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BRIDGING THE POPULAR DIVIDE:
FORGING GERMAN IDENTITY IN THE AGRARIAN LEAGUE, 1893 – 1918.

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

McCall Perrin Simon
May 2008

Acknowledgments

This thesis is the culmination of two years of work and would still remain a mere idea without the invaluable assistance of several people. I wish to thank Dr. Vejas Liulevicius for his unceasing guidance throughout this entire process. I would also like to thank Dr. Denise Phillips and Dr. David Tompkins for their invaluable comments on the drafts of this thesis. Additionally, I wish to thank the staffs of the European Reading Room and the Newspaper Reading Room at the Library of Congress and Hodges Library at the University of Tennessee for their efforts in locating and obtaining the sources for this document.

Finally, I wish to thank my family and friends, particularly Tyler Cook, Jessica Lumsden, my brother Camden, and my mother for their patience and encouragement during this process.

Abstract

This work examines the nature of the community of the German Agrarian League (*Bund der Landwirte*). In particular, it focuses on the interactions of the elite, *Junker* membership and the peasant membership. An examination of previous work reveals a theme of *Junker* domination of the League. This work challenges that theme by examining one possible avenue for agency within the League: the associated newspapers. Using Benedict Anderson's theory of print-capitalism and Marshall Sahlins' definitions of community interactions and space definition, it becomes possible to reveal a non-coerced peasant voice within the League by searching for rhetorical shifts in the newspapers that correspond with shifts in peasant membership and political focus of the League. This allows for a model of community that is more interactive for all participants, not just the elite membership, and fundamentally alters the basic concept of conservatism in the German Empire. Avenues of further research to examine this model in greater detail are provided.

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I Introduction

The *Bund der Landwirte* (BdL), or League of Farmers (a.k.a. Agrarian League), was but one of many political and economic pressure groups that operated in the political sphere of the German Empire (1871 – 1918). Also known as the German Agrarian League, this group promoted agricultural interests within the empire. The organization came together in response to Chancellor Georg Leo von Caprivi's efforts to lower the importation tariffs on various agricultural products in 1892 and 1893. Fearful of cheaper, foreign grains supplanting their own market-share within the *Kaiserreich*, the BdL sought to protect agrarian interests by maintaining high tariffs, mounting a vigorous political campaign against Caprivi's policies, and providing aid and assistance to farmers in need, particularly during the agricultural depression of the late 1890s.¹ Because of the solid base provided by the agriculturists, the league enjoyed a sizable membership that steadily increased from 160,000 at its inception to a claimed mass of over 333,000 by the outbreak of the

¹ Sarah Tirrell, *German Agrarian Politics After Bismarck's Fall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 144 - 146.

First World War. Its membership base, the landed elite east of the Elbe River and smaller peasant farmers throughout the nation (who comprised seventy percent of the membership) also pushed a cultural message, arguing for a traditional society, thus making the BdL a natural and indispensable ally of the conservative movement.²

It is this alliance with the conservative movement that accorded the BdL a prominent place in the history of the tumultuous *Kaiserreich*. Scholars attribute disturbing social trends, such as pan-Germanism, anti-Semitism, and the *Blut und Boden*, or "blood and soil," rhetoric, and their subsequent effects on German society, to the German conservative movement of the early twentieth century.³ Thus, it is essential that the scholarship on prominent constituent organizations of the movement, such as the BdL, render a complete and accurate image of these groups; the very importance of these matters in defining Germany and German society through 1945 demands this level of effort. This work seeks to fill a portion of this void by demonstrating that the agrarian section of the conservative movement was not orchestrated by an

² Dieter Fricke, ed., *Dokumente zur deutschen Geschichte, 1897 – 1904* (Frankfurt am Main: Röderberg-Verlag, 1977), 130; and Dieter Fricke, ed., *Dokumente zur deutschen Geschichte, 1905-1909* (Frankfurt am Main: Röderberg-Verlag, 1977), 132.

³ James Retallack, *The German Right, 1860 – 1920: Political Limits of the Authoritarian Imagination* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 291, 296; Roger Chickering, *We Men Who Feel Most German: A Cultural Study of the Pan-German League, 1886 - 1914* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1984).

authoritarian leadership alone but rather evolved its stances through interactions between the BdL's leadership and its entire membership. This in turn is crucial because it demonstrates the adaptability and flexibility of the conservative movement in response to the increasing demands of modernity.

As one of the many right-wing pressure groups that operated in the empire, the BdL is already the focus of a significant body of scholarship. Unfortunately, this scholarship is relatively narrow in breadth. Most of the works focus on important questions of the league's external politics, namely its influence on political and economic policy and its interactions with other pressure groups, or its place in an illiberal timeline that culminates in National Socialism. Fewer works broach the obviously important subject of group composition and cohesion. Yet the fusion of *Junkers* and the traditionally anti-aristocratic peasant society outside of Prussia creates an intriguing dichotomy that needs explanation. The presence of two traditionally opposed groups within the same organization demonstrates that something created this fusion, whether structural forces or self-serving interests. More importantly, this membership composition reveals a fluid nature in the beliefs and ideals of the right; both sides were willing to set aside their differences and operate in concert in order to ensure that their shared goals were met. This

fluidity in the conservative movement gave it a characteristic volatility and relevance.

A second cause for investigation concerns the nature of the goals of the organization. The BdL focused on the agricultural health of the nation. Common political aims included increased prosperity for all of Germany through a strong agricultural sector and a protection of German traditions. What made these goals significant was their seemingly innocuous nature; the promotion of agricultural health is normally viewed as value-neutral and beneficial for all in society. This seemingly value-neutral stance helped reinforce the conservative definition of “German” within the empire at a time of contending differentiations of German identity. The farmer as the backbone of the nation became a trope which permeated German society through the newspapers and pamphlets of the BdL. It related closely to the *Blut und Boden* trope, “blood and soil,” as the cornerstones of traditional German culture, with the traditional peasant farmer as its source. By focusing the internal rhetoric on these topics of agriculture and traditions, the BdL propagated a singular image of tradition and rural community that defined its concept of “German,” such as the common metaphor of the farmer as

the source of the nation's health and moral character, or the fields as the basis for the strength of Germany.⁴

It is this larger idea of forging a German community that warrants further investigation.⁵ The majority of work on the BdL focuses on the league as a tool of manipulative, elite, conservative *Junkers*. Many of these works neglect or ignore outright the role of the peasant farmers within the league, surmising that they were backward rustics manipulated by the *Junkers*. In actuality, the community dynamics were not so one-sided. The peasant farmers played a critical role in the BdL, particularly after 1900 as the Conservative Party increasingly relied on the BdL for political clout. In a parallel case, Eugen Weber's classic work on social composition in rural France in *Peasants into Frenchmen*, published in 1976, provides a detailed model of this kind of community. Weber's ideas of structural forces and self-serving motivations in place of coercion are particularly applicable here; rather than being manipulated, the peasants focused on their own livelihoods and made effective, pragmatic use of the league's resources. Economic forces, such as the expansion of the railroads and the general growth in industry, also spurred action on the

⁴ *Korrespondenz des Bundes der Landwirte*, 28 April 1899; *Deutsche Tagezeitung*, 20 September 1914.

⁵ Roger Chickering's work *We Men Who Feel Most German: A Cultural Study of the Pan-German League*, provides a useful model for examining conservative movements that sought to form distinctive identities within the *Kaiserreich*.

part of the peasants and the *Junker* members. These structural forces and the peasants' motivations combined to transform the shape of the conservative community.⁶

But while these forces demonstrate why the league came together, the rhetoric and newspapers of the BdL show how it operated in practice. Through its rhetoric the league forged a community that presented a single front for its national audience. Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined communities underscores this effect, as the regional leaders of the BdL utilized the newspapers and the ballot box to weld this community together. By following Anderson's lead and viewing the newspapers as a dialogue between reader and publisher leading to an imagined community, it is possible to begin to track the level of interaction between peasants and the leadership of the BdL. This dialogue created an imagined conservative community and notions of tradition that reinforced this new community's particular vision of "Germanness."⁷

This examination should be prefaced with a basic overview of the BdL. As mentioned, previous historical work focuses on the elite elements within the BdL, specifically the *Junker* membership. The *Junkers* undoubtedly exerted considerable influence and control within the

⁶Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: the Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 119 - 122.

⁷Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition, (New York: Verso, 2006), 33 -34.

organization, and understanding this level of involvement is key to understanding the role and influence of other members within the group. The particular goal of this preliminary examination, however, will be to measure the level of leadership the *Junkers* provided the organization and the level of influence they exercised in dictating the rhetoric of the organization.

Thus, the first part of this work will investigate the historiography of the BdL. This still-developing debate provides key insights into the structure of the League, its growth, and the goals and desires of the elite membership core of the BdL. The second section develops a methodology by which the level of influence of the majority membership, the peasants, can be discerned. Specifically, the methodology used relies heavily Benedict Anderson's principle of imagined communities and Marshall Sahlins' work on space definition and invention of traditions. Finally, the implementation of this methodology on selected material will be covered in the third section. This combination of methodology and close attention to associated newspapers, a widespread medium through which they can articulate their voice, reveals a pattern of rhetorical shifts that mirror the increased size and influence of the peasant membership. While the historiographical sections will examine the peasant populations of southwest Germany and Saxony, the newspapers selected do not reflect

this same geographical selection. By selecting a newspaper such as the *Deutsche Tagezeitung*, which was published in Berlin and distributed mostly in the Brandenburg area, we are able to examine a paper that printed for a composite audience. It stands to reason that a paper that has a monolithic audience, one that's solely peasant or solely elite, would not witness the same levels of rhetorical shifts as one that published for a wider audience. The *Deutsche Tagezeitung* provides us with an opportunity to examine how a paper interacts with a more differentiated audience. This paper will then be contrasted with the *Korrespondenz des Bundes der Landwirte*, which is a paper with a monolithic audience, specifically the elite membership of the BdL. Unfortunately, the inability to access a peasant specific paper means this aspect is neglected in the examination. The review of James Hunt's contributions should alleviate this to an extent.

II

Forging Control: Development and Perception of the Agrarian League

Voluntary associations dominated the complex social landscape of the *Kaiserreich*. The nature of these organizations ranged from economic and political to purely social, but the basic goal for each remained the same: to bring together like-minded Germans for a common purpose. The typical German was active in a number of different associations, usually one that related to his profession, one that related to his church, and several that participated in the social scene in the community. Aside from these, however, were a number of larger, politically oriented, associations. These groups, commonly termed political pressure groups, sought to influence the political parties and the government. Their goal was to obtain favorable legislation for their constituents or hinder passage of legislation deemed harmful to their goals.⁸

These political pressure groups typically associated with a particular political party and focused the bulk of their energies on

⁸ David Blackbourn, *History of Germany, 1780 – 1918: The Long Nineteenth Century*, 2d ed. Blackwell Classic Histories of Europe (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 210 - 211.

developing influence in its ranks. Associations were tied to every political party in the Empire. Usually these groups expressed a highly focused rhetoric that appealed to an audience in the targeted political base. For example, the Pan-German League, which sought a greater political union of Germans in central Europe, focused the bulk of its energy on the conservative elements of the political parties, such as the Conservative Party (DKP) in Germany and Austria-Hungary.⁹ The idea behind this mechanism was to influence the members most likely to be sympathetic to the cause and gain their support in proposing and implementing their political agenda.

While this aspect of these groups mirrors contemporary lobbying groups, the political organization of the *Kaiserreich* influenced the operation of these pressure groups.¹⁰ The Chancellor wielded the largest political authority within the Empire. Appointed as the direct representative of the Kaiser, the Chancellor operated above the legislative Reichstag and was able to issue directives without consulting the Reichstag. In fact, the only real power the Reichstag commanded was in passage of the annual budget. Even then, numerous legislative tricks combined with political alliances constructed by the Chancellor served to

⁹ Roger Chickering, *We Men Who Feel Most German: A Cultural Study of the Pan-German League, 1886 – 1914* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1984), 115.

¹⁰ Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire*, trans. Kim Traynor (Dover, NH: Berg, 1985), 83. The bulk of this work describes the operation of the government during the Imperial era.

ensure that the wishes of the Kaiser and the Chancellor proceeded with little hindrance. The relative impotence of the Reichstag meant that the pressure groups normally focused on gaining a voice within the Chancellor's office instead. This, however, did not mean that the Reichstag members were useless to the pressure groups. Typically the most influential members of the parties in control of the Reichstag had some sway with the Chancellor, making them appealing targets of attention for the pressure groups. Thus these groups had two approaches available for use. First, they could appeal directly to the Chancellor through a myriad of letters, demonstrations, newspaper articles, and petitions. Second, they could seek to gain the ear of the influential members of various political parties and use them to gain favor with the Chancellor's office. The success of the approach depended much on the political nature of the organization and its appeal to the members of government.

These political machinations, in hindsight, reveal much of the reason for the social construction of the conservative political pressure groups. Whereas liberal and socialist groups typically kept their focus on the expansion of their political goals within the Reichstag, the conservative groups sought influence through alliance with prominent conservative elements in government. This led to a natural union with elite members of targeted organizations, such as generals, admirals, and party leaders within

the Reichstag and the Landtags.¹¹ The more allies these pressure groups could gain within the political sphere, the more successful they became in fulfilling the goals of their organization. Thus, by the early 1900s, political pressure groups dominated the political landscape of the *Kaiserreich* throughout the political spectrum and acted as one of the primary motive forces in the political sphere.

As a pressure group, the *Bund der Landwirte* was one of the most prominent conservative elements within political sphere. Operating as an agricultural protectionist group, the BdL was able to influence a wide variety of legislation, ranging from local issues in the regional Landtags to foreign trade tariffs implemented by the imperial government. First formed in 1893, this organization rapidly became one of the largest pressure groups in the empire. This growth resulted from a purposeful expansion from its *Junker* roots to include agriculturists of all social classes.

Undoubtedly the *Junkers* exercised considerable control of the organization, even after the membership expansion between 1896 and 1899, which makes them the natural target for initial inquiries into the construction of the BdL. The exact nature of this *Junker* control, however, was the subject of a considerable amount of debate. While a myriad of scholars have written on this matter, the most influential voices on the

¹¹ Wehler, *The German Empire*, 79, 84, 88.

subject are Sarah Tirrell, Hans-Jürgen Puhle, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, James Retallack, and James Hunt.

Sarah Tirrell, author of *German Agrarian Politics after Bismarck's Fall*, was one of the first major scholars on the subject.

Tirrell's focus was on the formation of the BdL and its early years during Caprivi's chancellorship. To this end, she examined the events that led to 1893, particularly the economic and political factors of the late 1880s. From this examination emerged a portrait of a reactive agricultural base. Tirrell noted that the lowering of tariffs, particularly in the agricultural sector, acted as a catalyst. Caprivi viewed these tariff changes as necessary, believing that they would jump-start the flagging economic and agricultural export sectors and allow an influx of food products that would reduce prices to a more reasonable level.¹² Efforts by other, prominent conservatives argued against these reductions, citing a danger to their livelihood and railing against "injurious work of the Left."¹³ The tariff changes, however, passed the Reichstag in 1891 and 1892. The resultant decrease in profit produced a sense of impending disaster among the agriculturists. Collapsing land values, a decline in prices for products, and a sense of alienation from the government were the more prominent fears

¹² Tirrell, *German Agrarian Politics*, 119.

¹³ Tirrell, *German Agrarian Politics*, 122.

within the agrarian base.¹⁴ Tirrell argued that these factors triggered the formation of the BdL. A decline in prices of wheat and rye, the two major grains of the German diet, forced largely by a large increase in production worldwide, followed on the heels of the tariff reductions. Additionally, Caprivi proposed further reducing tariffs with Russia, which would allow Russia to export its rye production to German markets. At this point, a group of six men, five *Junkers* and one successful peasant farmer, formed the BdL in February of 1893.¹⁵

Thus, Tirrell saw the league's formation as a reaction against Caprivi's policies. While the founding six included one peasant among their number, it is notable that this was the only peasant on whom Tirrell focused in her work. In fact, Tirrell noted that this founding peasant was quickly marginalized once the league began to increase its membership base, and the *Junkers* retained exclusive leadership of the league.¹⁶ Thus, the BdL became an extension of the *Junkers'* conservative goals and a vehicle through which they could voice these goals. The effectiveness of the organization was apparent through the gains the agrarians made in the 1893 Reichstag elections and in the increased rural membership.¹⁷ This

¹⁴ Tirrell, *German Agrarian Politics*, 139 - 141.

¹⁵ Tirrell, *German Agrarian Politics*, 159 - 161.

¹⁶ Tirrell, *German Agrarian Politics*, 170.

¹⁷ Tirrell, *German Agrarian Politics*, 190, 236.

expanding membership allowed the BdL to effectively attack Caprivi's policies on a national level. While Tirrell did not credit these attacks alone with causing Caprivi's fall in October of 1894, she noted that they undoubtedly weakened his position within government.¹⁸ Notable in all of this was the primacy of the *Junkers* in the organization. Understandably, Tirrell focused almost exclusively on them, and her source material dealt with either official government statistics and documents or official BdL documents. Neither of these sources provided adequate means on their own with which to examine the role of the peasant members.

Subsequent scholarship on the BdL largely focused on the overall nature of the organization. Two prominent German scholars, Hans-Jürgen Puhle and Hans-Ulrich Wehler, viewed the BdL as a political extension of wider *Junker* interests within the empire. The work of Hans-Jürgen Puhle in *Agrarische Interessenpolitik und preußischer Konservatismus* provided a seminal argument for the ascendancy of the *Junkers* in the BdL. Puhle argued that BdL activity was a conspiratorial method by which the threatened elite in Prussia could maintain its political clout and operate within the new empire.¹⁹ The BdL thus acted as an organ of Conservative Party demagoguery, focused solely on manipulating

¹⁸ Tirrell, *German Agrarian Politics*, 329.

¹⁹ Hans-Jürgen Puhle, *Agrarische Interessenpolitik und preußischer Konservatismus* (Hannover: Verlag für Literatur und Zeitgeschehen, 1966), 34.

pseudo-democratic efforts in a controlled manner that would ensure the success of conservative goals at the ballot box and in the Reichstag in a classic “good cop, bad cop” routine. The reactionary efforts of the BdL meant that the elites in the Conservative Party could offer a more moderate route, that, while still conservative, offered a more palatable alternative to the “progressive and ... pre-Fascist” BdL rhetoric.²⁰ Puhle also examined the effect of rhetoric in forging a single political voice. He did not, however, view the newspapers as organs that reacted to their audience, but rather as the simple, unproblematic mouthpieces of the controlling elite.²¹ This was greatly evident not only in the arguments of the work, but also in his selection of source material. Puhle examined few works that were not of governmental or *Junker* origin. For example, the humbler newspapers of southwestern Germany, which included prominent regional papers such as the Stuttgart-published *Der württembergische Bauernfreund*, were not considered at all. This undoubtedly skewed Puhle's analysis, as the only voice he found was the voice that propagated the official BdL ideology. Puhle's analysis, however, remains influential; James Retallack's latest work used Puhle's interpretation as one of the sources for his recent examination of the Conservative movement.²²

²⁰ Puhle, *Agrarische Interessenpolitik*, 236; Hans-Jürgen Puhle, “Conservatism in Modern German History,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 13, no. 4 (1978): 706.

²¹ Puhle, *Agrarische Interessenpolitik*, 87.

²² James Retallack, *The German Right, 1860 – 1920*, 83.

Puhle did give considerable attention to the official documentation of the BdL. His appendices were filled with statistical data culled from this source as well as individual documents and the leadership of the BdL.²³ Included were early membership numbers from 1893 to 1897, which illustrated the high number of *Junker* members, but also showed the growing peasant membership, particularly in Saxony and southwest Germany. Notably, these tables which separated peasant and elite membership stopped at 1897. This is curious, since the source used for all of this data, the *Bundeskalender des Bundes der Landwirte*, was available yearly until the late 1920s. Other tables used by Puhle encompassed the entire duration of the BdL, but they failed to differentiate between peasant and elite. As a result, Puhle provided only a snapshot of the membership roles and leadership. This particular use of sources reinforced his *Junker*-domination thesis, as it did not show the growing peasant membership that occurred from 1897 onward.

Hans-Ulrich Wehler's canonical work *The German Empire* examined the development of the empire, noting the role of the BdL in reinforcing the state's strength. Wehler essentially contended that the BdL operated in the interests of the “*Junker* elite and agrarian entrepreneurs,” all members of society who sought to protect their political

²³ Puhle, *Agrarische Interessenpolitik*, 309 - 338.

influence and economic standing.²⁴ By fighting for and winning high tariffs on agricultural products, the *Junkers* strengthened their position within society and buttressed the state's power. Wehler depicted these efforts as “superficially camouflaged pieces of class legislation.”²⁵ Notable, however, was the lack of peasant participation in Wehler's thesis. His insistence on the complete supremacy of the Trans-Elbian *Junkers* in the league was questionable because well over half of the membership base lay outside of Prussia. Overall, Wehler provided little that was not already voiced in Tirrell or Puhle, except that the vigorous tone of his prose seemed to especially condemn the domination of the *Junkers* in the organization. This, however, was understandable in view of the scope of Wehler's synthetic work. He was examining the development of the German Empire as a whole, and thus the section on the BdL and their interests occupied only a small span of eighteen pages in the work.

In the evolving historiography, James Retallack's *Notables of the Right* provided a more balanced view of the BdL, but still did not examine the inner workings of the league in any detail. As with Wehler, this failure was not due to a flawed thesis but rather the avowed scope of the work. The book focused not on the BdL but rather on the German

²⁴ Wehler, *The German Empire*, 36.

²⁵ Wehler, *The German Empire*, 38.

Conservative Party (*Deutsch-Konservative Partei*, or DKP). Retallack thus quite properly examined the role of the BdL in terms of its influence on the DKP. He described the structure of the BdL, namely its extremely powerful directorate that formed BdL policy.²⁶ Retallack also noted the work of the league in establishing community. The newspapers enjoyed a wide circulation, with the official journal of the league, the *Bund der Landwirte*, reporting over 247,000 subscriptions.²⁷ Additionally, the league created a social community by providing materials such as equipment, songbooks, calendars, and by organizing social functions. The formidable numerical strength of the league was also mentioned, as Retallack noted the ability of the BdL to provide petitions with upwards of two million signatures.²⁸ This, however, was the extent of Retallack's examination of the social composition of the league; his focus was more political in scope, and on the DKP instead of the BdL. But his provocative mention of newspapers, songbooks, and social functions hinted at efforts to establish a community within the league.

In his later work *The German Right, 1860 – 1920*, James Retallack offered a more extensive account of the role of the BdL within the context of the German conservative movement. Whereas he focused

²⁶ James Retallack, *Notables of the Right: the Conservative Party and Political Mobilization in Germany, 1876 – 1918* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 107 - 108.

²⁷ Retallack, *Notables of the Right*, 109.

²⁸ Retallack, *Notables of the Right*, 110.

exclusively on the DKP in his prior work, Retallack's newest work conceded a large and influential role for the BdL within the DKP and the conservative movement as a whole.²⁹ Essentially Retallack expanded Puhle's thesis of a *Junker*-dominated BdL that operated exclusively for the benefit of its elite constituency. Retallack's contribution, however, was to observe that while the BdL initially began as mouthpiece for the elites, it rapidly saw its conservative demagogues wage "unprecedented campaigns against the authorities," seeking to exert their own influence outside of the elites that controlled the League.³⁰ Retallack suggested that this occurred because of the agitators' desire to become a part of the system of political notables. Their exclusion from this system induced them to seek their own voice by manipulating the mass membership for their own gains.³¹ The result was a radicalization of the conservative ideals within the BdL. This, coupled by their expanding influence within the ranks of the DKP and other conservative elements of the German Right, led Retallack to argue for an emerging radicalization of the agrarian movement in the beginning of the twentieth century and an ambiguously hostile relationship with the leadership cadre of the DKP.³²

²⁹ Retallack, *The German Right, 1860 – 1920*, 43.

³⁰ Retallack, *The German Right, 1860 – 1920*, 88.

³¹ Retallack, *The German Right, 1860 – 1920*, 88, 345 - 346.

³² Retallack, *The German Right, 1860 – 1920*, 347.

Other work, however, examined the internal membership dynamics in more detail. James Hunt's portrait of the Agrarian League's composition pointed to a more interesting dichotomy in membership: on the one hand, the “traditional elite” east of the Elbe River that made only fifteen percent of the League's membership and on the other hand a sizable “differentiated and relatively egalitarian” peasant society west of the Elbe River that comprised forty-five percent of the membership.³³ This somewhat odd combination led to Hunt's analysis of peasant society in southwest Germany. Although Hunt's work shortly preceded Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen*, it was evident that he shared many similar ideas with the American scholar. Hunt's examination of the structural shifts in Württemberg (the site of his regional focus) revealed an increase in railroads and industry in the kingdom. His argument, echoed by Weber in his own work, was that these structural changes threatened the life of the peasant societies and forced a general acceptance of the BdL, both from a political and economic standpoint.³⁴ In the end, however, Hunt also argued that *Junker* influence dictated the direction and structure of the BdL. Although Hunt did attribute a measure of agency to the Swabian

³³ James C. Hunt, “The 'Egalitarianism' of the Right: The Agrarian League in Southwest Germany, 1893 – 1914,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 10 (Jul 1975): 514; Puhle, *Agrarische Interessenpolitik*, 312.

³⁴ Hunt, “Egalitarianism' of the Right,” 514; Weber, *Peasants*, 118 - 127.

peasants, he viewed them in the final analysis as manipulated and ultimately coerced by the elite leadership of the league.³⁵

A large portion of Hunt's argument focused on the methods used to attract peasant membership and utilize them in aggregate as a local political tool. Hunt stated that the BdL utilized agitation methods in Württemberg that are normally attributed to Populists, such as mass rallies and wide-scale use of print propaganda.³⁶ These methods were necessary for the BdL's growth in the region. Until 1898 it enjoyed limited influence, partly because of the peasants' anti-aristocratic and Populist leanings and partly because of the relatively successful economy for the peasant farmer in the region prior to 1896.³⁷ Once economic conditions collapsed in 1896, the peasants became more susceptible to the BdL's rhetoric. Notably, however, the BdL also shifted and molded its rhetoric to be more acceptable to the peasants by exploiting fears, social resentments, and anti-Semitic notions already present in the population.³⁸ The result was the construction of a dichotomous relationship, an "Us vs. Them" postulate that allowed the BdL to incorporate this base into its membership. Hunt, however, still maintained the prevailing traditional view of

³⁵ Hunt, "Egalitarianism' of the Right," 516.

³⁶ Hunt, "Egalitarianism' of the Right," 517 - 518.

³⁷ Hunt, "Egalitarianism' of the Right," 514.

³⁸ Hunt, "Egalitarianism' of the Right," 517.

Junker supremacy within the organization, as in the end he coined the term “pseudo-egalitarianism” to describe the situation.³⁹

Ultimately, a historiographical examination of the BdL yields an orthodox picture of a passive League dominated by its elite *Junker* membership with little room for effective participation by the majority of the humbler membership. The more recent works, however, hint that the domination thesis, as Puhle vigorously articulated, leaves too many gaps to effectively explain why a large number of populist-oriented peasants would join the League. Furthermore, Retallack's most recent work suggests that the League's loyalty to the conservative elite was questionable or problematic at best, especially after 1903.⁴⁰ Missing from these works, however, is an effective explanation of the role of the peasant membership and their reasons for participation within the League. James Hunt provides some useful insights, but he also follows Puhle's thesis. Perhaps only Thomas Kühne gives a basis for investigation through his assertion of a development of an independent political consciousness in the rural membership of the BdL after 1900. Unfortunately, however, Kühne provides little more than a small bit of evidence that the farmers in East

³⁹ Hunt, “Egalitarianism' of the Right,” 527

⁴⁰ James Retallack, *The German Right, 1860 -1920*, 347.

Prussia began to elect BdL representatives and Reichstag members from among their own ranks.⁴¹

Perhaps one reason for this unsatisfactory view is a result of extensive study of the League through its external interactions instead of its internal ones. To a large extent these examinations have ignored the internal structure of the BdL. The focus of this paper is to fill in that void. The largely anti-authoritarian and anti-aristocratic peasant farmers of the west voluntarily joined the same group as the *Junkers* of Prussia. This was an unusual relationship. Hunt and Puhle noted the suspicious attitude of the peasants toward any form of aristocracy, as most of them prior to 1896 were populists who sought only to protect their own way of life while ensuring that the conservative elite landed farmers did not interfere.⁴² This organization, however, overcame the suspicious nature of the peasants by appealing to economic need and developed a united political voice that wielded considerable influence in the DKP and in regional politics until the end of the German Empire. How did that voice of community develop *within* the BdL? That is a critical question that is as yet unanswered. In the historiography, the works of Puhle, Wehler, and Retallack provided excellent arguments for the motivations of the elite membership of the

⁴¹ Thomas Kühne, "Professionalization or 'Amateurization,' Homogenization or Segmentation?" in *Les Familles Politiques en Europe Occidentale au XIXe Siècle* (Palais Farnèse: École Française de Rome, 1997), 403 - 404.

⁴² Hunt, "Egalitarianism, of the Right" 514; Puhle, *Agrarische Interessenpolitik*, 116.

BdL. Apart from James Hunt, the peasant membership received little attention. This was due partly to the available sources. Few sources remain that deal directly with motivations and concerns of the peasant membership of the BdL. A far larger body of documents is available for the leadership and *Junker* membership, which reveals a reason for the large amount of attention paid to that portion of the membership. But it is not possible to really examine how a community such as the German agrarian community is forged if sources used are one-sided in their perspective. One side, such as the elite core of the BdL, may be dominant in the relationship; nevertheless, all participants, including the peasants, do, in greater or lesser measure, influence the composition of the community and, ultimately, the direction it takes.

III

Finding Space for All: Methods of Internal Interaction in the Agrarian League

From the first days of the *Kaiserreich*, conservative elites, including the Prussian *Junkers*, naturally sought to protect and extend their interests (as indeed did Bismarck himself).⁴³ Typically, aristocrats maintained their own associations and branches within the political parties, but changes in the political landscape of the 1890s forced an adjustment in their policies. The rebirth of the Social Democratic Party, combined with new centrist and conservative movements, created opposition for and alternatives to the traditional conservative elements. The tariff disputes of 1892 highlighted the need for the agricultural elites to band together to protect their economic interests from the policies of the Caprivi government. Thus, these *Junkers* formed the *Bund der Landwirte* in 1893 as an association designed to promote the economic interests of the elite agriculturists, large landholders, and aristocrats.

⁴³ Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600 – 1947* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006), 571; A.J.P. Taylor, *Bismarck: The Man and the Statesman* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 150, 265.

These same changes, however, also demonstrated the power of mass mobilization to the leadership of the BdL. Both socialist and populist movements succeeded in gaining traction in many areas of the nation, particularly in Baden and Württemberg.⁴⁴ In these places the BdL and other conservative movements found little traction. Often the populist movements were already entrenched in society, and the prevalence of local anti-aristocratic sentiments hindered the development of pro-BdL or pro-DKP sympathies. The result was a stagnation of BdL membership outside of Prussia and neighboring territories. This territorial restriction threatened to condemn the fledgling BdL to a status of a local association with a limited scope of power. Thus, in 1894, the BdL launched concerted efforts to appeal to populist groups in the rest of Germany, particularly the peasant farmers west of the Elbe River.⁴⁵ The BdL started a systematic change in its rhetoric, shifting from a purely economic tone to an increasingly radicalized stance that utilized emotional and populist rhetoric to win a sizable peasant membership.

It is notable that these peasants did not initially join the BdL upon its formation in 1893, despite wide-spread appeals from the League's

⁴⁴ James Clark Hunt, *The People's Party in Württemberg and Southern Germany, 1890 – 1914: The Possibilities of Democratic Politics*, (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1975), 26, 71; Retallack, *The German Right, 1860 – 1920*, 283 - 293.

⁴⁵ Tirrell, *German Agrarian Politics*, 177; Hunt, *The People's Party in Württemberg and Southern Germany*, .63.

leadership for all farmers of all estates to join its ranks.⁴⁶ One reason may be the League's initial image. The word *Landwirte* itself does not encompass the typical smaller German peasant. According to Tirrell, *Landwirte* meant a landed agrarian, typically one who owned estates which employed a number of agricultural workers. These estates varied in size, from ten to twenty acres to the massive agricultural estates of the most successful *Junkers* in Prussia. Peasants, who went by the humbler terms *Bauer* or *Grundbesitzer*, were also independent cultivators. They, however, typically owned only a few acres of land that provided only a modest profit for its owner.⁴⁷ Socially, there was a wide gulf between these two groups. In Prussia, the *Landwirte* had been owners of their land prior to the October 1807 emancipation of the peasants, whereas most peasants had gained their modest holdings in the wake of the emancipation.⁴⁸ In other regions, such as Württemberg, there existed few of the *Landwirte* status alongside the plethora of smaller peasant holdings, many of which were multi-generational in ownership.⁴⁹ Economically, the peasant of the southwest resembled the peasant of the east, rather than the *Junker*.

⁴⁶ Tirrell, *German Agrarian Politics*, 174.

⁴⁷ Tirrell, *German Agrarian Politics*, 17 - 19. Without exception, the work of other scholars cited utilize these definitions without the prejudice typically attached to the term "peasant" in other societies.

⁴⁸ Blackbourn, *History of Germany, 1780 – 1918*, 63; Tirrell, *German Agrarian Politics*, 20.

⁴⁹ Hunt, *The People's Party in Württemberg and Southern Germany*, 20.

It quickly becomes apparent that the BdL sought to forge an organization that transcended traditional geographic and social borders. To do so, they would need to find a way to bridge the economic and social interests of the elite *Landwirte* membership, particularly the *Junkers*, and the more common and basic economic and social interests of the mass of peasants. The two different classes of farmers had different primary concerns in the economic sphere. The *Junkers* and other large landholders were more concerned with tariffs and access to the most profitable markets, whereas the smaller peasant farmers focused first on immediate needs such equipment and basic infrastructure.⁵⁰ The resulting differences in economic focus made it difficult for the BdL to articulate a simple political message. The construction of a common social framework, or community, however, would allow the League to create a common focus which appealed to a majority of the League. This community could then work first for the primary common interest, then mobilize its mass to fulfill the secondary and tertiary goals of the group.

In terms of methodology, perhaps the most effective manner to gauge the created community follows Benedict Anderson's advice and examines the communication organs of the BdL: the newspapers.⁵¹ The

⁵⁰ Tirrell, *German Agrarian Politics*, 21; Hunt, *The People's Party in Württemberg and Southern Germany*, 74.

⁵¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 44 - 46.

BdL used both national and regional papers. Each type of paper has an audience, usually either the elite membership or the general membership in the area of publication. By examining the content and focus of each paper it is possible to find overlap in the rhetoric used. While a high level of similarity in the rhetoric existed between regional and national papers, the regional focus gives a perspective on the particular issues that were important in that day to the local membership. One discovers an evolution of language in the regional papers, particularly in *Der württembergischer Bauernfreund*, that moved from addressing the peasants' initial wariness of *Junker* motivations to stressing their shared values and goals. Anderson is not alone in his ideas, as the preeminent work of James Lockhart on colonial Latin American legal documents and newspapers utilizes a similar methodology to indirectly locate the influence of the audience society.⁵²

While Anderson provides a valuable method, the work of Marshall Sahlins gives the necessary theoretical framework to understand and to justify the necessity of this investigation. The idea of peasants participating with the elite is not unfathomable. Marshall Sahlins, a prominent cultural anthropologist, argues that "inventiveness of tradition,"

⁵² James Lockhart, "Encomienda and Hacienda: The Evolution of the Great Estate in the Spanish Indies," *The Hispanic American Historical Journal* 49 (Aug 1969): 412, and idem, "The Post-Conquest Period of Mexican History," in "A Scholarly Debate: The Origins of Modern Mexico - Indigenistas vs. Hispanistas," by Jacques Lafaye and James Lockhart, *The Americas* 48 (Jan 1992): 325 - 326.

or the propensity of all societal members to actively participate in forging cultural traditions, creates opportunities for agency within all levels of that society.⁵³ More importantly, however, Sahlins asserts that no one completely dominates a culture, that its members are not “*sui generis*, no people the sole or even the principal author of their own existence.”⁵⁴ All people within the culture participate and contribute to the creation and pervasiveness of societal structures, whether through active leadership or passive participation. While it is easy to discern the reason for participation on the part of the elite or ruling classes (power, wealth, etc.), Sahlins provides a reason for understanding the participation of the people in general:

The people are not usually resisting the technologies and ‘conveniences’ of modernization, nor are they particularly shy of the capitalist relations needed to acquire them. Rather, what they are after is the indigenization of modernity, their own cultural space in the global scheme of things.⁵⁵

Thus, in Sahlins’ view, people seek to define a place for themselves within society. If their role is threatened, they will not be averse to adopting a level of conformity within a modern society in order to define their own position and space. This is an active function evident within the BdL. The decreases in tariffs, a function of a modern capitalist society, created a

⁵³ Marshall Sahlins, “Two or Three Things that I Know about Culture,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5 (September, 1999): 408, 412.

⁵⁴ Sahlins, “Two or Three Things,” 411.

⁵⁵ Sahlins, “Two or Three Things,” 410.

threat to the livelihood of the farmers, especially the peasant farmers. By conforming at a certain level with the elite through joining the ranks of the League, the peasants were then able to define their space within this threatening society through a process of differentiation from the *Junkers* within the BdL. This differential process is found in the shifting rhetoric of the organization, especially within the pages of newspapers.

In order to locate this “space definition” by the peasants in the BdL, we must study the modes by which these processes occurred. A prominent mode is the newspaper's rhetoric and its general acceptance within the organization. Two ways exist to gauge the general acceptance of BdL rhetoric. First, the newspaper subscriptions and membership rolls act as indicators of acceptance. The papers' editors usually report the number of readers and subscribers; while the specific number may or may not be accurate, the numbers presented seem to correspond to the accepted levels of distribution. The general trend of growth throughout the period under examination hints at a broadening base of support, though this must be carefully weighed against the possibility of pragmatic members who do not care for the rhetoric but simply join for the benefits. A second, and perhaps more effective, gauge of acceptance is the rhetoric in the newspapers. Anderson notes that newspapers act more as mirrors of their audience and thus adjust their message over time. This print-capitalism

seeks to make profit, either in simple money for a purely capitalist enterprise or to maintain a membership base for a parent organization. Thus, by examining the rhetoric over time, it is possible to find which goals are important to the base and which ones require adjustments or rhetorical reframing to make them palatable.⁵⁶

However, before it can be argued that the BdL was responsive to peasant demands and that, thus, the peasants exerted significant influence on BdL policy, it must be possible to gauge this demand. The official journal of the organization provides a clear look at their official rhetoric, but is it possible to track the shifts in rhetoric and trace them to a non-*Junker* source? The goal of this study is to search for these shifts and determine if they exercised influence on BdL policy. If this approach produces significant irregularities in several paradigmatic cases, then a larger examination of the BdL's structure will be warranted and practical.

⁵⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 35, 38 - 40.

IV

Providing Voice for Themselves: Newspapers of the Agrarian League

The regional papers provided an important insight to the communication structure of the BdL. As James Retallack and James Hunt both noted, there were at least two kinds of regional newspapers published by the League. The first kind was merely a localized version of the national publications. These reproduced articles published in national papers and augmented them with commentary from local association leaders and local news immediately pertinent to its audience. Examples include *Der schwäbische Landmann* and *Badische Landpost*.⁵⁷ The second kind was completely separate from the official publishing arm of the League. These papers typically operated with only a regional circulation and a level of editorial independence. In many regions these pseudo-independent newspapers enjoyed a fair degree of success, often claiming a readership that exceeded the participation level of the League. The exact level of influence the League maintained over these papers is the subject of considerable debate. Regardless of this, there did exist a

⁵⁷ Hunt, *The People's Party in Württemberg and Southern Germany*, 186; Retallack, *The German Right*, 287.

sizable level of editorial independence that allowed these organs to be critical of BdL officials. Preeminent examples of these papers were *Deutsche Tageszeitung* and *Der württembergische Bauernfreund*.⁵⁸

This differentiated structure means that it is possible to contrast newspapers that are either official papers or affiliated papers in order to discern the differences in rhetoric, audience, and purpose. Additionally, trends in rhetoric and subject matter can be traced, affording the astute reader the opportunity to locate the source of philosophical developments, economic concerns, and political goals. Ultimately, this structure makes it possible for scholars to locate the source of ideas and concerns within the BdL and assess what level of influence the peasants and the elites, as mass entities, commanded within the BdL.

With this goal in mind, two newspapers were selected for examination, the *Korrespondenz des Bundes der Landwirte* and the *Deutsche Tageszeitung*. The *Korrespondenz des Bundes der Landwirte* was one of several official journals of the BdL. It reflected the official views of the league, and allows us to gauge how changes in rhetoric evolved during the paper's publication run. It had a substantially limited print run compared to other official journals of the organization; Retallack

⁵⁸ Hunt, *The People's Party in Württemberg and Southern Germany*, 95, 186; Retallack, *The German Right*, 287; Tirrell, *German Agrarian Politics*, 307.

numbered its high point at 3200 subscriptions in 1911.⁵⁹ Part of the reason was its audience. The *Korrespondenz* deliberately was exclusive and targeted the elite, and primarily *Junker*, membership of the BdL, whereas the other official journal, confusingly titled *Bund der Landwirte*, was intended to be read by the entire membership and claimed over 247,000 subscriptions in 1912. The choice of using *Korrespondenz* for this study is deliberate. Examining a paper targeted at the elite alongside another paper targeting a general audience allows us to examine the transference of ideas between the two and the source of these ideas.

By contrast, the *Deutsche Tageszeitung* provided an unofficial view of the BdL. Published in Berlin from 1893 through the First World War, it was ostensibly an editorially independent newspaper. Its pages, however, reveal a decidedly conservative and agrarian slant in its reporting and editorial policy. Its agricultural sections echoed much of the *Bund der Landwirte* in sentiment, but the newspaper was also responsive to its own subscription base, which encompassed a wide range of the conservative base in Germany. One particular marker of this responsiveness was the ebb and flow of agrarian articles within the paper; the peaks of this rhetoric tend to follow major events such as new appointments in government. Additionally, the presence of local concerns within the *Deutsche*

⁵⁹ Retallack, *Notables of the Right*, 253.

Tageszeitung hinted at the composition of its subscription base. Though it had over 40,000 subscriptions, most of which were in the larger Berlin region, it retained a regular section on regional agricultural concerns.⁶⁰ The newspaper covered national and international concerns, but it remained responsive to its audience's agricultural base.

The *Korrespondenz des Bundes der Landwirte* provides a useful starting point, as it is an official journal and thus will convey the group's interpretation of the issues of the day. It is remarkable that, to a large extent, the ideas mentioned correspond to the themes articulated by Puhle, Wehler, Retallack, and Hunt. This is due largely to the direct usage of this paper by these scholars. These scholars, however, accept that the rhetoric of the journal solely reflected the beliefs of its elite membership. In fact, this point is debatable. A subtle shift in rhetoric occurs between 1894, its first date of publication, and later issues. New themes insert themselves at key moments. It is certainly arguable that a group's ideology will naturally shift over time. However, in the cases illustrated below, these themes occur at times that correspond to other events occurring within the organization. By themselves, these shifts do not prove anything, but their presence, coupled with their timing and the evolving structure of membership, opens the possibility that the rhetoric and ideas of the BdL

⁶⁰ Retallack, *Notables of the Right*, 253.

were not completely dominated by the elite leadership, but affected by other influences.

For example, consider a pair of articles from two separate issues of the *Korrespondenz* published in 1898. The first article, published on February 4, 1898, was largely political in scope. It set out three points of interest to the BdL and called on the readers to utilize them in conversation with political authorities in order to build up and support agricultural concerns. First, it called for “an amalgamation of all those that stand on this ground,” namely those engaged in agricultural, foreign trade, and business. This collective action was to restore a balance to the German economy and reduce the economic impact of foreign competition, thereby “strengthening Germany in the interior.” Second, it called for this collective group to stand as a united force in the Reichstag as an influential majority and shift the government’s economic policy to benefit everyone in the economy. Third, it called for an “alliance of farmers” to play their part in this group, partly by working with the other economic sectors and partly by consciously and deliberately not “exaggerating the emphasis” on the agricultural sector.⁶¹

This was, to a large extent, reflective of the articles published in the journal since 1894. Its concern was with the improvement of the

⁶¹ *Korrespondenz des Bundes der Landwirte* (Berlin), 4 Feb. 1898.

agricultural economy. Most of the articles detailed political or economic ideas that would improve this sector of the economy, with a large portion focusing on tariffs, quotas, and other forms of agricultural protection. For example, a series of articles appeared in the *Korrespondenz* in the latter half of 1893 that focused on the continuing dispute over the proposal to reduce tariffs on Russian grain. One particular article from October 12, 1893, explicitly stated that:

the supply [of cereal grain] already exceeded demand and ... the price did not cover costs of production. This price would sink considerably lower as soon as the supply increased as a result of Russian imports. ... Until currency matters and freight rates between the contracting states were regulated, there could be no talk of a commercial treaty.⁶²

In total, the journal appealed to the educated land owner who understood the economic impact of government policies. Solutions such as the ones presented above were not unique, as a continual focus of the journal was the construction and use of political alliances to achieve these economic goals. As the cited articles demonstrate, the writers, and likely the leadership of the BdL, knew the importance of political alliances within the Reichstag, the importance of utilizing basic economic theory, and the need to work with other sectors of the economy, even the ones that called for lower tariffs in 1891. Yet a shift was coming.

⁶² *Korrespondenz*, 12 Oct. 1893.

The second unsigned article, published April 6, 1898, offered a quite different view to the readers of the *Korrespondenz*. The ideas presented in it were completely new; strains of them can be seen in scattered articles since 1896. It did, however, represent one of the first articles that lacked a decidedly macroeconomic or political focus. It was a polemic, written in response to an article published a few days before in the *Berliner Tageblatt*. This article condemned the focus of the *Tageblatt* on the concept of an industrial state as a picture of health for the empire. Instead, the article harked back to the days of Frederick the Great and its position as an agricultural state that was a model of health in Europe. It then compared the health of industrial workers to the health of farmers, contrasting them by using cultural tropes such as the “emaciated factory worker” and the “weathered, tanned farmer.” It further deprecated the presence of “social- and Jewish-democratic reading materials” available to the workers, much to their disadvantage. Finally, it called the open spaces of the farms a “fountain of youth” for the German people, “a place of power” that renewed the spirit of the nation and its health.⁶³

This article was representative of a growing trend in the *Korrespondenz* of incorporating more polemic and cultural moralizing in its pages. It did not, like the previous article, maintain a pragmatic stance. In

⁶³ *Korrespondenz*, 6 April 1898.

fact, nothing within this article gave any ideas, guidance, or direction for actually improving the economic and political situation of the agricultural sector. It was not in response to a growing audience of the journal, either. Retallack's table of subscriptions, which pegged the 1911 subscriptions at 3209, listed just over 2000 for the period between 1896 and 1897 versus a growth of over 100,000 subscriptions in the same time period enjoyed by the main journal of the BdL, the *Bund der Landwirte*.⁶⁴ The small gains in subscriptions by the *Korrespondenz* hardly represented a shift in reader base, but likely only a shift in geographical spread. The bulk of the readership remained within the elite class.

Instead, the article demonstrated and was symptomatic of a larger shift in BdL rhetoric. Originally economic in its stance, as it reflected the concerns of its initial core of members in 1893, the growth of the league forced the rhetoric to change. As Hunt noted, many in the peasant classes were traditionally opposed to the interests of the *Junkers* and other elite.⁶⁵ A shift of rhetoric was necessary to gain the political clout that came with mass mobilization. Hunt's model of the creation of a dichotomous relationship is useful here. However, the argument by Hunt et al. that this was merely manipulation of the masses by the elite was

⁶⁴ Retallack, *Notables of the Right*, 253.

⁶⁵ Hunt, "'Egalitarianism,' of the Right" 514.

somewhat shortsighted. While this ultimately corresponded to the desired ends of the *Junkers*, it must be remembered that the peasant members joined for their own interests. The political clout of the BdL was relatively insubstantial until after they had won a large mass of peasant members. Peasants had to be recruited, retained, and, most importantly, mobilized. This gave the peasant membership a subtle power, subtle only in that the texts available to us today do not directly reflect their desires and influence. It was a power, nonetheless. Eugen Weber noted this invisible but real, latent power of peasants over the landholders when he discussed the relations between them and the peer influence peasants had in determining the course of their village.⁶⁶

The rhetoric of this article reflected these peasant views. While it would be fallacious to argue that anti-Semitism or a general disgust with the socialists and urbanized working class were not present in the *Junkers*, it is notable that this degree of polemics did not exist in the *Korrespondenz* prior to 1897. The shift in rhetoric, not coincidentally, mirrored the increase in membership that began in 1897. To gain this increase, the BdL had to be made appealing to the masses. It was unlikely that the German peasant was more sophisticated than his French counterpart, and thus likely would not be drawn to the rhetoric that dominated the early stages of the

⁶⁶ Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 128.

BdL.⁶⁷ As a result, the strategic desire to increase the membership forced the BdL to adopt rhetoric that pleased the masses. The pervasiveness of this shift was evident in the fact that it existed even in the *Korrespondenz*, a journal specifically targeted at elite agrarians. In effect, on this score the BdL had reacted to the peasants, an idea which departs significantly from Puhle's and Wehler's orthodoxy.

The *Deutsche Tageszeitung* represented a different source of conservative, agrarian rhetoric. Its editorial independence uncoupled it from any requirement to participate in the dissemination of BdL ideology. However, it generally favored the ideas and goals of the BdL. Many editions carried a section entitled "Landwirtschaftliches," wherein the paper described the latest in concerns of the agricultural sector. Until 1915, the paper actually devoted an entire page to agricultural issues, ranging from market information to pertinent political news. The paper frequently featured direct responses from the BdL and other agricultural organizations, including a series in August and September of 1917 where the BdL responded to the formation of the Fatherland Party.⁶⁸

An important reason for examining this paper lies in its editorial oversight. As a paper nominally independent of a pressure group, the

⁶⁷ Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 127.

⁶⁸ *Deutsche Tageszeitung* (Berlin), 7 Sept. and 10 Sept. 1917

Deutsche Tageszeitung was free to print news and any views it saw as pertinent. This very independence made it more responsive to its readership than some other papers, as its existence depended entirely on maintaining subscriptions. The large number of subscribers indicated that a large portion of the readers were not of the *Junker* class but rather of other classes. Mostly likely this encompassed a substantial number of peasant farmers due to the agrarian focus of the articles and the classified advertisements. The *Deutsche Tageszeitung* more readily shifted its views to fit its audience in order to retain them than a party organ would, thus allowing countervailing views to circulate among its readership. This shift was most evident after 1914, as the readership declined by a quarter between 1904 and 1913, but, after a change in rhetoric, reached a high of 65,000 subscriptions during the war.⁶⁹ The paper also focused on a whole range of ideas during its publication run. While certain events, such as the war during the period from 1914 to 1918, became the main focus of the first few pages of the publication, it retained featured sections such as “Landwirtschaftliches” and “Aus Stadt und Land” throughout its publication period. These two sections, along with the “Landwirtschaft, Nahrungs, und Genußmittel” section, are the focus of this study on the *Deutsche Tageszeitung*. By examining these sections, it is possible to note

⁶⁹ Retallack, *Notables of the Right*, 110 and 253.

a parallel change in rhetoric in the *Tageszeitung* and assess what portion of the audience likely influenced the change.

The “Landwirtschaftliches” section retained a largely neutral standpoint. Usually, it conveyed general news from the farms in the larger Berlin area, such as celebrations, railway constructions, or military impact in the region.⁷⁰ This section ran at least twice weekly during the *Deutsche Tageszeitung*’s print run. A marked shift occurred, however, between 1898 and 1917. Initially, the paper conveyed only news pertinent to the large landowners in this section, such as the sale of a large portion of an estate.⁷¹ Over time, however, the section became less exclusively focused on the estate owners and more on farming in general. This is particularly evident during the war years. While news of the transfer of ownership of a large estate would still be mentioned, the “Landwirtschaftliches” section now primarily dealt with celebrations, weather news, and military maneuvers in the area. All of this information was useful to the entirety of its readership. This, coupled with its wide-scale distribution in Berlin and the surrounding rural regions, hints that the newspaper was responding to its declining readership to win back its lost audience by speaking to broader concerns.

⁷⁰ *Tageszeitung*, 8 Oct. and 31 Dec. 1914.

⁷¹ *Tageszeitung*, 27 April 1899.

The “Landwirtschaft, Nahrungs, und Genußmittel” section is another part of the *Tageszeitung* that changed between 1900 and 1914. Typically this section listed social news, usually most pertinent to the *Junkers*. By 1914, this section was rarely seen more than once a week, versus its previous frequency of three or more times per week. After December of 1914, it is no longer published, and no reason is listed in the final edition of that section.⁷² A likely explanation is similar to the shift in content of the “Landwirtschaftliches” section, namely that the declining audience forced the paper to react by pulling its less appealing sections. This is, admittedly, speculation; the continuation of the war and the publication of news items pertinent to it likely exercised influence with regards to space constraints in the publication. Nevertheless, it is striking that this is a section that was marked for deletion, noting the shifting priorities of the *Tagezeitung* from appealing to the *Junkers* to appealing to the entire potential audience.

The final section in consideration, “Aus Stadt und Land,” played a myriad of roles. Initially, it reported national news, such as the death toll in the fighting around Breslau or events around the Brandenburg region.⁷³ It continued this role, but it evolved over the war years from simple

⁷² *Tageszeitung*, 30 December 1914.

⁷³ *Tageszeitung*, 22 November and 26 November 1914.

reporting to reporting and critiquing. For example, in a July 1917 edition of this section, news is reported on the fighting in Belgium. Included, though, is a subtle critique of a Habsburg noble during his inspection of a Prussian battalion, noting poor performance on the part of Austrians during the war.⁷⁴ An October 1917 issue called attention to the impact of the war on the farms of Thuringia, crying for relief for the farmers there through the one panacea, total victory.⁷⁵ While this particular section did not necessarily illustrate a shift influenced by one portion of the audience, it did highlight Anderson's idea of print-capitalism and a newspaper's willingness to shift content in response to its audience.

Overall, these assessments may seem subtle and limited. Indeed, the idea of a prevalent *Junker* force in the BdL is not refuted. Most scholars do not deny that peasants made up the majority of the membership of the *Bund der Landwirte*, at times comprising over seventy percent of the rolls.⁷⁶ What is countered, however, is the claim concerning the respective levels of influence exerted by the constituent members. While this paper is not long enough to provide an exhaustive review of the journals and newspapers of the BdL nor of other papers affiliated with the organization, its examination of two, the *Korrespondenz des Bundes der Landwirte* and

⁷⁴ *Tageszeitung*, 25 July 1917.

⁷⁵ *Tageszeitung*, 16 October 1917.

⁷⁶ Hunt, "'Egalitarianism,' of the Right" 514; Puhle, *Agrarische Interessenpolitik*, 312, 320.

the *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, provides some insights into the working mechanisms and balance of power within the BdL. The conclusions are significant and suggestive. First, the *Junkers* and other elite members did exert considerable influence on the organization. They acted as the majority of the leadership, and they provided a considerable amount of backing for the print media. Second, the peasants also exerted influence within the organization themselves. To argue that the pages of papers such as the *Deutsche Tageszeitung* acted only to manipulate their audience (in a one-way transmission) ignores a fundamental principle of print-capitalism, namely the reactive measures a paper will take to retain its audience and its profit. Additionally, the shift of rhetoric of the *Korrespondenz* between 1896 and 1898, a journal targeted solely at the elite membership of the BdL, hints that something was influencing the leadership of the BdL and causing them to change their rhetoric. The radicalization of the League, propelled by a proto-democratic structure and peasant demagogues, forced the BdL leadership, as well as other leaders within the conservative movement, to adjust and account for the desires of the peasants who composed the bulk of the League.

V Conclusion

It would be fallacious to assert that the peasants exercised a dominant portion of influence within the BdL. This paper, however, demonstrates the need for a wider study on the workings of the BdL, beginning with examination of the regional agricultural papers, especially the ones ignored by Puhle in his work. Retallack mentions other items that need to be examined, such as songbooks, folklore, and social functions.⁷⁷ Current scholarship provides but an incomplete picture of the BdL as an organization by the elite and for the elite. This study, at the least, demonstrates that the peasant membership did have public modes of influence that are exhibited by the changes to the rhetoric in the papers. Their numbers meant more than simply signatures for petitions. The relationship was more complex than manipulation alone. Rhetorical shifts from economic orientation in the *Korrespondenz* and from an elite orientation in the *Deutsche Tageszeitung* coincide too well with the changes in membership and readership to be only coincidental. These changes illustrate the peasants' participation within the BdL and their

⁷⁷ Retallack, *Notables of the Right*, 109.

method of creating their own “cultural space.” Undoubtedly, personal papers of the papers’ editors, if they exist, would shed further light on the subject.

In summation, the current orthodoxy that calls the BdL an organization that worked solely for the “*Junker* elite and agrarian entrepreneurs” is shortsighted at best. The influence of the peasant class was felt, at a minimum, in the increased use of traditional rhetoric. Additionally, the BdL afforded the peasants a meaningful mode of democratic political participation as well as a coherent expression of German tradition as an expression of national identity. Further work will undoubtedly make the respective roles in the formation of these community values clearer. It is evident now, however, that the prevalence of these influences forged a distinctive identity and imagined community for the agrarian community, one that by 1914 was viewed as being steeped in the true tradition of Germany. Certainly by 1914 there existed a clear picture of a single agrarian community, which is deeply ironic considering their disparate views prior to 1893. The League persisted into the late 1930s, carrying with it into the Weimar and Nazi periods this unified conservative agrarian image. At the least, a new, “traditional” community was formed out of the challenges of modernization, driven by *Junker* interests and

fueled by peasant values and ideology, one which later became the ideological base cited by the Fatherland Party and the NSDAP.

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