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# Nobility, Peasantry and Estates

in southwestern Germany,  
from the eighteenth to the twentieth century

By Daniel Menning

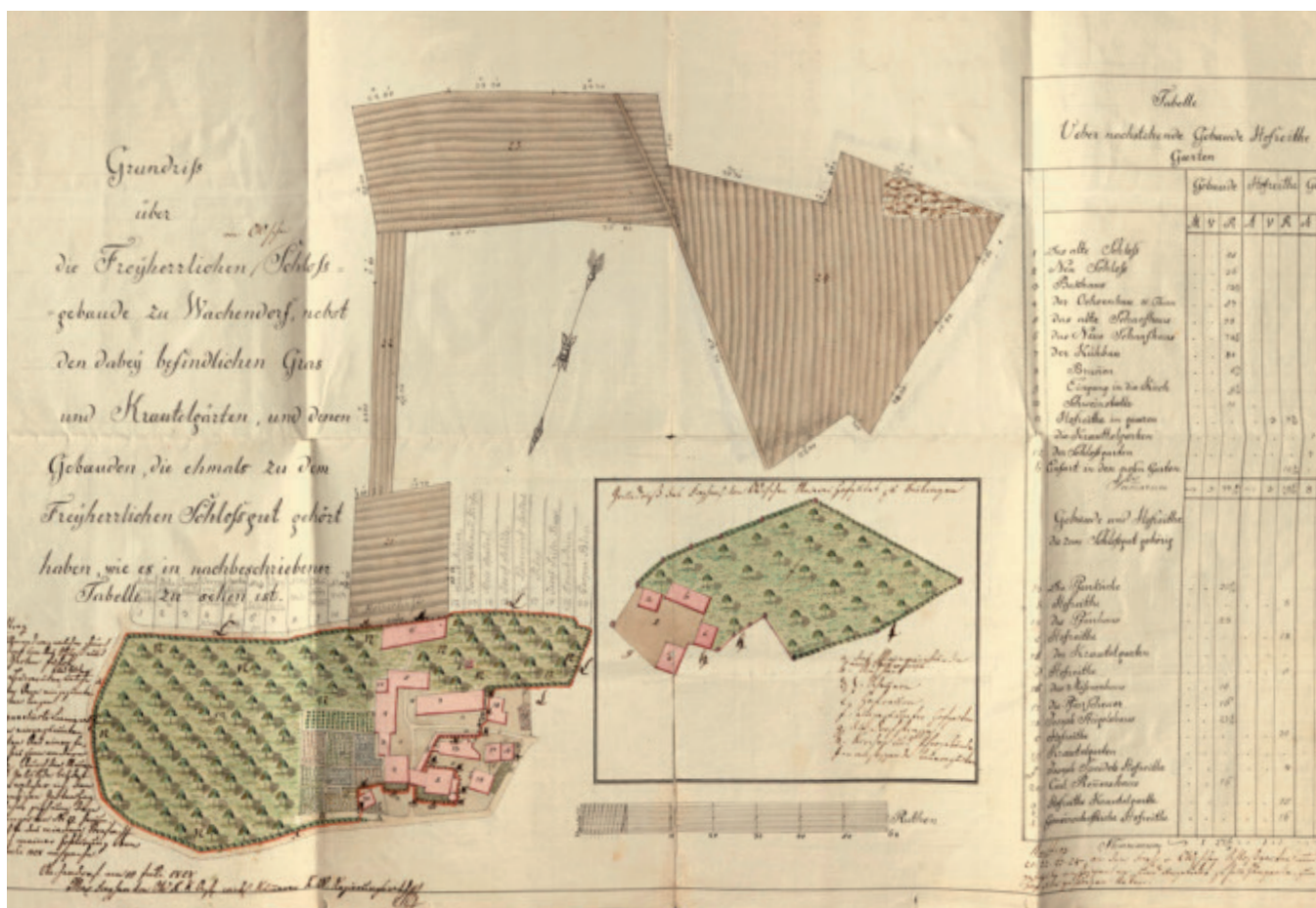
## An Attack

Not long after the German Revolution on November 9, 1918, two hand grenades were thrown into the garden salon of Schloss Wachendorf in Württemberg.<sup>1</sup> Apparently due to the wet weather conditions, they did not explode. But they certainly showed the dissatisfaction of some inhabitants of the village with the status quo and the behaviour of Baron Hans-Otto von Ow. There had, of course, been a build-up to the incident. A few days earlier, the parish and the revolutionary peasants' council had asked the baron to relinquish his right to the personal use of the *Chörle*, the manorial family pew or chapel, reserved for the patron and directly accessible from the palace. After four years of hardship during the First World War, they believed they were entitled to equality within the church, but Baron von Ow had refused the request. He proclaimed that his privileged seat was justified by his position as patron of the church. Unknown inhabitants then reacted by simply demolishing the wall between the church's nave and the *Chörle*, to which von Ow responded by filing a criminal complaint. When he was asked to withdraw his complaint, he at first refused, but the unwanted presents flying into his salon made him reconsider. Shortly after the incident, he renounced his right to the *Chörle*, but also never visited another service in 'his' church again. The conflict, thus, seemed resolved, and when von Ow died around two and a half years later, according to his descendants, large numbers of the area's population attended his funeral.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, this conflict was only one in a long series of intermittent clashes between the noble owners of estates and the village populations

**Oppenweiler Palace, built in the 1780s for Baron Franz Georg Sturmfeder von Oppenweiler**

The structure stands on an island and was built on the remains of a medieval moated castle. The palace was sold to the municipality in 1939. (Photo: Daniel Menning)



**6.1 | Map of Wachendorf Palace** and its surroundings around 1830. The estate has been in the possession of the von Ow family since the Middle Ages. Legend as follows: 1 old palace; 2 new palace; 3 bakery; 4 oxen stable, IV tower; 5 old sheep stable; 6 new sheep stable; 7 cow stable; 8 fountain; 9 entrance to the church; 10 pig stable; 11, 15 and 19 herb and vegetable gardens; 12 palace garden; 13 church; 14 rectory; 16 sacristan's house; 18 and 20 village dwellings. (Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart E 157/1, Bü. 398)

in southwestern Germany which had occurred since at least the late Middle Ages. While much research has been devoted to these conflicts in the early-modern period, especially the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, hardly any has been conducted into the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. There are distinct reasons for this neglect. During the eighteenth century the lower nobility was quite weak and, for a historiography focused on state formation, it appeared to be a curious, but unimportant aberration. In addition, the lower nobility were relatively poor and, therefore, left few architectural statements of importance in the landscape of southwestern Germany. Württemberg and Baden, the two states that actively sought to subdue the lower nobility of the region at the beginning of the nineteenth century, are considered to be very bourgeois with regard to the leading circles of government and society.<sup>3</sup> As German historiography was mostly interested in the role of the nobility within new elites and their influence upon the catastrophic political development of Germany up to 1945, look-

ing at a region whose nobility was not part of the political elite was deemed largely unnecessary.<sup>4</sup>

However, the fact that clashes like the one in Wachendorf kept occurring should cause historians to pause and reconsider. Just because the lower nobility in Baden and Württemberg were no longer important at a state level, or for Germany as a whole at the beginning of the twentieth century, it does not mean that they were negligible. Evidently, the inhabitants of Wachendorf were still very much aware of the remaining influence of the nobility and their estates at a local level. Estates and the rights attached to them shaped the lives of thousands of people in villages throughout the southwest at least until after the Second World War – and in some cases continue to do so today. It is in this local arena that we need to search for the remaining influence of the lower nobility in southwest Germany. Looking at their estates, their inheritance patterns, and their agricultural economy opens up new avenues into the social history of the region and new ways of understanding the remaining influence of the nobility itself, which was evidenced by the hand grenades thrown in Wachendorf, as well as its limits.

To do this, the chapter will proceed in four steps. It will first introduce the lower nobility in southwestern Germany, roughly coinciding with the modern federal state of Baden-Württemberg. The second part will look at the nobility's relationship to their estates and inheritance patterns in particular. This will be followed by a consideration of the feudal relationship between the nobility and the peasants, and its dissolution from the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Finally, the size of estates, their management and their impact on the relationship with the peasants will be considered.

## **The Nobility in Southwestern Germany**

In contrast to other parts of the continent, but in common with central Europe, a centralized power did not develop in southwestern Germany before the early 1800s. The kings from the Staufer dynasty may have come closest to developing a unified territory during the Middle Ages. After their extinction in the thirteenth century, however, several powers faced each other in the region – especially Württemberg and the Habsburgs – each thereby effectively blocking the expansion of the other. This had a lasting influence on the landscape, to which Fig. 6.2 testifies. The region was





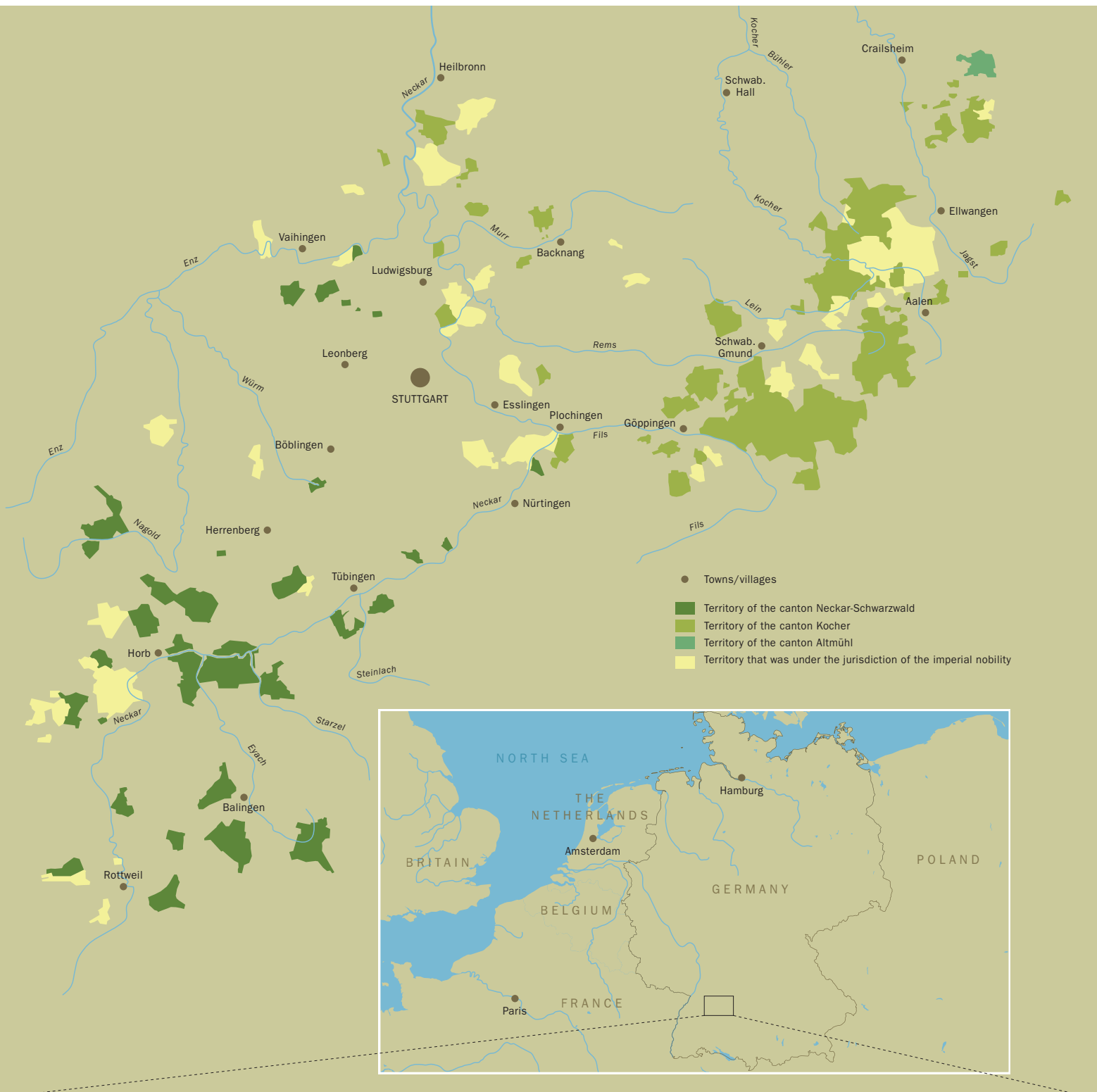
## 6.2 | Map of southwestern Germany at the end of the eighteenth century, showing the high degree of political fragmentation that was a result of the development of the Holy Roman Empire since the Middle Ages.

Overall, more than 300 territories existed in central Europe with very different statuses and constitutional arrangements (e.g. GFS/Grafschaft = earldom; FSM/Fürstentum = principedom; FSBM/Fürstbistum = prince bishopric; Herzogtum = dukedom; RS/Reichsstadt = imperial city; Abtei = abbey; Markgrafschaft = margravate; Schweizer Eidgenossenschaft = Swiss confederation [not a part of the Empire]). These territories could have different laws and customs, law enforcement, taxes and duties. The intermingling of these polities especially in the South made attempts to develop 'modern' administration by the larger territories like Württemberg particularly difficult. Map detail drawn by Thomas Höckmann.

The map to the right includes the borders of present-day Germany as reference.

highly fragmented, with even the larger territories of Württemberg and the two Badens (Baden-Baden and Baden-Durlach) occupying only a limited amount of the map. The smallest principalities often consisted of only one or two villages. These village-principalities were scattered across the region, although clusters can be seen, for example, along the upper Neckar River, the middle parts of the Rhine close to Lake Constance, and in Franconia. The princes of the larger territories resented the small village-size territories because they made the administration and policing of their own principalities more difficult, as criminals could escape across the border and innumerable road tolls had to be paid when passing through these enclaves. Over the course of the eighteenth century the princes of the larger territories tried to annex these territories, but were largely unsuccessful.

Most territories retained their independence until 1805, and so the nobility in southwestern Germany was predominantly an imperial one: noblemen were not subject to anyone but the Holy Roman Emperor in Vienna. In rank, the high nobility ranged from the Duke of Württemberg, to lower-ranked princes such as the two Hohenzollerns (in Hechingen and Sigmaringen) or the earls of Löwenstein, all of whom were represented at the German Empire's diet in Regensburg, right down to the lower nobility of so-called 'imperial knights' (Reichsritterschaft), who were not represented in the diet. With the Holy Roman Emperor becoming the guardian of the constitution of the empire itself during the early-modern period,



the Habsburgs also took on the role of protecting the independence of the smaller territories against infringements by larger rulers. In return, the imperial nobility paid subsidies to the emperor – one of the only means of taxing the empire that was open to the imperial administration in Vienna. By the late-sixteenth century the imperial nobility had organized itself into cantons in order to better finance and defend themselves to an extent that was beyond the means of the individual knight and his village-sized territory.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, however, many knights were losing ground economically. They gathered income from their territories in the form of taxes and levies. In addition, because a part of the territory was also farmed by the nobility or their representatives, like noble estates in other countries, further proceeds resulted from agriculture and especially forestry. Yet, both of these sources often proved insufficient to support a noble standard of living. For this reason, knights took up careers in the administration of larger states, commissions in the military, or in the case of catholic knights, positions within the church. However, the resulting income from these posts and the accompanying expenses of court life did not always result in surpluses and economic problems frequently increased rather than decreased. Only a few, mostly catholic knights were successful in acquiring high posts in the church, or even in becoming bishops of larger territories, thereby gaining wealth for their families. As not many were able to make fortunes, the amount of money that could be funneled back into the family's estates was limited, resulting in high debts on numerous properties and their subsequent sales. In Kocher, for example, only one quarter of families kept their estates for more than three generations.<sup>6</sup>

The knights' organization, the cantons, were trying to prevent these frequent sales, at least to non-members, since more powerful rulers such as the Duke of Württemberg could otherwise slowly buy out the vulnerable imperial knights. Even worse, the territories bought by larger sovereigns would usually cease contributing to the taxes the cantons collected. These were badly needed to finance their administration and maintain the favour of the Emperor in Vienna via subsidies. It was also not unusual for the cantons to try to prevent estate sales by taking over the administration from knights who were overburdened with debt. But the general results of these measures were mixed. Although they could not keep their members from selling individual estates if they wished to do so, and despite the fact that a good number of estates were alienated from the imperial nobility, the

**6.3 | A map of the imperial nobility's territories along the Neckar river, lending even more emphasis to the fragmented territorial situation in southwestern Germany. While cantons were regional organizing units for the imperial nobility and, therefore, member villages are shown in like colours, each village-cum-territory retained its independence. (Map from Siegfried Kullen: *Der Einfluß der Reichsritterschaft auf die Kulturlandschaft im Mittleren Neckarland* [Tübinger Geographische Studien 24]. Tübingen 1967, p. 15. The inset map shows the borders of present-day Germany as reference)**



group as a whole managed to survive the eighteenth century as an independent entity of the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>7</sup>

The smaller principalities only disappeared when the empire collapsed under Napoleon's onslaught. In 1802 the French emperor ordered a territorial reorganization, superficially in order to compensate those noblemen losing territory on the western banks of the Rhine (which now became French territory), though at the same time trying to build up alliance partners in central Europe and to punish the Habsburg emperor's supporters. Weakened militarily and politically, the emperor in Vienna appeared to lose his control as protector of the constitution. This had a negative influence on the willingness of newly grown states like Württemberg, Baden and Bavaria to play by the rules of the empire. Though the imperial nobility and many somewhat larger territories managed to survive in 1803 (the former paying huge bribes), they were nevertheless subjugated two years later, after the crushing defeat of Austria at Austerlitz and shortly before the Holy Roman Empire's dissolution in August of 1806 in a second step of Napoleonic territorial reorganization in central Europe. Only the new kingdom of Württemberg, the Grand Duchy of Baden and the two Hohenzollern states survived in the southwest, because of their connections to Paris along with French strategic considerations, and they became part of the Confederation of the Rhine in 1806.

In 1805, as a compensation for their military support, Napoleon granted the subjugation of smaller territories that had survived in 1802/3 to Baden and Württemberg, as well as to Bavaria. In the process, the high and low imperial nobility were turned into landed nobilities. After 1815 this group was split in two: into the *Standesherrn*, those formerly represented at the diet in Regensburg who continued to form the higher nobility in Württemberg and Baden; and the former imperial knights which, as *Grundherren* (Baden) or *Ritterschaft* (Württemberg), now constituted the lower nobility. Though the former imperial nobility lost all their rights as territorial rulers, they retained the land they had owned before 1800, which now more closely resembled the agricultural estates in other parts of Europe.

The nobility regarded their treatment by the new enlarged states as, at best, not particularly kind, and at worst thought of it as illegal terror.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the former imperial knights managed to survive into the nineteenth century as a landed nobility with legal distinctions. Yet many rights and privileges, like special representation within the parliament for owners of formerly imperial territories, were no longer dependent on the noble

title alone. Instead, the possession of estates was a necessary precondition to these privileges. Even worse with regard to social status, the income derived from the estates was often still too limited for a landed elite lifestyle, and service in the administration or military remained the norm. Ecclesiastical occupations became unusual after secularization in 1803 had taken away most of the landed possessions from the catholic church.

The nobility's privileges were further limited over the course of the nineteenth century, but were only abolished completely by the Weimar Constitution of 1919, after which date noble titles turned into parts of the family names. However, local influence and deference were often maintained because the nobility were still important landowners. Significant expropriations that could have dissolved this power base occurred neither after 1918 nor after 1945.<sup>9</sup>

To conclude, the history of the imperial nobility prior to 1806 and its transformation into a landed elite shows the interconnection between the individual and group status and the possession of territories and estates. But at first sight, this seems curious: how could territories and estates be the basis of status if they often did not provide enough income for an elite lifestyle? The solution to the conundrum lies in the peculiar inheritance patterns prevalent amongst a large number of noble families in southwestern Germany.

### **Estates as Family Property**

Most estates owned by the lower nobility in Baden and Württemberg in the eighteenth century were either entails (*Fideikommiss*), or were still based on the older German legal form of *Stammgut*, which originated in medieval feudal laws. While entails became more popular in Germany in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, *Stammgüter* had existed for far longer. However, it appears that as tradition lost its influence over the eighteenth century, numerous families of the lower nobility tried to reinforce rules concerning estates by adapting entails, thereby creating confusion between the origins of the two systems and sometimes even creating the composite noun *Fideikommissstammgut*.<sup>10</sup> During the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, laws in Baden added to the misunderstandings, as they consistently used the term *Stammgut* for what was legally an entail.<sup>11</sup>

The confluence of the two different legal traditions had an important effect in southwestern Germany. Traditionally daughters were excluded from

**6.4 | Plan of the von Stetten family castle in Stetten, around 1830** The castle dates back to the eleventh century, with two further palaces (A and D) added in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries respectively. The image demonstrates that estates in southwestern Germany sometimes had more than one palace, in order to accommodate multiple owners. (Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart E 157/1, Bü. 377)



inheritance, but all sons were entitled to a share of their father's *Stammgut*. The term to describe this common possession was *Kondominat* (or *Kondominium*), literally commonly ruling a territory. The result was that estates and their revenues were split between sons. Though each son had a part in the status that the landed possession provided, the individual income from the revenues of the *Stammgut* was insufficient for a noble or elite lifestyle for all the heirs. When the idea of the entail arrived in southwestern Germany, it was used to strengthen the inalienable nature of the property, but the idea that there could only be one owner to an entail was not regarded as a fundamental component. On the contrary, in the eighteenth century it was even claimed that individual succession into the whole estate would create an unhealthy dominance of one family member over his brothers and cousins and, thus, *Kondominate* survived into the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

As the nineteenth century continued, the *Kondominat* was frequently criticized. In particular, the possibility of an infinite number of owners was condemned. Earl Leo Amadeus Henckel Donnersmarck wrote: "It is not hard to prove that with the family growing everybody will have something, but nobody enough."<sup>13</sup> There was at least partial truth in this claim, especially if certain branches of the family had a lot of offspring. For example, in 1914, Baron Emil Göler von Ravensburg received 64 marks as his share of the estate produce, which was not even a tenth of a contemporary worker's

wage. On the other hand, his cousin Felix, from a part of the family that had been less fortunate with children, but correspondingly more so with income, received 8,200 marks in the 1890s.<sup>14</sup> Critics also made much of the “disgusting affair” of Balzheim,<sup>15</sup> though in truth it was an unusual case. From the eighteenth century, shares of this estate could be inherited by men and by women. Around 1905, 120 people possessed parts of the estate – not all of whom were noble. Baron Friedrich von Gaisberg-Schöcking claimed that trade in these shares was quite lively, and that people were trying to buy them because a co-possession in this formerly imperial territory brought with it electoral rights for the privileged parliamentary representation of estate owners. Gaisberg-Schöckingen posed the question: in the long run, how could a claim to privileges in society be based on such negligible possessions as a share in a *Kondominat*, so easy to acquire?<sup>16</sup>

*Kondominate* not only seemed to threaten the nobility’s social status; conflicts also arose with regard to their administration. As the number of owners grew, opinions on how to manage the estate multiplied, and as individual shares diminished in value and size, the owners’ willingness to forgo personal revenue streams for the sake of investment in the long-term prospect of the property decreased. Some families drew up articles of association to prevent conflicts, although this did not always work. If the haggling became too much, separation was an option. However, even then, the shares could never become fully independent legal entities, as they still had to remain part of the original *Stammgut*. They were thus not private property, could not be sold without the consent of all other owners of the *Stammgut* and would revert, in the absence of a male heir, to the remaining male family members. Forest land was usually a major component of noble estates and fragmentation made no economic sense, as economies of scale meant that profits per acre increased with size. Therefore, it was usually not split up by the *Kondominat*’s inheritors into individually managed, though not legally independent, shares.<sup>17</sup>

The transformation of a *Kondominat* into an estate with individual succession seemed to be the solution to the diminishing financial returns of small estate shares and the concomitant threat to the social position of the nobility. The administration would be in one set of hands, and the revenues of the single owner could be much larger. However, as noblemen learned, it was easier to call for individual succession than to implement it. Usually, no owner of a share was willing to simply cede his right to income to one of his brothers or cousins. Thus, a change in inheritance practice

was often only feasible when the estate was in a single set of hands due to other owners dying without male offspring and the current owner not yet having more than one son. Under the *Stammgut* or entail, as soon as a son was born he had a right to the estate and changes could only be made if he agreed to them or, in the case of minors, if a legal guardian did so. Thus, in order to introduce new inheritance rules, owners of a *Stammgut* either needed money to compensate younger sons for their losses or had to find other means to pressure heirs into accepting the new inheritance patterns. Finally, as a more limited form, individual succession did not necessarily have to mean the complete abolition of a *Kondominat*. For example, the four *Kondomini* of the von Adelman family decided to introduce single inheritance for each of their shares. They thereby accepted their present situation, but prevented further subdivision in the future.<sup>18</sup>

From lists drawn up around 1900 it is possible to get an impression of how far this development from common to individual succession progressed. In Baden, out of 73 estates owned by the lower nobility (mostly former imperial knights), 37 were *Kondominate* and 36 were passed on to only one son. While the former encompassed a total of 9,900 hectares, the later owned 15,300 hectares. Thus, owners of a *Kondominat's* share were often not only disadvantaged by the splintering of the estate, but also by its relatively smaller size. The numbers in Württemberg were quite similar, though the acreage per estate was somewhat larger. Forty-four estates (comprising 20,232 hectares) were passed on to one son only, whereas 36 estates (comprising 13,605 hectares) were held as *Kondominate*.<sup>19</sup>

The provision of the Weimar Constitution of 1919 that entails would be abolished had dramatic consequences in southwestern Germany, though they differed somewhat between Baden and Württemberg. The laws dissolving inheritance rights were much stricter in Baden than in Württemberg, and whereas the latter allowed for ways of turning forests and attached agricultural property into foundations which could again limit inheritance rights, the legislation in Baden did not open up new possibilities for transforming *Stammgüter*.<sup>20</sup> The abolition meant that especially *Kondominate* were now quickly subdivided between sons and daughters. In the von Stetten family in 1925, the smallest share was already 11/1296ths of the whole. Entails that had individual succession prior to 1918 usually fragmented more slowly, and some families were able to prevent it for a long time. For example, the owner of the von Bodman family estate, the largest of the lower nobility in Baden, had no children in the 1930s and adopted



one of his brother's sons. Thus, there was only a single heir and the estate was kept intact until the twenty-first century.<sup>21</sup>

To conclude, noble status in southwest Germany was based on estates which were not negligible in size, but, due to the peculiar inheritance patterns, a considerable amount of landed property was shared between multiple heirs and could not provide enough income for a noble style of living amongst them all. Noblemen, therefore, had to pursue careers, often in the state administration or the military, in order to generate extra income, keeping them away from their estates for large parts of the year. However, even if the property did provide sufficient income, it is unclear whether most noblemen would have chosen to reside in the countryside, because owners of property with individual succession often preferred urban careers and lifestyles over rural ones. Absenteeism, whether caused by circumstance or preference, had serious effects on the relationship with the local population and the estates' management.

**6.5 | Bodman Palace in Bodman (next to Lake Constance)** The first palace was constructed in 1757; the current one dates from 1831/2 and received additions in the early-twentieth century. It is surrounded by an English garden dating to the eighteenth century. (With the permission of Wilderich Graf Bodman)

## Territories, Feudal Society and its Abolition

The local influence of the lower nobility in southwest Germany was strong prior to 1800, even if noblemen were not present on their estates. Imperial knights could set the rules in their villages as the territorial lords, while at the same time they headed the judiciary, and in the agrarian economy drew income from numerous sources as owners of land and tithes.

Within the system of *Grundherrschaft*, the fields and pastures of a noble landowner were mostly handed over as fiefs to peasants. In return, peasants had to pay duties and provide services. The former could either be in kind or monetized and included, for example, part of the harvest, money paid upon change of ownership of farms, and so on. In addition, tithes had been acquired by the nobility from the church. *Corvée* labour was usually not very onerous, but included free transports for the nobility with carts or ships, for instance across Lake Constance. These duties were complemented by the nobility's possession of the lower jurisdiction, the *Gerichtsherrschaft*, which also brought fees into the landowner's coffers. Serfdom was the final component of the rights attached to territories, though it was far less onerous than in eastern Germany. However, peasants had to pay a number of tax-like fees, and provide limited and unlimited *corvée* labour (although they had to be paid for providing it); but, they were also usually free to leave the land after paying a fee. The amount of labour to be provided was normally unfixed with regard to the building and maintenance of roads and noble houses, but fixed in most other cases; sometimes it was monetized in the late eighteenth century, although it is unclear how frequently this happened. All in all, innumerable local variations existed, but they all had the same effect: even if the noble owners were absent, their economic and legal presence was quite real – even if only exercised via their administrators.<sup>22</sup>

As part of the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, Napoleon granted the subjugation of smaller territories to Baden and Württemberg in 1805, the suzerainty of the former imperial knights was abolished, along with their policing and jurisdictional powers. Although there were attempts to reacquire these latter two functions after Napoleon's defeat in 1815, Baden and Württemberg were mostly successful at either not returning them or seriously limiting their effects.<sup>23</sup> Thus, noblemen's landed possessions lost the character of territories, but as the nobility kept the land, the character of estates remained. For the village inhabitants, the



existence of new overlords (the King of Württemberg or the Grand Duke of Baden) meant that they now had to pay duties into two different coffers. Everything that was attached to the use of land still went to the noble owner of the estate, which turned the relationship between peasant and nobility into a purely economic one. Any duties that were intended for 'state' expenses now went to the King of Württemberg or the Grand Duke of Baden. However, within the framework of limited state-building that had occurred in the villages of the imperial nobility, it was not always clear which payments were originally rents and which had come into existence as taxes. This led to peasants' calling into question more and more payments due to the noble estate owners, as they felt that these may have had origins as taxes and that a *quid pro quo* was accordingly missing. Tensions between the nobility and the peasantry over payments increased in the 1820s and 30s, because the latter felt disadvantaged, now having to serve two masters.<sup>24</sup>

**6.6 | Weitenburg Palace, overlooking the Neckar river valley**  
The oldest part of the building dates from the sixteenth century, to which parts in different styles were added up to the nineteenth century. (Photo: Erich Merkler 1985, Staatsarchiv Sigmaringen N 1/96, T 1, Nr. 411/001)



A solution, however, seemed close at hand. The abolition of remaining payments and dues by peasants to the nobility (leases, *corvée* labour and tithes) was already on the agenda when parliaments were created in Baden and Württemberg in the late 1810s. Liberals and democrats called either for a final single charge or the simple abolition of all remaining feudal payments. In their eyes, these fees were hampering the freedom of the individual peasant to get the most out of his labour. However, the nobility had no interest in lump-sum payments in exchange for transferring the ownership of land to the peasants. Instead, they favoured the transfer of part of the peasants' land to the noblemen as settlement, as in the eastern provinces of Prussia, but this was consistently rejected by the government of Württemberg.

Thus, with money payments as the only way forward, the nobility objected that the amounts offered for different obligations were too low. Privately, they also feared the loss of a secure income in exchange for large amounts of cash for which it was hard to find good and secure investment opportunities, especially since they would be receiving a part of an entail's or *Stammgut's* fund that they had to preserve for future generations. Land seemed too scarce and expensive for reinvestment, and industrialization was still progressing too slowly to offer a credible alternative.<sup>25</sup> For a while the peasants were reluctant as well with regard to some payments, particularly tithes. The annual payments seemed easier, especially since the agrarian economy was in a state of depression until the 1830s.<sup>26</sup>

These differing perspectives ensured that it took decades for all feudal dues to be abolished. Baden started in 1818 and the more valuable ones were disestablished from 1831 onwards, and in 1833 a general abolition of tithes was enacted for twenty times their annual value, payable solely by peasants. In Württemberg, an initial law abolishing personal serfdom was introduced in 1818. However, it had to be suspended shortly afterwards, as the nobility took recourse to the German Federation, which in 1815 had guaranteed their personal property. Quoting this, owners of estates denied the state legislation's power to change anything about serfdom without the nobility's consent. Only in 1836 did the nobility agree to the abolition of work obligations, a first duty on land usage (*Beede*), and serfdom for an average of twenty-two and a half times the annual value, again payable as a lump sum by the peasants.

Villagers' discontent with the remaining duties, fees, and tithes increased in the 1840s, but there was virtually no progress towards abolition.

Then in 1848, during the early phase of the revolution, dissatisfaction was vociferous and in some cases turned to violent action.<sup>27</sup> While the nobility were blamed for not getting rid of all feudal duties, the peasantry looked to the government for help. The new liberal “March governments” were quick to react to the requests, hoping to re-establish law and order and at the same time garner support from the peasantry after they had been able to overcome the conservative sovereigns’ ministers. Several of the remaining feudal payments were abolished within weeks, the last in the following year. In some cases compensation was paid, in others not. With the nobility on the defensive, rates were much lower than during the 1830s. Tithes and duties (*Gefälle*) in Württemberg were only capitalized at twelve to sixteen times their annual value. Yet overall, the sums received were huge: in the case of the lower nobility in Württemberg about 4.76 million guilders. In Baden, where the abolition of tithes had already started in the early 1830s and the annual capitalization was higher, they obtained almost 20.7 million guilders.<sup>28</sup>

Our knowledge of the amounts received by individual families of the lower nobility and the form of reinvestment is scarce. In the case of one branch of the Barons von Gemmingen, it appears to have been 52,556 guilders, which was almost exclusively laid out in new land, as there were no old debts that needed covering. In the mid-1830s, large plots of land proved scarce and vendors were eager to drive up prices, knowing that a lot of noble families were seeking to buy property. Prices did, however, come down in the 1840s when emigration increased the availability of property. In addition, the von Gemmingen family’s decision to buy larger numbers of small plots instead of only large ones made reinvestment of the money easier. After 1848, when prices appear to have increased again, reinvestment took other forms, as can be seen from the actions of the Barons von Berlichingen. They seem to have had a net influx of at least 225,000 guilders for former feudal duties, and by around 1870, substantial amounts were still invested in railway bonds from Europe and North America, while smaller amounts had been spent for company shares. However, at the same time, according to a family memorandum, most of the money (or perhaps the received interest) – about 200,000 guilders – had been used to acquire land. Yet, only in about one third of the cases could the Berlichingen buy larger farms as opposed to smaller plots, which were usually more difficult to work, administer or lease. Overall, the purchasing of forest or areas that were suitable for reforestation appears to have been preferred by the nobil-

ity, as income from these was fairly secure and predictable, they were easy to administer, and they created less tension with the local populations.<sup>29</sup> However, where these kinds of lots were unavailable, farmland was bought instead.

While the subjugation of the imperial nobility under the King of Württemberg and the Grand Duke of Baden got rid of any “governmental” relationship between the nobility and the peasantry, the abolition of feudal duties decreased economic contact between the two groups. However, this did not mean that tensions disappeared: because the nobility’s remaining and newly acquired arable land had to be cultivated, there was an opportunity for new conflicts which become visible when looking at the size, composition and management of estates.

### **Territory and Estate: size, composition, management**

The objects that belonged to a territory or estate and their relative value differed from one to the other, and general knowledge about the associated economies is still quite limited. The Adelsheim family, however, reveals how the role of inheritance rules could affect the wealth of imperial knights. After the death of Johann Christoph von und zu Adelsheim in 1689, his estate was inherited by his three sons. A year later, they decided to separate their shares in the estate so that each could administer his part individually. With a value of 75,000 guilders and an annual income of about 3,600 guilders, the property was of a good size for a single owner. However, after the brothers had each received their shares, which were spread over the villages of Adelsheim, Laudenburg, Wagenschwend, Hergenstadt, Egelfingen, Wachbach, Dörtel, Hachtel, and Stein, they were left with only around 1,200 guilders each – not a very impressive sum for a nobleman. Furthermore, each share was quite distinct in composition (Table 6.1).

What is evident from the table, and true for many territories and estates in the early-modern period, is that income was derived from numerous sources. While feudal rights seem to have been quite valuable for the possessions of the Adelsheim family, they may have been unusually high. On the other hand, tithes always formed an important component of an estate’s income, while rents and leases were less valuable in this case compared to others. Unless noblemen had moved on to tenancies with fixed short durations or had made peasants’ fiefs harder to inherit, the amounts due had

Object	full estate		1st share		2nd share		3rd share	
	Rhenish Guilders	%	Rhenish Guilders	%	Rhenish Guilders	%	Rhenish Guilders	%
Share of the palace and other buildings	16,900	23.0	6,365	26.0	5,660	22.9	4,875	20.0
Feudal rights (bailiwick, court, taxes, Jewish taxes, etc.)	15,999	21.7	3,891	15.9	4,321	17.5	7,787	31.9
Tithes (cereals, wine, hay, livestock)	17,871	24.3	7,596	31.1	4,374	17.7	5,901	24.2
Forest	5,075	6.9	2,456	10.0	2,221	9.0	398	1.6
Agriculture	10,325	14.0	2,912	11.9	3,738	15.1	3,675	15.0
Feudal rights (rents, leases, etc.)	7,441	10.1	1,238	5.1	4,420	17.8	1,783	7.3
Debt	20,000							
<b>Sum</b>	<b>93,611</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>24,458</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>24,734</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>24,419</b>	<b>100</b>

been set down decades (sometimes centuries) earlier, and were difficult to raise. Towards the later eighteenth century, noblemen tried to increase the amount of land under fixed-term tenancies, but this was only possible after a peasant family had died out in all branches and the land had, therefore, returned to the administration of the nobleman. The advantage of fixed-term tenancies was of course that farmers could be evicted more easily in cases of poor performance and rents could be adjusted to match increasing prices during periods of inflation. Notwithstanding numerous differences between individual territories and estates, the overall impression is that duties and rents made up a large proportion of the income from the land. This ensured that the peasants' economy and the noblemen's income were inseparable – a fact that certainly caused clashes at times. These confrontations seem to have been more frequent in villages that had multiple owners and where the possession of the estate changed quite frequently. In villages that belonged to one family over centuries, frictions appear to have been less, or at least did not erupt to such a degree as to have left traces in primary sources.<sup>30</sup>

Forests may often have been an object of greater importance than they were in the Adelsheim case, and they were regularly managed by the noble families themselves. Finally, land cultivated by noblemen was not usually very extensive: about 126 hectares were farmed by the Adelsheim family, of which two brothers got around 30 hectares each, and the third roughly 66 hectares. While this part of the noblemen's economy increased in some cases over the eighteenth century, it tended to decrease again during the

**Table 6.1 | Division of property at the Adelsheim estate, 1690**

The estate was distributed between three heirs, awarding each of them a slightly different share - the first share included a larger proportion of the palace and buildings, while the second share was given almost all incomes from rents and land leases, and the third share received the largest proportion of court taxes. The first and third shares would receive larger proportions of the tithes, while the second and third shares were given a larger proportion of the income from agriculture. (After Andermann 2002, 174, 189)

French Revolution. At times noblemen switched from leasing whole farms, to managing them themselves, and back again in just a few years. Sometimes *corvée* labour was used to work the nobleman's personal fields and pastures, to the extent that its contribution to an estate's value could be as high as 10% of the income. Usually, however, the number of days available was quite limited, and an increase could result in quarrels and lawsuits at higher imperial courts, as peasants tended to complain if they felt that the amount of work asked for exceeded what was traditionally provided or agreed upon.<sup>31</sup> Around 1800, mindful of revolutionary France, some peasants even refused to provide labour or, where it had been agreed upon, the substitute payments.<sup>32</sup>

As prices for agricultural products rose during the eighteenth century, some noble families were very successful economically and continued to buy property and build new palaces, while others were failing. Though in many of the former cases, access to cathedral chapters, success in the military, or administration of other territories and states helped to subsidize agrarian income, the early modern nobility's estate management cannot be regarded as a general disaster, as it was described in older literature.<sup>33</sup>

With the abolition of manorial and feudal duties as well as tithes by the mid-nineteenth century, the economic structure of noble estates changed quite dramatically. One would expect tensions with the local peasantry to have disappeared after the old interrelationships had vanished; perhaps new ones with hired labour should have appeared. However, the economy of the nobility's estates still proved to be a bone of contention and conflicts with the peasantry continued, albeit in different ways.

The main components of estates' economies after 1848 were forests, agricultural land, and in some cases, small industrial enterprises such as breweries or brick-making facilities, rather than the earlier duties, rents and tithes. On the larger estates, forests and woodlands were an important source of revenue into the twentieth century. Forests made up over 55% of the nobility's acreage in Württemberg and roughly 40% in Baden, and were generally managed by professional forest wardens. Wine was another important product for estates in some areas, and vineyards were also usually worked by administrators and hired labourers. In both cases, the possibility of conflict with the local population was fairly limited after the mid-nineteenth century. Tensions did, however, continue to arise from agricultural property. As in the early-modern period, noblemen did not usually manage it themselves, often due to absenteeism

created by inheritance practices. Possible conflicts between co-owners on how to best plant the fields may have been another reason, but individual owners seem to have differed little; in Württemberg, almost 90% of the agricultural land owned by entails was leased either in individual plots (30%) or as whole farms (59%), leaving only 11% of the agricultural land for the noble families to farm themselves. The proportion of leases was even higher in Baden, where only about 7% of agricultural lots was worked by the nobility, about 48% was leased in plots, and 45% as whole farms.<sup>34</sup>

This tendency to lease was the cause of most conflicts with village populations after the abolition of feudal rights and duties in the nineteenth century. This may seem odd at first, as the amount of arable land owned by estates (and especially entails) was limited in both states. The available data was usually collected in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century and focused on entails, always with an eye on debates for their abolition. Nevertheless, it probably covers the largest part of the estates in Baden and Württemberg. In Württemberg, by 1918, the lower nobility owned 89 entails with 34,606 hectares (or about 27% of all the land) in the possession of entails. Overall, entails of the higher and lower nobility comprised only about 7% of the state's territory.<sup>35</sup> In absolute numbers, this was more than in Baden, where around 1905 the lower nobility owned 75 entails with 25,405 hectares, of which roughly 40% was forest and 60% was agricultural land. Despite the impression that more land was entailed in Baden than in Württemberg, this is only due to the different frame of reference (all land in the former case, all arable land in the latter).<sup>36</sup> Thus, in neither of the two large southwestern German states did entails or large estates account for the majority of the land.

But the state perspective is misleading, because even though only limited amounts of the arable land in Württemberg and Baden belonged to the higher and lower nobility and were held in the form of entails, the amount of property excluded from the market varied widely between regions and villages. While in Württemberg 7% of land was entailed overall, in some regions it was less than 2%, and in others almost 10%. On the basis of individual villages, 135 had to cope with more than 30% of the property being entailed, while 240 had between 10% and 30%. Even discounting forest, 68 villages were faced with more than 25% of the farmland being excluded from the property market; in a few, the proportion was even higher than 60%.<sup>37</sup>



**6.7 | A peasant paying his rent at an estate's administration office**

As noblemen were frequently absent, the relationship with their administrator was especially important for the local population but – as this image suggests – was also characterized by subservience. (Drawing by Joseph Bauer, around 1848, Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart E 146, Bü. 8444)

Therefore, village life in certain areas was still very much influenced by the nobility even after the abolition of feudal duties because the property market was artificially tightened and the land was leased to villagers eager to get additional soil under their plough. The result, it was claimed, was that together with the church, noblemen at times had a local monopoly on land available for lease, thereby driving up prices. This seems to have been a cause of tension prior to 1918, although how widely it was spread is difficult to ascertain.<sup>38</sup> However, it became clearly visible in 1919. After Germany's defeat in the First World War, and with the abolition of entails high on the political agenda, the Association of Communities with Entails in Württemberg (*Vereinigung der württembergischen Fideikommissgemeinden*) was formed, and by mid-1919 almost 400 communities had joined the movement. The association claimed that in certain regions arable land was a scarce resource for peasants and that the noble owners who were offering plots for lease were driving up the prices, thereby making life difficult for the peasantry. The Democratic Party picked up on the debate, and in 1920 introduced a law into Württemberg's parliament that called for the expropriation of large landed properties which were either not worked by the owner, but leased, or were usable for settlement purposes, or were hampering the economic development of villages. Also, the expropriation of privately owned forests was envisaged in certain cases, though former owners were to be compensated for all land that was redistributed.<sup>39</sup>

Ultimately, neither the Association nor the Democratic Party was successful in modifying local circumstances, but nevertheless things changed. Following the abolition of entails and the rise of the National Socialists to power in 1933, the property market accelerated. Dismantling the nobility's inheritance regulations and making the individual shares of a property more easily transferable caused many noblemen to take the opportunity to get rid of parcels of land that were small in size and difficult or expensive to administer from a distance. Some may also simply have needed the proceeds from the sale for other purposes during the economic difficulties of the 1920s and 30s. After the National Socialists' accession to power, local Nazi authorities tried to gain sympathy from local populations by more or less openly forcing the nobility to sell their land. The measures they used created difficulties for the nobility's estate administration, forcing down lease prices and pressuring the transfer of land from large block leasers, such as a sugar beet producer in northern Baden, to large numbers of small peasants. This made leasing more laborious and income less cer-

tain, while at the same time the possibility of selling looked more tempting.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, even after the feudal duties had been abolished, tensions between large landowners and local populations in villages remained. The continuing importance of the nobility as property owners and their preference for leasing out their land meant that estate economies were still too firmly connected to those of the peasants to allow for a common understanding.

## Conclusion

It is unclear what happened to the nobility in southwestern Germany and their estates after 1945. Certainly, there were no large scale expropriations as in the Soviet occupation zone, though some measures were taken in that direction.<sup>41</sup> The loss of property and influence may, therefore, have been a slower process and some families were certainly able to resist the development. Also, we do not know about relationships within villages after the Second World War.

It is clear, however, that the nobility had a strong influence upon certain regions of southwestern Germany up until the 1930s, although this was not evident on a state or the national level. Here their influence significantly decreased over the course of the nineteenth century, and disappeared in the twentieth. The abolition of feudal society also dissolved interconnections between noblemen and villagers that could have been, and were, viewed as reminders of former lordship. But in contrast to other regions of Germany, the nobility did not reconstitute itself as a class of large-scale farmers with hired local and (towards the later nineteenth century) migrant workers. Not that this would have eased tensions in villages, but in southwestern Germany the uneasy relationship with the local population continued because the nobility only changed from being territorial lords to lords of arable territory leased out to the village population. There are two reasons why the nobility did not change their estate economies: first, the peculiar inheritance rules of the *Kondominate* which resulted in the absenteeism of many noblemen and a lack of interest in working the fields themselves; second, in contrast to Prussia, for example, the southwest German nobility received money instead of land as compensation for the abolition of feudal duties. However, it proved difficult to re-invest this capital in large consolidated properties, and dispersed holdings were, on the other hand, easier to lease to peasants.



The simmering conflicts between nobility and peasantry were still in the back of somebody's mind when they threw two hand-grenades into the garden salon of Wachendorf palace in November 1918. The measures taken in this instance may have been exceptional, though just how unusual this incidence was, we do not know. But we cannot understand this outburst of violence at a moment when the old political order appeared to have lost control without understanding the basic development of the estate landscape in southwestern Germany and the long-present tensions within it. In 1939, the mayor of Wachendorf still perceived a "somewhat tense relationship between the village nobility and the village population" that he traced back to the economic arrangements created during the transitions of the nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup>

## Notes

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