

Katonabárok és hivatalnok grófok: Új arisztokraták a 18. századi Magyarországon [Soldier barons and office-holder counts: New aristocrats in eighteenth-century Hungary]. By Tamás Szemethy. Budapest: MNL–BTK TTI, 2020. 479 pp.

Tamás Szemethy's book, analyzing the emerging Hungarian "new aristocracy" of the eighteenth century from the viewpoint of social history, is based on a PhD thesis defended in 2020 at Eötvös Loránd University under the supervision of István Szijártó. Szemethy is one of the most promising members of a circle of young social historians who are gathered around Szijártó's "school" at the Department of Social and Economic History of Eötvös Loránd University. Szemethy's doctoral thesis was finalized and turned into a book within the framework of the research group "The political culture of the Hungarian estates' system (1526–1848)" (NKFI K 116 166), coordinated by the National Archives of Hungary and the "Integrating Families" Research Group of the Institute of History of the Research Centre for the Humanities (LP2017-3/2017), supported by the "Momentum" ("Lendület") Programme of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

The main goal of the book is simple: to validate or refute the topos of the "dilution of the Hungarian aristocracy" in the eighteenth century, which Szemethy considers a persistent commonplace in Hungarian historiography. The volume raises some crucial questions concerning the so-called "new aristocrats," i.e., those who earned the title of a Hungarian baron or a count as plain nobles, characterizing it as a social group to establish his chosen research methodology. His main inquiry concerns the framing of the group, the careers of its members, and other factors preceding the elevation of their ranks, as well as possible explanations as to why the ruler decided to bestow on them a new rank. Finally, Szemethy also considers the typical career moves of the group.

Methodologically, the author commits himself prosopography, one of the auxiliary disciplines of social history, arguing that it can provide a qualified set of data which enables one to arrive at findings concerning the main tendencies of the group in question and general changes in the eighteenth-century social elite. Szemethy tries to define what he means by this in the first chapter, which could be treated as a practice-oriented contribution to this field of historical auxiliary sciences. According to this, not only has prosopography been separated from the traditional genre of archontology, but its advantages and disadvantages have also been considered. Referring to the work of English historian Lawrence Stone, Szemethy mindfully reflects on the limits and difficulties of doing prosopographic

research, highlighting the problems of gathering sources that are of adequate quality and quantity, as well as the scarcity of narrative sources (first of all, ego-documents). He also cautions against conflating the typical characteristics of the whole group with those of its few prominent members, e.g., those individuals who held high offices and stirred interest among contemporaries. Based on these considerations, Szemethy constructs a group of “new aristocrats” as the subject of his analysis, zooming in on 91 people from 76 families between 1711 and 1799. He excludes from this group naturalized foreign aristocrats (*indigenae*) and those who earned the title due to their relatives and not their own career moves. In practice, apart from the chapters on atypical careers, his research is based fundamentally on the classical and more recent genealogical literature on the one hand and on the Royal Books (*Libri Regii*) on the other, though Szemethy also uses urbarial conscriptions, files from the Austrian State Archives in Vienna (nobility files, etc.), and other archival sources, if to a lesser extent. His style is succinct, clear, and factual, and his chapters are rhetorically well-structured, but the richness of the information provided sometimes makes it rather difficult to read them.

The book is divided into four main chapters and includes an almost 200-page long appendix, which contains all the relevant biographical and career data concerning the members of the group, as well a much shorter list of the high-ranking soldiers who earned the Military Order of Maria Theresa. This well-built database constitutes the backbone of the analyses. The structure of the whole book and the individual chapters is clear and logical, almost didactic. The short methodological introduction is followed by the longer prosopographic analyses of “typical” careers. The subsequent chapter then presents three “atypical” cases, and finally, a conclusion summarizes the achievements of the project.

Within the group of “new aristocrats,” two bigger subgroups, namely the office holders and the soldiers, have been set apart, and the title-donations of lower (baron) and higher (count) value are examined separately. By reason of the changing tendencies, the baronial donations implied different inner periodization and further subgroups: regarding the officials, the two subperiods are 1711–1770 (18 persons) and 1770–1799 (16 persons). In the case of officers, the timeframes are 1711–1758 (10 persons) and 1758–1799 (16 persons). In the first case, the dividing line is grounded in the emergence of a professionalizing office holder, marked by the baronial donation of Károly Reviczky, which approximates the conclusions of a study by Szijártó and Tünde Cserpes on the “high office holders” of the eighteenth century, cited frequently by Szemethy. The second

case is much simpler, because the foundation of the Military Order of Maria Theresa definitely marks the beginning of a new period.

Concerning each group and subgroup, the careers, social backgrounds (ancestry, social status), and financial situations of its members are compared. Their financial situations are reconstructed on the basis of the amount of land they owned according to the urbarial conscriptions, an indicator which offers a rough approximation of the wealth of a certain family. However, the urbarial conscriptions indicate only possessions that were burdened by urbarial services. The measure of the current social status and the degree to which the “new aristocrats” could be said to have been integrated into the traditional aristocracy is assessed based on the *connubium*, i.e., the marital strategies of people recently elevated in position and their children from the perspective of the social and legal statuses of their spouses.

The subgroup of soldiers who earned baronial titles before 1758 is similar to the officials of the same period. In other words, most of them were elevated from wealthy noble families. After 1758, in contrast, several soldiers of humble backgrounds rose to the new aristocracy as well. However, the estimated wealth of the so-called “soldier barons,” based on the urbarial conscriptions, of the period was much less on average than the wealth of the officials. While the meritocratic elements of selection became significant among the soldiers in the last third of the century and this criterion (merit) also began to be more frequently applied within the central bureaucracy of the period, it remained only a subsidiary reason for bestowing a baronial title on officials. Regarding officials who earned a baronial title, Szemethy also points out that the father’s career was a factor only in a few cases of title donation, while the legal status of wives and mothers could also contribute to a certain extent to the rise of the nobility into the layer of aristocracy.

A subchapter focuses on those who earned the title of Hungarian count, making up the top elite of the emerging new aristocracy. As Szemethy points out, the Habsburg Monarchy had neither a unified aristocracy nor a unified nobility. Thus, the Austrian provincial, imperial, Transylvanian, Bohemian, and Hungarian title donations were all available at request at the same time, though at different prices and representing varying contents and values. The Hungarian titles were of the greatest value because of the political rights they potentially provided, i.e., the participation of aristocrats in the meetings of the upper house of the Hungarian diet in person or by proxy. The title of Hungarian count was not only more expensive than the title of baron, but as Szemethy presumed and

has verified, it required a more successful military or civilian career, in addition to wealth and ancestry. From the group of 91 people, 28 became counts, and a third of them earned their title in two steps. As the author points out, most of them belonged to wealthy noble families with mid-size and large-size estates, and a significant number of them acquired their lands by themselves. While the number of official and soldier barons was balanced in the period, in the case of counts, only those who had a successful official career could advance, and only five soldiers were given this rank, who also needed to earn a significant land donation. Because of these reasons, until the end of the period under study, the subgroup of counts formed a more exclusive and prestigious circle than the barons within the new aristocracy and the group of magnates in general.

In contrast to the quantitative analysis in the second section, which is dry but rich in information, the third part focuses more on narrative methods and careers and elevation in rank of three persons considered “atypical.” These chapters originally were intended to complete and contrast the prosopographic analysis of the group of new aristocrats. However, each of them could be read as a micro-historical essay in itself. Zooming in on the three atypical careers, Szemethy shows further sides of his talent as a historian by examining other problematic questions and using new types of sources. In the case of István László Luzsénszky, Szemethy focuses on the role of the patron-client relationship between the ambitious nobleman and clergyman Luzsénszky and his influential patron, Imre Csáky. In doing so, he relies on their highly formalized “functional” correspondence, based on a method used by Heiko Droste. Szemethy points out that the elevation in rank was an outcome of the accumulation of Luzsénszky’s family inheritance as wealth and as socio-political symbolic capital. Reconstructing the case of György Farkas Chiolich, the author tries to track a charge of cradle-snatching against the bishop of Zengg-Modrus. He proves that Chiolich took steps to earn an aristocratic title in addition to his prelateship in order to accumulate more power and authority not only among the clergy, but also among laymen. Finally, the third case study focuses on Mihály Manduka, later known as Mihály Horváth, an ambitious Greek merchant of non-noble background who rose to become a figure of the Hungarian nobility and, a few years later, in the last decade of the eighteenth century, of the aristocracy as a baron. The chapter affirms the findings of renowned urban historian Vera Bácskai, according to which Horváth should be regarded as an “ennobled burgher” rather than as a “new aristocrat” who embraced the identity and ethic of the landowning nobility. Consequently, he could be considered one of the predecessors of nineteenth-century entrepreneurs.

In his concluding remarks, Szemethy, on the one hand, points out that the efforts of the Viennese court to make talented military officers more visible by bestowing titles on them led to a kind of “dilution” of the Hungarian elite. On the other hand, he calls attention to the fact that, of the officials, those who received a baronial title belonged to the wealthy and were able to reach the required standards. The new counts remained an exclusive group the members of which could assert themselves better in the environment of the traditional aristocracy. Szemethy summarizes his findings as follows: “[I]t would be more accurate to consider the social changes of the second half of the eighteenth century not simply as the dilution of the elite, but rather as its transformation and complementation with new elements.” All things considered, Szemethy has drawn a persuasive image of the eighteenth-century “new aristocracy” based on the method of prosopography, complemented in some cases with the inclusion of different kinds of primary sources, as well as some more innovative ways of analysis. Nevertheless, I cannot help but make a few critical remarks concerning some aspects of his undertaking which follow mainly from Szemethy’s presuppositions and the inflexibility of his method.

First, with regard to the treatment of primary sources, two significant shortcomings have to be mentioned. Szemethy did not research and use family archives systematically or extensively. Furthermore, his research on the practices of the chancellery and the changes it underwent over the course of the century is also flawed. Szemethy was frank about this, claiming that his “research in family archives yielded disappointing results,” and he mentions as an example the Luzsénszky family archive and the lack of narrative sources, first and foremost private family correspondence, diaries, and memoirs. Nonetheless, the conclusions he draws are hardly convincing, and they are even less so if all the related families are considered. Due to the lack of narrative sources, he is unable to demonstrate how “new aristocrats” considered and represented their own social status within the public sphere or what attitudes emerged in the narrower and broader social environment towards them. The contemporary set of the positive and negative topoi concerning new aristocrats should have been analyzed too, irrespective of their factual content. With regards to the former point, the case study of the Luzsénszky–Csáky relationship offers the possibility of narrative analysis, and with regards to the latter, the same is true of the “pilot study” on Gábor Draveczky in the first chapter. As for the practices of the chancellery, it would have been fruitful to consider the requests that did not result in title donations, particularly regarding the Military Order of Maria Theresa.

Second, while the starting date of the study, 1711, is unequivocally considered the beginning of a new era, marked by the year when Charles III ascended the throne, the ending year, 1799, is rather disputable. In Szemethy's, his choice enables him to examine the tendencies of the *fin-de-siècle* in the context of late eighteenth-century military and political history, while the context of Napoleonic Europe provides a fundamentally different framework. The French Revolution and the Revolutionary Wars profoundly changed the political and military situation for the traditional powers of Europe, including the Habsburg Empire and thus the Kingdom of Hungary. Nevertheless, the whole period between 1792 and 1815 (or so forth) should have been treated rather in its entirety to show tendencies in progress under the rule of Francis I, marked as "cabinet absolutism." This would have made it possible to assess the effects of the French Wars on the subgroup of the emerging "military aristocracy." For example, the case of Dániel Mecséry, who earned not only the Knight's but also the Commander's Cross of the Military Order of Maria Theresa and thus became a baron still struggled for land donation in vain and died relatively poor. Moreover, he left behind a German autobiography which constitutes a valuable narrative source, in contrast with those on whom Szemethy has focused in his research.

Finally, some remarks should be made with regards to the structure and appearance of the book. The method of presenting factual information, sometimes to a superfluous extent within the main text (apart from the three analyses of the "atypical" careers, where it seems necessary for the reader to be able to follow the text), is to some extent debatable, because the appendix contains detailed biographical data concerning each member of the group. Instead of this, the publisher could have published the tables in the appendix as an online searchable database (which would have been a more concise and economical option). Fortunately, this is also in progress, according to the latest information. Since the subject and name indices are missing from the volume, the use of the appendix and, in fact the whole volume is difficult. Nevertheless, the book can be downloaded for free, which remedies this problem to a certain extent. Notwithstanding these remarks, however, the richly illustrated and attractive book is well-edited and of very high quality.

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