

Liberalism in Lower Styrian Rural Areas during the Habsburg Monarchy at the End of the 19th Century: the Case of the Christlicher Bauernbund

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Contents

Introduction

1. The Array of Farmer's Associations

2. The Christlicher Bauernbund

3. Innovativeness and exclusiveness

Conclusion

Introduction

It has been said that Austria's "Liberal" era began in 1867 with its December Constitution and ended with the Liberals' defeat in the 1879 Imperial Parliament elections. Anti-Liberal Lagers (camps) consequently formed throughout the 1880's, and the Liberals vanished. However, this view was revised by Judson in his 1996 monograph, "Exclusive Revolutionaries"¹ which pointed out that liberalism in Austria was not extinguished in 1879, but instead spread from the city into rural areas, closely tied with nationalism.

According to Judson, liberalism was a credo and world view shared by urban bourgeois property owners containing both an egalitarian opposition to public authority as well as a somewhat conservative desire to avoid dangerous social changes. The Liberals' rhetoric of equality masked an essentially hierarchical world view. They divided the populace by whether they deemed their citizenship to be active or passive. For example, while women, children, and those others considered 'inferiors' in the national hierarchy were presumed to be unable to exercise good judgment and were thus undeserving of active citizenship, they were entitled to participate in the bourgeoisie through an education which would lead to their enlightenment and cultivation. Because of this selective inclusion, Judson called the bourgeoisie "the exclusive Revolutionaries".

The Liberal-nationals in Bohemia tried to impart their values to the different classes in the countryside, but had little success when confronted with rural inhabitants' so-called "national indifference"². Judson and Zahra's case studies of Bohemia showed that the rural classes were bilingual and non-committal to a single nationality or language, and so hesitated to support nationalistic activities, such as those promoted by the Südmark, a nationalist organisation

¹ Judson, Pieter M., *Exclusive Revolutionaries: Liberal Politics, Social Experience, and National Identity in the Austrian Empire, 1848-1914*, (An Arbor, 1996).

² Regarding this term, see Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls. National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900-1948*, (Ithaca/London, 2008).



whose committee was entirely bourgeois. This does not mean liberalism was ignored by rural inhabitants. Its later influence evidently left a strong mark.

To examine how Liberal-nationalism developed significance in rural areas, I use the example of the Christlicher Bauernbund (“Christian Farmers’ Association”) in Steiermark (Styria), considered by contemporary people to be a ‘liberal’ association.

Steiermark (Styria) was a ‘borderland’ of the Habsburg Monarchy; supposedly straddling the German-Slovene linguistic border. Styria consisted of three parts: Upper, Middle, and Lower Styria. The Bauernbund featured in this paper was active mainly in Upper and Middle Styria, and aimed to unite independent, stand-alone farmers. Through examining the Bauernbund’s activities and campaigns, the concept of Liberalism held by the indigenous farmers can be exposed.

1. The Array of Farmer’s Associations

Here, I outline several movements³ which rose after the fall of urban Liberalism. Gradual changes to election laws had made voting more affordable. The decrease in the voting tax from ten to five Gulden extended suffrage to farmers, workers, craftsmen, and others who had hitherto not engaged in political life.

First, the Catholic conservative movement in Styria. In 1868, Alois Karlon, a well-known cleric established der Katholisch-Konservative Volksverein (“Catholic Conservative People’s Association”), which published the newspaper “Grazer Volksblatt” and was supported by many in the clergy.

Karlton also organized a second, Christian-Social movement in Styria. Der Arbeiterfreund (“Workers’ Friends”) was established in 1895 and co-operated with the Catholic-Conservatives in the 1897 elections. The organisations were later merged into the Christliche Volkspartei (“Christian People’s Party”).

Third, the German-National movement. German Liberals were continuously in majority in the Landtag (the Styrian state parliament) when it reformed in 1861. In the 1880’s, some were strongly influenced by Schönerer (an extremely radical politician) and broke away to form the German-National group ‘die Südmark’ in Graz in 1889.

Fourth, the social democrat movement. In 1868 der Arbeiterbildungsverein (“Workers’ Educational Association”) was established in Vienna, and started to spread to other states. After its 1889 party convention in Heinfeld, it began to target local areas. In 1890 its sub-section in Styria started to publish its newsletter “Arbeiterwillen (Workers’ Will)” and advocate universal (male) suffrage.

Alois Posch, a German-Liberal member of the Landtag began a Styrian version of the liberal farmers’ association in Upper Austria. Later, Achatz, a farmer, published “Bauernwille” (Farmers’ will) in 1873 and started the Socialist Farmers movement. This influenced all of Styria, and in 1884 his followers established der Bauernverein Umgebung Marburg (“Marburg-area Farmers’ Association”). The taking of the association’s chair by the Schönerer-influenced Kulmholz, who shifted its direction towards radical German-Nationalism, spelled the beginning of the end for the organisation. It was disbanded in 1888 at the command of local authorities.⁴

The Catholic-Conservatives were the most lively and influential movement, rumoured to have the backing of all Styrian farmers. In the late 1890’s the Christlicher Bauernbund (“Christian Farmers’ Association”) competed with them through appeals to German-Nationalism. In response, Catholic conservatives through Hagenhofer established the Katholisch Konservative Bauernverein.

³ On Styrian Farmers’ Movements, overview by Burkert-Dottolo, Günter R., *Das Land geprägt – Die Geschichte der steirischen Bauern und ihrer politischen Vertretung*, (Graz/Stuttgart, 1999) and Haas, Alexander, *Die vergessene Bauernpartei. Der Steirische Landbund und sein Einfluss auf die österreichische Politik 1918–1934* (Graz, 2000).

⁴ Burkert-Dottolo, Günter R., “Deutschnationale Beeinflussungsversuche steirischer Bauern 1880 – 1914, Steirmärkischer Bauernverein, Bauernverein Umgebung Marburg und Christlicher Bauernbund als „schönerianische Bastionen“, in: *Österreich in Geschichte und Literatur* 30/2, 1986, p.94-108.

2. The Christlicher Bauernbund

The Christlicher Bauernbund was established in 1896 in Graz by Friedrich Karl von Rokitansky. Von Rokitansky was from the bourgeoisie, studied law in Innsbruck, Vienna, and for 2 Semesters in an agricultural college in Vienna. In 1895 he purchased land near Graz, and became a landowner. The association had 60 starting members; farmers, merchants, hand-workers, and teachers, especially ex-Schönerarians. Von Rokitansky had difficulty recruiting Catholic-conservatives as his criticism of the Catholic clergy was unacceptable to pious farmers. However, Protestants accepted him more easily.

In 1898, von Rokitansky called in a speech at a farmers' convention for the support of all farmers, regardless of nationality, which separated him from other German-Nationals who could not conceive of cooperating with the Slovene farmers in Lower Styria.

Von Rokitansky engaged in dialogue with farmers' associations in other states, such as those in Carinthia, Upper-Austria, and Tyrol, to appeal the Rottenmanner Program in 1897, and undertake the creation of a unified farmers' party. Since 1897, von Rokitansky had been the only association member with a seat in the Landtag, but lost it ironically in 1902, as six fellow association candidates won theirs. Von Rokitansky's influence in the movement waned afterwards. The Christlicher Bauernbund broke up in 1913 because of dwindling funds and memberships.

However, after World War I, in December 1918, Leopold Stocker, editor of an agricultural paper, established a new Bauernbund in Styria, with ex-Christlicher Bauernbund members. In 1922, this Bauernbund joined the Austrian Bauernbund and were incorporated with other state Bauernbunds into the German Reichslandbund. They insisted that through this affiliation they had achieved agrarian Anschluss ('union'), well before the national Annexation/Anschluss in 1938. This Austrian Landbund was the predecessor of the Landbund which formed part of the government in the interwar period, alongside the Christian Social Party and the Grossdeutsche Volkspartei.

The Christian Bauernbund periodical, "*Bauernbündler*" (1897-1907), helps us examine their activities. The executive committee consisted of 10 members and 2 auxiliary members, including the Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Secretary, and Treasurer. These posts were occupied by members of the parliament, landowners, and so on. Branch sections had about 300 active members including mayors, landowners, and shop-owners. Aggregate membership is unclear, but we can see that in 1896, within 6 months of formation, it had gained 5,000 members, doubling to 10,000 by the end of the following year.

The main activity of the association was to organize "farmers' meetings" in rural areas. Near-weekly meetings were held in every part of Upper and Middle Styria. Von Rokitansky attended almost every meeting and gave speeches which sometimes lasted 2 hours. Besides political topics, they talked about agricultural techniques like how to make good compost.

Meetings were often accompanied by balls (dance parties) which offered rural inhabitants opportunities for social interaction. On such occasions, 500 or more people, farmers and bourgeoisie alike, would assemble at popular restaurants or hotels. A marching band would typically play the "Rokitansky march", and there would be plenty of meals and dances. The hall would be decorated with flowers, and pictures of celebrities like von Rokitansky, Kaiser Franz Josef, and Sisi. By offering such occasions, the association facilitated networking between farmers and the bourgeoisie.

Members were obliged to subscribe to the "*Bauernbündler*" at 50 Krone per year. Association income also came in the form of fees, donations, and Bauernbündler merchandise like matches, postcards, and portraits of von Rokitansky. The proceeds went to publishing and election campaigns. The association made flyers and posters for their candidates, held cheer meetings, and assembled together to vote at elections.

Their political agenda was to advance the interests of German, Christian, independent farmers. They admired the Social Democratic Party for its success in uniting workers into one "Stände" (class). The association tried to spread

their political opinions through their newsletter. They held not only political meetings, but also—as previously mentioned—parties to entertain and give farmers a chance to network. Their primary goal was to place as many candidates as they could at all levels of politics.

3. Innovativeness and exclusiveness

Text from *Bauernbündler* articles reveal what they wanted to promote and what they wanted to undermine. Firstly, to promote an “Emphasis on the farmer as an independent and self-sufficient person” they placed great importance on education. From the *Bauernbündler*: “Wissen ist macht! (Knowledge is Power)”. This motto is shared with the Social Democrats. About the Social Democrat Party, it is said as follows: the Party made an effort to enhance the literacy of the people. They gave workers knowledge and made them think. With this spiritual freedom, they united closely”. The Association held the Social Democratic Party in high esteem and saw it as a role model. While the *Bauernbund* at first advocated shortening compulsory education from 8 to 6 years, they later changed their position to support providing farmers with 6 years of general national education, plus 2 years of agricultural studies.

In favour of self-determination they asserted that farmers had been misled by the clergy and the liberals, and that they now had to unite and think for themselves. An article dated 25th December 1897 titled “If you become a Self-Sufficient Farmer”⁵ listed considerations for newly independent farmers: “You will have to make decisions all by yourself...pay taxes, employ and feed *Dienstbote* (servants), and so on”. For those questions, the article offered advice and consultation.⁶

Several articles also addressed problems with servants. Industrialization in cities like Graz drew manpower from rural areas. Farmers reported servants leaving to work in cities, returning only during recessions, and having no choice but to welcome them back with warmth (and some paternalism).

The newsletter expressed scorn towards the clergy and aristocrats for their reliance on gratuitous services from exploited farmers, and thus for not being ‘self-reliant’. The article “Thus we were Trampled, not Represented”⁷ recounted how the farmers’ demands on the *Landtag* were obstructed by conservatives, revealing their antipathy and anti-clericalism.

From other articles we can conclude that they revered education and self-reliance, and treated paternalistically those who could not achieve it with statements like, “I personally admire the clergy, but don’t want them to poke their head into politics”.

The newsletter also recorded the Association’s political demands. One was for a game act to limit hunting. Farmers believed that they, as landowners, should have the right to ban hunting which harmed the woods and lands. Regarding the *Landtag*, the Association demanded a secret vote system, more seats for farmers, and lower suffrage taxes.

As for economic demands, the farmers complained that tariffs were too low compared to other countries. They argued to abolish land tax, particularly in times of poor harvest. The article “Stop the Gold Standard”⁸ insisted that farmers, who tended to be heavily indebted, would suffer greatly with a change to the currency peg.

Their political and economic agenda was furthered by proposing resolutions in the *Landtag*, and by sending petitions and delegations to the *Reichstag*.

It is important to note that their agenda was primarily self-interested. They never campaigned for unrestricted, universal suffrage, or to reduce voting tax to zero. It was entirely acceptable to them to withhold the vote from other citizens who would not or could not pay for it.

⁵ *Bauernbündler*, 25. Dec.1897.

⁶ In 1902 for example, 1095 consultations were held.

⁷ *Bauernbündler*, 18. Nov.1900.

⁸ *Bauernbündler*, 3. Feb.1900.

Where the Bauernbund can be called 'revolutionary' is in its attempt to improve rural areas. They aimed to disseminate modern agricultural techniques and general knowledge. For example, they encouraged farmers to challenge superstitions on the basis that they were neither scientific nor rational. They tried to halt the long-standing exploitation of farmers by intermediaries by establishing directly managed stores in every town from which basic produce was sold, including fruit.

They campaigned to regulate futures transactions and for curbs on speculative capitalism. They demanded state trade protection and import bans, particularly resenting the "Ausgleich (Compromise)" with Hungary which they felt flooded the country with cheap products. Their position sometimes led to confrontations with retailers and other urban residents. During a so-called "milk war", Socialists claimed that the price of milk was too high, to which farmers countered that they were already selling it near production cost.⁹

Jews were portrayed by the publication as smart and clever brokers. One article claimed that Jews in Israel had started to manipulate the price of wheat. Such portrayals, like that of Jews in Vienna and Budapest influencing futures transactions and grain prices, were groundless but persistent.

Finally, in terms of nationalism and patriotism, the Bauernbund professed to be German-National and secular, but were in reality reverent Christian monarchists. The "*Bauernbündler*" wrote repeatedly, "we sustain the crown and the altar", and emphasized that they were "kaisertreu (faithful to the emperor)". They ended meetings with cheers for the emperor, and especially loved Josef II and Maria Theresia for abolishing serfdom and emancipating farmers. Schönerarian German-Nationalists revered the position of the German Emperor, but for the Bauernbündlers, the Emperor meant only the Habsburg Emperor. Although being part of the German Genossenschaft (co-operative) meant German-speaking life in Bohemia was under pressure by language equality ordinances, they were still undoubtedly part of the Habsburg monarchy.

Their exclusive nationalism was not strictly consistent. On one hand, they criticised the Bohemian language ordinances and school problems in Cilie for harming German national property. They were very sensitive to what they considered threats to German interests. They even blamed Catholic conservatives for siding with slaves. On the other hand, they were sometimes friendly to farmers from Slovenia. An article dated 22nd April 1900 on Slovene wine-farmers coming to Graz to petition for their economic interests, while the Slovene member of parliament boycotted the Landtag, writes of von Rokitansky being very impressed and moved by the Slovenes' desire for their children to learn German and migrate to a better life. Von Rokitansky claimed solidarity, and a desire to cooperate, with the Slovene farmers. While this may appear generous, it was conditional upon them learning German. Furthermore, in 1898 von Rokitansky told the Landtag, "it is natural [that] the Slovenes oppose us to protect their own national property".¹⁰ So while von Rokitansky may have appeared understanding towards all farmers, he clearly considered other ethnicities and language groups rivals in a zero-sum game for national property.

It is safe to say that the Bauernbündler's strong German-Nationalism was limited to the Habsburg monarchy and certain classes of Germans.

Conclusion

To summarise the Christliche Bauernbündler: they fought for their own interests, often against the conservative Catholic aristocracy, while distancing themselves from peasants, servants, workers and Slovenes, even if they were also farmers. They thus waged war on two fronts against those they considered elite and those they considered lesser. They can be considered "exclusive revolutionaries" in the sense that their liberalism and nationalism were limited to their own interests.

⁹ *Bauernbündler*, 28. Jan. 1906.

¹⁰ *Stenographische Protokolle über die Sitzungen des Steierm. Landtages*, 1898, p.682.

48 Liberalism in Lower Styrian Rural Areas during the Habsburg Monarchy at the End of the 19th Century

As previously mentioned, the successor association to the Bauernbund was amalgamated with other associations into the Austrian Bauernbund to create what they claimed to be an “agrarian Anschluss”. This alludes to a connection between the agrarian liberalism and later National Socialism. Whether this connection exists, and whether their perspectives were shared with other contemporaneous and successor farmers’ groups are, I would suggest, excellent questions for further study.