

## Processes of Social Decline among the European Nobility

**Veranstalter:** Ewald Frie / Chelion Begass / Jacek Klimek / Johanna Singer, Collaborative Research Centre 923 „Threatened Order – Societies under Stress“, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen,

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Elite status and material well-being are still considered the hallmarks of „nobility“ even today. Not surprisingly, historical scholarship on the nobility has tended to focus on questions related to the formation and transformation of this social elite. The international conference „Processes of Social Decline among the European Nobility“ sought to question as well as expand this perspective. In her introduction, CHELION BEGASS (Tübingen) showed that the narratives of ‘decline’ and ‘adaption’ do not give an adequate picture of the nobility. Based on the premise that there were many nobles who lost their social standing and found themselves in precarious economic situations, despite the demonstrated ability of the nobility to adapt to changing times on the whole, the core focus of the conference was to examine these processes of downward mobility effecting the nobility from the 17th century until the outbreak of World War I. Turning the scholarly perspective around in this way promises to provide a more nuanced look at the nobility in all its depth and variety as well as its particular status within a given society. At the same time, it shows how the nobility can be used as a prism to examine a society’s structures and social stability in general. The conference was divided into four sections, each of which examined different aspects of these processes of social decline.

The first section entitled „Changes in Rule – Changing Points of Reference“ began with JONATHAN W. SPANGLER (Manchester) whose talk dealt with the transformation of the influential court nobility in the Duchy of Lorraine into provincial nobility over the last half of the 18th century. Spangler outlined how noble families from Lorraine successful-

ly adapted to the loss of old centers of power and the establishment of new ones. He noted, however, that no clear patterns emerged as these nobles established themselves in an international context at different courts. The loss of local influence, he argued, did not necessarily go hand-in-hand with social decline. BERTRAND GOUJON (Reims) discussed French families who either acquired their titles or whose nobility was reconfirmed during the Restoration from 1814-1830. He suggested that social decline must be understood as a non-linear process as some nobles were able to achieve social stability by means of careers or marriages within a middle-class milieu. In end effect, according to Goujon, some families disappeared from among the ranks of the nobility while others were successfully reintegrated. EWALD FRIE (Tübingen) commented that the reintegration and disappearance of noble families in Europe differed depending on the degree to which the transfer process, or rather the nobility itself, was part of a formalized structure. He noted that Prussia, for example, represented a specific case due to the minimal amount of formalization associated with nobility. Prussia, Frie explained, clearly differed from the French case, as well as southern and western regions of Germany where nobility was often coupled with knighthood or membership in the cathedral chapter. CLAUDE-ISABELLE BERLOT (Lyon) spoke about the period between 1789 and 1880, describing the French Revolution and the events that followed as a „perfect observatory“ for tracing processes of social decline. However, she maintained that a line should be drawn between social decline (*déclassement*) and poverty. Moreover, she argued, there are more indicators of social decline than just quantitative measurements of income or wealth; comparable factors include unbefitting marriages, unmarried women without dowries or nobles engaging in activities not usually associated with their class. Given that each case of *déclassement* should be examined individually, Berlot argued, *the nobility* can only be understood as a fuzzy group constantly vacillating between social classes. Consequently, she maintained that „impoverished nobility“ cannot be used as a collective description. The first day of the confe-

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rence ended in the second half of the 20th century with a paper presented by MICHAEL SEELIG (Marburg) on the effects of the „collapse after 1945“ on the East Elbian nobility and its reactions to radical challenges. Seelig outlined the massive loss of socio-economic as well as socio-cultural values facing the nobility after 1945. In order to improve their precarious economic situations, Seelig noted, nobles found themselves forced into middle-class occupational fields. At the same time, certain cultural practices within noble families and family associations were kept up in order to help retain traditional noble ways of life. DANIEL MENNING (Tübingen) pointed out that the language used in Seelig's sources seemed to echo the kind used after 1918 – metaphors such as „Entwurzelung“ („uprooting“), for example, appeared after 1918 as well as after 1945.

JENS WENDEL-HANSEN (Copenhagen) opened the second section, „State Reforms – Changes in the Framework“, with a look at the social decline of the Danish nobility after the abolishment of fiefs in 1919. The changes that took place, Wendel-Hansen explained, had a lasting impact on the economic situations of former liege lords. ANDREEA-ROXANA IANCU (Paris) spoke about the survival strategies used by the old noble families in Wallachia at the turn of the 19th century when their existence was threatened by the appearance of new nobles. She outlined different ways these older noble families sought to retain their identity and she touched on the role played by the introduction of the *Code d'Ipsilanti* in 1780 in which only the family seat was bound to the family while all other lands were opened to the free market. According to Iancu, this code brought a number of changes, including an increased emphasis on the male line of descent as well as the strengthening of the individual rights of family members.

Keeping the focus on Eastern Europe, IVANA HORBEC (Zagreb) discussed the existential challenges facing the Croatian gentry in the 18th century. The enlightened absolutism that reigned in the Habsburg Empire at the time, she explained, brought changes that endangered the foundations of noble ways of life. She argued that the great majority of the

gentry were not able to react flexibly to these changes; rather, they remained firmly embedded within a traditional estate-based order. As a result, Horbec noted, the Croatian middle class was able to strengthen and stabilize its position vis-à-vis the nobility by taking on public administrative offices. Ultimately, this led to the social decline of the lesser nobility and contributed to the dissolution of the estate order in 1848. GEORGE REGKOUKOS (London) brought an end to the second section with a regional look at the impact of state reforms on the positions and networks of the nobility in the Russian Empire under Alexander II. For the nobility, he remarked, these reform efforts entailed a loss of significance and legitimacy. Nonetheless, contrary to what one would expect, some nobles supported state reforms and a spirit of „awakening“ and „intellectual openness“ became characteristic of this new era. Regkoulos argued that this new perspective on the history of the Russian nobility in the 19th century revises the notion that the fate of the nobility was only a story of decline.

The third section „The Costs of Representation – the Relationship between Social Ascent and Decline“ started with MARTIN ARNOLD (Dresden) who used the example of the von Salhausen family to look at the way the enormous representation costs and the race to accumulate property among the nobility could lead to the downfall of noble families in northern Bohemia in the 16th and 17th centuries. In this context, Arnold outlined a „cultural-psychological family pattern“ that compelled different generations within the family to take on more and more debts in order to keep up within the culture of representation befitting their station. However, measures of „symbolic representation“, such as the publication of a family history, or even a closer bond to the king achieved through the conversion to Catholicism could not prevent the family's social decline over the long run.

SHIPÉ GURI (Brussels) described of a similar phenomenon in her talk on the noble Richardot and Cottureau families in the Spanish Netherlands in the 16th and 18th centuries. She explained how the ascent into the nobility and the acquisition of titles was linked to massive debts because of the continually high

costs for the representation expected of noble families. To a certain extent, Guri added, it was considered normal to go into debt in order to move up the social ladder. The cases of the Richardot and Cottereau families in which the crown intervened to relieve the financial malaise of the families, she argued, have to be seen as rather extreme examples. For the most part, she noted, even heavily-indebted nobles were able to circumvent bankruptcy on their own.

In a similar vein, JACEK KLIMEK (Tübingen) showed how massive indebtedness did not always lead to social decline in southwest Germany in the 17th and 18th centuries by examining the fate of the vom Holtz family of imperial knights. In the case of this family, phases of property acquisition and the extension of rule alternated with phases of massive debt accumulation. Klimek found that although the family lost standing financially, it never lost its social status, especially because a broad property base and the implementation of an Imperial Debt Commission ensured that the family kept its rank. The acquisition of debts for the purposes of representation, he added, has to be seen in a critical light; in the case of the vom Holtz family, for example, contemporaries repeatedly emphasized how dysfunctional it was to borrow money.

In his evening keynote speech, RONALD G. ASCH (Freiburg) discussed the role models of nobility in England and France during the Wars of Religion and the age of Baroque monarchy. Using a variety of examples, Asch demonstrated that the role of the nobility was re-defined during this period. He described how a new ideal of masculinity developed that was closely tied to military prowess.

The last day of the conference and the fourth section „Social Decline and Poverty among the Nobility as Norm“ began with a paper from DOMINIQUE PICCO (Bordeaux) who was unfortunately unable to attend in person. Her discussion of the actual and relative poverty of the French nobility in the 17th and 18th century was read by Claude-Isabelle Brelot. Picco's analysis revolved around the attempts of noble families to secure a spot for their daughters in the royal *Maison Royale de Saint-Louis* in Saint-Cyr, which was a prestigious educational institution for noble

daughters requiring financial assistance. The way in which these nobles portrayed their own poverty varied greatly from letter to letter. By comparing these self-descriptions with other socio-economic sources, Picco looked at whether such poverty was actually reflected in other materials or whether these descriptions were always relative. JOHANNA SINGER (Tübingen) then sketched the contours of the link between poverty and the employment of noblewomen in Imperial Germany. Above all, she explained, single noblewomen were forced to take up a profession out of financial necessity. Yet, because of their status as women and „höhere Töchter“ („well-born daughters“) with a noble background, they were quite limited in their choice of profession or employment. Singer also noted that noblewomen, too, benefited from better employment opportunities as a result of the opening of more professions to women at the end of the 19th century thanks to the efforts of the women's movement. Her sources revealed that from the perspective of the state and noble contemporaries, as well as the women themselves, such employment by no means endangered their status as noblewomen – as long as the chosen profession was one considered acceptable for a „well-born daughter“. In conclusion, Singer pointed out that the employed noblewomen were a more common phenomenon in the 19th century than previously assumed – they represented an inherent aspect of upper-class normality. Through this social decline of noblewomen, as it were, the social status of the entire family, represented by the male line of descent, could be rescued.

HENRY FRENCH (Exeter) and MARK ROTHERY (Northampton) came to similar conclusions about the landed gentry in England between 1700 and 1900. By looking at the situations of younger sons who were excluded from the inheritance of property according to the principle of primogeniture governing the English aristocracy, they illustrated how the social descent of these sons secured a place at the top for the rest of the family. Moreover, the need to provide for themselves financially, French and Rothery argued, drove a wedge between these „younger sons“ and the social class into which they were born, often leading

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to identity crises. PAUL JANSSENS (Ghent) concluded the fourth section with his talk on the effects of democratization and industrialization on the Belgian nobility. He described how most of the noble families were able to retain their lifestyle and influence in the period between the French Revolution and 1914; whereas those nobles who became impoverished during and shortly after the French Revolution were not reintegrated into the ranks of the nobility, the remaining noble families adapted to these new circumstances. Consequently, Janssens argued, the impoverishment of the nobility through democratization and industrialization remained relative up to 1914, only becoming apparent when noble estate owners were forced to make room for industrialists.

In the discussion following the sections, the participants generally agreed that the tendencies toward financial and social decline among the nobility during the Early Modern era were a pan-European phenomenon. That said, however, the processes that were involved, as well as the perceptions and assessments related to this decline, varied from country to country. It was also agreed that the terms „social decline“ and „poverty“ cannot be used synonymously: they describe multifaceted phenomena that do not necessarily always go hand-in-hand. The real challenge, according to those in attendance at the conference, lies in finding terms that can be used to more accurately describe the often divergent ways in which processes of social decline among the nobility appeared across Europe during the Early Modern period. It also became clear over the course of the discussion that there is much potential for cross-European comparisons of these processes. Generally-speaking, the way societies dealt with the decline of the nobility or rather impoverished nobles varied according to the particular significance and status attached to the respective nobility. The relationship between the nobles and the state, as was discussed in the first two conference sections, is particularly important in this regard. Likewise, the questions raised during the last two sections as to the ways in which financially-declassified nobles could retain their status within the nobility definitely merit further inquiry.

## **Conference Overview:**

EWALD FRIE (Spokesperson CRC 923, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen): Welcome

CHELION BEGASS (Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen): Introduction

### *Section A: Changes in Rule – Changing Points of Reference*

JONATHAN W. SPANGLER (Manchester Metropolitan University): From Magnates to Provincials: the shift from centre to periphery and its impacts on the court nobility of the Duchy of Lorraine in the mid- to late 18th century

BERTRAND GOUJON (Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne) : Y être, c'est (encore) en être: déclassement social et aspirations nobiliaires parmi les familles maintenues en noblesse en France sous la Restauration (1814-1830)

CLAUDE-ISABELLE BRELOT (Université Lumière Lyon 2) : Les déclassés dans la noblesse provinciale française: processus et périodisation des déclassements (1789-1880)

MICHAEL SEELIG (Philipps-Universität Marburg): Adligbleiben nach dem „Zusammenbruch von 1945“. Die Auswirkungen von Flucht, Vertreibung und Enteignung auf den ostelbischen Adel in der frühen Bundesrepublik

### *Section B: State Reforms – Changes in the Framework*

JENS WENDEL-HANSEN (Copenhagen): The abolition of the Danish fiefs 1919 - the social decline of the Danish nobility

ANDREEA-ROXANA IANCU (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris) : « ...pour que les maisons boyardes ne s'éteignent pas ». Reconfiguration institutionnelle, identité lignagère et politiques de sauvetage (Valachie, fin du XVIIIe –début du XIXe siècle)

IVANA HORBEC (Croatian Institute of History, Zagreb): Arme Diener des Königs und ihre (verpassten) Chancen. Existentielle Herausforderungen des kroatischen Kleinadels im 18. Jahrhundert

GEORGE REGKOUKOS (King [U+02BC]s College London): Land, reform and social revolution: The decline and decadence of noble social networks in blacksoil Russia (1860-1900)

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*Section C: The Costs of Representation - the Relationship between Social Ascent and Decline*

MARTIN ARNOLD (Technische Universität Dresden): Von Ambitionen und Realitäten. Die Familie von Salhausen in Nordböhmen im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert

SHIPÉ GURI (Université Libre de Bruxelles) : Processus d'aristocratisation et débâcle financière dans les Pays-Bas espagnols (fin XVIe-début XVIIIe siècles): les cas Richardot et Cottereau

JACEK KLIMEK (Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen): Zwischen Herrschaftsausbau und Verschwendungssucht – Die Freiherren vom Holtz im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert

RONALD G. ASCH (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg): Helden, Höflinge und Rebellen. Rollenmodelle des Adels in England und Frankreich im Zeitalter der Konfessionskriege und der barocken Monarchie

*Section D: Social Decline and Poverty among the Nobility as Norm*

DOMINIQUE PICCO (Université Bordeaux-Montaigne-CEMMC) : Pauvreté vécue, réelle ou relative dans la noblesse française des XVIe et XVIIIe siècle

JOHANNA SINGER (Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen): "...gezwungen in einem Berufe mich auszubilden." Armutsbedingte Erwerbstätigkeit adliger Frauen im Deutschen Kaiserreich

HENRY FRENCH (University of Exeter ) / MARK ROTHERY (University of Northampton): Decline Through Survival: The Lives of the Younger Sons of the English Landed Gentry, 1700-1900

PAUL JANSSENS (Universiteit Gent) : Endettement et appauvrissement de la noblesse du 17e au 19e siècle. Le cas belge