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**Published on** H-Poland (March, 2022)

**Commissioned by** Anna Muller (University of Michigan - Dearborn)

**A People's History of Poland**

This important, innovative, even iconoclastic book tells Polish history from the perspective of the bottom 90 percent of the population, the “common folk/people” (*lud*), instead of from that of the elites, the way Polish history has traditionally been told. *Ludowa historia Polski: Historia wyzysku i oporu; Mitologia panowania* (A people's history of Poland: A history of exploitation and resistance; The mythology of rule) is part of a recent “folk turn” in Polish history.[1] But this is not any quaint ethnographic exploration of the rural past but rather a forthright appraisal of the tensions inherent in the tug-of-war between the masters and the masses laboring under them throughout Polish history.

If the English-language title has a familiar ring, that is no accident: this is a critical history along the lines of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (1980). This is made clear in the tour-de-force concluding essay on methodology, with reference to Marxism, Friedrich Nietzsche, Hayden White, Michel Foucault, and Zinn (among others), and of course (a much criticized) Polish historiography. Adam Leszczyński's strategy of saving methodology for last is one of the ways this engagingly written book, despite its enormous size (nearly six hundred pages of text), is eminently readable by layman and historian alike.

The protagonist of *Ludowa historia Polski* is a collective yet heterogeneous one embracing all the peoples at the bottom rung of the social ladder within the Polish-Lithuanian state and later Polish permutations. One might expect these masses to be faceless. Yet the author has creatively mined and critically read and analyzed a rich and heretofore underutilized collection of primary as well as secondary sources, cited in the book (there are over 2,500 footnotes). Court cases and testaments, letters of complaint and supplication, correspondence, memoirs, and more provide snippets of real lives lived under conditions of oppression. Not idealized, the masses—just like the elites—are...
shown, warts and all. This “complete reinterpretation of national history” from the perspective of the underdogs focuses on the relations of power and the conflict surrounding redistribution (p. 507).

The history of the Commonwealth is told from the perspective of competing efforts: those of the elites to gain the greatest share of what was produced on their estates and those of the remaining 90 percent of the population, which tried to retain the greatest part of what it produced. The “resistance” of the subtitle took on such forms as slow work, theft, and sabotage while working for the lord; more drastic options were to escape the village to go elsewhere where conditions were more favorable or ultimately to revolt. If such options sound familiar to historians of the post-emancipation period, that is no accident: the structure of exploitation and redistribution, Leszczyński argues, undergirded not only the distant past of serfdom but also the entire twentieth century, the interwar and communist periods included. (The book’s narrative ends in 1989.) In other words, there are more continuities and parallels than ruptures and differences.

A perusal of the titles of the seven chapters suggests that this is not your average Polish history. The periodization in this chronologically organized work disregards the regnal dates, partitions, insurrections, wars, and permutations of various Polish states that figure in traditional accounts. Instead, turning points of note are the fourteenth century, 1520, 1768, 1864, 1944, and 1989. Some of these dates may be familiar to the reader, while others require further reading. (Some of these dates are more visible in the chapter titles than in the chapters themselves; the author tends to open each chapter with an anecdote rather than a focus on the chronology.) A short review simply cannot do justice to all the salient points made in the book: each individual chapter section—and these are numerous—conveys valuable nuggets of information and interpretation.

Serving as an introduction, chapter 1, “Two nations: Myths of rule and bondage,” presents the great divide that separated the nobility from the rest of the population. Nobles and the common folk were viewed as two distinct nations, nations lent substance by myths of origin: the folk were considered to be descendants of the biblical Cham and destined for bondage, whereas nobles’ exalted opinion of themselves was ultimately buttressed by the Sarmatian myth, the convenient fiction that distinguished the multiethnic “Sarmatian” nobility from the rest of the population. Parallels are drawn between the position of Poland’s serfs and slaves in the New World, beginning with the powerful opening vignette of the book. And indeed, Leszczyński—who demonstrates a fine command of the appropriate literature/historiography throughout—does not shy away from other such comparisons.

Chapter 2, “Beginnings (to the 14th c.),” opens with a very early example of a peasant’s life from the thirteenth-century Book of Henryków. Historian Joachim Lelewel’s imagined Slavic harmony to the contrary, the early state was most likely built on violence and conquest—slavery included, a vision of statebuilding seen in James C. Scott’s book Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States (2017). The rulers of the lightly populated, less affluent, and cash-poor country that was Poland came up with a creative approach to gaining the resources it needed: a series of obligations were imposed on the people, who were required to supply foodstuffs and services. Leszczyński emphasizes that exploitation was “the skeletal system of the very state and the core of its economic organization, and the creativity of the ruler (władzy) in creating successive burdens was impressive” (p. 77). (This is only the first instance in the book where Polish elites are shown to have exhibited a similarly motivated “creativity.”) The situation of
towns and Jews are also examined, both here and throughout the book.

Chapter 3, “Melioratione terre (to 1520),” reassesses the traditional negative assessments of both the German colonization and the division of the country among King Bolesław Krzywousty’s sons, instead claiming that both represented “a change for the better” for those at the bottom of the social hierarchy (p. 82). German law in particular helped to regulate the previously arbitrary relations between ruler and ruled, leading to stability if not lesser obligations (be they in cash or kind). A similar degree of well-being and personal freedom would not be had by the common people again until emancipation or even later, according to Leszczyński.

At or around one hundred pages and eight-twelve sections apiece, chapters 4 to 6 are the meat of the book. A powerfully written chapter 4, “The turning of the screw 1520-1768,” takes its beginning date from the Toruń statutes of King Zygmunt the Old, according to which labor obligations (pańszczyzna) were to amount to no less than one day a week per łan (a unit of land measure), even in situations where the peasants had negotiated rents instead. To get the peasants to work, incessant brute force was used by the nobles; violence was endemic to the system. An important section on the manor economy underscores the rationality of this private-controlled, as opposed to state-controlled, system in which the nobles consistently strove to monopolize profits as well as extract the maximum from the peasants. Serfdom was not a sign of backwardness in this lightly monetized country, according to Leszczyński; rather, it made economic sense. The creatively tinkered-with system worked amazingly well—from the perspective of the nobility—to the extent that at the end of the sixteenth century it was already difficult to find a wealthy peasant. The situation nonetheless worsened drastically after the wars of the mid-seventeenth and early eighteenth century racked the country, in each case resulting in a huge loss of life. Peasant revolts—with their concomitant “carnival of violence”—were generally limited to the more lightly populated borderland regions, which were harder to control (p. 217).

Chapter 5, “The end of bondage 1768-1864,” takes its beginning point from the cardinal law of 1768, which, while restoring the traditional Commonwealth order, nonetheless took away the nobles’ power over life and death of their peasants. It appears that this change was one reason motivating the Bar Confederates to action—yet another manifestation of the nobles’ obsession with maintaining their position of power over the 90 percent at all cost. Jews were blamed for demoralizing the peasants, the nobles seemingly forgetting that Jews were in their service. In one section Leszczyński takes to task American historian Larry Wolff, the author of *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (1994), for downplaying the reality that prompted critical observations of the Commonwealth by foreigners such as William Coxe. Even the most reformist of eighteenth-century reformers did not put their money where their mouths were—witness the half-baked entrusting of the peasants to the “care of the government” in the constitution of May 3, 1791. The general opposition to any reform—including Tadeusz’s Kościuszko’s Połaniec Manifesto, which finally granted peasants personal freedom while also introducing a “market conception of social relations,” reflected in the debt the personally free peasant owed the owner of the land he used—remained great (p. 286).

It took foreigners to put this emancipatory trend into practice. In need of taxpayers and recruits, the partitioning powers of Austria and Prussia set to regulating relations between the peasant and the lord. Napoleon Bonaparte likewise granted serfs personal freedom in the constitution he dictated for the Poles of the Duchy of Warsaw. But personal freedom alone hardly fixed
the woes of the peasants, some of whom became vagabonds, in this way feeding the fire of opposition to such reforms. What comes interestingly into the picture is the new, liberal enshrining of personal property as sacred—another excuse not simply to give peasants the land they tilled. Nobles fought back more democratic elements of the Duchy of Warsaw and its successor state, the Kingdom of Poland: even during the November Insurrection nobles were loath to give the peasants anything in exchange for joining them in the fight. Even the Polish democrats bungled the approach to peasants to win their support. The Galician revolt of 1846, in which over two thousand nobles were massacred and 150 manors set ablaze, gets nuanced treatment and contextualization. New insights into what led up to the emancipations of 1848 in Galicia and 1864 in the Kingdom of Poland, which resulted in the respective imperial authorities winning the loyalty of the peasantry, conclude the chapter.

Chapter 6, “Capitalism on the peripheries 1864-1944,” shows that peasant emancipation—if not only that—initiated what would be a steady decline in the number of noble estates. It also led to a growth of industry in the Polish lands, with the excess population essentially forced to work in factories that had little in the way of protection for the badly paid workers, the supply of labor vastly outstripping that of capital. From the very outset, the system favored the industrialists, who saw any concessions to the workers as cutting into their profits. In Leszczyński’s words, “The creativity of factory owners in saving on expenses was on par with the creative approach of the nobility to serfdom two centuries earlier” (pp. 353-54). This period also seemed to set the tone for the weakness of both labor laws and their subsequent implementation that would hold true for later periods of Polish history as well. Work conditions led to protests and strikes, often brutally put down. The 1905 Revolution, for which more workers were punished than their upper-class leaders, helped cement National Democracy—the leaders of which rather cynically instrumentalized tradition and religion to gain influence among the masses—as the party of choice by various segments of society, including workers and peasants. A section on antisemitism (part of the National Democratic package) demonstrates the sway it held over much of the population and gives the lie to pogroms as something un-Polish; after World War I, some blamed the Jews themselves for the pogroms, ostensibly triggered to make the new Polish state look bad.

The careful reader will note that the achievement of Polish statehood was no turning point in the peasants’ eyes. Far from being a “Republic of Farmers,” the Second Polish Republic was “the state of the bureaucratic and military intelligentsia” (p. 474). Only in times of crisis—such as the Polish-Bolshevik War—were the agricultural reforms that the peasants demanded countenanced; little was actually done, and the masses found themselves worse off than before 1914, when economically things were looking up (thanks in part to emigration). The numerous protests and strikes of the interwar period were put down brutally, as the police and military repeatedly “pacified” the population. That said, during the Nazi German occupation political entities across the political spectrum were all projecting a new future Poland for the people.

That essentially is what they got—at least in name. The title of chapter 7, “PRL: Exploitation in the name of the party, 1944-1989,” says it all. Here a mere three sections sketch out the situation in the workplace, in the village, and with advancement. The Polish People’s Republic (PRL) put an end to the centuries-long domination of the Polish landowners. Enterprises were nationalized and agricultural reform initiated. Leszczyński nonetheless argues that there were more similarities with the prewar period than one might imagine. Domination by the nobility was exchanged for domination by a new set of elites: the communists, who in stern patriarchal fashion were ostensibly acting in the best interests of the working class, as
they defined them. Workers’ well-being (in the form of living standards or safe working conditions) took a back seat to capital accumulation for purposes of investment, resulting in frequent protests and strikes (many more than are common knowledge)—and ultimately, the Solidarity movement. A number of strikes were put down no less brutally than in the interwar period. As regards village life, land reform was not economically but politically motivated (to gain support for the new regime). The collectivization that soon followed proved disastrous. Władysław Gomułka’s 1956 decision to do away with it—farmers in cooperatives put in minimal effort—represented “one of the few successes of peasant resistance in Polish history” (p. 511). Furthermore, for some former peasants, including the author’s own grandfather, the new regime allowed for an upward mobilization unheard of in earlier periods. The “advancement” of the section title also seems to refer to some of the changes wrought by the system, although the picture—which Leszczyński reviews in greater detail—was still bleak. Opportunities for women, forthcoming during Stalinism, were soon cut back; and Solidarity proved conservative in this regard. Nor were the elite members of the Committee for the Defense of Workers (KOR) entirely trusted by the workers of the Solidarity movement.

The book concludes by emphasizing the continuities and cyclical nature of violence and emancipation in Polish history. Time and time again the elites made emancipatory promises to the common people. In this the Third Republic was hardly different from the Second Polish Republic. Instead of enacting workers’ self-rule, the elites embraced the capitalist system, creating in the process space for the emergence of a more nationalistic and communitarian Right. Institutional disfunction within the state remains a constant. Yet Leszczyński concludes with a positive message: despite this cyclical dynamic—met with failure in 1794, 1830, 1846, 1863, and 1905, and with success in 1918 and 1989—the people’s history of Poland is nonetheless a history of a hard fought-for emancipation.

Anyone interested in Polish history, bottom-up history, history of the masses, or social relations more generally should read *Ludowa historia Polski*. Poland’s historians should find it instructive. I would like to see the book, or an abridged version of it, translated into English. *Ludowa historia Polski* should be of great use to those who teach Polish history more broadly or want to learn more about the lives of the 90 percent. My one quibble would be that a book of this nature deserves more than an index of names. That said, the table of contents does contain the suggestive titles of the numerous chapter sections as well as chapters, which will help the reader who wishes to locate and pursue certain topics.

Note
