

The aim of this project is to expand our understanding of human capital (skills such as reading, writing, and counting) in the society of southern Polish territories during the first half of the 19th century. The research seeks to provide answers to several straightforward, yet important and previously underexplored questions:

Can historical evidence help us distinguish between signatures that display skilled handwriting and those that are merely memorized symbols? What were the primary demographic and socioeconomic factors associated with literacy? Was the gap in literacy and numeracy between men and women, as well as among different social classes, larger under difficult economic conditions (second serfdom) than in regions of Europe moving toward industrialization (early capitalism)? Did the collapse of the Polish state (partitions) and significant changes in borders and institutions during that time impact the level of human capital in the regional population? Was the spatial distribution of human capital more influenced by state borders and administrative divisions, or by factors such as urbanization, economic opportunities, and the environment? Do different measures of human capital, such as age-heaping (the phenomenon of misreporting age), the ability to sign one's name, and school enrollment rates, show discrepancies, and what factors contribute to these differences? How did individuals and institutions perceive literacy, and how did they attempt to shape it?

The significance of this research stems from both the gaps in existing historical and economic knowledge about literacy in this part of Europe before the spread of mass education and modern statistical sources such as population censuses, and the potential to bring new perspectives to contemporary academic debates. These debates address the relationships between population skills and socioeconomic development, the reliability of historical sources as indicators of human capital, and the long-term effects of historical events on today's educational inequalities.

By utilizing quantitative sources (such as civil marriage registers introduced with the Napoleonic Code in the study area, population censuses from the final period of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, reports and inspections of parish, public, and trivial schools), it will be possible to determine not only the percentage of people who could sign their names or correctly state their age but also to reconstruct the size and structure of the school network and the popularity of this form of education in society at the time. Additionally, the quantitative results will be enriched by cultural, social, and spatial contexts. An important aspect of the study will also be the assessment of the quality of signatures made by newlyweds and witnesses in civil marriage records, focusing on their proficiency in handwriting.

The main outputs of the project will include articles published in international and Polish academic journals, as well as data sets made available after the project's completion in a research data repository, along with documentation and code (in R), allowing for the replication of analyses, their modification, or use for own research.