



**Dieter Kastner.** *Kinderarbeit im Rheinland: Entstehung und Wirkung des ersten preußischen Gesetzes gegen die Arbeit von Kindern in Fabriken von 1839.* Köln: SH-Verlag, 2004. 303 pp. EUR 29.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-89498-129-7.



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## Defending Prussian Social Policy: The Child Labor Law of 1839

On March 9, 1839, Prussia passed a law controlling the practice of child labor in its industrial regions. It forbade the factory employment of those younger than nine, limited the labor of youths under sixteen to ten hours a day, and outlawed night and Sunday shifts for children. Numerous twentieth-century scholarly studies focus on this regulation because it was the first of its kind on the European continent. Many of these works critique the law's toothless enforcement and limited restrictions as a part of a repressive Prussian tradition. In *Kinderarbeit im Rheinland*, however, Dieter Kastner carefully reexamines the debates, reports, and correspondence surrounding the law to defend its role as model for other industrializing European nations.

The primary aim of this monograph is a refutation of studies that impose twentieth- and twenty-first-century standards on nineteenth-century Prussia. Kastner analyzes child labor from the perspective of contemporary actors in order to offer a more balanced assessment of the law's formulation and consequences. He criticizes the historiography of the GDR, especially studies by Jürgen Kuczynski from the 1950s and 1960s. Kuczynski dis-

paraged the 1839 regulation for its selective enforcement and claimed it passed primarily because of Prussian militarism. He emphasized the "cannon fodder thesis," which argued that Prussia pursued a reformation of child labor to create more sturdy recruits for their growing military machine. Kastner claims that West German historians and pedagogues continue to accept the conclusions of Kuczynski and other like-minded GDR academics and accuses them of an anti-Borussian Marxist bias. He offers an alternative narrative, demonstrating the peripheral role of the military in child labor policy and illustrating the advanced attributes of the law. The decree passed because of concerns by reform-minded bourgeois civil servants in the Rheinland about education, public health, and Christian values. Therefore, nineteenth-century Prussia, often portrayed as restorative and conservative, passed a child labor law that predated and surpassed those of its German and European neighbors.

*Kinderarbeit im Rheinland* also adds to past literature on the topic through its regional emphasis. Unlike past studies, which focused on political machinations in Berlin, this book analyzes initiatives for reforms in the

Rheinland, the center of Prussian industrialization and home to 80 percent of its child laborers. Kastner suggests the resourcefulness behind child labor reform came from the provinces rather than the center. He carefully evaluates Landtag debates initiated by Rheinland *Oberpräsident* Ernst von Bodenschwingh and press attacks undertaken by Barmen industrialist Johannes Schuchard as antecedents to the national law. Kastner emphasizes a different set of documents than past studies and quotes local sources extensively to provide a fresh perspective. Furthermore, this monograph suggests that local school laws enacted and enforced throughout the 1820s and 1830s paved the way for more extensive reform in 1839. As bourgeois civil servants examined school attendance and literacy levels, they grew concerned that child labor prevented the Prussian state from fulfilling its duty to educate the younger generation. Most child laborers received little more than an hour of instruction a week and many remained illiterate. An increasing regional concern about education led to more humane worries about working hours and health conditions on a national level.

Kastner's treatment of Prussian social policy possesses several significant strengths. First, he convincingly explains the initial reluctance to address child labor as well as an increasing willingness to reform. Throughout the early industrial period, Prussians of both upper- and lower-class backgrounds viewed child labor as normative. Children always worked for the family in rural as well as proto-industrial economies and it seemed natural to use them in an industrial setting. Poor working-class families also needed the money provided by the labor of their children. Most bourgeois politicians refrained from reform on the issue because of their liberal economic principles. Laws regulating child labor would violate their devotion to Adam Smith's theories about the free market economy. Industrialists also opposed change and argued that children performed "easy labor" that was beneath adults. Change resulted largely from the dissonance created for liberal reformers when confronted with educational problems presented by child labor. Despite factory schools, Sunday schools, and night schools, few working-class children received satisfactory instruction and illiteracy rates rose. Most liberals viewed education as a central duty of the state and its decline motivated their reluctant intervention in the economic realm.

This study also effectively compares Prussia's engagement with child labor to that in other European nations. Kastner shows that contemporaries viewed Great Britain as the standard. Before Britain reformed their own more extensive system of child labor in 1833, most

liberal politicians refused to act out of fear that Prussia would fall behind the world's most industrialized nation. The book demonstrates, however, that in 1839 Prussia enacted and enforced a more extensive regulation than the British. Comparisons with other European countries, such as France, Baden, and Bavaria, suggest that the child labor law was a cornerstone for future social policies pursued by Prussia and continental Europe. Kastner's comparative approach supports his more sympathetic treatment of Prussian child labor policy.

Finally, *Kinderarbeit im Rheinland* provides a glimpse of religion's complicated role in early nineteenth-century Prussian society. Many Protestant leaders provided a moral critique of the working conditions for child laborers. For example, influential reformer Johannes Schuchard questioned the role of fourteen-hour workdays for children in a Christian society and demanded change through newspapers and speeches. He based his views upon prevalent Pietist beliefs that grew in prominence during the early nineteenth century. Child labor reform resulted not only from bourgeois-liberal concerns about education, but also from complaints of those influenced by Christian worldviews. The monograph also demonstrates the confessional cleavages of the era. While Protestant elites advocated reform, Catholic clerics protected the status quo on behalf of their followers. Concerned about the economic ramifications for their poor congregation members, Rheinland priests utilized their role as school inspectors to excuse students from education to work in factories after their first confession and first communion.

Despite these achievements, Kastner's book has drawbacks. Although he convincingly refutes several of Kuczynski's conclusions, GDR historians represent convenient straw men. He insists their ideas remain influential, but fails to engage those West German historians who support Kuczynski's findings. Starting in the early 1980s Anglo-American and German historians have refuted academics from east and west who portray nineteenth-century Prussia as abnormal or backward. This book's overwhelming focus on the dated "cannon fodder" argument and Marxist interpretation signifies a belated and unnecessary attack on the *Sonderweg* thesis. *Kinderarbeit im Rheinland* also ends abruptly. Although Kastner offers details about an even more comprehensive Prussian child labor regulation enacted in 1853, he fails to demonstrate the level to which it was enforced or its consequences. He also ignores the role of Prussian labor policy for a unified Germany in the late nineteenth century. Without commentary about the legacy of the

1839 regulation on impending legal changes, it is difficult to assess Kastner's judgment suggesting that it was the progressive cornerstone of future Prussian social policy.

Dieter Kastner contributes greatly to our knowledge about nineteenth-century Prussia with this monograph. He carefully analyzes a watershed moment in the social history of Europe. This book is necessary for scholars studying the early nineteenth century, even for those who disagree with the thrust of his argument. His detailed analysis of both known and less emphasized docu-

ments presents a sound introduction to newcomers in the field of labor history and also provides the sophistication and detail sought by specialists.

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