

Adam Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski: Historia wyzysku i oporu: Mitologia panowania* [A People's History of Poland: History of Exploitation and Resistance: Mythology of Dominance], Warsaw: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2020, 669 pp.

It is a strenuous task to review the monumental historical essay by Adam Leszczyński. I dare say very few people would be able to critically review all (or even most, for that matter) of the author's theses on Polish history between the tenth century (occasionally even earlier events are discussed) and 1989 (and sometimes after). In this book, the selection and interpretation of facts are as important as the ideological framework and messaging.

As the author writes in the introduction, his work is devoted to three main topics. The first one is 'the history of the mechanisms of exploitation in Poland'. Putting the matter in social science terms, he states that 'the objective of the book would be the following: it is a story of how much surplus value the elites of our country appropriated and what social institutions enabled them to do so; what evolutions these institutions underwent; and finally — to what degree were they similar to Western institutions, and to what degree were they peripheral

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and idiosyncratic' (p. 14). The second problem examined in the book is 'the rule over others' and the way it was justified. Already at this point the author puts forward theses that are essential to his reasoning. As Leszczyński claims, these justifications were initially

rooted in the religious order (even as late as in the nineteenth century) or ethnogenetic mythology: many authors believed that the nobility (*szlachta*) and peasants came from different peoples (some even claimed, as recently as the twentieth century, that the two groups belonged to genetically different 'races'). In the twentieth century, the clerical intelligentsia that ruled the Second Polish Republic justified its dominant position by the necessity to protect the common good: the regained Polish state. However, for many peasants and proletarians (not to mention national minorities), this state was just as oppressive as the former partitioning powers. In later history, the Polish People's Republic mercilessly exploited the same working class whom, according to the dominant ideology, the communist party allegedly represented. Finally, as the Third Polish Republic built democracy, the industrial working class was sentenced to social and material degradation, once again, on behalf of the national interest (pp. 14–15).

The third objective of the book is to present the history of resistance to authority — 'resistance that was aimed not at the ethnically alien occupying powers but against the social order' (p. 15).

Who is the collective protagonist of the book? The answer Leszczyński offers is somewhat labile, even given that the term as such seems vague. In the closing methodological essay, the scholar defines 'the people' (*lud*) as the "'bottom 90 per cent" inhabiting the Poland-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and in the later period — the resurrected Polish state' (p. 569). As the author further elaborates, a people's history of Poland is a history of 'the governed, and not the government; the poor, and not the rich; those who were mostly uneducated and always subjugated to authority' (p. 569). As another fragment reads, those subjugated include 'peasants, the urban poor, women, Jews, and other categories of people whom the elites expected to be obedient and who often did not have full political rights (different in different historical periods)' (p. 570).

As these citations demonstrate, the definitions used by Leszczyński are imprecise. It is dubious whether women and Jews were 'common people' *en bloc* — it seems 'subjugation' is not the best criterion to decide whether particular women or Jews belonged to the group Leszczyński is most interested in. To provide a *reductio ad absurdum*: were wealthy Jewish factory owners from Łódź 'common people'? I would not say so. By the same token, different women had different social statuses.

The author declares he always sides with the underprivileged and tries to give them a voice (p. 15). Leszczyński also does not believe that historians should use disengaged language (p. 14). As the scholar claims, the role of 'a people's history of Poland' is to 'do justice to the governed instead of repeating what has already been written in hundreds of textbooks'. This systematic emotionality is

similar to the approach employed by Henryk Ślabeek in his work on the social history of Poland after 1944 which Adam Leszczyński did not use as a source.<sup>1</sup> However, the author is aware that many aspects of the common people's behavior and mentality were ethically reprehensible (Leszczyński mentions this multiple times while discussing particular events). In the last paragraph of the work, the author writes that amongst the Polish nobility and the intelligentsia 'there was an array of righteous, just people who selflessly worked for a truly democratic Poland. A "people's history" cannot be reduced to a simplistic Manichean parable' (p. 572).

The author claims that the chronology of his essay is dictated by the objectives he wants to achieve. Consequently, Leszczyński deliberately decided not to periodize Polish history in a traditional manner, 'with each turning point in the story marked by a political event such as the fall of the First Polish Republic' (p. 16). Hence the period between the mid-eighteenth century and 1864 (described in Chapter 5: 'The End of Serfdom') is treated as a cohesive unit — the focus is on the gradual abolition of serfdom rather than the partitions, military conflicts, and national uprisings. Leszczyński also proposes to treat the period between 1864 and 1944 as another such unit (Chapter 6: 'Peripheral Capitalism'), even though it was 'marked by the restoration of Poland's independence and two world wars'. In fact, World War II is almost absent from the narrative (except for few remarks, including pp. 444–45, 498 ff.). Given the subject of the work, this decision is quite risky, not to say wrong. The social processes that occurred during World War II (what I mean here are not only the consequences of the Holocaust) profoundly influenced the people Leszczyński examines.

The author does not explain the chronological frameworks of other chapters. While the periodization of Chapter 7 is clear 'The Polish People's Republic: Exploited for the Party 1944–1989', the decisions behind some other parts of the books are ambiguous — specifically, Chapter 1 — 'Two Nations: Myths of Domination and Enslavement', Chapter 2 — 'The Beginnings (Until the Fourteenth Century)', Chapter 3 — 'Melioratione Terre (Until 1520)', and Chapter 4 — 'Turning the Screws: 1520–1768'.

Apart from being a narrative on the people's history of Poland arranged in a chronological and topical structure, the book includes a methodological essay titled 'How to Write a People's History of Poland?'. I will further elaborate on this subject later in this review.

The sources used by the scholar include academic works, published editions of primary sources, press articles, and, rarely, archival resources. The number of sources Leszczyński researched is enormous — the book includes 2,060 footnotes. Nevertheless, the author faced a major difficulty — the protagonists of his book themselves created almost no primary sources. This is hardly surprising, since for centuries they were mostly illiterate and did not create many ego-documents. It is all the more noteworthy that the author looked for 'traces of

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<sup>1</sup> Henryk Ślabeek, *O społecznej historii Polski 1945–1989*, Warsaw and Kutno, 2009.

peasants' in primary sources created by representatives of other social groups, although the author is aware of all the methodological difficulties of this task (p. 117). Leszczyński primarily examined legal norms, court records, inventories, wills, and transaction records. He also inspected the literature and journalistic texts. The scholar offers an interesting analysis of laments and supplications, two primary sources that common people produced. Apart from their content, Leszczyński also points to formal differences (linguistic formulae that expressed submission or dignity).

As the research objectives are presented in the context of socio-political and economic transformations in Poland, the essay is more than just a history of peasant oppression.

In the chapters devoted to medieval and early modern Poland, Leszczyński focuses on the conflict between the peasantry and the nobility. In his opinion the Khmelnytsky Uprising was the most significant popular revolt in the period. The author analyses it as a social conflict.

According to Leszczyński, elements of the titular 'mythology of domination' were already present in the Middle Ages and in the early modern era. The scholar thus analyses the myths produced by Sarmatism and the so-called 'conquest' theory of the genesis of the Polish state; he also provides extensive quotations from works that justified the differences between the ruling nobility/lords and their subjects, manifested not only in their respective wealth and clothing, but also in their ethnicity. The latter concept was still treated as 'scientific knowledge (or a viable hypothesis at the very least)' (p. 47) as late as the beginning of the twentieth century.

As Leszczyński notes, early modern handbooks on land management by esteemed authors such as Anzełm Gostomski and Jakub Kazimierz Haur include excerpts demonstrating that 'absolute power over the subjects — the power over life and death' was considered as something obvious. Haur even wrote that 'the harder peasants work, the healthier they are' (p. 131). Leszczyński also mentions that the nobility could easily punish peasants with the death penalty (p. 163).

As the author notes, between the mid-sixteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries 'the legal status of serfs drastically deteriorated. They were downgraded from human beings — lower in rank and dependent on their lord — to what was essentially almost "movable property"' (p. 158). While noting incidents of serf peasant trade, the author adds that the phenomenon was not specific exclusively to Poland but also occurred in German states, including East Prussia, as late as in the eighteenth century (p. 161).

Nevertheless, in these parts of the book the author tries to see peasants as more than victims of exploitation by the nobility. Their resistance strategies included not only the relatively rare peasant revolts (according to the author, these hardly occurred because the people feared cruel punishment) but also sabotage and theft of the lords' property (p. 178). As Leszczyński notes, these strategies were rational in the reality of serfdom, evolved depending on the economic and

political circumstances, and could be divided into 'collective strategies' (such as revolts) and 'private strategies' (for example flight). The author also argues that the peasant uprising of 1038 was one of the foundations of Polish statehood. In my opinion this thesis is somewhat difficult to prove.

Further on Leszczyński discusses the peasants' position during the Enlightenment era, noting that no real reforms were undertaken. He also writes about the approach the leaders of the Polish national uprisings had towards the peasant question, and describes the reforms that ultimately led to the abolition of serfdom in Poland. These topics are well recognized and have been extensively analysed in secondary sources. What Leszczyński manages to contribute is a vivid account of the discord between the national question and the agrarian question — as he writes, the peasants robbing one of the landed properties in 1831 screamed: 'Hura! Polska w skórę wzięła' (Hurrah! Poland took a beating!) (p. 303). The author also underscores the extreme poverty the peasants had to endure in the nineteenth century, including cases of cannibalism in Galicja in 1847 (p. 335).

In Chapter 6, Leszczyński yet again shows his talent for vivid description as he describes the formation of workers' groups: 'The first generations of Polish workers [...] were managed with a whip — economically and literally' (p. 305). He also interestingly presents account of nineteenth- and twentieth-century labour revolts and strikes. His visions of the Łódź revolt of 1892 and the revolution (or perhaps uprising?) of 1905–07 are particularly attention-grabbing. As the scholar describes the latter event, he elaborates on the wave of lynchings, criminal and political violence (p. 421), the fights between political parties that devoured over a thousand lives (p. 424), etc. The scholar is right not to reproduce the idea that the peasantry was particularly patriotically involved in the 1920 Polish-Soviet War, contrary to what historiography may suggest. His portrayal of the common people in the Second Polish Republic is bitter and centred on deep conflicts with the ruling elites. Leszczyński also describes police brutality against the peasantry, especially in the 1930s (pp. 464–65). According to the scholar, the Second Polish Republic belonged to 'the clerical and military intelligentsia' (p. 474).

Chapter 7 presents the role of the communist era in the people's history of Poland. I will discuss it more extensively here because of my own research interests. The author focuses on the 1940s, 1950s, and — to a lesser extent — 1960s, examining four topics: protests in factories; land reform; agricultural collectivization; and upward social mobility.

Adam Leszczyński is right to elaborate on the repressions against the revolting workers and the upward social mobility, experienced chiefly by the rural population moving to urban areas, although it should be noted that the latter process began decelerating in the 1960s. The author however does not discuss the stigma of upward mobility; neither does he describe the social consequences that followed the shift of the main focus of economic activity to the industrial

sector in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> It is hard to understand why Leszczyński chose to include remarks on alcoholism, corruption, and theft in the section devoted to upward social mobility.

Given that the author chose to treat women as a group that belongs to the common people, he should have provided more details about their situation after 1944. Most academic works on women in Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, propose that after the collapse of communism, a conservative backlash against gender equality occurred. Researchers note that attempts to exclude women from the public sphere were caused by problems such as high unemployment rates. In Poland, the 1993 abortion ban is a spectacular example of backlash. However, gender equality was targeted already during de-Stalinization. After the death of Stalin, mass layoffs of women workers took place; the local branches of the League of Women in workplaces were shut down; and women were encouraged to return to domestic labour rather than work in the industrial sector.

From this point of view, the last two decades of communism mark a peak of traditional gender politics. Pro-natalist policies were employed, on the one hand introducing support for pregnant and child-rearing women, and on the other — reinforcing the reproductive role of women. To what extent were these policies aimed at excluding women from the workforce? This issue deserves further investigation.

This decline of gender equality in post-Stalinist communism, justified by traditional cultural norms and hierarchical gender relations, has been dubbed ‘conservative modernity.’<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Adam Leszczyński does not discuss these issues in his work.

As Leszczyński claims in the concluding chapter of the book (‘Conclusion: Violence and Emancipation’), ‘the people’s history of Poland is a history of emancipation, strenuously and forcefully obtained’ (p. 530). However, I failed to find a precise definition of emancipation in the work, unless the enumeration on page 529 can be treated as such. It mentions: personal freedom, abolition of serfdom, land reform, workers’ self-governing bodies, better wages, and efficient allocation of public housing (p. 529). It does not seem like this list can replace a proper definition. Leszczyński does not clarify the relationship between emancipation and equality for different groups (for example women in the Polish People’s Republic). It also remains unclear which groups enjoyed equality in the Polish People’s Republic, and to what extent.

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<sup>2</sup> Maria Halamska, *Wież polska 1918–2018: W poszukiwaniu źródeł teraźniejszości*, Warsaw, 2020, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Małgorzata Fidelis, ‘Równouprawnienie czy konserwatywna nowoczesność?: Kobiety pracujące’, in *Kobiety w Polsce 1945–1989: Nowoczesność, równouprawnienie, komunizm*, Cracow, 2020, pp. 103–64; Dariusz Jarosz, *Polacy a stalinizm*, Warsaw, 2000, pp. 121–24, 134–36.

Anti-Semitism is a prevalent subject throughout the book, and the author dedicates a separate section of Chapter 6 to this matter. Discussing the era of the so-called *demokracja szlachecka* (democracy of the nobility), Leszczyński claims that 'In the sixteenth and seventeenth century in Ukraine, local insurgents massacred Jews just as vehemently as they massacred the gentry' (p. 228). As he writes about the 1936 Przytyk pogrom, the scholar concludes that anti-Semitism 'captured the imagination of a large part of the Polish common people' (p. 444). Leszczyński extensively discusses the pogroms that took place during the 1892 strike in Łódź (p. 358) and the 1905 revolution (p. 359). He also (albeit rather briefly) writes about anti-Semitism during World War II and in the post-war era, discussing such events as the 1940 Easter Pogrom in Warsaw, the Kielce Pogrom, and the denunciation of Jews under German occupation (pp. 444–45). The author also notes that after the perpetrators of the Kielce Pogrom were sentenced to death in July 1946, 16,000 workers went on strike in Łódź to protest the decision (p. 489).

Leszczyński claims that starting in the 1880s, anti-Semitism played a 'crucial' or even 'leading' role in Polish politics for 'the next several decades' (p. 436). I have my doubts about this blanket statement, which seems to me to be somewhat exaggerated.

*A People's History of Poland* by Adam Leszczyński is incomplete — as its subtitle reads, it is limited to the analysis of exploitation, resistance, and the mythology of domination. The scholar does not discuss matters such as culture — including the culture of everyday life — that undoubtedly had a heavy impact on the situation of the common people. The work also lacks a systematic analysis of the social rights the common people gained or the traditional strategies they used to secure bearable living conditions in old age (such as an annuity in the rural areas or the introduction of social insurance in the nineteenth century<sup>4</sup>).

It is worth noting that Leszczyński's book offers more than just a narrative on Polish history. The scholar also chose to express his stance on the development and quality of contemporary historiography. As shown in the closing essay, titled 'How to Write a People's History of Poland?: Methodological Essay', the author clearly has a talent for polemics. The essay has two basic objectives: an evaluation of the existing historiography centred on people's history; and a presentation of Leszczyński's postulates regarding further research in the field.

Leszczyński writes that many of the works of Marxist historiography are defective and anachronistic. However he also claims that: 'The problem is we often do not have anything better at our disposal. A people's history of Poland

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<sup>4</sup> See for example: Urszula Lehr, 'Od dożywocia do emerytury: Społeczno-kulturowe uwarunkowania strategii przetrwania', in *Ludzie starzy i starość na ziemiach polskich od XVIII do XXI wieku (na tle porównawczym)*, ed. Agnieszka Janiak-Jasińska, Katarzyna Sierakowska and Andrzej Szwarz, 2 vols, Warsaw, 2016, vol. 2: *Aspekty społeczno-kulturowe*, pp. 123–49; Bartłomiej Gapiński, 'Życie ludzi starych na wsi polskiej przełomu XIX i XX wieku oraz w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym', in *Ludzie starzy i starość na ziemiach polskich od XVIII do XXI wieku*, vol. 2, pp. 111–21.

written as dictated by the authorities [of the Polish People's Republic] did ultimately produce a body of basic research, publications of archival works, and an array of literature on people's history.' (p. 541)

This nuanced critique becomes more vehement when Leszczyński writes about Polish historiography after 1989. The scholar is particularly eager to attack the syntheses written by Andrzej Nowak, claiming that the historian's work is driven by his political agenda — "Soil, people, language and culture, the state, religious faith", as the author himself summarizes in the first volume of his work devoted to the genesis of Polish statehood and the beginning of the reign of the Piast dynasty' (p. 543). This critique is also aimed at other Polish historians: 'Nationalism — the more unwitting it is, the more dangerous it becomes — and the anachronic focus on meticulous monographs on peripheral issues [...] are two problems that still plague Polish historiography' (p. 562). Leszczyński's own project of *A People's History of Poland* was largely inspired by the experience of Howard Zinn, the author of the widely-discussed *A People's History of the United States*. As the Polish scholar writes, 'the history of Poles is too important to relinquish it to historians whose writing is influenced by nineteenth-century nationalism and whose methodology is based on naive realism' (p. 567). A page later, Leszczyński asserts: 'A people's history of Poland cannot be reduced to the history of common Polish men and women.'

Leszczyński aspires to be a historian of the people; this surely is a praiseworthy intent. His extensive research of sources is impressive. Captivating and skilfully narrated, the book has a chance to appeal also to readers who are not professional historians.

Despite occasional imprecisions, the work certainly remains an interesting read, deliberately limited to certain thematics. In point of fact, the book is a polemic against Polish historiography post-1989. In this sense, it becomes a part of the debate on the current ideological conflicts in Poland AD 2021 (as its reception proves).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For one of the most polemical reactions, see 'Polskość znienawidzona: Zniszczyć wspólnotę, by zbudować inną — z prof. Andrzejem Nowakiem, historykiem, rozmawia Krzysztof Masłoń', *Do Rzeczy*, 2021, 25, pp. 14–19.