

Famine, either directly or through attendant epidemic diseases such as dysentery, was the key perpetrator of population losses in the pre-industrial era. It was a factor not only in increased mortality but also in lower birth rates, bringing on each occasion a prolonged period of poor crop harvests and food shortages, which led to high prices and famine spreading beyond farming communities. This, at least, is what West European research implies, because in Poland this issue has not yet been a subject of detailed studies. Here, researchers have tended to focus instead on war damage or epidemics, remaining satisfied that famine occurred from time to time, but without knowing its extent, scale or effects.

As existing studies of the Old Polish period show, crop yields dropped in Poland, peasant landholdings shrank, and weather conditions were the same as in the rest of Europe, with the most notable being the effects of the Little Ice Age between the mid-17th and mid-18th centuries. This prompts the assumption that famines occurred relatively often and their consequences were harsh.

The first research objective will be to identify the food crises and the severity and course of each one. This will be achieved by analysing vital records (many of which have preserved from the first half of the 17th century onwards) from a representative group of parishes. These will be supplemented with data from other sources relating to crops and prices. The second key objective will be to draw up a profile of the peasant community with respect to its vulnerability to periodic crop declines. Sources such as estate inventories, Austrian tax returns and the land cadastre will enable me to determine the sizes of peasant farms, the size of the landless population, and the size and breakdown of crops.

The area under analysis will be southern Małopolska (Lesser Poland, from 1772 on referred to as Western Galicia) as this scope facilitates analysis of the issues outlined above in diversified environments (in respect of both geography and ownership).

The project will contribute to a better knowledge and understanding of the mechanics of agriculture and society in the pre-industrial era, and will help to identify the relationship between economy and demography, and to place the history of Polish food crises in a broader European context.