HOW DID A GERMAN EMIGRANT FIND HIS WAY IN EASTERN EUROPE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 19TH CENTURY?

Spatial and cultural orientation during emigration using the example of Franz Xaver Bronner and his journey to Kazan and back again (1810–1817)

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How someone finds their way in a foreign country can be explored in different ways. In the case of Franz Xaver Bronner's travels from Switzerland to Kazan in 1810, and his return in 1817, a geographical approach is used to provide a fact-based foundation.

Approach

At the beginning of 1810 Franz Xaver Bronner (1758-1850) was offered a professorship at the newly founded University of Kazan on the Volga. During the summer and autumn he traveled from Aarau in Switzerland, via St. Petersburg, to his new workplace. In 1817 he returned... disappointed. This time he took the more direct route via Moscow, Galicia, Vienna, Munich, and his home town of Höchstädt on the Danube. His travel notes, which have only been partially worked out, are in the Aargau State Archives and are being edited online as part of the DFG project "Digital Editions of Historical Travelogues" ↗. Connected with this is a scholarly evaluation based on an ontology, i.e. a systematic categorical framework, and on the cartographic representation of routes and relationships.

Travel route with different means of transport

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INHALT ANZEIGEN

Orientation in the Region

In an interesting essay,[1] the Finnish historian Panu Savolainen uses the diary of the later Protestant pastor Pehr Stenberg to examine how he oriented himself during his studies in the university town of Åbo (Turku). Stenberg mainly mentions the names of house owners in this very simple town, along with street names and important landmarks such as the market square, the river Eura and the bridge that crosses it. Bronner, for his part, describes the major streets of Frankfurt am Main as if he were wandering through foreign cities. But unfortunately this is not reflected in his travelogue.

In St. Petersburg, whose spaciousness visibly overwhelms him, he mentions the Winter Palace and the Admiralty, although he couldn’t find the "Hôtel d'Angleterre" which is opposite the

Admiralty. But one misses, for example, the Neva with its striking pontoon bridge to Vasil'evsky Island (where Bronner visited several people); even the famous Nevsky Prospect appears only in the final copy, i.e. as a result of reflection. (On the map, the localized places can be displayed via the menu "Layers and Legend" under "Travel points" show all) In the search for people–who, by the way, are mentioned in great numbers–he was aided by the first city address book published the previous year.[2] In Kiev and Vienna, Bronner took hired footmen (Mietlakaien) as guides. Therefore, when locating inns and apartments, we had to rely primarily on the city address books, which existed only for a few places at that time.

The situation is quite different in rural areas: Bronner provides us with detailed descriptions of the landscape, which allowed us to precisely locate a surprising number of villages, postal stations and individual landscape points by using old and modern maps as well as private images published in Google or Yandex.

Bronner mentions throughout his report the remarkable number of 1439 places and geographical points. Of these, we have so far been able to locate 1113 (77%) with certainty. Significantly, the missing ones are mostly located in cities.

Map: "Travel points". Beyer-Thoma, Hermann, Free access - no reuse

Comparisons

Bronner came, as mentioned, from Höchstädt on the Danube. He entered the Benedictine monastery of St. Cross in Donauwörth at an early age. But his real life began only after his second escape to Switzerland at the end of 1793. As a supporter of the Enlightenment, and thanks to his dexterous pen, he attained an important post in the administration during the period of the Helvetic Republic established by France (1797-1803) which, however, also brought him many hostilities after the victory of the reaction. He spent the following years as a teacher at the newly built high school in Aarau Canton with a poor, and above all, insecure salary. According to his three-volume biography from 1795-1797,[3] his literary enthusiasm for Switzerland at that time, his friendship with the Zurich poet and patriot Salomon Gessner and his family, and his acquaintance with numerous members of Zurich's educated liberal elite, contributed to this. The numerous comparisons of travel impressions with Switzerland, which are displayed on the map with lines (if you activate "Connections") and which are always in favor of Switzerland, prove this impressively.

It is striking that Bronner's original home on the upper Danube and in "Swabia" hardly appears in comparisons. Understandably, Bronner repeatedly refers to places he has already traveled through, whereby the backward-looking comparisons (albeit predominantly with Switzerland) become more frequent after crossing the Russian border. In this context, "Switzerland" stands–in accordance with the clichés of the time–for fertile landscapes and a highly developed agriculture, while "Germany" stands for higher culture. The reality described was somewhat different. In Prussia, Bronner repeatedly gets upset about arbitrariness of officials– this, too, not without the influence of contemporary stereotypes, but besides that also as a consequence of the desolate state of the country after the defeat against Napoleon. In Russia, Bronner notes with displeasure the constant need to pay bribes ("gifts") (map: activate "points with officials"; it is recommended to deactivate the connections afterwards). Already at the border beyond Memel he mentions his initial helplessness against this system. The perfection to which it had been developed is impressively experienced on the journey home, when Bronner describes how a Jewish innkeeper guides him through the Russian export customs at Radziwiłłów/Radziviliv. Incidentally, the map shows that bribes did not stop entirely in Austria, either. Bronner's image of Poland (beginning in the Polish partitions of Prussia) was consistently negative. His negative image of Jews was linked to his encounter with the culturally alien Eastern Jews and their concentration in the Russian settlement regions but could be partially corrected by experience.

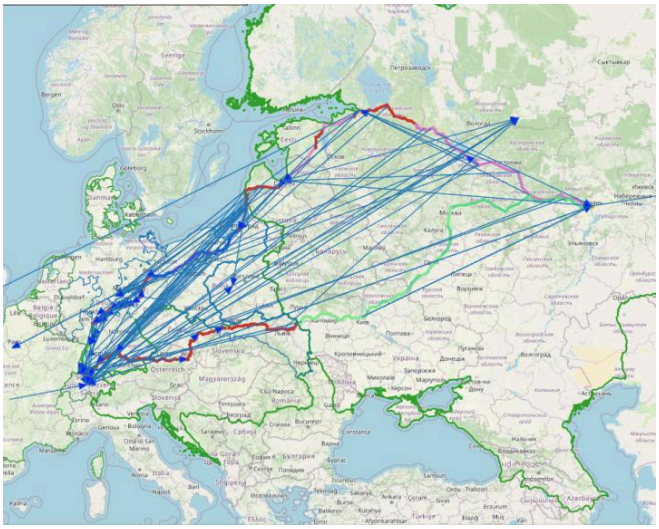
As an element of foreignness, Bronner adds serfdom in the Baltic states– again recognizably under the influence of European discourse. Almost everything that he comments on negatively there, especially the poverty of the rural population, Bronner associates with serfdom. In the interior of Russia, on the other hand, it is only marginally an issue for him.

Even St. Petersburg, behind the facades of the magnificent houses, no longer makes such a

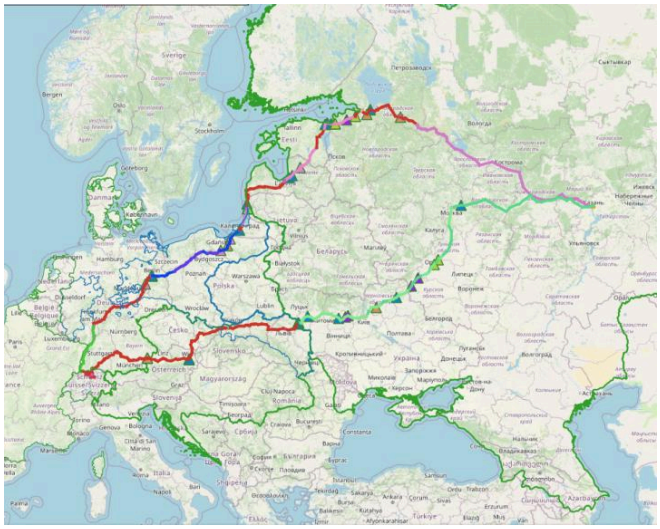
European and civilized impression on Bronner. His description of the house corridors is likely to awaken memories in many readers of their own observations from late and even post-Soviet times.

Beyond the capital, Bronner got deeper and deeper into the Russian province. The descriptions of how he was robbed by coachmen and even threatened by peasants during quarrels make a mockery of the predictions of the St. Petersburg informants that Bronner would be in good hands with honest "real" Russians there. Nevertheless, he apparently believed this himself in the beginning.

On the whole, Bronner paints a picture of a culturally inferior world in the East, but without using this word. Having said that, it begins at the Saxon-Prussian border and, as he turns homewards, it gradually fades away after crossing the Russian-Austrian border in Galicia, and only really ends at Simbach on the Bavarian border.



Map: "Connections". Beyer-Thoma, Hermann, Free access - no reuse



Map: "Points with officials". Beyer-Thoma, Hermann, Free access - no reuse

Perception of Women

This also applies, if "taken with a grain of salt (cum grano salis)", to a topic that always played a major role for Bronner who was socialized in the gallant century: women (activate "dots with women" and "gender separation" on the map; it is advisable to switch off the "dots with officials"). Bronner always describes the regional women's costumes (weiße Raute) on the journey. He often highlights (marked on the map in shades of green) the good looks of young women, but also their smart and skillful behavior. Also, critical remarks (in red tones) refer not only to appearance. Bronner would have liked to have arrived in Kazan married, and he therefore made a futile marriage proposal to his long-time beloved Küngold Tobler in the run-

up to the trip–her brother, a well-established Reformed pastor and Bronner's closest friend, vehemently opposed the Russian adventure. Bronner then made another shy attempt in Weimar with the widowed daughter of Christoph Martin Wieland, whose sister was married to another of Bronner's good friends, the son of the previously mentioned poet Salomon Gessner. However, the tender beginnings were ruined by the spoiled mood after Wieland's criticism of Bronner's monumental epic book "The First War", as well as by the arrival of guests. Notwithstanding this, Bronner was happy to allow himself a flirt or two along the way, and he also reports the erotic adventures of his traveling companions. (Serious and less serious relationship interests are marked in shades of blue and purple.) Women appear remarkably active in Bronner's account; even as travelers, they are strongly present in the account in every age and class group, alone or in company—travel research, moreover, has confirmed this. In the Baltics, after crossing the Russian border, cultural differences also mix into the picture. The young girls in particular appear very uncovered to Bronner, which he associates with serfdom and poverty. He only gradually understands the different dress tradition behind this. In the better society of the Baltic, on the other hand, Bronner repeatedly observes a degree of gender segregation that is unusual for him, for example at table (large circles on the map). In the countryside and in simple inns, however, there was no sign of this; everyone slept in one room, whereas in Germany they long since had dormitories that were separate from the guest room. Bronner notes that this was not to every young girl's liking, at least not in the presence of a gentleman from the city.

Shortly after Tikhvin, Bronner boarded a Swiss merchant's ship that took him to Kazan. Prior to that, he spent the night in a Russian farmhouse. The vivid description of the life of the extended family–all sleeping in one room–appears in many respects as a continuation of what Bronner had already observed among the serfs of the Baltic–and reads like a living setting of the farm museum of Kiži.

How alien Bronner remained to the peasant Russian family and gender order, even though he observed things remarkably closely, is shown by a few episodes on the journey home in which he expresses his displeasure that Russian peasant women were decidedly demanding when it came to money for small services such as hot water or gifts for older family members and for the children. Although he came from a poor rural family, Bronner had long since internalized the urban ideal of the restrained woman–and after seven years in Russia, apparently also the view of the Russian landowner: "It seems that generosity makes slaves insatiable." In the Russian peasant family, however, which was based on the division of labor, the woman was well aware of her sphere of control and of her joint responsibility for the income and well-being of the entire family.

On this occasion, even the not entirely figure-hugging traditional Russian women's clothing found no mercy before the eyes of our traveling aesthete, who came from a world of laced

breasts.

Map: "Dots with women" and "gender separation". Beyer-Thoma, Hermann,
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Summary

The observations compiled here from Franz Xaver Bronner's travelogues of 1810 and 1817 concern two different aspects: the comparisons and the remarks about corruption, Jews, Poles, and serfdom show what our traveler considers to be characteristics of an orderly state system. Here, only the southern small and medium-sized states of Germany, as well as Switzerland, meet Bronner's demands without reservation. Bronner's observations on women and gender relations serve us as examples of "culture shock." Here, the region of otherness that triggers astonishment and incomprehension is more narrowly limited, essentially to the Baltic States and "actual" Russia.. In any case, the influence of contemporary discussion and contemporary prejudices–also from the environment of Bronner's Russian interlocutors–cannot be overlooked. However, despite all the elaboration of stereotypes, one must not misjudge that Bronner is, above all, an immensely precise and detailed observer. In addition to the 1439 places already mentioned, he mentions at least 749 individual persons, among whom some are well-known, but also includes many nameless ones. The electronic edition of the travelogues will provide detailed access to this valuable source of information.

English translation: Coady Buckley

Footnotes

1. Savolainen, Panu: Stadtrummet och miljöupplevelsen i Pehr Stenbergs levernesbeskrivning under studieåren i Åbo (1779–1789). In: Historisk tidskrift för Finland 105, 2020 (2), S. 209–233. ↥

2. фон Реймерс, Генрих: Санктпетербургская адресная книга на 1809 г. 2 отд. Санкт-Петербург 1809. ↥

3. Bronner, Franz Xaver Franz Xaver Bronners Leben, von ihm selbst beschrieben. 3 Bände. Zürich 1795–1797. ↥

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