
The world of “the nobility” is a world of myths and fairy tales: those created by the noblemen themselves, and those perpetuated by their later historians. Among these myths, one of the most prominent is the belief that there exists “a nobility,” as a yardstick against which all the nobilities should be “measured.” This fine collection of essays is a good illustration of the fallacy of this belief as well as of the pitfalls that it may create.

The collection, representing a series of lectures held at Yale University in 1978-79, includes the following essays: “The Nobility in the History of Russia and Eastern Europe” (Ivo Banac and Paul Bushkovitch); “The Szlachta of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Their Government” (Andrzej Kamiński); “The Noble as a Hero and the Noble as a Villain in Polish Romantic Literature” (Wiktor Weintraub); “The Ukrainian Elite in the Eighteenth Century and Its Integration into the Russian Nobility” (Zenon E. Kohut); “The Russian Nobility in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: Trends and Comparisons” (Marc Raeff); “Progressive Feudalists: The Hungarian Nobility in 1848” (Istvan Deak); “The Position of the Nobility in the Organization of the Elite in Northern Croatia at the End of the Nineteenth and the Beginning of the Twentieth Centuries” (Mirjana Gross); and “The Russian Nobility and Party Politics before the Revolution” (Terence Emmons). The articles deal, therefore, with five countries and with periods stretching from the first half of the fifteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. The authors have not been asked to refer to a unified set of issues, and each of them has dealt freely with his subject, without reference to the other essays included in the book (there is only one such reference, of minor importance, on p. 119, n. 8). By and large, although comparisons (whether substantive or metaphorical) between nobilities may be found, the authors’ approach is not a comparative one in terms of the methodologies used. The collection is informative, thought-provoking, and a welcome addition to the growing body of research on this subject. As is quite often the case with collections and sborniki, any attempt to summarize in a few sentences the complex issues dealt with in each article would not do justice to the richness of the analysis and of the arguments. I will therefore limit myself to some random reflections and observations.

The excellent introductory essay by Banac and Bushkovitch sketches the scope and problematic of the subject and points out that “the studies collected in this volume reflect the complex fate of the nobility in the more recent history of Russia and Eastern Europe” (p. 10); in fact, a “complex fate” which could serve as a common denominator (among others) to all the nobilities in Europe—Western, Central, and Eastern alike. (An interesting insight, well worth further pursuit, is the authors’ distinction between the nobilities’ evolution in Catholic and Orthodox countries.)

Kamiński observes that with regard to Poland-Lithuania there has been a “paucity of research on the aristocracy as a social group” (p. 26) and that the latter “should be studied as a social group” (p. 25). This timely proposition has guided the author in defining the article’s goal and scope, namely “to describe the social stratification of the szlachta and to analyze the relations between them and the sources of political power in Poland-Lithuania” (p. 20). The result is a valuable attempt to integrate socio-economic processes into the analysis of political strife. The main weakness of this attempt, however, stems from the fact that the notion of “socio-economic stratification,” as used by the author, is too general and conceptually vague. Nevertheless, he has many interesting and original things to say about the political and constitutional aspects of the relationships between nobility and kings, as well as on other important topics such as the former’s legal position, government structure and control, institutional changes, and the appointment of officials.
Weintraub's elegant essay deals with the Great Emigration after the Polish insurrection of 1830-31, an emigration that comprised most of Poland's cultural and political elite. Analyzing selected works by Mickiewicz, Slowacki, Chojecki, and the historian Lelewel, the author finds that the ideological radicalization (leading for some to varieties of agrarian socialism) did not bring about a rejection of the past, but on the contrary, led to an idealization of the old gentry in pre-partitioned Poland. Weintraub points out that this idealization of the old szlachta by radicals is "a paradox," and it certainly is, although not a rare one in the enchanted world of ideas and ideologies, whether radical on the left or on the right.

Kohut addresses the problem of "the Hetmanate's secular elite," which comprised Cossack officers and szlachta of various national origins. The author gives a description of this group's political outlook in the 1760s, the stages of its incorporation into the Russian nobility, and the role of its customs, traditions, and the development of a modern Ukrainian national consciousness.

Raeff's essay is an able summary of the author's recent published work. As a summary, dealing in twenty-two pages with two hundred years of the Russian nobility's history, it has the advantage of conciseness and sharpness of synthesis mixed with the inevitable shortcomings of vague generalizations and questionable approximations. To the inquiring mind, though, it gives much food for thought. The author's starting point, main thesis, and conclusion affirm the view that "within the family of European nobilities in modern times, the Russian nobility is a phenomenon sui generis" (p. 99). The essay does indeed present some interesting differences between the Russian nobility on the one hand, and the Prussian and French nobilities, on the other. These cursory and random comparisons do not seem to make, however, a strong case for the thesis that the Russian nobility was "a phenomenon sui generis," because the yardstick used by the author, namely "the family of European nobilities," is an abstraction which has none of the advantages of an "ideal type," while having all the disadvantages of a "model." Instead, should a comparative approach (not to be confused with random comparisons) have been used, it would have revealed that, viewed within a diversified and graduated European pattern, the Russian nobility was neither "more" nor "less" sui generis than, say, the Spanish, the Polish, or the Hungarian vis-à-vis, for instance, the Russian or the English; and for that matter, any nobility vis-à-vis all the others. They are all different yet comparable, because they have in common some basic structural, functional, and historical traits. In this perspective, there is no reason to single out the Russian nobility or any other as being sui generis, and the essays in this volume (as well as several cases mentioned in Raeff's own essay) give excellent examples of the unity within diversity shared by the European nobilities. Such a comparative approach might have also led the author to reexamine some of his conclusions (which tend, generally speaking, to understate and belittle the role and function of the Russian nobility in state and society). In any case, one of these conclusions seems to this reviewer questionable, both on factual and methodological grounds, namely the conclusion that "the historical path of the Russian nobility in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is almost a reverse of that in France and Prussia (and other European countries as well)" (p. 119). Using a similar approach, could it not be said that the historical path of the French nobility is almost a reverse of that in Prussia? If so, then is the Russian nobility's path almost a reverse of that of two others, one of which is the reverse of the other? Also, would it be wrong to argue that the historical path of the English nobility is almost a reverse of that in Poland and Spain? If so, which is the straight historical path, and which one—the reverse?

It is to be regretted, too, that the author has repeated, in this otherwise stimulating essay, some stereotypes which recent research has clearly shown to be inaccurate—stereotypes such as "the absence of local solidarities" in Russia (p. 103), "the absence of permanent local residence [sic] and involvement" of the Russian nobleman (p. 103), and his being "cut off early in life from local contacts and bonds" (p. 100).