

How to Survive Without Commons? Conflicts Over Forests and Coping Strategies of the Poor in the Post-Feudal Period in the Northeastern Part of the Habsburg Empire



 International Journal
of the Commons

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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 ubiquity press

ABSTRACT

The article deals with the conflicts over common forests and peasants' common rights in the first decades after the abolition of serfdom in the north-eastern part of the Austrian Empire (Galicia). The analysis focuses on the revolutionary agrarian reforms that had a direct impact on the existential condition of former serfs. On the one hand, the peasants received the land they had been cultivating and no longer had to work for free for the nobility. On the other hand, they lost access to the common lands and common rights that had been essential for their everyday life. As a result, the peasants developed their own coping strategy due to the lack of resources necessary for survival, i.e. through illegal acts such as thefts of natural resources in the manor forests.

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KEYWORDS:

forests; common lands;
common rights; peasants;
coping strategy; Eastern Europe;
Galicia

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Popek, J. (2025). How to Survive Without Commons? Conflicts Over Forests and Coping Strategies of the Poor in the Post-Feudal Period in the Northeastern Part of the Habsburg Empire. *International Journal of the Commons*, 19(1), pp. 359–380. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ijc.1554>

(...) *our deplorable state drives us to desperation but we are far from violating the forests rashly and maintaining our rights in this way* (CSHAUL, corps 146/64, vol. 5093).

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the spring of 1848, an unprecedented event took place in Galicia (Judson 2016, p. 71; Dabrowski 2014, p. 98; Grodziski 1971, p. 27–30).¹ On 15 May, all serf labour and other feudal obligations provided by peasants to the manor ceased to be performed. Franz von Stadion, the then provincial governor, announced the imperial patent for the abolition of all feudal burdens (*Ueber die Aufhebung 1848*), which marked the end of the Second Serfdom system in this part of Europe (Dennison, Ogilvie 2007, p. 513–544; Ogilvie 2005, p. 402–451; Ogilvie 2007, p. 649–684) and was part of the violent changes in the Habsburg monarchy, carried on the wave of the Spring of Nations. As a consequence, the main dimensions of conflict between peasants and the landed gentry (nobility), i.e. serfdom and feudal rents, including the most onerous free labour on manorial land, ceased to exist at that time (Simons 1971, p. 795–817; Polonsky 1998, p. 443–69).² However, the future for the peasants did not look promising. The first decades after 1848 may be defined as a ‘post-feudal’ reality, referring not only to the historical period but to the role of the main actors involved or entangled in the profound transformations, i.e. the state, the nobility and the peasants. The announcement, consisting of several sentences only, and regarding the abolition of serfdom, was publicly communicated in Lviv in April of that year. It also referred to an extremely sensitive issue – the new plane for the emergence of mass antagonisms between the peasants and the landed gentry of Galicia, which continued uninterrupted almost until the end of the 19th century. These were feudal common rights (Dąbkowski 1911, p. 254–5; Hube 1874, p. 114),³ which until 1848 guaranteed peasants access to manorial property, i.e. forests (collection of existential raw materials, including firewood, timber and forest litter) and meadows and pastures (grazing cattle) (Poppek 2021a, p. 50–72).

In the period of ‘the Second Serfdom’, common rights were also interpreted as an essential component of serfdom. In many manors, respecting peasants’ commons depended on the performance of obligations to the manor (for example, a serf who had arrears in feudal labour could be prohibited from gathering firewood in the forest) (CSHAUL, corps 146/64, vol. 2015). Landlords often emphasised the dependence of common rights on the payment of the most important form of feudal rent owed to the manor, i.e. their obligation to perform feudal

labour. A telling example occurred in a court hearing with the manorial bailiff of Klimówka, who said: ‘Only after the abolition of serfdom [in 1848] the former proprietor of Klimówka, Leopold Pawłowski, began to deny that right under the pretext that since feudal labour was no longer provided to him, his obligation to provide peasants with firewood also ceased’ (CSHAUL, corps 146/64, vol. 1966; Hall 1864, p. 92). Mass-scale social antagonism occurred after the abolition of serfdom in Galicia (Map 1) and the entire monarchy in 1848. Until a separate statute could be passed for the purpose of official regulation of common rights, the central authorities ordered peasants’ rights to continue to be respected; however, it was necessary to pay a fee for any acquired resource. Despite the clear injunction, the majority of landlords denied their former subjects the use of manorial property or charged fees in the form of work in manorial fields, thus compensating for the loss of feudal labour. The peasants, on the other hand, accepted the requirement of payment for raw materials taken from manorial land, or for cattle grazing, only with great reluctance. In effect, peasants lost their right to collect raw materials for free which contributed to arose numerous disputes between the village and the manor. The peasants protested the manor’s infringements and abuses, and the landlords complained about damage done to forests, theft of wood, and the peasants’ unwillingness to pay fees. This was ended by the 1853 patent abolishing common rights, although the practical implementation of its provisions started only in 1857 and continued for decades until the end of the 19th century (*Provinzial-Gesetzsammlung 1848*, p. 75; Ślusarek 2002, p. 158; Inglot 1972, p. 245; Taylor 1976, p. 72–3).

The article presents a specific attitude of peasants contesting the post-feudal reality in the face of the loss their historical ‘commons’, oscillating around the polarisation of social relations and the consequent ‘hunger’ for existential resources. The social dissonance stemmed from the significant disparity in the ownership of property (forests, meadows, pastures) and the income derived from them. The main problems of the analysed period, i.e. the first decades after the abolition of serfdom, can be characterised best through the prism of the aspirations of the actors of the time: the post-feudal peasants who desired to preserve the old rights and developed a coping strategy for dealing with collecting raw materials (essential in everyday life), and the landowners who questioned the previous customs and obligations resulting from the former position of landowning authority towards their former serfs. There is no doubt that peasants were the perpetrators of common crimes and illegal acts. Just as in the feudal period, thefts, batteries, murders, destruction of property, etc. took place at that time. However, this article aims to draw attention to illegal acts with a clear



Map 1 Galicia as part of Austria-Hungary in the second half of the 19th century.

motive, i.e. aimed at satisfying specific needs and thus targeting forest owners (usually landowners), as a direct consequence of the loss of their commons. An analysis of archival documentation on the conflicts of that time (CSHAUL, vol. 146/64, 146/52; [ÖS, AT-OeStA/AVA Inneres MdI Allgemein A 381-383](#))⁴ leads to the claim that during the period in question, there was an increase in forest crimes. However, before there was any transgression of the law, most conflicts over the ‘literal’ closure of forests by landowners were preceded by official complaints made by former serfs to the state authorities. When such protests did not bring the desired effect, and when the spectre of hunger and cold started looming on the horizon, the only desperate solution was to enter the forest and steal the wood. The issue of wood theft was already addressed by Karl Marx as early as in the 1840s, a topic that has since been revisited and analysed in contemporary scholarship by Daniel Bensaid ([Bensaid 2021](#)).

The discussion on property rights in Europe, including the evolving functioning and conceptualization of ‘commons’ over the centuries, remains a vibrant and ongoing debate

([Béaur et al. 2013](#); [Congost & Santos 2012](#)). Until the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions, common lands constituted a fundamental component of continental agriculture. Prior to their enclosure and privatization, they provided arable land, pasturage for livestock, and played a supportive role in traditional farming by supplying forest litter for animal bedding (and thus manure), firewood, materials for crafting agricultural tools, as well as a variety of food products ([Grüne et al. 2016](#); [Brakensiek 2000](#)). Such forms of exploitation of ‘commons’ were widespread across Europe and remained a consistent feature in regions such as the British Isles ([Winchester 2022](#)) and Germany, Flanders, the Netherlands ([De Moor et al. 2002](#)), France ([Béaur & Varet-Vitu 2006](#)), or Spain ([Serrano Álvarez 2014](#)). The analysis of numerous publications addressing the evolution of property rights and commons in Western Europe reveals a significant imbalance in comparison to the relatively limited scholarship on the history of commons in the eastern part of the continent – an area that constitutes the primary focus of this article. Its main aim is to analyse the consequences for peasants in the context of the loss

of their common rights to use the manor's woods in the northeastern part of the Habsburg Empire (Galicia) in the first two decades after the abolition of serfdom and feudal burdens in 1848. The discussion is also meant to show what consequences the actions of the reformers and modernizers (the state and aristocratic circles) had for the poorest peasants, leading to the abolition of the common rights of former serfs and the separation of commonly used forests, meadows, and pastures. The article focuses on the so-called transition period between 1848 and the beginning of the formal process of abolition and regulation common rights, which was carried out individually for each location where common rights and common land existed between 1857 and 1895. Therefore, the hypothesis assumes that the nobility's unwillingness to respect peasants' rights, the physical enclosure of forests and the attempt to force peasants back to work on the manor lands (payment for raw materials in the form of labour or money) contributed to the development of a coping strategy among the peasants based on illegal acts, i.e. theft of raw materials from manor forests. From a bottom-up perspective, i.e. from the point of view of the peasants, it was a form of contestation of the new reality, completely different from the noble perception of ownership of the previously utilized forests, a different moral assessment of the thefts in the manor forests themselves (in accordance with the theory of moral economy according to E. P. Thompson) (Thompson 1971, p. 76–136), the defence of their 'historical' rights, but above all a way to access the natural resources necessary for survival. The critical stance of modernizers toward the commons was not an exception in the Carpathian region (Galicia). Rather, it reflected the mercantilist policies of the Habsburgs – characterized by a negative view of traditional techniques and forms of resource use – that were consistent throughout the entire monarchy. This was pointed out, among others, by Peter Jones (Jones 2016, p. 37, 51–76) or Alessandra Dattero (Dattero 2024, p. 7–33) in their analysis of agrarian reform experiences – specifically the introduction of land cadastres (i.e. the taxation and profitability assessment of land, including forests) – in Austrian Lombardy as early as the 18th century. The commons were viewed with suspicion due to their allegedly disordered forms of exploitation. They were seen as antithetical to the then-emerging vision of sustainable forest cultivation, rationalization, productivity, and the implementation of scientific forestry principles. Above all, they eluded Enlightenment ideals concerning the measurement of natural resource productivity and the maximization of income, thus standing in contrast to the desired model of individual (private) ownership. Jones further noted that both Maria Theresa and her son Joseph II actively sought to eliminate the commons, often

encountering spectacular failures in this regard. A similar, though more critical, assessment of modernization efforts across the Habsburg Monarchy was put forward by Polish and Ukrainian historians. Roman Rozdolski demonstrated that certain ill-considered decisions to abolish the commons led to the pauperization of rural populations across entire regions. The forced privatization of approximately 57 000 hectares of communal pastures and arable land in Podolia and Pokuttya (present-day Ukraine) at the end of the 18th century resulted in the appropriation of all such land by the nobility and the simultaneous loss of access to the commons by the rural population (Rozdolski 1962, p. 20–21, 261).

The article also takes a specific position in the international debate on the evaluation of the idea and legitimacy of the existence of 'common-pool resources' (CPRs), as co-used or co-owned properties, as well as the rules and forms of their functioning. It, thus, corresponds to the two opposite concepts of Garret Hardin (Hardin 1968, p. 1243–1248) and Elinor Ostrom (Ostrom 1990). Galician peasants lost their rights and access to previously utilised lands 'overnight', and perceived the new reality as the privatisation of common property, i.e. its takeover by the nobility. This action and the rhetoric of the exclusive ownership of forests by the nobility was recommended and supported by state, which aimed to abolish all customary rights. They were perceived as traditional and archaic practices, contradicting the increase in forest productivity and thus the profitability of owners and the state. The arguments put forward by the then Enlightened monarchies and aristocracy about protecting nature (forests and pastures) to prevent overexploitation were similar to those raised by the author of *The Tragedy of the Commons*. Traditional forms of forest use (Szabó 2020, p. 304–326) were questioned and arguments were raised about the alleged lack of knowledge and skills of peasants to preserve the balance in the exploitation of resources. As Paul Warde pointed out, it was the governing elites, as modernisers of the economy, who pushed the vision that only the state has the knowledge and means to apply the mechanism of limits and protection of habitats from extensive exploitation (Warde 2018, p. 4, 154, 182). Peasants' traditional forest exploitation practices deemed to be 'disorderly' supposedly lead to the destruction, degradation and overexploitation of the environment, and therefore had to be organised (abolished) through the top-down liquidation of peasants' common rights and the separation of common lands (actions such as the questionable effectiveness of reforms implemented from the top-down were analysed, among others, by James C. Scott in *Seeing like a state*) (Scott 1998, p. 11–20). From the point of view of the negative consequences of the liquidation of the commons for

peasants, the Nobel Prize winner's concept is much more reasonable. The same conclusion can be drawn from the point of view of the functioning of common goods (as an effect of legal regulations in the second half of the 19th century) that have survived to the present day.⁵ Similar to the United Kingdom, as Brian Short proved in 2022 ([Short 2022, p. 465](#)), the functioning of the 'commons' – both in terms of the utilisation rights of third-party property (e.g. state forests) and land communities – does not necessarily lead to overexploitation and, under certain utilisation rules, can have positive effects on both the economy and society.

The analysis of Eastern European commons both expands upon and aligns with existing theoretical frameworks, including those developed by Edella Schlager and Elinor Ostrom ([Schlager, Ostrom 1992, 249–262](#)), Nancy Peluso and Jesse Ribot ([Ribot, Peluso 2003, p. 153–181](#)), as well as Rui Santos, Jorge Gelman, and Rosa Congost ([Congost et al. 2017, p. 176–204](#)) in the context of the classification and significance of property rights and rights to use natural resources. The feudal CPRs in the northern Carpathians, upon which the poorest segments of the peasant population based their subsistence, fit textbook definitions of operational-level rights as identified by Schlager and Ostrom – namely, the right of 'access' to the resource and the right of 'withdrawal', i.e. the extraction of raw materials. Despite the presence of slightly different operative mechanisms specific to the feudal context – such as assignment to designated extraction sites or the obligation to possess explicit permits – the functioning of Eastern European commons was based on a comparable bundle of rights and roles. Peasants could operate within a system in which they were co-owners (e.g. some highland communities jointly owned alpine meadows in the Carpathians), enabling them to manage access and withdrawal, and exercise rights of exclusion and alienation. From the perspective of contemporary law, including the Austrian Civil Code (ABGB – *Allgemeines Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch*), the vast majority of peasants held the status of authorized users and claimants, possessing only the rights of access and withdrawal in relation to forests that were fully controlled by the nobility or the state. The analysis of commons-related conflicts in the post-feudal period presented in this article demonstrates that the principal sources of disputes were:

- deeply polarized perceptions and often unilateral enforcements by whoever held specific rights within the bundle of entitlements;
- contestation of agrarian reforms that introduced capitalist relations, which enforced redefined property rights and user entitlements across the Habsburg monarchy.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research presented in the article is the result of many years of analysis of the functioning, the process of abolition and conflicts over (including the regulation of) 'commons' (rights and lands) in the north-eastern part of the Austrian Empire. Similar problems to those in Galicia can be seen in other parts of the monarchy. The existence of 'common-pool resources' was very common in Central and Eastern Europe. This is indicated by the richly preserved archival collections in the Vienna State Archives, among others, which relate to the functioning and abolition of the commons in almost every province ([ÖS, AVA Inneres Mdl Allgemein Teil 2 A 343](#) (Grundentlastungen, Servituten, Tirol); A 341a (Grundentlastungen, Servituten, Salzburg (1900–1912); A 339a (Grundentlastungen, Servituten, Dalmatien, Kärnten); A 341 (Grundentlastungen, Servituten, Niederösterreich, Oberösterreich, Küstenland); A 342 (Grundentlastungen, Servituten, Steiermark); A 344 (Grundentlastungen, Servituten, Tirol); A 339b (Grundentlastungen, Servituten, Krain); A 384 (Grundentlastung, Servituten, Naturalleistungen-Ablösung, Kärnten-Krain); A 394 (Grundentlastung, Servituten, Naturalleistungen-Ablösung, Schlesien-Steiermark); A 383 (Grundentlastung, Servituten, Naturalleistungen-Ablösung, Galizien); AVA Verkehr Reg.v.EG SBG A 8.11 (Servituten-Ablösung, Hainisch, Wiener Neustadt)). In Galicia, conflicts over the commons were a very frequent aspect of the relationship between the village and the manor, both before the abolition of serfdom and after. While there were more than 6 200 communities in the mid-19th century ([CSHAUL, corps 166/1, vol. 5390](#)), the commons existed in almost 3 600 ([CSHAUL, corps 146/64, vol. 1–12109](#)). One location could hold multiple forms of rights and their holders, as well as common lands. However, the majority of conflicts between peasants and the nobility occurred after 1848 during the reform that abolished rights and separated common lands. However, the first mass antagonisms between the village and the manor occurred in the period immediately after the abolition of serfdom, before the reforms were implemented. In other words, no one has so far shown what problems the post-feudal peasantry of the time faced as a result of losing access to the commons, in terms of access to energy resources and what deeds they had to resort to in securing their family's livelihood in order not to experience extreme poverty. The peasants' ability to adapt, corresponds to the view proposed by James Scott ([Scott 1976](#)). However, Scott's concept is based on other economic and social realities, including, above all, the relationship between two social groups (peasants and nobility) affected by the rapid changes in Central and Eastern Europe.

The research was based on an extensive and highly diverse collection of archival manuscripts written in German and Polish. The vast majority of sources consist of qualitative and quantitative detailed data at the local level, pertaining individually to each village or small town, or to specific conflicts. In addition to the dispute resolution proceedings conducted by state commissions (discussed further below), a wide range of collective peasant complaints, letters, and grievances were also utilized – providing a direct and grassroots voice of the rural population – as well as correspondence between selected state institutions and a broad selection of judicial and administrative rulings. The analysis of detailed quantitative data proved to be extremely time-consuming; however, it ultimately enabled the integration of archival knowledge into digital maps using Historical Geographic Information Systems (HGIS), based on the historical administrative divisions of the provinces from the mid-19th century ([Administrativ Karte von den Königreichen Galizien und Lodomerien](#)). General quantitative data were provided by reports from the Ministry of the Interior dating from the second half of the 19th century, sourced from the Vienna-based Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (State Archive in Vienna). These primarily consisted of provincial authority reports and statistical summaries concerning the process of commons enclosure in Galicia, which also enabled an assessment of the scale and frequency of related conflicts.

The conclusions drawn from the analysis of the everyday life of the Galician peasants are based on many years of archival research in Lviv (Ukraine), which dealt more broadly with the mass conflicts surrounding one of the most important agrarian reforms in the Habsburg monarchy in the second half of the 19th century, i.e. the abolition of the common rights of the former serf population. Reading the manuscripts of the hearings during the arbitration proceedings was a startling observation of the various testimonies in which peasants manifested unauthorised acts towards the manorial forests. The credibility of the accounts depicting the course of brawls and feuds in the forests (sometimes extensively submitted to state investigators) was confirmed by the accompanying aura of gratitude to the emperor for the ‘freedom’ and ‘abolition of serfdom’ he had obtained, which in the second half of the century was identified with the birth of the idea of the ‘good emperor – protector of the serfs’ ([Potkański 2011, p. 90](#); [Grodziski 1976, p. 281](#); [Falkowski 1879, p. 116](#)). It was obvious to the Galician peasants that the emperor had sided with them in the conflict with the nobility and they believed that he would continue to do so. Consequently, they perceived imperial officials as their protectors, sometimes allies, of whom they should not be afraid, as opposed to fear they experienced in confrontation with

manorial officials. As a result, interrogations took the form of a clear expression of emotions and a variety of problems, not necessarily related to the ongoing investigation. This is because the peasants’ consciousness was based on the conviction that the abolition of feudalism was not necessarily linked to the loss of their common rights. By looking through the eyes of unobvious characters, who stood in the shadows, it was possible to broaden the perspective and look at a number of problems differently from the classic narrative based on the so-called ‘Great History’. This approach partly corresponds with recent Polish publications, e.g. by Andrzej Chwalba and Wojciech Harpula ([2022](#)), Mateusz Wyżga ([2022](#)), Kacper Pobłocki ([2021](#)), Adam Leszczyński ([2020](#)) and Michał Rauszer ([2021](#)), conducting research on peasant riots and violence from the anthropological point of view.

RESULTS

In 1848, the peasants were given personal freedom and the ownership of the land they had previously used, but the nobility remained the owners of most of the forest areas in Galicia, including forest common lands ([Rutowski 1888, p. 1888, p. 17, 22](#)). The main problem of the article therefore refers to the diametrically different perception of the previously commonly utilized forests by peasants and the nobility. It can therefore be said that what occurred after 1848 was not the maintenance of private property, but from the perspective of the peasants, the privatization of goods that had previously been utilized commonly. From the perspective of the nobility, the new economic system and the division of property that was formed at the time had logical consequences for their former subjects: ‘you were given the ownership of the land, you don’t do serfdom anymore, so we have the right to protect our property and we will not respect your ‘common rights’ to extract natural resources from our forests’ ([Stauter-Halsted 2004, p. 21](#)). The nobility no longer considered forests as common land to be shared with the peasants, as was previously customary law. Forests were seen as private property, with no obligation to respect previous rights, and the state and its reforms supported that view. The peasants, on the other hand, had a completely different point of view. They perceived the circumstances after 1848 as the privatization of land that had previously been their reservoir for satisfying existential needs. In accordance with the new legal circumstances, only in theory were they able to secure legal access to the forests by paying monetary fees to the manor or in the form of labour (which involved a return to a form of feudalism). In other words, the peasants lost their common rights to the forests and found themselves in a

position that pushed them to become dependent on the manor again. Firewood, timber or cash to buy raw materials could be obtained by working in the manor. However, in general the factor which influenced the emergence of peasants' actions contesting the existing reality was the feeling of injustice regarding the removal of their 'eternal' rights and the systemically imposed obligation to pay fees for subsistence raw materials (most often firewood). It was thus a 'contestation' of the rules imposed by the landowners and the state, understood as a protest expressed in a specific behaviour. Apart from the official grievances and complaints to the state authorities, there was also a second form of opposition – acts perceived by the law as violations of somebody else's property, i.e. theft of natural resources. In other words, these were forcible attempts to preserve the *status quo* of peasants' access to common forests, along the same lines as before 1848. Committing illegal acts did not merely refer to contestation of reality *per se*. Indeed, intense emotions were at play, triggered by the prospect of a threat to existence and the vision of an inevitable deterioration of the material situation, especially among the poorest peasants (e.g. those who did not own any land). This category included, above all, the so-called 'zagrodnicy', i.e. smallholders with only a house and a small field, the volume of which was insufficient to support a family. The introduction of fees for the collection of manorial raw materials after 1848, therefore, may have been an excessive (or impossible) financial burden (Szewczuk 1939, p. 266–298; Althammer 2012, p. 93–116; Ó Gráda et al. 2009; Neville 2012, p. 80–94).⁶ On the other hand, due to a lack of land and financial resources, they were forced to work in manors, working in forests and fields in exchange for access to raw materials again.

The proposed view of the adaptability and coping strategy-building of the rural population in Galicia is not an attempt to relativise, but to understand the attitudes, motives and circumstances surrounding the peasants' actions. Although the memory of the bloody revolt against the nobility of 1846 was still vivid in the minds of both social groups, the main motives behind the peasants' theft of raw materials from manorial estates did not stem from the need for manifestation of hatred or revenge against the entire social class. To some extent, the strategy reflected in the thefts committed by peasants that could be justified at the time corresponds to E.P. Thompson's theory of the complexity of motives and types of behaviour. The moral justification of the illegal acts committed by peasants under the conditions of that time can be understood as a situation when protests against nobles did not bring the desired effect, and when the prospect of hunger and cold started looming on the horizon, the only desperate solution was to enter the forest and steal the wood. However, in the

conditions of the time, it was applicable on an individualised level. Although the scarcity of subsistence raw materials was a problem afflicting the entire social group, the specific circumstances leading to the perpetration of a crime were conditioned by the extreme situation of individual peasant families. In a literal sense, the mere act of going into the forest and collecting, for example, free-lying dry branches, was clearly of individual nature and expressed a desperate material situation. In most cases, according to peasants' strategy, the act was to go unnoticed and, ultimately, undetected by the manorial forest service. On the one hand, this approach was a manifestation of quiet contestation of the reality (privatization of common forests by the nobility) and made it possible to satisfy the basic existential needs. On the other hand, it was a strategy for long-term energy supply. Indeed, group acts of robbery or open clashes between peasants and landowners were rare. When they did occur, they tended to contest the system or specific decisions, which was vividly portrayed by the famous Polish writer Władysław Reymont in his seminal novel *Peasants* (Reymont 1904–1909).⁷

The vision of a lack of firewood (especially in winter), or the scarcity of resources needed to maintain the cow, which provided staple food for the whole family, conjured the prospect of suffering, and in the literal sense, of hypothermia and starvation. The possible gain, on the other hand, was seen as obtaining energy resources for one's own needs (for one's own farm), which would suspend the spectre of destitution and satisfy basic physiological needs and ensure security. In the view of the peasants themselves, it was therefore not a matter of appropriating other people's property or profit, understood as an opportunity to steal raw materials for sale. Consequently, an individual peasant had to assess incurring of possible losses versus obtaining the possible gain, and then to make a choice. On the one hand, the peasants were well aware of the direct and immediate consequences that might befall them in the forest (risk of confiscation of tools or livestock, possible violation of their personal dignity), and of the indirect consequences of the discovery of a criminal act, perceived in the light of the law as a crime (punishment administered by the justice authorities) (CSHAUL, vol. 146/64, corps 5084–5247, 5457–5720, 6515–6979, 6980–7310, 9073–9289, 10073–10277).⁸

Being caught in the act, 'red-handed', by manorial foresters was associated with very unpleasant consequences. Bearing in mind the methods used against so-called 'forest pests' (CSHAUL, vol. 146/64, corps 1969; vol. 146/52, corps 34)⁹ in feudal as well as post-feudal times, entering the forest, finding firewood and bringing it on one's back (especially in winter), exposed an individual peasant as well as his family, to material losses and sometimes humiliating repercussions. Immediate penalties

enforced on the spot, in the form of confiscation of axes or livestock such as cows (in the case of unauthorised cattle grazing), were generally treated as a surety until financial compensation was paid for the caused damage. Even if peasants were not caught while collecting firewood or grazing cattle in the forest, similar consequences on the part of the manor could await them once the matter was discovered (e.g. the footsteps in the snow). From the perspective of the scale of experienced emotions, discretionary punishments administered through the use of physical violence, including corporal punishment, aimed at psychological humiliation and the destruction of personal dignity of the peasant, were much more difficult to bear. Roman Rozdolski points out that the Austrian authorities, immediately after the incorporation of the southern lands of the Republic in 1772, recognised the widespread problem of the use of corporal punishment against peasants. Prohibitions and restrictions on its use were not, however, effective, as evidenced by numerous complaints from serfs to higher state offices (Rozdolski 1962). In the feudal period, such action was, in theory, intended to discipline peasants in the long term, through attempts to humiliate them by appealing to their feelings of shame. The public infliction of punishment (beating with sticks, kicking) by court officials was a common disciplinary practice. In extreme situations, in the absence of a response from the local authorities, peasants decided to seek help even directly from the Emperor in Vienna. The burden of enduring corporal punishment destroying personal dignity is best illustrated by the summary of one of several peasant letters from the village of Cmolas to Emperor Franz I Habsburg in 1804: '(...) tyrannically beaten and tortured, and because of all this we have to suffer considerable and great damage to our honour and health'. In addition to a whole list of abuses committed by court officials, the letter was accompanied by an extensive list of peasants who were punished in the form of beating. The discretionary nature of the offences led to arbitrariness in the administration of alleged justice.

The peasants' letter shows that more often than not, the butlers and chief stewards of the manor, caught the peasants while they were working (e.g. ploughing) or while they stayed at their own farms, and physically disciplined them. Holding hands and feet and beating adult men with sticks or whips in the presence of the village community or the peasant's own family, first of all stripped the victim of all personal dignity and generated a sense of immense shame (CSHAUL, corps 146/64, vol. 4767). Similar situations occurred in the forests themselves, just before the abolition of serfdom. Discretionary use of psychologically humiliating punishments was not limited to mere beatings. Another well-known form of justice was physical violence which entailed the stripping of clothes from peasants caught

collecting firewood in the forest. Peasants' testimonies from peasant arbitration committees, indicated that some of the manorial servants were eager to abuse their serfs, e.g. to force them to surrender their clothes in winter and to return from the forest to the farm in just their underwear. One situation of this kind occurred in the village of Wilcza Wola in December 1844. A peasant named Tomasz Pacyna, who was caught collecting firewood in the manor forest at the time, was forced by the manor foresters to give up almost all of his clothes (except for his shirt and underwear). He was then helped by other villagers (CSHAUL, corps 146/64, vol. 6381). The abolition of feudal relations in 1848 by no means meant immediate change, both in the practice of immediate punishment for petty forest theft and in the peasants' own perceptions of the expected consequences they might face in the forest. Former serfs' accounts of conflicts with landowners clearly indicate that abuse and immediate physical violence by manorial foresters was a common occurrence in the 1850s and 1860s (CSHAUL, corps 146/64, vol. 11552), as was the implementation of unwritten rules and autonomy of landowners in numerous confiscations of tools and livestock. It was popular at the time to compile lists of peasants who were the so-called 'forest pests', collectively submitted to the state administration or courts, with precise personal details, the types of offences precisely listed and the immediate preventive measures taken (CSHAUL, corps 146/64, vol. 1969-1979).

From the peasants' perspective, it was initially not entirely clear what the new reality meant, a reality in which the landlord no longer administered justice as the first instance of patrimonial jurisdiction. The completely new circumstances of defining and investigating offences, on the one hand, empowered peasants by giving them full procedural rights and removed the whole dimension of possible offences related to serfdom and serfdom obligations towards the manor. From another perspective, however, the state's policy in the context of economic control over forests, coincided with the objectives pursued by the nobility, to which most of the Galician forests belonged. In other words, the state shared the position of the landed gentry and Enlightenment 'scientific forestry' circles in giving the forests a strictly economic function. This meant, above all, the elimination of all elements negatively affecting forest management plans, including the common rights of former serfs and all other unregulated (traditional) attempts to take advantage of forest resources (e.g. theft) (CSHAUL, corps 146/52, vol. 16, 22).¹⁰ The reinforcement of such a policy and attempts to comply with it started with the publication of the 1852 Forest Act (Danckelmann 1888; 'Patent vom 3. December 1852'), which influenced both the broadening of peasants'

knowledge and the raising of the awareness that the decision to enter a forest would not only incur a possible prison sentence, but also a financial fine. In the 1860s, e.g. in the Jaworów powiat, unauthorised cattle grazing in manorial forests was generally punished with 8 to 14 days' imprisonment and a fine of 1 to 11 guilders (CSHAUL, [corps 146/52, vol. 24](#)). Private property had been protected since 1852 by *[Österreichisches] Strafgesetz über Verbrechen, Vergehen und Übertretungen mit Kundmachungspatent* [the Austrian Penal Act on Crimes, Offences and Misdemeanours] (*[Österreichisches] Strafgesetz über Verbrechen 1852, p. 278*), in particular articles 434–486c, concerning the so-called security of property. Forestry offences, most often committed by peasants, were then classified under Article 460 as petty theft and punishable by imprisonment – from one week to six months. In the first decades after the abolition of serfdom, the central authorities were aware of the widespread hunger for raw materials in the countryside (CSHAUL, [corps 146/52, vol. 34](#)),¹¹ treating, as a rule, individual thefts of firewood (e.g. dry branches) with leniency, delaying the resolution of disputes or failing to intervene in the case of some open antagonisms between peasants and landowners. Such was the attitude of the state administration for almost 11 years, from the abolition of serfdom until the start of the reform abolishing common rights in 1857 (his is indicated by the numerous requests to the authorities by both peasants and landowners themselves, asking for the establishment of arbitration or inquiry committees). On the other hand, however, it should be clearly emphasized that the access to the manor forest and the gathering of wood by peasants after 1848 was seen and understood by former serfs in a completely different way than from the perspective of the law. The peasants did not perceive their actions as criminal or illegal. Referring to the already mentioned concept of 'moral economy', what appeared to be 'illegal' for the state (authorities), from a bottom-up perspective, did not have to be so – it was not perceived as theft. The peasants had a number of arguments for this, the most important of which resulted from a different understanding of the 'ownership' of commonly utilized forests (until 1848) and their disappointment with their privatization by the nobility.

Deciding factor to steal raw by peasant in materials was the fear of pauperization resulting from the loss of access to subsistence (energy) resources. This vision included, above all, the extreme scarcity of firewood necessary for heating the dwelling, preparing meals, heating water for washing and lighting after dark. Wood as building material, on the other hand, played a primary role in the functioning of the entire material base of the farm. The construction of all agricultural tools, cooking utensils and entire buildings was based on wood from the manorial forests

(CSHAUL, [corps 146/64, vol. 5275, 6450, 8753, 11798](#)). From the point of view of feeding the family, access to manorial property was of existential importance for the poorer peasants with cows. Common woods, pastures and meadows allowed the animals to be kept in good condition and to be provided with forest litter used in the stables as a substitute for straw as it was constantly in short supply (the litter was also used for insulating peasant buildings for winter; in Polish the so-called *gacenie*) (Kolberg 1871, [p. 156](#)). The cow was seen as the breadwinner for the family (Kosiek 2009, [p. 165–175](#)). It provided food (dairy products) all year round. In addition, manure, as a by-product of animal husbandry, made it possible to fertilise the cultivated field. Abolishing of the commons and the closure of the forests or the obligation to pay a fee for any raw material received from manorial properties, put the poorest part of peasant families on the brink of survival. Negative experience could be linked to the lack of any financial resources or the prospect of losing financial liquidity, threatening the operation of the farm. They were compounded by natural disasters (floods, hail, locusts, potato blight) and epidemics (typhus, cholera) haunting the province in the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s. During the so-called Great Galician Famine (1847–1848) alone, the disaster claimed several hundred thousand lives (Zadoks 2008, [p. 23–24](#); Miodunka 2016, [p. 221–222](#)). There were reports of acts of cannibalism, baking bread from couch grass (Łuczaj 2021, [p. 11, 30](#); Łuczaj, Szymański 2007, [p. 9](#)), or feeding on grass in early spring, after winter supplies had been exhausted (in Polish: *przednówek*, the early spring hungry gap). According to Napoleon Cybulski, the poorest peasants, reportedly, baked *bread and cakes of chaff mixed with coarse flour, linden or beetroot leaves, clover blossoms, corn cobs, acorns, potato peelings, all kinds of mushrooms, berries and all kinds of plants, prepared either in the same way as cabbage or in the same way as spinach. This category of plants includes pigweed, (...), thyme, horsetail, nettle and all kinds of sorrel plants. In some places, even bark and leaves from trees were to be used at the same time* (trans. mine) (Cybulski 1894, [p. 152–153](#)).

The very definition of subsistence resources is of particular importance in this context: it refers directly to the raw materials responsible for survival (acquired for one's own needs, rather than bringing financial gain), which were previously obtained from common forests. As a result, it can be hypothesised that the post-feudal peasant was highly aware of the consequences that could befall him. Entering the forest and stealing was their last resort; something which the peasants did not in fact did not aim to achieve and preferred to avoid. The above mentioned words, as well as the mass complaints and grievances filed with the local authorities, and begging

letters sent to the Emperor, indicated that the peasants' overriding goal was not acts of hatred towards another social group, but the desire to survive. From the peasants' perspective, the only recipe according to which the entire level of conflict between the countryside and the manor could be eliminated, was the restoration of only the rights that would allow them to use the manor forests but not the entire feudal system. However, the vision of the decision-makers in Vienna, the landed gentry and 'scientific forestry' circles was diametrically opposite ([Szczerbowski 1907](#); [Strzelecki 1901](#)).

Looking through the prism of the monopoly on the possession of land (nobility, clergy and the king) maintained for centuries in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, peasants had achieved a certain habit of perpetrating petty forest thefts, which were completely socially acceptable in rural areas. The problem of the 'hunger for raw materials' and the polarisation of the difficult relationship between peasants and the manor was therefore not something new. It was antagonised and accentuated both by the very situation in which the two social groups found themselves after 1848 and, indirectly, by the influence of long-term state policy, coinciding with the spirit of Enlightenment forestry principles. In the latter case, the central government's vision of the function that forests should fulfil, i.e. a vision converging with the views of 'scientific forestry', played a vital role. Christoph Ernst noted that West German forests, prior to the introduction of sustainable development principles, were a reservoir for various forms of exploitation (also by the rural population) ([Ernst 1998](#); [Warde 2018](#)). The situation was similar in the case of Galicia. In the eyes of both the authorities, driven by economic considerations, and the forest owners (the nobility), the unsystematic and unorganised use of the forests by various social groups threatened and disrupted the role it should play in an industrialised economy, i.e. the production of wood pulp. Such a trend was not only present in Galicia: the influence of the German concept of sustainable development in forestry, referred to as *Nachhaltigkeit* ([Duhamel du Monceau 1764](#); [Von Carlovitz 1713](#); [Hölzl 431–460](#); [Stuber 2008](#)), under which similar models of forest exploitation were applied (e.g. *Schlagwaldwirtschaft* as described by Ernst), was clearly present in the policies of the European states of the time and set the main tone for legal and economic doctrines ([Bonan 2019](#); [Watkins 2014](#)).

In addition to the state policy geared toward the economic functionalization of forests, the problem of hunger for raw materials was generated by a clear disparity in property ownership between the rural population and

landowners. Thus, the decision to carry out a thorough reform abolishing peasant common rights was aimed at alleviating the disparity in property ownership (and the derived income) by redistributing it, i.e. transferring some of the forests held by the manor to rural communities, and systematizing forest management. State policy (coinciding with the aspirations of the landowners), treated the rights of peasants to use manorial forests as an anachronism, contradicting the recommended economic model of forestry. As a result, common rights had to be abolished by handing over part of the manor forests to the peasants as compensation, where they could, in theory, satisfy their demand for natural resources. The very decision to carry out a thorough reform, therefore, was based on two reasons: the desire to introduce a systematized model of forestry, and the elimination of the plane for the emergence of massive conflicts over common rights between peasants and the manor. The biggest problem of the reform, proved to be primarily time-consuming. It took several decades (formally until 1895), due to the number of rights to be abolished (30 000 individual cases) and the scale of mass conflicts (almost 70 per cent of all cases). Over the long term, the sheer volume of complaints, grievances, and protests submitted, along with the number of conflicts and the proactive engagement of peasants within official channels, was among the factors that contributed to a partial relaxation of access to the forests. Finally, the changes led to the transfer of much of the forests and pastures to the peasants, which have survived to the present day as communal (*gmina*) forests and land communities. The forest resource redistribution project, which formally began almost 10 years after the abolition of serfdom and lasted until the end of the 19th century, partly redressed social inequalities in terms of wealth and alleviated social conflicts. It also influenced the scale of occurrence and the very perception of existential forest theft. As rural communities began to have forests at their own disposal and started to utilise them with the needs of all residents in mind, the motivation for theft (existentially grounded) in manorial forests decreased. According to official state figures, by 1895 there had been 30 733 proceedings abolishing or regulating common rights. 7 949 were abolished through agreements, while 2 798 were precisely regulated. The rest of the cases were accompanied by conflicts, so that the final decision had to be made by special commissions or courts. As compensation, some 280 000 morgens of forest and pasture land, separated from manorial estates, were, first of all, transferred to rural communities ([Kochanowski 1923](#), p. 57; [ÖS, AT-OeStA/AVA Inneres MdI Allgemein A 381](#)).

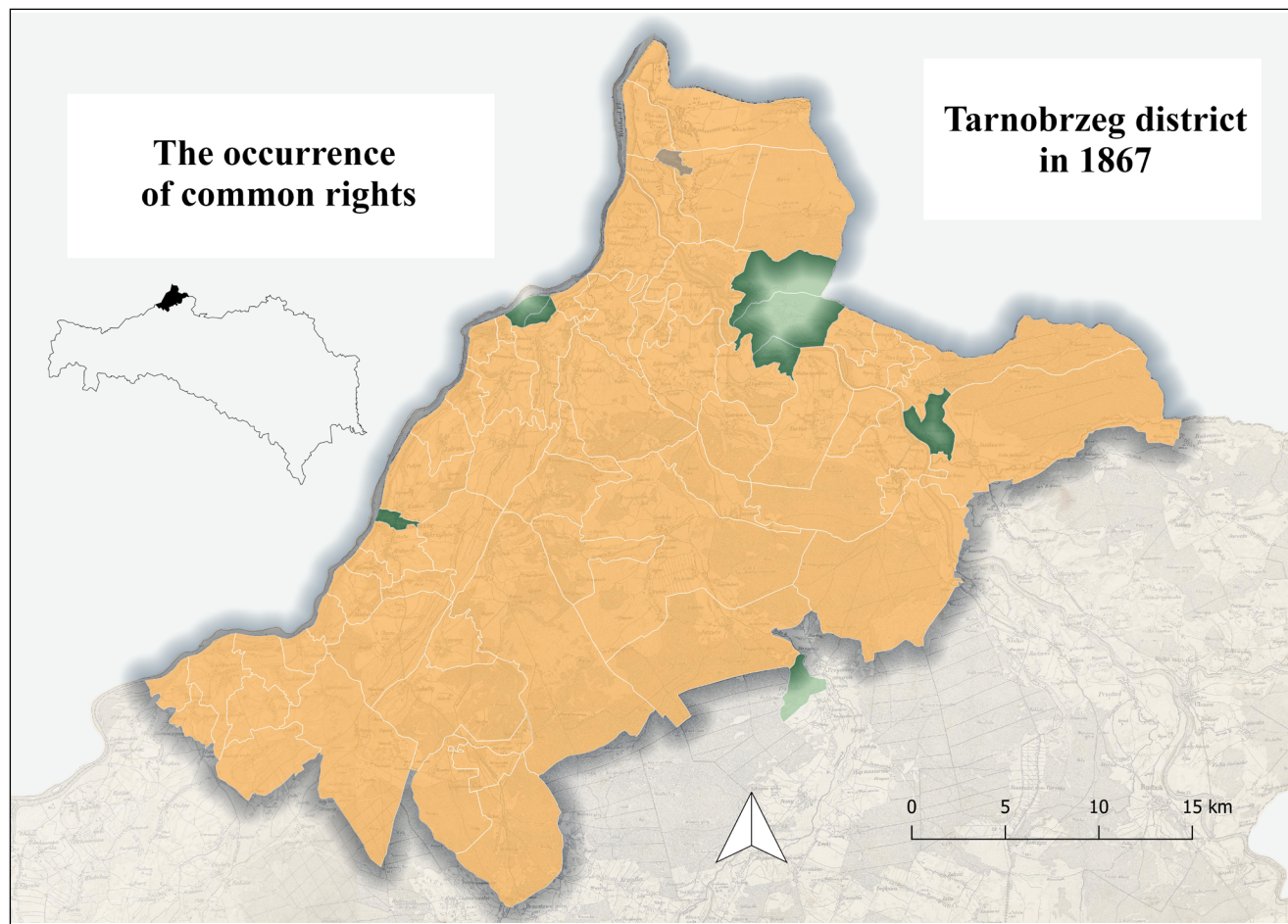
| AREA | NUMBER OF SETTLEMENTS, MUNICIPALITIES, HAMLETS AND GERMAN COLONIES | TOTAL NUMBER OF INDIVIDUAL CASES FILED FOR PROCEEDINGS (UNTIL 1878) | ENCLOSURE MOVEMENT IN GALICIA (AGREEMENTS AND CONFLICTS DURING THE ABOLITION OF COMMONS) | FOREST COMMONS | | | | | OTHER COMMONS | |
|--|---|---|---|----------------|----------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|--|------------------|---------------------------|
| | | | | FIREWOOD | TIMBER FOR BUILDINGS | TIMBER FOR TOOLS | TIMBER FOR FENCES | NON-TIMBER FOREST PRODUCTS (FRUIT ETC.) | | OTHER FOREST RIGHTS |
| Whole province (74 districts) | Where 'commons' occurred | 29 619 (76 unresolved cases) | Agreements | 7058 | 4644 | 1345 | 2309 | 1267 | 5230 | 7 842 |
| | Where 'commons' did not occur | | Conflicts (forced rulings and court proceedings) | | | | | | | |
| | 5 386 | 19 749 | 9 946 | | | | | | | |
| | 1 794 | | | | | | | | | |

(Source: ÖS, AT-OeStA/AVA Inneres MdI Allgemeines A 382).

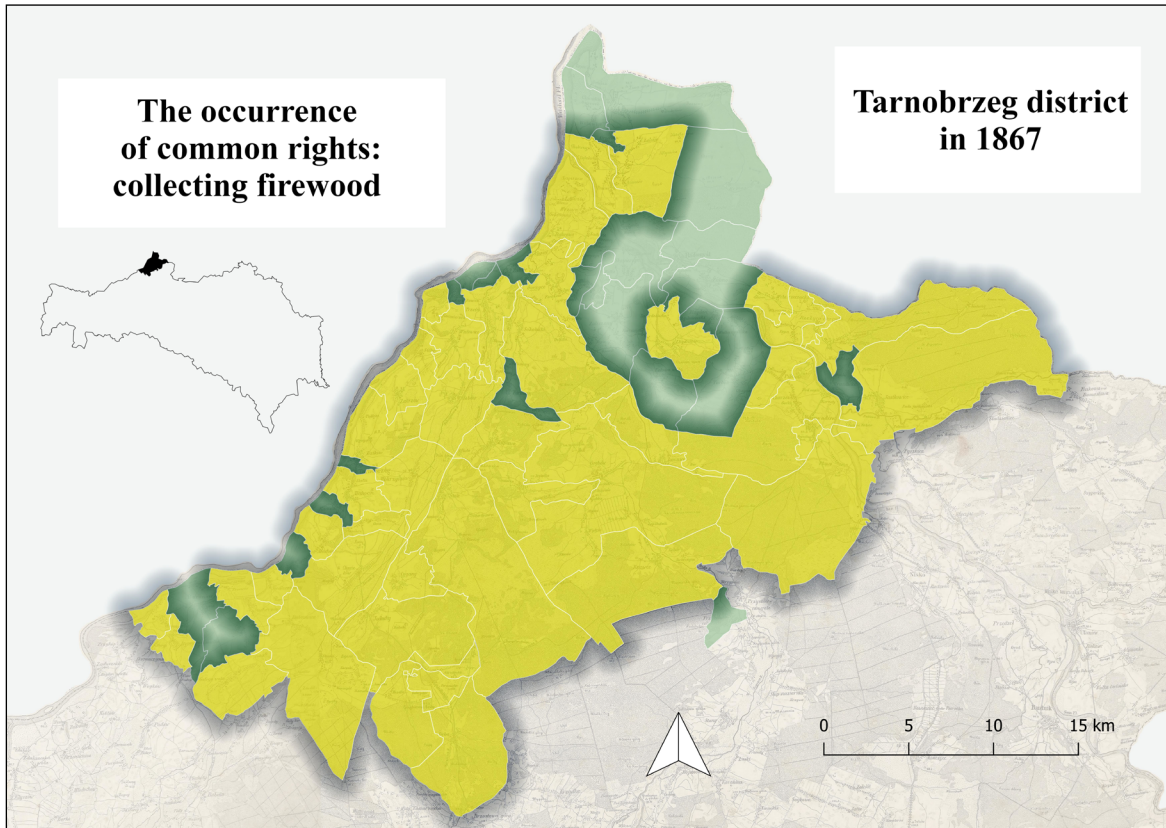
The analysis of general reports submitted by provincial authorities to the Ministry of the Interior in Vienna allowed for a detailed account of the number of peasant forest rights throughout the province and allowed the comparison with the scale of conflicts. Although the authorities at the time did not maintain detailed statistics on the number of disputes over the commons for each type of forest resource extracted by peasants, the reports reveal many interesting insights. In the majority of settlements (villages, hamlets, and small towns) included in the report (5 386 out of 7 180 listed), commons or entities entitled to exploit manor estates operated. By 1878, 29 619 individual cases had been submitted for enclosure or regulation. Of this number, as many as 21 880 concerned the rights to use forest resources – such as gathering firewood for personal use, collecting forest litter and other products, and grazing on forest meadows. The remainder involved issues related to common pastures and rights to communal grazing on stubble fields and wastelands. The central administration’s general statistics

confirm conclusions drawn from detailed regional data (sourced from the Lviv archives). They primarily reflect the scale of conflicts and the widespread nature of official disputes concerning forest commons. According to the 1878 report, nearly 20 000 of the then-pending cases (out of 29 000 total) were accompanied by various conflicts.

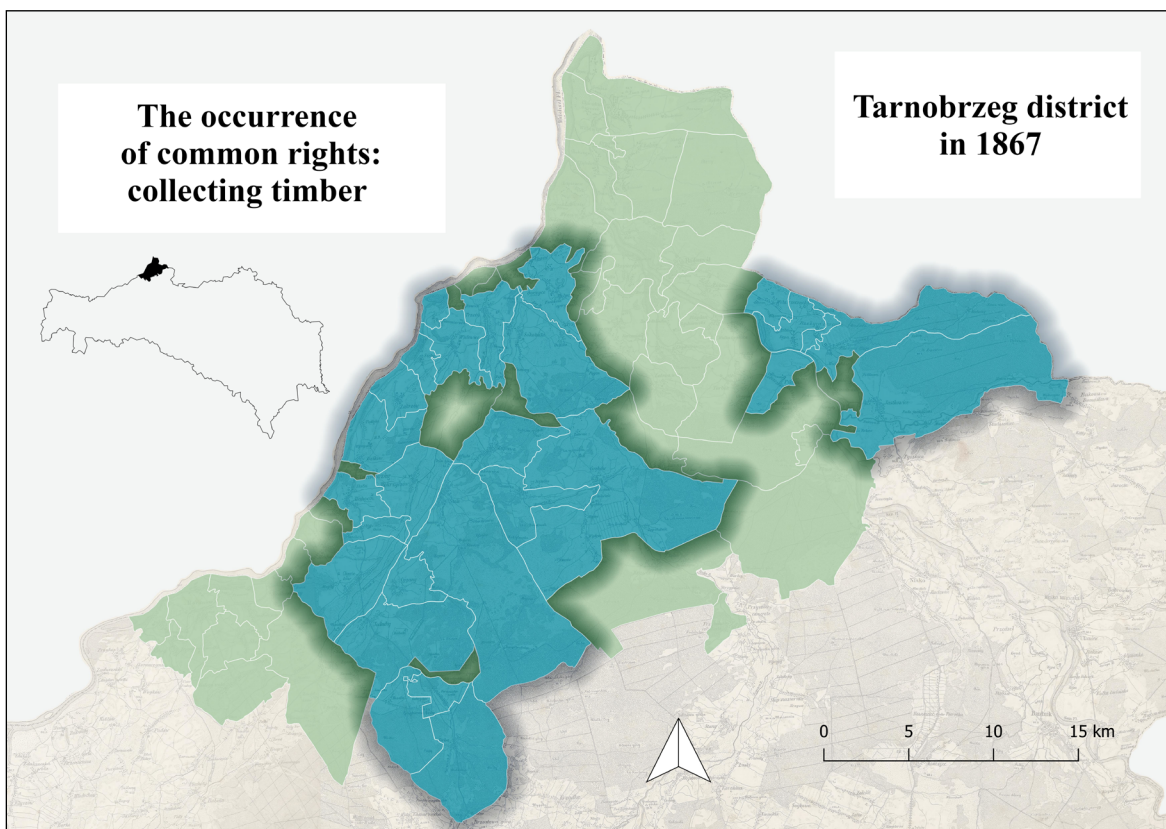
Both the general and detailed data find confirmation in the spatial distribution of conflicts. From a geographical perspective, a broader view emerges regarding the scale of commons and related disputes. The following spatial arrangements (Maps 2, 3, and 4), illustrating the situation in the Tarnobrzeg powiat – one of the 74 administrative districts in Galicia during the second half of the 19th century – reflect a similar condition throughout the province. They indicate that in almost all analysed rural settlements, peasants possessed rights to exploit manor forests until 1848. The majority had rights to collect firewood, while about half had rights to harvest construction timber.



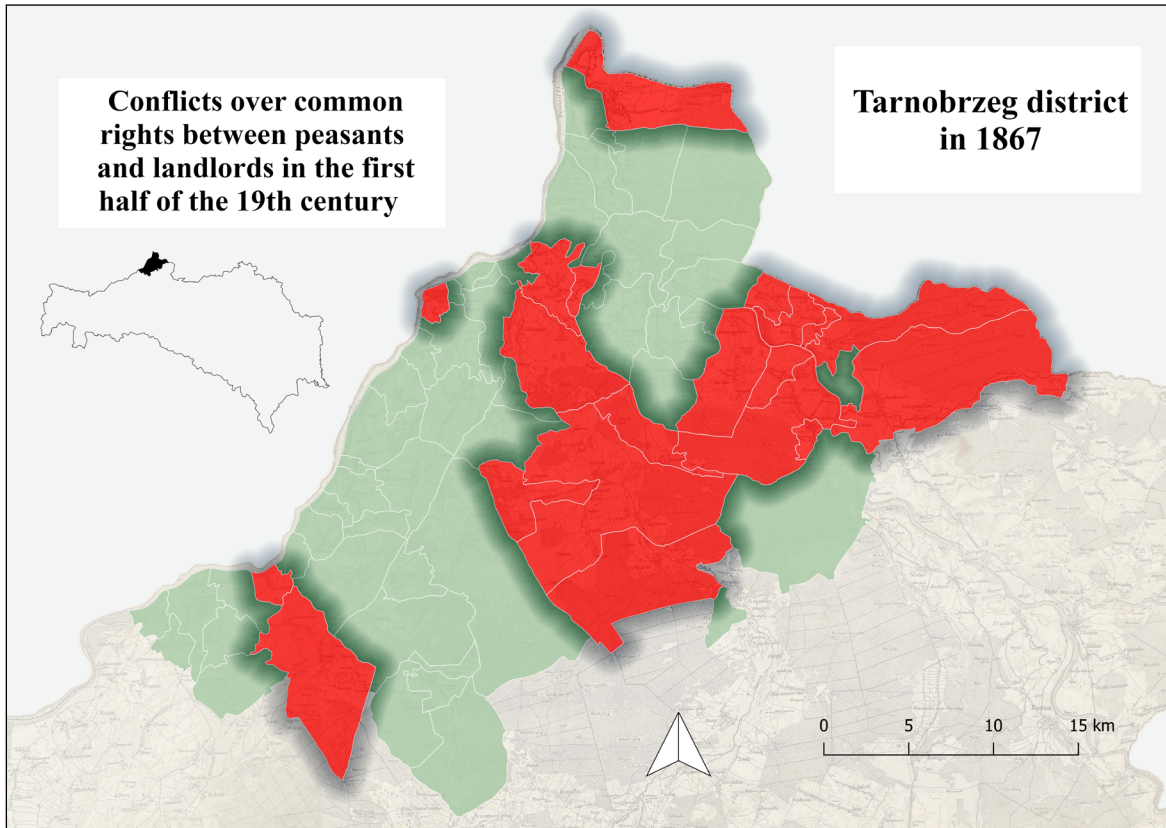
Map 2 The occurrence of common rights in Tarnobrzeg district.



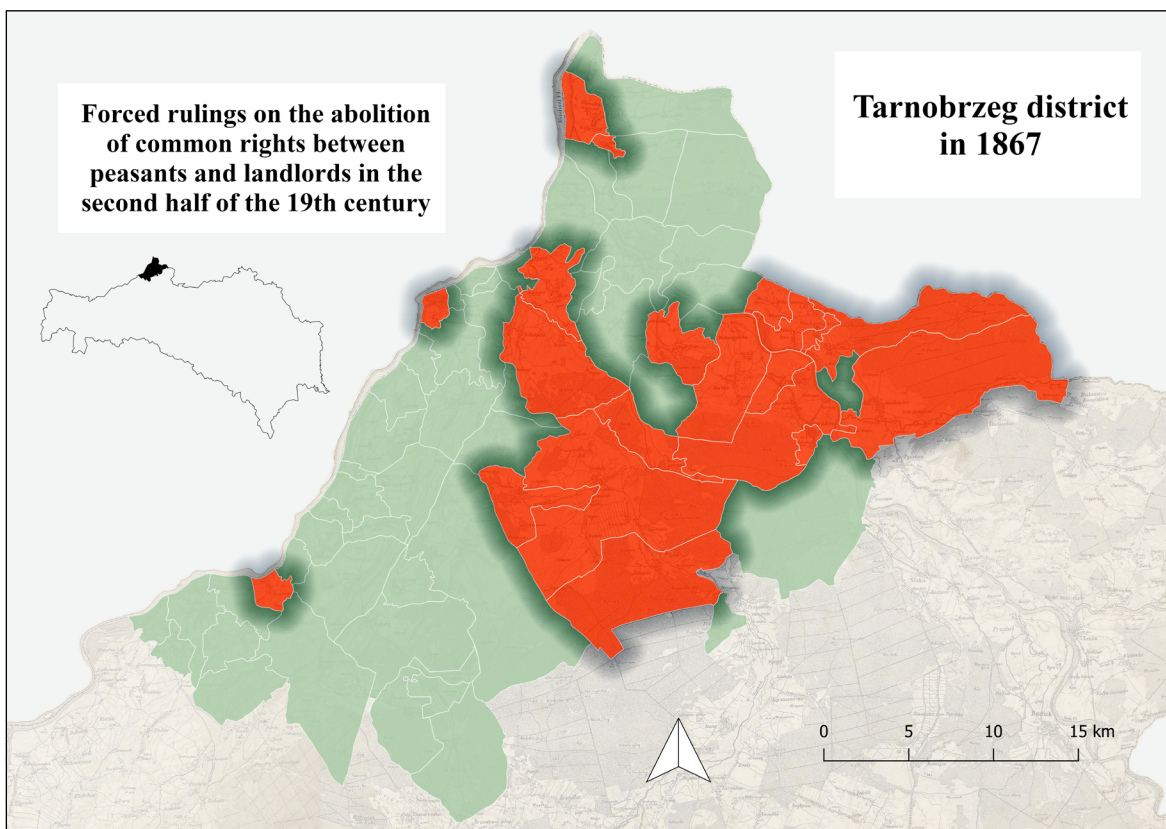
Map 3 The occurrence of common rights: collecting firewood.



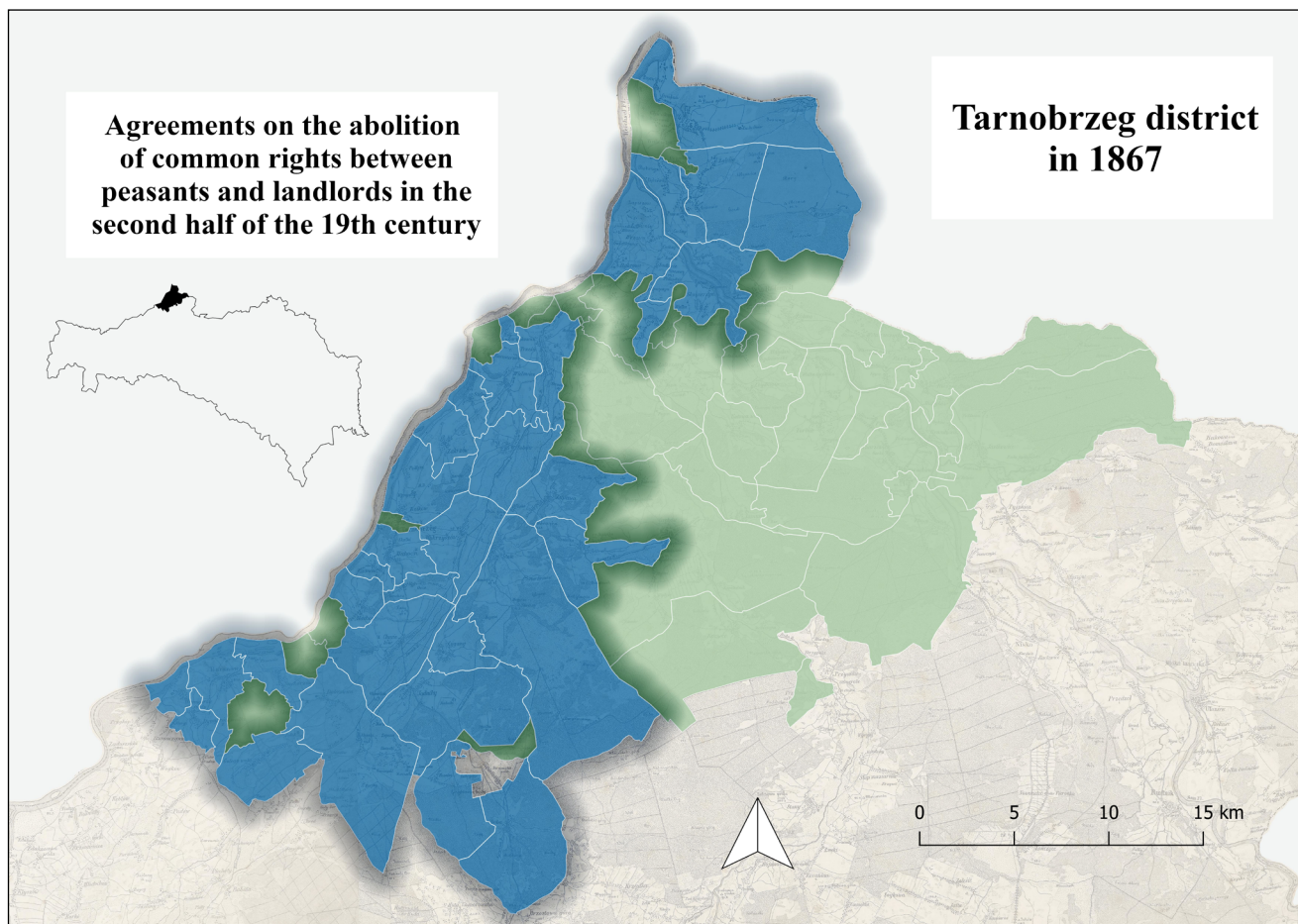
Map 4 The occurrence of common rights: collecting timber.



Map 5 Conflicts over common rights between peasants and landlords in the first half of the 19th century.



Map 6 Forced rulings on the abolition of common rights between peasants and landlords in the second half of the 19th century.



Map 7 Agreements on the abolition of common rights between peasants and landlords in the second half of the 19th century.

The integration and visualization of archival data in digital maps also allowed a broader perspective on conflicts over forest commons. Analysis of peasant complaints and dispute resolution process documentation indicates that in settlements where peasant-noble conflicts occurred over a longer time span – namely, even before the abolition of serfdom in 1848 – there was a higher incidence of wood theft by peasants, and the conflicts themselves tended to be more violent. Source and spatial analysis of the situation in each settlement within the Tarnobrzeg district further identified some causes of conflict emergence and escalation. [Map 5](#) highlights villages where regular disputes between peasants and nobles took place before 1848. The subsequent map ([Map 6](#)) illustrates conflicts that persisted or escalated during the enclosure process in the second half of the century. In these cases, courts and state administration most often served as arbitration bodies, issuing mandatory and final rulings that abolished the feudal commons. The third arrangement ([Map 7](#)) depicts the scale of agreements regarding commons liquidation between villages and manor estates. The key conclusions drawn from source and spatial analysis indicate that the most difficult relations and longest-lasting disputes over forest commons occurred in private estates. Where nobles

attempted to impose restrictions on peasant access to forests in the first half of the 19th century, strained relations persisted longer, and old unresolved conflicts escalated during the commons enclosure process. Conversely, stable, long-term, and conflict-free functioning of forest commons ([Map 7](#)) in the first half of the 19th century most frequently occurred on former state estates, where peasants based their rights not on custom and oral tradition but on written official documents. Moreover, these conclusions are supported by an analysis of compensation received by rural populations for lost access to manor forests. The largest and most valuable compensations – in the form of extensive forest land equivalents – were granted to peasants from former royal-imperial estates. It was also on these estates that wood theft occurred on the smallest scale ([CSHAUL, vol. 146/64, corps 10297-10480](#)).

Beside to the scarcity of energy resources, plaguing post-feudal Galicia was the hunger for money. This was a direct result of the change in the economic regime, which led to a surge in demand for financial resources (both groups – peasants and landowners). Although the landowners were to receive indemnity in the future for the abolition of feudal rents, including, above all, the free labour of peasants ([Ślusarek 2002](#)), the extensive manorial farms were deprived

of free labour in May 1848. From then on, the principles of manorial farms, were similar to capitalist enterprises, where labour had to be remunerated. This form led to a search for cash, which could be found in several places. The most obvious direction was banks, usurers and any institution that could provide credit. As a result of the loss of liquidity and mortgage debt, many estates went bankrupt and were seized by creditors. Magdalena Semczyszyn reports that as a result of the progressive indebtedness of the nobility, by the end of the century, around 80% of the landholdings in the eastern poviats, including Kamionka, Podhajce and Sambor, had mortgage debts. A significant proportion of them went bankrupt, while the estates themselves were parcelled out and judicially auctioned. Similar information showing the low profitability of noble estates is presented in the so-called *Tabula Krajowa* [National register of manor estates] – a list of mortgage debts of every major estate in Galicia (Semczyszyn 2019, p. 796; CDIAUL, corps 166/1, vol. 5421, 2337, 2522, 3469, 3471, 3498, 3741, 3781, 4573, 4610, 4619, 4730, 4739, 4758, 4767). Some of the nobility attempted to modernise the estates and make them profitable, mainly by diversifying their areas of activity. Although agriculture continued to be the primary branch of farming, significant financial benefits could be provided by industrialisation and the exploitation of forests. The ownership of extensive forest acreage (sometimes a monopoly) provided many opportunities. In the long term, they were an abundant source for the exploitation of natural resources for industrial purposes (timber, firewood). In post-feudal conditions, forest ownership gave an advantage over the former serf population and facilitated making short-term profits. As Keely Stauter-Halsted rightly pointed out: “even though the peasants had gained their freedom, they enlisted in the service of the manors in exchange for access to forests and pastures” (Stauter-Halsted 2004, p. 21–22). Those who agreed to the conditions offered by the landowners generally received around 15 kreutzers (1 guilder called in Galicia *złoty Reński*) = 60 kreutzers) (Ihnatowicz 1967, p. 91) for a day’s work of the heaviest work such as haymaking at harvest time, 12 kreutzers at threshing time, 12 kreutzers for other heavy harvest work and around 8 kreutzers for light work. The peasants who did not agree to such conditions in this way contested the position of the landowners, who took advantage of their privileged status to find cash or hands to work, which was seen as an attempt to return to feudalism (CSHAUL, corps 146/64, vol. 5190). In other words, reforms abolishing the commons and at the same time as the nobility had a monopoly on owning forests, were one of the reasons why peasants once again had to work for the manor. Depending on local conditions, the advantage of landowners could therefore lie on two levels: their possession of a monopoly of forests, and cash at their

disposal (or the equivalent of other goods, such as food). Consequently, this allowed them to offer rates that did not always correspond to the market value. As late as 1836, in the western part of the province, the average daily wage of a so-called ‘wyrobnik’ (an unskilled manual labourer), ranged between 20 and 30 kreutzers, depending on the time of year (CSHAUL, corps 146/64, vol. 5322).

The attitude of post-feudal peasants to the landowners was openly distanced and negative. Nevertheless, practices applied by some manors did not come as a surprise as in the eyes of the peasants, this was the type of behaviour with which they were well acquainted and towards which they had the same moral judgement as before 1848. In the face of attempts to exploit the situation created by the needs of the most numerous social group and to create conditions for the functioning of their farms, possible thefts with existential motives bore the hallmarks of a morally justifiable act. The straightforwardness of the peasants, particularly evident in the supplications to the Viennese court, exposed their bitterness at the attitude of the landed gentry, who only sought financial gain despite seeing peasants’ poverty and misery (Complaints of peasants from, among others, the villages of Polany, Lipnica Górna – CSHAUL, corps 146/64, vol. 11552). The attempt was thus to convey to the emperor the message that the problem of hunger for financial resources also affected the peasantry to a large extent. Post-feudal farms, small in size (on average between 2 and 5 hectares), not sufficient to support entire families for one year, were increasingly characterised by fragmentation. While the abolition of serfdom and agrarian reforms encouraged the trend of dividing peasant land, a sharp escalation of the problem occurred after 1868, as a result of the repeal of the previous ban on land division. In such circumstances, finding funds to buy firewood in the manorial forests was a considerable challenge.

DISCUSSION

Galicia was one of the poorest regions, both in the Habsburg monarchy and in Europe at the time (Wróbel 1994, p. 97). The province was strictly agricultural in character, facing overpopulation, numerous natural disasters and social unrest (the Galician slaughter, the Spring of Nations, the Russian army marches in 1848/9). Freeing peasants from the bonds of serfdom and separating them from the landlord’s power, by no means contributed to the birth of a new being – a new man, nor did it dramatically improve living conditions and raise material status. Michał Łuczewski notes that despite successive agrarian reforms in Galicia, abolishing elements of feudalism, “the class structure of society did not change” (Łuczewski 2012, p. 214). What is more, it initially deteriorated the economic position of the

peasants, which was mainly due to the fragmentation (the creation of 'a chessboard' of land) and the farms falling into debt. The abolition of serfdom, coupled with the loss of the commons, paradoxically had a negative impact on the poorest peasants. This, in turn, underscored the particular importance of common goods. The new reality forced reliance on individual ownership – that is, small and fragmented plots of land – as the basis for subsistence.

Post-feudal peasants were an integral part of the shaping of the new economic regime. However, their aspirations were based on a moral economy, understood as the pursuit of a livelihood for themselves and their own families. They sought at all costs to preserve the *status quo*,¹² failing to perceive that in the new reality, by actively participating in competition on legal grounds with the landed gentry, they could also gain a great deal. Some peasants, as early as in the 1860s, recognised this opportunity. As a result of their determined and consistent attitude in confronting the landowners at the time of the abolition of the common rights, peasants were given extensive meadow, pasture and woodland plots (Popek 2021b, p. 87–89). The vast majority of peasants, however, did not believe that they could win against the landlords before the court or the state administration. This disposition was accompanied by both a lack of faith, oscillating around the post-feudal syndrome of the dominated man, reinforced by an awareness of their lack of education (Brock 1958, p. 93; Himka 1988, p. 15),¹³ and financial resources.¹⁴ When minimizing the risk of losing access to natural resources, they did not want to decide to maximize profit, i.e. start pursuing their interests according to new rules. As a result, existentially motivated forest thefts for some peasants took the form of a strategy appealing to a very simple goal – survival.

There is no doubt that despite the efforts to redistribute goods, both at the end of the 19th century and in the 20th century, numerous thefts of wood could be observed in the manor forests and later in the State Forests. The hypothesis is also confirmed by official statistics. Out of a total of 25 551 offences committed by so-called 'forest pests' in 74 districts in 1872, 1 241 people were found not guilty, while 2 766 cases were dismissed due to lack of evidence. All thefts were charged with a total of 6 552 days of arrest, fines of 8 538 guildens and 14 840 guildens in compensation for losses to landowners. From the perspective of the authorities at the time, an evaluation of the report in the context of the entire province indicated that these were disappointing statistics, as in almost 7 000 cases, only a warning (caution) was given. The authorities considered the mitigating circumstances to be, above all, the low level of education (or lack of it) and the low level of harm to the so-called 'forest culture' (CSHAUL, corps 146/52, vol. 34). In practice, the perspective of those who administered provincial justice in Galicia may have been different from

that sought by the central government. The individual view of local officers on the enforcement of forest policy and criminal code guidelines towards peasants did not always have to fully coincide with the recommendations from Vienna. This is confirmed by frequent reports of pressure and exhortations, including the above-mentioned report to the head of the Chrzanów district, to be much stricter towards so-called forestry crimes.

The loss of common forests in 1848 was a heavy burden for the peasants, and a circumstance they did not accept. They perceived the state reforms and the nobility's efforts as the 'privatization' of the woodlands, as well as an attempt to establish noble ownership of previously common utilized pastures and forests. They saw this as an abuse because they also claimed the common resources they had utilized earlier as their own property. By adapting to the new reality, the coping strategies both expressed a silent protest against the enclosure movement of the woodlands and provided the necessary raw materials for everyday life. Therefore, they did not consider entering the forest and collecting the necessary firewood as theft or any other illegal act, but as their right to the forest, which they had possessed for generations. The loss of the commons also generated new areas of mass conflict, which occurred in various forms until the end of the 19th century. This problem also affected the government itself, which allowed the regulation of rights in the process of reform – under clearly defined rules. This solution is closer to Elinor Ostrom's concept, both in terms of the regulation of 'old' peasant rights, as well as the principles by which the new common lands were to be managed, created on the basis of forests and pastures separated from the manor areas (as compensation for the abolished rights).

In the eyes of the landowners, it was paramount to confirm their right of ownership to the forests and ensuring the viability of their vast holdings was considered paramount. Any intrusion into the forest without permission, including that of peasants, amounted to outright theft and a violation of somebody else's property. Moreover, each side indulged in extreme behaviour. The theft of raw materials by the rural population, initially existentially motivated, could take on an opportunistic dimension. Similarly, in the case of extreme acts of contestation of the landowners' policies, peasants were responsible for frequent devastation and deliberate destruction of manorial forests. In the case of the landowners after the abolition of serfdom, by contrast, there were situations of ruthless closure of forests, prohibition of the sale of timber to peasants, and the implementation of their own form of justice with attempts to replace the official courts in the administration of summary justice. Situation in the landed estates near the villages of Chorkówka and Leśniówka in the Jasto powiat (CSHAUL, corps 146/64, vol. 5167).

The deeds of Galician post-feudal peasants reflected the problems of the everyday life of the most numerous and at the same time poorest social group at the time. The problems that were most important from their perspective differed from the patterns examined by the so-called “Great History” (grand narratives). Peasants did not think about national, political or national liberation issues. The identity of the post-feudal peasant can be described by the Polish word ‘tutejszość’ (in English ‘localness’) as identification with the local community (family, village) (Kargol 2017, p. 405–6; Jakubiec 2017, p. 419). Their interaction with the landed gentry was not guided by convictions of belonging to a nation or an ethnic group. A peasant living near Kraków perceived finding firewood for the winter in the same terms as a peasant from eastern Galicia. Moreover, peasants were ‘imperial’ and identified themselves as such. They owed everything they had to the Austrian Emperor and did not identify with the point of view and aspirations of the Polish nobility, as was vividly demonstrated by the meagre effect of the attempted uprising in the Kingdom of Poland by Colonel Józef Zaliwski’s partisans in 1833, the slaughter of the gentry in 1846, the peasant-volunteer *Landsturm* during the suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1848, and the very content of letters sent to emperors throughout the 19th century. Peasants recruited by the gentry to Colonel Józef Zaliwski’s partisan units deserted after a few days of fruitless wandering in the border forests of the Kingdom of Poland (CSHAUL, corps 146/64, vol. 3133, 3161, 5315, 5325, 1985, 1994, 1887, 1997, 2007, 2013, 2015, 2019, 2020, 5093, 5120, 5121, 5208, 6414). In the testimonies they gave at length to Austrian investigators, they indicated, e.g. that: ‘During our march across the San River, my companions told me we were going to Poland, where the Revolution was, in order to fight the Muscovites. (...) On the third day after our stay in the forest, me and my other companion, but I don’t know his name, having left our weapons, escaped from that band, because we didn’t feel like going to Poland with them; (...) I returned back to my host and hid for a few days, and finally I went to work as a serf.’ (Interrogation of Jan Onas from Werynia) (CSHAUL, corps 152/2, vol. 107).

The analysis of peasant actions presented in this article also aimed to diversify and capture the directionality and symmetry of violence – between the nobility and their officials towards peasants, and peasants towards manor officials. The passages referring to conflicts presented in this article (e.g. a fragment of a letter from peasants of the village of Cmolos to the emperor in 1804) undoubtedly highlight the peasant perspective. However, one should not be swayed solely by the persuasiveness of the complaints and thus exclude the possibility that, both in this specific example and in a broader spatial and temporal context,

the relations between peasants and manor officials were more symmetrical rather than one-sided. Acts of violence by manor officials against peasants, if reported to the state administration – regardless of whether conciliatory actions were taken or not – were generally recorded, while penalties for peasant aggression against officials were imposed immediately as part of the first-instance patrimonial (judicial) jurisdiction exercised by the nobility. These punishments could therefore be administered promptly, without formal documentation or referral to the state administration. What is more, the serf population in Galicia, which by the late 18th century had acquired procedural rights, including the ability to file complaints about noble abuses and violence, began to exercise these rights, submitting grievances and letters *en masse* to the imperial administration. The numerous preserved sources can thus reinforce a compelling image of peasants as the sole victims, being beaten and abused by the nobility. However, contemporary studies – such as those conducted by Marcin Kamler – support the conclusion that as early as the 17th century, it was the peasants who were responsible for up to 30% of acts of aggression against the nobility in the regions of Mazovia, Lesser Poland, and Greater Poland (Kamler 2020, p. 523–524).

What was, then, the image of post-feudal peasants? They could represent a kind of phenomenon, for in extremely hostile conditions (natural disasters, famine, lack of access to forests) they were able to adapt and take care of themselves and their families. Despite their lack of education and money, and their sense of inferiority in relation with landowners, they were able to develop coping strategies. They were able to consciously take decisions and actions based on their own hierarchy of values and moral principles. Moreover, they were proactive, not only hiding ‘in the shadows’, adapting to the new situation and not limiting themselves to defensive actions. They were also able to take the initiative in the official sphere: engaging in negotiations and bringing formal accusations before the courts.

NOTES

- 1 The full name Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria (commonly known as Galicia) referred to the southern territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which were part of the Habsburg monarchy as one of the crown provinces between 1772 and 1918.
- 2 Mutual hostility in relations between the manor and the village was a growing problem in the first half of the 19th century. Resentment and discontent against serfdom had its outlet in a bloody peasant uprising against the nobility in 1846, which is referred to in historiography as the ‘Galician Slaughter’. Rebellious peasant troops, led by the peasant Jakub Szela, rose up against the nobility preparing for a national uprising. Estimates suggest that up to a thousand people of noble origin may have been killed at the time. Most, however, were captured and hauled off to state offices and manors.

- 3 The term ‘common rights’ requires explanation from a legal point of view. It encompasses all rights to the use or usufruct of somebody else’s land, derived from the Latin definition of *servitutes praediorum*, functioning in the Polish lands. The rights existed in various relations between the owner of the property and the other party holding the right to use it, e.g. a parish, a manor, several villages, towns or individual persons. According to Polish lawyers and legal historians, the definition also referred to the whole range of peasants’ rights to use land belonging to landowners (manors), which operated under the system of serfdom.
- 4 Most of the source documentation on peasant testimonies and state forestry policy comes from the Central State Historical Archive of Ukraine in Lviv. Summaries and general statistics, however, from the Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv, Finanz- und Hofkammerarchiv).
- 5 For example: Leśna Wspólnota Gruntowo-Serwitutowa “Las” w Kamieniu, “Gaj” Wspólnota Gruntowa Wsi Wojaszówka, Wspólnota Gruntowa w Bielińcu, Lipnica’ Leśna Wspólnota Gruntowa Wsi, Leśna Wspólnota Gruntowo-Serwitutowa – Jeżowe, Leśna Wspólnota Gruntowo-Serwitutowa Wsi Raclawice; Leśna Wspólnota Gruntowa Wsi Markowizna; Leśna Wspólnota Gruntowa Tuszów Narodowy; Leśna Wspólnota Wsi Dzikowiec.
- 6 This effect was intensified by numerous natural disasters (floods, locusts, crop failures), epidemics and famines (e.g. in the years 1846–1847), which in the 19th century haunted Galicia like other parts of Europe.
- 7 In 1924, the novel *Chłopi* (Peasants) by Władysław Stanisław Reymont was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The justification emphasised above all the novel’s ‘outstanding national ethos’.
- 8 Such situations occurred, among others, in poviats located in the Carpathian belt with a high level of forest cover, such as Krosno, Jasło, Sanok, Turka, Nowy Sącz, Nowy Targ, Lesko, and Stryj. Tensions and antagonisms between the manor and the village (highlanders) were quite common in locations in the Tatra Mountains, e.g. Zakopane.
- 9 A list of people commonly known as ‘forest pests’, was drawn up based on Appendix ‘B’ of the Forestry Act 1852 for the protection and security of forests. Official reports were to be delivered to the district authorities on a monthly basis. However, the surviving source documentation indicates that, in practice, only some landowners complied with the recommendations of the Act.
- 10 Such plans were intensively introduced already in the 1860s. Forest management plans around the village of Moszczanica in the district of Żywiec or the village of Daszawa in the Stryj poviat.
- 11 Official correspondence between the provincial authorities and the individual poviats from 1871, indicates that crimes committed by the so-called ‘forest pests’ (i.e. the rural population) were treated leniently by the state authorities. According to provincial reports, a significant number of thefts were punished only with a reprimand.
- 12 In most cases (hearings) the peasants straightforwardly demanded a return to the *status quo*, i.e. the restoration of the old (feudal) laws and old customs.
- 13 Illiteracy in the Galician countryside was a common phenomenon.
- 14 The money needed at least to pay for a writer, an experienced forester and someone familiar with the legal procedures of the time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers whose valuable advice and suggestions helped me enhance and refine the article.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This article arose from the research project: ‘Entangled in common rights. The impact of conflicts over common rights and common lands on socio-economic changes in Western Galicia in the second half of the 19th century’, as part of the SONATA 16 competition (No. 2020/39/D/HS3/01298) funded by Poland’s National Science Centre.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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- Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv, Finanz- und Hofkammerarchiv) [hereafter: ÖS]
- AVA Inneres MdI Allgemein A 381–383.
- AVA Inneres MdI Allgemein Teil 2 A 343 (Grundentlastungen, Servituten, Tirol); A 341a (Grundentlastungen, Servituten, Salzburg (1900–1912); A 339a (Grundentlastungen, Servituten, Dalmatien, Kärnten); A 341 (Grundentlastungen, Servituten, Niederösterreich, Oberösterreich, Küstenland); A 342 (Grundentlastungen, Servituten, Steiermark); A 344 (Grundentlastungen, Servituten, Tirol); A 339b (Grundentlastungen, Servituten, Krain); A 384 (Grundentlastung, Servituten, Naturalleistungen-Ablösung, Kärnten-Krain); A 394 (Grundentlastung, Servituten, Naturalleistungen-Ablösung, Schlesien-Steiermark); A 383 (Grundentlastung, Servituten, Naturalleistungen-Ablösung, Galizien); AVA Verkehr Reg.v.EG SBG A 8.11 (Servituten-Ablösung, Hainisch, Wiener Neustadt).
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7310, 8753, 9073–9289, 10073–10277, 10297–10480, 11552, 11798.

corps 146/52, vol. 16, 22, 34.

corps 152/2, vol. 107.

corps 166/1, vol. 5390.

[Österreichisches] Strafgesetz über Verbrechen, Vergehen und Übertretungen mit Kundmachungs-Patent 1852.

‘Patent vom 3. December 1852, wirksam für die Kronländer Oesterreich unter und ob der Enns, Salzburg, Steiermark, Kärnthen, Krain, Görz, Gradiska, Istrien, Triest, Tirol und Vorarlberg, Böhmen, Mähren, Schlesien, Galizien mit Krakau und die Bukowina, wodurch für diese Kronländer ein neues Forstgesetz erlassen, und vom 1. Jänner 1853 angefangen in Wirksamkeit gesetzt wird’, in: *Allgemeines Landes-Gesetz- und Regierungs-Blatt für das Kronland Galizien und Lodomerien mit den Herzogthümern Auschwitz und Zator und dem Grossherzogthume Krakau*, Kaiserliches, Lemberg 1852.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Popek, J. (2025). How to Survive Without Commons? Conflicts Over Forests and Coping Strategies of the Poor in the Post-Feudal Period in the Northeastern Part of the Habsburg Empire. *International Journal of the Commons*, 19(1), pp. 359–380. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ijc.1554>

Submitted: 19 March 2025 **Accepted:** 06 August 2025 **Published:** 01 October 2025

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