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## Demolishing “the Dream of Might” of the Nobility of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, or on the Discussion Concerning the 1670 TV Show\*

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**ABSTRACT:** As the screenwriter of *1670*, Jakub Rużyłło, admitted, nobody expected such an enormous popularity of this Netflix show. In Poland, it gave rise to intense emotions, both negative and positive, and, as follows, discussions, also among history lovers and professional historians. In their Internet statements (both in the form of articles and comments on social media), some unhappy audience members point to factual errors in the show, others claim that this text slanders the history of the Commonwealth, while others still (who usually do not wonder about the reality of the 17th century society) are amused by *1670*. *1670* does contain historical truth, but we are frequently unable to find it, as school education, including Henryk Sienkiewicz’s *The Trilogy*, shaped an image of the Commonwealth in our minds that is focused on history of events, rather than everyday history; history pertaining to kings, military leaders, and not an average nobleman. And the latter – as the show’s creators depicted in a satirical, sometimes even grotesque manner – was not always a spotless knight, such as Jan Skrzetuski or Michał Wołodyjowski. However, the show’s critics view it through the lens of their own political views, which frequently involve perception of the past, for instance, idealizing the nobility (especially the Hussars) and the Catholic Church.

**KEYWORDS:** historical education, history in the media, popular culture, *1670* TV series, nobility, Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

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\* The article was written as part of the research subsidized by “National Program for the Development of Humanities” project no: NPRH/DN/SP/0146/2023/12; subsidy amount PLN 429 804,19

Emerging over the course of years, new media products not only encourage scholars to perceive their own study field in a different manner, but also increasingly force those academics to use audio-visual media as new opportunities to interpret and present the already conducted analyses (Hendrykowski 2000). Visual history points, on the one hand, “to the role that (audio)visual representations play in creating historical representations (imaginary visions of the past), becoming a kind of an alternative to academic historiography”, while, on the other, “to research methods useful in analyzing audio-visual representations of the past as relatively new – but equally important to written history – forms of reflection on the past and historical sources that demand new abilities concerning criticism and hermeneutics of media messages” (Skotarczak 2012: 188–189). Cinema is a particular kind of a case, as in the changing reality, film images have accompanied us for over 100 years. However, it ought to be kept in mind that not every visual representation of the past is a historical film<sup>1</sup>. Currently, enormous popularity is being enjoyed by shorter visual forms – TV shows. Contemporary societies shape their communal, social, cultural memory mainly due to media, including television, and thus also TV shows (Connerton 1989; Hoskins 2001: 333–334). Today, they are the forms that repeatedly shape the contemporary visions of the present, future and the past.

This is the foundation of the basic problem with the *1670* TV show. In order to attempt to analyze the discussion started by this production, I will begin with a fragment of one of many Internet statements on the subject:

What is the reason for making a film about “noble Poland” if it is not a film about the 17th century Poland, but, rather, about big city phobias of contemporary educated youth? The Baroque entourage is just a pretext. Just as well the action could be taking place among the 19th century Polish emigration or in a 1990s city block neighborhood inhabited by a typical “janusz” crowd from memes [“janusz” is a pejorative term describing a person displaying stereotypically negative features of Poles and their primitive behavior – J. O.]. One can say that this is supposed to be a universal story, a story about Poland, Poles and national defects. However, I have a strong impression that this isn’t supposed to be a reflection on our national vices, but a ridicule of everything that the right wing (or at least a part thereof) has been talking about with pride in the recent years. [...] The embarrassing level of *1670* is a result of a deep lack of understanding of Polishness which is only seen through a collection of memes, TikTok virals, mustached Hussars, cavalry marching on tanks and Papal cream-cakes, although in the case of the latter two elements I can’t even be sure if the creators behind the Netflix show know what I mean (Szczepańska 2023).

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<sup>1</sup> “A historical film [...] is a collective name, including various genealogical structures whose subject refers to the past, is supported by historical knowledge which, in connection with fiction results in a generalized image of the past, remaining within perceptive capabilities of a viewer equipped with particular historical awareness” (Machwitz 1983: 125).

This is what Anna Szczepańska wrote about the Netflix produced show in her article entitled, significantly, *Wielka i Śmieszna Polska Katolicka. Niepoprawne politycznie spojrzenie na „1670”* [*The Great and Ridiculous Catholic Poland. A Politically Incorrect Look at “1670”*]. Simultaneously, the article author decided that leftist audience members are in awe of the show. I will return to the political perspective on the reception of this hit show later in the article.

This statement confirms that the 1670 TV show gave rise to considerable emotions, upending the common outlook at the nobility of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, including one of its major and most recognizable symbols – the Hussars – as preserved in education starting with primary school, contaminated especially with Henryk Sienkiewicz’s *Trylogia* [*The Trilogy*], and subsequently, with its adaptations by Jerzy Hoffman. This was, above all, due to the fact that we had become used to presenting the history of early modern Poland as the history of the 17th century wars: with the Cossacks (in *Ogniem i mieczem* [*With Fire and Sword*]), with Swedes (in *Potop* [*The Deluge*]), with Turks (in *Pan Wołodyjowski* [*Sir Wołodyjowski*]). Grounded in the reality of grand history – history of events, kings, great leaders – it presented knights with flawless character who are able to put their lives at risk, or even sacrifice them, for the Homeland, honor and God. This idealized image of unconquerable Hussars, together with the idyll of a noble manor straight out of another great writer’s work – Adam Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz* – constitutes the symbol of Polishness for a part of our society.

Not all nobles were such perfect knights: they were reluctant to take part in mass levy (as king Jan Kazimierz himself complains in the movie/TV series version of *Ogniem i mieczem*). Landed nobility preferred to look after their larger or smaller wealth, take care of the crops that ensured their living, protect their estates from being destroyed. Indeed, it is difficult to define who an average noble was given the varied noble stratum. If we use data, the largest group was the *szlachta zagrodowa/zaściankowa* (petty nobility: croft/village owners) and the so-called *częstkowa szlachta* (partial nobility) who, in addition to their own land, owned other small pieces of a village, usually one or two peasant households (Markiewicz 2004: 141). This is the standardized and, obviously, very simplified image of an average noble that was presented in 1670. The daily life of a noble and his problems are shown in this production in opposition to grand history – in the village of Adamczycha, history happens slowly and it is of a different caliber than great events recorded in the pages of school and academic books.

And here appears the first problem with how professional historians – especially those concerned with political and military history (that is, history taught in Polish schools) view the show. This is evidenced by both shorter and longer statements regarding the show. For instance, one of articles in “*Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*” was entitled „1670”. *Jaki naprawdę to był rok? [1670. What Year Was That Really?]* (Krajewski 2024). Similarly, a scholar of 17th century military history, Zbigniew Hundert talked about the historical reality of the era in the pop-

ular podcast *Sigillum Authenticum* (*Sigillum Authenticum* 2024). There is a reason why I refer to the historical reality with the word “era” and not “the year 1670”. Indeed, this year has not been chosen accidentally by the creators: we will learn nothing about it from the pages of history books. Meanwhile, historians and journalists, talking about the show reality, discuss the consequences of long years of war (especially the just ended war with Turkey), the 1669 election of Michał Korybut Wiśniowiecki to the throne, the breaking of his Coronation Sejm, etc. Thus, they focus on the grand history, while the creators had a different idea for the series. This needs to be stated openly (and repeated every time we talk with someone not well familiar with the era’s reality): this is not a document, it is not even a historical TV series, so one should not look for historical truth here. However, this is not to say there is no historical truth in 1670, which I will return to in a minute. Firstly, however, let us reflect on why this series divided society, especially historians and/or lovers of our history, so much?

Obviously, not everyone will enjoy satire, grotesque, sense of humor resembling that of Monty Python productions; these have a particular group of fans in the land by the Vistula river as a majority of the Catholic – at least nominally – Polish society still does not accept film classics such as *The Life of Brian*. And to a large degree, this form has overshadowed for some audience members, including historians, the most important – in my opinion – positive result of this show: the early modern era has become talked about, in a dimension that had previously been lacking. Popular, or even mass culture, is aimed at a much wider audience than high culture, and as a result, some viewers started seeking information on the history of early modern Poland, but it was a different kind of information than that obtained during school education. Historians (or history lovers) – experts on the era – criticize the show, looking for historical errors. At the same time, they forget that there are no films, TV shows or books devoid of errors, what is more: there are people who specialize in finding such mistakes. A more serious complaint of the lovers of the modern Commonwealth history is the claim that 1670 is an anti-Polish show, which slanders national history and our ancestors – the nobility (sidestepping the issue that the majority of Poles have peasant roots, as nobility constituted about 8% of the Polish-Lithuanian state; Zajączkowski 1993: 10). Such opinions regarding the Netflix production, one of which was quoted in the beginning of the article, appear frequently – especially on social media. This is, however, only one side of the coin. The other consists in articles entitled, for instance, *Szlachcicem być – i basta! Dlaczego nie mamy problemu z tym, że serial „1670” śmieje się z Polski i Polaków [To Be Noble – and That’s It! Why It Isn’t a Problem that 1670 Makes Fun of Poland and Poles]* (Barańska 2023), which is not true, because there are some for whom it is a problem, as confirmed by the earlier quote from Anna Szczepańska.

As Robert A. Rosenstone wrote about the attitude of historians towards cinema – especially films depicting the historical period that the given scholar of the past is an expert in:

For an academic historian to become involved in the world of motion pictures is at once an exhilarating and disturbing experience. Exhilarating for all the obvious reason: the power of the visual media; the opportunity to emerge from the lonely depths of the library to join with other beings in a common enterprise; the delicious thought of a potentially large audience for the fruits of one’s research, analysis, and writing. Disturbing for equally obvious reason: no matter how serious or honest the filmmakers, and no matter how deeply committed they are rendering the subjects faithfully, the history that finally appears on the screen can never fully satisfy the historian as historian (although it may satisfy the historian as filmgoer) (Rosenstone 1988: 1173).

As I have mentioned, some historians complain about the unsuccessful – in their opinion – representation of the history of the era (Adamkiewicz 2023). Conversely, the show’s producer, Jan Kwieciński, stated that

We wanted to create a fairly symbolic world, based in facts, but not stuck to these facts. The world presented on the show is supposed to reflect the historical knowledge of an average citizen [...] We weren’t very interested in details of the voting process during a noblemen’s assembly. There was an assembly, there was *liberum veto* and this was enough for us to make an episode. We take those facts that fit our convention (Anagnostopulu 2024).

And in my opinion, they do so magnificently – both in terms of situations and main characters. I will focus on the nobility. Despite it being depicted in an exaggerated, satiric, grotesque manner, it is still a depiction of modern noble brothers – or, rather: models that should be legible for most contemporary audience members – that follows historical truth. Would it be then possible to find (or even popularize) historical knowledge in this show, which presents, as it has been aptly termed, “historical contemporaneity” (Horbacz 2024)? Especially given the fact that heretofore film and TV productions on the subject of noble culture of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth may turn out to be inaccessible, or even – let us not shy away from this word – boring for the contemporary youth (Orzeł 2013). The key issue is, obviously, the assumption that films are not “a pure reconstruction of historical facts, but their visual interpretation within the script, utilizing various tools, that is, music, light, acting – always set in a certain genre” (Techmańska 2016: 22). Finally, they are a director’s and/or the producers’ own particular vision of the past. Over 40 years ago, Marc Ferro, a representative of another generation of the “Annales” school, researcher of connections between history and cinematography, claimed that

After all, a film [or a TV show] is nothing more than an event, an anecdote, fiction, information subject to censorship or a chronicle, which

puts winter fashion and death in the summer at the same level. What would new history do with that. On the one hand, a film [or a TV show], on the level of an image, seems to capture events, on the other – [it] gives the impression of manipulation in all meanings of this word (Ferro 1974: 239–240).

What historical reality has been depicted in the right, if anecdotal manner, in 1670? It is impossible not to begin with the figure of Jan Paweł Adamczewski, who will not become the most famous Jan Paweł in Polish history. But why should he not dream about it? The political system of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth allowed for a nobleman to become the king of Poland, as proven in 1669 by Michał Wiśniowiecki, and, after all, it is during his rule that 1670 takes place. If Wiśniowiecki could have been elected the monarch, why should Jan Paweł Adamczewski not be? Admittedly, Korybut became king in particular circumstances: due to the fame of his father Jeremi's military achievements, due to commendable (if made up) genealogy, referring to the Jagiellons themselves, as well as due to the noble society being somewhat tired with foreign rulers. This enormous role played by genealogy in noble society is also wonderfully articulated by Jan Paweł Adamczewski. It is thanks to an ancestor – as the show's protagonist claims – he was “lucky to have been born into nobility here in Poland” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023a). Similarly, the following statement sounds mocking, and yet how genuine, when Adamczewski mentions that “I didn't get a free ride, you know. I inherited all this myself” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023a). Especially the noble title. Indeed, the 17th and 18th century saw lively debates concerning nobility inherited due to one's blood instead of due to achievements or virtues, and not only in the area of the Commonwealth (Donati 1995). Sometimes nobility was the only wealth (even if immaterial) that one could boast. And, in fact, one was lucky to be a member of nobility at the time of the Commonwealth, even if a poor one: other social strata could not even dream about the nobility's rights.

To a large degree, the Adamczewski family carries out an Old Polish model. The eldest son (Stanisław) is the heir, while the second (Jakub) is destined for priesthood. The show presents this as a reason for pride, but in reality, church career was dictated by the small acreage of land to be divided between sons. Nonetheless, sons were the pride of noble family, as only they could ensure the continuity of the family. This will be Stanisław's responsibility. His parents are thus terrified when he chases after a town woman, as for the Adamczewski family (and in the Old Polish society a family was more important than an individual) such a relationship would mean downgrading in social hierarchy. Jan Paweł Adamczewski's less likely – if not naive – dream than becoming a king is marrying his daughter Aniela to a magnate's daughter. Starting with the second half of the 17th century magnates increased the pace of consolidating their wealth and positions, gradually limiting access, in order to become practically unavailable to the rest of nobility in the following century. One cannot forget

Zofia – Jan Paweł’s wife (although he almost forgets her while introducing his family in the first episode of the show). She fulfills roles typical for a 17th century noblewoman: she is a wife and a mother, but, above all, a God-fearing (if not to say, devote) Catholic, who could make *memento mori* into her life motto. This kind of exalted but superficial piousness, since the second half of the 17th century closely connected with the triumph of Catholicism after the Counter-Reformation, was frequently the object of puzzlement for foreigners visiting the Commonwealth. As the Frenchman Gaspard de Tende, having arrived in the early 1660s in the land at the Vistula shore, wrote about this phenomenon: “Le Polonois patoissent fort dévots. Ils donnent beaucoup aux Églises. Mais ils ne donnent pas asses aux pauvres, & n’ont pas asses de soin de leurs valets quand ils sont malades. Ils prient Dieu presque tout haut à l’Église” (Tende 1697: 306) (“The Polish people seem strongly pietist. They donate a lot to the Church. But they do not donate enough to the poor and do not take enough care of their servants when they are ill. They pray to God almost out loud at Church”). And if we talk about Zofia, we also need to mention her brother, the participant “of some of the most notorious defeats in the history of our army, in the past decade”, that is, Bogdan, “a sixth-generation pure-blooded nobleman, with no land, temporarily” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023a). Additionally, this grotesquely portrayed Hussar, representative of *gołota* (barefoot, or landless, nobility) represents an approach to the Polish-Lithuanian union, as well as to other nations in general, that was accurate for a large part of the Old Polish society. On the one hand, we can treat it as xenophobia increasing in Commonwealth society, as admitted by Bogdan himself, although in a very particular manner: “I’m not a racist [...] but Poles are just such superior beings”, after which he adds, “And Lithuanians. They’re pretty good too” (Buchwald, Kądziela 2023b). Here, we touch upon another issue, because this does not pertain to xenophobia towards the Lithuanians as such. The problem is much more serious: despite the unions – first the personal one in Krewo in 1385, then the real union in Lublin in 1569, despite the increasing Polonization of the Lithuanian nobility manifested in assuming the Polish language or the political culture of the Crown nobility, the Lithuanians were not always treated in the same manner as the Crown Poles (sometimes the former even consciously separated themselves from the latter). After all: even today, do Poles not frequently simplify the period of the Commonwealth, talking about Polish history, and, in a way, forgetting about Lithuania as the second part of our common state?

Since we mention the characters on the show, one of the Internet articles contained the thought that the most important character are Polish vices, that the show is a mirror in which we can look to see the truth about ourselves (Barańska 2023). Obviously, not everyone will want to see it. It is worth quoting Joanna Barańska’s reflections here:

I wonder how 1670 will influence the belief, fairly common in our country, that the majority of us are descendants of nobility described by

Sienkiewicz in *Trylogia* – as evidenced by the numerous houses with columns, imitating a manor and found all over Poland. What is the source of this pride? What is so elevated about Jan Paweł and other litigants and spongers of his ilk? Let's go further. What will those who tattoo Hussar wings [on their bodies] think about Jan Paweł's brother-in-law, Bogdan, who is brave but not particularly thoughtful? Will they laugh or will they be angry, because Bogdan and his wings ridicule the figure of a Polish warrior? And finally – what about the fact that the smartest person in the farm is a peasant, and a Lithuanian at that (perhaps that is why Maciej rarely expresses his criticism towards nobility openly – after all, only a Pole can criticize a Pole out loud, right?) (Barańska 2023).

Jan Kwiecieński, a *1670* producer, confirmed in an interview that the goal of the series was to start a discussion “about Poland and about how we perceive ourselves” (Anagnostopulu 2024), although he admitted that the show created a sensation mainly due to the political climate in the country at the time. Similar statements were made by the screenwriter, Jakub Rużyłło:

We undoubtedly found a right moment and some kind of a lively need in the nation. It is easy to speculate as to the reason after the fact, but the truth is that we completely didn't expect our show to be so successful. For some time we bounced around various decision-makers with the text of *1670*. While they usually highly assessed its literary value, they claimed that a costume film about nobility will not interest the audience, especially its young members. Then a complete reverse happened. We have definitely benefited from the folk turn in literature. *Fantomowe ciało króla* [by Jakub Sowa] was [published] in advance of interest in peasant history, and I wrote the script to *1670* concurrently to the publication of subsequent books on this subject. These were very helpful sources. We all have noble myths and stories in our cultural code, but due to the folk turn the way this social stratum is perceived has changed, we left behind the 1990s paradigm. On this ground was born the need to laugh at our noble past. And this is when we appeared with our TV show (Marzec 2024).

Above all, historians talking about the show were connected with the recently popular subject of folk history, as, for instance, Kacper Pobłocki (Marzec 2024). While they did not officially comment often on the series, they were divided in their opinions in private conversations. Some complained of the not very intelligent, or even “painfully embarrassing” sense of humor (Szczepańska 2023). And here I will go back to the beginning of the article. It seems that the way the show is received – also on the part of scholars professionally concerned with modern history – is, for the most part, a result of our political views. Indeed, none of us is objective in assessing or describing the issues we have

been studying for so many years. Meanwhile, the “historical contemporaneity” of the show conducts a revolution, although one can also encounter positive opinions of people of more conservative worldviews:

this production takes shots at everyone, in the form of gentle grotesque, rather than sophisticated pastiche. It laughs at the expense of the fundamentalist national-conservative side and its accretions and vices, but also at Aniela’s naive belief in change of habits and her pro-ecological activities. We can also find criticism of a neo-liberal system in which peasants are similar to employees of a great corporation, and what is important is the result at all costs. However, going back to the Sarmatian imaginary world of 1670: one can laugh, but keeping it at arm’s length. It is not necessary to see danger and attack on traditional values in every production of this kind. And yet, when I see the malicious remarks of some people who want to see elements ridiculing and criticizing a more traditional Poland in this show, I have the sense of unfairness and of instrumental use of a work of culture. Additionally, it is worth reflecting whether this spirit of reception does not enforce, by the means of 1670, a culture of humiliation and boosting one’s self esteem because there is “backwater” and I am the enlightened city person who knows French. Without adding ideology, one can smile at this show, even if their sensitivity is conservative (Horbacz 2024).

Once again, 1670 proves that a considerable part of contemporary society, including historians, cannot maintain detachment towards the history of our homeland, especially since historical politics has been instrumentally used by the most important people in the country for many years. One should agree with Piotr Zaremba’s opinion that 1670 is the essence of Polishness, not due to what it presents, though, but, rather, because to a large degree it divided Poles into two fighting camps (Zaremba 2024). Indeed, as Jacek Szymala aptly noted, “every film tells us more about the times it was created in than about those it depicts” (Szymala 2016: 9). Therefore, a comedy show should not be treated as historical one, but as a product of contemporary times – a visual text that talks about attitude towards history, one that co-creates this history. 1670 says a lot about contemporary Poles, including the fact that as people, we differ little from modern nobles, or that some of us do not agree for the romantic vision of a mighty Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to be destroyed. Historians must face new visions of the past that dominate in visual media narrations (Hoskins 2001), take up reasonable discussion with those, and, preferably, make use of their popularity to educate society: both about the past that is gone and the past that we still carry within us.

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