



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890
Veterans' Evening Discussions in a Small Pomeranian Town (1870s)

The following text is an excerpt from the autobiography of the rural laborer Franz Rehbein (1867-1909). Shortly after his death, Rehbein's autobiography was edited and published by Paul Göhre. We see here that even in a remote village in the rural Prussian province of Pomerania, enthusiasm for the Wars of Unification (1864-1870/71) conjured up "memories" of heroism from the Wars of Liberation against Napoleon at the beginning of the century. The veterans described by Rehbein gathered at the "regulars' table" [*Stammtisch*] in countless local pubs throughout Germany. They also found their way into organizations such as the League of German Soldiers [*Deutscher Kriegerbund*], which already boasted 27,500 members the year it was founded (1873) and grew to more than a million members in 1898, or the Kyffhäuser League [*Kyffhäuser Bund*] – a nationwide umbrella organization with 2.9 million members in 1910.

FROM MY CHILDHOOD

Eastern Pomerania! Puttkameron!! – – Just thinking about this rather infamous corner of our beloved German fatherland makes one feel so curiously "eastern." It is as though a whiff of the Middle Ages were blowing across the flat Pomeranian fields.

One aristocratic residence after another, one manor after another; ancestral castles and day laborers' shacks, masters and helots. From time to time, there is a small farming village whose culture has fallen behind the times, and small rural towns without much industry are situated at a respectful distance from one another, each with its own bourgeois farmers, artisans, and – local dignitaries.

This is how we see the land of Messrs von Puttkamer, v. Köller, v. Zitzewitz, v. Bonin, v. Waldow, v. Kamecke, v. Glasenapp and however else these established, blue-blooded lordships may call themselves. And this region is my home. In one of the remotest corners of Eastern Pomerania, in the small rural town of Nn., I drew my first breath, the son of an artisan.

Childhood! A delightful word for many!

Home! Fortunate is he who can sing its praises!

[. . .]

Even in those days, I was already listening with great interest to the “political” discussions that my father engaged in with a number of his neighbors and acquaintances, particularly during the long winter evenings. Usually, our “warm tailor’s shop” was the meeting place for this “closing-time guild,” as its members called it. When the wind howled outside and the snowflakes were floating, the warm stove offered a comfortable place indeed for telling a tale. Now and then, a huge snuffbox made of birch rind was passed around, and everyone took a hefty quantity of brown stuff from this so-called garbage box, thus revitalizing, as it were, the conversation.

War stories were generally the main subject of conversation. After all, most of the men present had direct experience in this area and were able to speak from that experience. A bricklayer and a cobbler had participated in the 1870 campaign: one as an infantryman, the other as part of the Black Hussars. The latter preserved his black hussar’s cap, complete with the death’s-head, as though it were a sacred relic. A gardener had campaigned in 1866. He preferred talking about the charge of the Third Dragoons on July 3, 1866, an action in which he had taken part and suffered injuries. A clog-maker had participated in the Polish invasions; he expressed the least enthusiasm for war, however. “Yes, yes, if it were not for the endless strain and the poor treatment,” he said with a meaningful look. “What does one get out of it anyway?” The seniors of the “guild,” however, were two invalids from the Wars of Liberation, a couple of old veterans who were living on “veterans’ pay.” They still had their coats from the Napoleonic era, the ones they had worn while fighting under York and Blücher¹ and had often used as blankets during cold bivouac nights. I always beheld the two weather-beaten figures with a sort of reverent awe; after all, they seemed all the more venerable to me since they were real, living witnesses of a stormy time with only a few remaining survivors.

When listening to the tales of these veterans, the stories and protagonists of those eventful times (about which we had to learn quite a bit in school) came to life before my eyes. How I pictured in my childlike imagination the first Napoleon, Blücher, Schill,² old Nettelbeck,³ the French Guards, the Prussian Territorial Reserve [*Landwehr*], and the Russian Cossacks! I imagined a hail of bullets, the fray of battle, cavalry charges – an enthusiastic mutual slaughter “with God for king and fatherland.” After all, that was roughly how it was taught to us in school.

Of course, I felt sincere admiration for the German military leaders of the 1870 war as well. Everything Prussian appeared grand, lofty, and ideal. And of all these things, anything specifically “Pomeranian” seemed considerably grander and loftier to me. My bosom swelled

¹ Ludwig Yorck von Wartenburg (1759-1830), Prussian general field marshal, and Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher (1742-1819), Prussian field marshal. – trans.

² Ferdinand von Schill (1776-1809), Prussian officer who founded and led a Free Corps known as “Schillsche Jäger” [“Schillish Hunters”]; fell in 1809 against French troops – trans.

³ Joachim Nettelbeck (1738-1824), sailor who took part in the 1807 defense of Kolberg against French troops – trans.

with childlike pride about the fact that it was none other than Pomeranians who, “under Moltke’s personal command,” had brought about the triumph of German arms on the evening of the Battle of Gravelotte. How I pictured that in my imagination! It must have been exactly as I had seen it “copied” so splendidly in the *Ruppiner Bilderbogen* [*Ruppin Illustrated Broadsheet*] – Moltke,⁴ with sword drawn, leading [the charge] on a magnificent warhorse. Behind him, columns of brave Pomeranians. To the right, the left, and all around him, French grenades are exploding. By the dozen, the valiant warriors are falling in the bloody attack. In the whole pack, common soldiers and officers are lying and falling, but Moltke is not. Invulnerable like the god of war himself, he spurs his black horse. He points at the enemy with his glittering sword, his general’s eye turned backward. It is thus that he spurs on the Pomeranian grenadiers amidst the most intense hail of bullets and leads them in a dashing bayonet attack across the vanquished red pants⁵ to victory. Really, this would have to turn any – child – into a patriot.

And let us not forget Bismarck! Was he not our special fellow compatriot? Certainly he was: after all, the Pomeranian country estate of Varzin belonged to him. With its extensive forests, it was located only a few miles away from our place. So we had plenty of reason to be proud.

Incidentally, a considerable number of noble estate owners who had participated in the recent campaigns, as Herr Lieutenant, Herr Captain, Herr Cavalry Captain, or Herr Colonel, could also be found in the vicinity of our town. These gentlemen frequently came to our little town, noblemen from head to toe. In the summer, they appeared on horseback or came by carriage; in the winter, they wore splendid fur coats and came in elegant sleighs, quite often four-horsed, with two outriders, a coachman, and a servant in rich livery.

When this happened, it was not uncommon for local dignitaries and businessmen to stand in their doorways, bowing and scraping, and many a proper philistine considered it a high honor to be fortunate enough to greet such distinguished ladies and lords and even – to be greeted in return. The lords and ladies seemed to regard these deferential greetings by the town dwellers as something entirely natural, for most of the time they returned them with only a light, casual nod of the head; they seldom raised their own hats in greeting. As children, however, we delighted in the fiery, snorting horses that steamed and foamed as they paraded in front of the noble carriage. I also never neglected to take a routine peek at the gentlemen’s chest to see whether it displayed some colorful medal ribbon. If I saw one, then I regarded its owner as easily ranking among the bravest of all brave Pomeranian warriors. I considered him a kind of higher being. Consequently, in my eyes he was not merely a born leader and officer of common soldiers, but also a legitimate master and lord in other things, someone who was naturally entitled to other people treating him with respect and courtesy. This was also what the teachers in school told us, admonishing us often to be extremely polite and deferential toward those sirs, for they were, according to God’s will, the leaders of the people. And so it had to be true.

⁴ Helmuth von Moltke (1800-1891), Prussian field marshall and, as head of the general staff, the main architect of the Prussian victories in the Wars of Unification – trans.

⁵ French soldiers – trans.

Source: Franz Rehbein, *Das Leben eines Landarbeiters* [*The Life of a Farm Worker*] (orig. 1911), ed., Urs J. Diederichs and Holger Rüdell. Hamburg: Christians, 1987, pp. 5, 12-15.

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