ended up in occupationally segregated communities in which they would mingle with one another socially

off the job because companies would have to build often much of, or even all, the housing for their newly-opened mines in what had been rural areas.

On the other hand, key problems existed in creating an effective solidarity among miners, which was undermined by the amazing amount of job switching and turnover at the mines, the immense power of the employers, especially when part of a cartel, as well as the ethnic, religious, and political differences among the miners which their similar work environments and conditions could not erase. As Hickey notes, the miners never won a substantiative concession from employers before the war without the government intervening to help them (H., pp. 225, 296, 302). Divisions in the Ruhr's working class are illustrated by how the SPD, Centre, and even the employer-dominated National Liberal parties all successfully competed for working class votes. Furthermore, no less than four unions came to exist among the miners: the Polish union, the Catholic, the liberal Hirsch-Duncker, and the SPD's (H., pp. 237-238, 262+, 274, 292). Furthermore, there was the problem of the sheer number of men to organize--nearly some 400,000 by 1912--which made the older, spontaneous wildcat strike harder to spread and/or be sustained, not to mention competing coal fields elsewhere in Germany and Europe which could increase production in case of a strike in the Ruhr (H., p. 205). None of the major strikes in this period--1889, 1905, 1912--lasted more than a few weeks, and normally only a few days, which is very different from major British coal miners' strikes, which often lasted for months. All this helps support Hickey's view the SPD and its unions were in the process of creating class consciousness in a still forming, Protean German working class, for many in the Ruhr's workforce were freshly drawn from those with an agricultural background who were not used to depending exclusively or mostly upon paid wage work (H., p. 25).

The rootlessness and job changing by miners and workers in the Ruhr were truly astonishing, something which Crew extensively discusses as well (C., p.

60+; H., pp. 28-32). On average more than half of all miners changed their jobs every year, while even in bad years at least a third did so (H., p. 28). This turnover had its effects on union (and SPD) effectiveness as well, since newly recruited workers would often move and drop out of the organizations in question (H., pp. 241, 258-259). The employers were often attempting to recruit workers long distance from eastern Prussia, including Polish-speaking areas, to fulfill their needs for labor. Heilwig Schomerus maintains such turnover and migrating is not typical of developed industrial economies, since the migration is caused often by seasonal, agriculturally-related factors (E. & L., p. 180).

One remarkable factor about most miner's strikes in the Ruhr was how they were spontaneous grassroots creations, with the exception of the dismal failure of the 1912 strike, which was called by three of the four unions in the Ruhr (the Catholic Gewerkverein abstained). The initiative came from the bottom-up, leaving the miners' "leaders" scrambling to catch up. During a smaller strike in 1891, the local SPD newspaper even had to concede: "If the miners do not listen to well intentioned advice or if they are unable to control their bitterness any longer, then all right. Let it run its course; we cannot prevent it" (H., p. 178). Hence, the unauthorized, wildcat strikes that occurred during World War I in various parts of Germany that union leaders could not stop from starting were hardly anything new.

Crew's Town in the Ruhr is a social history of Bochum, and it is quite similar to Hickey's work in subject matter, although it includes the iron industry which Hickey largely omits. Both deal with coal miners and focus their analysis upon Bochum, although the Hickey's analysis is somewhat more regional in perspective. Crew's work spends much more time analyzing the city's politics in light of the relationship between the business elite and the local mittelstand (C., pp. 110+, 137). Hickey concentrates mostly on the politics of the mineworkers themselves and their local unions, especially the SPD's coal

miners union, the Alter Verband. As noted above, Crew spends much more space on statistical charts and social science methodology than does Hickey. For example, he did a study of working class social mobility by using a random sample of 1,117 adult males chosen from the 1880 Bochum city directory, and traces any changes in status by 1901 (C., pp. 75-86). The results are striking for there was significantly less social mobility in Bochum compared to America for working class males. He also spends more time than Hickey in specifically attacking false analysis of this or that phenomenon, such as his powerful critique of various hypotheses as to why miners became militant and other workers were not as much so (C., pp. 163-186). Crew notes how miners were at near subsistence levels in the mid-1880's, yet were much militant than similarly paid workers in the local iron industry. Crew also discusses the economics and business problems of the local coal and iron industry, such as foreign competition, cartelization, etc., than Hickey does, who concentrates on the miners' problems

One misconception found in Arthur Imhof's essay in The German Family is the view that women's work became more intense without (by implication) men's work also intensifying during industrialization, having similar negative effects (L. & E., pp. 159, 172). However, this process of intensification can be found also in industries dominated by men, such as coal mining and the iron industry during and in the wake of the Great Depression of the 1870s, in which cutthroat competition between mine owners and steel firms caused them to cut wages and tried to maximize output by pushing the miners as low as possible harder. (C., pp. 24-26, 36-42). Hence, the excess differential of female over male mortality exclusive of childbed fatalities should not be attributed to an intensification of female work without further study, such as checking what this differential was in more industrial, urban areas than the three villages and one small town Imhof's article studied, such as those of the Ruhr. Logically the intensification of women's work did not occur in the Ruhr because women in this area had

largely relieved of the burdens of agricultural tasks, except for small vegetable patches and a few animals kept in sheds, which is the type of work Imhof is discussing in his article. (On the other hand, because local heavy industry could not use women's labor much, women became very dependent upon their menfolk's wages, which caused a significant degree of insecurity since it was considerably harder for a woman to make up the shortfall involved when her man was injured, sick, or killed on or off the job (H., p. 153; C., p. 55)).

The book Evans and Lee edited as well as contributed essays to, The German Family, is different from the other three works discussed above for being a collection of essays, and for bringing attention squarely onto issues of gender. This work contains a variety of methodologies, from such a traditional social history effort as Robyn Daisy's study of women garment workers in Hamburg and Berlin, to the anthropological approach used by Wilke and Wagner in studying the social structure and customs of the village of Körle, to the almost mind-numbing complexity of the data on Duisberg's housing used by Jackson in his social science approach to testing the nineteenth century view that high housing densities cause social pathologies. Lee in his opening essay also lays out the analytical considerations researchers on the family should take into account, critiquing the limits to Peter Laslett's older quantification approach. Karin Hausin's essay on the development of the ideology of separate spheres for men (public, work) and women (private, family) for their sex roles in society during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contains a striking footnote on the subject of methodologies, administering a careful rebuke to the cliometricians of the new economic history:

> In comparison to the quantitative results of a family research based on the methods of historical demography the present work--as yet unquantified and possibly not amenable to quantification--runs the risk of being branded unscientific. In my opinion this methodological failing is at any rate less theoretically problematic than restricting research to such topics as can be easily quantified.

While such social science methods and statistics can be very valuable to the researching historian, the controversy erupting over Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman's Time on the Cross, the revisionist view of American Black slavery, shows they are hardly infallible: garbarge in, garbarge out. Hence, Evans and Lee's work contains much food for though not only on the subject of the German family, but on how to do social/family history.

All four of these works contain approaches and methodologies that are valuable in analyzing the struggles of the German working class against an authoritarian--militaristic state and the upper middle class it had co-opted. Each of the four books does a very good job, within their chosen methods and parameters, of analyzing German workers and their leaders. Feldman's top-down approach using a traditional verbal analysis of primary documents constitutes an interesting contrast to Crew's bottom-up approach which often uses social science/statistical methods. Hickey's work falls in the middle between these two, using a bottom-up approach with a traditional verbal analysis of primary documents mainly. Evans and Lee's work constitutes a grab bag of different methodologies, but they all basically use a bottom-up approach to social/family history. Each of these approaches and methodologies is of value for historians, for no one approach will give you a full picture. Instead, using the "tools" of the historian's trade one is comfortable with, one can use the method(s) with which one will have the most success. And all four of these works, using the approaches and methodologies the authors judged best or most useful, help bring us a more detailed and (hopefully) more objective view of the past.