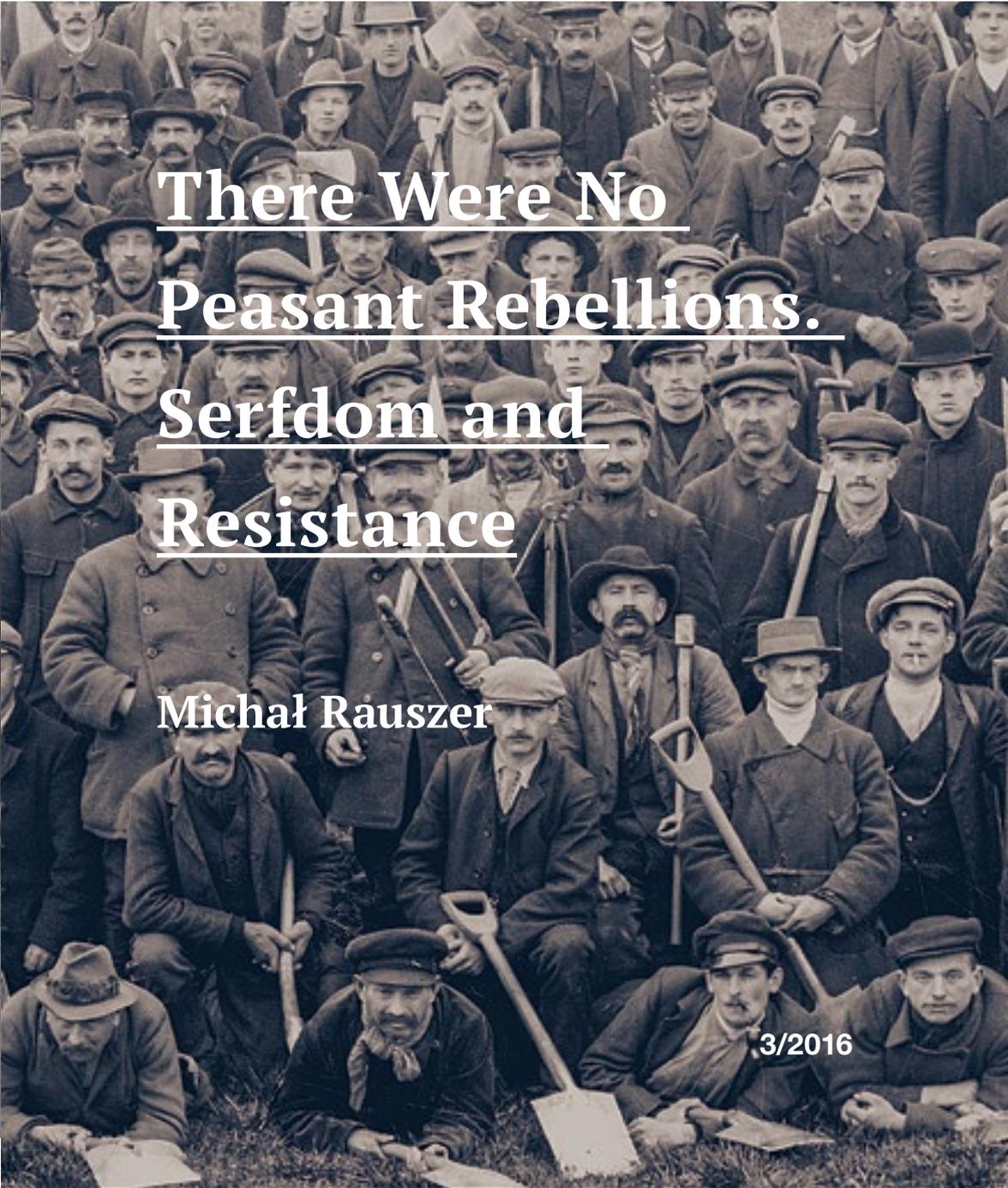


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Serfdom and
Resistance

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We have very extensive knowledge regarding the methods, models and strategies for organizing peasant rebellions. However, we know very little about how peasants actually rebelled. There are very few written records about peasants, hence no wonder that there is insufficient knowledge about peasant rebellions. Basically, in the 1950s historians dealt with the issue most intensively. At a later stage, with a few exceptions, this subject matter was not very deeply explored. It also had its roots in the fact that during the Stalinist period, there were attempts to create an identity of “the new Polish man” on the basis of the peasant and the folk roots of the Polish nation. This attempt failed very quickly, yet an association with the crude peasant hagiography remained. As a result, as early as the 1960s, due to the screen versions of Henryk Sienkiewicz’s novels, an interest in the Sarmatian roots simply exploded.¹ Only recently have we been

1 P. Czaplński, *Resztki nowoczesności. Dwa studia o literaturze i życiu*, Kraków 2011, p. 88–89.

dealing with a renewed interest in peasant rebellions,² for instance in the works as Jan Wasiewicz, who analyzes not only peasant rebellions but also the way in which their memory was shaping.³ Another case of refreshing memory of peasant rebellions, although a bit off the main narrative, is the already famous work by Jan Sowa entitled *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą*.

Even though the reasons for this state of memory about our peasant roots might be linked with a number of different processes and phenomena, I believe that lack of memory of peasant rebellions⁴ has its roots in at least two processes. The first one is that it was the noble culture that created the narrative of the nation and the cultural identity of Poles. This narrative was first of all to serve as disciplinary and hegemonic. If all the rights and privileges were accessible to every individual who was a part of the nation then it is obvious that from the ideological point of view, under no circumstances could a peasant belong to the nation. Jacques Rancière wrote that political history is the history of those who are in the possession of *logos* and the others. *Logos* means not only access

2 See W.J. Burszta, *Preteksty*, Gdańsk 2014, p. 190, and K. Wasilewski, "Najpierw pańszczyzna, potem ojczyzna", *Tygodnik Przegląd*, 29.03.2016, <http://www.tygodnikprzeklad.pl/najpierw-panszczyzna-potem-ojczyzna/> (16.06.2016).

3 J. Wasiewicz, *Bunty chłopskie*, [in:] S. Bednarek, B. Korzeniewski (edited), *Polskie miejsca pamięci. Dzieje toposu wolności*, Warsaw 2014, p. 154–155.

4 Even though there is still some more or less advanced memory not only about peasants but also peasant rebellions, yet it has the status of memory that is pushed out and a bit embarrassing. Why the memory of peasants has not become and won't become an element of identity imaginary, as Andrzej Leder convincingly showed (*Prześlona rewolucja. Ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej*, Warsaw 2014, p. 98–99).

to power but also to the possibilities of using the work of other people.⁵

If we had a closer look at the arguments used to justify serfdom we could clearly notice that noblemen, that is those who had *logos*, perceived and ideologically reduced the rest (80% of the general state of the Polish nation) to the form of almost passive cattle. And here we reach another fundamental reason for lack of memory of peasant rebellions: if peasants constituted something like working animals, the class deprived of *logos*, hence with no thinking and subjective acting abilities, then it is difficult to imagine for such individuals to rebel. In Poland, there is a common belief that with regard to serfdom requirements peasants were rather passive. This perception of peasants impacts the statement that when compared with laborers, peasants were only capable of sudden and uncoordinated outbreaks of bare and pointless violence. If this accusation is repeated by Celi-
na Bobińska, a historian politically involved in Stalinism, who claims that Marxist historiography was successful in promoting the thesis that peasants, if they rebelled at all, did so only in the form of chaotic destruction of everything around them (in this perception of peasant rebels resonates an echo of perceiving them as animals),⁶ then there must be something wrong with the memory of peasant rebellions. An unclear status of the memory of peasant uprisings also serves a political function. According to Aleida

5 J. Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, translated by J. Rose, Minneapolis 1999, p. 22–23.

6 C. Bobińska, *O przywódcach chłopskich w Polsce w XVIII i XIX wieku*, [in:] S. Michalkiewicz (edited), *Wybitni i przeciętni przywódcy a lud i społeczeństwo w dziejach*, Katowice 1985, p. 39.

Assman, who is referring to the work by Christian Meier, if the cultural memory refers to the events related to violence, hatred and revenge, then forgetting takes on a function of historical creation of imagined unity.⁷ Hence, the political nature of this memory consists of creating a specific vision of the community of which one is the holder. The memory of peasant rebellions and serfdom hits the myth of the eternal homogenous Polish nation and, at the same time, undermines it from the inside. Hence the possible reason for its unclear and complex status.

Who Came Up with the Idea of a Strike?

One of the key arguments to leave peasant rebellions in the sphere of chaotic uprisings is their reference to workers' strikes. Strikes are usually presented as an organized and modern form of resistance whereas peasant rebellions are shown as bloody and chaotic carnage. The very name of one of the biggest peasant rebellions suggests its interpretation: *rabacja*, i.e. the Galician slaughter. Moreover, wars and mass peasant uprisings abroad (for instance peasant wars in Germany) are very often opposed to the passivity of the Polish peasant.

Absolute or absolutist systems were based on centralized legal norms, strict tax collection, and conscription of recruits to the army; because of that they created a type of holistic point of reference for peasant struggle. Apart from that, the administration introduced a type of a centrally

⁷ A. Assman, *To Remember or to Forget: Which Way out of a Shared History of Violence?*, [in:] A. Assman, L. Shortt (edited), *Memory and Political Change*, New York and others, 2011, p. 53.

managed model of state where different states existed, but their point of reference was always the central authority. The whole situation, based on the principle of the feedback loop, channeled discontent and peasant resistance. Peasant fighting aimed at the abolishment of the superior authority and establishment of a new political system. Such were the motives behind e.g. insurgents during the peasant fighting in Germany from 1524 to 1526 when there were postulates against feudalism, in favor of a revolutionary social change and establishment of all people as equal in the Holy Spirit.⁸

However, the situation in Poland was fundamentally different. As Sowa illustrated, in Poland we dealt with the deep decentralization of political authority which resulted in a situation that in fact every nobleman was almost a sovereign entity of serfdom obligations.⁹ Even the amount of serfdom was established individually for every administrative unit and the amount of the so-called *freebies*, i.e. extra work provided by peasants for instance during the sowing period which was not included in the serfdom depended almost entirely on the “lord”. Additionally, there were different duties in the royal possessions (the crown land) than in the possessions that belonged to the Church. Therefore, neighboring estates frequently took a different approach towards their own peasants even though this differentiation obviously shouldn’t be overestimated. Another issue is that in different lands serfdom was introduced in different periods. For instance still in

8 Zob. M. Bensing, S. Hoyer, *Wojna chłopska w Niemczech 1524–1526*, Warsaw 1973.

9 J. Sowa, *Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą*, Kraków 2011, p. 285–287.

the 16th century in the Łęczyckie Voivodship, there were cases of mixed marriages (peasants with noblewomen), buying land by peasants, effective court verdicts in favor of peasants, etc. Alongside the development of the feudal system all these elements were gradually vanishing in favor of permanently increasing obligations.¹⁰

Even though in the late 17th century there were places free from the farming economy, in general we can speak of the consolidated feudal system at the end of the 16th and at the beginning of the 17th century. Then fighting starts to break out and escalate. Fragmentation and diversification of noble properties (followed by the structures of feudal obligations) as well as lack of radical intelligentsia led to no mass insurgent movement in Poland (until the 19th century but this is discussed below) compared with for instance the uprising of Yemelyan Pugachev in 18th century Russia.

The main difference between the feudal structure in absolutism and the system of the Polish state involved working off the serfdom. In Poland, the feudal economy forced the peasants, apart from work in their own fields, to work in their lord's fields, i.e. serfdom. What did it involve? All peasants in a given village had to provide unpaid work in another person's field for a particular period of time. Work in the lord's farmstead would keep the peasant away from their own farmstead (for which they also had to pay a number of rents and other fees) and it forced them to enter into particular cooperation (apart from individual

10 B. Baranowski, *Położenie i walka klasowa chłopów w królewstwach woj. łęczyckiego w XVI–XVIII wieku*, Warsaw 1956, p. 25.

activity); hence the work mechanisms on top of their own farming activity. It was compulsory for a peasant to give away a certain proportion of working time in a place where it was the lord who was making the profits. In this way the lord became the owner of the fruits borne as the result of this forced, collective labor. It is commonly known that the form of resistance is dependent on the form of exploitation. In case of a decentralized feudal system and forced collective labor in another person's field, and with the rate of serfdom visible in the form of the fruits of this collective labor, the form of resistance had to be located and based on hitting the effects of this work. This form of resistance was "a refusal to work" that is today known under the popular name of "strike".

A refusal to conduct serfdom services was rarely a spontaneous phenomenon; it was not a rare occurrence either. According to Czesław Rajca, in the very Kingdom of Poland between 1815 and 1864 there were about 700 incidents involving a refusal to perform serfdom services or free services whose range spread from 2 to 49 villages (most often 2-15 villages). Rajca also gives examples of incidents, such as Father Ściegienny's participation in the conspiracy, keeping in touch with Galicia, raids on manor farms, burning manorial estates, insignificant uprisings (two villages), raids on manorial estates, court trials with the manor, taking over meadows or manor forests, reclaiming the land incorporated into manor property, beatings of foresters and manor officials or raids on forests.¹¹ Obviously, it took

11 C. Rajca, *Ruch oporu chłopskiego w Królestwie Polskim w latach 1815–1864*, Warsaw 1969, p. 297-340.

place during the times of political transformations and revolutionary sentiments, which well illustrate the intensity of peasant disagreement with serfdom.

Apart from permanent forms of working off serfdom, village folk were also obliged to provide free services, the so-called *freebies*, extra unpaid works, such as work during the planting and harvest periods or the so-called guards involving guarding the manorial estate and property. These obligations counted as duties performed “minus a day”, so they were not included in the fundamental part of one’s serfdom. Nevertheless, peasants were forced to provide them. Those were for instance carriage, in the form of transportation of goods, farming during periods of intensive work, obligatory use of lord’s mills or the compulsory taproom, that is the obligatory consumption and purchase of a specific amount of alcohol in the lord’s taverns. Additional works were requested in key moments during the cycle of vegetation, such as sowing. There were also obligatory hires when peasants were forced to provide some paid services during harvest. Thanks to this, manorial estates were able to limit their own permanent labor force.¹² It was mostly during harvest that work was refused since then a strike might severely affect potential profits. The refusal was total as all services provided for the lord were put on halt. Of course anyone who didn’t participate, we can use the modern term “strike-breaker”, was severely punished; in most cases they were expelled from the village. Strikes would break out for different reasons; most of

¹² Ibidem, p. 99.

them were related to a decrease in serfdom duties or the possibility to pay off the dues in monetary rent. Strikes were only successful when the lord saw a profit in them; otherwise they were brutally suppressed.¹³

In every labor refusal there were local leaders, rural elites or members of the council respected for their experience, age or determination. This element is crucial since it must be stressed that the process of labor refusal was based solely on the internal powers of a given community.

The situation in Podhale differed from other parts of the Polish state. Due to the fact that the economy of Podhale was more focused on breeding of animals, e.g. sheep, there were only traces of serfdom as it was based on monetary rent. When Mikołaj Komorowski took the office in the county of Nowy Targ he decided to change the relatively easy situation of the peasants and introduce the farming economy forcefully. It was with force that he incorporated peasant land into the manor; he used beatings and torture and kept both men and women in the dungeon. The resistance movement's leader was Stanisław Łętowski, the village leader of Czarny Dunajec, nicknamed "the Marshal". At first the rebels were seeking to solve the problem with the use of legal measures, but when Komorowski ignored court trials on 7 November 1630, his manorial estate was raided. The king, facing a threat of uprising, gave the order of obedience which was read out in the churches. According to Baranowski, the reaction was as follows: "Ev-

¹³ Ibidem, p. 99–100.

everyone shouted that they didn't want the head of county as their lord and they would rather be killed than have him as their lord and they wouldn't let him in the county as they no longer believed this fraudster even if he was being half consumed by flames".¹⁴ The problem faded away when Komorowski died in 1633 and his successor didn't make any attempts to apply pressure by force. However, this outbreak prepared the ground for one of biggest peasant uprisings, namely the Aleksander Kostka-Napierski uprising of which Łętowski was a leader and was at a later stage executed alongside Kostka-Napierski.

“Therefore, His Majesty the King Solemnly Promises All Liberties...”

Because of long and freezing winters in Podhale, it was difficult to keep production on the level that was suitable for serfdom duties. An individual resistance to serfdom was spreading but so were cases of escapes and brigandage. Those who for some reason weren't capable of meeting the requirements frequently moved to more remote parts. That is how Zakopane was established. Mountains also provided good refuge and plenty of room for action for the bandits. Due to the background of escapees, who came from surrounding villages, they could count on either the help of peasants from the neighborhood, or the news or provisions. Nobility, in turn, in order to denounce peasant disobedience would frequently put resistance on the same footing as brigandage activity, which, in the eyes of the peasants, added the political dimension to brigandage.

¹⁴ B. Baranowski, *Położenie...*, p. 35.

The Aleksander Kostki-Napierski rebellion was not very spectacular since it only lasted 10 days (from 14 to 24 June 1651). Kostki-Napierski arrived in Podhale around April 1651 carrying a forged army recruiting letter. In accordance with the letter he was to recruit mercenaries. He was travelling around Podhale and was recruiting – but it was peasants for an uprising. The uprising began on 14 June with the strategic capture of the Czorsztyń castle. The capture of the castle was meant to be a signal for the commencement of the uprising throughout Podhale while the recruited insurgents were supposed to recognize each other by wreaths attached to sticks hung on houses. Another document that was sent was a proclamation of Kostka-Napierski; and it is an analysis of this document that makes our deliberations highly interesting. The proclamation's opening statement pledges allegiance to the king. In the document Kostka-Napierski states that the nobility was planning to organize a rebellion (*rokosz*) against the king and that is why every faithful subject should join the uprising to defend the king. The core of the document defines the strategy of the fights against the “noble *rokosz* against the king”: “Therefore, His Majesty the King solemnly promises all liberties to those who now stand by him; he promises them manorial estates with all the property inside. And indeed, you must wish to cast off the chains of this slavery now when the time has come. If they are to destroy you, you'd better destroy them. There have been enough killings by those masters; the cries for revenge to God must have reached you”.¹⁵ Napier-

15 Uniwersał Kostki Napierskiego wzywający chłopów do powstania. Z Czorsztyńna, 22 czerwca 1651, [in:] A. Przyboś (edited), *Materiały do powstania Kostki Napierskiego*, Wrocław 1951, p. 30–31.

ski presents here the basic battle lines. The reference to the king is not accidental. In order to shed more light on the matter we need to compare the feudal system in England to the noble democracy in Poland. In the feudal system (e.g. in England) particular classes, however different in regard to wealth and position, were all subject to the king and existed on the horizon of this ruling as the sovereign (the symbolic body of the king). In the Polish state this type of dependence didn't exist. The nobility had sovereign power to make laws, including for instance the amount of serfdom. Therefore, for peasants the king was a remote being rather than an individual directly responsible for their oppression, someone who had formal power over the nobility. Moreover, on royal properties, the serfdom was not as tough, as only in royal lands had peasants any real right to gain anything in court. The fundamental political struggle in the period before the 19th century was then based on the reference to the superior power for the nobility.¹⁶

It was a fight not only for the abolishment of the hierarchical feudal system but for its particular arrangement. A fight with serfdom seemed like a fight with unjust exploitation by one social group that had concentrated such substantial power that it led to a situation in which this social group could freely perform "parasitic" practices on the other group. The same element of justice of the superior power will be present in the emancipatory peasant

¹⁶ The same thread also appears in the case of the so-called Ściegienny's conspiracy to distribute *Złota książeczka* which was a bonus bull of Pope Gregory XVI. In the bull he claims that God made all people equal and condemned exploitation of man by man. See P. Kuligowski, *Miecz Chrystusa. Chrześcijańskie inspiracje polskiego socjalizmu sprzed powstania styczniowego*, „Ogrody Nauk i Sztuk” 2/2012, p. 55.

movements up to the beginning of the 20th century and it will constitute a political stigma used to present peasant movements as those supporting the tsarist or partitioning authority.¹⁷

Returning to the Napierski proclamation: at this point in time it doesn't speak of the king's overthrow (like a hundred years later in France). It does mention, though, an abolishment of the extra and disproportionate power of the nobility over the peasants, which contradicts the ideal system. This system was arranged as a type of natural order which peasants perceived as disturbed by the excessive power of the nobility. From their perspective the nobility was a parasite. The effectiveness in which Napierski recruited peasants for the uprising seems to confirm the view that his perception of the peasant vision of the world was accurate.

“Do Not Take Priests, Do Not Take Officials, Do Not Take Masters”¹⁸

On 1 May 1846 a primary election to the National Assembly took place throughout Prussia. On that day every adult resident of Prussia, i.e. all individuals over 24 years of age, except for those granted local or national social benefits, had the right to select electors, that is individuals who would vote in proper elections. And so on 8 May of that year the electors voted for representatives to the National Assembly in Berlin and Frankfurt am Main. In that election the following individuals were elected from

17 Por. E. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, Manchester 1959, p. 13–14.

18 An extract from propaganda distributed among peasants during the elections.

the region of Upper Silesia: Marcin Gorzołka, a farmer from Wielkie Borki (Oleski county), Chruszcz, a butcher from Lubomia (Racibórz county), Franciszek Rybnicki, the village head in Radoszowy (Rybnik county) or Priest Józef Szafranek, a parson from Bytom.¹⁹

Polish peasants became MPs in the general elections to the first Prussian parliament, but before it happened a few other things had taken place. In 1807, the Prussian king abolished personal serfdom of peasants, first of all tying the peasants to the land with a special edict.²⁰ This edict was obviously not the result of goodwill. Several factors contributed to it being issued. First of all, we need to recall the fear of revolutionary movements since the French revolution had been the ground for political activity on the continent. According to Major Pannwitz: “It is simply beyond comprehension how deeply rooted the French sense of liberty is. They didn’t even try to hide repeating ‘We are already capable to use the French method to stand up for our rights.’”²¹ Moreover, the then crawling industrial revolution required a workforce whose accessibility was limited by peasant attachment to the land. Four years later, in 1811, an additional regulatory edict was issued and allowed wealthy peasants to buy land and free themselves from the existing serfdom obligations. This edict didn’t abolish serfdom completely, yet it narrowed it down to several conditions. Rumor spread that on the day the edict

19 K. Popiołek, *Radykalni przywódcy chłopów śląskich*, Katowice 1955, p. 20–21.

20 S. Michalkiewicz, *O rzeźniku Gracy, zмові tworkowskiej i powstaniu chłopskim 1811 r.*, Katowice 1985, p. 10–11.

21 *Ibidem*, p. 9.

was to be implemented serfdom would be abolished. The Silesian nobility was concerned and sent a message to the king that said: “Your Majesty would wish to bestow personal freedom on all the peoples, even though it would entail an uncompensated loss of our hard fought and legally granted rights. Alas, liberty given to the crude peoples can only lead to lust and licentiousness [...]”²² As a reaction to the king’s edict, the peasants from the Silesian agricultural region, i.e. the belt between Racibórz and Pszczyna, began, as described by officials, to make arrangements that from the moment of the edict’s implementation they would cease all serfdom activity. Here once again we have a chance to see the scheme of peasant resistance. Legal court proceedings by the king lead to nobility resistance and peasants fiercely striving for its execution (although in a quite free interpretation here). A reaction for issuing the edict is therefore very predictable: a declaration of an absolute strike, a refusal to perform any serfdom-related activities and settling any accounts. In January 1811, 19 rural communes wrote down an “arrangement” in a tavern in Tworków for a refusal to provide any serfdom-related activities from that moment forward: “In the name of the Holy Trinity several rural communes arrange not to perform any more work. Yet, it is not an act of anarchy, but a result of the October edict [...]”²³ Peasant emancipation was met with a strong response of both the king who sent over an official to investigate the situation, and the nobility who sent Captain Koehler’s military unit from Racibórz. They arrested the leaders of the rebellion and

22 D. Zalega, “Zmowa tworkowska”, *Le Monde Diplomatique – Edycja Polska* 1/2016, p. 42.

23 *Ibidem*, p. 42–43.

defeated a 50-strong group of peasants who came to the rescue from a village nearby. The neighboring villages reacted in the form of assemblies where the decision was taken to get the detainees back.

The rebellion spread throughout the agricultural belt. In some places peasants used force to make their lords abolish serfdom; other feudal lords were beaten and punished for disobedience. In the Pszczyzna county, peasants humiliated MP Scholetterbach who had to light up their pipes while in Pawłowice they ordered to be kissed on the hands by the lords; manorial estates were plundered in such places as Gardawice or Woszczyce. In every place, the abolishment of serfdom was to be established with the use of force. The nobility started to panic; property owners were seeking refuge in bigger towns and appealed to the king to use military force. And so it happened and the peasant rebellion was violently crushed by the Uhlans from Gliwice and the Hussars from Prudnik. Only as late as in 1821 did the problem of serfdom abolishment return. However, there was a condition of returning a big part of the land as a compensation for the lords or making up for the “loss” in cash. Peasants didn’t stay passive, though. It was already during the Spring of Nations that they took advantage of the appointment of the first parliament and the first general election and they placed their representatives in the new bodies. Two years after the election the Landowner’s Society was established in Mirosławice. In the Silesian region it had 200,000 members. Even though the Prussian king eventually put an end to the parlia-

ment, on 2 March 1850 he abolished the serfdom obligations without compensation.

Even Though He Seems To Be a Decent Guy / He Is a Greedy Servant

The romanticization of Polish history makes it very difficult to speak about the lives of 80 per cent of the Polish society. In the recently published history of our nation by Mariusz Markiewicz or Urszula Augustyniak there are respectively six pages out of 750 devoted to peasants and four out of 1,000.²⁴ I believe one of the reasons is the fact that the history of peasants might be told only and exclusively from the system and class perspective, rather than through the prism of heroes and groundbreaking events. Among the peasants it is difficult to find individuals that would influence politics and the economy, or outstanding military leaders whose stories we would read and learn about. Writing about peasant rebellions is not easier due to the fact that existing publications were prepared during the Stalinist times when the narrative about peasant resistance was to serve as the initiator for a new identity. While in terms of presentation of facts these pieces of work are usually accurate, one needs to be extremely cautious with regards to the authors' interpretation. Besides, writing about peasants does not facilitate the interpretation of the category of a nation beyond its historical context.

²⁴ See M. Markiewicz, *Historia Polski 1492–1795*, Kraków 2004, U. Augustyniak, *Historia Polski 1572–1795*, Warsaw 2008. D. Łukasiewicz draws our attention to the gross disproportion shown above, "Apologia sarmatyzmu i upadek Polski", *Le Monde Diplomatique – Edycja Polska* 12/2015, p. 43.

If, during the times of the Polish state and later, the nation justified noble supremacy over peasants and they were denied being a part of the nation and if those peasants rebelled against their lords, it was very easy to compromise their activity as that serving foreign, invading interests. I believe, however, that the history of the peasant resistance should be written down. Despite the crushing burden of serfdom, peasants managed to organize and invent modern forms of resistance long before modernity, and we should restore the memory about these events.

translated by Justyna Chada



