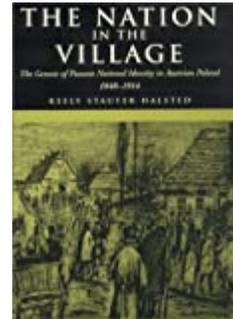




Keely Stauter-Halsted. *The Nation in the Village: The Genesis of Peasant National Identity in Austrian Poland, 1848-1914.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001. x + 272 pp. \$47.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3844-8.



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From Peasants to Poles

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At the beginning of *The Nation in the Village*, Keely Stauter-Halsted states that she will explore “the transition from serf to citizen in the Polish lands by examining the formation of a peasant national identity (or identities) between emancipation in 1848 and the outbreak of the Great War” (p. 3). The narrative that follows is insightful and innovative in its approach to a complex topic that has received far less attention than it deserves. While nationalism studies have produced a cornucopia of theories, relatively few have delved into the murky processes of peasant identification with “the nation”. An early exception is the path-breaking work of Eugene Weber on the transformation of the French peasantry into Frenchmen.[1]

Long an inspiration to historians of the peasantry, students of village life in Eastern Europe and Russia only recently have begun to produce comparable works. Stauter-Halsted’s book is a fine example that draws on a dazzling array of printed and archival sources to reveal what peasants themselves were saying, writing, thinking, and dreaming about any future Polish nation. Act-

ing in their own interest and with educated Poles as their mentors, peasants seized opportunities that emerged after emancipation in 1848 to integrate themselves into a national debate. In the process, they became citizens in name and practice.

Stauter-Halsted begins her book with a powerful story about the uprising of February 1846, when Polish-speaking serfs hid from bloodthirsty Polish gentry rebels. Believing themselves to have little in common with the aristocratic rebels, the simple countryfolk considered Poland and its supporters to be nothing less than foreign. Scarcely half a century later, the descendants of these same peasants staged ornate village festivities in honor of the centennial of Tadeusz Kosciuszko’s insurrection. In the short span of two generations, they, along with fellow peasants throughout Austrian Galicia had become Polishmen.

The processes involved in this transformation are grounded in the theoretical underpinnings of the book. Stauter-Halsted extends Habermas’ public sphere to the village, where, in Poland as elsewhere in Europe, a rural civil society was emerging in the discussions, arguments,

and debates taking place in formal and informal venues. As peasants travelled along the bumpy road to a modern Polish identity, they drew from a rich cultural repertoire of “nested identities” (pp. 8-9). Galicia is “an ideal testing ground in Eastern Europe for the interaction between the broadening membership in the national movements and the expansion of the public sphere” (p. 15). Galician peasants were much like their counterparts outside of Eastern Europe, too, as they reflected upon “the nation” in ways similar to villagers elsewhere in Europe, China, and Mexico.

The remaining nine chapters are divided into two parts. The first concentrates on the decades following the emancipation when political life in the village began to take shape. The second half of the book traces the links between countryside and capitals that nurtured a sense of Polish identity. Chapters one and two are about the immediate consequences of the emancipation for village life. Having received a less than equitable settlement in 1848, Galician peasants were barely able to cope with the consequences of land shortage, population growth, primitive agricultural methods, and epidemics. The cultural sphere could be as oppressive, but here peasants imposed their own restrictions based on oral tradition and custom.

Two symbols dominated village life at least until the early 1870s: the church and the tavern. The church organized village piety and gave meaning to the calendar and stages of life. The tavern was the secular counterpart of the church and an almost exclusively peasant sphere of public activity. Contemporary ethnographers rightly noted the symbolic relationship between church and tavern, one attending to the sacred, the other to the profane. Proximity of one’s cottage to the church, as well as income levels and land ownership, were the bases of social distinction under serfdom. After 1848, the appearance of a small group of wealthier peasants introduced new secular variables to the status hierarchy that diminished the importance of church and tavern. Culturally, tension was never far away. Any single village might have among its residents Polish Roman Catholics, Ukrainian Greek Catholics, German Lutherans or Catholics, and Jews, practicing their individual faiths and speaking a handful of languages. [2]

Peasants sharpened their political teeth at the male-dominated village council and in the local tavern, where they began to establish norms and behaviors that would be useful once they began serving in the Galician *Sejm* in Lwow and the *Reichsrat* in Vienna. The council, folk distinctions between insiders and outsiders, and curiosity

about the world beyond the village constituted the main elements of peasant “political theory” in the first post-emancipation decades and eventually drew sharp lines around US as Poles, and THEM as everyone else.

The use of written law to integrate Galician peasants into imperial political and social life is the subject of chapter three. [3] Although peasants (at least village elites) were expected to learn the written laws and to subordinate custom to it, aristocratic politicians at first did not know customary law or respect the peasantry’s new political rights. When peasants were included in the Galician *Sejm* for the first time in 1861, a symbolic struggle erupted between rural and urban social and cultural worlds. At issue were differing ways of establishing candidates’ credentials. Elite members of the *Sejm* used the letter of the law to exclude peasant voices in the assembly, while villagers resorted to customary measures that included a moral code favoring regional loyalty.

Stauter-Halsted argues in chapter four that peasants, rebuffed in the *Sejm*, had little choice but to turn their energies on the village commune. By then, non-officeholding peasants were becoming more knowledgeable of written laws and used “tricks” similar to those employed by aristocrats against rural deputies in the *Sejm* to remove village council members. After 1875, disgruntled peasants also turned to rural newspapers to voice their complaints. Outside the realm of politics, the peasantry increasingly brought law suits against each other to settle land disputes and small claims. By the end of the 1870s, peasant custom was unquestionably under attack by the very peasantry itself.

The manipulation of peasant stereotypes, the impact of literacy, and the demands of peasants for a moral community are the themes that link parts one and two. Chapter five examines the “peasant” as a literary and ethnographic metaphor. [4] Like elites throughout nineteenth-century Europe, the Polish upper classes in Galicia drew from peasant tradition to construct their images of Poland and thus transformed village culture into a “discursive battleground” about the nation (pp. 98-99). As elite representations of the peasantry became scientifically oriented, local activists established folklore institutes and ethnographic museums throughout the countryside. The closely related field of statistics offered yet another portrait of the people, one that was filled with despair, fatalism, and bitterness.

Chapter six describes the work of gentry activists, parish priests, and urban intellectuals to spread their philosophy of cultural and economic self-improvement.

Picking up on a growing peasant antipathy for Jews, elites united behind anti-Jewish sentiment to lure villagers into the nationalist agenda. For the first time, cooperation behind ethnic hate had created a domestic ethnic “other” in the form of Jews. Once respected by the peasantry, by the early 1870s villagers began to see Jewish tavern keepers as avaricious moneylenders eager to make loans to land hungry villagers. Adding to this image was the sudden rise in Jewish landownership.

More positive cooperation between elites and the peasantry can be found in the Agricultural Circle Society and its offspring, which began their work in 1882. Circles fused traditional association of a religious nature with politics, and soon shifted the focus of village public life away from church and tavern. Ever suspicious of the intentions of the gentry and outsiders, peasants soon took control of these societies and distanced themselves from the central administration.

With the peasantry becoming increasingly empowered, all that remained was a transfer of this new political competence to the national level, which is the topic of chapter seven. Education linked village and national cultures and, along with worldliness, replaced age and knowledge as desired leadership traits. A fascinating section entitled, “The Schoolmaster as Populist Advocate” (pp. 160-66) describes the teacher as a model of the new traits that were to combine traditional piety and humility with citizenship and patriotism. Through the teacher resonated the agenda of school officials, a trinity of piety, patriotism, and education. [5]

The admiration peasants had for teachers and priests extended beyond the moral sphere since both professions were avenues to social mobility. Conservative educators tried to curb peasant mobility by revising the rural school curriculum to include only basic instruction in reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion. Polish teachers, however, were an independent lot with a more inclusive vision of future society. To prepare their students for full participation in the life of a revived Polish nation, teachers introduced a populist version of history that featured peasants as historical actors. Beyond the classroom walls, teachers fostered a sense of peasant participation in the national struggle by supporting the construction of reading rooms, subscribing to periodicals, purchasing books, and volunteering in circle stores.

The final two chapters of the book are about peasants taking control of national images, combining them with their own model of the moral community, and then producing a distinct brand of national identity. No sin-

gle image of Poland emerged, but a set of shared principles distinguished peasants as “ethical, sober, pious, and industrious,” as opposed to the nobility and clergy who were “corrupt, urbane, disloyal” (pp. 185-86). The rural press became a symbolic public square for literate peasants to work out their visions of the nation, while their illiterate brethren turned to historical commemorations to construct their own “moral-national vision” that stressed the soil, family, and religion.

Historical commemorations, a topic in further need of research throughout Eastern Europe and Russia, raise many questions about communication and reception. Even if we accept that mass celebrations of historical figures and events were carried out on the initiative of village elites, we cannot assume that planners and participants agreed on their meaning and significance. Nor is it clear that these celebrations provided opportunities to negotiate between different meanings of the nation. And while it may be that some peasants saw these events as vehicles for incorporating “rural symbols into the iconography of the nation” (p. 211), it is as likely that many participants simply wished to partake in the festivals because they featured food, drink, singing, storytelling, and dancing. [6]

Peasants reached full political “maturity” (the author’s word which she surrounds with quotes) by 1905 when they believed that their interests could only be represented in the *Sejm* by one of their own kind. There was a certain irony to this since peasant activists themselves turned out to be the worst enemy of traditional rural life. As they sought to introduce reforms, to introduce basic schooling in villages, and to support rural industry, peasant activists replaced one world with another.

Keely Stauter-Halsted raises important questions and argues persuasively about the existence of a national identity among Galician peasants in the last decades of the Habsburg empire. The village bubbles with energy and enthusiasm. Peasants as historical actors used the rural public sphere to set their own agendas, disagreed about what the revived Poland would look like, and promoted their vision of nation into the national arena in a way that affected unity in post-World War I Poland. Further implications are suggested about the public sphere in village society in pre-World War I Europe, as well as the impact of peasants as contributors to national political debate.

The author also makes other contributions about national identity formation and secularization. Unfortunately though, most references to theories of national

identity are given in the introduction only, which leaves the reader to make the connections between Hroch's various phases, for example, and Anderson's imagined communities; while chapter seven sets forth a subtle argument about the secularization of village life without a single reference to Max Weber or any number of more contemporary theories.

There are only a few things to criticize about this expertly researched book. The first is an inadvertent and mild one-dimensional presentation of the peasantry in the first half of the book. For example, peasant views of religion and ethnicity may be difficult to untangle, but how they influenced the internal relationships of the village may be critical to later peasant conceptions of the nation. Are we to assume that all Christian and ethnic groups had the same views and stereotypes of Jews? Even so, what influence did possible tensions between Christian groups (in the same village) have on the rise of anti-Jewish tension? Did Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, and Lutherans live in harmony throughout this period? If so, what might this tell us about the role of religion in the formation of Polish national identity among peasants? [7]

The village as "moral community" certainly existed, but by equating peasant activity to a moral (implied ethical) endeavor (with too little discussion of selfish and immoral/unethical motives), the author presents a version of an elite ideal. This is not to say that peasant motives were not morally based, but other motivations deserve more attention (jealousy, envy, and pettiness, common traits of peasant society, have provided fascinating insights to the workings of village life in Russia [8]). From another angle, one could get the impression that the gentry were, with certain exceptions noted in the book, acting immorally, without ethics, and only out of self-interest.

This leads to the question of representativeness. What proportion of the peasant population is the author talking about? Literacy rates would have strengthened the argument about the effects of literacy in the formation of national identity. How many peasants subscribed to newspapers or used the new reading rooms and libraries? What percentage of peasant girls were educated, and what role did women (educated or not) play in the formation of ideas about the nation? How many school teachers were women? In short, what role did gender play in the transformation of village life?

Although Stauter-Halsted's style is often compelling, a finer editorial pen would have removed repetition in the

first part of the book, and would have seen the need for a glossary. The reader is also left to place this fine piece of scholarship in a comparative context, a matter that undoubtedly follows editorial prejudice against lengthy references to similar findings in other parts of Europe. Some pictures capture perfectly the argument in the surrounding text, such as the sketch of a village teacher whose expression, attire, and demeanor, as well as the difficulties he will face, are depicted in iconographic fashion.

These concerns aside, the fresh approach to the village and identity will make a strong contribution to the literature on nationalism, peasant studies, and the public sphere. Stauter-Halsted's book should be essential reading for anyone interested in modern Europe, the peasantry, and national identity.

Notes:

[1]. Eugene Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976). A helpful overview of nationalism theories can be found in Gopal Balakrishnan, ed., *Mapping the Nation*, with an Introduction by Benedict Anderson (London and New York: Verso, 1996).

[2]. A comparison of Polish peasants in Galicia and their counterparts further east reveals a different pattern of development. For example, the village tavern in Russia is associated with drunkenness and debauchery rather than sober public debate. Peasants who discussed politics in a tavern were likely to be turned in to the local police whose files bulge with such utterances. Russian peasant villages were also more ethnically, religiously, and linguistically homogeneous, though no less contentious.

[3]. In Russia, the Emancipation of 1861 created a dual legal system, one based on oral custom, the other based on written laws that, in a fundamental way, alienated the Russian peasantry from the rest of society. See Gareth Popkins, "Code versus Custom? Reading Peasant *Volost*' Court Appeals, 1889-1917," *Russian Review* 59, no. 3 (2000) 408-424.

[4]. For the same in Russia, see Cathy Frierson, *Peasant Icons: Representations of Rural People in Late 19th Century Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[5]. Contrast this to the trinity of Russian nationalism, Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality.

[6]. For comparison with the Russian case, see Chris J. Chulos, "Orthodox Identity at Russian Holy Places," in *The Fall of an Empire, the Birth of a Nation: National Identity*

tities in Russia, eds. Chris J. Chulos and Timo Piirainen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 28-50. 1832-1863 (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2000).

[7]. Johannes Remy has discussed the complicated issue of ethnicity, religion, and language for Polish students in the mid-nineteenth century: *Higher Education and National Identity: Polish Student Activism in Russia*, [8]. Jeffrey Burds, *Peasant Dreams and Market Politics: Labor Migration and the Russian Village, 1861-1905* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998).

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