

**Klemens Skibicki.** *Industrie im Oberschlesischen Fürstentum Pless im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert.* Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002. 341 pp. EUR 62.00, paper, ISBN 978-3-515-08036-1.



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The heroes of Klemens Skibicki's book are the aristocratic families of Promnitz, Anhalt-Köthen, Henckel von Donnersmack, Hohenlohe, Ballesterm, Tiele-Winckler, and Schaffgotsch. These dynasties owned much of Silesia as feudal lords, but in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they made a considerable contribution to the industrialization of that region. In the period of investigation many of the Silesian magnates--the term was coined for these historical figures--transformed their estates from feudal fiefdoms into capitalist businesses. The author uses the case of the Upper-Silesian magnates--in particular that of the principality of Pless--for a detailed study of the implications and driving forces behind the fundamental economic transition of the period.

In his study Skibicki sets out to investigate three points. First, he undertakes to "decipher" the "economic logic" (p. 280) of the transition from more feudal to more capitalist economic structures. His main claim is that the transformation was largely driven by rational, utility-maximizing behavior of the magnates. Second, an emphasis is

put on the diversity in the development of the different estates. Third, some elements of economic theory are used to explain the important role of the state for industrialization of the region. Skibicki's thesis is that the state created the need for state intervention by inadequately protecting the intellectual property rights of inventions. State intervention is also seen as being promoted by a class of bureaucrats who were furthering their own power by expanding state activity.

With these goals in mind Skibicki proceeds after the introductory chapters to the core of his study which is made up of a case study of the economic development of the Principality of Pless from the early-eighteenth to the late-nineteenth century. This case study makes up about 120 of the total 341 pages and constitutes the "main dish" on Skibicki's "research-menu." In this chapter (chapter 5) he offers a contribution to the understanding of the transition from feudal to capitalist structures by discussing the most minute details of institutional and technical change in Pless. Skibicki's study stands out by virtue of the precise

and detailed work with the available archival material.

From the middle of the eighteenth century to the late-nineteenth century the principality was administered by a sequence of magnates. They were scions of three different dynasties that succeeded each other in Pless in the period. For each of these administrations the author examines the development of the principal industries: the mining of iron ore and hard coal, and the local iron production. Special sections are also devoted to the prevailing organizational structure and to other aspects of production. It is Skibicki's goal to bring out the decisive effect that different approaches of the magnates had on the local economy. The two earliest magnates examined here were Friedrich Erdmann (1765-96) and his successor Friedrich Ferdinand (1797-1818). The study credits both of them with giving strong impulses for industrialization. In particular, Friedrich Erdmann introduced changes in the administration and brought qualified workers to Pless in order to improve mining. Friedrich Ferdinand invested in the local zinc production and made Pless one of the centers of this industry. It is emphasized in the study that these two early magnates already took a number of decisions which Skibicki characterizes as entrepreneurial. However, feudal structures such as labor duties of the local population persisted at the time and were only reduced subsequently.

After this dynamic era began a period of stagnation under the two brothers of Friedrich Ferdinand. Both took little interest in the further growth of industrial activity in Pless. Skibicki explains this lack of initiative with the fact that they were both without heir and therefore without motivation to give impulses to long-term economic development. The phase of stagnation which lasted from 1819-46 put Pless in an inferior position compared to other territories of the region which experienced a more dynamic industrial development. According to Skibicki, even the choices that

led to this period of stagnation were rational. In his view, the decision of the two magnates not to invest in the improvement of the mines is to be seen as rational because they also decided not to invest in the roads that were used to transport the output of the mines.

After a dynastic change, Hans Heinrich X of the house of Hochberg began to administer Pless. His administration and that of his successor Hans Heinrich XI lasted from 1846 to 1880. They are the last magnates of Pless whose policies and decisions are examined in the study. Hans Heinrich X found the territory in a neglected state. The administration was inefficient, and necessary investments had not been undertaken for too long. In addition to this a series of bad harvests, a flood, and a typhus epidemic had brought misery and famine to Pless and the surrounding territories. Population had been reduced to half in some localities and economic life had virtually come to a halt. In this situation Hans Heinrich X initiated a fundamental change of the administrative structure in order to improve the management of the iron and coal production. Simultaneously he invested in the roads and other infrastructure. Feudal labor services were reduced. Another important step away from feudal structures was the Prussian judiciary reform which took the remaining judiciary powers from the magnates of Pless. The progress initiated by the policies of Hans Heinrich X were continued by his son. The coal production continued to grow. The construction of a railway line by the Prussian state, which had already been completed under Hans Heinrich X, helped the growth of coal mining. After initial efforts of Hans Heinrich XI to modernize the inefficient iron production, it was finally decided to reduce significantly this branch of industry.

The period analyzed by Skibicki ends in 1880. To satisfy the curiosity of the reader the author adds a brief summary of the further destiny of the principality. After Hans Heinrich XI, other magnates of that name followed. Hans Heinrich XV

stands out in that line by virtue of his wife. Although the invention of the jet engine was still to come it seems fully appropriate to describe Princess Daisy as a member of the "jet-set." Her extravagant life was financed by the continued economic development in the territory of Pless which was fostered by her husband Hans Heinrich. However, as a result of WWI Pless became a part of Poland and Hans Heinrich's activities with the associations of the German minority did not go down well with Polish authorities. Part of the principality was put under Polish government administration in 1934. The People's Republic of Poland finally took full control of the territory in 1945.

The very solid and detailed chapter on Pless is followed by six shorter sections on other dynasties of magnates that reigned in neighboring territories. These sections help to compare the findings of the previous chapter to other cases. However, the length and detail of the additional sections vary greatly and do not offer the same comprehensive analysis as the chapter on Pless. Finally, in the last chapter of the book, the findings of the various case studies are analyzed in a different way. Instead of presenting the findings case by case, the last chapter structures the analysis along categories such as "the role of the state" or the "function of wood."

There can be little doubt that an in-depth analysis of the transition from feudal to capitalistic structures in one specific case is of great value. Inevitably a study such as Skibicki's raises at least as many questions as it can answer. There is, for example, the question of the relative impact of individual entrepreneurial initiative and state activity. It is an important merit of the present study to shed light on the entrepreneurial activity of the magnates. But at the same time the study also highlights the huge impact of investments and institutional change that was beyond the influence of the magnates. Events such as the construction of a railway to Pless by the Prussian state neces-

sarily dwarf the relevance of even the most brilliant entrepreneurial decision of Hans Heinrich X or Hans Heinrich XI. The same is true of the transition from feudal to capitalist institutions. The reduction by the Prussian state of the judiciary powers that the magnates exercised in 1851 had no small impact on their transformation from feudal lords to early capitalists.

Skibicki underlines the importance of the Prussian state repeatedly. The author's explanation for the intense governmental activity is twofold. On the one hand, he argues, the state created the need for its own intervention by not granting sufficient protection to intellectual property rights in invention. On the other hand, Prussian bureaucrats acted to increase state activism in order to increase their own power. While both hypotheses are interesting, further work will have to be done in order to document the historical specifics of these mechanisms in detail. Economic historians will have to face the task of understanding where investments were undertaken by the state, because private investors could not shoulder the volume or the risk of an investment, and where private investors did not invest because they feared that their intellectual property rights were not sufficiently protected. Moreover, it will have to be examined further whether the incomplete protection of property rights in inventions did not significantly contribute to the spread of technological progress rather than slow it down. Equally the assumptions about the behavioral patterns of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bureaucrats need further examination. Only specific research on the motivations and actions of Prussia's administration will be able to provide a sound base for discussion. Quite clearly these are tasks that lie beyond the scope of Skibicki's study. His book provides a valuable contribution to a better understanding of the transition from feudalism to capitalism and provides economic historians with a detailed case study of high quality about this complex process.

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