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Adam Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski*: A Revolution in Polish Historiography?

Adam Leszczyński's *Ludowa historia Polski* ("The People's History of Poland") has already received its fair share of critical commentary in Polish journals, and rightly so. The book's reframing of the long durée of Polish history "from the ground up" challenges the way we view the relative contributions of noble actors and the broad masses of unlettered peasants. Leszczyński's recasting of the nation's history parallels a similarly controversial effort to shift the focus of the American story. The highly controversial "1619 Project," published in 2019, suggested an inversion of the power dynamic in US history, substituting Black Americans as founders to change the national narrative from a tale of heroic beginnings to one of internal struggle for liberation. *Ludowa historia* has the potential to spark a similar debate about the very nature of Polish history. The questions are: where will the conversation go from here, and how can we as scholars make best use of Leszczyński's reappraisal?

"The People's History of Poland" re-examines the entire sweep of Polish history by focusing our attention on the fortunes of the oppressed majority and de-emphasizing the powerful minority. But this is no mere Manichean opposition of forces. Rather, Leszczyński structures his reappraisal around three intersecting concepts: the changing structures of oppression imposed upon the peasantry and other lower social orders, the varying justifications for these power dynamics, and the matrix of ways the subject population maneuvered around these restric-

tions. At its base, “The People’s History of Poland” asks us to rethink the lessons Polish history teaches, or to consider whether it teaches any concrete lessons at all. No longer a story of romantic struggle against foreign invasion, conquest, and occupation or a heroic battle “for your freedom and ours,” Poland here is the site of internal struggle among competing social orders. This recalibration suggests a much darker past, one that is peppered with institutionalized violence and systematic exclusion. Leszczyński revisits the country’s dramatic turning points from the perspective of the politically disenfranchised and economically oppressed—peasant farmers, lower-class urban inhabitants, and industrial wage laborers. Symbols of exploitation are substituted for myths that mask the reality of life among the lower ranks. The curse of Cham fills in for the legend of Lech. The bloody violence required to settle peasants on the land substitutes for the drama of medieval warlords. Mieszko I, we learn, was in all likelihood involved in the slave trade and the 1036 peasant revolt was less a reaction to the imposition of Christianity than a rebellion against putative masters. Time and again, Leszczyński reinterprets well-known moments in the country’s past from the viewpoint of small farmers. The infamous late medieval “Drang nach Osten,” for example, that brought German colonists to the Polish lands is touted as a source of improved agricultural techniques and a more flexible legal system, developments welcomed by the serfs, rather than the economic “disintegration” and national conflict earlier historians describe.

“The People’s History of Poland” thus opens up complex developments in the Polish past that are often flattened into simplistic dichotomies or pat generalizations. The so-called “second serfdom” is handled here with deft depictions of the peasantry’s gradual and uneven descent into increasingly harsh arrangements with landlords. From the earliest times, Leszczyński reminds us, peasants were divided into multiple categories with different rights and privileges; throughout the feudal period service obligations and tribute varied depending on the number of animals and the size of the holding each farmer worked. All of this shifted during the 15th century and by the 17th century, we find depictions of the brutality with which landlords treated their enserfed laborers, such as that from a German traveller of a peasant “lying in the snow, chained to a stake by his neck (...) I know not for what crime” (Leszczyński 2020, 113). Leszczyński stresses that the nobility’s Golden Freedoms and the tremendous artistic production of the early modern period were sustained on the backs of the subject serf population. He recalls that the Chmielnicki massacre and the *potop* that followed were less about the country’s weak central government and more a backlash resulting from

Polish landholders encroaching on independent farmers in the *kresy*. And he emphasizes that the marginalization of Polish towns well into the modern period helped slow the economic liberation and social mobility of the popular masses. Here and elsewhere, Leszczyński displays a unique gift for storytelling, conjuring up vivid images of peasant beatings and contrasting them with idyllic depictions of life on the landed estate. Clearly, presenting a thousand years of history from the perspective of a mostly unlettered population poses significant challenges, but Leszczyński effectively employs evocative vignettes to underline the deep social tensions at the base of Poland's evolution.

All of this developed out of what Leszczyński describes as the fundamentally racist notion that the small farmers of the Polish countryside were ethnically distinct from the nobility governing them. "The People's History of Poland" reexamines the Sarmatian myth of ethnogenesis, arguing that far from a simple legend used to justify the institution of serfdom, the division of Polish-speakers into separate strata, one meant to rule and the other to be dominated, penetrates deep into Polish consciousness. During the Enlightenment, the Sarmatian legend helped dismiss the onus of serfdom as a foreign borrowing brought to Poland via conquest. By the 19th century, experts leaned on this conception to claim Polish peasants were "naturally" weak, docile and disorganized, and destined to a life of bondage. Interwar scholars rejected the invasion theory, but replaced it with the "modern" notion that the Polish nobility and peasants represented two distinct anthropological "types," the nobility being "Nordic" while the peasants were proto-Slavic. The former were said to be gifted, talented, and well organized, while the latter were weak, incapable of self-governance, and primitive. Again, just as institutionalized violence and social tensions have underpinned the Polish story, the habit of defending social inequality also haunted the country's development as it struggled to become modern.

Little of this will be dramatically new for most historians of Poland, though the depictions of peasant subjugation contribute a fresh vividness to our understanding of the social dynamic. What is more powerful and potentially of greater significance are the examples Leszczyński offers of peasant farmers challenging their oppressive circumstances. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of "The People's History of Poland," and one that again echoes the 1619 Project, is the pattern of personal agency Leszczyński charts across the history of the Polish lands. He relies on court records to document a steady stream of complaints from smallholders directed at abusive landlords and negligent clergy. These sophisticated appeals suggest a sense of empowerment that remained even as the screws

of serfdom continued to tighten. Peasants were savvy, knew their rights, and could be strategic in the ways they directed their attacks. More than formal petitions, they also employed various “weapons of the weak” such as work slow downs, running away, sabotaging the planting, breaking their tools, or stealing from their masters to mitigate their subject condition. The regular social rebellions sprinkled across modern Polish history, from the 1846 Galician massacre to the Kościuszko Rising, and finally to the rise of the Solidarity Trade Union movement, suggest that the Polish masses never accepted their position passively. Rather, as Leszczyński notes, individual acts of resistance coalesced into collective challenges, and finally exploded into violent rebellions when the opportunity arose. While it is true that the fortunes of small farmers declined as the nobility enjoyed greater prosperity, Polish serfs were never the chattel slaves of the Americas. They were never “owned” by others and even occasionally had the opportunity to transgress the sharp class divide and “become” merchants or members of the lower gentry. This was a system that may have had racist foundations, but it was not completely closed or impermeable. Moreover, smallholders maintained some autonomy within the peasant commune itself, where *gromada* officials helped mediate disputes with the lord and a distinct social hierarchy developed based on family size, landholding patterns, and reputation in the village. Such independent thinking helps explain one of Leszczyński’s most important interventions, namely the assertion that the peasantry did not automatically support the 19th-century nationalist uprisings since they did not always see their fortunes reflected in the return of the noble republic. Serfs, Leszczyński suggests, may have been objects of persistent abuse, but they maintained some limited agency and were capable of assessing their own self-interest.

Within this sociological analysis of the peasant village, it must be admitted, “The People’s History of Poland” misses an opportunity to look at the doubly subjected position of women in the village, and even more so at migration to the city as a form of liberation for many females. Moreover, it is unclear how unusual the power relations in Poland were within the broader context of Western history. What was special about the Polish story of subjugation and resistance? Leszczyński acknowledges that seigniorial systems existed across Europe for much of the medieval and early modern periods, but stresses that the farther west one looks, the weaker were the ties of serfdom. Yet he fails to note that across the *ancien regime*, members of the lower social orders were consistently subjected to barbaric punishments and inhuman forms of torture for the slightest infraction. Instead, by stressing Poland’s status

“on the periphery” of Europe, he suggests a uniqueness to Polish social tensions that threatens to reify the old martyrdom approach to the country’s past. If the history of Poland is not to be one of noble heroism and sacrifice, we must be careful not to replace that narrative with one that is uniquely marked by peasant oppression. Rather, serfdom and slavery were abusive systems everywhere, and everywhere they left their mark on the generations that followed. In most cases, we are still dealing with their legacy. By the same token, Leszczyński gives little credit to the Polish People’s Republic for promoting social mobility amongst small farmers and industrial laborers. If the PRL did nothing else during its half-century grip on Polish society, it eliminated noble titles, expanded access to professional and educational opportunities, and at least temporarily expunged inherited wealth.

“The People’s History of Poland” also poses a challenge to the way historians approach their practice in another important respect. The professional writing of history has long been a nationalist enterprise, established by scholars dedicated to the reification of the state for which they worked. For this reason, most historical narratives are structured around the rise and fall of royal dynasties, the development of key institutions, the codification of laws, diplomatic maneuvers, or military conflict. The prospect of charting the lives of the “non-political,” non-elite population has slowly gained traction since the second half of the 20th century, but the work of social historians has often been challenged as lacking the necessary political scaffolding to explain its relevance. Of what value are anecdotes about disenfranchised masses if they are not connected to larger regime changes or cultural developments? How is it possible to remove the nation or any political framework from such a massive historical account? In this respect, Leszczyński takes some risks that may limit his readership, tacitly proposing a new and different shape to historical inquiry. His history lacks the political infrastructure that shapes the majority of such grand surveys. We read little about the expansion of the state, the colonization of the eastern lands, or the introduction of elected kingship. Readers familiar with the main currents of “established” Polish history will find this account refreshing, but it may be challenging for students who lack a background in these more conventional turning points.

Above all, though, “The People’s History of Poland” leaves open the question of what the fundamental focus or parameters of such a history should be. If it is meant to be a history of the subject population of the Polish lands, it is unclear why more attention is not paid to the cultural diversity of the peasantry. Are Kashubians and Sorbs to be considered

Polish in the same sense that the Bretons and the peasants of Languedoc are viewed as French even before they spoke the language of Paris? And what about Greek Catholic Ukrainian speakers? Was their subjugation to Polish-speaking lords not distinct in that it came with attempts to also disrupt their religious observance? The Jews are discussed here, but more as victims of persecution than as agents of their own fate. On the other hand, Leszczyński appropriately includes the mass migration of Polish peasant laborers across the globe since many maintained their attachment to Polish culture in emigration, even as they adopted other languages for everyday use. Who then are the “Polish” folk, and is the concept of Poland here based on territory, culture, language, or something else? In many respects, the very fact that the limits of Leszczyński’s study are poorly defined gives us cause for discussion about the shape and configuration of Polishness as a historical category. Regardless of the (lack of) framing, the book nonetheless provides a welcome set of observations about the entrenchment of the class-based attitudes that have served as the undercurrent of Polish history for generations.

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Citation:

Stauter-Halsted, Keely. 2022. "Adam Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski*: A Revolution in Polish Historiography?" *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 1(43): 263–269.

DOI: 10.19195/prt.2022.1.14

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Tytuł: *Ludowa historia Polski* Adama Leszczyńskiego: rewolucja w polskiej historiografii?