

## **The Duty Economy in Pre-Industrial Norway 1600-1860**

In many countries increasing state power can be observed in the first half of the seventeenth century. That was also the fact in Denmark-Norway which had been in a union since 1380. A clear sign of this was the establishment of national armies. Another was establishment of post offices. Their most important task was to transport the letters of the state administration costless. Manpower was needed to both institutions, and in Denmark as in most European countries, this was mainly done by wage labour. The army was mainly drafted, and the transport of mail was organised commercially. In Norway, however, these services were organised as duties on the peasant population (the army established in 1645-43 and the post office in 1647). The inspiration seems to have come from Sweden.

In these two countries, and in particularly Norway, the feudal aristocracy had little importance which meant that the peasants had a stronger position than common in Europe. They were part of society, not a suppressed group at the bottom. This was important for various reasons: They were not reserved for use by the nobility, and they could be armed without danger of making revolt. By using the peasants the states could get cheap and loyal armies. They could also be trusted with transporting the mail. Both countries had small populations, long distances and rough ground. Probably it would not have been possible to organize post transport commercially.

The Norwegian peasants also had other older duties that were formalised at about the same time: the duty to maintain the roads and transport civil servants costless (and others against pay). Rewarding by exemption seems to have been a principle. A post peasant got exemption from road maintenance, the duty to transport civil servants and conscription both for himself and one of his servants. However, the peasants were not satisfied with this, and from 1758 they were also paid about half the regular wage for transportation. In this way the peasants should be encouraged.

From the 1770s the system was enlarged, all those who had civic duties were given a servant free from military service. In addition to post peasants that meant ferrymen, the chairmen in the transport of travellers and in the maintenance of roads.

The problem with rewarding by exemptions was that the burden was passed over to others. The military and the road authorities lost manpower. It was therefore much discussion about this arrangement and often suggested to abolish it. But the post office was able to maintain this privilege.

What put an end to it was the dramatic expansion of communications and particularly the post office around 1850. A lot of new post routes were established. New post peasants were needed, and the possibilities to avoid military service increased. In 1857 The Ministry of Defence wrote: "how joyful the progress of the communications and the post office may be one should not forget the problems that arise for the defence."

This may have been an exaggeration, but never the less the formulation is enlightning. When the post peasants for around two hundred years had been rewarded in a way that was negative for the defence, that was because the post-office was rather small and the harm not so big (half a million letters were sent in 1806, against 44 million in 1900). With the expansion of the post office in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was obvious that the disadvantages were becoming too big. The Ministry of Defence proposed the privilege for the holders of civic duties to keep a servant free from military service should be dis-continued which was resolved by Parliament. From 1860 the transport of post and the other duties became ordinary paid work. The Norwegian duty-economy was finally terminated.