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POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews

**WAS THERE EVER A POLISH PEASANT?  
HISTORICAL IMAGINATION  
AND THE PEOPLE’S HISTORY OF POLAND**

Review of: Kamil Janicki, *Pańszczyzna. Prawdziwa historia polskiego niewolnictwa* [Serfdom. A True Story of Polish Slavery], Poznań, 2021, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 384 pp.; Piotr Korczyński, *Zapomniani. Chłopi w Wojsku Polskim* [The Forgotten. Peasants in the Polish Army], Kraków, 2022, Wydawnictwo Znak, 365 pp.; Adam Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski. Historia wyzysku i oporu* [A People’s History of Poland. A History of Exploitation and Resistance], Warszawa, 2020, Wydawnictwo WAB, 672 pp.; Kacper Pobłocki, *Chamstwo* [Peasantry], Wołowiec, 2021, Wydawnictwo Czarne, 384 pp.; Michał Rauszer, *Bękartypańszczyzny. Historia buntów chłopskich* [Bastards of Serfdom. A History of Peasant Revolts], Warszawa, 2020, Wydawnictwo RM, 296 pp.

**Abstract**

This essay uses five new Polish-language books popularising the ‘people’s’ history perspective as a jumping-off point to discuss distortions in the historical imagination. At the centre is the issue of the peasantry. In some national mythologies, the peasants or the ‘people’ serve as the heart of the nation. In the Polish case, this has been the role of the nobility or *szlachta* and as a result the peasants are often forgotten or skipped over in popular historical narratives. These new books represent a sea change in historical imagination, not for the academy, but for the broader public.

**Keywords:** nationalism, peasantry, nobility, historiography, memory

In the 1930s, a few hundred poor farmers in Poland submitted autobiographies for a 'peasant memoirs' competition. One woman, located on the outskirts of Warsaw, wrote, "And the peasant will never have it good in Poland; he will never receive his rights as long as the great lords rule because they put their welfare and interests even higher than the welfare of the Fatherland, and the peasant's misery never concerns them".<sup>1</sup> Even though serfdom nominally ended generations prior, this woman's experience, and that of many others like her, was seeped in the ancient relations between a peasant [*chłop*] and the aristocratic lord [*pan*]. A change is underway in popular representations of Polish history, highlighting the 'people's' perspective and revealing the massive gap between elites and subalterns that left an imprint on Polish society. Importantly these books are not for academics but are published with the broader public in mind, hoping to change historical consciousness. One of the main threads tying these books together is an indictment of the landed elites as brutal oppressors for their own profit and comfort. This is a fact of feudalism worldwide, not just in Poland, of course. But in the process of making the modern Polish 'nation', Poles had to forget about the feudal past. That segment of history could only be stripped away, idealised, or erased so that the peasantry could become a part of the nation, not separate from it.

This shift in presentation has fundamental consequences for the historical imagination of Poland's past because it undermines the modern nation's constructed myths. History has been an essential element of justifying the nation, since each group must be able to tell its story from the beginning and then transfer that knowledge from generation to generation, creating a cycle of justification.<sup>2</sup> According to this logic, a nation has a right to exist because of its continuity from the past.<sup>3</sup> This is why many nineteenth-century nationalists

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<sup>1</sup> "I nigdy nie będzie chłopu w Polsce dobrze, nigdy on nie znajdzie swoich praw, dopóki rządzić będą wielcy panowie, bo oni dobro swoje i interes stawiają nawet wyżej, niż dobro Ojczyzny, a nędza chłopska nigdy ich nie obchodzi", no. 3: 'Żona gospodarza piętnastomorgowego w pow. Warszawskim', in *Pamiętniki chłopów*, ed. Ludwik Krzywicki (Warszawa, 1935), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1992); John Connolly, *From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe* (Princeton, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, 2010 [1982!]).

obsessed over the creation of 'national' histories that drew straight lines from the ancient past into the present, and novelists, artists, activists and historians carefully cultivated the past in Poland to connect a family of Slavic landowners with all Polish-speaking people in the present.

The historical consciousness of belonging has been fundamental to the creation of a 'we' that can be projected into the past. Polish history has been particularly successful in its bout to outline this discursive universe. Ask the average Pole on the street today about their history and they'll probably be relatively knowledgeable. Certain basic facts are practically universal: Poland's 'baptism' in 966, the country's 'disappearance' from the map at the end of the eighteenth century, its 'rebirth' after the First World War, its victimhood and heroism during the Second World War, and oppression under the Soviet-led communist yoke after 1945. For the professional historian though, these simplifications should be doubtful, if not outright false. 'Poland' in the tenth century and 'Poland' in 2022 aren't connected in the way the average school textbook seems to imply. This flattening out of history is a necessary part of nation-making, it allows the pronoun 'we' to apply backwards 1,000 years in the past, and Poles in the twenty-first century can speak of 'our' victory at Grunwald in 1410 or 'our' struggles for freedom against the tsar in 1794, 1830 and 1863.

One of the most fundamental issues that underpin the works reviewed here on peasants is that 'Pole/*Polak*' in feudal society was synonymous with 'lord' or 'noble'. To be a 'Pole' in the distant past meant that one had the right to own property, to move about as they pleased and, after the decline of the Jagiellonian dynasty, to vote for a king. The word did not indicate ethnic belonging or geographic origins so that Stanisław Orzechowski could write without contradiction in the sixteenth century that he was *gente ruthenus, natione polonus* [by ethnicity Ruthenian, by nationality Polish]. 'Pole' could be a marker of belonging while sojourning across Western Europe or attending university at Jena, but at home, it was the difference between the privileged and unprivileged.

In the modern era, the existence of great magnate families of noble birth, kings and queens – regardless of their territorial origin – became the basis for Poland's claim to statehood. In the popular imagination, the nobles or *szlachta* represented 'Poles' in the past; they were the true

carriers of Polish culture.<sup>4</sup> The massive western Slavic peasantry in east central Europe did not boost the Polish cause at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Instead, an elite with territorial rights, economic interest and, importantly, a written history justified their right to nationhood and, thus, statehood.

Even though the main current of Polish history has drawn a line from the landed elites to a modern nation, professional historians have been interested in peasants for a long time. Decrying the supposed paucity of Polish histories about this great mass of the population, Adam Leszczyński writes, “their history has been written as if they were a minority, or at least a separate, closed, and foreign world for the author and reader!”<sup>5</sup> Professional historians may take issue with Leszczyński’s assessment, since peasant issues were the focus of a large number of studies – especially during the communist period.<sup>6</sup> However, there has been a distinct departure between the academic discourse and the popular understanding of the peasantry.

The change in these newer works is one of emphasis. The authors reviewed here did not discover new sources or uncover treasure trove collections but used the existing literature to unravel national myths that have solidified through more than a century of national thinking. The older works were histories by and for the elite, even if their object of study was the subaltern. The people’s history vein forces a reckoning with the glorification of the *szlachta*, and the legacies of a place variously referred to as ‘Poland’.

While constructing national history, historians effortlessly connected the Polish nobility to the modern idea of the nation. The problem was

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<sup>4</sup> This can be contrasted with other contexts where it was the peasants who were considered the true bearers of the ‘nation’. The difference being that this happened in places where the urban elites had assimilated to another culture and language, such in the Finnish or Czech case.

<sup>5</sup> “Chłopi stanowili siedem czy osiem dziesiątych populacji Rzeczypospolitej przez dziewięć dziesiątych czasu jej istnienia. Tymczasem o ich dziejach pisano tak, jak gdyby byli mniejszością, a przynajmniej osobnym, zamkniętym i obcym dla autora oraz czytelnika światem!”, Leszczyński, 582.

<sup>6</sup> Synthetic works include: Janina Leskiewiczowa (ed.), *Zarys historii gospodarstwa wiejskiego w Polsce*, i (Warszawa, 1964); Stanisław Arnold (ed.), *Zarys historii gospodarstwa wiejskiego*, ii (Warszawa, 1964); Janina Leskiewiczowa (ed.), *Zarys historii gospodarstwa wiejskiego*, iii (Warszawa, 1970); Stefan Inglot (ed.), *Historia chłopów polskich: opracowanie zbiorowe*, i: *Do upadku Rzeczypospolitej szlacheckiej* (Warszawa, 1970).

what to do with the rest of the people considered to be 'Poles'. The nationalist rhetorical consensus normalised in the present obscures the past because peasants have been fully integrated into the idea of the Polish national family since the early twentieth century. Henryk Słotwiński wrote in the early nineteenth century, "Among the peasants of Masuria, 'fatherland' meant 'inheritance' (that which the father left behind), 'Polok' was some mythical monster, unequally worse than the devil, and the peasant himself in his own conviction was not Polish, but 'imperial'".<sup>7</sup> Similar statements can be found in countless nineteenth-century sources confirming that peasants did not think of themselves as 'Poles' at all, but identified regionally as Masurians, Kurpians, Cracovians, Podlesians or simply 'peasants'.<sup>8</sup> When we return to a framework outside modern nationalism, it is clear that the adjective 'Polish' could not apply to the feudal peasant. And if Polish meant noble, then how could one be a 'noble peasant'? That's an oxymoron. Maybe there never was a 'Polish' peasant? Perhaps all peasants should be considered autochthonous until proven otherwise. Perhaps the image of the archetypal Polish historical ancestor should not be a powerful aristocrat or a heroic hussar riding horseback into battle, but a weather-worn emaciated farmer, with dirt caked under his fingernails. What difference would it make?

#### PRIDE/SHAME

At a time when it was practically unthinkable, Jesuit preacher Piotr Skarga (1536–1612) publicly condemned his fellow Poles for their horrible treatment of the feudal peasantry, calling it a 'tyrannical injustice' [*tyrańska krzywda*].<sup>9</sup> The people's history authors reviewed here repeatedly emphasise the violence and humiliation to which feudal lords subjected their peasant farmer subjects. They are continuing Skarga's work and inviting readers to face these foundations as part of Polish history. Any time historians muster a chronicle of 'embarrassments,'

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<sup>7</sup> "U chłopca na Mazurach 'ojczyzna' była ojcowizną (spadkiem po ojcu), 'Polok' był jakimś mitycznym potworem, nierównie gorszym od diabła, a chłop sam w swem silnym przekonaniu nie był polskim, jeno 'cysarskim'", Pobłocki, 302.

<sup>8</sup> Helena Brodowska, *Chłopi o sobie i Polsce. Rozwój świadomości społeczno-narodowej* (Warszawa, 1984), 60–75.

<sup>9</sup> Leszczyński, 27.

they are often met with resistance. Shame is a difficult emotion, and most people prefer to be proud of their past. Especially in a society that largely views itself as an archetypal victim, it is hard to accept that perpetrators of evil were also part of the same group. The Polish *szlachta*'s role as a torturer of the peasant masses is not part of the popular historical imagination of the past, and few would think twice about connecting their family's lineage to a great magnate of old Poland.

As usual, popular culture was more potent than an academic discussion. In the 1960s and 1970s, around the time that Henryk Sienkiewicz's historical novels made it to the silver screen, the noble myth conquered the public consciousness. Moreover, communist authorities continued to present 'culture' as synonymous with the landed elite, while 'backwardness' was associated with the countryside. After the 1989 transformation, the search for noble roots, family crests, and ancestral latifundia became increasingly fashionable.<sup>10</sup>

The present Polish historical imagination is dominated by noble manors, aristocratic pretensions, and huge wooden tables sagging under the weight of liquors and smoked meats. *Wieśniak* (a toponym roughly denoting 'redneck') derived from the word for village [*wieś*] was and is an insulting epithet. As Michał Rauszer put it, "there is hardly any lively local folk tradition [in Poland] as one finds in Germany, where local costumes and local pride for a 'peasant' past are alive, or in Czechia, where *swojskość*, localness and peasantness are key features of identity. In Poland, that pride for our peasant past has been erased, and that had to happen because it connected 'Polishness' with feudalism".<sup>11</sup> In essence, Rauszer points to a necessary step that undergirds Polish identity. To connect the people, language, culture and nation-state to the 'Polands' in their various historical forms, the peasants have to fall away from view entirely, and the narrative focus stays on the noble class alone.

Recent history textbooks for schoolchildren in Poland barely mention the peasantry at all. In a primer for elementary students, a short

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<sup>10</sup> Adam Wierciński, 'Kresomania wyobrażona?', *Odra*, 10 (2011).

<sup>11</sup> "Brak u nas żywej tradycji lokalno-ludowej, tak jak ma to miejsce w Niemczech, gdzie lokalny strój i swoista duma z 'ludowej' przeszłości są żywe, czy w Czechach, gdzie *swojskość*, ludowość i lokalność są istotnymi składnikami tożsamości. W Polsce ta duma z chłopskiej przeszłości została wymazana i musiało tak się stać, bo wiązała się ze skojarzeniem 'polskości' z pańszczyzną", Rauszer, 20.

mention of serfdom [*pańszczyzna*] simply says: “It was free labour done on the land of the estate owner in exchange for the possibility of using his land”.<sup>12</sup> A diagram showing the functioning of a seventeenth-century estate takes up a two-page spread in the same textbook, but the ‘village’ is off in the distance and is described as “where the peasants live in wooden huts”.<sup>13</sup> In essence, the ‘Polish’ space is separate from the ‘village’ space, and thus the student is to understand that it is barely part of the same ecosystem.

In the museum space, there are ample instances of how peasant life is separated from ‘Polish’ life. The State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw is one of a few areas where one can find village items and art on display. As part of the permanent exhibition, a large room is filled with tools and household items collected from villagers over the past century. These worn-down knives, roughhewn boats, and looming mechanisms are lain out at random without much explanation.<sup>14</sup> Another exhibition hall displays the various traditional peasant costumes of regional groups.<sup>15</sup> Since visitors will find these items in a museum filled with weapons, masks and religious artefacts from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, the message is clear: village culture is foreign and exotic.

To dislodge aspects of the past that Poles often treat as settled facts, the authors of new people’s history books must shake their readers awake. Strikingly many of them employ the same comparison between feudalism and American chattel slavery to provoke the public. Leszczyński begins his *People’s History* on the island of Hispaniola, where a Polish aristocrat observes the enslaved Black people toiling away on sugar plantations and immediately makes the connection to his own feudal peasants back home. Through the book’s narrative, we learn how “the Polish *szlachta* idealised the estate owner’s life, considered it the greatest, most virtuous and conducive to creating happiness ... the fact that cotton farms surrounded American plantation

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<sup>12</sup> Bogumiła Olszewska, Wiesława Surdyk-Fertsch, and Grzegorz Wojciechowski, *Wczoraj i dziś. Klasa 6. Podręcznik do historii szkoły podstawowej* (Warszawa, 2019), 47.

<sup>13</sup> *Wczoraj i Dziś* 6, 48–9.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Porządek Rzeczy/The Order of Things’, Exhibition at Muzeum Etnograficzne, Warsaw, Poland.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Czas świętowania/Celebration Time’, Exhibition at Muzeum Etnograficzne, Warsaw, Poland.

manors, and Black slaves worked them instead of white peasants, was not the most important thing; the estate owner's life in Poland and America had fundamental similarities".<sup>16</sup> The other books follow suit. In Janicki's *Serfdom*, the author claims up front that the words used to describe peasants were all synonyms for 'slave'. The implication is a bit of shock. If 'we' the people were slaves, then doesn't that mean 'our' celebrated elites were slave owners?

It is clear that this provocation worked because several reviewers reacted to the comparison with particular vitriol. In conservative weekly magazines such as *Sieci* and *Do Rzeczy*, reviews of Leszczyński's book panned this analogy as entirely inappropriate.<sup>17</sup> An oft-repeated argument claimed that feudal peasants were well-fed and generally better treated than Black slaves. Not only do they see it as historically incorrect – that is, peasants and serfs were not slaves in the same sense as American chattel slavery – but clearly, these reviewers found it offensive to have their ancestors compared to enslaved Black people. Korczyński's *The Forgotten* came out almost two years after Leszczyński's book, and so he had a chance to address these doubting reviewers in his introduction. Korczyński dismisses the debates about food rations for Black slaves versus feudal peasants as missing the forest from the trees. "Here the game is played for higher stakes – freedom, the ability to decide one's own destiny, a sense of dignity, the prospect of a better life for oneself and one's children. These higher needs are typical of all people, not just the elites..."<sup>18</sup> For the other authors as well, the terms of debate are not necessarily about material conditions, the exact rules of movement, or lord-peasant relations, but about what it means to be a free person in the world.

<sup>16</sup> "... polska szlachta idealizowała żywot ziemiański, uważając go za najlepszą, najbardziej cnotliwą i sprzyjającą szczęściu formę ziemskiego bytowania. Jak komentował inny historyk, Janusz Tazbir (1927–2016), fakt, że rezydencje amerykańskich plantatorów otaczały plantacje bawełny, a pracowali na nich czarni niewolnicy, a nie biali chłopci, nie był tu najważniejszy; żywot ziemiański w Polsce i w Ameryce miał swoje fundamentalne podobieństwa", Leszczyński, 121.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example: Grzegorz Janiszewski, 'Polski chłop to nie Murzyn, czyli nie do końca ludowa historia Polski', *Do Rzeczy* (6 March 2021).

<sup>18</sup> "Tu gra szła o wyższą stawkę – o wolność, możliwość kierowania własnym losem, poczucie godności, perspektywę lepszego życia dla siebie i swych dzieci. Te wyższe potrzeby są typowe dla wszystkich ludzi, nie tylko dla elity ...", Korczyński, 13.



Lurking behind this is a more fundamental question that plagues historical memory discussions across the globe. History is full of moments of pride and shame, but which elements are fundamentally part of who we are and which ones can be labelled an aberration or departure from the norm? Were the heroes of our historical narratives a force for good or a force for evil? A 2021 Texas law on public education instructs that teachers may not tell students that “slavery and racism are anything other than deviations from, betrayals of, or failures to live up to the authentic founding principles of the United States, which include liberty and equality”.<sup>19</sup> That is, that they are not of the American tradition but separate from it. Beyond the extremist political posturing of either side, the fundamental divide in American memory is not about whether or not chattel slavery happened, but whether or not it is of us, i.e. a foundational element, or a kind of error, a time when America lost its way. And so in the Polish case, the same question can be posed: is feudalism a fundamental part of Polish history or an aberration? Do feudal relations in the past play a role in the functioning of society today?

Howard Zinn’s *People’s History of the United States*, first published in 1980, was a major step toward confronting Americans with the ‘shameful’ side of their past.<sup>20</sup> Zinn undoubtedly influenced all the authors reviewed here, directly or indirectly. Leszczyński is the most public about this fact, giving the nod in his title, and even opening his book similarly. Even though much of Zinn’s book has been subject to meticulous criticism and correction, it still remains an important work today, selling thousands of copies per year and offering a needed counter-balance to the oversimplifications that abound in school textbooks. American public schools still teach students to believe that

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<sup>19</sup> Senate Bill no. 3, Legislative Session 87(1), Texas Legislature, <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/871/billtext/pdf/SB00003I.pdf> [Accessed: 7 Dec. 2022].

<sup>20</sup> In recent years, controversy abounded over the *New York Times*’ ‘1619 Project’ that posited the founding of the United States at the moment when the first Black slaves were imported to Jamestown colony. In response, a group of conservative historians put together a Trump administration counter-project based around 1776, placing the Declaration of Independence and its promise “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”. Both projects are selective in their narratives, but the ‘1776 Project’ has been poorly received by professional historians as disingenuous at best.

the United States has offered freedom and opportunity to all. Zinn's *People's History* unveiled that it has been available only to a White Protestant elite. Through his eyes, Christopher Columbus was not an adventurous explorer, bringing civilisation to uncharted lands, but a mass murderer exporting genocide. The Revolutionary War was not the moment that liberty became a universal principle in the thirteen colonies but a shrewd financial calculation by a narrow group of wealthy magnates and businessmen. The Civil War and Reconstruction were not the victory of good over evil, but a series of events that underscored all of America's broken promises. Zinn challenged the triumphalist narrative that is still often repeated in schools about the United States' role as a champion of personal freedom and defender of fundamental rights. Inspired by Marxist criticism, he convincingly showed how these freedoms and rights were limited to a certain class and race. By no means did Zinn obliterate the textbook views of American history, but he certainly pushed the mainstream conversation in a more constructive direction. Rather than seeing the great American mission as completed, *People's History* reminded Americans that the 'promissory note' of equality and justice for all has yet to be fulfilled.<sup>21</sup> Rather than rejecting the American ideal altogether, as some right-wing critics interpret Zinn, he was encouraging us to try and live up to that ideal.

Leszczyński's *People's History*, in contrast to Zinn's gripping narrative, is a source-heavy account of Polish history from the twelfth century up to the 1990s. The copious source quotes, sometimes at length, leave the reader feeling bombarded with historical 'facts', though we cannot reasonably take issue with that. Leszczyński's writing is excellent and the sources are well chosen. He is overwhelming his reader with evidence to prove that he has something revelatory to share, backed up by the standard methods acceptable among other Polish historians. His logic is demonstrative, not inductive. He is

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<sup>21</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have A Dream," Delivered August 28, 1963. "In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness", [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/mlk01.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/mlk01.asp) [Accessed: 7 Dec. 2022].

showing his readers, not telling them, that Poland's large landowners built their wealth upon a system of forced labour, and that they coveted their privilege to the detriment of the country (and 'nation') as a whole. Leszczyński points out, for example, that the only thing standing in the way of the emancipation of several million peasants in southern Poland was a group of around 4,500 people.<sup>22</sup> Seen through the lens of the present, this fact could generate feelings of betrayal or shame for the actions of the elite against people with whom they supposedly shared a 'national' affinity. But that view is ahistorical.

Part of the reason why the comparison between Polish feudalism and American slavery seems to work for these authors is the thread of racism that was fundamental for the functioning of both. Since there was no apparent outward difference in skin colour, Polish elites cultivated a legend about their origins through an imaginary tribe of Sarmatians from Persia to govern the lands along the Vistula and Warta Rivers. A self-fulfilling prophecy thus certified that some were born to rule, others to work the land.

Another myth repeats the biblical justification for American slavery, that is that the sons of Ham were doomed to be servants. After the great flood, Noah got drunk and naked, Ham apparently disrespected his father, and in turn, Noah cursed his descendants to be "a servant of servants" (Genesis 9:25). Speculation abounds about the meaning of the passage, but in the Americas, it was used often to justify black slavery. Meanwhile, in early modern Poland, peasants were also given the dishonour of being called sons of Ham. In a chapter entitled 'The Darker People' Pobłocki explains the double entendre in the title of his book *Chamstwo*. The land of the Lords [*Pan*] forms the word for the 'state' [*państwo*], but it is the word for biblical Ham [*Cham*] that gives us the book's title *Chamstwo*, meaning the land of the sons of Ham. The first Polish dictionary, published at the beginning of the nineteenth century, defined *cham* as a "peasant, churl, of low birth".<sup>23</sup> The word is more widely used today to mean rudeness, gruffness or boorishness. To be called a *cham*

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<sup>22</sup> "Warto w tym miejscu uświadomić sobie, jak nieliczną grupę stanowiła blokująca wytrwale zmiany szlachta galicyjska. Według szacunków rządu austriackiego w całej prowincji do indemnizacji (odszkodowania) za zniesienie pańszczyzny uprawnione były 4553 osoby", Leszczyński, 359.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Bogumił Linde, *Słownik języka polskiego*, i, part 1 (Warszawa, 1807), 231.

is to be the opposite of cultured, civilised or refined. In other words, to be a peasant *cham* entails a direct offence, a source of shame.

Since most of these works argue that there was a racial element undergirding the relationship between the peasant and his feudal lord, the current nationalist language about who is 'Polish' and where is 'Poland' becomes somewhat problematic. While the use of racial categories might be inappropriate in the early modern context, contemporaries understood one's birth as meaningful and a determinant of character. Some authors have addressed how this may undermine mainstream understandings of the past, while others don't seem to have noticed the logical quicksand they've created. Janicki's *Serfdom* presents a particularly harrowing vision of the past, with landlords beating their underlings to a bloody pulp at every turn. Meanwhile, instead of seeing these actions as evidence that these people are not to be lumped together into the same group, he seems to slam his reader over the head with incredulity at *Polish* lords beating *Polish* peasants in *Poland*.

Contrast that with Poblócki, who tiptoes gracefully around the pitfalls of projecting the present into the past and does not use the word Poland [*Polska*] but instead uses *Polszcza*, as most of its residents would have known it, he says. The Polish language is not *język polski*, which would imply a projection of standard modern Polish on autochthonous masses with local dialects, but Poblócki renders it as *polszczyzna*, but with some caveats.

That which we have inherited from *Polszcza* is *polszczyzna*, which has always been a language of power. A language that revolves around a few key concepts: property/ownership [*własność/włość*], statehood/rule [*państwo/panowanie*], ruling/order [*rzządzenie/porządek*], as well as violence/assistance [*przemocy/pomocy*], and ability/wealth [*możność/zamożność*]. These terms mark the borders of the semantic field in which we still live ... That which connects [the meaning of the words in the past and today] is a common script in the theatre of social life. The actors change, the scenography changes, but we are still players in the same performance.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> "To, co odziedziczyliśmy po *Polszczy*, to *polszczyzna* – która od zawsze była językiem władzy. Językiem, który obraca się wokół kilku kluczowych zagadnień: własności/włości, państwa/panowania, rządzenia/porządku oraz przemocy/pomocy, możliwości/zamożności. Terminy te wyznaczają granice pola semantycznego w którym wciąż żyjemy.... To co je łączy to wspólny skrypt w teatrze życia społecznego.

Perhaps more deeply than the other authors considered here, Poblócki uncovers the issue that the entire Polish discursive and linguistic universe is a repetition of feudal power relationships. Certainly, a linguist may find fault with this comparison, but as a rhetorical tool, it is effective. What space is there for the Polish peasant if any words involving power or agency exist outside their realm? Thus, Poblócki and Leszczyński, in particular, emphasise the imaginary separateness of peasants in historical discourse and the present.<sup>25</sup>

### COMPLIANCE/RESISTANCE

As with American slavery, we can wonder how a system that allowed a few thousand people to control the lives and deaths of millions could even function. The authors of the books reviewed here are of one voice; the answer is physical violence. Leszczyński writes, “Violence was the foundation of this system: people from the lower rungs of society experienced it at every turn and in nearly every situation during their rather short lives”.<sup>26</sup> Poblócki continually returns to gruesome details of violence to show what undergirded the feudal system and interpersonal relations. Violence in feudalism was random, it rendered peasants powerless, and any attempts to appeal to a higher power for mercy were almost always met with silence.

On the other side of the coin are the moments of resistance, and the uprisings against the system. This is the main focus of Rauszer’s *Feudal Bastards* – an allusion to Quentin Tarantino’s 2009 film *Inglorious Basterds*. Rauszer, much in the spirit of Tarantino, wants us to be able to see those moments when the feudal peasant takes revenge on his torturer. The very fact that there were uprisings highlights the agency of peasants in a space where they are usually presented as passive. As his stated goal, Rauszer wants to present digestible historical narratives, so he drives it with personal stories. This becomes a limitation

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Zmieniają się aktorzy, zmienia się scenografia, ale gramy zasadniczo ten sam dramat”, Poblócki, 174.

<sup>25</sup> Leszczyński refers to this gap as two nations [*dwa narody*], one peasant, one noble, Leszczyński, 4.

<sup>26</sup> “Przemoc była fundamentem tego systemu: ludzie ze społecznych nizin doświadczali jej na każdym kroku i niemal w każdej sytuacji swojego niezbyt długiego życia”, *ibid.*, 339.

because feudalism before the nineteenth century is hardly a whisper. Instead, Rauszer expounds on microhistories, such as the Robin Hood of western Galicia Jakub Szela (1787–1860), reminding readers of a time not that long ago when peasants carried the heads of Polish magnates on pikes. Austrian officials paid handsome fees for each rebellious lord that could be disposed of.

Korczyński's book, *The Forgotten. Peasants in the Polish Army*, might be expected to show how peasants propped up a system that kept them at the bottom of the social and economic ladder, reinforcing the status quo. However, it is quite a bit more nuanced than that. Korczyński wants his reader to appreciate the peasant not as a rebel rouser *per se*, but as a thinking person who calculates when to follow orders and when to refuse.

Peasant soldiers had little motivation to fight other than the promise that – if they survived – they could be rewarded with freedom. However, as Korczyński tells us, that happened only rarely. “Soon both the war itself and the enemies he met there – Muscovites, Swedes, or Tatars – began to seem kinder to him than his own countrymen, who by all possible means tried to convince him that he was, is and will be a slave”.<sup>27</sup> As Korczyński notes, this disrespect had its own consequences as when the peasants from around Nowy Targ refused to submit to Polish authorities and formed their own short-lived republic. Local resistance reflects a dissonance between the ‘Polish’ peasant and their belonging to the ecosystem of Poland. ‘Why else would they resist?’, Korczyński and Rauszer seem to ask.

Some more familiar points in history look very different from the perspective of the ‘people’. The Khmelnytskyi Uprising is a key moment in Ukrainian national history, when the free Cossacks turned their weapons against their Polish masters. However, several of the authors reviewed here highlight the closeness of the two sides. Rauszer claims, for example, that the actual people fighting there were local peasants, townspeople and even the impoverished nobles, *déclassé*, poor and unprivileged in the economic sense.<sup>28</sup> Poblócki

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<sup>27</sup> “Prędko zarówno sama wojna, jak i spotkania tam nieprzyjaciele – Moskale, Szwedzi czy Tatarzy – zaczęli wydawać się mu miłsi od własnych rodaków, którzy wszelkimi sposobami starali się go przekonać, że był, jest i będzie niewolnikiem”, Korczyński, 80.

<sup>28</sup> Rauszer, 188–91.

emphasises that there were plenty of ‘Poles’ on the anti-Polish side of the conflict, complicating both the Ukrainian and Polish national histories.<sup>29</sup> In fact, as Leszczyński’s fuller narrative displays, the seventeenth century was a time of mass colonisation of Ukraine by Polish nobles, and they dealt with constant pushback. Meanwhile, thousands of peasants from the Polish heartlands had run off to Zaporizhzhia in Cossack-controlled territory to escape serfdom. This might imply that the kernel of the Ukrainian nation in the future were the rebellious peasants from lands further west.

In the usual telling of the story, the partitioning and end of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of the eighteenth century brought disaster and imprisonment under foreign rule. Intelligentsia elites crafted a mythology of the world they had lost world in prose and verse. These new works provide a strong corrective, and we can hardly accept that most of the Commonwealth’s inhabitants experienced the state’s implosion in the same way. Pobłocki writes, “The popular classes had nothing to long for”.<sup>30</sup> Leszczyński is just as brutal:

The collapse of the [Commonwealth] – treated by earlier historians as a catastrophe and annihilation of civilisation – often meant a rise in living standards for inhabitants. This was because the oppressive structure that squeezed the subjects to the bone, taking away every gram of grain produced that exceeded the minimum sufficient for survival, was collapsing. The breakdown of the state organism was, therefore, a disaster only for the elite.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, many Polish elites were not even interested in returning the old state. During the Kościuszko Uprising (1794) to restore Polish rule, Count Jan Potocki wrote that it would be absolutely foolish to start arming peasants as he sat passively on his massive estate.<sup>32</sup> Though this might be seen as a betrayal to the nation, the worse

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<sup>29</sup> Pobłocki, 188.

<sup>30</sup> “Klasy ludowe nie miały do czego tęsknić” (Pobłocki 165).

<sup>31</sup> “Upadek wczesnego państwa – przez dawniejszych historyków traktowany jako katastrofa i zagłada cywilizacji – dla jego mieszkańców oznaczał często wzrost poziomu życia. Rozpadała się bowiem opresyjna struktura, która wyciskała poddanych do cna, odbierając każdy gram wyprodukowanego zboża, który przekraczał minimum wystarczające do przeżycia. Rozpad organizmu państwowego był zatem katastrofą tylko dla elity”, Leszczyński 1031–4.

<sup>32</sup> Pobłocki, 167.

betrayal – from the elite perspective – would be to support the end of serfdom. One can imagine in this context then why many noble Poles supported an alliance with Russia for the purpose of maintaining the old order.<sup>33</sup>

Tadeusz Kościuszko, of course, does not belong in this category, as he was a committed democrat. But ultimately, there was little opportunity for him to provide freedom for all those who fought with him or entice others to join with that prospect. There is a tendency to relate the American Revolutionary War (1775–83), the French Revolution (1789), and the *Levée en masse* (1793), with the Kościuszko Uprising. The difference, of course, is free people taking up arms for ideas and personal gain, versus peasants who are promised freedom in exchange for their bodies but are essentially duped since little changes afterwards. Why would a peasant join the Kościuszko Uprising to maintain feudal relations? An army of Slavic slaves should not be compared with an army of free Frenchmen.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast to the nationalist vein of history, the men who fought with Kościuszko were not engaged in acts of patriotism, they were victims of physical violence. A historian of the older generation wrote, “Answering the call of Tadeusz Kościuszko, without an order or force, peasants went to defend every last inch of the Commonwealth from the foreign occupier”.<sup>35</sup> But as Korczyński shows, most of the soldiers were forced to fight, often as punishment.<sup>36</sup> And during that war, neither Kościuszko nor anyone else promised an end of serfdom to motivate fighters.

In later attempts to regain power, the elites tried to correct this mistake from the past. An announcement from the 1830 Uprising addressed to Lithuanian peasants reads:

The time has come for you to be truly free. You will own that which [you] only desire; you will be able to eat and drink to your heart’s content; you will not be giving the time of day to any lords and abusers, tax assessors, overseers and other Muscovite agents... If you simply grab a weapon and,

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<sup>33</sup> Here in reference to the Targowica Confederation. In modern Polish ‘Targowica’ is shorthand for ‘traitor’, much like Quisling or Benedict Arnold.

<sup>34</sup> Korczyński, 125, 128–9.

<sup>35</sup> Helena Brodowska, *Chłopi o sobie i Polsce. Rozwój świadomości społeczno-narodowej* (Warszawa, 1984), 18.

<sup>36</sup> Korczyński, 132.



along with the Poles, chase out the Muscovites from this land, the Poles will accept Lithuanians and Samogitians like brothers, and you will be equal and free among them; in a word: you won't be *Muzhyki*, as the Muscovite calls you, and you won't have any shackles upon you and you won't pay any poll tax, and you'll never be taken into the army like animals, but will come to the aid of your fatherland and the lords of your own free will.<sup>37</sup>

But in 1830, as before, these appeals were met with limited success. The gap between the peasant and Polish lord was too great to be repaired with empty promises. As Korczyński effectively shows, a record of broken promises on what could be gained from military service did not do them any favours.

The road to including the 'Polish' peasant into the nation began in earnest after the failure of the January Uprising (1863–4) against Russian rule. Though the widening of the political nation had its precedents in the Polish Enlightenment, the monumental failure of the third major uprising caused a sea change in political and social thinking.<sup>38</sup> However, a consensus among intellectuals about the conceptual borders to include anyone who spoke 'Polish' among the 'Poles' did not make it a reality.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the very concept of 'Polish' in the nineteenth-century context should be viewed with extreme scepticism. That label was often imposed from above. The language used by farming communities was much more fluid, and there was a vast gap between the official language, the 'King's English' so to say, as opposed to the language used daily. Written and spoken languages, too, could differ significantly. Cases where regional variations were recorded, such as Silesian, Kashubian or Masurian, show the potential for linguistic – and therefore cultural – a diversity that is difficult to integrate into the national historical narrative.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Egidijus Aleksandravičius and Antanas Kulakauskas, *Pod władzą carów: Litwa w XIX wieku*, transl. Beata Kalęba (Kraków, 2003 [2001]), 163.

<sup>38</sup> The esteemed historian Jerzy Jedlicki places this transformation at the period of the Duchy of Warsaw (1807–15), when the Napoleonic Code was introduced to a small portion of the former Commonwealth, making peasants and nobles legal equals. See Jerzy Jedlicki, *Jakiej cywilizacji Polacy potrzebują. Studia z dziejów idei i wyobraźni XIX wieku* (Warszawa, 1988), 36.

<sup>39</sup> Keely Stauter-Halsted, *The Nation in the Village: The Genesis of Peasant National Identity in Austrian Poland* (Ithaca, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> Consider also the linguistic diversity described in late 19th century France by Eugen Weber in *Peasants into Frenchmen*. I've yet to see a similar work that would

Eugen Weber wrote in his classic *Peasants into Frenchmen* that, “The modern view of the nation as a body of people united according to their own will and having certain attributes in common (not least history) was at best dubiously applicable to the France of 1870”.<sup>41</sup> If we can accept this premise as basically correct, then there is no doubt that the same statement could apply to Poland of the 1930s, perhaps even the 1950s, since, as a whole, the Polish lands experienced much lower levels of homogenisation and centralisation in comparison to France, which essentially moved towards a continuously more centralised government from the seventeenth century onward.

However, these works do not intend to identify the moment when peasants became ‘Poles’ but to give the ‘people’ a voice. Despite the authors’ genuine commitment to do so, we do not hear from peasants themselves, and each of the books reviewed here struggles with this problem. Leszczyński writes that his book “always sides with the weaker side and attempts to allow them to speak”.<sup>42</sup> Leszczyński and Pobłocki, in particular, claim that there simply are not any sources, but academic historians call foul. There are plenty of sources to hear *about* peasants, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That said, few peasants could write for themselves or left behind much of a written record that was not filtered through the state, the Church or the nobility. In that sense, their actions are to be their voice. Rauszer and Korczyński, by highlighting resistance, show that the peasant was not always subject but had agency. As we see in *The Forgotten*, for example, the narrative is based on military commanders and has nothing to offer in terms of the voices of peasant soldiers until the twentieth century. All the authors reviewed here repeat the error of claiming to give peasants a voice while continuing to lean on elite source material replicating the same issues of elite-subaltern relations.

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uncover the varieties of language and dialects spoken by so-called ‘Polish’ peasants in a similar period. See Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford, 1976).

<sup>41</sup> Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 485.

<sup>42</sup> “Autor tej książki zawsze stoi po stronie słabszych i stara się im oddać głos”, Leszczyński, 10.

## EMPIRE/COLONY

Postcolonial perspectives, orientalism, and cultural Marxism have all played a role in the creation of these new works, but as with the absence of peasant voices, there have been certain limitations. Only in recent years has it become part of the Polish discourse to attempt the decolonisation of history or postcolonial knowledge production. To embark on such an endeavour, the historian has to already take the perspective of the ‘people’ or in the Polish case, the peasantry so that there is an antagonistic relationship between the ‘colonisers’ and ‘colonised’. Over a decade ago, Jan Sowa’s *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą* [Phantom Body of the King. Peripheral Struggles with Modern Form] became one of the first to attempt to see Polish history through the lens of postcolonial studies. In many ways, Sowa’s presentation comes to the same conclusions as the authors reviewed here, and has much in common with Leszczyński’s *People’s History*. There are some key differences, however. For one, Sowa uses the Marxist explanatory apparatus to reach his most fundamental conclusions. Why, for example, was the feudal system particularly ruthless and abusive to the peasants? Sowa says that this resulted not from internal market issues or cruel individuals but rather from “outside pressure of the capitalist market, where income from grain sales grew in direct proportion to its production”.<sup>43</sup> Secondly, Sowa was primarily concerned with psychoanalysing the Polish understanding of history instead of reaching for source material to uncover the past. In that way, it is more of a historical, sociological exploration through the realm of Poland’s imaginary.

The postcolonial in the Polish context can bring to mind two edges of the same sword. On the one hand, the theoretical can be employed to unmask and deconstruct Russian narratives of power, such as Nikolai Karamzin, who claimed that the Polish-Lithuanian state was an occupation of eternally Russian lands.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, that same set of ideas unveils how the Polish obsession with *Kresy* (eastern borderlands) is essentially colonial and differs little

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<sup>43</sup> “... zewnętrzna presja rynku kapitalistycznego, na którym dochody ze sprzedaży zboża rosły wprost proporcjonalnie do jego produkcji”, Jan Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą* (Kraków, 2011), Kindle edition, 2170–2 (emphasis in original).

<sup>44</sup> Nikolai Karamzin, *Istoriya gosudarstva Rossiyskogo* (1816–1826), vols 1–12.

from British nostalgia for Ceylon plantations or the ‘good old days’ in Rhodesia.<sup>45</sup> Recent works in English have started to address both sides of the postcolonial consequences for Polish history, sometimes in the same book.<sup>46</sup> In the Polish language, the historiography of decolonisation is still underway and has significant limitations in its current form.

Polish history, whether for popular or academic audiences, has yet to take into account its own imperialist ‘Polo-centric’ assumptions that steamroll over the existence of subjecthood and agency for others. Historian Roman Szporluk commented that since some Poles today leer nostalgically over the current borders and sigh, ‘Ah, but Kyiv or Vilnius used to be ours,’ then Lithuanians could just as well do the same with Warsaw or Cracow.<sup>47</sup> This formulation underlines the existence of a Polish imperial mentality that is hard to wipe away; an issue raised merely by simple (mis)understandings of what ‘Poland’ meant in the distant past and what ‘Poland’ means today. And while Leszczyński and Pobłocki are particularly wary of projecting national assumptions into the past, Janicki, Rauszer and Korczyński are not particularly sensitive to the existence of contradictory perspectives.

From the Polish point of view, claims that seem to challenge the ‘accepted truths’ are often easily dismissed. It might seem absurd to the average Pole that a Belarusian tourism website included Adam Mickiewicz and Tadeusz Kościuszko on its top-five list of famous people from Belarus.<sup>48</sup> Much more than in the Belarusian context, rich Lithuanian and Ukrainian historiographical traditions overlap

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<sup>45</sup> Sowa wrote, “Gdyby polscy historycy potrafili przeanalizować i zdekonstruować polski dyskurs imperialno-kolonialny z taką sprawnością i zacięciem, z jakim demaskują mocarstwowość Rosji, Polska byłaby już zapewne światowym liderem studiów postkolonialnych”, Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla*, 876–9.

<sup>46</sup> Kristin Kopp, *Germany’s Wild East: Constructing Poland as Colonial Space* (Ann Arbor, 2012); Lenny A. Ureña Valerio, *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities: Race Science and the Making of Polishness on the Fringes of the German Empire, 1840–1920* (Athens, 2019); Kathryn Ciancia, *On Civilization’s Edge: A Polish Borderland in the Interwar World* (Oxford, 2021); Piotr Puchalski, *Poland in a Colonial World Order: Adjustments and Aspirations, 1918–1939* (New York–London, 2022).

<sup>47</sup> From a conversation in 2004 between Roman Szporluk and Andrzej Nowak: *O historii nie dla idiotów. Rozmowy i przypadki* (Kraków, 2019), 89.

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.visit-belarus.com/en/famous-belarusians-world-history/> [Accessed: 7 Dec. 2022].

considerably with the Polish. Rather than reject them out of hand, these national histories should be studied and understood to decolonise history's production in the present. A brief overview of national histories in light of the new Polish 'people's' history trend is quite revealing.

Ukrainian national history began in earnest with Mykhailo Hrushevs'kyi (1866–1934) and his magisterial *History of Ukraine-Rus'* in 10 volumes.<sup>49</sup> It is comparable to the aforementioned Karamzin for Great Russians or Palacky's *History of Bohemia* for the Czech national consciousness. This history was intended to be the positivistic proof that the Ukrainians are a nation in the Rankean sense, i.e. a people with their own separate history. It is difficult to pick out the exact narrative threads in the source-heavy books, but Hrushevs'kyi presented the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a relatively benign entity that allowed for the advancement of Ruthenian elites. Lithuanian families intertwined with the Ruthenians; Grand Duke Jogaila, later King Ladislaus II Jagiellon, was the son of the Duchess of Tversk. The Union of Lublin in 1569, which placed modern-day Ukraine into the administrative territory of the Kingdom of Poland, was a turning point toward disaster. Hrushevs'kyi claims the 'Ukrainian' elites turned toward closer ties to Polish elites, converting to Roman Catholicism in some cases and thus losing their distinct language and identity in the process.<sup>50</sup>

A slightly later tradition in Ukrainian national historiography took part in the postcolonial turn *avant la lettre*. Ivan Kryp'iakevych (1886–1967), a student of Hrushevs'kyi, published several essays and books on the history of Ukrainian colonisation, primarily in 1930s Poland.<sup>51</sup> During the first Soviet occupation of L'viv, he published a compact overview, *Istoria Ukraini*, with much more accessible language than his dear professor. Kryp'iakevych claims that up to the sixteenth century Ukraine had its own *szlachta*, who integrated with Lithuanian princes (*kniazi*).<sup>52</sup> Ukrainian nobles, he writes, cultivated

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<sup>49</sup> Available in English translation: Mykhailo Hrushevsky, *History of Ukraine-Rus'*, vols 1–10 (in 12 books) (Edmonton–Toronto, 1997–2014).

<sup>50</sup> This is covered in volume 6.

<sup>51</sup> Иван Петрович Крип'якевич, *Історія української колонізації в Географія українських і суміжних земель*, ed. В. Кубійович (Львів, 1938).

<sup>52</sup> Иван Петрович Крип'якевич, *Історія України* (Львів, 1990 [1941<sup>1</sup>]), 121.

culture and traditions as well as *starozhitnia religia* (ancient religion). The author marks the Union of Lublin as the breaking point for Ukrainian culture, not because of assimilation *per se*, but rather because poor Polish nobles flooded in from the west to colonise the area.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the work, Kryp'iakevich builds evidence for the claim that Ukrainians have continually struggled against outsiders attempting to exploit their great wealth.

Both for Kryp'iakevich and Hrushevs'kyi, Poles were the essential others. Perhaps due to their Galician experiences, they understood the Polish idea as the most destructive to their own visions of cultural distinction and independent statehood. Karamzin's wild imagination aside, from a historical perspective Poland, had been an interloper, an unwelcome coloniser.

The Lithuanian national tradition requires a more delicate touch with regard to its relationship with Poland and Polish culture. Due to the personal union and then the Union of Lublin, the Polish Kingdom and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania became intertwined in ways that are difficult to separate clearly along recognisable national lines. Lithuanian nobles quickly adapted to the Polish language and customs, and powerful families intermarried between the boundaries of Lithuania and Poland. As the Lithuanian language and pagan traditions faded among the nobility, the elites no longer bore the markers of Lithuanianess according to current standards of national belonging. Attempts by either Polish or Lithuanian national histories to lay claim to certain cultural influences or personalities are rather disingenuous and should not have a place in academic discourse.

In the Soviet period, regime historians flattened and simplified the past, claiming simply that Lithuanians were the peasants and the Poles were the lords.<sup>54</sup> Post-Soviet Lithuanian historiography has turned the focus back to elites by emphasising the separateness of the Polish kingdom from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, such as the council of lords, and Lithuanian diet (parliament), each with their own internal politics. Lithuanian elites also have their own origin story of separateness. Rather than descending from Sarmatians, they related themselves to the Romans, as relatives of Emperor Nero, and as the offspring of the Roman Emperor they were born

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>54</sup> Aleksandravičius and Kulakauskas, *Pod władzą carów*, 220.

to rule. This is all but ignored in the mainstream Polish telling of the same history.<sup>55</sup>

The story of the Lithuanian peasantry, too, looks considerably different. Mainstream Lithuanian publications do not shy away from the subject of these unprivileged farmers, but there are two distinct pathways. In Lithuania major in the east, the *veldami* experienced a similar experience of feudal serfdom as in much of the Polish lands. However, in the western core of the country, Samogitia [*Žemaitija* or *Žmudž*], there was a significant population of wealthy peasants who became the core of the national revival; the nobles lived in poverty.<sup>56</sup> Thus the heroes of Lithuanian national histories are those Lithuanians who managed to be isolated from Polish influences in the lands under Prussian control. As one overview put it, despite the encroaching Germanic dominance, Lithuania minor “never lost national and cultural ties with Lithuania”.<sup>57</sup>

In large part as a reaction to the perceived or real imperialism of Polish historical narratives, Lithuanian and Ukrainian historiographies remain stuck in a nationalising mode. A relatively recent history of Lithuania provides the following perspective on peasant life:

One interesting phenomenon of the time is that a consciousness of ethnic identity very seldom appears in court proceedings [in the early modern period]. In most cases, only the Lithuanian, Polish, Belarusian, or German names help distinguish ethnic identity. Polish and German names dominate the muster roll of manorial owners and managers. Lithuanian names appear among the most oppressed and abused, but at the same time, the most rebellious peasants. In one case, the restive peasants actually refer to their self-respect as Lithuanians in refusing to bow to serfdom.<sup>58</sup>

These kinds of generalisations come as a bit of shock, and it is hard to believe that something like this was published only a few years ago, especially considering all of the advances made to deconstruct the projection of national identity into the distant past. Ultimately

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<sup>55</sup> Zigmantas Kiaupa, Jūratė Kiaupienė, and Albinas Kuncevičius, *The History of Lithuania before 1795*, transl. Irena Zujienė (Vilnius, 2000), 198–9. Leszczyński mentions a slightly different version of the same legend, Leszczyński, 20.

<sup>56</sup> Bronius Makauskas and Vytautas Černius, *History of Lithuania: From Medieval Kingdom to Modern Democracy* (Vilnius, 2018), 158–9.

<sup>57</sup> Kiaupa, Kiaupienė, and Kuncevičius, *History of Lithuania*, 304.

<sup>58</sup> Makauskas and Černius, *History of Lithuania*, 161.

though, it seems as if attempts to nationalise the past are a corrective against the possibility of mislabelling. Perhaps the broad brush term of 'Polish' peasant might be applied to those who should be placed in the category of 'Lithuanian' peasants, and then the Lithuanian national historian would lose constituents in the distant past. These same historians made claims about the number of Lithuanian peasants in the sixteenth century, though there is little indication of how they arrived at those numbers.<sup>59</sup> A national history does not require explanations of that kind, however, since it sees the world through a national lens.

Historians of 'Poland' face rational and logical difficulties that did not exist for Hrushevs'kyi and others like him. They composed monumental histories of neither a place nor a state but of a 'people'. Leszczyński writes, "The people's history of Poland, therefore, cannot under any circumstance be limited to the 'people's history of Poles'".<sup>60</sup> The 'people' in his history are defined by class; they are at the bottom of the economic and social hierarchy. Leszczyński commits to writing the history of women, peasants of various religious and linguistic backgrounds, Jews and other marginalised people who lived and died in a place some people called 'Poland'. This is a refreshing take, and thanks to Leszczyński, Pobołcki and others, we are on the road to the best possible understanding of the past.

However, since the story they have to tell is ultimately a response to the elite, rather imperialistic, historical narratives, the long shadow of 'Poland' hangs heavy over a complex society that is a historiographical warzone. It's hard to escape the vortex of 'Poland' when operating within this frame that views the Piast dynasty, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the modern Polish nation-state as a single narrative stream, gliding seamlessly over the complexities of space and time. Zinn arguably made a similar error, and over the past 30 years, scholars challenged that framework by working on bottom-up processes. This allows peasants themselves to have a role in accepting and adjusting national messages for their own purposes. The elites or state alone do not act on a passive population, but subalterns can create initiatives

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 134–6.

<sup>60</sup> "Ludowa historia Polski nie da się więc w żaden sposób sprowadzić do 'ludowej historii Polaków (i Polek)'", Leszczyński, 611.



and influence the shape of national identity.<sup>61</sup> Rather than working from the assumptions of the nation and the state, a ‘people’s’ history of Poland should begin with the people alone, free from the chains of the ahistorical nation.

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<sup>61</sup> See, for example: Florencia Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley–Los Angeles, 1995); Bryan Roberts, *The Making of Citizens: City of Peasants Revisited* (London–New York, 2016).

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