

MPhil research proposal: Peasant experience of the city in late nineteenth-century Poland.

The aim of my MPhil thesis is to provide a systematic analysis of peasant social mobility by investigating the experience of urban and rural spaces. In the second half of the nineteenth century, a growing number of Polish peasants decided to leave the village and earn their living not just in the countryside, but also in the city. Although the majority, particularly in the Russian partition, joined the working class, some succeeded at partial assimilation to the broadly understood 'intelligentsia'. Of course, many peasant intellectuals were active primarily in the village, but even rural forms of activism, such as founding agrarian circles, required contact with the urban spaces. The transition from life centred on the countryside into one divided between the urban and the rural *milieux* offers a unique opportunity for a study of social change in *fin-de-siècle* East Central Europe.

A fascinating example is offered by Jakub Bojko, a peasant from Gręboszewo village in Galicia. His experience of Lviv and Vienna, where he was a deputy to the Galician Diet and the Imperial Council respectively, was ambivalent. Whilst, he saw the city as crowded, 'smelling of the Jew' and generally unfriendly, he also appreciated the anonymity that urban churches offered, as due to their size and the number of people attending the mass, nobody cared about his political preferences. In his diary, Bojko complains how he misses his family and how alienated he feels, but also expands on how much he appreciates the respect with which he is being treated after years of political activity (the greatest privilege of all being the opportunity to meet Emperor Franz Josef).¹

Bojko's diary raises some key issues that I would like to explore in my thesis, such as the change in religious experience in urban centres, a transition in the perception of space, as well as the transformation of peasant antisemitism in response to interactions with the Jews away from the shtetl. I am particularly keen to address the question of how villagers attempted to negotiate their place in between their urban and rural communities. The questions I would like to consider are: what is the relationship between spatial and social mobility? Is 'modern' social mobility inherently tied to urbanisation? What is the impact of urban environment on the change in peasant social and political views?

To my best knowledge, the proposed focus on peasant oscillation between two *milieux* represents a new approach in the Polish context. My analysis will draw from fields of microhistory, urban history, peasant studies and collective biography. In this context, my research would benefit substantially from the support of the diverse and interdisciplinary academic community offered by Cambridge.

The Master's thesis proposed will build upon my undergraduate thesis, where I explore social imaginaries of Galician peasant intelligentsia. Specifically, I focus on peasant elite's attitudes towards their social betters, their relationship with the church, and approaches towards the past (notably the memory of the *jacquerie* of 1846).

Along with the thematical change, I propose to expand the geographical scope to include the Russian partition of Poland. This can not only help explore different contexts of mobility thus providing a valuable comparative perspective, but also bring into my study examples of peasant

¹ Warsaw, *Archiwum Zakładu Historii Ruchu Ludowego*, Bojko Papers, syg. 3: Bojko's handwritten diary.

intellectuals outside of the Galician populist movement, which has served as the primary focus in the studies of Polish peasant elites to-date.

Crucially, I will attempt to move away from the dominant historiographical trend to study peasant mobility primarily through the lens of politicisation and nationalism. Although works by Jan Molenda and Keely Stauter-Halsted touch upon social issues, their aim is primarily to explain the rise of popular nationalism.² Peasant elites are seen not as a separate object of analysis, but as the group responsible for turning ‘peasants into Poles’. This is a valuable perspective. However, I believe that becoming ‘conscious of’ one’s nationality is just a small aspect of the peasant experience; opportunities and threats presented by growing urban spaces are a particularly neglected topic. Studies of peasant mobility in Poland go back to Józef Chałasiński’s and Florian Znaniecki’s works from the first half of the twentieth century.³ Both are excellent, particularly the latter, but they are works of sociology and thus make structural conclusions that are not entirely satisfactory to a historian.

I plan to rely on a variety of sources, including peasant letters, press, diaries, literary sources and memoirs, as well as administrative records of peasant presence and activities in the city. I will attempt to avoid using retrospective accounts as the main source in order to maintain a diachronic approach. I would like to understand the *process* of how peasants ‘learned’ the city and its effect on their experience of the village.

I intend to use my time at university to start learning German. With the knowledge of Polish, English, Russian, French and German, I would be able to access sources from all Polish partitions.

I envision being supervised by Hubertus Jahn, due to his broad interests in cultural and East European history, as well as his expertise with respect to material culture. I also look forward to joining the budding community of scholars associated with Cambridge Polish Studies, most notably Stanley Bill, whose efforts to promote Polish history and culture in English are truly inspirational.

² J. Molenda, *Chłopi, Naród, Niepodległość* (Warszawa, 1999); K. Stauter-Halsted, *The Nation in the Village: The Genesis of Peasant National Identity in Austrian Poland 1848-1914* (Ithaca, 2001).

³ J. Chałasiński, *Przeszłość i przyszłość inteligencji polskiej* (Warsaw, 1997 [1946]); W. I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (2 vols, New York, 1972 [1918-1920]).