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## “The People’s History of Poland”—a Guide- book for Middle-Class Readers

The book by Adam Leszczyński is probably the most intensely debated (and also the best selling) Polish historical work of the last half year. Though it is not the first publication in recent years showing the rising interest in the history and legacy of serfdom or labour history, it is the first full academic panorama of the whole history of Poland that uses the perspective of people’s history. Therefore, much has been said already about its strengths and weaknesses. My commentary will not point to factual inaccuracies in one or another detail or discuss the validity of the book’s general interpretation line (what many reviews of it do). Instead, I focus on three general issues: (1) what is, according to Leszczyński, people’s history, (2) what is Poland for him, and—last but not least—(3) what is the book’s intention and aim?

(1) The author of the Polish people’s history consciously steps into the shoes of Howard Zinn, borrowing not only the title but also the idea of putting all kinds of exploited groups into one basket. As he declares: The “people’s history of Poland should be a history of the bottom 90% of the society, the ruled not the rulers, the poor not the rich, mostly uneducated and always subordinated to the authority” (Leszczyński 2020, 569). The bottom 90%—in fact, very diverse—is, however, not the subject for itself but mainly throughout the relationship with “the upper 10%.” As the book’s subtitle says, it is “a history of exploitation and resistance.” Leszczyński shows the history of Poland as

an economic struggle where the rulers used their position and force (often: hegemony) to exploit the society. The exploited usually have little power or capital (economic, social, cultural) to change their position for the better. That is why the resistance and sometimes its violent form—a rebellion—were the only proper and, in fact, reasonable collective solutions to counteract the oppression.

Leszczyński's people's history is deeply rooted in economic history and, in particular, rational choice theory (not necessarily explicitly mentioned but often seen beneath the surface). The exploitation of peasantry or workers was, from the Polish nobleman or capitalist's view (apart from all kinds of mythologies that justified it), usually a reasonable solution. The semi-peripheral position of Poland within the global economic system was the reason that forced labour seemed to be profitable. On the other hand, the revolt was often no less reasonable for the powerless and desperate exploited. The Warsaw historian convincingly shows that the frequency and strength of peasant revolts coincides with the rising oppression and hopes for a positive change. Therefore, we observe waves of collective insubordination in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when those hopes could be met with some institutional changes. Although often spontaneous, the revolts of peasants (and later workers) reasonably used the tools available to them: performativity (also performativity of violence) and collective actions.

In that respect, I need to add that the issue that seems to be the most controversial for many Polish historians is that Adam Leszczyński compares serfdom with slavery. Not only does he compare, but he also states that, regardless of some legal and contextual differences, peasants in Poland for centuries were “white Negroes,” viewed by the ideologies of ruling noble elites as “yokels” and “naturally subordinated.” As he argues and quotes the sources, that comparison was already explicitly made by some perceptive observers in the Early Modern period, so we should not avoid using it today. Here comes the problem of—what I would call—mutual misunderstanding. On the one hand, Leszczyński's critics tend to ignore that he is aware of those differences between a slave on a plantation in Georgia and a crofter in Masovia. Nevertheless, he shows that both occupied the same social position in the social structure and within the discourses legitimising it. On the other hand, Leszczyński focuses so on the elites' legitimising mythologies and peasants' resistance that other forms of the peoples' life and their agency almost disappear from his sight. From the “The People's History of Poland,” we learn a lot about the exploitation, resistance, and domination mythologies but much less about the actual 90% of the “bottom 90%” lifetime. Everyday

life appears here only as the context of the three main themes, which is, in my view, a pity.

(2) To write a synthetic history of over a thousand-year history means to select only some cases to build up the general picture. Since the term “Poland” referred to different entities through the ages, that task is even more difficult than in England or the US. One can always ask why the author did not refer to the context of a region X or a city Y or an author Z, and one never gets the picture with all possible elements (in fact, Leszczyński notes that and cites Jerzy Jedlicki’s notion of “a demon of induction” who can possess a positivistic historian). Having said that, I still regret that Poland in the reviewed book is located predominantly around Warsaw, Łódź and Krakow, and sometimes also in the Eastern borderlands. Some regions in Western Poland like Upper Silesia hardly ever appear, even in the chapters about 20<sup>th</sup>-century history. That perspective—centred around what has been the Russian Polish Kingdom and Austrian Galicia—is quite typical for Polish historical narratives in general. In other words, Leszczyński cuts himself off from traditional elite-centred historiography but follows the same centralised pattern when it comes to geography.

If geographical framework might be disappointing, the chronology of Polish history, introduced by Leszczyński, is, in my view, an innovative concept that can be useful for further studies. He divides the history into six periods: early middle-ages, the period of the German law colonisation (up to 1520), the Early-Modern manor economy (which he calls “the tightening of the screw”), “the end of slavery” (mid-18<sup>th</sup> up to the abolition of serfdom in the Polish Kingdom in 1864), “capitalism on peripheries” (mid-19<sup>th</sup> to 1944) and communist Poland—“the exploitation in the name of the party.” The periodisation consciously goes beyond political history schemes, arguing, e.g., that introducing the general obligatory serfdom in 1520 is a far more critical date for the people than the death of another king. That chronology allows one to notice key processes happening regardless of political changes, including the partitions or the rise of the Polish state in 1918. On the other hand, I regret that there is a tiny place for military conflicts in that periodisation, even for the First and the Second World War, which without question had an immense importance for “the bottom 90%” in all possible dimensions. The Polish people’s history of WWI and WWII is still to be written.

(3) Beginning this commentary with the parallels between Zinn’s and Leszczyński’s books, I should return to it once again. Leszczyński, like his American predecessor, openly declares that writing history is

a political act, a statement in the public debate. Positivistic (or, in another way, modernist) belief in the cognitive and political neutrality of a historian is not only a mirage but also a mischievous illusion, supporting, in fact, the elite-centred view of the past. Citing Andrzej Nowak (a conservative Polish historian), Leszczyński argues that right-wing historiography is already aware of its political power and uses it for their needs in strengthening a nationalistic and elitist view on Polish history. It is high time for the progressive historiography to do the opposite, not following positivistic illusions—says Leszczyński. “»The People’s History of Poland« must put the interests and needs of the subordinated people at the first place and entirely reinterpret the national history from their perspective” (Leszczyński 2020, 570).

Here come two interlinked questions which, in my opinion, are central to understanding the “The People’s History of Poland”: to whom is the book dedicated and what message does it carry? To find an answer to the former question, let’s first deal with the latter. In my view, the full impact on exploitation, resistance and ruling elites’ ideologies serves to demonstrate the sources and mechanisms of social distance and long-lasting mistrust between Polish elites and Polish people (*lud*). That is why we read so little about the people’s lives and so much about their economic and power relationship with the elites. The bottom strata had (and still may have) a lot of good reasons not to trust the upper- and middle-classes and not to share their viewpoints. If both speak about values, social order, dignity, freedom, they, in fact, refer to two different memories of deeply-rooted historical experiences. Rare moments in Polish history when a noticeable part of the elites offered true understanding and a sense of community with the people (like in 1794, 1863, 1905 1918, 1980) usually ended with a failure or a disappointment. That is why the bottom strata were and are sensitive to the signs of patronising and looking down on them.

Finally, we can name the reader of Leszczyński’s book: this is not the best-seller for the bottom classes but, on the contrary, a guidebook for middle-class intellectuals, educators, activists, thinkers, and policymakers (of all kinds). “The People’s History of Poland” should make them/us aware of the deep reservoir of mutual class mistrust and historical reasons for that distance. It reminds us of economic mechanisms of exploitation, standing behind it, which might not be noticeable when one does not belong to the bottom classes. Considering that the current middle class in Poland is on one-two generations of peasant or workers’ origins, it is a form of a collective anamnesis of who “we” were in the past. If, despite all its weakness, that is the effect of Leszczyński’s book, it will meet its aim.

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Let me also add a little postscript: while writing this commentary in English, I realised that, paradoxically, this book might be far more surprising for a Polish reader who is used to the traditional textbook and elite-oriented historiographical narratives than for a foreigner, aware of what the people's history is. Nevertheless, in Polish historiography, the importance of Leszczyński's book is marked not only by what he wrote (and whatnot), but also by the time it was published and its political statement.

### References

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