

Paper prepared for the conference

**Rural History 2013**  
Bern, 19-22 August 2013

Session: Social Movements and popular participation in rural societies. Part II: XXth century

Paper 4.5.2

**Bauern, Bonzen, und Bomben: Peasant Protest in Northwest Germany,  
1927-1930**

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## **Bauern, Bonzen, und Bomben: Peasant Protest in Northwest Germany, 1927-1930<sup>1</sup>**

In the fall of 1929, aspiring author Rudolph Ditzen was working as an advertisement salesman and local correspondent of the *General-Anzeiger für Neumünster* in Schleswig-Holstein, when he was assigned to cover a trial that resulted from a peasant protest march through the streets of Neumünster. The peasants, who styled themselves *Landvolk*, had carried a homemade black flag emblazoned with a silver ploughshare and red sword. The march had been given prior permission by the authorities, but carrying a flag had been forbidden. When police intervened and attempted to seize the flag, a fight ensued. The peasants involved were put on trial for violations of the peace. The *Landvolk* responded with buying and selling boycotts that lasted nearly a year. Ditzen knew that he had the stuff of a novel. His manuscript was purchased by Ernst Rowohlt and published in 1930 as *Bauern, Bonzen und Bomben*. The work remains a classic, memorializing the rural protest movement that preceded the collapse of the Weimar Republic.<sup>2</sup>

The Neumünster protest was but one of many. In the quiet Lower Saxon county town of Bremervörde, for instance, on February 3, 1928, an estimated 5500 peasants attended what the county newspaper characterized as a "spontaneous" protest against a

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<sup>1</sup> This paper constitutes part of a larger project, *German Peasants and Jews: Anti-Semitism and Rural Politics in Northwest Germany*. Readers can access the entirety of

<sup>2</sup> Ditzen wrote under the name of Hans Fallada. See *Bauern, Bonzen und Bomben* (Rowohlt, 1931). There is a 2012 English edition – *A Small Circus* – translated by Michael Hofmann. The standard English language biography is Jenny Williams, *More Lives than One: A Biography of Hans Fallada*. See the website <http://www.fallada.de/index.php/en/>.

range of rural grievances.<sup>3</sup> Since the county was home to just over 22,000 inhabitants, it is fair to say that the vast majority of the county's adult male farmers participated in the protest. The whole of northwest Germany, it seemed, was rising in protest. The Prussian and Oldenburg state governments, the existing political parties, and the wide array of interests groups that claimed to represent rural people were confronted with an angry, auto-generated protest movement. In this paper, I will focus on the Stade administrative district (*Regierungsbezirk*) of the Prussian province of Hanover and the Free State of Oldenburg, outlining the contours of the crisis of the late 1920s, the protests that emerged, and the attempts by existing entities to control or coopt peasant anger.<sup>4</sup>

### **Rural Crisis**

What was amiss in the countryside? The rural sector emerged from the Great Inflation of 1921-1924 in relatively good shape. Farmers' products were in demand and they could generally charge what the market would bear. Stories abound of humble peasant abodes graced with furniture, porcelains and grand pianos traded for sacks of potatoes at the height of the Inflation.<sup>5</sup> Most peasants, however, used the opportunity to

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<sup>3</sup> *Bremervörder Zeitung*, 3.2.28, p. 1 “*Protest der 5500 in Bremervörde.*” The protest was in fact organized by the county's Rural League (or *Landbund*). The largest protest took place in the capital of the Oldenburg, where an estimated 40,000 people took part in a protest on the *Pferdemarkt*.

<sup>4</sup> My work has been deeply influenced by Wolfram Pyta, *Dorfgemeinschaft und Parteipolitik 1918–1933. Die Verschränkung von Milieu und Parteien in den protestantischen Landgebieten Deutschlands in der Weimarer Republik*. (Düsseldorf 1996), whose insights I have tried to integrate into the body of this work. My knowledge of the theoretic literature on peasant protest is terribly outdated. I hope to learn from my colleagues in our two panels on rural protest.

<sup>5</sup> In a recent course on hyperinflations, I had my students read Adam Ferguson, *When Money Dies*, which is full of such accounts.

pay off pre-War debt. Some – the most innovative and adventurous – took on new debt to modernize and expand their operations.

If the rural sector was blessed by the hyperinflation, the stabilization and the effects of the Dawes Plan ravaged it. In the early spring of 1925, rural producers experienced a sharp restriction of credit just at the time that they needed to borrow money to purchase seed. This *Kreditnot*, according to Bremervörde's county administrator, *Landrat* Ernst Grubitz, hit precisely those peasant holdings that were farmed most intensively and contributed most to the wider rural economy. These farmers after the War had followed the call to intensify, improved the quality of their livestock, and sought most industriously to increase the yields from their crops. According to Grubitz, this transformation was only possible by taking on debt. Because the interest on these loans was so high, they were not able to repay them and the debts grew ever higher. He reported that although there were farms in the county that were debt free, it was only a matter of time until they too were forced into debt to pay the higher post-War taxes and social costs.<sup>6</sup>

In the winter of 1927, Mother Nature turned against the peasants of northwest Germany. Flooding along the Elbe, Weser, Ems, and their tributaries destroyed livestock and, in the *Altes Land* and Kehdingen along the Elbe, resulted in a massive loss of fruit trees, that area's primary income earner. Ernst Müller, director of the Oldenburg Rural

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<sup>6</sup> *Niedersächsisches Staatsarchiv* (hereafter NStA) Stade, Rep. 180 L, Nr. 80, *Lage der Landwirtschaft und der Volksernährung*, *Landrat* Bremervörde to *Regierungspräsident* Stade, 03.03.1928. Among these social costs was an extensive system of unemployment insurance put in place after the War. Government reports indicated that many young people preferred to work as day laborers during the peak season and collect unemployment benefits the rest of the year instead of taking permanent positions as farm laborers.

Association reported that, “the conditions of agriculture, which had already been bad, have been made worse by crop failure and the livestock deaths that have resulted from the winter floods. Credit has dried up and pig fattening, the backbone of the Oldenburg peasant economy, has become unsustainable because of the high price of fodder and the low price paid for fattened pigs.”<sup>7</sup> The director of quasi-governmental Hanoverian Rural Credit Institute wrote, “after three years of sub-standard harvests, one can speak of *einer großen Notlage der Landwirtschaft*.”<sup>8</sup> He estimated that 1/3 of all peasant farms ran at a deficit in 1927.

In a report to his superior, *Regierungspräsident* Hermann Rose, *Landrat* Grubitz wrote that, “because of the damp summer, the potato harvest for 1927 was *sehr mässig*, so the income was very low. Incomes for dairy products have also fallen as *Kraftfuttermittel* has become more expensive and *Grundfutter* (hay and beets) have less nutritional value because of poor weather during the harvest. Pig-fattening at this time is completely unprofitable.”<sup>9</sup>

The situation in the neighboring county of Stade was somewhat different, although the *Landrat* there observed that the general situation was much like everywhere. Many of the dairy farmers were not doing that badly (especially those who had not intensified and still depend upon *weide* and *wiesen*), so they are not in the “katastrophalen Strudel” that the purely cereal growing small and large farmers were

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<sup>7</sup> *Jeversches Wochenblatt*, 14.01.1928. The region’s many swine producers were also feeling the effects of a collapse in swine prices in 1926, a normal part of the highly cyclical swine market.

<sup>8</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 L, Nr. 78, *Lage der Landwirtschaft*, Memo Drechsler to *Regierungspräsident* Stade, 31.11.1927.

<sup>9</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 L, Nr. 80, *Lage der Landwirtschaft und der Volksernährung*, *Landrat* Bremervörde to *Regierungspräsident* Stade, 3.3.1928.

experiencing. The cost of procuring seed has forced nearly all farms into new debt and led to a diminution of arable planted in rye. The condition in the pig-raising sector has been catastrophic. Nearly all the farms took on heavy, short-term debt from the millers for the purchase of grain. The millers, in turn, were indebted to the *Grosslieferanten*. This source of credit has now for the most part dried up. To cover their debts, the farmers have been forced to sell their pigs at a loss, further driving down the price of hogs. Debts of this sort for the larger producers are not so high that they can get by through consolidation. For the smallholders, who speculated heavily in the hog-fattening sector, the debts are precariously high. How these can work their way up again cannot be seen.” He concluded, “This is why the current protest movement has its origin in and draws its activists from the ‘little people’. The knife is at their throat and that has driven them to a desperation that is real and in no way contrived. ... Things would calm down a little if peasants were reassured that the government was listening to them.”<sup>10</sup>

### **The Demonstrations**

The demonstration in Bremervörde – cited at the beginning of this talk - took place on Friday, February 3 in the *Markthalle*, the largest venue in town.”<sup>11</sup> The meeting was chaired by county *Landbund* chair Wahlen. There were 3 main speakers, each representing various sectors of the rural economy: *Kolonist* Karels spoke for farmers, Senator Bode of Bremervörde spoke for commerce and *Schneidermeister* Mügge from

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<sup>10</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 L, Nr. 80, *Lage der Landwirtschaft und der Volksernährung*, *Landrat Stade to Regierungspräsident Stade*, 2.3.1928.

<sup>11</sup> *Bremervörder Zeitung*, 2.2.1928, p. 1, “*Aufruf zur Notkundgebung des Landvolkes.*”

Wesermünde spoke for the artisans. Additional speakers included Christian Meyer,<sup>12</sup> business manager of the *Kreislandbund*, and Georg Weidenhöfer,<sup>13</sup> anti-Semitic member of the Reichstag and head of the *Landbund* for the administrative district of Stade. After the speech by Weidenhöfer, the participants marched by villages in a peaceful fashion to the *Finanzamt*, where petitions signed by the attendees were handed over. At the conclusion of the march, the protesters returned to their villages.<sup>14</sup>

*Landrat* Grubitz reported that, “In order to report accurately on the character of the demonstration, I attended the first part of the meeting, leaving before Meyer and Weidenhöfer spoke. I ascertained that ... no flags were displayed and the speeches did not call the listeners to illegal actions and constituted no illegal attacks covered by the Law for the Protection of the Republic. The speakers were energetic but overall

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<sup>12</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 L, Nr. 80, *Lage der Landwirtschaft und der Volksernährung*, *Landrat* Bremervörde to *Regierungspräsident* Stade, 3.3.1928. *Landrat* Grubitz makes some interesting comments on the *Bremervörder Zeitung* and its editor. The only newspaper in the county, the *Bremervörder Zeitung*, is “entirely at the disposal of the protest movement. Every day it publishes articles on the crisis in agriculture and demonstrations both near and far. The newspapers *tempermentvoller* publisher, Herr Borgardt, who believes in sensationalism, is at the moment one heart and soul with the equally *tempermentvoller* business manager of the local *Landbund*, Hauptmann a.D. Meyer. It is now said *scherzweise*, that he has become the editor-and-chief of the newspaper. Meyer is among the most radical exponents of the protest movement. He was the first in the province to call for a buyer’s strike. Before the current collapse, he was recognized as farming according to the rules of the most modern, intensive model. Despite his extraordinary diligence, he was forced to give up the farm as unprofitable. Understandably, he is very bitter about this.

<sup>13</sup> A short biography can be found in *Reichstagshandbuch*, Band 1924. A typical Weidenhöfer stump speech can be found at *Deutsche Tageblatt*, 01.014.1928, “*Der Kampf des Landvolkes um die Scholle*.” On Weidenhöfer and *Landbund*, see my paper, “[The Landarbeiterbewegung and Reaction in Northwest Germany, 1918-1924](#)” presented at the ESSHA meeting in Ghent, 2010. Weidenhöfer was personally recruited to the NSDAP recruited by Hitler in 1929. A collection of newspaper articles related to his “conversion” can be found in *Bundesarchiv Berlin*, R 8034/III, Nr. 494.

<sup>14</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 L, Nr. 80, *Lage der Landwirtschaft und der Volksernährung*, *Landrat* Bremervörde to *Regierungspräsident* Stade, 06.02.1928

deliberate and fact-based. ... The participants in the demonstration were peaceful and deliberate, although the speeches demonstrated the enormous bitterness (*Erbitterung*) of the entire rural population.”

Rallies held in other towns and cities across northwest Germany demonstrated the extent of peasant discontent. In Neuhaus, the *Kreislandbund* held a rally attended by over 3000. Only 2000 could fit in the hall, so the rest stood in the street outside the meeting hall and listened to the proceedings over loudspeakers.<sup>15</sup> Cord Cordes, chair of Hanoverian provincial *Landbund*, spoke to over 7000 persons at a rally in Geestemünde.<sup>16</sup> A rally in Basbeck drew 3000 participants<sup>17</sup> and one in Osterholz on February 2 had ca, 2000 participants.<sup>18</sup>

An estimated 1500 peasants attended a rally staged by the *Kreislandbund* in Stade on February 4. While Christian Meyer (from Bremervörde) made a factual presentation, Georg Weidenhöfer, made a speech that the *Landrat* termed “repulsive” and “schroff” but not to the point where it could have been declared out-of-order and a halt brought to the meeting.<sup>19</sup> The speech focused on the Dawes Plan, the failure of the parties, and Germany’s incapacity because it had no army. Weidenhöfer received the most applause for his remark that, “It says something about the our present form of governing that even

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<sup>15</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 L, Nr. 80, *Lage der Landwirtschaft und der Volksernährung, Neuhaus-Ostener Zeitung, Landwirtschaftliche Sonderbeilage*, 06.02.1928, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 L, Nr. 80, *Lage der Landwirtschaft und der Volksernährung, Landrat Geestemünde to Regierungspräsident Stade*, 10.2.1928. The *Landrat* reported that although he did not personally attend the meeting, his deputies told him that the report of the meeting in the *Wesermünde Neuste Nachrichten* was accurate.

<sup>17</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 L, Nr. 80, *Lage der Landwirtschaft und der Volksernährung, Landrat Osterholz to Regierungspräsident Stade*, 07.02.1928.

<sup>18</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 L, Nr. 80, *Lage der Landwirtschaft und der Volksernährung, Landrat Osterholz to Regierungspräsident Stade*, 06.02.1928.

<sup>19</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 L, Nr. 80, *Lage der Landwirtschaft und der Volksernährung, Landrat Jork to Regierungspräsident Stade*, 06.02.1928.

right wing deputies elected with the support of the *Landbund* voted for the Dawes Plan, because Herr *Fraktionspapa* has ordered it.”<sup>20</sup>

*Landbund* protests were less centralized in Kehdingen county, meeting in six villages *in toto* (Baljerdorf, Oederquart, Freiburg, Wishhafen, Drochtersen and Assel). The *Landrat* remarked that they were all held indoors and not “*unter freiem Himmel*”, which would have violated the law.<sup>21</sup>

For a huge regional rally in Bremerhaven, organizers only arranged for the great hall of the Tivoli to be used. As a result of the tremendously large crush of people, three concurrent meetings were held in the largest halls in town. The *Landrat* reported with astonishment that every 6<sup>th</sup> inhabitant of the two counties of Lehe and Geestemünde participated. Since these were male-only events, with few minors present, well over 1/3 of the region’s adult male peasants attended.<sup>22</sup>

A delegation came from Bremervörde on a special train; those from other directions came on regular trains that had been augmented with additional cars, as well as “*Fahrzeuge aller Art.*” There was especially large applause when *Begrüßungsschreiben* from the *Stahlhelm* and the *Deutschen Legion* were read. A telegram from the area’s anti-Semitic member of the Prussian parliament, Pastor Paul Voß, was read that proclaimed “*Unruhe jetzt die erste Bauernpflicht.*”<sup>23</sup> [This was underlined in red pencil in the report

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<sup>20</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 L, Nr. 80, *Lage der Landwirtschaft und der Volksernährung*, *Landrat Jork to Regierungspräsident Stade*, 16.02.1928.

<sup>21</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 L, Nr. 80, *Lage der Landwirtschaft und der Volksernährung*, *Landrat Kehdingen to Regierungspräsident Stade*, 03.02.1928.

<sup>22</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 L, Nr. 80, *Lage der Landwirtschaft und der Volksernährung*, *Landrat Lehe to Regierungspräsident Stade*, 11.02.1928.

<sup>23</sup> One can find a brief biography of Voß in *Kreisarchiv Rothenburg-Wümme*, *Landratsamt Bremervörde*, 400-5, *Akten betreffend der Reichstagswahl 1912*. One can find a typical Voß speech in *Stader Tageblatt*, 25.4.1928.

with a question mark next to it.] The *Landrat* noted that there was no *Rednerfreiheit* at the meeting, but that this didn't matter, as there were no members of the opposition present.<sup>24</sup>

The *Landbund* rally in Otterndorf on February 9 is especially worth inspection. The peasants of *Land Hadeln* were perhaps the most phlegmatic of north Germans; they were surely the most resistant to radicalization before the winter of 1927/28. Circa 3000 farmers were present for the demonstration, making it far-and-away the largest event ever held in the county. The speakers were Hofbesitzer Garbs, Malerobermeister Stolberg, and the omnipresent Georg Weidenhöfer. The demonstrators decided to send a very extensive petition to the leading county newspaper, the *Nordhannoversche Landeszeitung*, whose demands far exceeded those made at similar demonstrations across the province. It is not hard to see the hand of Weidenhöfer in them. The farmers demands were gathered into five categories: reparations and state policies, tariffs and customs duties, taxations questions, social and educational policy, and credit policies combined with complaints about the size of the government.

What did the farmers demand in detail? Priority was given to the denying the “lie” that Germany was responsible for the War and rejecting the Dawes Plan. This was followed by demands for a ban on the importation of cow, horses, fresh meat, milk and dairy products, as well as foreign fruits, vegetables and potatoes. The border was to be closed to the importation of all luxury goods and *Schwarzarbeit* was to be prohibited. The Reich and the states must be made responsible for school financing. Unjust school taxes and social welfare costs must be reduced. Voluntary work beyond the 8-hour day must be

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<sup>24</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 L, Nr. 80, *Lage der Landwirtschaft und der Volksernährung*, *Polizei-Direktion* Wesermünde to *Regierungspräsident* Stade, 14.02.1928.

allowed, and the Unemployment Insurance Law must be revised on a voluntary basis so the sufficient workers were available for agriculture.

The list of demands closed with a set of demands catch all list of complaints against the expansion of government under the Republic and the extension of cheap credit to farmers. The protesters call for the simplification of administration and the reduction of public expenditures through a reduction in the number of the civil servants. The reduction of interest rates, especially for direct and indirect loans secured through public funds, the provision of long-term, cheap credit for agriculture, trade, and crafts, and the bettering of conditions of debt (*Schuldverhältnisse*) with the goal of reintroducing the penalties for usury.

In terms of taxation, one of the most vexing issues for farmers, the demonstrators were quite specific. In fact, the subsection on taxation contained nine points.<sup>25</sup>

1. Neiderschlagung der Rentenbankzinsen, die am 1. April und 1. Oktober d.Js. zahlbar sind, und spätere gänzliche Aufhebung de Rentenbankgrundschuld.
2. Beseitigung der Hauszinßsteuer und der Wohnungszwangswirtschaft für dad platte Land und Förderung der Bauwirtschaft.
3. Niederechlagung der am 15. Februar und 15. Mai fälligen Raten der Reichsvermögensteuer.
4. Niederschlag der an den Staat zu entrichtenden Grundvermögensteuer bis zum Ablauf des Jahres 1928 mit dem Ziel der gänzlichen Aufhebung dieser Steuer als Staatßsteuer in ihrer jetzigen Form.
5. Aufhebung der unsinnigen Einschätzung der Vergleichsbetriebe in den Marschen durch den Reichsbewertungsbeirat für die Einheitsbewertung 1925/27. Revision der Einstufung der Vergleichs- und Musterbetriebe in den Marschen durch den Reichsbewertungsbeirat unter hinzuführung sachverständiger Landwirte aus den Marschen.

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<sup>25</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 L, Nr. 80, *Verschuldung, Kredite. Lage der Landwirtschaft und der Volksernährung. Sammelheft*. 1928, Report Landrat Kreis Hadeln to Regierungspräsident Stade, 11.2.1928. I have left the text *auf Deutsch* because of its technical nature, which does not translate well into English.

6. Rückgang der Erhöhung der Richtsätze für die Einkommen- und Umsteuer 1926/27. Veranlagung zur Einkommensteuer nach 3 jährigem Durchschnitt.
7. Eine Freigrenze für die Umsatzsteuer.
8. Änderung und Vereinfachung des Steuersystem überhaupt.
9. Einführung des Zuschlagsrechts der Gemeinden lediglich zur Reichseinkommensteuer, mithin gänzlich Beseitigung der Gewerbesteuer, mit dem Ziele der Senkung der kommunalen Realsteuer. Alle vom der Reichseinkommensteuer befreiten Einkommenbezieher sind nach fingerten Richtsätzen zu verlangen.

Believe it or not, the meeting inserted only one local demand: “in the last years, flooding as particularly damaged the farms of the *Hadler Sietland*. We demand from the authorities special efforts to correct this situation.”

The meeting concluded with the declaration that, “If these demands are not met quickly, we are prepared to use extreme measures to protect house and home. The time for patience and moderation is over. Our *Not* (emergency) is the emergency of the entire middle class. *Bauernnot ist Volksnot*. There have been words enough, now we must see deeds. We are not prepared to unquestioningly follow our leaders, but demand that they put their backs into an untiring struggle for the interests of the working property owners.” These were fighting, if not revolutionary, words. The authorities had every reason to be concerned. Georg Weidenhöfer was the most prominent anti-Semite in the Stade administrative district, having been a member of the banned *Deutsch-völkisch Schutz- und Trutzbund*, the *Deutsch-Völkisch Freithheitspartei*, and the *Völkisch-Sozial Bloc*, as well as chair of the districts Rural League. Christian Meyer had belonged to the same groups and was clearly following in Weidenhöfer’s *Fahrwasser*.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See Jeremy Noakes, *The Nazi Party in Lower Saxony 1921-1933* (Oxford, 1971).

## Government Concerns

By January 1928, both structural and natural crises were clearly at hand, and the government was profoundly worried about the “extreme measures” called for in the Otterndorf petition. In the province of Hanover, the Social Democratic *Oberpräsident*, Gustav Noske, instructed his district administrators (*Regierungspräsidenten*) to learn all that they could about the protests and impress upon the county administrators under their jurisdiction that the protests must stay within the bounds of legality.<sup>27</sup>

Many *Landräter*, such as Ernst Grubitz in Bremervörde, were sympathetic to the demonstrators and had to be brought into line. On January 28, Stade district administrator Hermann Rose wrote a sharply worded letter to Grubitz. He remarked that, “In the *Nordhannoversche Landbote* it has been reported that at rally in Bremervörde, ‘It was decided to follow the radical path followed in other provinces, where it is generally accepted that only by acts of violence (*Gewaltmaßnahmen*) in the current age of mass politics can the necessary measures for the aid of agriculture be realized.’ Was the word “*Gewaltmaßnahmen*” uttered in the assembly or to be found in the statement agreed to by the assembly? I have enclosed a report of the meeting from the *Bremervörder Zeitung*. Please tell me who was chair the meeting and which civil servants participated.”<sup>28</sup> Under the rules governing public meetings, a civil servant (the *Landrat* or his deputy) should have been at the meeting and if violent measures were proposed that civil servant should have closed the meeting down.

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<sup>27</sup> The materials found in Dirk Stegmann, *Politische Radikalisierung in der Provinz. Lageberichte und Stärkemeldungen der Politischen Polizei und der Regierungspräsidenten für Osthannover 1922-1933*, (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1999) are invaluable in this regard.

<sup>28</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 P, Nr. 531, *Notkundgebung der Landwirtschaft im Jahr 1928*, Letter *Regierungspräsident* Stade to *Landrat* Bremervörde, 28.1.1928, p. 4.

*Landrat* Grubitz's response is a case study in deception, as he replied, "the yearly deputies assembly of the *Landwirtschaftlichen Hauptvereins Stade* on January 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> was chaired by *Klostergutspächter* Weidenhöfer from Burgsittensen, *Kreis Zeven*. The resolution to which your letter refers was passed by representatives of the constituent county *Landbünde*. Persons employed by the government were not present. ... The *Gewaltmaßnahmen* referred to in the resolution, according to the business leader of the *Kreislandbund* Bremervörde (Christian Meyer) as a buyers strike (*Käuferstreik*)."<sup>29</sup> Not to put to fine a point on it, a buyer's strike is not "violent measures" and the *Landrat* deliberately misconstrued Meyer's statement. Since, as shown above, both Meyer and Weidenhöfer were associated with organizations banned under the Law for the Protection of the Republic, Rose's concern was not unfounded.

Being unsuccessful with his insubordinate *Landrat*, Rose reached further down the bureaucratic food chain, writing the police administrator in Bremervörde, "It has come to my attention that in a *Landbund* procession through the streets of Bremervörde that a number of inflammatory placards were carried, including one that read '*Die Beamten und die Swien [sic] sind des Bauern Ruin*'. I want to know on what grounds you allowed this."<sup>30</sup> The policeman proved as truculent as the *Landrat*. "So far as I have been able to determine," he wrote, "the only signs carried in the procession were village identifiers (*ortstafeln*) and one association placard (*vereinsschild*). I think that in the

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<sup>29</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 P, Nr. 531, *Notkundgebung der Landwirtschaft im Jahr 1928*, Letter *Landrat* Bremervörde to *Regierungspräsident* Stade, 1.1.1928, p, 5.

<sup>30</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 P, Nr. 531, *Notkundgebung der Landwirtschaft im Jahr 1928*, Letter *Regierungspräsident* Stade to *Städtischen Polizeiverwalter* in Bremervörde, 13.2.1928, p, 7.

current state of agitation, it would be very negative to question the *Kreislandbund* about these.<sup>31</sup>

### **Direct Action**

The government had more to fear than demonstrations. The crisis led ever-greater numbers of peasants into acts of civil disobedience that they never would have previously contemplated.

The biggest threat faced by indebted peasants was forced-sales. In 1926, only 138 hectares in the Stade Regierungsbezirk had been subject to forced sale. The number rose imperceptibly to 144 the following year but jumped to 341 in 1928. These forced sales fell hardest on those farms in the smaller class size, those holdings of less than 20 hectares.<sup>32</sup> A frequent peasant response to forced sales was boycotts (as referenced in the report above) and penny auctions. The most common form of boycott was refusing to buy from local merchants who wouldn't offer credit or tried to collect on bad debt. Many local merchants were intimidated. Merchants and lenders who tried to collect on bad debts found that peasant collateral frequently "disappeared" the night before it was to be auctioned off.<sup>33</sup>

The *Landbund* of Jork county threatened its opponents with a social and economic boycott. It declared that 1) taxes should not be paid out of the "substance" of the farm, 2) that all farmers must join the *Landbund* ("Those who are not with us are against us."), 3)

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<sup>31</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 P, Nr. 531, *Notkundgebung der Landwirtschaft im Jahr 1928*, Letter *Städtischen Polizeiverwalter* in Bremervörde to *Regierungspräsident* Stade, 18.2.1928, p, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Stegmann, *Radikalisierung*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>33</sup> NStA Oldenburg, Bestand 136, Nr. 10053, *Protestversammlungen in der Landwirtschaft*, Gendarmerie report.

farmers who have not joined the *Landbund* were to be subject to an economic and social boycott. *Landbund* members were not to help non-members in need. (“*Wenn ein Pferd im Graben ist oder eine Kuh kalbt, auch wenn es der beste Nachbar ist.*”), and 4) every *Landbund* member must wear the *Landbund* pin and place a designated green sign on his house.<sup>34</sup>

The most radical form of boycott was the refusal to pay taxes. The *Landrat* of Stade believed that, “while it would be very difficult to carry out a buyers strike,” he was concerned though that there would be a tax strike in the county, fearing this would lead to considerable unrest along with conflict over enforcing the law.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, when farms or chattels were put up for sale to pay debts or taxes, local farmers would constitute themselves as a *Notgemeinschaft* (emergency committee), flood the auction site and intimidate bidders. In numerous cases, a sympathetic peasant would buy the farm for 1 Mark, to later resell it to the former owner. When *Landwirt* Cremer of Hekeln for declared delinquent for owing 20 RM in back taxes, the Oldenburg authorities put six of his pigs were put up for auction. A large number of peasants were present at the auction and they demanded that the local authorities cancel the sale and forgive the taxes. Willms, the *Amtshauptmann*, was given until 11 AM to cancel the sale “or else”. After taking refuge in the village tavern for an hour, Willms cancelled the sale.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 P, Nr. 531, *Notkundgebung der Landwirtschaft im Jahr 1928*, *Volksblatt*, “Von der Unterelbe,” p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> NStA Stade, Rep. 180 L, Nr. 80, *Lage der Landwirtschaft und der Volksernährung*, *Landrat Stade to Regierungspräsident Stade*, 2.3.1928.

<sup>36</sup> NStA Oldenburg, Bestand 136, Nr. 10053, *Protestversammlungen in der Landwirtschaft*, Gendarmerie Report. Willms would later deny press reports that he cancelled the sale, but the facts stand.

## The Landvolk

Boycotts, in their various forms, threatened the government's defence of the constitutional and legal order. *Gewaltmaßnahmen* however raised the revolt in the countryside to a new level. The "extreme measure" the government feared most was direct attacks through the bombing of government buildings, a tactic linked to the *Landvolk* movement.

The *Landvolk* were most radical manifestation of rural self-mobilization. From its origins in Schleswig-Holstein, it eschewed traditional interest group and party political activity, focusing instead on peasant self-help and direct action. There were two stages in development of the movement. The first, lasting roughly from January 1928 to the spring of 1929, began with a set of protests over the forced sale of farms. The movement entered its second stage in the summer of 1929, when *Landvölker* set off 8 bombs in Schleswig-Holstein, and 3 bombs in the Stade district.<sup>37</sup> On the night of June 3, a bomb placed in the central tax office in Oldenburg exploded.<sup>38</sup>

That the authorities in the Free State of Oldenburg took the *Landvolk* very seriously is clear from a set of reports survive from the spring and summer of 1929. At the end of April, the *Gendarme* in Dedesdorf reported on a *Landvolk* meeting in his town.<sup>39</sup> Police and the press, as the law required, had been told that the speaker was to be "Landwirt Petersen from Schleswig-Holstein." The meeting lasted 3 ½ hours and ended at midnight. In the opinion of the observing *Gendarme*, the speaker went beyond what

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<sup>37</sup> *Landvolk* leaders Claus Heim, Wilhelm Hamken and 34 others were put on trial in Altona, found guilty, and sentenced to seven years imprisonment.

<sup>38</sup> See the report on the Democratic newspaper, the *Oldenburgische Landeszeitung*, 04.06.1929.

<sup>39</sup> NStA Oldenburg, Bestand 136-10053, police report, 30.05.1929.

was legally permissible and sought to incite the listeners against the government and the law. (Interestingly, he did not try to shut the meeting down, as was within his power.)

Reports from other authorities indicated that “*Jungbauern Petersen*” spoke on June 6 in Elsfleth, on the 13<sup>th</sup> in Großenmeer and the 14<sup>th</sup> in Oldenbrok.<sup>40</sup> Member of the Oldenburg *Landtag* Addicks chaired the meetings. At the end of each talk, “*Notgemeinschaften*” were formed. Their purpose was to represent peasants in *Not* to the authorities, even “*wenn sie die gesetzlichen Wege überschreiten.*” Petitions are circulated in which the signatories pledged to refuse to pay taxes. (According to the transcript of the meeting, there was no talk of violence or sabotage at this meeting is recorded in the transcript, although it is hard to know how measures to “exceed the law” could be considered otherwise.)

A speech “Petersen” made in Ovelgönne to a crowd estimated at 140 is worth noting. He declared that there were so many lies being told about what was going on in Schleswig-Holstein. “The metropolitan asphalt press (*große Asphaltpresse*) owned by the Ullstein, Mosse, and Singer families is instinctively against us. ... If one says that we are revolutionary, we reply that we want to create a state appropriate to the German people.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> NStA Oldenburg, Bestand 136-10053, police report, 11.06.1929.

<sup>41</sup> NStA Oldenburg, Bestand 136-10053, police report, 22.06.1929. More excerpts from the speech: “*Das heutigen System – Parlament – ist eine Hochverratsorganisation. Von diesem hat die Landwirtschaft, der Nährstand unseres Volkes, nichts, aber auch nichts zu erwarten. ... Wir Bauern werden durch Steuern dieses Systems unbarmherzig von Haus und Hof vertrieben, wir werden zu Industriearbeitern gemacht. ... Ihr Bauern erwacht endlich, wehrt Euch mit allen Mitteln dagegen! Denkt an die früheren Bauernkriege, wo die Bauernkriege, wo die Bauern mit Sensen und Flegeln bewaffnet für ihre Scholle, für ihre Freiheit kämpften. Nehmt Euch ein Beispiel daran!*”

The Oldenburg authorities had reason to be concerned. It was informed by the *Reichskommissar für Überwachung der öffentlichen Ordnung* in Altona that “Petersen” was probably Walther Muthmann, a former schoolteacher. Muthmann who had joined the “nationalist revolutionary *Bauernbewegung*” in 1928.<sup>42</sup> This was followed up with a report from the District Administrator of Schleswig-Holstein. This report, including a photograph and stated that Muthmann belonged to Organization Consul, the notorious death squad based in Munich that had murdered Mathias Erzberger and Walther Rathenau.<sup>43</sup>

With the authorities on his tail, Muthmann had to be more circumspect. His speaking engagements from the middle of July in Berne<sup>44</sup> and Bardenfleth<sup>45</sup> were advertised on simple 9”x12” placards attached to trees and fences. They read, “*Es sprechen bekannte oldenburgische und holsteinische Bauern. Landvolkbewegung Nordwest*” with notice of place and time. These were in complete violation of the Law for the Protection of the Republic, which stated that a group had to notify the police of chair of the meeting and an accurate list of speakers. Moreover, since March, *Landvolk* meetings *unter freiem Himmel* have been banned, as had those of the DKP and NSDAP.

The Oldenburg authorities eventually Muthmann ran off. Other *Landvolk* representatives took his place but were less successful. Two *Landvolk* rallies were

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<sup>42</sup> 15.06.1929, *Reichskommissar für Ueberwachung der öffentlichen Ordnung* in Altona to *Polizeiamt* Oldenburg. *Bei ihrer Entwicklung waren völkische und nationalsozialistische Einflüsse mitbestimmt.*

<sup>43</sup> Letter, *Regierungspräsident* Schleswig-Holstein to Minister of the Interior, Oldenburg, 30.07.1929. While I did not see it indicated in the records, I believe that Oldenburg authorities believed that Muthmann was behind the *Finanzamt* bombing.

<sup>44</sup> NStA Oldenburg, Bestand 136-10053, police report, 21.07.1929.

<sup>45</sup> NStA Oldenburg, Bestand 136-10053, police report, 25.07.1929.

recorded in November and one in January, after which date *Landvolk* meetings were no longer recorded.

### **Co-optation**

If the government feared self-generated protest, the established parties and interests groups were desperate to assert control over a situation that was slipping out of control. The huge Bremervörde protest with which I began this paper was, as were similar protests held across northwest Germany, organized by county chapters of the National Rural League. While the *Reichslandbund* was the legal successor to the pre-War Agrarian League (*Bund der Landwirte* or *BdL*), it was in fact a very different creature. Firstly, it was less centralized and less Berlin-centric. Secondly, the *Landbund* was emphatically non-partisan at its highest levels and in its provincial and local branches. In the area I am focusing upon, this meant that German Hanoverians (supporters of the Guelph dynasty that was overthrown in 1867) and members of Gustav Stresemann's German Peoples Party were assembled under the *Landbund's* umbrella as well as anti-Semites, Conservatives and Nationalists of every stripe.<sup>46</sup> By 1924, the *Landbund* had succeeded in becoming a more respected, more non-partisan, and more powerful representative of Agrarian interests than its pre-War predecessor had been. As we have seen in the administrative district of Stade, anti-Semites played an integral and important role.

In February 1928, Reinhardt Hepp, a member of the liberal People's Party and business manager of the *Reichslandbund* in Berlin, along with a number of associates and

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<sup>46</sup> Noakes, p. 116, is uncharacteristically wrong when he asserts that the *Landbund* was merely the German National rural auxiliary.

the editorial board of the Rural League's newspaper, the *Deutsche Tageszeitung* decide that they would try to direct peasant unrest by founding a new political party – the Christian Nationalist Peasant and Rural People's Party (the *Christlich-nationale Bauern- und Landvolkspartei* or CNBLP) – to contest the upcoming May 1928 national election.

All of the county *Landbünde* were not in line with this decision. A GIS of the May election allows us to see where the new CNBLP was successful and where it was not.<sup>47</sup>

**I will display my GIS maps of the 1928 Reichstag election in the Ppt here.**

The GIS masks several unpleasant facts. While the CNBLP won over a half-million votes and 9 seats in the Reichstag, these were mostly votes cannibalized from the other parties. Perhaps more importantly, the CNBLP did not join the government. It had no opportunity to influence the government or enact its program. By 1930, when it did enter the Brüning cabinet, events had passed it by. It would be left to other forces to try to harness rural unrest.

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<sup>47</sup> Local results are found in county newspapers available on microfilm at the *Institut für Zeitungsforschung*, Dortmund or in print form at the *Landbibliothek* Oldenburg. These were the same numbers that the local election committees reported the government. Unlike other electoral analyses, where voting data is aggregated at the county level, my work is based on communal results that I have gleaned from 38 newspapers held at 30 archives and libraries. I have not used the unreliable county-level data compiled in the ICPSR Weimar elections dataset. See Jürgen Falter and Wolf Grüner, “Minor and Major Flaws of a Widely Used Data Set: The ICPSR ‘German Weimar Republic Data 1919-1930’ Under Scrutiny”, *Historical Social Research* 20(1981)4-26. The “Electoral and Social Data for the Counties and Communes of the German Reich from 1920 to 1933” held at the Center for Historical Social Research in Cologne has been widely used in recent electoral studies as it lacks the problems of the IPCRS dataset. It does not work well for my purposes as it aggregated cities, towns, and communes into categories by population size rather than using individual polling place results. See Dirk Hänisch, “inhalt und Struktur der Datenbank ‘Wahl- und Sozialdaten der Kreise und Gemeinden des Deutschen Reiches von 1920 bis 1933’”, *Historical Social Research*, 14(1989)39-67.

Attempts by the Nazis to instrumentalize the *Landvolk* after the failed election were problematic. In May 1929, the Nazi *Gauleiter* of East Friesland, Heinrich Lohse wrote the Munich leadership that, “the *Landvolk* continue to be difficult to work with. The probability that the stupidity of these people will endanger us is monumental (*riesengroß*).”<sup>48</sup> While Hitler concurred that the lawlessness of the *Landvolk* threatened his “policy of legality”, many *Landvolk* leaders were no less eager to distance themselves from what they saw as the failed actions of the political parties and interest groups that traditionally represented and protected the peasantry. As *Landvolk* leader Ernst von Salomon wrote, “[T]he *Landvolkbewegung* arose spontaneously out of the peasantry. It has the rural masses behind it. Peasants can only be led by other peasants. Every attempt by the parties or interest groups to ensnare the *Landvolkbewegung* is a betrayal of the National Revolution.” As his reference to the “national revolution” suggests – despite his public denunciation of party politics – Salomon eventually led the majority of his peasant followers into the National Socialist movement.<sup>49</sup>

Let me conclude with a GIS suggesting where the unrest eventually led.

**I will display my GIS maps of the 1930 Reichstag election in the Ppt here.**

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<sup>48</sup> Stoltenburg, *Strömungen*, p. 146.

<sup>49</sup> Ernst von Salomon, *Die Landvolkbewegung*, p. 122. On the process, see Richard F. Hamilton, *Who voted for Hitler?* (Princeton, 1982).