

The Feudal Revolution and the Agrarian Transformation of Eastern Europe 1400-1600

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*When I went back to our estate in Mecklenburg and told my father who I wanted to marry (the scion of an old noble family in west Germany), he opened his Gotha and read up on the family. Later, he came to me and said, 'You know, they were nobles when we were still apes in the jungle.'*¹

Since the publication in 1953 of Georges Duby's study of the Mâconnais in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a growing number of historians have focused on the 'feudal revolution', the stormy and sometimes violent social transformation through which military servitors in eleventh and twelfth century Western Europe won their own lands, lordships, and, ultimately, a share of political power.² Nevertheless, despite on-going debate on the feudal revolution in Western Europe, there have been no attempts (so far as I know) to apply the concept to Eastern Europe. The present essay, which may thus be the first step in that direction, argues that the lands east of the Elbe experienced a similar feudal revolution much later, beginning around 1400, when the military retinues of Eastern Europe's princes and rulers broke free of their status as household servitors and transformed themselves into western-style nobilities with land, lordship, and political power. This essay also argues that the feudal revolution in Eastern Europe took place within a particular economic context marked by an abundance of land, high grain prices, and monetary scarcity. This accounts for the particular pattern of agrarian development in many lands east of the Elbe after 1500, namely the 'second serfdom', in which noble landowners transformed their

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1. Recent conversation with a woman born into a distinguished noble family in Mecklenburg.
 2. Duby 1953. The important works on the feudal revolution are discussed in Bisson 1994, pp. 7-9.

lands into market-oriented manorial economies based on the labour services they imposed on their (increasingly unfree) peasants.³

Historians often draw conclusions about Eastern (east-Elbian) Europe based on synchronic comparisons with Western Europe. But such comparisons are often misleading, since the lands between the Elbe and the Volga made a later entry into the mainstream of European life. Thus, for example, a recent author noted that one of the distinguishing characteristics of Eastern Europe was its appropriation of religious and cultural models that had already been developed by its more advanced neighbors.⁴ If we compare, for example, newly Christianized Mecklenburg to Rhineland Germany in the twelfth century, this observation appears correct, but it is misleading, since it implies a different, or more 'original' pattern of development in Western Europe. In fact, the appropriation (in some cases imposition) east of the Elbe of more advanced cultural and religious models was not fundamentally different from the long process through which barbarian tribes in Western Europe appropriated Roman cultural and religious models.

Synchronic comparisons are not only misleading in the case of seeming differences, but also in the case of apparent similarities. It is tempting, for example, to see the fifteenth century conflicts between rulers and 'nobles' east of the Elbe as typical of the struggles between crown and Estates in late medieval Western Europe.⁵ But this is to assume that, by 1400, the military retinues east of the Elbe had already (like their counterparts in the west) achieved land and lordship. As we shall see, this was not necessarily so, and the struggles of the military servitors east of the Elbe represent not the typical conflicts between a 'mature' nobility and the ruler, but rather the initial creation of a nobility, i.e. the feudal revolution. This essay begins with a brief discussion of the feudal revolution in Western Europe, and will then focus on the feudal revolution in three German lands east of the Elbe, Mecklenburg, Brandenburg, and Prussia. The essay will conclude with a brief discussion of the degree to which the period was one of crisis in Eastern Europe.

3. The important comparative studies include: Barg, ed. 1986; Kaak 1991; Topolski 1994; Schmidt 1997; Hagen 1998; Melton 1988; Peters 1997.

4. Hecker 1985, p. 179.

5. Thus, for example, Hartmut Boockmann views the Thirteen Years War in Prussia (1454-1466) as a 'typical struggle between ruler and Estates in the late Middle Ages.' Boockmann 1989, p. 209.

The feudal revolution in the Carolingian lands (10th-12th centuries)

Beginning around 980 in the Carolingian heartland between the Rhine and the Loire, the feudal revolution brought into existence a relatively large and militarized nobility that owed its status to the lordship it was able to impose and maintain over the lower strata of the rural population.⁶ Aristocracy and lordship were, of course, nothing new; both had long existed in the Carolingian world, where the aristocracy was a dynamic imperial elite, often drawn from the kin groups of Carolingian rulers, which had distinguished itself in Carolingian service as counts, bishops and archbishops, and heads of great religious foundations.

Although these aristocrats also had large patrimonial landholdings and exercised lordship over the free and unfree people living on them, they were not a large group, and in maintaining at least some degree of effective public order and justice in the relatively large regions and localities that they administered for their rulers, they depended on their own military retinues, recruited in part (perhaps largely) from the large and amorphous kin groups typical of aristocratic families in the Carolingian period. Some servants also came from the upper ranks of rural and urban commoners who had risen through service to their aristocratic lord.⁷

The essence of the feudal revolution was not the creation of an aristocracy or the invention of a new kind of lordship, but rather the massive appropriation of aristocratic status and lordship by the individuals or families serving in the upper and middle levels of these military retinues.⁸ Thus, by the twelfth century, the aristocracy was not limited to the great aristocratic families of the Carolingian period and their successors, but included middle and lower level families, who, with the collapse of Carolingian order and justice, had broken free of their positions as dependent household retainers, using the political power vacuum to carve out independent, castle-centred lordships for themselves.⁹ In the words of Tho-

6. Bisson 1994, pp. 6-42.

7. Goetz 1991, pp. 451-80.

8. Münch 1990, p. 118.

9. Bisson 1994, p. 6.

mas Bisson, 'The new castle on its rock became an ominous spectacle in the tenth century.'¹⁰

In the Carolingian era, the German lands north of the Alps also had an aristocracy, of which Hans-Werner Goetz has given us a revealing portrait.¹¹ Their dual roles as Carolingian officials and great landlords naturally gave them an advantage in creating their own territorial lordships, but the major principalities created east of the Rhine in the tenth century (Bavaria, Swabia, Saxony, and Franconia) were not identical with the old Carolingian administrative units; they were new creations forged from a mixture of 'private' lordships and 'public' Carolingian territories.¹²

As in the Carolingian heartland, the lower nobility in Germany came largely from the military retinues of the emperors, princes, and church foundations. Nevertheless, these retinues were much larger than in France or England, and were made up primarily of unfree servitors (*ministeriales*).¹³ The proliferation of *ministeriales* in imperial and ecclesiastical service appears to have contributed to the stabilization, rather than to the disintegration of central power, at least under the Ottonians and early Salians in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.¹⁴ If the unfree status of the *ministeriales* initially carried some degree of social stigma, their service as armoured knights or administrators did not appreciably differ from that of free nobles; like the latter, they also held land and (increasingly) lordship in return for service. In Southwest Germany, the *ministeriales* intermarried with free noble families, and by the late thirteenth century, had merged completely with them to form one group – the lower nobility.¹⁵ In Thuringia, the *ministeriales* attained such a high status that many free nobles also entered their ranks.¹⁶

As a concept, the feudal revolution has proved very controversial, and even Duby later took a more distanced approach. Moreover, recent studies have taken strong issue with many of Duby's arguments. Dominique Barthélmy has argued vigorously against

10. Bisson 1994, p. 16.

11. Goetz 1981, pp. 133-73; also Schultze 1990, pp. 44-5.

12. Goetz 1977, pp. 409-31.

13. Arnold 1985, pp. 17-9, 69, 147.

14. Bosl 1980, pp. 206-10.

15. Rösener 1977, pp. 85-90.

16. Fleckenstein 1977, pp. 37-8.

(among other things) Duby's emphasis on the violence with which the nobility established its lordship.¹⁷ Barthélmy's arguments are supported by Bruno Lemesle's monograph on the nobility in another part of the Carolingian heartland, the Haut-Maine (south-west of Paris), which reveals both more continuity of 'public' (comtal) authority, and less success on the part of the military retinues, whose acquisition of lordship was partially thwarted by the resurgence of the great religious foundations.¹⁸

Future studies will doubtless alter, perhaps even refute, the specific model of feudal revolution associated with Duby and his followers, but Thomas Bisson has very clearly shown the enduring value to medieval historians of the concept of a feudal revolution.¹⁹ It is no less valuable to historians of early modern Europe, especially in light of Otto Brunner's argument that the noble's landed estate was the *locus* of pre-industrial European society, the point where the complex and interlocking relations of noble domination were crystallized, visualized, and thus made concrete.²⁰ This domination, based on land and lordship, was the defining element in the structure of European society from the twelfth to the eighteenth century.²¹

The feudal revolution in the German lands east of the Elbe (ca. 1450-1600)

The feudal revolution in Western Europe in the period 1000-1250 had been accompanied by vigorous economic recovery. In Eastern Europe, we see a similar process, but only much later, in the late fifteenth century, and the population densities at the beginning of this recovery were probably much closer to those of late Carolingian Europe than to fifteenth century Western Europe. Around 1500, for example, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg, and Poland had population densities averaging approximately ten inhabitants per

17. Barthélmy 1994, pp. 51-88.

18. Lemesle 1999, pp. 213-8.

19. Bisson 1994 (cited above) shows persuasively the value of the concept.

20. Brunner explored this subject brilliantly in his study of the life and literary works of a Lower Austrian estate owner in the seventeenth century. Brunner 1949.

21. Brunner 1958, pp. 331-4.

square kilometre, while France had approximately thirty.²² In most regions of Northeastern Europe, from Mecklenburg to Russia, the population grew in the sixteenth century, although in some areas of Mecklenburg and Brandenburg, the population crisis of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries lingered on into the sixteenth century. While in some districts of Mecklenburg, the population had fully recovered by 1450,²³ other regions may have had numerous deserted farmsteads well into the next century.²⁴ In Brandenburg around 1450, a third of the peasant households were still deserted, and the population only gradually recovered in the sixteenth century.²⁵ In the core lands of the Polish crown (Little Poland, Great Poland, and Mazovia), the average population density had reached twenty-one inhabitants per square kilometre by 1570.²⁶ In parts of Northwestern Russia (Novgorod region), the population may have increased by fifty percent during the first half of the sixteenth century; around 1550, the Muscovite heartland (the non-black soil region around Moscow) had a population density of approximately nine inhabitants per square kilometre.²⁷

The recovery, however, was initially sporadic. Despite occasional upward fluctuations, rye prices in Rostock appear to have been relatively flat between 1460 and 1520.²⁸ Only in the 1520s do we see the rapid rise in grain prices in Danzig.²⁹ Most important, however, at least from the standpoint of the emerging nobilities east of the Elbe, was the persistent lack of money. The fifteenth century had seen a fifty percent decline in the circulation of coin in Northeastern Europe.³⁰ Whether cause or effect of the late medieval economic depression, the effects of this catastrophic monetary contraction continued into the early sixteenth century. This did not mean bad economic conditions for the peasants, who were often able to profit from the high

22. Samsonowicz and Maczak, p. 8.

23. Seemann 1987, p. 12.

24. Prange 1967, p. 74.

25. Melton 1998(a), p. 299.

26. Bérélowitch and Gieysztor 1997, p. 568.

27. Bérélowitch and Gieysztor 1997, pp. 556-7.

28. North 1990, p. 178.

29. Wyczanski 2001, p. 28.

30. North 1990, p. 224.

prices of hops, barley, and buckwheat,³¹ but the peasants also hoarded their coin.³² The emerging nobility, however, faced the following situation in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century: they had land, and grain prices were rising, but there was no money. Faced with this situation, a market-oriented manorial economy based primarily on the labour services of their peasants was in most, though not all cases, the best solution. Nevertheless, it wouldn't have been possible without effective lordship over the peasants.

Mecklenburg

Prior to 1400, it is difficult to find in the military retinues serving the rulers of Mecklenburg clear evidence that presages their later development into a powerful and cohesive nobility. With the possible exception of a few families, most of these servitors held small estates with very limited power over their peasants.³³ In the early Carolingian era, the pagan Slav (Obodrite) rulers of the west Slav lands that would later form the Duchies of Mecklenburg had waged intermittent warfare with the Danes in the north and the Saxons in the south and west. With Charlemagne's conquest of the Saxon lands in the early ninth century, Mecklenburg became the northeastern frontier of the Carolingian Empire, and in 1160, Henry the Lion defeated and killed the Obodrite ruler Niklot, and then granted Mecklenburg back as a fief to Pribyslaw, Niklot's newly baptized son. As the rulers (after 1348, Dukes) of Mecklenburg, Niklot's descendants would rule until 1918.³⁴

Christianization and Germanization did not proceed smoothly in Mecklenburg. Slav uprisings in 983 and 1066 had ended initial attempts at Christianization, and it was not until the late twelfth century that the Bishoprics of Ratzeburg and Mecklenburg were securely reestablished along with the Cistercian monastery of Doberan.³⁵ In the thirteenth century, Pribyslaw's successors encour-

31. Cordshagen 1985, pp. 14-7.

32. North 1990, pp. 127ff.

33. Schattkowsky 1994, pp. 135-64, provides an essential bibliographical and conceptual introduction to this problem.

34. Karge, Münch and Schmied 1993, p. 26.

35. Karge, Münch and Schmied 1993, p. 42.

aged German settlement, and by the middle of the fourteenth century, Mecklenburg had become Germanized.

The Mecklenburg nobility first appears in the thirteenth century as a largely undifferentiated military retinue. German nobles from west of the Elbe sought land and mobility in the service of the Mecklenburg rulers (the ruling dynasty and the religious foundations).³⁶ Indigenous Slav elites also joined these retinues, although the Mecklenburg princes would exclude the indigenous elites living in Slav lands conquered later.³⁷

Until the late fourteenth century, the social and political status of these rural servitors seems to have been similar to the position occupied by most military and administrative servitors in the retinues of the lay and ecclesiastical lords in the west before the eleventh century. Although the Mecklenburg princes had granted full lordship, along with generous landgrants, to the bishoprics and monasteries, they were less generous to the knights in their retinues, who held, in exchange for service, small estates that mostly ranged between 120-140 acres and rarely exceeded 300 acres (peasant farms ranged between 40-80 acres).³⁸ The knights were free from the taxes and dues paid by the peasants, but their rights over the peasants and cottagers on their estates were quite limited.

If we define lordship as the noble's right or ability to impose significant conditions on the peasant's person, land, and rents, most Mecklenburg knights of the thirteenth and early fourteenth century did not have lordship, and there were no clear social distinctions separating them from their peasant neighbors.³⁹ By 1300, both Slav and German peasants were in possession of extensive rights that had come with the introduction of 'German law' (*Hufenverfassung*). They did not own their farms (which belonged to the ruler), but nevertheless had hereditary tenure, the freedom to move, and a significant degree of self-government and protection from the claims of the knights in their villages.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, some families had already gained distinction (and doubtless privileges) that probably corresponded to their specific

36. Münch 1995(a), p. 117.

37. Reimann 1998, pp. 502-19.

38. Dollen 1995, p. 27.

39. Münch 1995(b), p. 122.

40. Schmidt 1997, p. 24.

military achievements, and that in any case raised them well above their comrades-in-arms.⁴¹ Around 1500, there were approximately one hundred-seventy noble families (split into different lines) in Mecklenburg, of which approximately fifteen made up the power elite.⁴² These families had been able to acquire relatively large and concentrated landholdings, in part by annexing peasant lands deserted in the demographic crises of the late Middle Ages. By the late sixteenth century, they held approximately forty percent of all seignorial lands.⁴³ Beginning around 1500, the sources reflect a widening gap between the elite families and the remainder of the nobility. Only the elite families are distinguished as *Ritter* (knights), while the other nobles are designated simply as *Junker*.⁴⁴

The high-flying ambitions of Mecklenburg's rulers, and the lack of territorial and dynastic unity would also contribute immensely to the emergence of the power elite. In the thirteenth and fourteenth century, the Mecklenburg dynasty had been split, first into four, which then ended as two separate duchies. In the fifteenth century, these were once again reunited during the reign of Henry IV (d. 1477), but he, like his predecessors, had financed his policies by borrowing heavily, and by pawning ducal estates (with lordship) to members of the power elite.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, the nobility had seized the chance to present itself as the true representative of the land, and in the early sixteenth century, when conflicts between the Güstrow and Schwerin lines of the dynasty threatened to once again split the land into separate duchies, the power elite played the leading role in the Union of 1523, which asserted the unity of the Mecklenburg Estates even if the land were once again split into separate duchies.⁴⁶ The Union also created a standing committee empowered to represent the interests of the respective Estates. The majority of the committee members (twelve of twenty-three) were nobles, most of them from the families of the power elite: Bülow, Maltzahn, Moltke, Preen, and others.⁴⁷

41. On the concept of the 'power elite', Göse 1998, pp. 139-43.

42. Münch 1995(c), p. 50.

43. Göse 1998, pp. 152-3.

44. Münch 1995(a), pp. 118-9.

45. Münch 1995(a), pp. 45-7.

46. Münch 1993, pp. 57-9.

47. Göse 1998, p. 165.

In the course of the sixteenth century, the power of the nobility would eclipse that of the other Estates. The Reformation, by weakening the power of the Prelates, played a role in this, but the essential factor was the financial embarrassment of the Dukes, which benefited both individuals and the nobility as a whole.⁴⁸ In 1555, after much debate, the Estates agreed to assume some of the ruler's debts (thus saving the land from bankruptcy). In exchange, the Duke had to agree to the Estates' demand that all finances were henceforth dependent on their approval. He also had to accept the formation of a standing committee entrusted with financing and paying off the existing debts; the committee was made up of fourteen nobles (most of them from the power elite), while the other two Estates were not represented on the committee.⁴⁹ In 1572, the Estates took over the ruler's huge remaining debts (400,000 Guilder) in exchange for the three monasteries of Ribnitz, Malchow, and Dobbertin, which came under the nobility's corporate administration and would thus continue as exclusive institutions for unmarried noblewomen.⁵⁰

The triumph of the feudal revolution in sixteenth century Mecklenburg is also apparent in the composition of the ducal administration. Around 1500, a number of high positions had been in the hands of non-Mecklenburg nobles, or non-noble jurists. In the course of the century, however, the Mecklenburg nobility, and especially the power elite, secured an effective monopoly on important posts.⁵¹ Given this growing dominance, it is not surprising that the power elite played a far more active role than their ruler in establishing the Reformation in Mecklenburg before its official introduction in 1549. An important aspect of the Reformation there was the nobles' attempt to get control of church livings on their estates, a struggle in which they achieved *de facto* success.⁵²

In the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the nobility also gained increasing power over its peasants, a process reflected in their acquisition of high justice.⁵³ The rise of lordship was accompanied by an increase of violent feuds in Mecklenburg,

48. Göse 1998, p. 173.

49. Schmidt 1997, pp. 28-9.

50. Göse 1998, pp. 187-8.

51. Göse 1998, pp. 162-3.

52. Göse 1998, pp. 178-9.

53. Maybaum 1926, pp. 70-2, 193-217.

which appear to have reached a high point in the first half of the fifteenth century. There was also a boom in the construction of fortified manor houses and castles in the fourteenth and fifteenth century.⁵⁴ These fortifications reflected the nobles' determination to protect, consolidate, and, if possible, expand their lands and lordship. In many localities, the rising index of noble feuds in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century reflects the struggles of the power elite to expand, consolidate, and defend their large estate complexes against other powers, especially the ruler or neighboring towns.⁵⁵ Feud, like fortification, was part of the feudal revolution in Mecklenburg.

By the late fifteenth century, some Mecklenburg nobles were powerful enough to begin transforming their estates into market-oriented manors (*Gutsherrschaft*) based on unfree labour provided by (or coerced from) their peasants in lieu of (or in addition to) rents in cash and kind, and here again, the power elite led the way. *Gutsherrschaft* offered attractive economic possibilities to a nobility eager to cash in on its recently acquired rights of lordship by riding the tide of rising grain prices.⁵⁶

During the first half of the sixteenth century, noble estate owners expanded their demesnes, primarily by annexing arable land that was either deserted or at least did not belong to occupied peasant farmsteads. Noble claims on peasant labour rose, but were still relatively modest (one day per week) by the mid-sixteenth century.⁵⁷ In the second half of the sixteenth century, however, nobles increasingly demanded more labour services. By 1595, it was the norm for a peasant farmstead to provide labour services of three days per week.⁵⁸ The sixteenth century also brought the beginnings of the *Bauernlegen*, the expansion of demesne lands through expropriation of occupied peasant farmsteads, although as late as 1630, approximately two-thirds of the arable land in seignorial districts was still in peasant hands.⁵⁹ Later on, at the height of their power, Mecklenburg nobles would undertake the wholesale expropriation of their peasant farmsteads, which had numbered twelve

54. Münch 1995 (c), pp. 50-3.

55. Münch 1992, pp. 31-2.

56. Maybaum 1926, pp. 108-20.

57. Maybaum 1926, pp. 131-44.

58. Maybaum 1926, p. 145.

59. Tessin 1955, pp. 155-6.

thousand after the Thirty Years War, but by the end of the eighteenth century were only two thousand.⁶⁰ The majority of peasants were reduced to cottagers or semi-landless agricultural labourers.

This is not to exaggerate the ease with which Mecklenburg nobles achieved their rise. Their struggles to expand and consolidate their estates brought them into conflict not only with peasants and other nobles, but also with formidable opponents like the powerful city of Rostock.⁶¹ Assuming responsibility for ducal debts in the late sixteenth century gave the Mecklenburg nobility greater power, but only at the cost of substantial financial burdens that sometimes brought financial ruin even to the wealthiest members of the power elite.⁶²

Of course, the ruin of some nobles was the fate not of a social order, but simply of individuals, and in the early modern period, the nobility of Mecklenburg stood second to none in its cohesiveness and corporate power. This esprit de corps must have owed much to the astonishing continuity of noble families and landholdings. The mere survival of noble families in this period was a major achievement, since from the thirteenth century on, Europe's noble lines died out at the rate of approximately fifty percent per century.⁶³ Many noble families in Mecklenburg also died out or disappeared, but of the three hundred fifty landed estates that existed in early sixteenth century Mecklenburg, at least half had been in the continuous ownership of the same families since the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries.⁶⁴

Brandenburg

Brandenburg's feudal revolution followed a similar trajectory. As in Mecklenburg, initial German conquests of the Brandenburg lands between the Elbe and Oder rivers had been erased by the Slav uprising in 983, and it was not until the middle of the twelfth century, as a result of the crusade mounted against the Slavs in

60. Karge, Münch and Schmied 1993, p. 109.

61. Münch 1993, pp. 322-8.

62. Göse 1998, pp. 174-5.

63. Melton 1994, p. 85.

64. Münch 1998, pp. 356ff.

1147, that German princes and their retinues were able to resume the process of settlement and statebuilding. In addition to the territorial state constructed by the Margraves of Brandenburg, the other territorial rulers were limited to ecclesiastical foundations, the most important of which was the Bishopric of Havelberg and its cathedral chapter.

Like the Dukes of Mecklenburg, the Margraves of Brandenburg, especially the Ascanian dynasty (extinguished 1420), initially limited their grants of lordship to religious foundations, while bringing some, though not all, of the few independent noble lordships under their vassalage, and did not, in most cases, grant lordship to their military and administrative servitors.⁶⁵ Thus, for example, the Dewitz family had served the rulers of Brandenburg since the early thirteenth century, and in the early fourteenth century they were defending castles in Stargard, along the Mecklenburg and Pomeranian borders.⁶⁶ The estates held by the Dewitz servitors were modest, amounting to only 175-300 acres, although this was larger than many estates, which were often hardly more than peasant farmsteads.

Those who served the Margraves were, to be sure, exempt from the rents and dues their peasant neighbors paid, but the latter also enjoyed substantial rights. As in Mecklenburg, the peasants held heritable farmsteads that usually ranged from forty to eighty acres. The rents and dues they owed their lords were modest, amounting to approximately twenty percent of their production in an average year.⁶⁷ Their village communities enjoyed legal status as self-governing institutions that dispensed local justice, and regulated land use.

Nevertheless, beginning around 1400, the feudal revolution would transform the social structure of east-Elbian Brandenburg. As in Mecklenburg, the fifteenth century was a violent period marked by feuds and widespread plundering and destruction of villages and livestock. In regions particularly afflicted, much of the rural population fled. In the Uckermark, for example, more than thirty percent of the villages were totally deserted in 1500.⁶⁸ Whatever the economic and demographic effects of these disorders, the nobles

65. Enders 1995, pp. 219-20, 223-4.

66. Heinrich 1990, pp. 23-6.

67. Heinrich 1990, pp. 126-7.

68. Enders 1992, p. 124.

clearly emerged as the winners, since by the 1530s they had secured lordship over most of the land in Brandenburg, and were already building the system of *Gutsherrschaft* that would dominate the agrarian structure of Brandenburg until the nineteenth century.

As in Mecklenburg, the feudal revolution in Brandenburg would be led by a small group of families in margravate service, many of whom had already achieved prominence as castellans (*Schlossgessene*) in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Among them were the Schulenburgs and Alvenslebens (Altmark), the Bredows (Havelland), the Quitzows (Prignitz) and (in the late fifteenth century), the Arnims (Uckermark).⁶⁹ These families already had lordship in the thirteenth century, but it is not until the fifteenth century that the power elite emerges as a recognizable group.⁷⁰ As in Mecklenburg, the families in this elite were distinguished both by their large landholdings and their dominant role within the Brandenburg administrative apparatus.

Around 1500, the power elite had managed to accumulate a degree of landed wealth that set them well apart from the other families in the service of the Brandenburg rulers. Thus, for example, thirty-eight noble families had estates in the Prignitz around 1500, but three of these families held nearly half of the seignorial land there. In the Havelland ten percent of the noble families held more than half the seignorial land.⁷¹

The wealth of these few families stands in contrast to the modest holdings of the majority of Junker families. Again, we can take as an example the Havelland, where sixty percent of noble landowners owned a total of only thirteen percent of all seignorial lands. Given the relative poverty of most Junker families, it is not surprising that the power elite would play the dominant role at all political levels, exercising claims on state offices that would become virtually hereditary; between 1480 and 1620 thirteen families provided nearly half of all the State officials.⁷² In the same period, these thirteen families also accounted for three quarters of all the Brandenburg nobles attending university.⁷³ Most nobles outside

69. Hahn 1979, pp. 9-11.

70. Ribbe 1987, p. 263.

71. Hahn 1979, p. 47.

72. Melton 1994, p. 79.

73. Melton 1994, p. 81.

the elite remained uneducated and rarely held any administrative or advisory positions. Indeed, from the late Middle Ages to the Thirty Years War, sixty percent of the noble families in Brandenburg never held any office at any level!⁷⁴

By 1500, it was no longer possible for the Electors to govern without the counsel and consent of families like the Alvenslebens, Bartenslebens, Quitzows, and Schulenburgs; their names recur, both as signatories to important treaties and agreements, and also as loan guarantors or creditors of the Electors.⁷⁵ Indeed, just as in Mecklenburg, it was the increasing indebtedness of the Brandenburg rulers, especially Joachim II (1535-1571) that enabled the power elite to transform landed wealth into political power. In repeatedly rescuing Joachim from bankruptcy (1540, 1550, 1565), the power elite took on expensive financial responsibilities, but in doing so also gained increasing access to the ruler's patronage, especially in the form of lucrative offices. Old families, as well as new entrants into the power elite (Matthias von Saldern, Georg von Winterfeld, etc.) used their offices, and the princely patronage that accompanied them, to acquire new estate complexes.⁷⁶

Like their counterparts in Mecklenburg, the Junkers in Brandenburg transformed their newly acquired land and lordships into manorial economies that would enable them to take advantage of the fivefold increase in the price of rye between 1500 and 1620. Also, as in Mecklenburg, this was a slow and protracted process. During the fifteenth century, the Quitzows, one of the most powerful families in the Prignitz, had greatly expanded their landholdings through the purchase of Stavenow, with twenty-four villages, and had then rounded out their holdings through the purchase of adjoining lands. The Quitzows continued to draw their agricultural income from more or less fixed rents in cash and kind until 1515, when they began to transform their lands into manorial farms, for which they demanded that their peasants provide labour services. Thus began a long process of negotiation marked by both confrontation and compromise, but by the early seventeenth century, each of the forty-eight peasant farmsteads on the Stavenow estate were providing three days of labour services per week, and the value of

74. Hahn 1979, p. 82.

75. Hahn 1979, pp. 173-4.

76. Hahn 1979, p. 49.

the estate had increased fivefold in the course of the sixteenth century.⁷⁷

Intimidation and violence were also part of the manorial transformation, as we see in the case of Matthias von Saldern, who not only established *Gutsherrschaft* on his newly acquired (1560) estates, but also imposed a new and harsh style of seigniorial authority based on impersonal and apparently calculated displays of brutality carried out by his overseers on the rural population.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, the Saldern family survived the upheavals of the seventeenth century and emerged the stronger, while many of their neighbors did not.⁷⁹ Indeed, the period 1540-1800 would see the disappearance or extinction of two-thirds of the noble families in Brandenburg.⁸⁰

Unlike the Mecklenburg nobility, whose power and political influence continued to grow in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Junkers of Brandenburg had already reached the height of their power around 1620. The Thirty Years War, and the absolutist regime that followed, temporarily reduced their role in the state, and they did not begin to recover until the second half of the eighteenth century.⁸¹ Contrary to conventional interpretations, the Brandenburg Diet of 1653 was not a trade-off in which the nobility gave up control over state finances in exchange for unchallenged rights over their peasants; unlike the Mecklenburg nobility, the Brandenburgers would never get unchallenged rights over their peasants.⁸² The devastations of the Thirty Years War had created severe labour shortages that imposed limits to the Junkers' attempts to reestablish their manorial regimes, and while they often clashed with their peasants, or tried them before their patrimonial courts, the peasants often fought back using not only passive resistance but also royal courts, which did not shrink from imposing heavy fines even on powerful families like the Gans zu Putlitz.⁸³

77. Hagen 1985, pp. 80-112.

78. Peters 1995, pp. 248-61.

79. Enders 1994, pp. 11ff.

80. Melton 1994, p. 83.

81. Melton 1994, pp. 67-102.

82. Hagen 1989, pp. 317ff.

83. Enders 2000, pp. 713ff.

Prussia

Since the thirteenth century, the Prussian state had been ruled by the German Order, an aristocratic-monastic corporation that elected (and could also depose) the head of the Order, the Grand Master, who, together with a small oligarchy, ruled from the fortress of Marienburg, in West Prussia.⁸⁴ As a monastic knighthood recruited exclusively from families of the German aristocracy (mostly from the south and the Rhineland), the members of the Order provided the core of its military force, although in its primary military objective, the conquest of pagan Lithuania to the east, it was also aided by numerous aristocrats from Western Europe, for whom participation in at least one campaign against the Lithuanians was part of their *cursus honorum*.⁸⁵

All offices in the state, including those in the administrative districts (comanderies), were also held by members of the Order. These monk-aristocrats did not, however, hold private estates and lordships within Prussia; indeed, aside from the bishoprics, there were very few landed lordships outside the Order. The aristocratic members of the Order, who held all the military and administrative offices in the state, exercised lordship not as private individuals, but rather as officials of the Order. In short, a landed nobility did not exist before the feudal revolution in the late fifteenth century, although, like the great Carolingian aristocrats, the Order had its military retinues, which would play the leading role in the first phase of the feudal revolution in Prussia.

The Order recruited its military retinues primarily from commoners in the upper strata of the free urban and rural population. These included Poles (primarily in the Culmer and Pomerellen regions), German colonists, and the indigenous Prussians. The free population had its origins in the thirteenth century, when the Order had encouraged the military colonization of the newly conquered Prussian lands by granting lands both to settlers and to the free indigenous population on the basis of Culmic law. Those holding land under Culmic law had larger holdings and better conditions than the 'unfree' (mostly indigenous) peasants. In addition, they did not owe seignorial dues, and disputes among freemen

84. Burleigh 1984, pp. 1-3.

85. Boockmann 1989, pp. 150-69.

were judged in special district courts presided over by judges and juries chosen (by the Order) from the most prominent freemen in the district.⁸⁶ On the other hand, the freemen owed military service in the Order's retinues or castles, and a small yearly fine paid in grain.⁸⁷ The upper stratum (approximately twenty-five percent) of the freemen comprised the local elite; while most of the freemen, with farmsteads averaging eighty acres, were basically peasants, the elite, the 'worthy people', had landholdings that sometimes exceeded six hundred acres, although the average lay between three hundred and five hundred acres.⁸⁸ The freemen elite rendered military service as heavily armoured knights, and the wealthiest freemen fielded entire contingents.⁸⁹ The average landholding of the elite freemen was actually larger than the average noble estate in neighboring Poland, and clearly they had peasants or cottagers to work their lands. Nevertheless, they were, in the eyes of the Order and its aristocratic members, little more than peasants.⁹⁰

Beginning in the first decades of the fifteenth century, the *Ordensstaat* went into a rapid (and irreversible) decline signalled by a series of disastrous wars against Poland-Lithuania, which were then followed by economic depression. The Order's attempt to resolve the ensuing financial problems at the expense of the freemen and the towns led to an increasingly organized movement led by representatives of the major Prussian towns (Thorn, Elbing, and Danzig) and some of the most prominent members of the freeman elite (although some of the latter remained loyal to the Order). In 1440, this movement crystallized into a formal alliance of towns and freemen known as the Prussian Union, which increasingly viewed the king of Poland as its protector, and the Polish nobility as its social model.⁹¹ In 1454, the members of the Union swore loyalty to the Polish Crown, and by the Incorporation Act of 1454, Prussia was joined to Poland in a dynastic union under the Polish Crown; the freemen and towns both received recognition of their inde-

86. Burleigh 1984, pp. 138-40.

87. Burleigh 1984, pp. 122-7.

88. Wunder 1968, pp. 126-7.

89. Boockmann 1989, pp. 123-4.

90. Nowak 1992, p. 52.

91. The feudal revolution in Poland is too large a topic to be discussed in this essay.

pendent status.⁹² This put the existence of the *Ordenstaat* in question, and in the Thirteen Years War that followed (1454-1466), the German Order hired mercenaries from all over Europe. The mercenaries first plundered the land and then, when the Order proved unable to come up with their pay, occupied the Grand Master's fortress at Marienburg and then turned it over to Poland. As the result of the Second Peace of Thorn, which finally ended hostilities in 1466, the German Order lost Ermland and West Prussia (including the three major towns of Danzig, Thorn, and Elbing), to Poland. The *Ordensstaat*, now reduced to its territories in East Prussia, existed until 1525, when it became a secular duchy and Polish fief under Duke Albrecht von Hohenzollern, who had also been its last Grand Master.

This was, however, only the first stage of the feudal revolution in Prussia, which now diverged in two separate directions, the one (West Prussia) toward a gradual, but highly nuanced integration within the Polish nobility, the other (East Prussia) taking a complex path to dynastic union under the Elector of Brandenburg (1660).

West (Royal) Prussia. After 1466, the feudal revolution in West Prussia can be divided into two phases. During the first phase, which ended in 1537, the emerging nobility, despite deep internal divisions, tried to establish itself as a ruling elite separate from the Polish nobility. The second phase, beginning with the reign of Sigismund Augustus (1548-1572), would see the West Prussian elite increasingly integrated into the Polish nobility. Even before 1466, the leaders of the Prussian Union had developed into a power elite. The Baysens (the leading family within this power elite) were German, while others, like the Legendorf family, had risen from freemen of Polish or indigenous Prussian origin. Wealthy patrician families also belonged to the power elite; some of them, like the Weiher family, had entered the nobility.⁹³ By 1500, this power elite had become an oligarchy that held the major offices within Polish West Prussia. Stibor Baysen (d. 1480) held the highest position as governor; others governed the three Palatinates (Marienburg, Pomerellen, and Elbing) and the military districts

92. Friedrich 2000, pp. 22-3.

93. Boockmann 1993, p. 243.

(castellanies).⁹⁴ Only a third of the lands in West Prussia were seignorial, since, by the Act of Incorporation, the lands not held by the freemen or the bishoprics had become Polish crown domains. Many of these domains were held by the governor, Palatines, and castellans. The primary goal of the power elite was to ensure strict observance of the *jus indigenatus*, according to which political offices, crown domains, and landed estates remained the exclusive preserve of West Prussian nobles. In this, they were initially supported by the middle and poor nobility, whose poverty made them dependent on the oligarchy. The Thirteen Years War had devastated West Prussia, leaving as much as fifty percent of the farmsteads deserted.⁹⁵ In addition, Culmic law, under which wives and daughters, as well as sons, could inherit property, led to a rapid subdivision of estates. Around 1570, a third of the West Prussian nobility had estates of less than a hundred thirty acres, and only fourteen percent of the nobility had estates of more than four hundred acres.⁹⁶

Although the lower and middle nobles had generally supported the particularistic policies of the power elite, these policies had not only perpetuated oligarchic rule, but had also kept Royal Prussia separate from Poland, thus effectively sealing off the poorer nobles from political representation and personal advancement in the Kingdom of Poland as a whole. A political faction led by middle nobles gradually took form, and, in 1537, sent a delegation to King Sigismund (1506-1548) to complain against the oligarchic misrule of the elite. Growing hostility to the power elite led them to support Sigismund Augustus' program of reclaiming the crown's rights to domain lands. The Union of Lublin (1569), which incorporated the Prussian Diet into the Polish Diet, enabled the Prussian nobles to participate in the Polish Diet, integrated them into the Polish nobility, and essentially completed the feudal revolution in West Prussia. Nevertheless, the same process of integration also strengthened the power elite, since the Palatines and other major officials were now not only the powers within West Prussia, but also became Senators in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.⁹⁷ And

94. Friedrich 2000, pp. 22-4.

95. Biskup 1992, p. 88.

96. North 1994, p. 108.

97. Maltek 1994, p. 66.

while a few families were replaced by 'outsiders' in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the power elite of eight families kept an extraordinary grip on high offices and crown estates. In the period 1526-1657 eighty percent of the Palatines, and half the castellans and other officials came from these eight families.⁹⁸

East (Ducal) Prussia. Like West Prussia, most of the nobility in East Prussia was poor. In the sixteenth century, nearly half of them had estates of less than two hundred fifty acres.⁹⁹ Only a few of the freemen elite, those with more than six hundred acres, managed to assimilate into the nobility.¹⁰⁰ The others retained, at best, a yeoman status between peasants and nobles. After 1466, the nobility would be increasingly led by a power elite that drew primarily on 'outsiders', specifically a few families from the upper nobility in West Germany, the Dohnas, Lehdorfs, Eulenburgs, and others. Most of them, with the exception of Truchseß von Waldburg (who had been a member of the Order), had come to Prussia as mercenaries in the Thirteen Years War and the Order had paid them off with large estates. There was no doubt about the noble status of these families, who quickly staked their claims to the major offices in the Duchy (the *Landräte*) after secularization. By 1520, they had led the nobility to a full consolidation of aristocratic rights and privileges that set them off from the rest of the population.¹⁰¹ In the course of the sixteenth century, the power elite consolidated and expanded their landholdings. Like Mecklenburg nobles, they stubbornly held on to the original estates, with which their names were often connected. These estates served as the centers of their expanding estate complexes.¹⁰²

Unlike their Brandenburg counterparts, the power elite in East Prussia continued to gain power in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. During the rule of the Great Elector (Frederick William, 1640-1688), East Prussia became a sovereign possession of the Hohenzollern dynasty, and the Great Elector, who disliked the Lutheranism and political narrowness of the Branden-

98. North 1994, pp. 108ff.

99. North 1994, p. 106.

100. Wunder 1968, p. 120.

101. Guddat 1975, pp. 146-7.

102. Guddat 1975, pp. 419ff.

burgers, found within the East Prussian elite excellent material on which to build a powerful absolutism. The Dohnas and Lehndorf offer excellent examples: They not only had high imperial status, but were also rich, cultured, educated, and Calvinist.¹⁰³

Like their counterparts in Mecklenburg and Brandenburg, the Prussian nobility established power over its peasants in the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, the manorial system never dominated as fully as it did in Brandenburg and Mecklenburg before the Thirty Years War. Wage labour was widespread, especially in the Vistula basin near Danzig, where estate owners had immediate proximity to Danzig. Thus, in the sixteenth century, approximately half the crown domains in West Prussia were worked with hired labour, while *Gutsherrschaft* dominated in the other half.¹⁰⁴ Wage labour completely dominated on the crown domains (many of them held by the power elite) in the Marienburg Palatinate. The peasants there paid quitrents, but provided no labour services. This was clearly expensive, since labour costs on crown domains doubled in the course of the sixteenth century, but the profits were huge, and domain revenue rose by more than four hundred percent!¹⁰⁵ Nobles also found it increasingly profitable to purchase their peasants' farmsteads, and then lease them out to enterprising farmers for short periods (three to six years).

In East Prussia, the feudal revolution had doubled the amount of land held by the nobility, which had two thirds of the land by 1626.¹⁰⁶

As in West Prussia, *Gutsherrschaft* had a large, but not exclusive place in the agrarian economy. Faced with a relative over-supply of labour services in the early seventeenth century, administrators on some crown domains in East Prussia had commuted their peasants' labour services but quintupled their cash rents. Later in the century, when faced with heavy population losses, the administrators shifted back to heavy labour services, but around the beginning of the eighteenth century, they reverted once more to wage labour.¹⁰⁷ At this point, approximately forty percent of the estates

103. Melton 1994, pp. 85-95.

104. Melton 1998(b).

105. Melton 1998(b).

106. Guddat 1975, p. 421.

107. North 1982, pp. 70ff.

in East Prussia operated entirely without labour services.¹⁰⁸ These were mostly small estates, but the power elite had already led the way.¹⁰⁹ The nobility profited greatly from their alcohol monopoly, which forbade peasants from buying any beer or brandy other than their lord's. A bushel of barley, brewed into beer and sold on the estate, brought a much higher profit than shipping the grain to a market and selling it.¹¹⁰ Wage labour, of course, fed seigniorial profits, since agricultural workers spent their earnings in the estate taverns.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the feudal revolution in Mecklenburg, Brandenburg, and Prussia took place between 1400-1600. This is a period flanked by two great crises: Around 1400, the economic depression of the late Middle Ages had not yet touched bottom; in 1600, the military devastation of the south Baltic littoral was still at an early stage, as was the long term decline in grain prices. There were also crises in-between, but the period as a whole was not one of crisis, but rather of social and economic transformation. The emerging nobility had won its spurs, and set about reorganizing the agrarian economy into large scale agriculture units that produced mainly for the market. Depending on local or regional economic conditions, noble estate owners would rely either on labour services provided by their peasants, or on wage labour. In practice, most nobles made use of both, and in any case, the choice was theirs, because the feudal revolution had made them the lords of the land.

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108. Plehn 1905, p. 69.

109. See, for example, Dönhoff 1936, pp. 48ff.

110. Böhme 1902, pp. 40-1.

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