PEOPLE, MARKETS, GOODS:
ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES IN HISTORY

Volume 7

Slavery Hinterland

PEOPLE, MARKETS, GOODS: ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES IN HISTORY

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Slavery Hinterland

Transatlantic Slavery and Continental Europe, 1680–1850

Edited by

Felix Brahm and Eve Rosenhaft

ECONOMIC HISTORY SOCIETY
1926

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4

Spinning and Weaving for the Slave Trade: Proto-Industry in Eighteenth-Century Silesia[1]

ANKA STEFFEN AND KLAUS WEBER

Textiles were the most important merchandise in the barter trade for Africans destined for slavery, serving both as a consumer good and as a currency. Throughout the four centuries of the transatlantic slave trade, fabrics of all sorts made up about 50 per cent of the value shipped to Africa. Leslie Clarkson states that cotton figures most prominently in the literature relevant to the history of textiles, as a commodity which Europeans have always desired and which has been prominent in early intercontinental trade (including in the barter trade for enslaved Africans), in the slave-based economy of the American South, and in the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain.[2] At the same time, she concludes that linen has been almost entirely overlooked by scholars – although the fabric was ubiquitous in Europe, for clothing, bedding, tablecloths, packaging, canvas, and more. Even a more recent essay collection on the European linen industry treats mainly the British, Irish and North American aspects, and hazards some glances into Sweden, Belgium and nineteenth-century Germany, when linen was already in irreversible decline; the omnipresent linen trade of seventeenth and eighteenth century northern France and Central Europe is completely ignored.[3] Its importance has been taken into account by a number of German scholars, but their studies on some particular textile regions, published in German, have not had the impact they deserved.[4]

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[1] We are indebted to Chris Smith (London) and Eve Rosenhaft (Liverpool) for their reading and for ironing out our English. Any remaining errors are ours.

[2] Leslie Clarkson, 'The Linen Industry in Early Modern Europe', *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles*, ed. D. Jenkins (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 472–93. See also Giorgio Riello and Prasannan Parthasarathi, eds, *The Spinning World. A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200–1850* (Oxford, 2009); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton. A Global History* (New York, 2014).

[3] Brenda Collins and Philip Ollerenshaw, eds, *The European Linen Industry in Historical Perspective* (Oxford, 2003).

It is true that homespun linen lacks the glamour of silk, the ornaments and the brilliant colours of calicoes and the dignity of woollen cloth, but in spite of all its inconspicuousness it was one of the products that closely linked the peoples around the Atlantic basin with those in Atlantic hinterlands, and it did so over centuries. A history of linen can very well illustrate how distant regions established trade relations and thus constituted a wider, previously non-existent, socio-economic fabric. This chapter will first introduce the overall importance of export-oriented linen production for certain regions of the Holy Roman Empire. It will then scrutinise the conditions which helped to make the landlocked province of Silesia one of the major suppliers of textiles on Atlantic markets, and the living conditions of the textile workers in the region. The formerly Austrian, then Prussian province of Silesia is of particular interest because there the institution of serfdom survived well into the nineteenth century, in contrast with Germany's more western textile regions, such as Westphalia, the Rhineland or Swabia. In Silesia and in some other Prussian provinces, serfs not only worked the land but were also employed in spinning and weaving. The chapter concludes by proposing that Silesia's linen trade not only supplied the Atlantic world with certain types of textiles but also helped to make the 'New World' plantation economy more profitable than it would otherwise have been, because under its regime of unfree labour, such fabrics were produced at particularly low cost.

The Central European Economy and the Atlantic World

Central European provinces like Lusatia, Silesia and Bohemia had already been integrated into the European textile economy during the sixteenth century, when the Fuggers and Nuremburg textile magnates transferred much of their rural linen production from Swabia and Franconia further east. These prominent entrepreneurs were capitalising on the lower wages to be paid there.[5] Many of these textile regions were devastated during the Thirty Years War, but had fully recovered by 1700.

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[4] Axel Flügel, *Kaufleute und Manufakturen in Bielefeld. Sozialer Wandel und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung im proto-industriellen Leinengewerbe von 1680 bis 1850* (Bielefeld, 1993); Hans-Werner Niemann, *Leinenhandel im Osnabrücker Land. Die Bramscher Kaufmannsfamilie Sanders 1780–1850* (Bramsche, 2004); Marcel Boldorf, *Europäische Leinenregionen im Wandel. Institutionelle Weichenstellungen in Schlesien und Irland (1750–1850)* (Cologne, 2006).

[5] Arno Kunze, 'Die Verlagsbeziehungen des Nürnberger Handelskapitals zum sächsisch-böhmischen Leinwandproduktionsgebiete im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert' (unpublished dissertation, Halle, 1925); Gustav Aubin and Arno Kunze, *Leinenerzeugung und Leinenabsatz im*

Lusatia is situated on the upper length of the River Spree and thus well connected with the River Elbe. The Elbe also provided Bohemia with direct communication to the sea port of Hamburg. This Habsburg province produced not only linen, but also metal items and glassware. From the 1680s, traders from the remotest Bohemian mountain villages travelled as far as London, Amsterdam and Cadiz to distribute their merchandise. As in Westphalia and the Rhineland, a combination of different commodities created synergies for marketing. In Bohemia, new roads were built during the eighteenth century for the smooth transportation of fragile commodities to the riverboats on the Elbe.[6]

The old-established Westphalian linen trade had always been directed towards the ports of Amsterdam, Bremen and Hamburg, and towards British markets. They naturally benefited from the closer integration of the North Sea region into the Atlantic economy, in particular after the Thirty Years War. The merchants of larger Westphalian cities like Bielefeld, Osnabruck and Warendorf tightened their links with rural linen spinning and weaving, and established efficient institutions for quality control and marketing. A steady migration to Hanseatic and Dutch ports, and to London, secured a significant urban presence of Westphalian merchants and many of them actually made their way into the elite society of these cities. This strategy ensured a tight vertical integration of their family-based business.[7] The main transport route through Westphalia was the River Weser, with the Hanseatic city of Bremen on its estuary into the North Sea. The river's upper course also links Hessian linen regions with Bremen.

Among the regions mentioned, Silesia is the one most distant from the North Sea shores. Yet, its economic importance and its reliance on long-distance trade is illustrated with a Prussian achievement in civil engineering and a Prussian military adventure. The Prince-Elector Frederick William initiated the construction of a canal which linked the River Oder (flowing from Silesia into the Baltic Sea) with the River Spree (feeding the Havel, which in turn feeds the River Elbe), thus completing a navigable waterway of some 760 kilometres, from Silesia's capital Breslau (today Wrocław) into the port of Hamburg. Merchants using this direct route to the North Sea avoided the Danish sound toll, but had to pay newly established Prussian duties. The canal was opened in 1668, with thirteen watergates on its length of 28 kilometres.

östlichen Mitteldeutschland zur Zeit der Zunftkäufe: Ein Beitrag zur industriellen Kolonisation des deutschen Ostens (Stuttgart, 1940).

[6] Milan Myška, 'Proto-Industrialisation in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia', *European Proto-Industrialisation*, ed. S. Ogilvie and M. Cerman (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 188–207; Klaus Weber, *Deutsche Kaufleute im Atlantikhandel 1680–1830: Unternehmen und Familien in Hamburg, Cádiz und Bordeaux* (Munich, 2004), pp. 75–9, 133–43.

[7] Weber, *Deutsche Kaufleute im Atlantikhandel*; Margit Schulte Beerbühl, *Deutsche Kaufleute in London. Welthandel und Einbürgerung (1600–1818)* (Munich, 2007).

From 1740 until 1763, Frederick William's great-grandson Frederick II (the Great) waged three costly wars for the conquest of Silesia, which had thus far been a province of the Habsburg Empire. After the change of ruler, the linen magnates in Silesia's wealthy trading towns readily adapted to Prussian rule and intensified their exports via Hamburg, while the older links with Upper Germany and Austria were neglected.

The orientation of Central Europe's rural industries towards the sea corresponded to the growth in the eighteenth century's maritime trade. The slow but steady pacification of the Atlantic basin and of the Caribbean, along with the suppression of piracy, contributed to a reduction of transaction costs, which encouraged more individual traders to enter into the business, including the slave trade.[8] German merchants too benefited from these changes. A significant number of them did so by establishing themselves in a seaport of a slave-trading nation and operating under its flag.[9] To what extent did this presence of a German commercial elite in major port cities of colonial empires have an impact on the Central European hinterlands? This question can only be answered by a quantitative assessment of the exportation of Central European products.

The taste of consumers in colonial markets is reflected by an 1806 report of British merchants to Parliament: 'The Spanish Traders are very strongly prejudiced in favour of German linens … When a Spanish trader comes into a store in a British [Caribbean] Island, the first article he asks for is German linens.'[10] Another report, dated 1744, reported that the seventy thousand enslaved people on Barbados were 'usually clothed with Foreign "Osnabrughs"'.[11] Such labelling demonstrates that the products from particular northern German regions had made themselves a name, as 'stout Weser flaxen', 'true born Osnabrughs', 'true born Tecklenburghs' (Tecklenburg is a county in the province of Westphalia), or 'Creguelas de Westphalia' and 'Rosas de Westphalia'.[12]

These fabrics were in demand not only in American colonies, but also in Africa, where the proportion of German manufactures among the barter commodities used for the purchase of slaves was significant.[13] Even the assortments on board the early Portuguese slave ships were made up entirely of merchandise produced outside Portugal, mostly from more Central and Eastern European regions.[14] Bills of lading preserved from the 1660s show that hardly any East India ship would set sail from Britain for Africa without a substantial quantity of Silesian linen in its holds, labelled 'sletias'.[15] The slave ship *Amiral*, which left Bordeaux for the Guinea coast in 1744, had the bulk of its cargo made up of textiles, as most slavers would. Out of the total of 5,095 bales of cotton and linen on board, 1,440 derived from Nantes, there were far smaller batches from Rouen and Amsterdam, but as much as 2,720 from Hamburg.[16] The British ship *Mermaid* offers a similar picture: in 1732, before setting off for the Guinea coast, its captain had purchased textiles in Rotterdam, with a total value of £23,335. Half of them were 'sletias'. Much of the remainder, labelled 'bretannies' and 'cambrics', may also have been of German origin.[17] Counterfeits of the traditional linen from Cambrai and French Brittany were made in Germany, and much of it was distributed via Dutch harbours.

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[8] Pieter C. Emmer, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Economy, 1580–1880. Trade, Slavery and Emancipation* (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 12–32.

[9] Klaus Weber, 'Deutschland, der atlantische Sklavenhandel und die Plantagenwirtschaft der Neuen Welt (15. bis 19. Jahrhundert)', *Journal of Modern European History* 7/1 (2009), 37–67; Klaus Weber, 'Mitteleuropa und der transatlantische Sklavenhandel: eine lange Geschichte', *WerkstattGeschichte* 66–67 (2015), 7–30.

[10] Otto-Ernst Krawehl, *Hamburgs Schiffs- und Warenverkehr mit England und den englischen Kolonien 1840–1860* (Cologne, 1977), p. 441.

[11] British Parliamentary Papers, *House of Commons, Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, 19 vols (Wilmington, 1975), vol. 19: *Reports & Papers 1742–1760*, pp. 18–19.

[12] Edith Schmitz, *Leinengewerbe und Leinenhandel in Nordwestdeutschland (1650–1850)* (Cologne, 1967), pp. 33, 86, 92.

Such individual observations on overseas markets are confirmed by broader data from German regions of textile production. In his examination of the Prussian customs registers, Alfred Zimmermann emphasises the significantly Atlantic bias of the exports from Silesia. From the 1740s to the 1780s, more than three-quarters of its linen produce – the annual value was oscillating roughly between 3 and 6 million Reichsthaler – was destined for the markets of Western European sea powers. Some of it was even shipped directly to the Americas, but only a tiny fraction of the exports was sent east (to the Russia, Poland, Hungary and Ottoman regions).[18] Far smaller German territories also exported large quantities: in the late 1780s, the annual linen exports of the Westphalian County of Ravensberg were worth some 750,000 Thaler.[19] Similarly structured export markets have been observed in the case of metalwares from the Rhineland.[20]

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[13] Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 114.

[14] Alan F. C. Ryder, 'An Early Portuguese Trading Voyage to the Forcados River', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 1/4 (1959), 294–321.

[15] Margaret Makepeace, 'English Traders on the Guinea Coast, 1657–1668: An Analysis of the East India Company Archive', *History in Africa* 16 (1989), 237–84, here pp. 239, 255–68.

[16] Éric Saugera, *Bordeaux port négrier. Chronologie, économie, idéologie, XVIIe–XIXe siècles* (Paris, 1995), pp. 246, 352.

[17] Kazuo Kobayashi, 'British Atlantic Slave Trade and East India Textiles, 1650s–1808' (University Working Paper, Osaka, 2010).

[18] Alfred Zimmermann, *Blüthe und Verfall des Leinengewerbes in Schlesien. Gewerbe- und Handelspolitik dreier Jahrhunderte* (Breslau, 1885), pp. 460–7.

[19] Schmitz, *Leinengewerbe und Leinenhandel*, p. 81.

[20] Wilfried Reininghaus, *Die Stadt Iserlohn und ihre Kaufleute* (Münster, 1995), p. 585.

This pattern has been confirmed by a case study on British foreign trade: In the first half of the eighteenth century about 15 per cent of all imports to Britain consisted of linen. As Karin Newman has pointed out, 70–80 per cent of all these linens came from Germany, and 90 per cent of this volume was re-exported across the Atlantic. This implies that around 1700, about two-thirds of all British linen exports were of German origin. Irish linen followed in second place, and English-woven produce only ranked third.[21] If the annual average of the bales of German-made linen channelled through Britain during these years had been unrolled and pieced together, it would have produced a length of 11,000 kilometres – large enough to span the Atlantic from Britain to New England and on to Jamaica.

The French and Spanish contexts provide similar examples. The accounts of the important French trading house of *Fornier frères*, established in Cadiz, reveal that out of the total of its textile purchases between 1768 and 1786, amounting to a value of 12 million Reales, almost two-thirds were made in Germany. The major place of purchase was Hamburg, followed by Silesia.[22] This pattern illustrates the decline of French linen industry. In 1793 alone, Catalan industries imported nearly 1.1 million metres of linen from Hamburg.[23] All these examples illustrate the extent to which the book *The European Linen Industry*, cited above, is missing the wider picture.

The huge volume of rural textile production for export markets also had an impact on population growth and social structure in Central Europe. German labour-intensive proto-industries typically emerged in regions where poor soil and climate obliged the rural population (including women and children) to earn additional income for the purchase of food they could not produce themselves. The poor wages which cottagers would accept attracted textile producers to transfer manufacturing to such provinces. The general tendency was a move from more western and urban to more eastern and rural areas. With ever-increasing volumes of German manufactures being exported, such hitherto poor regions became permanent importers of food, allowing for an escape from the Malthusian trap. How narrow this escape was can now be tested through a closer consideration of the case of Silesia, focusing on the mountainous region surrounding Hirschberg (today Jelenia Góra). This small but commercially very powerful town, situated in the foothills of the Giant Mountains, was the province's most prominent centre for the processing and sale of linen.

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[21] Karin Newman, 'Anglo-Hamburg Trade in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries' (unpublished dissertation, London, 1979), p. 202.

[22] Robert Chamboredon, 'Une société de commerce languedocienne à Cadix: Simon et Arnail Fornier et Cie (Nov. 1768–Mars 1786)', *La burguesía de negocios en la Andalucía de la ilustración*, 2, ed. A. González García-Baquero (Cadiz, 1991), pp. 35–52, here pp. 35, 49.

[23] Pierre Vilar, *La Catalogne dans l'Espagne moderne. Recherches sur les fondements économiques des structures nationales*, 3 vols (Paris, 1962), vol. 3, pp. 118, 126.

Proto-Industry in Silesia

Merchants from Nuremberg and Augsburg had been ordering linens from Silesia since the early sixteenth century; Dutch buyers would soon join in. Notably following the Thirty Year's War, the number of people involved with textile production was on the rise, particularly in the mountain regions. A common explanation for this phenomenon has been refugees seeking protection in Silesia's more secluded areas, having to make their living without access to agricultural land.[24] An additional cause could be the increase in prices for staple foods, which was already in progress at that time.

From the mid seventeenth century the merchants in Silesia's linen trading towns Hirschberg, Greiffenberg (today Gryfów Śląski) and Landeshut (today Kamienna Góra) had established their own guilds (*Kaufmanns-Societäten*). Hirschberg was the most prominent place and the neighbouring villages were particularly crowded with weavers and spinners. In organising bleaching and other finishing processes, and in coordinating the transport to buyers, the guilds successfully pushed foreign merchants out of the Silesian linen sector. With their detailed knowledge of markets, the merchants instructed the workers to produce counterfeits of Western European makes: Bretannies, Cambrics and Sangallas (from the Swiss region of St Gallen). This did not go unnoticed, as substantiated by a protest of Cambrai merchants dating around 1750, who complained about 'fines toiles de Silesie', made in the style and measures of the original 'cambrics'.[25] With a diversified range of goods, Silesian merchants answered the demand from their own customers. These in turn were wholesale merchants at distant places of trade, who would order certain amounts of linen, of a specified quality and a defined degree of whiteness.[26]

Silesian industry also benefited from the institution of serfdom. By the eighteenth century, serfdom had virtually disappeared in the more westerly linen regions of Britanny, Normandy, Westphalia and Swabia. In Bohemia it was abolished in 1781;[27] in Silesia, by contrast, it remained in place into the early nineteenth century.[28] Estate ownership prevailed. Tenant farmers were obliged to work the land of their overlord for some days each week and owed him carriage services, or had to let him use draught animals at certain periods of the year. Serfs without arable land at their disposal had to make their living as lodgers working for their keep (*Einlieger*), farm-girls, farm-hands or household servants (*Mägde*, *Knechte*, *Gesinde*), having to toil as the overlord saw fit. Among these services spinning yarn and weaving were commonplace. Typically, *Einlieger* would also spin and weave on their own account in any free time they had. In earlier times estate owners had even acted as putters-out, dictating low prices for the purchase of the yarn or finished fabrics which they would in turn sell at a higher price.[29] Since the merchants' guilds had succeeded in establishing their own oligopoly on prices in the course of the seventeenth century, the estate owners had been squeezed out of this business.[30] Still, the landlords benefited from the industry; their tenants and lodgers owed them a fee for the permission to practise a craft. This was in place until the slow process of abolishing serfdom in Prussia was initiated with the October Edict of 1807.[31] Hence, the landless textile workers were never really able to negotiate the prices for their labour or for their product on equal terms. Further, with mobility harshly restricted, options to migrate for better-paid jobs were virtually non-existent. The Silesian merchants thus benefited from low production costs, enabling them to penetrate Atlantic markets with comparatively cheap textiles. At the beginning of the process of Silesia's proto-industrialisation, workers to some extent freely adopted industriousness, but in the course of the eighteenth century the stagnation and even decline of real wages imposed a further intensification of labour on the households of the rural population.[32] The low cost of labour must have been one of the reasons why most spinners did not even use spinning wheels but rather archaic yarn-winders.[33] Likewise, hand weaving persisted

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[24] Lujo Brentano, 'Ueber den grundherrlichen Charakter des hausindustriellen Leinengewerbes in Schlesien', *Zeitschrift für Social- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 1 (1893), 318–40, p. 327; Siegfried Kühn, *Der Hirschberger Leinwand- und Schleierhandel von 1648–1806* (Breslau, 1938), p. 14–16.

[25] Archiwum Państwowe w Jeleniej Górze (State Archives, Jelenia Góra), Sign. 23 Zoll- und Schiffsachen, report without date, presumably from 1749 or 1750.

[26] Kühn, *Der Hirschberger Leinwand- und Schleierhandel*, pp. 40–3.

[27] Arnost Klíma, 'Industrial Growth and Entrepreneurship in the Early Stages of Industrialisation in the Czech Lands', *Economic Development in the Habsburg Monarchy in the Nineteenth Century. Essays*, ed. J. Komlos (Boulder and New York, 1983), pp. 81–99, here p. 82.

[28] Ernst E. Klotz, *Die schlesische Gutsherrschaft des ausgehenden 18. Jahrhunderts. Auf Grund der Friderizianischen Urbare und mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der alten Kreise*

Breslau und Bolkenhain-Landeshut (Aalen, 1978); Markus Cerman, *Villagers and Lords in Eastern Europe, 1300–1800* (New York, 2012).

[29] Brentano, 'Ueber den grundherrlichen Charakter des hausindustriellen Leinengewerbes in Schlesien', p. 328.

[30] Marcel Boldorf, 'Märkte und Verlage im institutionellen Gefüge der Leinenregion Niederschlesien des 18. Jahrhunderts', *Die Wirtschaftsgeschichte vor der Herausforderung durch die New Institutional Economics*, ed. K.-P. Ellerbrock and C. Wischermann (Dortmund, 2004), pp. 179–91, here p. 183.

[31] Zimmermann, *Blüthe und Verfall des Leinengewerbes in Schlesien*, p. 18; Brentano, 'Ueber den grundherrlichen Charakter des hausindustriellen Leinengewerbes in Schlesien', pp. 327–8; Johannes Ziekursch, *Hundert Jahre schlesischer Agrargeschichte. Vom Hubertusburger Frieden bis zum Abschluss der Bauernbefreiung* (Darstellungen und Quellen zur schlesischen Geschichte), reprint of the 2nd edn (Aalen, 1978), pp. 42, 112; Kühn, *Der Hirschberger Leinwand- und Schleierhandel*, p. 19.

[32] Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (New York, 2008).

[33] Zimmermann, *Blüthe und Verfall des Leinengewerbes in Schlesien*, p. 60; Brentano, 'Ueber den grundherrlichen Charakter des hausindustriellen Leinengewerbes in Schlesien', p. 326.

well into the twentieth century.[34] The established elite of textile merchants did not initiate anything resembling the Industrial Revolution. It was a small group of newcomers, entering into the sector during the difficult Napoleonic years, who introduced mechanisation from the mid nineteenth century.

Demography and Living Costs in Prussian Silesia

When Prussian rule was imposed over the region in 1742, the sovereign Duchy of Silesia and the County of Glatz comprised some 37,500 square kilometres.[35] Population density in Prussia had been at ten people per square kilometre by the end of the seventeenth century; in Silesia it was already at twenty-one people per square kilometre. By 1805, the number of inhabitants per square kilometre in the southern region had reached fifty-two, whereas even in 1816 the density in Prussia as a whole did not exceed thirty-seven individuals per square kilometre.[36] Density was even more pressing in the mountainous regions of Lower Silesia, with sixty inhabitants per square kilometre by the early nineteenth century.[37]

The landless and the land-poor portion of the population grew even faster than the average, at least until 1806. Their numbers in Silesia exceeded 200,000 people by 1778, making up some 14 per cent of the province's population. In the face of this excess supply of labour, it is not really surprising that their daily wages stagnated. In contrast, the number of tenants working a larger or smaller tract of land on their own was hardly growing at all.[38] Information on daily, monthly or annual wages is very scarce, but it is worthwhile attempting an approximate assessment.

For a courier in late-fourteenth-century Silesia, the fee per mile had been 2 Silbergroschen and 6 Silberpfennig (30 Silberpfennig).[39] Pay had not improved

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[34] Joseph Partsch, *Schlesien. Eine Landeskunde für das deutsche Volk*, 2 vols (Breslau, 1911), vol. 2, pp. 504, 518; Heinz Pohlendt, *Die Landeshuter Paßlandschaften: Beiträge zur Landeskunde der westlichen Mittelsudeten unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der dörflichen Siedlungs- und Hauslandschaft*, Veröffentlichungen der Schlesischen Gesellschaft für Erdkunde und des Geographischen Instituts der Universität Breslau 25 (Breslau, 1938), p. 81.

[35] Silesia and the far smaller territory of Glatz were jointly ceded to Prussia, and they are usually treated jointly in the literature: Friedrich G. Leonhardi, *Erdbeschreibung der Preußischen Monarchie*, 6 vols (Halle, 1792), vol. 2, p. 7; Ziekursch, *Hundert Jahre schlesischer Agrargeschichte*, p. 61.

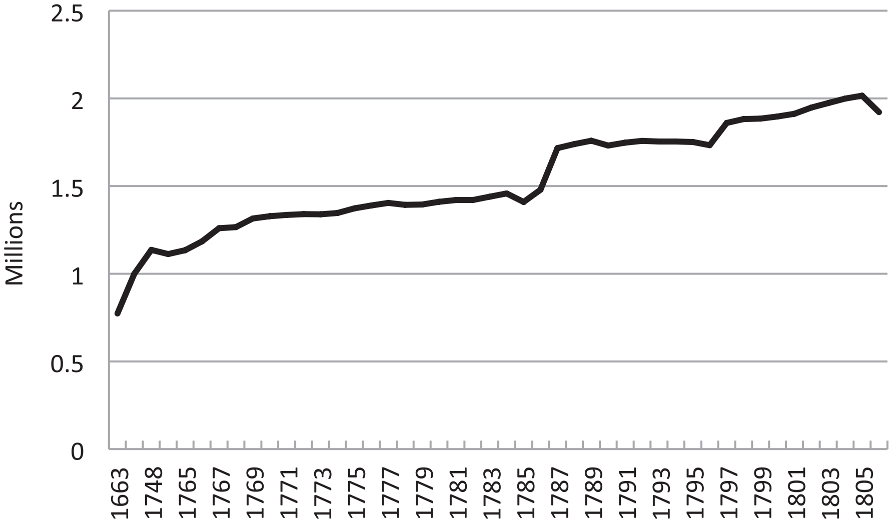
[36] Calculation based on Leonhardi, *Erdbeschreibung der Preußischen Monarchie*, pp. 7, 16; Otto Behre, *Geschichte der Statistik in Brandenburg-Preussen bis zur Gründung des Königlichen Statistischen Bureaus* (Berlin, 1905), p. 408.

[37] Ziekursch, *Hundert Jahre schlesischer Agrargeschichte*, p. 134.

[38] Ibid., pp. 73–6.

[39] One Reichsthaler was equal to 30 Silbergroschen or 360 Silberpfennig. One Prussian mile was equal to 7.532 kilometres.

Figure 4.1. Population in Silesia, 1663–1805



Sources: Leonhardi, *Erdbeschreibung der Preußischen Monarchie*, pp. 7, 16–17, 22, 24–5; *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 5 (1787), 59; *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 17 (1793), 411–13, here p. 411; Behre, *Geschichte der Statistik in Brandenburg-Preussen*, p. 462.

by the 1780s, when such a messenger still received only 3–4 Silbergroschen (approximately 36–48 Silberpfennig) per mile.[40] The figures seem reliable, as other sources mention similar wage levels for unskilled workers at the end of the eighteenth century. For example, one thresher (*Dreschgärtner*) could make 1–3 Silbergroschen (12–36 Silberpfennig) per day. A male farm-servant owing bonded labour received 12 Reichsthaler annually; a farm-girl obtained only 5 Reichsthaler per year.[41] Assuming 365 working days, this equates to 12 Silberpfennig for one day of male labour and only 5 Silberpfennig for one day of female labour – even though the Prussian Servants' Law (*Gesindeordnung*, 1676) had already mandated a minimal daily wage of 18 Silberpfennig for male farm-servants.[42] In contrast, day labourers not bound to serfdom could make up to 5 Silbergroschen (60 Silberpfennig) per day – but they could not count on any support from an overlord.[43]

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[40] *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 15 (1792), 429–40, here pp. 434–9.

[41] *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 8 (1788), 233–50, here pp. 235–6.

[42] 'Der Herren Fürsten und Stände verneuerte Gesinde-Ordnung Anno 1676 d. 9. Novembr.', in *Käyser- und Königl. Das Erb-Hertzogthum Schlesien concernirende Privilegia, Statuta und Sanctiones Pragmaticæ* (Breslau, 1713), pp. 178–202, here p. 188.

[43] Klotz, *Die schlesische Gutsherrschaft des ausgehenden 18. Jahrhunderts*, p. 100.

Costs of (Barely) Living

Highly valuable data from the periodical *Schlesische Provinzialblätter*[44] indicate that the income of landless and land-poor people was lagging behind the slow but steady rise of prices for grain, meat or items like shoes, and this applies from the Middle Ages to the end of the eighteenth century (Fig. 4.2). With the 1796 price for one pound of beef or pork a little over 2 Silbergroschen (25–28 Silberpfennig), it is evident why the lower classes were not consuming meat on a regular basis. Fish was even more expensive. Herring, the cheapest on the market, cost 2 Silbergroschen (24 Silberpfennig). Eel, at the top of the price range, was at 1 Reichsthaler (360 Silberpfennig). The prices for the cheapest bread oscillated around 1 Silbergroschen (12 Silberpfennig) per pound (just under 500 grams).[45] Bread was the main source of nutritional energy and it is reasonable to believe that the information that adult consumption was approximately two pounds per day is correct.[46] Hence, to cover the minimal nutritional supply with bread only absorbed up to 40 per cent of the daily earning of an unbonded male day labourer – provided he obtained the highest possible pay. Bonded farm-hands were usually provided with basic provisions by their employers, though very often of poor quality. The director of the Royal Credit Institute, Ernst Heinrich, observed that such budgeted provision might include only three dishes of meat per year.[47] It seems that the working poor were particularly impoverished in Silesia, to the point that their physical strength was perceptibly affected. According to the Prussian statesman Theodor von Schönau, for a comparable task 33 per cent more labourers were required on Silesian estates than on estates in the area surrounding Magdeburg.[48] It may even be claimed that from the 1770s many of those enslaved on plantations in the French Caribbean and in British North America were enjoying better material living conditions than Silesian cottagers.[49]

With population density higher but harvests poorer than in the lowlands

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[44] Michael R. Gerber, *Die Schlesischen Provinzialblätter 1785–1849* (Sigmaringen, 1995).

[45] *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 23 (1796), 488–91.

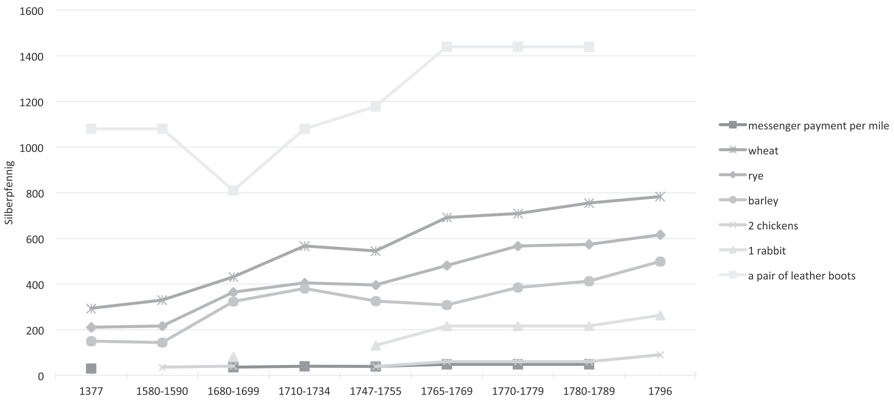
[46] *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 29 (1799), 525–51, here p. 539. Klotz even considers three pounds of bread necessary for one male farm-servant per day: Klotz, *Die schlesische Gutsherrschaft des ausgehenden 18. Jahrhunderts*, p. 64.

[47] The Royal Credit Institute was established to provide loans to keep struggling estates in operation; Heinrich's statement dates from the very end of the eighteenth century. Cited according to Ziekursch, *Hundert Jahre schlesischer Agrargeschichte*, p. 116.

[48] Ibid., p. 116.

[49] Dale Tomich, 'The Other Face of Slave Labour: Provision Grounds and Internal Marketing in Martinique', *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World. A Student Reader*, ed. H. Beckles and V. A. Shepherd (Kingston, Jamaica, 2000), pp. 743–57; David Eltis, 'Free and Coerced Transatlantic Migrations: Some Comparisons', *The American Historical Review* 88/2 (1983), 251–80, here pp. 279f; Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross. The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston, MA, 1974), p. 122.

Figure 4.2. Prices in Silesia for grain, other foodstuffs, leather boots and messenger's fee per mile, 1377–1796



Sources: Schlesische Provinzialblätter 12 (1790), 406–12, here pp. 407–10; *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 15 (1792), 429–40, here pp. 434–9; *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 23 (1796), 488–91; *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 83 (1826), 235–60, here pp. 237–8, 242; *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 102 (1835), 207–16, here pp. 211–13.

Figure 4.3. Grain prices in Silesia, 1781–1810

Prices for grain per bushel, in Reichsmark		1781–1790	1791–1800	1801–1810
Wheat	Hirschberg	5.31	5.33	10.06
	Breslau	4.25	4.25	8.04
Rye	Hirschberg	4.07	4.13	7.52
	Breslau	3.24	3.39	6.09
Barley	Hirschberg	3.16	3.04	6.08
	Breslau	2.53	2.97	4.82

Source: Zimmermann, *Blüthe und Verfall des Leinengewerbes in Schlesien*, p. 474.

of the province, the town and valley of Hirschberg relied on grain supplies from outside – which meant that prices for bread were usually above average (Fig. 4.3).[50]

Contemporaries saw yet another reason for the long-term rise in prices: the increase of the volume of coined money in circulation. According to the *Neue Bunzlauische Monatschrift zum Nutzen und Vergnügen* (published in Bunzlau, today Bolesławiec), the monetary expenses of a family of five had increased thirtyfold during a 250-year period: they had risen from 5 Reichsthaler and 15 gute Groschen[51] per annum in 1500 to 150 Reichsthaler per annum in 1750. The authors saw a direct nexus of this inflation with the increase of the volume of cash in German lands, assuming a sixtyfold multiplication from approximately 7 million Reichsthaler in 1500 to roughly 429 million Reichsthaler in 1750.[52] Those provincial eighteenth-century economists accurately described Earl Hamilton's 'Price Revolution' – avant la lettre.

Making Ends Meet

A very detailed picture of the expenses of a peasant in the last quarter of the eighteenth century has been provided by the *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* from 1788. It draws on the example of a farm in the mountains of Lower Silesia, rented by a seignorial peasant, with its modest revenues from crop cultivation corresponding with most of the farms in the region. The farm housed six persons: the farmer, his wife and their two children (who counted as one adult), one male farm servant, one maidservant and a boy groom. Besides two horses, the farm had two cows, two goats, two draught oxen and four chickens. The farm's annual revenue of about 186 Reichsthaler was essentially generated by farming, supplemented by the yarn spun by the maidservant and the farmer's wife during the off-peak farming months. In turn, the total expenses for maintaining the farm, paying the farm-hands, the provisioning and the clothing of the wider family, plus taxes and the rent to the landlord added up to 353 Reichsthaler per annum. The deficit amounted to 167 Reichsthaler. The farm itself required at least 136 days of labour. Apart from that, at least forty-two days of labour (including horses and oxen) were owed to the overlord. The shortfall of 167 Reichsthaler had to be earned with additional work by all farm members during the remaining 187 days of the year.[53] Farmers would typically offer carriage services or let their oxen or horses in exchange for money, but rarely took to weaving. It was rather the landless people who practised both spinning and weaving, not for an additional income but as the mainstay for survival.[54]

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[50] Max Müller, *Die Getreidepolitik, der Getreideverkehr und die Getreidepreise in Schlesien während des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Weimar, 1897), p. 154; Zimmermann, *Blüthe und Verfall des Leinengewerbes in Schlesien*, p. 78.

[51] One Reichsthaler was equal to 24 gute Groschen or 288 gute Pfennig.

[52] *Neue Bunzlauische Monatschrift zum Nutzen und Vergnügen* 4 (1787), 301f. The *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* provides different figures, the general assertion remains the same: *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 41 (1805), 31–7.

According to the sources, by the end of the eighteenth century up to one-third of the Silesian population was involved in one way or another with the linen trade.[55] If the overall population of the province was close to 1,800,000 at that time,[56] this would equate to about 600,000 people. Production was complex: cultivating flax, breaking and heckling it, spinning yarn and bleaching it, collecting the yarn and selling it to the weavers who then manufactured panels of ordinary fabrics or wove delicate, elaborately patterned batistes. Then the finished pieces had to be brought to the merchants in the urban trade centres, often by middle-women (*Mäklerinnen*, *Umtrag-Weiber*). They collected the bales from the scattered dwellings of the weavers and carried it to sale in town. Having thus been spared a time-consuming walk, the weavers paid them a small fee.[57] In each of the linen-trading towns, the historic market square is surrounded by a walkway, protected by the columns and arches of the patrician houses. There, the merchants could exercise quality control of the fabrics, in any weather and all year round. And there were other groups making an income from this trade: the finished merchandise was loaded on horse carts and hauled to reloading points on the waterways of the region or to more distant destinations. Tenant farmers would provide some of these services, but the boatmen on the rivers and canals, and the men at the watergates, had to be paid. Finally, we need to bear in mind the smuggling that was flourishing along the borders and which supported quite a number of families. Trading restrictions like the ban on yarn exports encouraged illicit trade: while the Prussian ruler wanted the yarn to be woven in his own lands in order to keep weavers employed and to increase the state revenues, weavers in Saxony and Bohemia were always hungry for cheap yarns.[58]

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[53] *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 8 (1788), 223–50.

[54] See also Brentano, 'Ueber den grundherrlichen Charakter des hausindustriellen Leinengewerbes in Schlesien', p. 325; Ziekursch, *Hundert Jahre schlesischer Agrargeschichte*, p. 94; Heinz Pohlendt, *Die Landeshuter Paßlandschaften*, pp. 60f.

[55] *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 29 (1799), p. 538.

[56] *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 17 (1793), 411–13, here p. 411; *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 47 (1808), 440–2, here p. 442; Ziekursch, *Hundert Jahre schlesischer Agrargeschichte*, p. 61.

[57] Zimmermann, *Blüthe und Verfall des Leinengewerbes in Schlesien*, p. 24; Kühn, *Der Hirschberger Leinwand- und Schleierhandel*, pp. 22–6.

[58] Burkhard Nolte, *Merkantilismus und Staatsräson in Preußen. Absicht, Praxis und Wirkung der Zollpolitik Friedrichs II. in Schlesien und in westfälischen Provinzen (1740–1786)* (Marburg, 2004), pp. 101–22, 143–7.

Combining Micro and Macro Levels

During the period between 1747 and 1805 the total of Silesia's officially registered exports averaged almost 10 million Reichsthaler per annum, with linen goods contributing 45–54 per cent of this annual amount. Three-quarters of all those linens were destined for port cities in Western Europe (and some of it even straight for the Americas).[59] By the end of the eighteenth century, exports of Silesian linens accounted on average for 23 per cent of the total Prussian exports, which averaged 27.3 million Reichsthaler annually, and for 65 per cent of the total Silesian export value.[60]

Despite these impressive figures, the average Silesian remained poor in comparison with the regular townsfolk in places like Halberstadt and Magdeburg (the more recent acquisitions of Prussia), with the common people living in Prussia's western exclaves of Minden, Ravensberg, Tecklenburg and Lingen, or with those in its core lands of Kurmark. In 1775–76, the per capita income in the most populous region of Prussia, Silesia, added up to 2.6 Thaler, whereas the average income in Halberstadt was 4.7 Thaler. Within Prussia, only the subjects living in the Neumark and in Pomerania, with only 1.96 and 2.28 Thaler per capita, were poorer than the Silesians.[61]

The total value of linen exports from Silesia averaged around 4.4 million Reichsthaler per annum. With one full-time weaver producing a three-score (some 58–60 ells) of ordinary linen cloth weekly,[62] and each three-score valued at 7 Reichsthaler,[63] a workforce of some 12,000 Silesians would have had to have been employed in full-time weaving during the years 1747–1805 to generate that annual sum. Yet, taking into consideration that the exports also comprised a portion of the more delicate and much more expensive linen batistes (40 Reichsthaler per piece at the top of the range),[64] the number of weavers must have been smaller than that figure. Other sources do mention a range of 8,841–10,888 weavers for the period 1778–95.[65] An estimate of around 10,000 weavers may be assumed to be realistic, at least for the late eighteenth century. The discrepancy between the three figures may be explained with the fact that part-time spinning and part-time weaving were widespread.[66] Even when taking the unlikely number of 13,000 weavers as a basis, and estimating Silesia's population at around 1.5 million during the period 1747–1805 (Fig. 4.1), it becomes clear that during those decades, the labour of less than 1 per cent of the total population accounted for more than half of the province's export value.

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[59] Calculation based on statistical data found in Leonhardi, *Erdbeschreibung der Preußischen Monarchie*, pp. 58, 68; *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 15 (1792), 265; *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 20 (1794), 385–6, here p. 385; *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 32 (1800), 575–6; *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 34 (1801), 376; *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 36 (1802), 144–7, here p. 145; *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 39 (1804), 36–8; *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 40 (1804), 444–6; *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 42 (1805), 561–3; Zimmermann, *Blüthe und Verfall des Leinengewerbes in Schlesien*, pp. 460–7; Behre, *Geschichte der Statistik in Brandenburg-Preussen*, pp. 346–8.

[60] Calculation based on data regarding three years (1781, 1785/6, and 1793): Behre, *Geschichte der Statistik in Brandenburg-Preussen*, pp. 346, 351.

[61] Ibid., p. 102.

[62] Ernst Michael, *Die Hausweberei im Hirschberger Tal* (Jena, 1925), p. 29, Marcel Boldorf, 'Märkte und Verlage im institutionellen Gefüge der Leinenregion Niederschlesien des 18. Jahrhunderts', p. 181.

[63] Leonhardi, *Erdbeschreibung der Preußischen Monarchie*, p. 52.

[64] Ibid., pp. 52f.

It is thus relevant to have an even closer look at this small but important group of weavers and at their living conditions. The modest number of weavers seems surprising at first glance, but is actually not so remarkable after all. The persistence of estate ownership and hereditary serfdom explains why not just anybody could take up weaving, even if this occupation seemed profitable at certain periods. Redemption from hereditary subservience had been possible even before 1807, the year of reform, but it was not extensively practised because of prohibitive costs: a so-called *Lytrum personale* had to be paid for the release of persons; a *Lytrum reale* paid for all belongings. Around 1748, the ransom was in the range of 10–18 Reichsthaler per capita. Given the low income noted above – one, a maximum of 3 Silbergroschen per day for a male servant – and the considerable cost of food, the accumulation of such sums was more than burdensome, let alone the ransom for a whole family. Three per cent of the people bound to a landlord were able to redeem themselves in 1785.[67] Assuming the same rate of redemption for a time span of thirty years, hardly any serfs would have been left. Yet, if a freed person took residence as peasant or cottager on a piece of land owned by another proprietor, he fell back into subservience. The same occurred if a freedman or freedwoman married a subservient partner.[68] In the long run, redemptions did not increase the portion of freedmen and freedwomen, but rather were just another lucrative source of income for the feudal overlords. Less costly was the permit for a tenant's temporary departure from the estate. Upon payment of a fee (*Schutzgeld*) he was allowed to seek a better-paid job. In case he relied on lodging provided by his temporary employer, he owed him another fee.[69] The mover also had to pay the spinning or weaving licence (*Weberzins*) if he joined any of these crafts. As small as this group of weavers was, they were ill-placed to maintain a high standard of living.

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[65] Ziekursch, *Hundert Jahre schlesischer Agrargeschichte*, p. 43.

[66] Kühn, *Der Hirschberger Leinwand- und Schleierhandel*, p. 19.

[67] Calculation based on the details provided by Ziekursch. He states that the ransom payments became a main source of income for the landlords: Ziekursch, *Hundert Jahre schlesischer Agrargeschichte*, pp. 104f.

[68] Ibid., p. 107.

[69] Ibid., p. 113; Kühn, *Der Hirschberger Leinwand- und Schleierhandel*, p. 20.

The Industrious Poor

To be sure, a weaver could still earn much more money than a common farm-hand – but only as long as the economic situation in Western Europe and in the wider Atlantic world favoured the linen trade. Peter Hasenclever, a prominent linen merchant from the Rhenish Duchy of Berg, who had made a career in the Atlantic world before settling in Landeshut, was also an expert in political economy. In 1787, he estimated that out of the 5–7 Reichsthaler a weaver was paid for one three-score piece of linen (which it took him a week to weave), only 2 Reichsthaler (60 Silbergroschen) were left once the worker had paid all the inevitable expenses: the weaving licence, costs for the finished yarn, rewards for the yarn carriers (*Garnsammler*), and the pay for the middle-woman who brought the produce to town. The weavers of batistes certainly obtained more money per piece, but had to rely on better and more expensive yarns.[70] On the one hand, as the wage figures cited above indicate, 2 Reichsthaler amounted to almost the twice the pay of a common day labourer and just over eight times the pay of a bonded male farm-hand. On the other hand, Silesia's close economic entanglements with the wider world entailed risks which were more threatening to the weavers than to the merchants: maritime and continental wars, increases in customs duties for one or other of the places of destination, import bans on certain textiles and the like had immediate repercussions in the province and could easily lead to underemployment or even unemployment. On top of this came the high volatility of prices for staple foods.[71]

Hirschberg may serve as an indicator of such dependencies. During the relatively stable and prosperous period from 1752 to 1790, the value of linen exported from Hirschberg and the surrounding villages averaged up to 1.5 million Reichsthaler per annum. The value of linen exported per week thus added up to approx. 31,250 Reichsthaler. This implies that in the town and the wider valley of Hirschberg, approximately 5,300 full-time and part-time weavers were needed to manufacture the corresponding volume of fabrics. Yet, during the difficult years from 1802 to 1822, export figures nosedived to an average of 505,000 Reichsthaler per annum. This meant that no more than 1,800 weavers were needed to meet the demand. Even in times of peace and thriving commerce, the poorer strata of Silesian population had just about managed to scrape through.[72] In these lean years, the evidence is that two-thirds of the weavers became redundant, and those still in business had to fear for their sheer survival.[73] The outmigration beginning with the process of the liberation of the peasants in 1807 reveals that the linen production in this province had at least to some extent been built on a coercion which resulted from the restriction of choices and opportunities. In the ten years following the October Decree, 7 per cent of the inhabitants left the mountainous region of Lower Silesia; as much as 12 per cent left the villages in the immediate vicinity of Hirschberg (Hirschberger Kreis).[74]

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[70] *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 5 (1787), 214–36, here p. 224; see also Leonhardi, *Erdbeschreibung der Preußischen Monarchie*, p. 52. On Hasenclever: Adolf Hasenclever, *Peter Hasenclever aus Remscheid-Ehringhausen, ein deutscher Kaufmann des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Gotha, 1922).

[71] Müller, *Die Getreidepolitik*, pp. 153–79.

[72] Brentano, 'Ueber den grundherrlichen Charakter des hausindustriellen Leinengewerbes in Schlesien', p. 335.

The intensification of labour in this part of Central Europe does not fit with Jan de Vries' concept of an 'Industrious Revolution', nor with Roman Sandgruber's model of the origins of consumer society in the eighteenth century.[75] Both authors emphasised the desire of individuals for new choices and their capacity to increase their own spending power, and this is certainly appropriate for eighteenth-century Britain and the Netherlands. But the Silesians described here did not increase their working hours in order to exploit new opportunities for consumption. They did so because an exploitative labour regime and the high price of staple foods forced them to do so – otherwise they would have starved.

The consumption of colonial foodstuffs may serve as an indicator of access to such new opportunities. Taking into consideration Silesia's imports and exports of sugar, and the demographic growth, it may be assumed that during the 1740s the average Silesian had 2.25 pounds (approximately 1 kilogram) of sugar in his diet. By 1805 consumption had risen to no more than 2.75 pounds (approximately 1.25 kilograms).[76] This lagged far behind the per capita consumption of 9 kilograms in Britain and the 4–5 kilograms consumed in the Netherlands during the decades around 1800.[77]

The wealth which was generated by proto-industrial textile production and the far-flung export trade was mostly skimmed off by the merchant elite. The more successful traders accumulated fortunes which allowed for the purchase of noble titles, and of landed estates with their adherent villages (and inhabitants), from declining families of the older nobility. Daniel von Buchs (1707–79) was granted a title in recognition of his commercial success; Christian Mentzel (1667–1748) acquired a substantial residential estate, but out of civic pride he declined the imperial offer to raise him to the nobility.[78] Most of the small but opulent baroque palaces around Hirschberg ended up in the hands of this new commercial elite.[79]

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[73] Calculation based on figures extracted from Leonhardi, *Erdbeschreibung der Preußischen Monarchie*, p. 434; *Schlesische Provinzialblätter* 15 (1792), p. 265; Daniel Hensel, *Historisch-Topographische Beschreibung der Stadt Hirschberg in Schlesien seit ihrem Ursprunge bis auf das Jahr 1797* (Hirschberg, 1797), pp. 621–718; Michael, *Die Hausweberei im Hirschberger Tal*, pp. 18f, 36; Rolf Straubel, 'Breslau als Handelsplatz und wirtschaftlicher Vorort Schlesiens (1740–1815)', *Jahrbuch für die Geschichte Mittel- und Ostdeutschlands. Zeitschrift für vergleichende und preußische Landesgeschichte* 49 (2003), 195–299, here p. 287.

[74] Ziekursch, *Hundert Jahre schlesischer Agrargeschichte*, pp. 303–4.

[75] De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*, pp. 122–77; Roman Sandgruber, *Die Anfänge der Konsumgesellschaft. Konsumgüterverbrauch, Lebensstandard und Alltagskultur in Österreich im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Vienna, 1982).

[76] Leonhardi, *Erdbeschreibung der Preußischen Monarchie*, pp. 75–6.

[77] Jonathan Hersh and Hans-Joachim Voth, *Sweet Diversity: Colonial Goods and the Rise of European Living Standards after 1492* (C.E.P.R. Discussion Paper, 2009), p. 14; see also de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*, p. 160.

Only during the first decades of the nineteenth century did their strategy become obsolete. Napoleon's Continental System had dealt a blow to Silesia's commercial networks in the western hemisphere. In the following years, increasing volumes of linen yarns and linen fabrics came from new textile mills in England, Ireland and Westphalia. The Silesian linen merchants never became 'modern' entrepreneurs or factory owners. The mode of production and the labour regime they had established turned out to be a dead end, with disastrous effects on the textile workers.[80]

Conclusion

According to Karl Polanyi and Eric Hobsbawm, the Old English Poor Law offered outdoor relief for agricultural workers during the poorer winter months, in order to prevent them from moving temporarily into urban regions (from where they would probably not return in spring, when labour demand peaked). It was designed 'to stop the development of a capitalist labour market'.[81] When slavery was abolished in the Caribbean and in the American South, this was achieved by Apprenticeship Laws and Black Codes.[82] In Silesia, the workforce was immobilised by serfdom and upward social mobility was minimised by the trade monopolies of the guilds. This feudal order secured a considerable elasticity in labour supply. With labour so readily available, entrepreneurs were able to freeze the wages of textile workers at the level of mere subsistence. Low wages, in turn, were no incentive for investment in mechanisation. The volatility of export markets was yet another factor which worked against technological innovation. The proto-industrial mode of production allowed for swift responses to the ups and downs of commerce. Workers were employed according to demand, and with minimal investment of capital into industrial equipment there was no surplus capacity lying dormant on which to draw during periods of crisis. For the merchant elite it was an economically sound strategy to instead invest their profits in real estate, in noble titles and in the manors that went with their new status.[83]

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[78] Gerhard Schiller, 'Christian Mentzel (1667–1748). Das Leben eines Hirschberger Schleierherrn als Kaufmann, Bankier und Mäzen seiner Heimatstadt', *Leben in Leichenpredigten* 12, ed. Forschungsstelle für Personalschriften (Marburg, 2011), http://www.personalschriften.de/leichenpredigten/artikelserien/artikelansicht/details/christian-mentzel-1667-1748.html (accessed 28 February 2016).

[79] Arno Franke, *Das schlesische Elysium. Burgen, Schlösser, Herrenhäuser und Parks im Hirschberger Tal*, Deutsches Kulturforum östliches Europa, 3rd edn (Potsdam, 2008), pp. 39f, 48–51, 68f, 123–9, 135f, 150–4, 169f; Kühn, *Der Hirschberger Leinwand- und Schleierhandel*, pp. 120–4.

[80] Kühn, *Der Hirschberger Leinwand- und Schleierhandel*, p. 126; Marcel Boldorf, 'Weltwirtschaftliche Verflechtung und lokale Existenzsicherung. Die schlesischen Kaufmannsgilden im internationalen Leinenhandel des 18. Jahrhunderts', *Praktiken des Handels. Geschäfte und soziale Beziehungen europäischer Kaufleute in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, ed. M. Häberlein and C. Jeggle (Konstanz, 2010), pp. 127–44, here pp. 143f.

[81] George Boyer, *An Economic History of the English Poor Law 1750–1850* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 75.

[82] Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name. The Reenslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York, 2008).

The cheapness of labour must also be seen in a wider Atlantic context. Wages in Central Europe generally lagged behind those in North-Western Europe.[84] Ulrich Pfister has recently claimed that real wages in German lands were even in decline during eighteenth century.[85] This case study on Silesia would confirm his results. The effects of low wages on the price of manufactures were significant, in particular with regards to labour-intensive products such as textiles. As early as the 1620s, the British economist Thomas Mun, a major shareholder of the East India Company, complained that ‘Cambricks’ and other linen from Continental Europe were competing in price with the calicoes the Company brought in from India.[86] Both calicoes and linen were in demand in West Africa, which implies that Central European and Indian textile producers were in direct competition on these markets – which were essentially slave markets. This competition helped to check price levels for textiles within the wider Atlantic basin, and thus to attenuate the rise of prices demanded for slaves from Africa. In short, low costs for labour in Silesia lowered the costs for slave labour on the plantations in the ‘New World’. This Prussian province, with its extremely low wages, is the most striking example, but Silesian conditions put pressure on pay rates in Germany’s more westerly linen regions as well. Silesian linen was also bleached or dyed in Rhenish territories before being exported – thus mixing free and unfree labour within one product. These effects and practices, and the general decline of wages from Western to Eastern Europe provided all German linen regions with relatively low labour costs. Their overall competitiveness is exemplified by with the numbers of 'sletias' on African slave markets, and by the omnipresence of 'Osnabrughs' in the Caribbean.

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[83] Kühn, *Der Hirschberger Leinwand- und Schleierhandel*, p. 120.

[84] Jan Luiten van Zanden, *The Long Road to the Industrial Revolution: The European Economy in a Global Perspective, 1000–1800* (Leiden, 2009), p. 98.

[85] Ulrich Pfister, *Great Divergence, Consumer Revolution and the Reorganization of Textile Markets: Evidence from Hamburg’s Import Trade, Eighteenth Century* (Discussion Paper, 1st draft, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, June 2012).

[86] Thomas Mun, ‘A Discourse of Trade, from England unto the East-Indies (1621)’, *Mercantilism*, vol. 1: *The Rise of Mercantilist Discourse*, ed. L. Magnussen (London/New York, 1994), pp. 49–80, here p. 52.