

Pražáková Seligová, Markéta: Život poddaných v 18. století: osud nebo volba? K demografickým, hospodářským, sociálním a rodinným aspektům života venkovských poddaných na panství Horní Police [The Lives of Serfs in the 18th Century: Destiny or Choice? On the Demographic, Economic, Social and Family Aspects of Life of the Serfs on the Estate of Horní Police].

Togga, Praha 2015, 504 S., ISBN 978-80-7476-060-0.

This is, by far, the best research monograph written on the economic and demographic situation of serfs in early modern Bohemia since the fall of the socialist system in former Czechoslovakia in 1989. It is not to say that it is without problems, but it stands out head and shoulder in comparison with other work published on socio-economic conditions of early modern serfs in Czech in the last two decades. In this review, I will first highlight the positives of the book, then I will discuss a few problematic issues. Given the sheer volume of the monograph – 400 pages of plain text and additional almost 100 pages of tables and other charts – not all issues can be discussed here and so I focus on two main problems, leaving some technical ones aside.

The monograph focuses on the demographic, economic, and social conditions of serfs on an estate of Horní Police in the 18th century northern Bohemia. It is a

thorough quantitative analysis using mostly the Registers of Serfs, a rich source of information on various aspects of socio-economic and demographic conditions of serfs, accompanied by other sources such as parish registers, and tax censuses from mid-17th and mid-18th century among others. Indeed, in addition to the tables and charts, the whole text permeates with numbers. The monograph is structured strictly along demographic topics which provides the book with a sense and purpose, but which also binds the author when she attempts to discuss other than demographic aspects of serfs' lives. She carefully discusses pros and cons of the Registers of Serfs and critically acknowledges their limitations throughout the entire monograph. This is one of the great strengths of the book. Claims are made after thorough deliberations of the quality and representativeness of data sources and careful cross-checks against other historical sources. There were even times when the critical reflection was so harsh that it made me question the usefulness of the Registers of Serfs at all. However, all this only reflects deeply-rooted thoroughness of the author. Another strength of the book is its aim to discuss the underlying data sources to such an extreme that one can almost go back to the original sources and retrace all the steps the author made in reconstructing the socio-economic picture of 18th century serfs. This is the most welcome approach at the times when the replication of scientific findings by others are called for. Indeed, the author does not spare us any details as can be seen in the long and dense footnotes. As already mentioned, Pražáková Seligová is extremely thorough and critical of the data sources and especially their quantitative nature. This, naturally, leads her to bring in mountains of qualitative evidence to support and (maybe) counterbalance the quantitative nature of the work. This does not make for an easy read, but it makes for a picture of serfs' lives as complete as possible.

The task of providing a balanced account of both quantitative and qualitative sources is a challenging one, especially when they offer different views. The author tried to do her best not to choke on the vastness of evidence she brought in, and even if one finds the organization of the text juxtaposing quantitative and qualitative evidence not very satisfying, the reader is rewarded with a plethora of evidence useful for one's own research. Indeed, we can see two books in there: one, full of quantitative evidence and text which talks 'through the numbers'; the other, more qualitative exploration of the lives of serfs based on almost biographical information traced over time.

Lastly, the great strength of the book is its stance on the second serfdom. The book offers abundance of evidence that the second serfdom mattered, that it permeated every aspect of socioeconomic and demographic life of serfs, and that it undoubtedly imposed far reaching constraints on the choices available to serfs, even in proto-industrial parts of Bohemia known for rather 'mild' second serfdom. This might seem as an odd take on the strength of the book, given the well-known facts about the constraints and limits that the second serfdom imposed on the early modern society. However, in the recent decades, it has been fashionable in Czech research on early modern Bohemia to consider the second serfdom as a rather unobtrusive institutional arrangement with little or even no effect on rural population.

Indeed, there are monographs which try to convince us that landlords' presence in

everyday aspect of serf's lives was either non-existent or minimal at best like Alices Velková's *Krutá vrchnost*¹ or monographs in which the second serfdom is ignored at all, at it is the case with Josef Grulich's *Populační vývoj a životní cyklus venkovského obyvatelstva*.² Ms Pražáková Seligová does not make that mistake. There were some worrying signs at the beginning of the book that the second serfdom would be avoided. For some unknown reasons, the author omitted to discuss the level of coerced labor duties (so-called *roboty*) reported in the Tereziánský Katastr, especially when everything else from that cadastre is discussed, and when the author spends 400 pages bringing in as many quantitative and qualitative evidence as possible not only on demographic aspect of serfs' lives. But the rest of the monograph offers plenty of other evidence pointing directly to the second serfdom and painting a plastic picture of the constraints imposed by the institutions of the second serfdom on all aspects of serfs' lives. The author very often puts them into the lengthy footnotes even though they belong to the main text – after all, the book is supposed to be about choice or destiny – but she does not ignore them, clearly showing that she is a researcher with integrity.

All those strengths make the monograph worth reading and keeping not only as a reference but also a source of valuable quantitative and qualitative evidence on early modern Bohemia. What are the problems with the book? One problem is the presentation of evidence. This seems like a trivial issue. It normally is, but not in this monograph. The author does not make it easy for the readers to follow the quantitative evidence presented in the tables which are put into a lengthy appendix. Some of them belong there, but many should have been part of the main text. Most excruciatingly though was the description of the tables. The whole monograph is full of lengthy descriptions of basic demographic patterns, often over several pages, something that could have been done with simple, yet revealing graphs, charts, or better presented tables, leaving underlying data to the appendix. All this matters because the strengths of the book I have discussed above are buried in the pile of sentences which reading is difficult even when the text is at its best. To be fair to the author, this is a particular feature of most of the monographs on the historical demography of early modern Bohemia written in Czech, and the reading of already mentioned monographs by Velková and Grulich respectively is similarly painful. Hence, it seems that the author works in an environment with a very specific style of presenting evidence. Here I would only urge the author to rethink the presentation of her findings when publishing for the international audience.

The main problem with the monograph is conceptual. The title of the book suggests that the readers are going to discover the lives of serfs in the 18th century

¹ Velková, Alice: *Krutá vrchnost, ubozí poddaní? Proměny venkovské rodiny a společnosti v 18. a první polovině 19. století na příkladu západočeského panství Štáhlavy* [Cruel Landlords, Poor Subjects? Transformations of the Rural Family and Society in the 18th and the First Half of the 19th Centuries on the Example of the dominion of Štáhlavy]. Praha 2009.

² Grulich, Josef: *Populační vývoj a životní cyklus venkovského obyvatelstva na jihu Čech v 16. až 18. století* [Population Development and Life Cycle of Rural Population in the Southern Bohemia from the 16th to the 18th Century]. České Budějovice 2008.

Bohemia, and whether they lived the lives of choice or not. Well, the readers will not. First, the book provides thorough description of mostly demographic life of serfs injected with information on economic and social life. The dominant focus on demography is fine, as long as it is clear that the book is mostly about that since the demographic aspect is only one aspect of the lives of serfs. Second, and more importantly, it says little whether they lived the lives of choice or not. It does not mean that the book does not say anything about it at all, on the contrary. However, given the length of the text and the additional tables and graphs, the readers are left with maybe a short chapter on the topic of serfs' choices after they splice it up from bits and pieces scattered all over the book. The author says something about the determinants of migration choices, occupational choices, educational choices (as limited as they were) but it is done rather impressionistically with no attempts to rigorously examine them. This is an opportunity missed given the vastness of evidence offered by the book.

How can we square the fact that the book is so rich on data sources, so thorough in their presentation, and so critical of their limitations, yet the task set in its title is barely achieved? The only way I can answer that question is that the author has never envisioned to do that in this book, and that the title of the book misses an addendum: *The Lives of Serfs in the 18th Century: Destiny or Choice. Part I: Evidence and Data Sources*. Because that is precisely what the book does. It describes the data sources, offers summary statistics, provides critical analysis of historical materials, and complements quantitative evidence with the qualitative one. Doing that, it paints a picture of the serf society on a north Bohemian estate in the 18th century as completely as possible. Naturally, analysing it requires another 500 pages at least. I hope the author is already working on Part II and I can't wait to read it.