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INTRODUCTION: LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN AUSTRIA-HUNGARY AND BEYOND

The topic proposed for this issue of *Acta Poloniae Historica* revolves around local elites during the modern period. While urban centres of elites were most prominent at that time, the theme is not confined to them alone. It fits into a broader trend of examining the pre-First World War modernising states through the lens of localness. Our central idea is to emphasise localness as a distinct dimension of culture[1] and a particular framework for social communication, including competition or cooperation.[2] The local dimension stands out as particularly interesting in studies on the specific nature of Habsburg society; the contributors to this issue seek to capture the dynamics of socio-cultural processes at a micro-scale. The category of elites, which serves as a common framework here, requires further clarification. As a research category, it has an interesting genealogy, tied

[1] See: Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983); Aleksandra Kunce, *Człowiek lokalny: rozważania umiejscowione* (Katowice, 2016); Bogdan Radzicki, 'Uwagi o ontologii lokalności', *Humanistyka i Przyrodoznawstwo*, 26 (2021), 131–46.

[2] See, e.g.: Olga Linkiewicz, *Lokalność i nacjonalizm: społeczności wiejskie w Galicji Wschodniej w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym* (Kraków, 2018).

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to the birth of sociology and political science.[3] Over time, it has permeated historical research, both in a broad cultural sense and in studies of nationalism.[4] Our definition of elites remains broad while staying true to its sociological core. We view members of the elite as actors who hold resources that are crucial within a given community and can be leveraged for capital and higher status.[5] Of course, such capital can take various forms: economic (as in the case of factory owners, etc.), social (members of prominent families or the families of wealthy politicians and local officials), or cultural (teachers, etc.). This gives them influence within the group, often enabling them to assume positions of responsibility or serve as role models.[6] Locality offers a way to examine the conditions for status change, and sometimes subtle choices or trends within micro-communities. A point of particular interest is the question of the values that matter to a given group, determining whether it embraces – or dismisses – the aspirations of its individual members. In this dimension, the question of national relations in Habsburg society seems the most compelling. The stratified ethnic profile of the old (post-feudal) elites and the emergence of new elite groups (undergoing integration and gaining political traction through nationalist ideas or technocratic interests)

[3] See: Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, transl. by Hannah D. Kahn (New York–London, 1939); Vilfredo Pareto, *The Rise and Fall of the Elites: An Application of Theoretical Sociology* (London–New York, 2017); Kenneth Prewitt and Alan Stone, *The Ruling Elites. Elite Theory, Power and American Democracy* (New York, 1973); John Scott (ed.), *The Sociology of Elites. Three Volumes* (Aldershot, 1990).

[4] One example of this tendency is presented in Adam Hudek, Peter Šoltés et al., *Elity a kontraelity na Slovensku v 19. a 20. storočí. Kontinuity a diskontinuity* (Bratislava, 2019).

[5] On the notions of resources and capital, see Piotr Długosz, *Strategie życiowe młodzieży na pograniczu polsko-ukraińskim* (Kraków, 2017), 169–71; Nan Lin, 'Les Ressources Sociales: Une Théorie Du Capital Social', *Revue Française de Sociologie*, xxxvi, 4 (1995), 685–704.

[6] Bourdieu identifies the ability to shape the categorisation of the social world and the creation of order as the key attribute of elites. Similarly, the texts in this issue explore the question of social order during the dynamic period of Austria-Hungary. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, transl. Richard Nice (New York, 2004), following here the Polish translation: id., *Dystynkcja. Społeczna krytyka władzy sądzenia*, transl. Piotr Biłos (Warszawa, 2005), 574–6. In the context of Austria-Hungary, an interesting case study of the accumulation of spheres of influence is András Gerő, *Modern Hungarian Society in the Making. The Unfinished Experience*, transl. James Patterson and Enikő Koncz (Budapest–London–New York, 1997).

gave rise to a new phenomenon of rivalry among elites.[7] This conflict is especially apparent in the local sphere. However, as the studies in this volume demonstrate, it is also interesting to look at such issues as (spatial and social) mobility, the enduring nature of social and cultural patterns from the Habsburg *longue durée* era, or the identity of a given professional group.

The study of local elites in modern times has a somewhat shorter lineage. It combines cultural history, employing a broader methodology than traditional social history, drawing on anthropological and sociological tools, alongside the aspirations and standpoints of the spatial turn, with the *locus* as the central research category. To be clear, in many respects, it also incorporates methods from social history and sociology, particularly in quantifying the elite groups and examining their formation and development. By emphasizing localness before 1914 – the interwar period changed this dynamic, as elites often saw their growing empowerment – such studies shift the focus away from top-tier political groups, with their inter-regional outlooks and feudal entanglements, toward emerging grassroots groups, or conversely, to post-feudal elites trying to navigate through the process of state, economic, and societal modernisation. What bound these elites together was their limited influence, which rarely extended beyond the immediate region; indeed, their ambitions were distinctly local, yet they also sought to expand their (local) influence and gain recognition as respectable figures, both among their peers in the elite and, crucially, in the eyes of state agents.

The state in question is Austria-Hungary (1867–1918), the Central-European empire (though the term 'empire' is occasionally criticised in this context), which began its large-scale modernisation in the mid-nineteenth century, when it was still the Austrian Empire (1806–67), in the neo-absolutist period of centralisation, only to be later transformed into an openly multi-cultural constitutional *Rechtsstaat* (rule-of-law state), which guaranteed civil rights to its citizens. Thanks to this transformation, elites from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds were able to rise to social visibility and compete for influence on the local urban stage, using various tools, including economic power,

[7] On the phenomenon of conflict between the old elites and the elites of non-dominant groups, see more in Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi–Newbury Park–London, 1991).

cultural impact, and a civilisational mission, and, less frequently, brute force. The significance of elites from different ethnic backgrounds in the Habsburg Empire has long been acknowledged by national historiographies. In contrast, the studies collected in this volume present these elites not only as staunch proponents of the national idea but as one of many active groupings within various local milieus, with their networks, entanglements, and multi-layered loyalties.

While the elites of Habsburg towns and cities in modern times have drawn the attention of scholars of local history for decades, the multi-ethnic nature of these elites was later also acknowledged.[8] Recent monographs on some of the Habsburg towns and cities can also be cited here as pertinent examples,[9] including those that address changes in their state affiliation post-1918.[10] Examples of recent scholarly interest in a more detailed history of local urban elites include studies of local elites defined as municipal power brokers, such as councillors, or local state agents, including teachers or members of the broadly defined officialdom,[11] as well as works investigating more or less grassroots local associations and their networks.[12]

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[8] An insightful overview of the topic can be found, among others, in Catherine Horel, *Multicultural Cities of the Habsburg Empire, 1880–1914: Imagined Communities and Conflictual Encounters* (Budapest, 2023).

[9] See, e.g., Gary B. Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival. Germans in Prague, 1861–1914* (West Lafayette, IN, 2006); Markian Prokopovych, *Habsburg Lemberg: Architecture, Public Space, and Politics in the Galician capital, 1772–1914* (West Lafayette, IN, 2009); Ion Lihaciu and Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans. A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848–1948* (Princeton–New York, 2018); *Czernowitz 1848–1918: das kulturelle Leben einer Provinzmetropole* (Kaiserslautern, 2012); Börries Kuzmany, *Brody. A Galician Border City in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Leiden, 2017).

[10] Peter Švorc and Harald Heppner (eds), *Veľka doba v malom priestore. Zlomové zmeny v mestách stredoeurópskeho priestoru a ich dôsledky (1918–1929) / Große Zeit im kleinen Raum Umbrüche in den Städten des mitteleuropäischen Raumes und deren Wirkungen (1918–1929)* (Prešov–Graz, 2012).

[11] E.g., Judit Pál, Vlad Popovici, and Oana Sorescu-Iudean (eds), *Elites, Groups, and Networks in East-Central and South-Central Europe in the Long 19th Century* (Leiden, 2022); Vlad Popovici, Alice Velková, and Martin Klečacký (eds), *Climbing up the Social Ladder? Social Mobility of Elites in East-Central Europe in the Long 19th Century* (Basel–Berlin–Boston, 2024). For an example of a more space- and memory-oriented approach, refer to Aleksander Łupienko (ed.), *Urban Communities and Memories in East-Central Europe in the Modern Age* (Abingdon, 2025).

[12] Andrea Ciampani and Thomas Kroll (eds), *Transnational Encounters? European Elites, International Associations and National States (1882–1914)* (Berlin, 2025).

This volume includes papers that originated partly from a workshop held at the German Historical Institute in Warsaw in June 2023, under the auspices of the Team (see below for details), and partly from an open call for papers. They propose various approaches to narrating the history of the Austro-Hungarian local elites from different localities, including the regions of Transylvania, Istria, and Cieszyn/Teschen Silesia, and the towns of Dubrovnik/Ragusa, Cieszyn/Teschen, and from social milieus, such as the communities of journalists, lawyers, rural priests, municipal councillors, and merchants. The international group of authors contributing to this volume includes Sorin Radu and Ramona Besoiu (University of Sibiu, Romania), Mihovil Dabo (Juraj Dobrila University in Pula, Croatia), Damian Kubik (Jagiellonian University in Kraków), Janusz Spyra, Marzena Bogus-Spyra (both from Jan Długosz University of Częstochowa), and Adam Świątek (Jagiellonian University in Kraków). The connecting theme across these accounts is a group-related strategy employed by generally minor social figures (though prominent within their local environment) to gain relevance while retaining the group identity. They show that the social drama of these actors was played out between the more or less stable locality (which of course underwent various changes) and different sources of social significance: the imperial centre; regional power brokers (Germans in Silesia, Croats in Dubrovnik, Hungarians in Transylvania, Italians in Istria); and the titular nascent local elites. As the authors demonstrate, it was the language and culture that helped preserve identity and rootedness amid the transformations of modernity; nonetheless, the imperial support (or lack thereof), inter-regional networks based on profession or religious affiliation, along with connections forged within the local milieu, were all equally significant in shaping strategies adopted by these social actors.

The texts collected here reveal a spectrum of strategies employed by representatives of local elites or by actors aspiring to attain this status. The central aspect seems to lie in the types of cohesive elements that can function as both distinguishing and unifying factors, and which, at the same time, could serve as a source of capital (cultural, social, economic). Janusz Spyra and Mihovil Dabo show that, depending on the social context, various community-building factors were in use: professional one (in the case of the Jews of Cieszyn) – as the occupation offered an opportunity to join supra-local networks and, at the same time, build economic and social status or the national

one (in the case of Croats from Istria), which proved effective in rural communities without access to political or economic capital. In the latter case, members of the local group gained agency through participation in the national collective, while the Jews of Cieszyn, drawing on economic resources and previously developed strategies of participation, integrated into the liberalising local urban community. It is not surprising that observations from the two poles of the monarchy (Istria, Transylvania) reveal that the clergy were instrumental in shaping the behaviour patterns of rural communities during times of transformation. When contrasted with studies of more urbanised regions (Cieszyn Silesia, Dubrovnik), a paradoxical phenomenon emerges: rural communities, initially the last to undergo nationalisation, gradually came to be identified with a conservative national identity. It should be acknowledged that other models of rural communities emerged in Austria-Hungary, such as Janez Krek's national cooperative movement among the Slovenian-speaking community[13] or the Galician People's Party.[14]

It is also important to note the different facets of the national question, which rightly holds a central position in analyses of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.[15] A bottom-up perspective, viewed through the prism of local communities, uncovers the diversity and ambiguity of strategies for leveraging national identity as a group-cohesive force, contingent on regional and social context. Sorin Radu and Ramona Besoiu present research on rural Transylvanian Saxon communities during the transition period after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire. As they emphasise, these were flexible communities, capable of adaptation, a quality stemming from their historical circumstances. Moreover, low political and economic capital did not afford them a strong negotiating position in the new state. Meanwhile, in Cieszyn Silesia, Germanness could serve as an appealing status marker or a factor in the formation of cultural communities, but it did not adversely affect the development of professional communities, as Marzena Bogus-Spyra

[13] Cf. Jure Krišto, 'Od slavenstva do jugoslavenstva: suradnja hrvatskih i slovenskih krugova u Katoličkom pokretu', *Pilar*, iv, 1–2 (7–8) (2009), 111–20.

[14] Cf. Paweł Woś, 'Galicyjski ruch ludowy w początkowym okresie działalności Stronnictwa Ludowego', *Galicja. Studia i Materiały*, 6 (2020), 492–505.

[15] Cf. on this topic Gary B. Cohen, 'Nationalist Politics and the Dynamics of State and Civil Society in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1867–1914', *Central European History*, xl (2007), 2, 241–78.

shows. Even in the small area of the Adriatic Littoral, community strategies related to Croatian identity differed between Istria and Dubrovnik, shaped by regional conditions and political constellations, and assumed either a more inclusive or an exclusive character.

As shown in the articles in this issue, factors that shape a community can vary, and key actors who serve as guides play a crucial role in defining it. One valuable conclusion from research on locality is the need to move beyond simple explanations of socio-cultural processes and transformations that rely on readily accepted but overly general concepts, such as nationalism, liberalism, or populism. The local perspective compels us to view community-building as a strategy in which participants and community members use available resources and cultural patterns to maintain a relative balance and/or gain a better negotiating position vis-à-vis competing groups. Of course, the studies in this volume do not provide a comprehensive overview of the strategies for the emergence and incorporation of new local elites into the Habsburg Empire's existing social order. However, we believe they provide valuable insights into the key phenomena observed through the lens of case studies that shaped the later (and even today's) trajectories of the functioning of complex societies undergoing modernisation.

It is important to recognise the guest editors of this issue of *Acta Poloniae Historica*, who contributed to the editorial oversight of this collection of six papers on local elites. The editors form the current Research Team on the Slavic Cultures in the Habsburg Monarchy at the Institute of Western and Southern Slavic Studies, University of Warsaw, a group that already boasts a range of activities, such as historical seminars with guests speakers and publications, including a volume on the concept of (Habsburg) peripherality;[16] the social milieus of Habsburg architects[17] or the guest editorship of one of the previous issues of this periodical.[18] The main idea behind the research is to move away from the nation-oriented historiography of the Slavs

[16] Anna Kobylińska, Marcin Filipowicz, and Maciej Falski (eds), *Peryferyjność: habsbursko-słowiańska historia nieoczywista* (Kraków, 2016).

[17] Anna Kobylińska and Maciej Falski (eds), *Architects and Their Societies. Cultural Study on the Habsburg-Slavic Area (1861–1938)* (Warszawa, 2021).

[18] See the APH issue on local elites in the Habsburg Monarchy after 1868, no. 121 (2020).

(and other ethnicities) in the Habsburg Empire, and instead to focus on a comparative, intercultural approach and a more detailed view of social realities during the modernisation period in a multicultural environment.

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