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As an intellectual movement romanticism has, for a long time, been generating extreme emotions: from despair of those who focus on semantics (think of the difficulties with defining this concept) to the concerns of political realists of all kinds. Nonetheless, the Polish imagination is very strongly marked by romantic thinking since Central Europe reached modernity in its deeply spiritualized version. Modernity is difficult to imagine when there is no mass political agent. In the Polish context which was marked by the experience of the partitions, the enlightened Reason could not be granted the task to invent a new form of political “us,” as was the case for example in France. That is why, the people, first noticed by the creators of the Polish Enlight-

enment, were established as a form of imaginable political actor in specific reality of spiritualization of modernity.¹

Considering that political modernity appeared in the Polish collective imagination in such a form, it is a paradox that the romantic king-spirit decisively failed in the field of history. This history, however, has to be carefully distinguished from what is commonly called “historical policy” and be more properly named the “management of collective memory.” As the tendency to idealize the past and construct narratives based on foggy cultural-religious values is becoming more popular in Poland, the form of these narratives reveal a purely positivist nature. Elite history dominates, coupled with an omnipresent fastidious collection of facts and 19th century methods of reading archived sources. This tendency is bound with Polish historical thinking to such an extent that many historians refrain from presenting methodological assumptions of their research, accepting that this is the only type of historical thinking.

Looking at the last 200 years from a metahistorical perspective, meaning asking how historians have been constructing their stories, we can notice that inspirations to get out of historical writing that is romantic in content and positivist in form can, paradoxically, be provided by radical romanticism. And indeed the first attempts to write a folk (people’s) history of Poland were made in the noble estates of the Lublin region, in Paris basement apartments

1 I write about romanticism as spiritualisation of modernity after: B. Trencsényi, M. Janowski, M. Baár, M. Kopeček, M. Falina, *A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe. Volume I: Negotiating Modernity in the ‘Long Nineteenth Century’*, Oxford 2016.

and British harbor cities. By using the term “folk history” I mean not only historical stories reported by representatives of the folk people, but also all narratives about them people and their activities, which were created by people who claim the right to be called professional historians or are simply using history as an instrument in a certain kind of political game. This article is aimed at reflecting over how this mental process, which aimed at writing Poland’s history as a folk history, has developed and why it failed.

Entering the Field of Historicism

Even though already in the First Polish Republic there were individuals calling for the need to improve the peasants’ standard of living, it was the Enlightenment which can be called the heyday of this kind of thinking. However, even at those times the peasant-focused reflection encountered numerous restrictions and only a slightly expanded understanding of what is political. The best example here was Adam Naruszewicz, a prominent representative of the enlightened thinking who stated that the core of the nation was to be found in the “active tiers of the Republic,” namely: the king, nobility and clergy, which clearly narrowed the borders of the political subject. This kind of interpretation was quite common for the second half of 18th century historians who believed that the constraint of the peasants was a result of nobility’s lawlessness, which, in turn, was a result of the collapse of royal authority, meaning the only institution defending peasants.²

2 A.F. Grabski, *Adam Naruszewicz – dziejopis narodu i Króla Jegomości*, [in:] idem, *Pespektywy przeszłości*, Lublin 1983, p. 89; E. Cesarz, *Chłopi w polskiej myśli historycznej doby porozbiorowej 1795–1864: syntezy, parasyntezy i podręczniki dziejów ojczyznych*, Rzeszów 1999, p. 76.

A change in the political thinking paradigm was brought by an encounter with modernity, which on the Polish territories overlapped with the trauma caused by the loss of statehood. As its result, the pauperizing nobility, students or civil servants, affected by the sense of threat and the breaking down of the world's harmony, started to search for new markers of certainty. In this sense, romanticism was born as a reaction to the weaknesses of the enlightened vision of the world. It became a search for security and community within the newly re-conceptualized nation.³ This specific type of romantic progressivism, which allowed for a reflection on Poland's folk history, was based on retrospective utopias. Apparently, it was Jerzy Samuel Bandtkie who put forward the first idealistic vision of Slavic community rule from the pre-state period. Bandtkie argued that the old Slav territories developed a Župan state, which was based on the equality of tiers. This equality, however, as Bandtkie further argued, could not last for too long as the plagues of hunger and poverty forced people to subordination towards the landowners. In his view, however, the subordination model that had been introduced in Poland was not a result of local conditions, but rather adaptation to local conditions of the German pattern.⁴ From today's perspective, this moderate narration did not yet include a vision of peasant classes⁵ as

3 M. Hroch, *National Romanticism*, [in:] B. Trencsényi, M. Kopeček (eds.), *National Romanticism – The Formation of National Movements*, s. 5–7; P. Kuligowski, "W poszukiwaniu stałości. Polscy socjaliści XIX w. i potworna nowoczesność," *Władza Sądzenia* 5/2015, p. 79–95.

4 J.S. Bandtkie, *Dzieje Królestwa Polskiego*, Wrocław 1820, p. 110–121.

5 In the text I am consistent in using this term in plural to show that class divisions in the 19th century were blurred. Hence, I believe that all attempts to draw simple conclusions in this regards lead to risky simplifications. It is difficult to use rigid categories to describe the class position of a factory worker who makes money on a side on for example sowing shoes, or a peasant who is a seasonal worker in a local factory.

an independent political agent, even though it had already opened the space for further crucial findings.

The next changes in historical thinking, which had a clear impact also on what is political, were a result of Joachim Lelewel's work. Lelewel noticed that historians' interests do not need to be limited solely to collecting facts on governments and dynasties, but can also include a reflection on specific social actors. What is more, Lelewel had thought that peasants should be seen as historically passive breadwinners, but had a significant input into culture, even the military sphere. Both of Lelewel's convictions had significant consequences for the ways of constructing the historical narration. In his *Uwagi nad dziejami Polski i ludu jej* (Remarks on the History of Poland and its People) which were written in the years 1835-1836, Lelewel departed from a chronological order for the sake of problem-based construction, devoting around 30% of the book to the history of peasants, which at that time was indeed very unique.⁶ In his later works Lelewel enforced some of his theses and intuitions. In one of his texts, he presented the development of the state of the first generations of the Piast dynasty through the prism of peasants' fight with the nobility; where the former, despite a temporary upper hand, did not get political domination grounded because of a strong sense of equality. Interestingly, for Lelewel the white spot in history, which was a short period of interregnum between the fall of Mieszko II and arrival of Casimir I the Restorer (usually interpreted as the time of anar-

6 E. Cesarz, *Chłopi w polskiej myśli historycznej...*, p. 161–163; V. Julkowska, *Retoryka w narracji historycznej Joachima Lelewela*, Poznań 1998, p. 117.

chy or “pagan reaction”), was a time when “peasants ruled everywhere.” It was put to an end by a foreign incursion.⁷

The paths paved by Lelewel were later taken by a few of his followers. Among the most interesting peasant historians, deriving from Lelewel’s method, was (at a certain stage in his life) Lucjan Siemieński. Siemieński would also stress old Poland’s egalitarianism and pointed to a few moments in history, where the engagement of peasants contributed to the elimination of a few serious dangers, which were a threat to statehood. Thus, Siemieński argued that King Władysław the Short was able to push back the attack of the Teutonic Knights thanks to the support he received from the city dwellers and the peasants; and that during King Jagiełło’s times, a division composed solely of peasants was to give a huge blow to the Teutonic troops.⁸ Siemieński’s work deserves attention also because of its interesting form. When the book was published, it was apparently authored by “Grzegorz from Raclawice,” a former Kościuszko soldier who fought at the Raclawice battle next to Bartosz Głowacki. It is composed of different “evenings,” which take the form of historical narrations prepared for local peasants. In this way, Siemieński not only democratized the object of his historical interest, seeking examples in Polish history when peasants acted as active subjects, but also the form, as the work takes the shape of a popular story, addressed to peasants.

7 J. Lelewel, *Stracone obywatelstwo stanu kmiecego w Polsce*, Bruxelles 1846, p. 9–13.

8 L. Siemieński, *Wieczory pod lipą. Historia Polski w opowiadaniach*, Warszawa 1910, p. 90, 133.

This completed a certain romantic canon in the thinking about peasants which, at that time, trespassed the accepted convictions on what should be regarded as historical. At the same time, the above reconstructed narration offers very limited potential for revolutionizing social attitudes. In other words, the picture of the peasant classes, which emerges from these stories, is a vision of a community engaged in recreating Polish tradition, producing food, and performing heroic acts at battlefields. It lacks reflection on the agency of peasants' which would directly expand understanding of what is political and question the rule of hegemonic classes. In the next part of the text I will be pointing to the moments when radical romantics were involved in such reflections.

Civic spirit, Khmelnytsky and Spartacus

The basis for such a reflection were two theoretical changes. Since this reflection took place outside the framework of the historical debate that was then taking place, the radical romantics, in their political practice, assigned new meanings to a series of concepts which had been coined by peasant researchers in the past. In addition, they questioned the method of rationalistic, proto-scientific historians, such as Lelewel, who were analyzing the creditworthiness of sources and constructed tools to criticize them. Romantics refuted this way of thinking, pointing out that the historical truth that is worthy of such a name has to be alive and is hence captured solely as something which operates in the culture.

They believed that the sources for writing history could only be found in people, folk tales, songs and legends, which they treated as more valuable to living history as it was rooted and coming from the grassroot level. That is why, the area of their search included, for example, Poland's history before Mieszko I, which was the period that Lelewel and some more rationalistically-oriented historians approached with distance.⁹

Narrations created for political practice and which were based on such understanding of “living history” show an array of concepts that compose interesting semantic layers, which, in turn, indicates the intensive conceptual work of that time. This was often used to directly justify radical peasants' uprisings by the then fashionable categories of “spirit” or “public reason.” Jan Czyński, one of the most radical social thinkers of the Great Polish Emigration, analyzed, in two works and two languages, the famous events called the “August 15th night;” when in 1831, during the November Uprising, the people of Warsaw started to riot and lynch Russian spies. Czyński, as a member of the Patriotic Society – an organization accused of inciting the capital's residents to riots – put much effort in refuting these accusations.¹⁰ In his text addressed to Polish-speaking readers, Czyński argued that the restless crowds, which had come to Warsaw's streets on August 15th “had their origin in public reason and the noblest of

9 V. Julkowska, *Lelewel i romantycy – spór o rozumienie prawdy historycznej*, [in:] K. Marchlewicz, P. Matusik (eds.), *Swoi i obcy: studia z dziejów myśli Wielkiej Emigracji*, Poznań 2004, p. 33.

10 A. Gałkowski, *Polski patriota – obywatel Europy: rzecz o Janie Czyńskim (1801–1867)*, Warszawa 2004, p. 28–31.

feelings.” In addition, he pointed out that the murders that took place at that time were not a pure act of destruction, because “this night [...] gave new power to public opinion.”¹¹ Quite similar, although with slightly different angles highlighted, was Czyński’s reporting on these events to his French-speaking readers. In this text, he started by pointing out that the image of the August 15th events was misrepresented by aristocracy – a group that had brought about Poland’s fall. This fall, as Czyński hastily added, was only partial, as the peasants, meaning the liveliest strata of the society, maintains and recreates songs and national legends. In his text, Czyński used, at least a few times, the term *civisme* – civic spirit, which was to characterize radical activities aimed at partitioning powers and aristocracy.¹² In both essays Czyński articulated his view, which was clearly in contrast with elitist convictions stating that peasants’ gatherings were solely a destructive force and driven by primitive instincts. In this sense, Czyński, assigning agent creative powers to such a collective and treating its activity as “civic spirit” was ahead, by a few decades, of the critics of elitist theories, such as José Ortega y Gasset or Gustave Le Bon.

Radical romantics also brought back the political dimension to the interpretation of some important events, from the peasants’ history perspective, of the First Polish Republic. One such event were the Cossack wars. Their

11 J. Czyński, *Dzień piętnasty sierpnia i sąd na członków Towarzystwa Patryotycznego*, Warszawa 1831, p. 17, 31.

12 J. Czyński, *La nuit du 15 août 1831 à Varsovie: précédée d'un aperçu rapide de toute la révolution*, Paris 1832, p. 2–4.

image in Polish collective memory had been to a large extent shaped by Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel, *Ogniem i mieczem* (By Fire and Sword) where participants of the Cossack rebellion (not war!) were actually dehumanized and treated as a destructive mass deprived of reason. This way of presenting Cossacks was yet not solely Sienkiewicz's input into the public discourse as they had been perceived as rebels in Polish historical works many years before the publication of the book. Lelewel made a certain breakthrough in this area when, fully aware of the consequences, he wrote about the "Cossack wars."¹³

Tadeusz Krępowiecki, a political activist of the Great Polish Emigration, went much further in his reflections on the nature of Cossack upheavals. He turned the narrating of this history, as a peasants' history, into a certain political performance during the second anniversary of the November Uprising. In his speech, Krępowiecki pointed out that Cossack uprisings were revenge attacks of the peasants on landowners, and compared their leaders – Pavlyuk, Nalyvaiko, and Khmelnytsky – to Spartacus. He also pointed out that peasants were suffering under the rule of both foreign and native lords. At the same time, peasants cultivate the desire for freedom, which can be "seen in grieving [full of grief – P.K.] soldiers' songs, elegiac love stories of a Ukrainian boy, memoirs of Zaporozhian Cossacks."¹⁴ The significance of Krępowiecki's analysis is

13 E. Cesarz, *Chłopi w polskiej myśli historycznej...*, p. 122.

14 T. Krępowiecki, *Przemówienie wygłoszone w Paryżu 29 listopada 1832 r. w rocznicę rewolucji polskiej*, [in:] W. Łukaszewicz, *Tadeusz Krępowiecki: żołnierz rewolucjonista 1798–1847*, Warszawa 1954, p. 150–151.

even greater when we consider the fact that it was presented in French. While in the 1930s there were some Polish voices condemning the system of the First Polish Republic, “outside” attempts were made to, above all, stress the egalitarian character of Slavic territories, which were deformed on the path of historical development. In this context, it is not surprising that Krępowiecki was condemned by nearly all the emigration circles.

In the 1830s, the discourse of the Great Polish Emigration saw many statements justifying the rapid acts of peasants’ resistance, or which were almost inciting to such bloody events. In 1835 a journal titled *Północ* (The North), which was published by Poles in France, noted a large number of arsons in forests owned by the nobility. The editors interpreted these events as a sign of peasant resistance – a resistance that was just, as it was caused by poverty, exploitation and driven by revenge for the inability to use the wood and other fruits of the forest.¹⁵ One year later, Gromada Humań – a small organization established in Great Britain – which in its name was showing its affirmation towards folk terror, went one step further. “Humań” was the word which all emigres associated with the 1768 Cossack and peasants uprising, during which a slaughter of the Polish and Jewish population took place in Humań.

The above-mentioned examples of writing on Poland’s peasant history can give the impression that the first decades of the 19th century prepared the ground for trespassing of the

¹⁵ *Północ* 5/1835, p. 17.

existing patterns of social life, which were inherited from the times of the nobility-magnates' rule. What is more, it seems that the expectations for such an egalitarian story was characterized not only by a small groups of radical romantics, but also representatives of Polish academic circles. Some years later, August Cieszkowski, the first chairman of the Poznań Society of Friends of Science, assigned a monetary award for a person who will prepare a comprehensive history of the peasants and economic relations in old Poland.¹⁶ Below, I will point to the main reason of the crisis in the thinking about peasants as a new political agent.

Szelism or Despair of the Masses

The year 1846 was, without a doubt, a significant moment marking the end of romantic projects of writing on Poland's peasant history. At that time, the nature and scale of the Galician peasants' uprisings caused much fear among the radical romantic groups. Initially, in the Democratic Polish Society (DPS) – an organization that in February 1864 tried to start an uprising in Galicia and Wielkopolska – nobody wanted to accept the fact that peasants' division in Galicia were gathering not to support the independence movement but to oppose it. In a weekly published by the DPS, on 18 April, meaning exactly two months after the first attacks on aristocratic mansions had taken place, an anonymous author reported that Szela was a commander of one of the divisions which were fighting with Austrian troops and

¹⁶ B. Limanowski, *Historia demokracji polskiej w epoce porozbiorowej*, Warszawa 1983, p. 799.

attacking garrisons.¹⁷ It was in the issue of 23 May 1846 when a participant of a failed uprising described the situation in Galicia in the following way: “robberies and murders that peasants performed on the nobility did not come from spite and revenge towards them, but the order of a police superintendent in Niepołomice and a starosta from Bochnia.”¹⁸ In other words, in the view of the editors of *Demokrata Polski* (The Polish Democrat), the Galician slaughter did not show any destructive tendencies in the peasants’ attitude. Their rebellion was seen as bad not since it was not a revolution which establishes a new order, nor since it took the form of a pure revolt; one that does not generate a long-reaching political horizon. The main problem that was mentioned by the author of this statement characteristic for democratic circles was that the peasants were acting in the name of a foreign interest. Nonetheless, the DPS undertook an attempt to bridge the gap that had emerged between the nobility and peasants as a result of the events of February and March 1846. Instead of praising the social fights or justifying individual acts of peasant terror, a narrative calling for greater solidarity was offered, calculated to reconcile the two sides of the political and economic dispute. Even the above-mentioned report of an eye witness was completed with a vision of individual peasants who, after having listened to manifestos brought to them by the democrats coming back from emigration, joined the uprising.¹⁹

17 *Demokrata Polski* 41/1845–1846, p. 164.

18 *Demokrata Polski* 46/ 1845–1846, p. 182.

19 *Ibidem*, p. 183.

A similar narration was attempted during the Spring of Nations. Wiktor Heltman, one of the most prominent representatives of the DPS at that time, described the events which apparently took place on 20 March 1848 in Jasło, where a few hundred noblemen were to meet with the peasants. In Heltman's view, the purpose of that meeting was reconciliation: the former participants of the slaughter apologized while the local priest conducted a mass for the reunion of the feuding parties.²⁰ Also a solidarity-oriented message was seen in two brochures, published by the DPS with a circulation of 2,000 issues, unheard of at that time, which in 1848 were distributed on the Polish territories and were planned to reach peasants.²¹ Similar results to the reading of both texts come from the analysis of the arrangement of some concepts, which organize the thinking process. Thus, in regards to a collective "us" the dominating category is a "brotherhood," followed by a "nation" or a "nationality," less frequently a "mother," "maternal" and the least frequently "people of Poland." Similarly, in both texts words such as "class" or "tier" are used only once, while concepts such as "captivity" or "slave" are used around 50 times altogether. This small semantic analysis, which points to the prevalence of the universal category of slavery and a large frequency of concepts which allow to treat a political community as a family, already shows a significant shift within the framework of the discourse of the radical romantics.

20 W. Heltman, *Galicja w 1848 roku*, [in:] W. Heltman, J.N. Janowski, *Demokracja polska na emigracji*, collected and edited by H. Rządowska, Warszawa 1965, p. 272.

21 Reference to: W. Heltman, L. Zienkiewicz, *Boże Słowa do Ludu Polskiego*, Polska 1847; [b.a.], *Słowa prawdy do Ludu Polskiego*, [b.m.] 1848.

None of the political groups then issued a word of approval towards Jakub Szela and his undertakings. Even female activists involved in social movements of that time, such as Naryza Żmichowska, were literally scared of the peasants after 1846 and gave up interest in social work in the villages for offering free education to artisans.²² The 1850s were hence a Chochol dance, meaning an expression of hopelessness, on the dead body of the radical romantic projects. More courageous political statements issued by this group were torpedoed by conservatives with the memory of 1846. Thus, in some texts of the 1850s we can even find the term “Szelism” which was used to express the despair of the masses, which for a long time had pushed out a bold affirmation of peasants as a mass political subject, capable of facing the challenges of modernity.

Conclusion. The Only Possible History

Writing Poland’s peasants’ history inclines the need to make a series of theoretical decisions. In the summary I will point to two possible interpretations, which are a result from the mental processes reconstructed here. An unsuccessful attempt to write a peasants’ history of Poland can be seen as (an equally unsuccessful) attempt to overcome the peripheral condition of Central and Eastern Europe. This is the most visible in the conviction, typical for the epoch, of a special nature of each nation, sought primarily in its pre-historic times. Secondly, and more importantly from the perspective of this analysis, the peasants’ history binds the historical process anew, which in this part of Eu-

22 J. Berghauzen, *Ruch patriotyczny w Królestwie Polskim 1833–1850*, Warszawa 1974, p. 272–273.

rope is full of disruption and discontinuation. In this sense, folk historians and the group of radical romantics, who opposed the analyzed social structures with the category of an institutionalized state, were trying to show that legally grounded political institutions are only the epiphenomenalism of an under-skin history, a history of long lasting, meaning peasant history. Hence, we can risk a thesis that the heroes of the story presented here anticipated, in some way, the conviction of such folk historians as for example E.P. Thompson, who stated that a class is not a community, but a social series, a cultural and historical process, and that class dynamics can be caught not through one-time events but in all spheres of life: from law and production to folk culture and everyday practices.²³

Secondly, the pressure of the whole group to seek a new political agent and new security in peasants, and not the state or other imaginable conditions without political independence, is quite telling. The point here is not to stress that the attempts to write a peasants' history of Poland and the political games that were undertaken through them illustrate an almost genetic weakness of political institutions in this part of Europe; which, in turn, according to some thinkers, points to the deep roots of Central and Eastern European antisemitism and xenophobia. Conversely, for me these unsuccessful and naïve, but somehow inspiring, projects are an encouragement

23 M. Baár, *Historians and Nationalism: East-Central Europe in the Nineteenth Century*, New York 2010, p. 66–67; R. Batzell, S. Beckert, A. Gordon, G. Winant, E.P. Thompson, "Politics and History: Writing Social History Fifty Years after The Making of the English Working Class," *Journal of Social History* 4/2015, p. 754–757.

for seeking a bottom-up and democratic history. Indeed, finally for the history of Poland – a state in which the largest percentage of inhabitants has peasant roots – a peasant history seems to be the only one which can be told without harm to the complexity of the picture. Thus, possibly, the term “folk” will eventually turn out to be completely useless.

translated by Iwona Reichardt





