Three figures stand in the foreground against an out of focus landscape. The repetition of each figure’s stance, their walking sticks, dark suits and hats creates a lateral rhythm across the picture plane. Each figure looks directly at the camera. The shapes of their heads and hats are delineated against the blank sky. Their expressions are serious. Their shared pose is a mixture of formal (stiff posture, 3/4 profile) and informal (cigarette of man on left). They appear to be on their way to an event and have dressed up. They are not in their usual work clothes. The Rule of Thirds is used to locate each figure from left to right and top to bottom - their heads, hands and feet. There is an implied movement from left to right - their feet point towards their destination.

Image taken with a large format glass plate camera mounted on a tripod with a long shutter speed (more commonly found in portrait studios). The photographer uses available early evening light. Shallow depth of field caused by relatively wide aperture and focal length of the lens. many of Sander’s negatives were destroyed either by the Nazi authorities or damaged during the war. This image was re-printed in 1996.

Sander was a German portrait and documentary photographer. During the Nazi period he struggled to maintain his practice. This image was the sixth plate in Sander’s portrait photobook ‘Face of Our Time’, published in 1929, and also appears in the first volume of Sander’s life-long but incomplete project ‘People of the Twentieth Century’, which was planned as a comprehensive photographic index of the German population, classified into seven groups by social ‘type’. The Marxist critic John Berger famously wrote about the image, arguing that the peasant’s suits are ill-fitting copies of a more bourgeois attire. These farmers, influenced by popular culture and advertising, may represent a trend that saw workers move away from the land towards the city.

Portraiture as a form of historical document - what does this picture tell us about a particular class of people in Germany on the eve of the First World War?

The photographic series - Sanders intended this photograph to be part of a sequence of images.

Typologies - ‘Face of Our Time’ is a photographic typology (classification) of German society intended to be seen as a group of connected images in book form.

Theoretical interpretations of photography - John Berger’s essay is an example of Marxist analysis (concerned with class relations and power).