

**‘Timber Beneficences’ from the Lords’ Forests:
New Light on Demesne Lordship (*Gutsherrschaft*)
in Brandenburg-Prussia, 1700–1850***

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1. Introduction

It is well known that in Brandenburg-Prussia, east of the Elbe River, feudal lords were established as owners of large estates during the 16th century. Historians have extensively examined the development of the peasants’ labour obligations to their lords’ estates¹. In contrast, the lords’ obligations to their peasants have not been investigated thoroughly. In the *Regulierungsedikt* of 1811, which aimed to dissolve the feudal lordship over non-farm-owning peasants, five then existing obligations of the lords were announced to be abolished. The lords had been obliged to assist their peasants in case of misfortune, to pay tax and other public charges for their peasants in case of poverty, to entitle their peasants to collect dry, fallen wood, to construct and repair the peasants’ buildings and to entitle their peasants to pastures and woods². A series of studies proved that the lord’s financial assistance in case of misery and misfortune was at best uncertain around 1800³. It was only granted when the lords could not find a single successor who

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¹ Hartmut Harnisch, “Die Gutsherrschaft. Forschungsgeschichte, Entwicklungszusammenhänge und Strukturelemente,” *Jahrbuch für Geschichte des Feudalismus* 9 (1985), 189-240; Hartmut Harnisch, “Probleme einer Periodisierung und regionalen Typisierung der Gutsherrschaft im mitteleuropäischen Raum,” *Jahrbuch für Geschichte des Feudalismus* 10 (1986), 251-274; Heinrich Kaak, *Die Gutsherrschaft. Theoriegeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Agrarwesen im ostelbischen Raum* (Berlin, 1991); Werner Troßbach, “Gutsherrschaft und Gutswirtschaft zwischen Elbe und Oder: Asymmetrische Agrarsysteme in wechselnden Perspektiven,” in *Ländliche Gesellschaften in Deutschland und Frankreich, 18-19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Reiner Prass, Jürgen Schlumbohm, Gérard Béaur, Christophe Duhamelle (Göttingen, 2003), 31-51, here 31-37.

² *Gesetz-Sammlung für die Königlichen Preußischen Staaten 1811* (Berlin), 281-299, here 283.

³ Klaus Spies, *Gutsherr und Untertan in der Mittelmark Brandenburg zu Beginn der Bauernbefreiung* (Berlin, 1972), 390. See also Hartmut Harnisch, *Die Herrschaft*

could prove to be more competent⁴. On the other hand, access to and provisions from the lords' forests were what the peasants could ordinarily and actually expect from their lords. These rights were indispensable for the peasants because in the East Elbian areas, the forests were concentrated on the properties of the royal and noble ranks, while most peasants did not have any forests of their own⁵. So, the East Elbian lords were not only the owners of large estates requiring the labour obligations of their peasants, but also the owners of large forests from which they were obliged to supply their peasants with necessities of life and economy. This study examines the lords' practices of supplying their peasants with building timber, through the case of royal demesnes in the Kurmark Brandenburg from about 1700 to 1850.

2. Development of forest coverage and asymmetry of forest ownership

Brandenburg has been famous as a woodland from olden times. After a large-scale deforestation that took place between 1130 and 1330 during the German Colonisation, the area of forestland of Brandenburg has remained constant, covering more than one-third of the total area of the Province⁶. The population pressure on the forests was considerably reduced by the combined effects of the Black Death in the late Middle Age and the Thirty Years War in the first half of the 17th century⁷. During the population growth from mid-18th to mid-19th century, much wood was cleared to build new

Boitzenburg. Untersuchungen zur Entwicklung der sozialökonomischen Struktur ländlicher Gebiete in der Mark Brandenburg vom 14. bis zum 19. Jahrhundert (Weimar, 1968), 122; Robert M. Berdahl, "Preußischer Adel: Paternalismus als Herrschaftssystem," in *Preußen im Rückblick* ed. Hans-Jürgen Puhle and Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Göttingen: Geschichte und Gesellschaft, Sonderheft 6, 1980), 130; Robert M. Berdahl, *The politics of Prussian nobility: the development of a conservative ideology, 1770-1848* (Princeton, 1988), 53f.

⁴ Takashi Iida, *Ruppiner Bauernleben 1648-1806. Sozial- und wirtschaftsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen einer ländlichen Gegend Ostelbiens* (Berlin, 2010), 105ff; Lieselott Enders, "Bauern und Feudalherrschaft der Uckermark im absolutistischen Staat," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte des Feudalismus 13* (1989), 272; Hartmut Harnisch, "Bäuerliche Ökonomie und Mentalität unter den Bedingungen der ostelbischen Gutsherrschaft in den letzten Jahrzehnten vor Beginn der Agrarreformen," in *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte 1989/3*, 96, 101.

⁵ Karl Hasel, *Zur Geschichte der Forstgesetzgebung in Preußen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1974), 9, 32; Karl Hasel and Ekkehard Schwartz, *Forstgeschichte. Ein Grundriss für Studium und Praxis*. 3rd edition (Remagen, 2006), 100f.

⁶ Rosemarie Baudisch, "Geographische Grundlagen und historisch-politische Gliederung Brandenburgs," *Brandenburgische Geschichte*, ed. Ingo Materna and Wolfgang Ribbe (Berlin, 1995), 15-44, here 21; Albrecht Milnik, *Im Dienst am Wald. Lebenswege und Leistungen brandenburgischer Forstleute* (Remagen, 2006), xix.

⁷ Hasel and Schwartz, *Forstgeschichte*, 58f., 61f.

settlements and to gain additional crop fields. But this was compensated by the active afforestation of former crop fields or wasteland⁸. Later, the pressure on the forest was drastically reduced by replacing firewood with coal⁹.

In the Kurmark, the central and extended area of Brandenburg, about 58 percent of the forests belonged to royal ownership around 1800, while 28 percent to noble and peasant' ownership.

Royal	1,078,099 Morgen (58%)
Cities' and towns'	266,022 Morgen (14%)
Private and subjects'	520,102 Morgen (28%) ¹⁰

This corresponded with the higher density of royal demesnes (54 in number) in the Kurmark, which covered 40 percent of all peasants¹¹.

For the District Ruppín in the Kurmark, more detailed data are available: In this district, the peasants owned only 4 percent of the forests, while 75 percent belonged to the royal families and 13 percent to the noble lords, etc.

Royal	97,003 Morgen (70%)
Prince's	7,146 Morgen (5%)
Cities' and towns'	11,023 Morgen (8%)
Noble and private	18,501 Morgen (13%)
Peasants'	5,554 Morgen (4%)
Total	139,227 Morgen (100%) ¹²

The peasants and their communities usually had either no woodlots or only meagre

⁸ Hartmut Harnisch, *Kapitalistische Agrarreform und industrielle Revolution. Agrarhistorische Untersuchungen über das ostelbische Preußen zwischen Spätfeudalismus und bürgerlich-demokratischer Revolution von 1848/49 unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Provinz Brandenburg* (Weimar, 1984), 147-168.

⁹ Hasel and Schwartz, *Forstgeschichte*, 217ff.

¹⁰ Friedrich Wilhelm August Bratring, *Statistisch-Topographische Beschreibung der gesamten Mark Brandenburg*. Kritisch durchgesehene und verbesserte Neuausgabe von Otto Büsch und Gerd Heinrich. Veröffentlichungen der Historischen Kommission zu Berlin, Bd. 22, Neudrucke, Bd. 2, (Berlin, 1968 [original: 1804-1809]), 119-123.

¹¹ Hans-Heinrich Müller, "Domänen und Domänenpächter in Brandenburg-Preußen im 18. Jahrhundert." *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 1965/4, 152-192, here 152.

¹² Friedrich Wilhelm August Bratring, *Die Grafschaft Ruppín in historischer, statistischer und geographischer Hinsicht*. (Berlin, 1799), 40-48.

woodlots in their deformed fields or meadows¹³. The peasants' woodlots were strictly controlled by the authorities for conservation¹⁴. In particular, the peasants in the royal demesnes were not allowed to cut even a single tree or shrub on a cultivated field without permission¹⁵. Moreover, they were encouraged in the second half of the 18th century to afforest the land that was not usable as crop field or meadow¹⁶. Nevertheless, the peasants' wood was far from sufficient to fulfil their demands for building timber or firewood and so they relied primarily on their lord's forest.

3. Development of 'timber beneficences' in the 18th century

The practice of the Elector of Brandenburg to grant free timber (*Freyholtz*) from his forests dates back to the 16th century¹⁷, namely to the formation period of *Gutsherrschaft*. But the peasants' dependence on it increased primarily after the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) because the practice was needed to reconstruct an enormous number of desolate farms. At the same time, peasants without farm ownership, also known as usufructuary holders (*Lassiten*), increased after the War. In this case, the farm, including buildings, livestock, seeds and implements, belonged to the lords, who therefore were responsible for preparing the property to bestow to the peasants free of charge¹⁸. The

¹³ August Bernhardt, *Geschichte des Waldeigentums, der Waldwirtschaft und Forstwissenschaft in Deutschland*, Bd. 1 (Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1966 [original: Berlin, 1874]), 210; Karl Hasel, *Zur Geschichte der Forstgesetzgebung in Preußen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1974), 9.

¹⁴ Bernhardt, *Geschichte des Waldeigentums*, Bd. 1, 210; Hasel, *Zur Geschichte der Forstgesetzgebung*, 9-10; Hartmut Harnisch, "Gemeindeeigentum und Gemeindefinanzen im Spätfeudalismus. Problemstellungen und Untersuchungen zur Stellung der Landgemeinde," *Jahrbuch für Regionalgeschichte* 8 (1981), 126-174, here 151-152.

¹⁵ Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv (hereinafter shortened to BLHA), Rep. 2, Kurmärkische Kriegs- und Domänenkammer, D. 657.

¹⁶ Hartmut Harnisch, "Die Landgemeinde in der Herrschaftsstruktur des feudalabsolutistischen Staates, Dargestellt am Beispiel von Brandenburg-Preußen." *Jahrbuch für Geschichte des Feudalismus* 13 (Berlin, 1989), 201-245, here 225-226.

¹⁷ *Corpus Constitutionum Marchicarum, Oder Königl. Preußis. und Churfürstl. Brandenburgische in der Chur- und Marck Brandenburg, auch incorporirten Landen publicirte und ergangene Ordnungen, Edicta, Mandata, Rescripta etc* (hereinafter shortened to CCM), hrsg. von Christian Otto Mylius, Berlin/Halle, IV. Theil, I. Abth. II. Cap., Sp. 505.

¹⁸ Friedrich Großmann, *Über die gutsherrlich-bäuerlichen Rechtsverhältnisse in der Mark Brandenburg vom 16. bis 18. Jahrhundert* (Leipzig, 1890); Lieselott Enders, "Das bäuerliche Besitzrecht in der Mark Brandenburg, untersucht am Beispiel der Prignitz vom 13. bis 18. Jahrhundert," in *Gutsherrschaftsgesellschaften im europäischen Vergleich*, ed. Jan Peters (Berlin, 1997), 399-427; Lieselott Enders, *Die Uckermark*.

lords were also obliged to maintain the buildings such as houses, barns and stables¹⁹.

The restoration from the War proceeded very slowly. Forty years after the War, 70 percent of the peasant farms in the Uckermark²⁰, 44 percent in Ruppín²¹ and 30 percent in Prignitz²² were still desolate. This delay was caused by the long-term agricultural depression in Europe²³, two subsequent Wars²⁴ and not least by the way of petitioning for timber. Until 1690, no one had been permitted to get any building timber from the Electoral forests, unless a 'gracious consent' and a written mandate from the Elector were obtained. The peasants had to go to the Electoral palace and petition the Elector. But this cost time and money. Because of the loss of time by petitioning for timber, a part of the subjects' buildings was not constructed. In order to remedy these defects, the Elector Friedrich III declared in 1690 that in the future all timber, so long as it was necessary for reparation of buildings, should be granted immediately and without paying, only on the certificate of each demesne's officials²⁵. They were then ordered to inquire in person regularly into the conditions of peasant buildings²⁶.

Friedrich Wilhelm I, now the Prussian King, took one more step forward. With the edict of 1729, he declared that in the future, the timber, which was necessary not only for maintenance but also for the construction of buildings, should always be given free of charge from his forests to peasant farms, which did not belong to the peasants, but to the King's property. This generous edict was intended to meet the needs of usufructuary peasants, whose economy was still fragile. The peasants often left a ramshackle building as it was, often resulting in its catching fire or collapsing; in the worst case, the farm became desolate again²⁷.

But soon there was a backlash. In 1731, as the Kurmark government requested the King to pay the cost of building timber purchased for the usufructuary peasants in the royal demesne of Gramzow from the nearby noble forest, he refused to do so. He then

Geschichte einer kurmärkischen Landschaft vom 12. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert.
Veröffentlichungen des Brandenburgischen Landeshauptarchivs 28 (Weimar, 1992), 347.

¹⁹ F. P. Eisenberg and C. L. Stengel, *Beiträge zur Kenntniß der Justizverfassung und juristischen Literatur in den Preußischen Staaten, Bd. 2* (Berlin, 1796), 10-11.

²⁰ Enders, "Bauern und Feudalherrschaft," 247.

²¹ Bratring, *Die Grafschaft Ruppín*, 60f.

²² Enders, "Das bäuerliche Besitzrecht," 411.

²³ Harnisch, "Probleme einer Periodisierung," 261.

²⁴ Swedish-Polish War (1656-1660) and Brandenburg-Swedish War (1674-1677). See Enders, "Bauern und Feudalherrschaft," 247.

²⁵ CCM, IV. Theil, II. Abtheilung, III. Cap., Sp. 145f.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Sp. 157ff.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Sp. 177f.

proposed to give farm ownership to all usufructuary peasants in the royal demesnes of the Kurmark, if they were ready to pay one-third of the cost of the timber provided to them from the royal forests²⁸. This project was supposed to involve the majority of demesnes, while in about 30 percent of them almost all peasants had already been farm owners²⁹. But this project was not realised because of the opposition from the Kurmark government and the demesne officials, who generally considered the peasants still too poor to pay the additional cost of getting ownership³⁰. So, the project was pursued thereafter occasionally on an individual basis. In 1763/64, as the royal demesne of Lindow was dissolved and distributed to the demesnes of Alt-Ruppin, Zechlin and Zehlendorf, several villages in these demesnes accepted the offer of 'donating' farm ownership only against paying one-third of the cost of timber in the future; however, the other villages did not accept the offer because they were concerned about the provision of free timber³¹. So in 1777, as Friedrich II offered ownership to usufructuaries in the royal demesnes, he had to promise to continue providing free timber. Hereupon, peasants in demesnes of Brüssow, Chorin, Gramzow and Löcknitz in the Uckermark became real farm owners while keeping their entitlements to free timber³². As a result, a considerable number of peasants in the royal demesnes remained entitled to timber from the royal forests in the 19th century, either free or for one-third payment. Moreover, there were some peasants who remained entitled only to timber for reparation, probably as a result of the above-mentioned edict of 1690³³.

4. Abuse and waste of royal forests

These generous practices of Prussian royal authorities undoubtedly contributed to restore and stabilise the economy of the peasants. In 1733, the Kurmark government reported that they had such a 'good effect' that a village belonging to the royal demesnes could be recognised by its well-kept peasant buildings³⁴. But once the restoration and

²⁸ BLHA, Rep. 2, Kurmärkische Kriegs- und Domänenkammer, D. 2179, fol. 102.

²⁹ Ibid.; The conditions for farm owning at that time were various. Some were entitled to timber only against one-third payment. Some were not at all see Jan Peters, Hartmut Harnisch, and Lieselott Enders, *Märkische Bauertagebücher des 18 und 19. Jahrhunderts. Selbstzeugnisse von Milchviehbauern aus Neuholland* (Weimar, 1989), 74, 80.

³⁰ BLHA, Rep. 2, Kurmärkische Kriegs- und Domänenkammer, D. 2179.

³¹ Iida, *Ruppiner Bauernleben*, 38.

³² Enders, "Bauern und Feudalherrschaft," 253f.

³³ BLHA, Rep. 2A, Regierung Potsdam, IIID, 1154, fol. 54ff.

³⁴ BLHA, Rep. 2, Kurmärkische Kriegs- und Domänenkammer, D. 2179, fol. 102.

stabilisation of the rural economy had been completed, it was increasingly realised that this generous practice would be accompanied by a waste of royal forests.

In 1783, a lodger on a peasant farm in the village of Kerzlin in the royal demesne of Alt-Ruppin denounced the peasant as an unqualified individual, asserting that the peasant had deceived the King by selling off the free timber granted to him to a joiner³⁵. This seems to have been a representative case. Around 1840, the peasants in this demesne declared openly that they did not have great faith in timber beneficences because the timber was often allocated several years after the need had arisen and was of such low dimensions and quality and in districts so far away that the peasants preferred buying the necessary timber elsewhere at the time they needed it. In such cases, they used to sell off the timber from royal forests³⁶. The peasant economy had been improved in so far as the peasants were able to procure superior timber on their own, given the agrarian boom in the last third of the 18th century³⁷.

A waste of royal forests was also caused by unnecessarily large peasant buildings. In the 1750s, von Nüßler, the president of District Niederbarnim, submitted a proposal to make a model drawing for peasant buildings. His major intention was to stop the prevailing waste of timber. He reported:

‘the master carpenters are building mostly after the gusto of peasants, the carpenters also understand something about it. As a result, the houses are built so differently, large and small, deep and narrow, [...] high and low. The house of the peasant Thierling in Loehme is in its upper part of rafter and gable higher than the other houses by one-third. But it serves for nothing except that it requires more straw to cover and the wind can grasp the straw-thatched roof better. Of course, more timber is necessary for such high houses. I find the peasant thinks nothing of cutting wood at all and requires always more timber than necessary’³⁸.

Excessively large peasant buildings still remained an issue at the end of the 18th century. In 1787, the superior authorities blamed the local construction officials of the Kurmark, the Altmark and the Prignitz for having failed to pay proper attention to avoid the wastage of wood. They pointed out cases in which the timber destined for new

³⁵ Iida, *Ruppiner Bauernleben*, 110.

³⁶ BLHA, Rep. 2A, Regierung Potsdam, IIID, Nr. 16730.

³⁷ Harnisch, *Kapitalistische Agrarreform*, 27ff.

³⁸ BLHA, Rep. 2, Kurmärkische Kriegs- und Domänenkammer, D. 637, fol. 20f.

construction was actually used to extend existing peasant buildings. At the same time, the construction officials were instructed to remove the second floors in peasant houses in the future. In such two-storey houses only the first floor was inhabited and the second was used as a granary, for which the space in the loft was sufficient³⁹.

On this occasion, all forest officials in the Kurmark, the Altmark and the Prignitz demesnes were instructed to warn carpenters against putting the sleepers of a peasant's building directly on the ground. Despite repeated warnings, this 'slackness' continued throughout the 18th century. As a result, sleepers had deteriorated in a short time, causing a waste of royal forests⁴⁰.

In 1787, just as the above instructions to check the wood waste were issued, the superior authorities observed that the amount of timber required for construction and reparation of peasant buildings was so large that the forest district of Rudersdorf could not bear it in the future, that is, a scarcity of wood would be unavoidable for the descendants. So, the superior authorities began to think seriously of introducing new construction materials. According to the economic reports of District Ruppín at the beginning of the 19th century, massive construction was energetically introduced by the royal and noble authorities, obviously to conserve their own forests; however, this was not the case for the peasants. They were indifferent to the advice recommended to economise firewood and timber⁴¹, because they had no forests of their own to care about and could enjoy free timber from the lords' forests.

The fear of wood scarcity was caused not only by the high timber demand for construction of peasant buildings, but also by the massive establishment of new cottagers and lodgers under the population growth policy of the Prussian Kings. This increased the number of rural establishments from about 36,000 in 1725 to 66,000 in 1800 in the Mark Brandenburg, while the population of peasants remained basically constant⁴². The royal authorities raised their efforts to check deforestation⁴³ and timber waste during the building of new cottages, but did not always succeed. In 1754, the officials of the royal

³⁹ BLHA, Rep. 2, Kurmärkische Kriegs- und Domänenkammer, D. 640, fol. 84, 113.

⁴⁰ Ibid., fol. 113f.

⁴¹ BLHA, Rep. 2, Kurmärkische Kriegs- und Domänenkammer, D. 39, fol. 84, 103, 177ff, 180f.; For adobe see C. M. Heigelin, *Handbuch der neuesten ökonomischen Bauarten* (Tübingen, 1827).

⁴² Hartmut Harnisch, "Der preußische Absolutismus und die Bauern. Sozialkonservative Gesellschaftspolitik und Vorleistung zur Modernisierung," *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 1994/2, 11-32, here 21.

⁴³ BLHA, Rep. 2, Kurmärkische Kriegs- und Domänenkammer, D. 16527.

demesnes were blamed for having 'hidden' timber for building new cottages under that allocated for repairing peasant houses⁴⁴. This padded demand was probably a reaction to the King's foregoing measure to reduce free timber supply for new cottages⁴⁵. It is conceivable that the demesne officials conspired with the peasants, who used to build new cottages for their children or siblings on their farms.⁴⁶

5. Abolition of 'timber beneficences' in the first half of the 19th century

The fundamental change to 'timber beneficences' arrived with the *Regulierungsedikt* of 1811. It aimed to dissolve the feudal relationship between the lords and their usufructuary peasants. But in the royal demesnes, this change could be traced back, in part, to 1799, as the authorities had begun to set the peasants, still obliged to labour service, free from their obligation and give them farm ownership at the same time⁴⁷.

In 1803, the authorities of the royal demesne of Alt-Ruppin⁴⁸ launched a settlement with four villages and proposed severe conditions. The peasants should compensate for the labour obligation with rent money, which was at least twice as high as the amount that neighbouring peasants, exempt from labour, had paid. In order to obtain farm ownership, they should not only purchase their farms, but also give up their entitlements to free timber without any compensation. Two villages, poor in wood, requested to remain entitled to timber from the royal forest against the one-third payment as the neighbouring farm-owning peasants were. But the authorities refused the request and insisted that giving up 'timber beneficences' was an indispensable condition. In particular, after the defeat of Prussia by Napoleonic France in 1806, Prussia suffered from an unprecedented financial crisis, so the alienation of royal forests was considered to be inevitable⁴⁹. In this situation, the royal authorities could never promise to continue giving timber. The sale of royal forests was justified by Wilhelm Pfeil, who created the

⁴⁴ BLHA, Rep. 2, Kurmärkische Kriegs- und Domänenkammer, D. 637, fol. 17.

⁴⁵ BLHA, Rep. 2, Kurmärkische Kriegs- und Domänenkammer, D. 637, fol. 14.

⁴⁶ Iida, *Ruppiner Bauernleben*, 170ff.

⁴⁷ Georg Friedrich Knapp, *Die Bauernbefreiung und der Ursprung der Landarbeiter in den älteren Theilen Preußens*, Bd. 2, 2., unveränd. Aufl., (München und Leipzig, 1927), 126-133; Harnisch, "Der preußische Absolutismus," 27f.

⁴⁸ For full details of the following case of the royal demesne of Alt-Ruppin, see Takashi Iida, "Bäuerliches Beharren auf der 'Holzberechtigung'. Die Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Gutsherrn und Bauern im brandenburgischen Amt Alt-Ruppin während der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts," in *Jahrbuch für die Geschichte Mittel- und Ostdeutschlands* 55 (2009), 121-165.

⁴⁹ Bernhardt, *Geschichte des Waldeigentums*, Bd. 2, 246-248.

Prussian forest policies until the mid-19th century. In 1816, he stated: there were many forestlands in Prussia, which produced too much wood even during poor management, resulting in the enormous waste of wood. Many of the appropriate proposals to economise on wood remained unexecuted as they were not necessary. An abundance of wood, however, produced conceited need which could not be restricted just as real need and would last even after the wood abundance disappeared⁵⁰. This argument perfectly applied to the practice of timber supply from the royal forests.

The four villages obliged to labour finally accepted the severe conditions and so resigned their entitlements to free timber without any compensation. Emancipation from labour services was the most important thing for them to realise at any cost and as quickly as possible⁵¹. It becomes even clearer when compared with the case of six villages of usufructuary peasants, who had already been exempted from labour obligations. They fought through until they could reach an agreement on milder conditions, and two villages gained compensation in rent to give up the entitlement to free timber.

It was not until the *Abloesungsedikt* of 1821 that the settlements between farm-owning peasants and the authorities started. Nineteen villages of the demesnes of Alt-Ruppin were inhabited by farm-owning peasants already free from labour obligations. The authorities proposed to convert all the peasants' obligations to a single rent, and in return, the peasants' entitlements to timber would be adjusted in the rent. All villages, except four equipped with substantial forests, were not satisfied even with this relatively favourable condition, and fought through until they succeeded in keeping their entitlements to timber in kind against one-third payment. Such behaviour was not unique to the demesne of Alt-Ruppin, but was reported repeatedly from elsewhere⁵².

Until 1821, the circumstances had become favourable for the peasants. The sale of state forests had not taken place to the extent once planned, also because of the opposition from Georg Ludwig Hartig. Thirteen percent of the Prussian state forests had been alienated, but they were only smaller and isolated areas that were difficult to manage and care for. As a result of the rapid recovery of the financial situation of Prussia,

⁵⁰ W. Pfeil, *Ueber die Ursachen des schlechten Zustandes der Forsten und die allein möglichen Mittel, ihn zu verbessern, mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Preußischen Staaten: Eine freimüthige Untersuchung* (Züllichau und Freistadt, 1816), 8-10, 38-41.

⁵¹ The similar behaviors of peasants could be found out in other royal demesnes. See Lieselott Enders, "Emanzipation der Agrargesellschaft im 18. Jahrhundert – Trends und Gegentrends in der Mark Brandenburg," in *Konflikte und Kontrolle in Gutsherrschaftsgesellschaften*, ed. Jan Peters (Göttingen, 1995), 427ff.

⁵² BLHA, Rep. 2A, Regierung Potsdam, IIID 16730, fol. 144.

beginning around 1820, a sale of state forests was out of the question⁵³. In the 1830s, Wilhelm Pfeil stated that everywhere in Prussia, except a part of Posen and Silesia, state forests were so extended and distributed that the demands on thick timber could always be fulfilled⁵⁴. On this material basis, the authorities finally agreed to leave the entitlements of farm-owning peasants to ‘timber beneficences’ intact after all their other entitlements and obligations had been settled.

Why then did the farm-owning peasants desire to continue receiving timber in kind provided on demand rather than a fixed yearly rent for it? One reason was the rising price of timber. The fixed rent would never cover the cost of necessary timber in the future. Another reason was the fact that in the 19th century the timber provided from the royal forests was generally thinner and of lower quality than before⁵⁵. Some timber was cut in the sap-flow period and suffered from insect damage⁵⁶. The peasants therefore had to repair and rebuild their buildings more frequently than assumed in the amount of rent. An official rightly said that the forest lords would gain if they provided better timber. Thus, a waste of timber was continuing in a new way.

6. Conclusion

The ‘timber beneficences’ from royal forests of the Kurmark continued to be a central issue, at least since the Thirty Years’ War. The practice of giving free timber was expanded to restore the peasant farms desolated by the War. After the restoration was complete, the royal authorities attempted to reduce free timber supply in the 18th century by offering all the usufructuary peasants farm ownership. They succeeded sporadically, even under the condition that the timber would be provided only against a one-third payment. The attempts to abolish or redeem the peasants’ entitlements to timber in the reform era did not always succeed, unless the authorities could make it a condition for emancipation from labour obligations on the royal estates. This evidence leads us to an understanding that a *Gutsherr* was essentially an owner of large forests giving peasants building timber, as well as an owner of a large estate expropriating their labour. So, it is necessary to combine perspectives of agricultural and forest history⁵⁷ to obtain a more

⁵³ Hasel and Schwartz, *Forstgeschichte*, 91.

⁵⁴ Hasel, *Zur Geschichte der Forstgesetzgebung*, 41.

⁵⁵ BLHA, Rep. 2A, Regierung Potsdam, IIID, 1154, fol. 43.

⁵⁶ BLHA, Rep. 2A, Regierung Potsdam, IIID, 17262.

⁵⁷ Werner Rösener and Werner Troßbach, “Editorial,” in *Zeitschrift für Agrargeschichte und Agrarsoziologie* 55 (2007), H. 1, 8-13.

comprehensive view of *Gutsherrschaft*.

‘Timber beneficences’ were not only a matter of royal budget, but also of sustainability of the royal forests. During a century-long restoration process after the Thirty Years’ War, free timber was really necessary and functioned effectively to reconstruct and stabilise the peasant farm economies. Later on, the practice of giving ‘timber beneficences’ resulted in wood wastage, which could have been destructive to the royal forests in the future. The peasants had hardly any incentive to economise on their building timber, as long as they had almost no wood of their own to care about and could enjoy timber beneficences from the royal forests. The royal authorities often failed to check the wastage of wood and were sometimes even involved in it at the local level, given that the land was rich in forests.