

JOHANN GEORG EISEN (1717–1779): EIN BORFÄMPFER DER BAUERN-BEFREIUNG IN RUSSLAND. By *Erich Donnert*. Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1978. 200 pp.

Pastor Eisen, a remarkable figure, is too little known to American historians. Therefore, Professor Donnert's biography is all the more welcome. Like several Baltic historians who have extensively published about Eisen, Donnert has occupied himself with the Livonian pastor for many years, and in this book he shows Eisen's importance as a critic of Russia's societal structure during Catherine II's time. Conforming to East European historical habits, Donnert seeks to place Eisen within the framework of Marxist patterns. Eisen did not belong to the "bourgeoisie," he was a "Kleinbürger," expressing "antifeudal thought" in Russia in its early stages. But essentially the book is more descriptive than analytical, and it is most readable. We find that Eisen himself is extensively quoted.

Johann Eisen was a German who went to Livonia when he was in his twenties. He later wrote in the spirit of the Enlightenment—envisaging morality and virtue—a worthwhile treatise on doctrinal questions (*Christentum nach der gesunden Vernunft der Bibel*) which, though unconventional, was not an attempt to introduce anything new but an attempt to elucidate the old. His historical importance, however, lies in other areas. He was a political thinker. He attacked the fundamental problems of existing society and was a persistent fighter for the abolition of serfdom. Serfdom, in his opinion, besides being an uneconomical system, had an evil effect not only on the peasant—his life, mind, and soul—but on all classes. It hindered the growth of a bourgeoisie tied to a dated guild system, it stifled artisanship and impeded the establishment of good schools, adequate housing, and so forth. It adversely affected the nobility, whose usefulness Eisen challenged vigorously. Nature and morality demanded that service obligations be replaced by taxes, that the peasant gain ownership of his land and the right to sell his products freely, and that a gradual transition period be promptly initiated. Eisen's pleas were intended not only for Livonia, where he naturally encountered opposition from the landholding nobility, but for all of Russia. "Ich verkünde den Sklaven der Sünde die Freiheit der Kinder Gottes," he wrote (p. 79).

Beyond theology and agriculture, Eisen wrote early in favor of inoculation against smallpox—including instructions for mothers and midwives—and he himself vaccinated hundreds of the poor. He developed and sold dried vegetables, recommending them as provisions for the military, and he propagated healthful herbs. With these projects he attracted the interest of various governments and even of a philosopher like Herder. He served as administrator of imperial and ducal estates, where he tried to introduce the reforms he advocated, and for two years he was also a professor of economics at Mitau.

An "origineller Kopf" (p. 46) and an abrasive personality, Eisen was listened to, his works were printed, but their practical effect was insignificant. Despite the ardent and penetrating nature of his last book, *Der Philanthrop*—to which Donnert devotes an especially interesting chapter that reviews once again Eisen's arguments against serfdom—and his high-placed protectors (he submitted his views to Peter III and also, in person, to Catherine II, who read them and toyed with his ideas), success was not to be his. "Wehe dem Menschen, der mehr tut als das Gewöhnliche," he wrote. Thus, as Donnert shows in this book, it was the character of the man as much as the fact that the times were not ripe that led him to receive only hard blows from fate. Yet, Donnert's presentation of Eisen's descriptions of conditions, his criticisms, as well as his endeavors significantly add to our knowledge of the country and of the period in which he lived.

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