

# Coping with Poverty in Rural Brandenburg

## *The Role of Lords and State in the Late Eighteenth Century*

Takashi Iida

While the Prussian Kingdom rose to become one of the European great powers through expanding its army, territories, and economic power during the eighteenth century, it still had a highly feudal structure characterized by demesne lordship (*Gutsherrschaft*), specifically in its provinces east of the Elbe River. The Hohenzollern monarchs were not only sovereigns of the Prussian state but also the lords of their domain estates that they owned just as noble lords owned their own estates. The income from domain estates increased remarkably and took a significant part of Prussian public finances throughout the eighteenth century (table 5).

In East Elbian Prussia, demesne lordship developed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and existed until dissolution through the “peasant emancipation” that began in 1807 as a part of the Prussian reforms. Demesne lords had one or more estates as their landed properties, which comprised not only farms that their subject peasants held in hereditary or leasehold tenure, but also their own demesne farms and forests. The tenant peasants were obligated to pay feudal rents in kind, money, or labor. As the lords’ demesne farms enlarged, they compelled peasants to render even more labor services, often with draught animals. To ensure such labor, the lords restricted their peasants’ freedom to leave the farm and even required the peasants’ children to work as servants, also known as *Gesinde*. Thus, entire peasant families became hereditary subjects (*Erbuntertanen*) to their particular lords. The subjects were also subordinated to their lords’ judicial right.<sup>1</sup> While the lords thus strengthened their rule over their subject peasants, they were also obligated to support these subjects. The lords were obligated to grant timber to (re)build and repair buildings on peasant farms, especially in case of leasehold tenure, as well as

TABLE 5. Development of Public Finances of Prussia, 1713–1806

	Income from domain estates (Million rt)	Tax (Million rt)	Total pure state revenue (Million rt)	Military Expenditure (Million rt)	Number of military personnel	Population
1713	1.6	2.4	3.4	2.5	38,000	1,600,000
1740	3.3	3.6	7	5–6	72,000	2,200,000
1786	6–7	10–11	23	12–13	195,000	5,400,000
1806	7–8	16	27	16–17	250,000	10,700,000

SOURCE: Schmoller 1898, 180.

NOTE: rt = *Reichstaler*.

to provide peasants with firewood, litter, and fodder from their forests, as will be detailed in chapter 13 of this volume. Otherwise, they were generally obligated to support their subjects in case of need.

In his study from 1887 of the “peasant emancipation” from the demesne lordship in Prussia, Georg Friedrich Knapp wrote a pioneering description of the East Elbian demesne lordship and gave a picture of the subject peasants as generally impoverished, unmotivated, and incapable of development under oppressive feudal lordship, despite being on the verge of emancipation. He illustrated their deep dependence on their lords for a wide range of life’s necessities, suggesting that there was a region where “many subjects openly say that they do not regard it as an injustice to steal their lords’ goods, and do not call it theft, but nourishing by the lords.”<sup>2</sup> Thereafter, for a century, the image of the patriarchal care of East Elbian lords for their subjects became a tradition in the scholarship,<sup>3</sup> although counterevidence was cited as well.<sup>4</sup> However, the traditional image was fundamentally challenged by new research beginning in the mid-1980s, which offered a more dynamic and diverse view of the peasants’ economy and society under the demesne lordship.<sup>5</sup> Since then, the image of generally impoverished and dependent East Elbian peasants can no longer be upheld. Nevertheless, it is still worth focusing on the lords’ obligations and practices to support their subjects’ lives, which varied according to the conditions.<sup>6</sup>

However, the lords were not solely responsible for supporting impoverished people. During the eighteenth century, the Prussian state sought to provide relief to the impoverished people through village or town communities.<sup>7</sup> This was all the more necessary because of the emergence of a new type of rural populace. After the resettlement of peasant farms that had been deserted because of the Thirty Years’ War, the Prussian state’s population growth policy meant to ensure a large army (table 5) led to an increase in the number of cottage residents. Among them, the lodgers (*Einlieger*) especially were free persons who, in contrast to subject peasants of feudal estates, could leave an estate freely but were more likely to fall

into poverty. These landless people were beyond the control of each feudal estate and were to be supported publicly by the state authorities or each village and town community.

This chapter illustrates how this dual system of poor relief functioned in rural Brandenburg in the late eighteenth century, focusing on the case of the royal domain of Alt-Ruppin, one of the fifty-four royal domains in the Kurmark (the greater part of Brandenburg comprising the Altmark west of the Elbe River and East Elbian areas down to the Oder River surrounding Berlin). Around 1800, the Alt-Ruppin domain comprised two towns and twenty-seven villages.

#### RURAL POPULATION, SOCIETY, AND ECONOMY IN LATE-EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY KURMARK

During the eighteenth century, rural Brandenburg experienced rapid population growth and social differentiation. Between 1725 and 1800, the number of rural establishments in the Kurmark increased from 35,784 to 65,804. While the number of peasant farm holders (*Bauern* and *Kossäten*) remained almost constant at around twenty-eight thousand, because of the impartibility of the farms, the number of cottage residents (*Büdner* and *Einlieger*) increased from 7,930 to 36,345.<sup>8</sup>

In the royal domain of Alt-Ruppin, the number of large peasants (*Bauern*) and small peasants (*Kossäten*) was almost unchanged at around 420 and 110 between 1764 and 1800. While farms passed undivided to a single child, noninheriting heirs were compensated with a portion with which they married into a peasant farm, set up a cottage, or rented it. Consequently, the cottage-resident class repeated their self-reproduction and became denser, because there was almost no chance of upward social mobility to the farm-holding class.<sup>9</sup> Between 1764 and 1800, the number of cottagers (*Büdner*), who owned a cottage, remained also constant at 124 after the rapid increase in the 1750s. However, lodgers (*Einlieger*) who rented a cottage that was built mostly on a peasant farm increased rapidly from 135 in 1764 to 322 in 1800 (see table 8 in chapter 13). Cottagers and lodgers usually earned their living as laborers, handicraftsmen, or soldiers. In this social differentiation, poverty became concentrated among the cottage-resident class, especially among lodgers.

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, the social disparity between peasant farmers and cottage residents widened. In this period, rural Brandenburg experienced an agrarian boom, in which grain prices almost doubled, because of increasing demands from industrializing England, the growing population of Berlin, and increasing number of local cottage residents.<sup>10</sup> While increasing grain prices benefited peasant farmers, they disadvantaged cottage residents as grain consumers. This contrast increased poverty and issues pertaining to the

cottage-resident class. However, the peasant-farmer class was also never free from poverty, as the next section examines.

#### COPING WITH IMPOVERISHED FARM HOLDERS

When a tenant peasant family was impoverished, the feudal lord's authorities immediately handled this matter. It was no wonder because the impoverishment inevitably affected the economy of the tenant farm that made up the lord's landed property. According to the Prussian General Legal Code (*Allgemeines Landrecht für die preußischen Staaten*) of 1794,<sup>11</sup> every lord was obligated to look after his subjects unstintingly in case of need (II 7 §122). However, he was entitled to evict his peasant subjects not only in case of rebelliousness or crime (§289, §290, §291) but for economic reasons as well. An eviction could take place if the peasant ruined his farm and its appurtenances through slovenly economy (§288), if he wasted the loan (§292), or because of old age or an incurable disease rendering him incompetent to manage his farm economy (§293). The reason for evicting a peasant was based on his "incompetence" (*Untüchtigkeit*) in maintaining his farm economy. The lords required that a farm holder retain the number of livestock and maintain farm buildings such as houses, stables, and barns. Indeed, every usufructuary holder and owner of peasant farms in the royal domains could obtain the necessary building timber from the royal forest free of charge or by paying one-third of the cost respectively.<sup>12</sup> In the case of rebuilding, they could enjoy the "ordinary" assistance of *Baufreiheiten*, an exemption from feudal rent for specific years. Otherwise, the farm holder himself was responsible for retaining the number of livestock and maintaining buildings. How did the feudal authorities actually cope with an impoverished farm holder between their obligation to support him and their right to evict him? The following case of a farm-owning small peasant (*Erbkossät*) named Joachim Siering in the village of Schönberg in the royal domain of Alt-Ruppin<sup>13</sup> serves as an illustration.

On April 21, 1784, Joachim Siering petitioned his lord, King Friedrich II, for extraordinary assistance to reconstruct his living house, stable, and barn, which were beyond repair. Since he had taken over the farm from his father, he kept it as a "most faithful subject," put great effort into cultivating it, and repaid part of the loan on it. However, "as an impoverished man," he could not afford to reconstruct the farm buildings. He attributed his poverty to family misfortunes. His mother had a lame hand, and of his seven children, one had a lame hand and stiff arm, and another a bandy leg. Siering had also been sick for a long time. In addition, two horses had died the previous winter.

Questioned by domain officials, the village headman of Schönberg named Döring confirmed that the difficulties of Siering's farm economy mainly originated in his unfortunate family circumstances: when he inherited his father's

farm twenty years earlier, it was already not mortgage-free, and he could marry only a poor woman with a dowry of ten *Reichstaler*. His family then grew, and of his seven children, four were still infants, and two were handicapped, as Siering complained. Furthermore, while supporting his growing family, he had to give a portion of retirement to his father for ten years and to his still-living mother, who was too infirm to work, for twenty years. Döring blamed him only for the frequent death of his horses, as Siering was engaged in transporting wares to different markets for handicraftsmen and tradesmen, which exhausted the animals, resulting in improper cultivation of the crop fields. Otherwise, Döring did not blame Siering for anything, and attested that he was never lazy in his farm economy.

Based on this attestation, the domain official of Alt-Ruppin gave his opinion to the Board of War and Domains in the Kurmark (*Kurmärkische Kriegs- und Domänenkammer*). His opinion was that Siering was a worthy recipient of extraordinary assistance, with which he could restore the farm economy “with the largest possibility.” However, the Board did not accept this proposal, because the assistance cost 327 *Reichstaler*, which, while enough to rebuild the farm and complete the livestock, was too much for a small peasant farm. Thus, on March 26, 1785, the Board decided that Siering should sell his farm to someone capable of renovating it.

This decision suggests that unfortunate family circumstances such as Siering’s were not reason enough for a peasant to be allowed to keep his farm by obtaining extraordinary assistance from the lords. In the late eighteenth century, the lords in the Kurmark saw good prospects of finding a satisfying successor. Population growth and the drastic rise of grain prices meant that there were usually several well-off applicants waiting to obtain a vacant farm or marry a widowed farmer, among which the lords could choose the highest bidder.<sup>14</sup> In this situation, lords could hardly decide to let an impoverished peasant remain as a farm holder by generously granting him extraordinary assistance.

Indeed, lords could make a different decision when a competent successor was not available. From the end of the Thirty Years’ War to the early eighteenth century, the lords prioritized the restoration of devastated farms. A “people shortage” and agrarian depression made this restoration difficult. As such, they were forced to keep a farmer regardless of how poverty-stricken he was. Even after restoration was completed, it was sometimes impossible to find a person willing to take on a ruined farm, especially when it was on poor soil and saddled with heavier labor obligations. In this case, the lords had to leave in place the impoverished farmer who had ruined the farm and provide him with extraordinary assistance.<sup>15</sup> However, these cases became more infrequent toward the late eighteenth century, because of the population growth and the agrarian boom. Thus, an impoverished peasant like Siering had less opportunity to keep the farm.

Before the eviction was decided, Siering started to find a purchaser who could both afford to renovate the farm buildings and livestock and provide him and

his family with at least free lodging on the farm. After much meandering, on May 2, 1786, the Board finally approved purchase of Siering's farm by Christoph Hartmann, a large peasant in Schönberg. Hartmann offered to renovate the farm only if he received extraordinary assistance of sixty *Reichstaler* from the royal budget. In addition, he permitted Siering and his wife to live in a cottage, which was to be built on the farm, free of charge and for life, and offered the land cultivated annually with two *Metzen* (6.87 liter) of flax seed free of charge, as long as one of them was alive. As owner of another farm, Hartmann had to agree to hand over Siering's farm to one of his sons or a competent person in five years, because no person was allowed to have two farms. However, until then, Hartmann could permit Siering's family members to live in their original house and, while doing so, build a cottage into which they could move when handing over the house to a new farm owner.

Thus, forced transfer of the farm to a well-off successor helped the lords to minimize their costs of renovating the farm and the farm-leaving peasant family to obtain support for their future lives from the farm. However, it was uncertain whether the successor was ready and able to take on such support.<sup>16</sup> Even when support was offered from a new farm holder such as in Siering's case, it was usually temporary, because the new holder was interested in using his cottage to support his own family or for rent. Furthermore, on an impartible peasant farm in early modern Germany, it was usually the case that new people successively came to hold the farm through remarriage with a widowed farm holder, which meant that the interests of earlier farm-holder families were not really considered.<sup>17</sup>

After Joachim Siering and his wife died, the free lodging and free use of land cultivated with flax were no longer guaranteed for their handicapped children. Thereafter, they could not enjoy the support from the farm owners, which was authorized by the domain authorities, and had to rely on relief from their close relatives or, if not, on public relief, as was the norm for impoverished persons living in a cottage.

#### COPING WITH THE POVERTY OF COTTAGE RESIDENTS

While tenants of peasant farms were usually subjects (*Untertanen*) of feudal lords and thus were not entitled to leave the farms without the lords' consent, lodgers (*Einlieger*) were free persons, who could move to another estate without seeking the lords' consent.<sup>18</sup> However, the lords' authorities reserved the right to consent to admission of lodgers in the estate,<sup>19</sup> and levy *Schutzgeld* (protection money) on them: in case of the royal domains, one *Reichstaler* on a lodger couple and twelve *Groschen* on a single lodger. Therefore, at least every six years, when the lease of a domain to the domain official was renewed, the domain authorities compiled a list of all the lodgers, who rented a cottage in the domain with his or her

TABLE 6. Number and Life Circumstances of Lodgers in the Rural Settlements in the Royal Domain of Alt-Ruppin, 1771–1783

	1771	1777	1783
Lodgers (total)	149	170	168
Impoverished, without means, supported, begging	7	12	27
Elderly, sick, handicapped, single mothers, invalid soldiers	-	19	13

SOURCES: BLHA, Rep. 2, Kurmärkische Kriegs- und Domänenkammer, D. 16367, fol. 124–8, 402–3; D. 16368, fol. 88–92, 198–9; D. 16369, fol. 39–44, 92–4.

family or alone, to estimate the income generated by the *Schutzgeld*. The lists also included information on each lodger's life circumstances that could affect ability to pay *Schutzgeld*. Table 6 is an extract of three available lists of lodgers in the Alt-Ruppin domain, which were drafted for the domain lease every six years, from 1771, 1777, and 1783. Over time, the number of impoverished lodgers—indicated as “impoverished,” “without means,” “supported,” or “begging”—increased from seven to twenty-seven, and their proportion among lodgers also increased from 4.7% to 16.1%. In addition, several lodgers were not indicated as impoverished but had difficulty—indicated as being “elderly,” “sick,” “handicapped,” “single mothers,” and “invalid soldiers”—and were likely to fall into poverty. Thus, the domain authorities cleared from paying *Schutzgeld* all impoverished lodgers and those having difficulty, as well as all soldiers.

However, it was not up to the domain authorities but the state authorities to provide for the impoverished lodgers. That is, feeding and clothing the poor was practiced not in the feudal patrimonial space but in the public space, where the state authorities charged each village community with the task regardless of whether it belonged to a royal domain or a noble estate. Starting in 1725, the Prussian state repeatedly ordered the judicial authority of each village or town community to establish its treasury to support the impoverished people living in the village or town. The main motive of these orders was that, from day to day, still more paupers and beggars were rushing to the city of Berlin from other towns and the countryside. Generally, however, the village communities remained passive and reluctant in this task. According to a study and report from 1745 on village communities in the district (*Kreis*) of Ruppin, many villages had not established a treasury and some that had had ceased its operation. In fact, in the nine villages in the royal domain of Lindow, which were in 1764 incorporated in the Alt-Ruppin domain, the treasury ceased in 1735, when the yearly cash contribution by villagers stopped. Instead, community members took turns to feed or clothe the impoverished, which, according to the report, was easier for them than making a yearly cash contribution to the treasury. In eight villages originally belonging to the Alt-Ruppin domain, where a treasury had established in and around 1725 and

still existed in 1745, the yearly contribution was not fixed, except in one village.<sup>20</sup> By 1769 and 1773, the number of the villages with treasuries or collecting boxes for the impoverished had increased. However, in several villages, contributions remained irregular.<sup>21</sup>

The village communities were cautious not only in their fixed contributions to the treasury, but also in supporting the local impoverished people, especially in the 1790s. To clear the country and towns in the Kurmark of beggars, three houses for impoverished and invalid people were established from 1791 on. A house for four hundred beggars and two hundred invalids was established near the town of Strausberg, and another for two hundred beggars and one hundred invalids was established near each of the towns of Wittstock and Brandenburg.<sup>22</sup> However, since the establishment of these public houses for the impoverished on the provincial level, many problems occurred pertaining to the local impoverished people, who were meant to be supported in each village. As reported in the inspection protocol of 1797 on villages in the royal domain of Alt-Ruppin, local impoverished people were oppressed in the most outrageous ways.<sup>23</sup> These problems generally occurred in the Kurmark.<sup>24</sup>

The problems were related to the then custom that only a person who had lived for three years in a village was recognized as a local impoverished person eligible for support from the village community.<sup>25</sup> The inspection protocol of 1797 on villages in the Alt-Ruppin domain reported three common patterns to the problems experienced. First, it was conjectured that a person or his children would become a burden on the village community, because of disease, old age, or having no close relatives. In this case, if the person had not yet lived for a full three years in the village, he was driven out toward the end of this period, at the risk of not being readmitted elsewhere. Second, if a person had already lived in a village for three or more years, the opposite scenario often occurred, especially in the case of an invalid soldier. Because the village community was obligated to support him, he behaved as he pleased and often neglected his obligation to serve as a herdsman. Third, an elderly person qualified as a local impoverished person who was eligible for relief by a village and, while still willing to work, could not find employment in the area. However, he could not leave for another village, because he would not be accepted elsewhere due to the risk of having to support him and his children in the future.<sup>26</sup>

Reluctant to take on tasks pertaining to relieving impoverished people, villages shifted the responsibility onto the parties close to the impoverished. The village of Herzberg refused to support orphaned children, whose father had moved to the village less than three full years before his death. Ultimately, the children's relatives offered to support the orphans provided that the village of Herzberg fed them with a few *Scheffel* of rye.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the village of Wildberg adopted a measure whereby each cottage owner had to support impoverished lodgers living in his

cottage to reduce the collective burden of the villagers. Unfortunately, this led to the cruel practice of driving lodgers between cottages after the lease period.<sup>28</sup>

Remember that according to the 1797 inspection protocol, each village adopted its cruel policy toward those lodgers likely to fall into poverty after the houses for impoverished and invalid people were established in the Kurmark. Another report of the same year also observed the emerging phenomenon of accommodation shortages for lodgers.<sup>29</sup> However, while this was not common, there had been similar incidents previously in the Kurmark. Jan Peters found a case from 1728, in which an impoverished, elderly, sick woman was passed from one village to more than ten other villages across the border between Saxony and the Kurmark without being accommodated until she ultimately died. Peters argued that this organized form of collective refusal to accommodate a person in need of help was already familiar to the villages.<sup>30</sup> This likely long-established merciless practice of village communities became common after the provincial houses for impoverished and invalid people were established. Thus, the village communities forced their responsibility onto the provincial institutions.

In the Kurmark Brandenburg, feudal lords were obligated to support their impoverished subject peasants unstintingly. However, only in cases in which a competent successor was lacking was an impoverished peasant allowed to keep the farm while enjoying extraordinary assistance from his lord. In the late eighteenth century, which was characterized by population growth and the agrarian boom, lords generally had good prospects for replacing an impoverished peasant with a competent successor selected from several applicants. Even in this case, the lords did not leave the evicted family to fend for themselves, but arranged as far as possible for the new peasant farmer to support the evicted family by accommodating them in a cottage on the farm or offering life's necessities, albeit for a limited time.

An increasing number of cottage residents, especially lodgers, suffered more frequently from poverty in the late eighteenth century. Indeed, the feudal lords helped impoverished lodgers in their estates by not holding them liable for the *Schutzgeld* payment. However, it was the task of the state authorities to provide for the impoverished lodgers, who could freely move over the boundary of feudal estates. To remedy the problem of the paupers or beggars rushing to the city of Berlin, the state ordered each village community to relieve the poor in the village by establishing a treasury for that purpose. However, the villages were never willing to take on this task. They did not always carry out the order to give a yearly or monthly fixed contribution to the treasury to assist the impoverished. The villages were inclined to shift the responsibility of support to the close relatives of local impoverished people or the owner of the cottage in which an impoverished lodger

lived. Often, the villages refused to accept a lodger in prospective poverty and passed him from one village to another to avoid the future responsibility of having to support him and his family. This cruel practice of village communities, which had likely been long established, became common in response to the establishment of the houses for impoverished and invalid people on the provincial level in 1791.

## NOTES

1. Rösener 1994, 104–124.
2. Knapp 1887/1927, 1:78.
3. Wald 1934, Lütge 1960, 381–382.
4. Spies 1972, 390, Berdahl 1988, 53–54.
5. Harnisch 1989a, part 3, 87–108. For a survey of the new research, see Kaak 1999, Finlay 2001, 282–284, Cerman 2012.
6. As the latest research, see Eddie 2013.
7. Harnisch 1989b, 216–217.
8. Harnisch 1994, 21. See also Wunder 1996, 82–84.
9. Iida 2010, 130.
10. Harnisch 1984, 27–58, Harnisch 1986.
11. *Allgemeines Landrecht für die preussischen Staaten von 1794*. Textausgabe mit einer Einführung von Hans Hattenhauer, 3. ed. (Neuwied: Luchterhand Verlag, 1996).
12. See chapter 13 in this volume.
13. Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv, Potsdam, Germany (hereafter: BLHA), Rep. 7, Amt Alt-Ruppin, No. 530, See also Iida (2010), 111–21.
14. Harnisch 1989a, 96, 101, Enders 1989, 272.
15. Iida 2010, 126–128.
16. Iida 2010, 124–126.
17. Iida 2010, 170–180. See also Schlumbohm 1994, Rouette 2003, and Rouette 2006.
18. *Allgemeines Landrecht für die preussischen Staaten von 1794*, II 7 §113, 121.
19. *Allgemeines Landrecht für die preussischen Staaten von 1794*, II 7 §114.
20. Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin-Dahlem (hereafter: GStAPK), Tit: CCII, Armen-Sachen, no. 4, fol. 95–101.
21. BLHA, Rep. 7, Amt Alt-Ruppin, no. 118.
22. Friedrich Wilhelm August Bratring and Otto Büsch, *Statistisch-Topographische Beschreibung der gesamten Mark Brandenburg: mit einer biographisch-bibliographischen Einführung* (1804–1809, repr., Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968), 237–38.
23. BLHA, Rep. 7, Amt Alt-Ruppin, no. 115, fol. 115.
24. GStAPK, Tit: CCII, Armen-Sachen, no. 4, fol. 235.
25. This qualification was based on the paragraph 15 of the edict of April 28, 1748, that, within two weeks, foreign beggars should leave Prussian Kingdom and native beggars should return to their home villages and towns, in which they were born or lived for the last three years (GStAPK, Tit: CCII, Armen-Sachen, no. 4, fol. 186, 237).
26. BLHA, Rep. 7, Amt Alt-Ruppin, no. 115, fol. 115.
27. BLHA, Rep. 7, Amt Alt-Ruppin, no. 115, fol. 141.
28. BLHA, Rep. 7, Amt Alt-Ruppin, no. 115, fol. 115.
29. GStAPK, Tit: CCII, Armen-Sachen, no. 4, fol. 235.
30. Peters 1991.

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