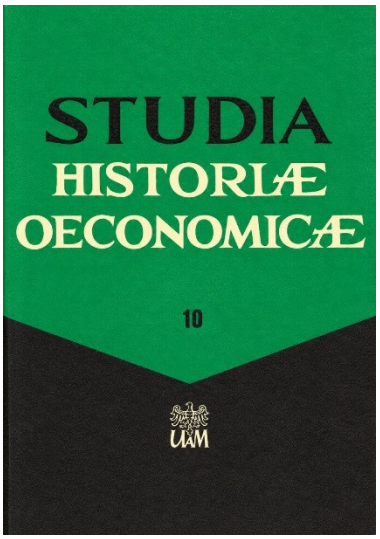


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SOME REMARKS ON RENTAL SYSTEM IN SOUTHERN POLAND

Those desirous to solve the problem of the output yielded by peasant economy in Poland and of its share in the commodities market, are faced with a number of difficulties. On the one hand, notwithstanding the attainments of previous research on peasant history in Poland, there remains to settle a great many questions relating to the Polish peasantry, this most numerous group of the country's population (ca. 75 per cent by the end of the 18th century). On the other hand, there are not many available archival records dating from the feudal age, which would directly concern peasant economy and its effects.

I should like to emphasize how useful for these pursuits is the research on the different forms of feudal rent. This refers above all to the evolution of these forms, to the conversion of previous tributes, of villein service in particular, into money payments, i.e., rent. The fact constituted an undeniable proof that peasant economy was entering the commodities' market. Once some constant dependencies are established, it will be possible to understand and account for phenomena, about which source records are either no more extant, or have not been ever drawn.

As commonly known, the conversion of the villein-service system to the rental one was growing more intense as one moved from east to west, in conformity with the general situation in the West of Europe, where in the eighteenth century there was no villein service altogether. As far as Polish territory is concerned, this regularity has been confirmed by recent research on Great Poland and Pomerania.

But also in the southern provinces of the country, in Little Poland, towards the end of the 18th century the trend towards this change became more pronounced. The change was introduced, however, under a form typical of this area. Along with whole villages, or a part of peasant farms within a village, from which permanent rent was paid pursuant to a mutual long-term contract between the peasants and the manors, there were also farms where the amount of payment was established by an annual conversion of every peasant duty into a money equivalent. There was also a growing number of villages where the peasants paid up the manor some established price instead of performing their villein duties. As opposed to the permanent rentals, this form of rent was distinguished by its fluctuating character resulting from the short-term nature of the contracts. This permitted the manorial landlords to regulate the amount

of villein service according to the current demand for manpower in the manorial farms. It gave a certain freedom in the performance of their tributes on behalf of the manor also to the peasants who when the general economic situation was unfavourable, or the crops poor, could pay them in kind, but it did not provide the stabilization brought about by the permanent rental system.

It is characteristic that in the regions where the purchase of villein servitude was going on the most intense scale, the second half of the eighteenth century introduced in some manorial farms a system of economy based fully on hired labour. And, what is more striking still, one comes across such farms not in the latifundial estates, which usually had a considerable potential of manpower at their disposal, but in landed property consisting of one — or, at the most, some three or four — villages, where the change to the rental system was extended to the whole peasant population. At the same time, though it must be admitted occasionally only, there were cases when manorial grounds were parcelled out among the peasants. In this way the manorial owners tried to overcome the ineffectiveness of villein labour, the resistance shown by the peasants — and to assure themselves a continuous revenue from their landed property.

As it results from research conducted on the question of feudal rent in 230 crown villages in the Province of Cracow, in as many as 66 per cent of those villages the forms of rentals were differentiated. Their location on the examined area is far from uniform. There was a marked tendency for the rents to become more dense when going from north to south — from regions typically rural, with fertile soil and a dense network of manorial farms, towards the hilly and mountainous regions, less densely settled, where the soil and climatic conditions for corn-growing were much less favourable.

The estimated calculation of the rental burden incumbent upon peasant farms has shown that it was consuming from 22 to 30% of the peasant income, from which the sowing expense and the tithes paid to the Church have been deducted. The results of recent research on the crop yield in Poland have proved that to feed a peasant family, feudal tributes included, it was necessary to own a farm with ca 8.5 hectare arable land. Since it was the three-field system that prevailed in Polish agriculture, not less than 5.5 hectare land had to be constantly sown over. Such farms were unable to produce extras for the corn market.

Now, on Little Poland area, where peasant farms were distinctly small and parcelled out and where the number of the landless population was constantly growing, the predominant group of farms had an acreage of 8 - 10 hectare — and, at that, they were regarded as quite well endowed in land. Only 10 - 15 per cent of the over-all peasant population had bigger farms. Meanwhile among the copyholders, along with the owners of larger farms there were also peasants owing just a food-providing lot, and land-starved peasants. It becomes thus

evident that the funds required for the rent, for the state-levied taxes and the necessary purchases of village industrial ware, could not be derived from the sale of grain.

While searching for the sources of peasant revenue, I have concerned myself, among other issues, with the location of rental villages. It appears that within the examined area they were most numerous: (1) in mountain regions where the network of manorial farms was not so dense; moreover, these areas were abounding in pastures, meadows and woods permitting to develop animal husbandry, as well as home industry — wood processing; (2) in regions where flax and hemp were cultivated on a large scale, and the weaving craft was flourishing; (3) in the vicinity of major towns where the village population found employment in transport, home industry and trade, (4) along trading routes and paths.

No doubt, the forms of feudal duties reflect on the manorial needs, — but also, on the other hand, on the peasants' own economic situation. It must be stressed that in villages where the peasants were deprived of any real opportunity to earn money for themselves they were opposed to the change of the villein-service system to the rental one and gave frequent vent to their dissatisfaction; this was also the case, inversely, when the manorial lords claimed for villein servitude in areas where peasant home industry, animal husbandry, and trade were well developing. For instance, in villages bordering upon the trading routes where the men could earn money as carters, and were trading on their own (in salt, cattle, pigs, wool, highlanders' cloth), the long opposition shown by the village population compelled the manorial lords to convert the villein service system to the rental one in whole villages, manorial land to be cultivated exclusively by hired labour.

A feature characteristic of the rental villages was the rapidly growing process of differentiation in the material situation of the peasants, even though this process was hampered by the institution of serfdom, by the weakness of the home market and by the restriction of the peasant rights to control their own land. In the rental villages late in the eighteenth century one can observe a progressive decrease in the number of medium-sized farms, along with a growth of the farming potential of a small group of well-to-do peasants employing hired labourers, with a simultaneous rapid increase in the number of small-farm owners and of the landless population. This differentiation displayed some features typical of the capitalist stratification which was to be brought by later years.

Research on the forms of feudal rent and their evolution, in economy based on the manorial and villein-service system, permits to establish the indices for the share of peasant farming in the commodities' turnover, in market contacts, while at the same time it brings to light the effects exerted by the economic laws governing them.