

Patrons of History. Nobility, Capital and Political Transitions in Poland

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Political displacement and various rigorous land reform campaigns over the last 150 years or so have striven to make the Polish gentry (a term the author uses interchangeably with nobility) irrelevant. And yet, as Longina Jakubowska argues in *Patrons of History: Nobility, Capital and Political Transitions in Poland*, the Polish nobility's influence and social appeal remains intact today. Posing this contradiction at the very start of her book, Jakubowska sets out to answer the question: "How did the group that had been systematically attacked for so many years manage to survive and reemerge in this way?" (p. 2). What follows is a masterful ethnography of the perseverance, adaptability, and transformation of the Polish upper classes over the course of several political transitions, beginning in the long nineteenth century through the Third Polish Republic. Special attention, however, is paid to the postwar period. Beyond offering us an entrance into the somewhat mysterious, esoteric, and perhaps even misunderstood lives of the social elite, Jakubowska shows how the nobility's own troubled past helped, in part, to construct the narrative of victimization that has long overwritten Polish history. Thus, the book is as important for anthropologists as it is for historians.

Patrons of History is the result of exhaustive and meticulous research. The author has mined Polish archives for documentary evidence in addition to collecting over one hundred oral and written testimonies. Participant interviews, she tells us, were conducted over the course of sixteen years, from 1994 to 2010, with more or less equal numbers of men and women aged twenty-five through ninety, though a majority of her informants were from the older generation. In analyzing these sources, Jakubowska employs Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus to garner information about "the gentry's system of dispositions, [and] their socialized tendencies ... as revealed through the ways in which they managed their transformation and found a new niche" (p. 3). In this way, Jakubowska is able to comment both on transformations in noble society and on the consistencies in upper-class behavior as a result of the very specific social and cultural world the Polish elite embodied over time. As she comes to argue, habitus informed the gentry's behavior and attitudes even when their actions could be and were perceived as traitorous. For Jakubowska, the gentry's ability to transform their symbolic capital into economic and cultural capital was key to their survival and it is this trajectory that structures her

narrative.

Aside from the first chapter, which serves as the introduction, the book is organized chronologically. In chapter 1, Jakubowska contextualizes her study in the field of anthropology and discusses her methodology. Key to this chapter is the way she historicizes the nobility and their mentality in Polish society. In addition to mentioning the Sarmatian myth—the notion that the Polish gentry are descendant of Eastern warriors and thus racially superior to commoners—the author also analyzes the importance of history and culture to the nobility. It was nobles' culture that set them apart from the uncultured lower classes and the best way to protect this culture was to immortalize it through history.

The second chapter addresses, rather broadly, the gentry's economic shifts and relative disenfranchisement from the sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries, as nobles slowly transformed themselves from landowners of expansive estates to a largely urban-based intelligentsia. Here, Jakubowska makes important claims concerning the gentry's relationship to patriotism and history. Nobles imagined themselves as the keepers of the nation, including its history and traditions, and perceived all of their actions, from landownership to staging an uprising, as moral and patriotic obligations. Peasant emancipation and land reform legislation over the course of the nineteenth century were economically crippling to the gentry. Forced, in some circumstances, to abandon agriculture, they moved to cities where they became part of the country's intelligentsia. Once the partitioning empires had fallen and the Polish state was reconstituted, the gentry could not return to the social and economic positions they once enjoyed, but rather took on new social, cultural, and political roles in the Second Polish Republic. One flaw in the chapter's analysis is that it remains focused mainly on noble patriotism and romanticism, and does not discuss the shift to realism in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

In chapter 3, Jakubowska explains the nobility's behaviors during the Second World War that were eventually demonized by the postwar regime. This is perhaps one of the strongest and most nuanced chapters. Jakubowska argues here that nobles' "class identification and the hidden dimensions of habitus, such as their cosmopolitanism and transnational connections, the tendency to think of etiquette as a moral discipline, their standards of aesthetic taste, a value for the past in the sense of continuity and tradition" (p. 59), informed each decision they made during the war, even hosting members of the Nazi Party elite in their manors and treating them to elaborate dinners. This, Jakubowska explains, should not be seen as an act of treason. Rather, when analyzed through the lens of tradition and habitus, such dinners are, in fact, moral imperatives based on class structures. Conversely, the Soviets, whom the Poles saw as racially and culturally inferior, were not treated in this way, demonstrating, once again, the importance of class, race, and culture to the Polish gentry.

The fourth chapter is focused on the 1944 Land Reform Decree that nationalized nobles' lands, dividing them among small farmers or turning them into state-run plantations. Here, Jakubowska contends that the Land Reform Decree effectively ended the role of the gentry as landowners and forced them to reinvent their self-identity. "In the absence of material embodiments of status," Jakubowska explains, "distinctions based solely on 'shared origins' and 'culture' became ever more important and pronounced, because 'culture' was all that the gentry had left of their previous grandeur" (p. 117). This loss of land also reified perceptions of nobles' sacrifice and victimization, as nobles drew a direct line from nineteenth-century land reform campaigns to their current predicament. Presented through the lens of patriotism, nobles could maintain that they acted heroically and in

support of Poland, even if it meant their own financial ruin.

Land reform was not the only way the Communist regime attempted to isolate the gentry. In chapter 5, Jakubowska highlights four ways in which the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) targeted the gentry, namely, by subjecting some nobles to show trials, by debasing the Catholic Church, by supporting a program of educational discrimination, and through public ridicule. She uses the show trial of Witold Maringe to demonstrate that such trials were rife with class-based attacks and that "the prosecution relied heavily on the large repertoire of negative images of the gentry in the eyes of the underclasses" to gain popular support for the regime and discredit the accused (p. 148). The church, with its strong ties to the gentry, was also discredited. And while universities opened their doors to students of rural and working families, students of noble background found it more difficult to get accepted. Newspapers and magazines began running political cartoons that ridiculed the gentry as entitlement and snobbery personified. These attempts, the author claims, only resulted in a more powerful insistence of noble identity and distinction.

With Communism now firmly rooted in Poland, the gentry had no choice but to adapt to the conditions of the time, living very different public and private lives. The sixth chapter details these differences. Far from entirely eliminating nobles from society, the Communist regime utilized their skills and educational levels, placing most in mid-level jobs where their education and professionalism were necessary. To make themselves less identifiable, some nobles even took to falsifying documents so as to not draw too much attention to themselves or their families. Privately, however, their situation was different. That most noble families were now urban meant that they could form urban-based enclaves and maintain noble circles of sociability. With the loss of land and the corresponding economic and political loss, the internal divisions within the gentry were flattened and a more common identity could flourish, one that heralded their sacrifice and patriotism for Poland. The final chapter serves as the conclusion, detailing the resurgence of the gentry in the public eye and the proliferation of noble-based groups and organizations since the collapse of Communism.

As a student of history, I have been trained to question the patriotic narrative of victimization that consumes Polish history. All too often we do this without realizing where this narrative originated and who its proponents were. In *Patrons of History*, Jakubowska offers an important interpretation of the narrative's origins: Polish nobles, understanding their lives to be the stuff of history, conflated their own personal narratives of suffering and victimization with that of the nation, thus giving life to a thematically similar national narrative. For all of its strengths, there are two issues that could have been discussed more clearly. Firstly, Jakubowska makes claims about the increasing homogeneity of the nobility, particularly in moments of struggle, and mentions only some moments where this homogeneity broke down. Readers might be hard pressed to believe that this homogeneity was as strong as Jakubowska claims. And secondly, for a book about the transformations of a social class, Jakubowska uses the term "peasant" all too easily to describe rural peoples without any clarification of her use of the term. Besides being anachronistic, this does not reflect shifts in rural society's own self-perceptions. Aside from these two minor criticisms, however, the book is a must-read for anthropologists and historians alike and an important contribution to the scholarly literature.

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