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## GERMAN CLERKS AND SHOP ASSISTANTS.

AN article by Dr. K. Oldenberg (*Hentige Lage der Commis*) in Schmoller's '*Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung*,' year XVI. part iii., 1892, draws chiefly on recent literature for its account of the condition of clerks, in the German Empire more especially. Indeed, on this subject there is little literature that is not recent; and the two books which Dr. Oldenberg most frequently quotes are Dr. Georg Adler's '*Kaufmannstand*,' 1891 (with the same author's article '*Handelsgehilfe*' in the *Handwörterbuch der Staatswissenschaften*,' 1892), and Prof. Mataja's '*Groszmagazine und Kleinhandel*,' 1891. The latter deals purely with Germany, while Dr. Adler's papers include France and England as well.<sup>1</sup>

There have been three several attempts to count the numbers of shop-assistants in Germany: (1.) in the Trades Census of 1875, (2.) in the Trades Census of 1882, and (3.) in the companion Census of Occupations in 1882. The last is the most accurate, giving for example the numbers of unemployed clerks, and of clerks employed in manufactories, and excluding the porters, carmen, &c., of a commercial establishment. By this Census of Occupations there were on June 5, 1882, in German commercial houses (excluding 7,219 in insurance business) 284,360 men and 58,415 women shop-assistants,—or 342,775 in all (including apprentices).

The numbers since then have probably grown in a faster ratio than the population; but the two Trades censuses of 1875 and 1882 are not comparable with each other at all, and the Trades census of 1875 is only roughly comparable with the Occupations census of 1882. By the comparison of the two last there was an increase of 44 per cent. in  $6\frac{1}{2}$  years, or 6·8 yearly, which would give for 1892 an increase of 68 per cent, or a present number of over 500,000 (Oldenberg thinks 470,000 is the likelier figure),—and for Austria 200,000, for Britain 1,000,000; but the difficulty of distinguishing an upper clerk from a manager and a lower clerk from a workman is a perplexity in all such statistics.

Is it true that in commerce as well as manufacture the great business is driving out the small? From the enumerations of 1875 and 1882 we can only get an indirect answer; and Dr. Oldenberg summarizes it as follows (for 1882):—

- (1.) In places with less than 2,000 inhabitants there were—  
 110,938 employers (masters, or *entrepreneurs*).  
 36,869 assistants.

<sup>1</sup> Our readers may also consult the small blue-book (Foreign Office, 1889, Miscellaneous Series, No. 140) on the Early Training of German Clerks, and the Consular Report (December, 1892) on the Commercial Clerks' Association at Hamburg. See *Board of Trade Journal*, January, 1893, pp. 18–21; also Dr. Oldenberg's paper on German Waiters (*Jahrb. für Gesetzg.* xvii. part i., 1893, pp. 141 *seq.*), and Mr. Maxwell's paper on the Hours of Shopmen in Co-operative Stores (Proceedings of Bristol Congress, May, 1893).

- (2.) In places with 2,000 to 5,000—  
     62,496 employers.  
     33,855 assistants.
- (3.) In places with 5,000 to 20,000—  
     75,323 employers.  
     60,276 assistants.
- (4.) In places with 20,000 to 100,000—  
     64,560 employers.  
     72,693 assistants.
- (5.) In places with 100,000 inhabitants and upwards—  
     66,911 employers.  
     90,933 assistants.

The smaller the place, the more employers ; the larger the place the more assistants. But in the cases (1.) and (2.) for example the conductors of many a business have no assistants at all, and it might be argued that the number of masters who are really employers grows from that point much more rapidly than would appear from the table. It would have been well if Dr. Oldenberg had told us the *number of places* included in each of the five categories.

The census of Occupations (1882) states the numbers of employers and non-employers for the Empire generally as :—

1. Non-employers, 65·7 per cent. of the whole of the conductors of businesses.
2. Employers, 31·6 per cent. with 1 to 5 assistants.
3. Employers, 2·7 per cent. with above 5.

Whereas if we go to the figures for the large towns (with population of 100,000 and over) there are :—

Non-employers .....	763	say 2 per cent.
Employers of 1 to 5 assistants .....	32,527	say 82 per cent.
Employers of 5 and more.....	5,612	say 16 per cent.
	<hr/>	
	38,902	
	<hr/>	

For the largest, namely Berlin, we have also direct means of calculation, since there was for that city in 1875 a census of occupations, repeated in 1880 and 1885. In Berlin there were :—

In 1880 7,794 employers, 30,277 employed.  
 „ 1885 4,280 employers, 39,737 employed.

And Berlin is less remarkable for large businesses than Leipzig, Frankfort, or Cologne.

Of course, allowance has to be made for businesses conducted by companies, all whose members would be set down as employers ; there were counted of these in Berlin 2,271 out of the 7,794 employers, and there still remained above 6,000 separate employing houses (p. 113).

In continuation of the figures for 1882 we may quote a table that throws light on the distribution of large businesses over the country.

The numbers employed by the small were to the numbers employed by the large concerns :—

In Posen .....	as	3·9 to 1	In Baden .....	2·6 to 1
(Province of) Saxony...	„	2·4 „	Reichsland (Alsace	
Rhineland .....	„	2·3 „	and Lorraine)...	2·9 „
(Kingdom of) Saxony	„	1·8 „	Bavaria.....	3·8 „
Württemberg .....	„	2·4 „	Lower Bavaria ...	13·3 „

Large businesses are therefore not yet displacing small ; but the old-fashioned small business, where the apprentice or other assistant had always the prospect of possible mastership and was not separated from his master by a distinction of caste, is becoming a thing of the past. In the large towns, especially in banking and bookselling, the assistants are more and more tending to remain assistants for life.

‘In the country districts and small towns, especially in South Germany, the prevailing system is that of small businesses with assistants few in number, and with only a short period of assistantship. Both in large and small towns there are great numbers of small independent tradesmen, who are outside ordinary commerce and simply disturb the statistics thereof. Alongside of them is growing up in the larger towns a system of large businesses, of capitalists and proletariat, —a system still young (in retail trading unknown in Berlin in 1848), but making swift progress,—full formed in banking and to some extent in bookselling, less developed in general retail trading’ (p. 116, cf. 148).

Once a shop-assistant, always a shop-assistant. Of the shopmen of 1882, those who were above thirty years of age formed :—

- (1.) A quarter of all engaged in general retail trade.
- (2.) Half „ bookselling.
- (3.) More than half „ banking,

and, of these, nearly a half of the general tradesmen, and more than a half of the other two groups were over 40. The age of marriage is nearer 40 than 30 ; and of the retailers more than a fifth, of the book-sellers more than a third, of the bankers nearly a half, were married. In the great Paris ‘Louvre’ 60 per cent. of the clerks proper are married, but only 42 per cent. of the whole staff of shopmen. It is to be remembered that many enter such a large establishment only to qualify for independent business in some country district.

After thus giving us an idea of the complications of his problem, Dr. Oldenberg considers the grievances of the clerks under the heads of (1) hours of labour, (2) food and lodging, (3) wages.

No doubt the majority of clerks especially in small houses are young and strong ; but the length of employment is often excessive. In England (p. 123) it is 84 to 85 hours a week of 6 days,—or 14 hours a day, 15 on Saturdays. On the other hand English shopmen have Sunday free. In Austria the time is 14 to 17 hours, including

Sundays. In Germany 15 to 17 or 18. There as in other countries particular trades (*e.g.* grocers' and tobacconists') bring up the average, and the summer time is longer than the winter (by about an hour a week); but there is a break at midday, the labour is not exhausting, and the absence of the Englishman's Sunday's rest is to some extent compensated by the absence of the English Saturday night's toil.

Even in the hours of labour the great towns and large businesses compare favourably with the small; and that the present is better than the past appears from a petition addressed by the shopmen to the Prussian Government in 1848, showing that the shop assistants in the retail business worked from 5 a.m. to 11 p.m., and without midday rest.

In regard (2) to food and lodging—the inspector is abroad, in all countries of central and northern Europe; and the dwelling accommodation of shopmen is no worse than that of others, while like that of others it is improving. The 'Louvre' and other great houses contain provision for their accommodation and attend to their comfort and health, and even amusement. The food, so far as Dr. Oldenberg can discover, is also better than it used to be, and is comparatively much better than the housing.

In regard (3) to wages there are the usual difficulties. The wages of a shopman who is practically agent or manager would pull the average up too high; and the apparently low wages of others are sometimes balanced by free quarters or other privileges. In money, wages are higher in France and Austria than in Germany.

The following figures apply to Frankfort-on-the-Oder and the retail tradesmen there:—

Wages with free quarters. £	Without such. £	Total employed.
1. 10	38	4
2. 10—15	38—50	34
3. 15—25	50—60	73
4. 25—30	60—75	97
5. 30—38	75—100	57
6. 38—45	100—120	29
7. Above 45	Above 120	36

For the town of Plauen in Saxony the following figures are quoted (based on the returns under the Sickness Assurance law):—

101 shopmen at or under 20 years of age ..	£48
148 „ from 21 to 26 „ ..	64
73 „ „ 26 to 30 „ ..	74
48 „ above 30 „ ..	81

It would seem from this table and a similar one for Hanover as if after a certain age there was a dispersion of the apprentices, when ripe for a business of their own.

But there is a resource present to the factory worker which is wanting to the shopman. The position of an independent artisan is a middle term between apprenticeship and the position of a permanent factory hand. There is practically no such middle position open to the shopman as an alternative, and even Dr. Oldenberg regards the situation of a shop assistant who is growing old in service as a very dreary one. As a rule he has no pension, except in some of the great Paris concerns, or unless, in Germany, he is poor enough (at £100 a year) to be included in the Imperial Assurance scheme. (See p. 154.)

The attractions of a great warehouse are like the general attractions of a great city; and it is said to be the ambition of every French shopman to enter one of the large houses. The drawbacks are the 'rules' essential to the conduct of a great business, but often telling hardly on the employed. There is the fear of dismissal (now at shorter notice than formerly) always hanging over the shopman like a sword of Damocles.

A more novel grievance is that the clerk is no longer distinguished from the strata below him by his superior education. The workmen are overtaking him, and thereby threatening him with competition in his own line of business. The copying machine and automatic 'slot-salesman' help to make him superfluous. Women are doing his work. In Berlin there were among shop assistants:—

In 1875	...	22,963 men	...	2,786 women	...	or 8 men to 1 woman.
In 1880	...	27,428 men	...	2,795 women	...	or nearly 10 to 1,

but in

1882	...	34,189 men	...	4,300 women	...	or little more than 8 to 1.
1885	...	34,154 men	...	5,583 women	...	or only 6 to 1.

In Upper Bavaria there are commercial schools for women that furnish an ample supply of clerks for mercantile houses; as many as thirty-six women clerks are employed by a single banking house. Many advanced reformers draw the line at 'women book-keepers' and 'women commercial travellers' (p. 140). The grievance is not really in the sex but in the low wages of the women. Such is the real grievance too of the employment of apprentices, not kept long enough to learn the business, or at least never taught it. That they are not taught it (in the small towns more especially) is conceded by Dr. Oldenberg himself; but he thinks that the alleged excess in the numbers of apprentices employed is not at all so certain (p. 144).

Neither does he believe the numbers of the unemployed clerks to be greater than might be 'normally' expected. 'A certain percentage of unemployed is as normal as a certain percentage of unoccupied houses' (p. 146). In the summer of 1880 there was much talk of the unemployed clerks in Berlin, said to be then

13,000 in number. But the whole number of Berlin clerks, apprentices and all, was 27,482; an examination showed that there were only 800 out of work, and these chiefly immigrants from other towns, and inefficient men. In the spring of 1892 a Social Democratic paper spoke of 8,000 out of work. It seems a pity that this statement was not tested also. The usual authority for such popular statistics is the Employment Agencies; and their large *clientèle* seems to Dr. Oldenberg only to show that labour is (as we all know) very shifting now-a-days, and men do not keep their old places contentedly but look out for new ones, often only from love of change. Organisations of clerks might be directed to the control of employment agency and the regulation of apprentices' labour, as perhaps their most feasible objects (p. 150). The oldest German unions were founded either by the masters or with their aid. The Berlin Young Tradesmen's Union dates from 1839. It became strongly political in 1848, subsided into lethargy for twenty years, but has come more to the front since the working-men's unions have been rising into importance (1868 to present time). Their demands in 1872 for Sunday rest, a shorter working day, and a minimum salary, were backed up by several masters, who practically combined with them against the rest (pp. 161-2). Since 1883 there has been a rival union, started by the Social Democrats. Though this new body is but feebly supported, there is no doubt that the general tone of all the unions has become more socialistic. They demand the intervention of the state for the redress of their grievances. The numbers of the chief unions are as follows:—

Hamburg (founded 1858).....	37,000	members in 1892.
Leipzig (shop assistants) .....	35,118	„ 1891.
Frankfort-on-the-Main.....	8,500	„ 1892.
Nürnberg .....	2,970	„ 1890.
Berlin (founded 1839) .....	2,870	„ 1891.
Mannheim .....	2,493	„ 1891.
Munich.....	1,900	„ 1892.
Leipzig (travellers) .....	4,000	„ 1889(?).

There is a tendency, too, for their action and deliberation to be more centralised, though the migrations of shopmen do not carry them so widely over the country as is the case with working men, and the local cohesion is stronger than the solidarity of the whole class. Dr. Oldenberg notes three characteristics of the unions as specially remarkable. Their membership is recruited from the well-to-do clerks rather than the poorest; they include many masters; and they get from the masters both financial and moral support. Of course, like other kinds of trades unions, they are benefit societies as well as instruments of agitation for redress of grievances.

In conclusion Dr. Oldenberg points us to the Imperial Commission which is to inquire into the whole question, and which will (it is hoped) fill up many unavoidable gaps in his work.

JAMES BONAR.