

Counts, princes, and margraves. Titled noble families as the power elite of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (16th–18th centuries)

This project aims to comprehensively analyze the functioning of Polish-Lithuanian noble families who used hereditary family titles in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the 16th to 18th centuries. The project's primary research hypothesis aims to test that titled noble families in the Commonwealth played a significant role as an informal but influential political and social elite (power elite). They acted as a functional aristocracy, similar to the aristocracy's role in other European countries.

Our research focuses on the noble families of Poland-Lithuania who held titles of prince, count, margrave, and other titles recognized within the Western European hierarchy of family ranks. This means that we will not include Lithuanian-Russian *knyaz*' families in the research unless those ones which joined the princes of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

In the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, noble families with titles did not function like the aristocracies in other European countries. No formal distinction between nobility ranks existed, so every family, regardless of wealth or status, was considered equal under the law. The principle of nobility equality was a core part of the social system, reinforced by the Sejm resolutions in the 17th and 18th centuries. The middle and lower classes of nobility viewed it as a fundamental belief. Despite this, between the 16th century and the fall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1795, some noble families openly used hereditary titles, violating the principle of estate equality. There were two types of these titles. The first type was of foreign origin, created by monarchs like emperors or popes. The second type was perceived as "domestic," which meant they were ancient titles from the early history of the Polish-Lithuanian state.

The phenomenon mentioned raises essential questions about the elites in Poland-Lithuania. Understanding the titled noble families is crucial for recognizing the basic mechanisms of Polish culture, law, society, and politics. These mechanisms significantly impacted the mentality and society of modern Poland, as seen in the famous "titlemania" (*tytułomania*) phenomenon. However, there hasn't been a thorough and comprehensive study of this issue, as the available publications are dispersed, selective, and superficial.

On the other hand, recent Western European historiography has shown a strong trend of cultural studies on the power elites and modern nobility (court studies, nobility studies). This trend highlights the scientific potential of studying the presented issue and its importance for advancing European research. Given the current state of Polish and European literature, it's essential to undertake monographic studies on this project's subject.

To verify the project's central hypothesis, we need to examine several specific issues that can be grouped into four main research topics based on the project's interdisciplinary nature. The project aims to investigate a set of specific problems that fall into distinct groups:

- 1) Legal and ideological aspects: This involves examining the legal status of titled families in Poland-Lithuania, both in statutory law and legal custom. This also includes analyzing the ideological basis of the regulations regarding family ranks. All of this will be done in the context of the law applicable to the nobilities of other European countries.
- 2) Genealogical and prosopographic aspects: This research is to identify and examine groups of noble families in Poland-Lithuania during the 16th and 18th centuries. It involves analyzing the titles used during these periods, investigating their introduction's circumstances, and establishing genealogical and family connections within these groups.
- 3) Social and cultural aspects: The research focuses on titled families' social and cultural aspects. This includes determining their social, cultural, and religious status, analyzing social reactions to their claims of title, and examining their actions to create a positive image of titled elites as an essential part of the nobility of the Commonwealth.
- 4) Political and cultural aspects: Analysis of titled noble families as the power elite, examining their political position, participation in state policy, presence at the royal court, career mechanisms, and cultural methods to legitimize rank and consolidate political influence.

The research project has a broad and in-depth scope, involving an interdisciplinary research questionnaire, multiple inquiries, and trips, both national and foreign, and the presentation of results in the form of a monograph and an article. Therefore, the project is expected to take three years to complete.