

Studies in Labour History



**Simon Constantine**

# **Social Relations in the Estate Villages of Mecklenburg c.1880–1924**



SOCIAL RELATIONS IN THE ESTATE VILLAGES  
OF MECKLENBURG c.1880–1924

*For Konni*

# Social Relations in the Estate Villages of Mecklenburg c.1880–1924

SIMON CONSTANTINE  
*University of Wolverhampton, UK*

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2007 by Ashgate Publishing

Published 2016 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

Copyright © Simon Constantine 2007

Simon Constantine has asserted his moral right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Notice:

Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

#### **British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Constantine, Simon

Social relations in the estate villages of Mecklenburg

c.1880–1924. – (Studies in labour history)

1. Sociology, Rural – Germany – Mecklenburg–Vorpommern –

History 2. Agricultural laborers – Germany –

Mecklenburg–Vorpommern – History 3. Mecklenburg–Vorpommern

(Germany) – Rural conditions 4. Germany – Social conditions

– 1871–1918 5. Germany – Social conditions – 1918–1933

I. Title

307.7'2'094317

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Constantine, Simon.

Social relations in the estate villages of Mecklenburg c.1880-1924 / by Simon Constantine.

p. cm.—(Studies in labour history)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7546-5503-9 (alk. paper) 1. Working class—Germany—Mecklenburg (Region)—History. 2. Landowners—Germany—Mecklenburg (Region)—History.

3. Mecklenburg (Germany: Region)—Rural conditions. I. Title.

HD8450.C66 2007

331.10943'1709041—dc22

2006030019

ISBN 13: 978-0-7546-5503-9 (hbk)

# Contents

<i>General Editor's Preface</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
Introduction	1
1 The Estate Village Population	13
2 Keeping Workers Working: Management and Resident Labour	37
3 Mismanagement and Labour Protest	69
4 Worker-Peasants and Urban Recruits: Labour Mobility between the Village and the City	87
5 Polish Seasonal Workers	107
Conclusion	135
<i>Bibliography</i>	143
<i>Index</i>	161

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Studies in Labour History

## General Editor's Preface

This series of books provides reassessments of broad themes in labour history, along with more detailed studies arising from the latest research in the field. Most books are single-authored but there are also volumes of essays, centred on key themes and issues, usually emerging from major conferences organized by the British Society for the Study of Labour History. Every author approaches their task with the needs of both specialist and non-specialist readerships in mind, for labour history is a fertile area of historical scholarship, stimulating wide-ranging interest, debate and further research, within both social and political history and beyond.

When this series was first launched (with Chris Wrigley as its general editor) in 1998, labour history was emerging, reinvigorated, from a period of considerable introspection and external criticism. The assumptions and ideologies underpinning much labour history had been challenged by postmodernist, anti-Marxist and, especially, feminist thinking. There was also a strong feeling that often it had emphasized institutional histories of organized labour, at the expense of histories of work generally, and of workers' social relations beyond their workplaces – especially gender and wider familial relationships. The Society for the Study of Labour History was concerned to consolidate and build upon this process of review and renewal through the publication of more substantial works than its journal *Labour History Review* could accommodate, and also to emphasize that though it was a British body, its focus and remit extended to international, transnational and comparative perspectives.

Arguably, the extent to which labour history was narrowly institutionalized has been exaggerated. This series therefore includes studies of labour organizations, including international ones, where there is a need for modern reassessment. However, it is also its objective to maintain the breadth of labour history's gaze beyond conventionally organized workers, sometimes to workplace experiences in general, sometimes to industrial relations, and naturally to workers' lives beyond the immediate realm of work.

Malcolm Chase  
Society for the Study of Labour History  
University of Leeds

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Deutsche Akademischer Austausch Dienst, and the Institut für Europäische Geschichte, Mainz, for supporting this project. Thanks are also due to Dick Geary for his advice and assistance.

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Introduction

## Historiographical Note

Until relatively recently, the social history of Germany has been dominated by studies of urban life. This is particularly true of the lower classes, despite the fact that 31 per cent of the German labour force still worked in agriculture as late as 1907.<sup>1</sup> Rural society was regarded as somehow conservative and unchanging, and, with the exception of the Prussian rural elite, attracted comparatively little attention.<sup>2</sup> In the last two decades historians have begun correcting this imbalance, and a number of important studies of rural life during the Empire and Weimar Republic have been published. However, in the main, this research has focused upon the landowning peasantry and the rural society of the west.<sup>3</sup> The very different rural landscape of East Elbian Germany, where the lower social strata consisted of rural labourers with little or no land of their own, is much less well explored.<sup>4</sup> It was claimed, as recently as in 1996, that the agricultural workers of the Second Empire were a ‘forgotten

---

<sup>1</sup> Gerd Hohorst, Jürgen Kocka and Gerhard A. Ritter (eds) *Sozialgeschichtliches Arbeitsbuch. Materialien zur Statistik des Kaiserreiches 1870–1914* (Munich, 1975), p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Kaschuba, ‘Dörfliche Kultur: Ideologie und Wirklichkeit zwischen Reichsgründung und Faschismus’, in Jacobeit, Mooser, Sträth (eds), *Idylle oder Aufbruch? Das Dorf im bürgerlichen 19. Jahrhundert im europäischen Vergleich* (Berlin, 1990), p. 194.

<sup>3</sup> For research with a focus on rural society in the west see Richard Evans and W. R. Lee (eds), *The German peasantry: conflict and community in rural society from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries* (London, 1986); Robert G. Moeller (ed.), *Peasants and lords in modern Germany: recent studies in agricultural history* (Boston, 1986); E. Hennig and M. Kieserling, *Zwischen Fabrik und Hof: Zwischen Republik und Dorf* (Kassel, 1990); Wolfgang Kaschuba, *Dörfliches Überleben: Zur Geschichte materieller und sozialer Reproduktion ländlicher Gesellschaften im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen, 1982); Wolfgang v. Hippel, ‘Industrieller Wandel im ländlichen Raum: Bergheim am Neckar’ *AfS*, 19 (1979); Wolfgang Jacobeit, Josef Mooser and Bo Sträth (eds), *Idylle oder Aufbruch? Das Dorf im bürgerlichen 19. Jahrhundert im europäischen Vergleich* (Berlin, 1990); Jonathan Osmond, *Rural Protest in the Weimar Republic: The free peasantry in the Rhineland and Bavaria* (London, 1993). Rural society in Bavaria is also the focus in Benjamin Ziemann, *Front und Heimat: ländliche Kriegserfahrungen im südlichen Bayern 1914–1923* (Essen, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> A notable exception here is the body of work produced by Jens Flemming. See, in particular, his *Landwirtschaftliche Interessen und Demokratie: ländliche Gesellschaft, Agrarverbände und Staat 1890–1925* (Bonn, 1978); ‘Die Bewaffnung des Landvolkes’, *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, 2 (1979): pp. 7–36; ‘Die vergessene Klasse: Literatur zur Geschichte der Landarbeiter in Deutschland’, *Historische Zeitschrift*, special issue, 15 (1986): pp. 389–418; ‘Fremdheit und Ausbeutung. Großgrundbesitz, “Leutenot”, und Wanderarbeiter im Wilhelminischen Deutschland’, in Heinz Reif (ed.), *Ostelbische Agrargesellschaft im Kaiserreich und in der Weimarerer Republik: Agrarkrise, junkerliche Interessenpolitik, Modernisierungsstrategien* (Berlin, 1994), pp. 345–60.

component of rural society’, and that, for the Weimar period, there was a ‘complete absence of scholarly work on the subject of estate villages’.<sup>5</sup>

Wolfram Pyta’s study of political culture in Protestant rural society, and research, in particular by Baranowski and Kölling on Pomerania, have partially rectified this situation for the later period,<sup>6</sup> and a number of important publications have also appeared in recent years on East Elbian Germany during the *Kaiserreich*. Much of this work, however, continues to concentrate exclusively on the rural landowning classes, and invariably the focus is on one or more of Prussia’s eastern provinces, with the result that the Mecklenburg states continue to be largely overlooked.<sup>7</sup>

This study of estate villages in Mecklenburg is thus a contribution towards improving our understanding of one of Germany’s more neglected social strata, in one of its least studied areas. This said, it would be misleading to portray it as an expedition into entirely unexplored territory. The research presented here builds, in particular, on related work carried out by historians in the GDR on Polish seasonal labour in this region,<sup>8</sup> and also on the work of historians and anthropologists, who have

<sup>5</sup> ‘Untersuchungen über Gutsdörfer östlich der Elbe, die wissenschaftlichen Ansprüchen genügen, fehlen ganz.’ Wolfram Pyta, *Dorfgemeinschaft und Parteipolitik 1918–1933: Die Verschränkung von Milieu und Parteien in den Protestantischen Landgebieten Deutschlands in der Weimarer Republik* (Düsseldorf, 1996), p. 44. James Retallack, *Germany in the Age of Kaiser Wilhelm II* (London, 1996), p. 102. More recently, Werner Berg felt justified in regarding his own work on estates as ‘an advance into unexplored territory’ [ein Vorstoß in forschersches Neuland] (Werner Berg, *Die Teilung der Leitung: Ursprünge industriellen Managements in den landwirtschaftlichen Gutsbetrieben Europas* (Göttingen, 1999), p. 13).

<sup>6</sup> See Pyta, *Dorfgemeinschaft*; Bernd Kölling, *Familienwirtschaft und Klassenbildung: Landarbeiter im Arbeitskonflikt: Das ostelbische Pommern und die norditalienische Lomellina 1901–1921* (Vierow bei Greifswald, 1996); Shelley Baranowski, *The Sanctity of Rural Life: Nobility, Protestantism, and Nazism in Weimar Prussia* (Oxford, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Reinhold Brunner, ‘Die Stellung des ostelbischen Adels zu Kultur, Wissenschaft und Kunst am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts’, in Kurt Adamy and Kristina Hübener (eds) *Adel und Staatsverwaltung in Brandenburg im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert: ein historischer Vergleich* (Potsdam, 1996), pp. 167–84; Ilona Buchsteiner, ‘Pommerscher Adel im Wandel des 19. Jahrhunderts’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 25 (1999): pp. 343–74; Marcus Funck and Stephan Malinowski, ‘Geschichte von oben. Autobiographien als Quelle einer Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Adels in Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik’, *Historische Anthropologie*, 7 (1999): pp. 237–70; René Schiller, *Vom Rittergut zum Grossgrundbesitz: ökonomische und soziale Transformationsprozesse der ländlichen Eliten in Brandenburg im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Johannes Nichtweiß, *Die ausländischen Saisonarbeiter in der Landwirtschaft der östlichen und mittleren Gebiete des deutschen Reiches* (Berlin, 1959). Reno Stutz, *Landwirtschaft und ausländische Arbeitskräfte im Großherzogtum Mecklenburg-Schwerin zwischen 1850 und 1914* (Rostock, 1991). Elsner’s many publications are listed in the bibliography. Of course there are problems with much of the GDR work, some of which is framed as a political attack on the ‘imperialist’ Bundesrepublik for its continuing use of foreign ‘guest workers’ (see, for example, Elsner, ‘Zum Menschenhandel im 20. Jahrhundert: Junker und Schnitter in Mecklenburg in den Jahren 1914–16’, *Unser Ostseebezirk*, 3 (1961): pp. 226–8). The crude, Marxist interpretative model used, and the uncritical use of Marxist

drawn extensively on the large body of material left by the Mecklenburg folklorist and collector Richard Wossidlo (1859–1939).<sup>9</sup> The approach adopted also owes much to the suggestions of other historians of rural Germany. The outline of the changes that occurred in the composition of estate workforces presented in the first chapter developed, in part, from Robert Moeller's call for more research on demographic change in the countryside, including the gender composition of the labour-force and patterns of urban-rural migration.<sup>10</sup> The following two chapters are partly a response to his and Ian Farr's belief that work needed to be done on the day-to-day hegemony of estate authorities and that 'peasant culture', and the role of religion and popular festivals, all needed to be explored more thoroughly. Farr's and Clemens Zimmerman's suggestion that folklorist sources could be used for this purpose was also particularly appropriate advice.<sup>11</sup> Moeller also called for further research on 'the points of intersection' between urban and rural society. One aspect of this intersection, which I explore in the fourth chapter, is the employment pattern of free labourers, whose search for work often

---

terminology, is also unhelpful. One particular obstacle in the way of sensible discussion is the ideological conviction that all workers were intrinsically revolutionary. With this sacrosanct, many of the authors were then forced into the futile explanation of why workers did not behave in a revolutionary fashion at certain times. Such a model leads, among other things, to constant defamation of the SPD as the party which 'betrayed' workers' 'true revolutionary interests'. See Heinz Koch, *Novemberrevolution und revolutionäre Nachkriegskrise in Mecklenburg-Schwerin 1917–1923* (Rostock, 1987), esp. p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> See, in particular, Gisela Burde-Schneidewind, *Herr und Knecht: Anti-feudale Sagen aus Mecklenburg* (Berlin, 1960); Siegfried Neumann, *Soziale Konflikte im mecklenburgischen Volksschwank* (Rostock, 1961) and Neumann, *Ein Mecklenburgischer Volkserzähler: Die Geschichte des August Rust* (Berlin, 1968); Ulrich Bentzien, *Landarbeiter und agrartechnischer Fortschritt in Mecklenburg* (Berlin, 1983); Ulrich Bentzien, Siegfried Neumann and Karl Baumgarten (eds), *Mecklenburgische Volkskunde* (Rostock, 1988). For a series of informative papers on the Damshagen estate see Gisela Burde-Schneidewind, 'Volkskundliche Aspekte bei der Erforschung der Geschichte landwirtschaftlicher Betriebe', *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 3 (1967): pp. 82–92; Karl Baumgarten, 'Damshagen – Bauen und Wohnen in einem mecklenburgischen Gutsdorf (von den Anfängen bis 1945)', *Jahrbuch für Volkskunde und Kulturgeschichte*, 16 (1973): pp. 142–67; Gisela Burde-Schneidewind, 'Damshagen: Erzählüberlieferungen aus der Geschichte des Dorfes', *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 18 (1975): pp. 103–32. Ingeborg Müller, 'Damshagen – Aus dem Alltagsleben der Tagelöhnerfrauen', *Jahrbuch für Volkskunde und Kulturgeschichte*, 20 (1977): pp. 86–103. For additional research on agricultural labour in Mecklenburg see Hanna Haack, 'Bäuerliche und soziale Gruppen landarmer Produzenten in Mecklenburg-Schwerin im neunzehnten Jahrhundert', *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (1982) 1: pp. 73–111, and Robert Pfahl, 'Landarbeiterlöhne und ihre Bewegung vom Anfang des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zum Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges: eine Studie zur Lage kontraktgebundener Landarbeiter auf den domanialen Pachthöfen des Großherzogtums Mecklenburg-Schwerin', *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (1973) 4: pp. 79–106.

<sup>10</sup> Robert G. Moeller, *Peasants and Lords*, pp. 1–23.

<sup>11</sup> Ian Farr, 'Tradition and the Peasantry', in Evans and Lee, *The German Peasantry*, pp. 20–22. Clemens Zimmerman, 'Dorf und Land in der Sozialgeschichte', in Wolfgang Schieder and Volker Sellin (eds), *Sozialgeschichte in Deutschland: Entwicklungen und Perspektiven im internationalen Zusammenhang*, 2 (Göttingen, 1986), p. 93.

caused them to move between both the urban and rural world.<sup>12</sup> Chapter five, which discusses the relationship between local and foreign labour, owes much to the existing body of research on migrant workers. In this chapter relations between local villagers and prisoners of war are also considered. Somewhat surprisingly, given the immense amount of research that has been done on most other aspects of the First World War, a recent conference on Prisoners of War concluded that the experience of captured soldiers had been largely neglected by historians.<sup>13</sup>

### ‘Mecklenburg’

The ‘Mecklenburg’ of this study is the western area of the modern *Bundesland* Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, divided in this period between two separate states, Mecklenburg-Schwerin and Mecklenburg-Strelitz, which were not unified until 1934.<sup>14</sup> Their combined population rose from 676,320 in 1890 to approximately three quarters of a million people by the war.<sup>15</sup> Both states were predominantly rural in character. Well into the twentieth century over half of the population lived in the countryside, and either worked in agriculture or forestry, or were dependent upon someone who did.<sup>16</sup> This study focuses on one particular sub-section of this rural population: the management and workforce of around 1,500 large estate (or ‘manorial’) farms (*landwirtschaftliche Großbetriebe*).<sup>17</sup> Typically these farms relied

---

<sup>12</sup> Kocka has drawn attention to free labourers as a gap in research. Jürgen Kocka, *Arbeitsverhältnisse und Arbeiterexistenzen: Grundlage der Klassenbildung im 19. Jahrhundert* (Bonn, 1990), p. 202; see also David Crew, ‘Why can’t a peasant be more like a worker?’, *JSH*, 22 (1988/89): p. 538.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Kriegsgefangenengeschichte: Ansätze der Forschung und Probleme der Durchführung (Tagung des Arbeitskreises Militärgeschichte am 26–27 September 1997 in Freiburg)’, *ZfG*, 46 (1998): p. 158.

<sup>14</sup> In this study, references to ‘Mecklenburg’, where the state is not specified, are to the region encompassing both states. Mecklenburg-Strelitz itself consisted of two territories some 200 kilometres apart; Ratzeburg to the west of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, and Stargard to the east. Mecklenburg-Schwerin, the larger of the two by some way, was one unified area of land, with the exception of two enclaves to the south in Brandenburg’s Prignitz region.

<sup>15</sup> Hohorst, Ritter, Kocka (eds), *Sozialgeschichtliches Arbeitsbuch*, p. 47; Hermann Priester, *Arbeits- und Lebensverhältnisse der Frauen in der Landschaft in Mecklenburg* (Jena, 1914), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> In Mecklenburg Schwerin just under 52 per cent of the population lived in the countryside by 1905. Fifty-eight per cent continued to work in (or depend on) employment in agriculture and forestry. *Statistisches Handbuch für das Großherzogtum Mecklenburg-Schwerin* (Schwerin, 1910), pp. 11–12, 16. For figures for both Mecklenburgs see Thomas Klein and Helga bei der Wieden (eds), *Grundriß zur deutschen Verwaltungsgeschichte 1815–1945, Reihe B: Mitteldeutschland, Bd. 13 Mecklenburg* (Marburg, 1976), p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Großbetriebe* were classified as such if they were over 100 hectares in size, although the majority were a good deal larger than 100 hectares. At the time of the June 1907 employment census, approximately 62,000 people worked the *Großbetriebe* in the largest of the two states, Mecklenburg-Schwerin. This figure did not include non-working dependents. *Statistisches Handbuch*, p. 118. In 1895 there were 1532 estate farms of over 100 hectares, in 1907, 1539. *Statistik des Deutschen Reiches*, vol. 212, pp. 58–61. In 1925, 1495 were In

on a core workforce of resident labour living in the estate village (*Gutsdorf*) of cottages situated nearby which, along with the manor house, the farm, and additional forested, garden or park land, together comprised the estate (*Gut*).

Before May 1920, when the system was rationalised, most of the manorial farms lay in two distinct (but geographically intertwined) administrative spheres. The majority were situated on 'knights estates' (*Rittergüter*), which were both privately-owned landholdings and political-administrative units (*Gutsbezirke*), in which the estate owner was not only an agricultural employer, but also performed many of the duties of local government. A large minority, however, were on crown (later state-owned) land (*Domanium*), in the hands of estate leaseholders, and as such were embedded in the state administrative apparatus.<sup>18</sup>

During the Empire the Grand Duchies of Mecklenburg-Schwerin and Mecklenburg-Strelitz were the only German states to be without an elected, representative assembly. Legislative power lay with the dukes and their ministers, and was only partially curtailed by an 'assembly of orders' (*ständische Versammlung*) shared by both states, which met biannually, and could veto measures which concerned taxation, although it had no further control over state budgets. Membership of the assembly was reserved for officials from the towns and for owners of *Rittergüter*, who were able to use the veto on taxation to block political and legal reforms detrimental to their own interests. This archaic system was not replaced by representative democracy until 1918, following military defeat and the German Revolution. Under the terms of the constitution which replaced it men and women over 20 years of age in both states elected deputies to separate state parliaments directly and through secret ballot. In both states the state governments were answerable to parliament, and reflected its political composition.<sup>19</sup>

## Social Relations

Wolfram Pyta has estimated that, on average, around 12 independent farmers with some land of their own lived within each estate administrative district (*Gutsbezirk*) in Prussian East Elbia.<sup>20</sup> In Mecklenburg, however, there were rarely more than one or two other property owners on the estates. A long history of expropriation, capped by legislation in the 1860s, had left fewer than 1,300 independent peasant farmers

---

1925, 1495 were counted. (Only 219 of these were in Mecklenburg-Strelitz.) See *Niekammers Güteradressbücher, vol 4: Mecklenburg* (Leipzig, 1928), p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> In 1913, of the 1059 estate farms in Mecklenburg-Schwerin examined by Buchsteiner, 644 (just over 60 per cent), fell within the administrative boundaries of the *Ritterschaft*, 317 the *Domanium*. A smaller number were also owned by town authorities and by the Protestant church. Sixty-three were owned by town authorities, 35 belonged to the church. Illona Buchsteiner, 'Zur sozialökonomischen Struktur mecklenburgischer Gutswirtschaften', *WZUR*, 36 (1987), p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed explanation of the political constitution of the Mecklenburgs, see Heinz Koch, *Funktion und Entwicklung des bürgerlichen Parlamentarismus in Mecklenburg-Schwerin 1917–1923* (Rostock, 1986) and Klein and bei der Wieden (eds), *Grundriß zur deutschen Verwaltungsgeschichte 1815–1945*, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Pyta, *Dorfgemeinschaft*, p. 98.

(*Erbpächter*) in Mecklenburg-Schwerin's *Ritterschaft* districts, and fewer than 40 in Mecklenburg-Strelitz's eastern territory of Stargard.<sup>21</sup> With this near absence of a middle strata of peasant farmers on the estates, 'social relations' in this study refer, in the first instance, to the relationship between the agricultural workforce and estate management. More narrowly, it is the *contractual* relationship stipulating payment, work load, conduct and also – in the case of resident workers – the terms of agreement between the employer in his capacity as landlord and the worker and his family as tenants of estate-owned housing which is under discussion. But the employment contract, however, was only one aspect of a much more complex relationship between the working people and the rural elite of estate villages. In their capacity as local officials, owners of *Rittergüter* were also responsible for local policing and for the provision of district level poor relief. Working women and men thus sometimes faced their *Gutsherr* ('estate master') not only as employees or tenants, but as paupers and criminals. These relationships, which have received very little attention to date, also need to be explored if we are to better understand estate village communities in this region, and across East Elbia more broadly.

Understanding social relations on the estates thus necessitates an understanding of the different capacities in which estate authorities exercised power within the village. Equally however, this book also seeks to map out the ways in which agricultural workers themselves shaped relations. For despite the tight restrictions imposed upon them, workers were often able to obstruct or resist the will of authority. The study is thus as much concerned with the agency of workers, as it is with that of their social and economic masters.

With the *Gutsherren* and other estate authorities responsible for so much of the organisation of daily life in these villages, it is tempting to study estates almost as isolated social experiments. But estate villages were not sealed off in this way. Although the owners possessed a great deal of power, estates were by no means fully autonomous and landowners, and management, relied on the wider state administrative apparatus to govern the estate populations. Ensuring that the workforce remained both healthy and obedient, for example, entailed (at the very least) the periodic recourse to the resources of both the national and state penal-welfare systems, as I discuss in chapter two.

That estates cannot be studied in isolation is most obvious when we look at the estate workforce. Rural-urban migration, and agricultural modernization meant that estate communities, few of whom were even self-replenishing, were too small to meet the labour requirements of the manorial farm. Extra workers almost always had to be brought in from off the estates, whether from neighbouring peasant villages (*Bauerndörfer*), from the cities, or, in the case of migrant workers, from much further away. These workers whose experience of work and life often differed markedly from estate labourers and servants, helped to change the attitudes and behaviour of the resident

---

<sup>21</sup> On expropriation see Friedrich Mager, *Geschichte des Bauerntums und der Bodenkultur im Lande Mecklenburg* (Berlin, 1955), esp. p. 374, and Paul Steinmann, *Bauer und Ritter in Mecklenburg: Wandlungen der gutsherrlichen-bäuerlichen Verhältnisse im Westen und Osten Mecklenburgs vom 12./13. Jahrhundert bis zur Bodenreform 1945* (Schwerin, 1960), esp. p. 237.

populations of the estate villages. Some appreciation of social background of these different workers, and the economic development which produced the conditions for their recruitment, is thus also unavoidable.

If it is therefore true that social historians focusing on agency at the local level cannot ignore macro-economic developments, this is equally true of political change. Worker's capacity to shape their own lives, for example, was not only affected by the will of their employers and local masters, but also profoundly influenced by developments at the political centres of state and nation-state. On occasion, indeed, decisions made at the centre could render questions of free will and action in the villages irrelevant. What rural workers said or did about the decision to go to war, and their subsequent conscription into the German army, for example, arguably mattered very little. Men of fighting age, who did not volunteer, were later compelled to fight. But political change could also empower workers. As I discuss in chapters two and three the Revolution of 1918/1919, and the reforms which came in its wake, in particular, were to leave agricultural workers here much less vulnerable than they had been during the *Kaiserreich*.

## Periodization

The impact of macro-economic development and of political change on village life are also the reason for the choice of period here. The onset of mass rural-urban migration in the mid 1880s and the lifting of the ban on 'importing' labour from the Russian Empire in 1890 together ushered in a new and highly dynamic phase for rural society and estate villages in particular. The 'flight from the land' (*Landflucht*), the recruitment of Polish workers, along with the growing 'threat' posed by Germany's resurgent social democratic movement became the central issues affecting rural society for a generation. It was not until the decade of crisis, beginning in 1914 with the outbreak of war and ending in the economic turmoil of 1922/1923, that this was to change. Inflation marked a steep decline in the scale of foreign worker employment. It also slowed, and, in some cases, reversed the flow of migration to the cities, with many workers preferring the safety of food payments in the agricultural sector to escalating price rises in the cities. For the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the affiliated labour movement the political settlement that followed economic crisis was also a watershed. The SPD, which had built on pre-war success in national elections and formed governments in both states in Weimar's early years, suffered a severe set back in elections in July 1923 (in Strelitz) and February 1924 (in Schwerin) bringing a phase of progressive, reformist politics in the region to a halt. With the German National People's Party (DNVP) triumphing and forming a government with the German People's Party (DVP) in Mecklenburg-Schwerin, these elections delivered power to the political Right. The emergence of an alliance of *völkisch* groups (DVFB) on the far right and the first significant vote for the Communists here also marked a polarization of politics in the region. Although they were not to become a major political presence in their own right until 1932, the National Socialists gained their first seat in the state parliament of Mecklenburg-Schwerin in 1924. The following year they began for the first time to recruit in the estates villages. The mid 1920s thus