

Aristocracy and education in Europe from the late 18th to the 20th centuries

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EDITORIAL

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Social history oriented investigations represent a peculiar field in research regarding the history of education – emphasizing the socially determined nature of education. For example, they explore the participation and successfulness of individual social strata in the education system.

The present thematic issue focuses specifically on education concerning members of the high nobility in a few chosen European countries. These researches gain a remarkably great significance due to the fact that in the former Socialist countries, for ideological and political reasons, this subject was not or only barely discussed. Since the 1980s, and especially after the Revolutions of 1989, educational historiography has been trying to make up for this laggardness – especially valid for the 19th and 20th centuries. To mention just a few examples: in Hungary, Virág analysed the education of aristocratic men and women in the 18th and 19th centuries in her book that grew out of a doctoral dissertation (Virág, 2013). She specifically dwells on the career of tutors employed in the castles, including their relationship to the students and their parents. Furthermore, Virág dealt with the debate that sprung up around the advantages and disadvantages of private versus public education. With regard to Russia, Solodyankina's oeuvre deserves a mention; she analysed numerous aspects of the subject, such as language teaching, the role of the grand tour, choosing governesses, and their work methods (Solodyankina, 2017, 2018).

Country studies regarding the discussed time period were also completed in relation to Southern and Western Europe. Non-exhaustively, let us mention the thematic issue of the Spanish journal of the history of education *Espacio, Tiempo y Educación*, published in 2019 (vol. 6, no. 2) and dedicated to the education of the elite, titled *Society, Education and Elites in Europe during the 19th and 20th Centuries*. In this issue, several writings featured that also discussed the traditional elite, that is: the aristocrats. Esteban Ochoa de Eribe (2019) wrote about the language acquisition of the 18th century Basque elite. Artola Renedo, Bermejo Mangas, and

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Chaparro Sainz (2019) analysed the institutions based on training the upcoming generation of military and political leaders, applying the method of prosopography. Imízcoz (2019) also dealt with the education of Basque and Navarran aristocracy – deliberating, besides the Bourbon-reforms – among others – on the significance of French schools and foreign study tours. Several authors examined the role of Jesuits in educating the elite, including the high nobility: Guasti (2019) regarding Italy, and O’Neill (2019) with respect to Ireland.

In the present thematic issue, countries under the leadership of Habsburg rulers (Tuscany, Croatia and Slavonia, as well as Hungary) will be analysed. The authors partly or entirely focus on girls’ education. For this reason, Winkelhofen’s book is worth mentioning; she compared the life careers of aristocratic women living in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, in the course of which she introduced their childhood and youth, as well. She also expounded on education, its circumstances and contents (2009, pp. 11–37).

Thus, the research problem features in international literature. Comparative studies have also been created in this subject matter. For example, Wasson examined the education of European aristocracy in terms of preserving power and wealth, supporting his train of thought with examples taken from numerous countries. He also refuted widely accepted views. For example, Wasson argued that introducing the meritocratic examination system did not further the decadence of aristocratic culture. In his opinion, aristocracy continued to afford quality education, remaining the most highly educated rank of society; therefore, they had better chances at making progress than the other classes (Wasson, 2006, p. 138).

Likewise in the framework of a comparative research, Lieven analysed the aristocracy’s education and culture, bringing up English, German, and Russian examples, and – now only mentioning one insight – he argued that because of better socialization or choosing their career, the elite preferred state-run schools (Lieven, 1992, pp. 161–177).

Out of the German literature, the theory of “Obenbleiben” (that is, stay on top) is worth highlighting prominently. According to this, European nobility, especially its upper stratum, did their best to stay at the peak of the social hierarchy. They endeavoured to preserve their social legitimacy (Braun, 1990, pp. 87–95; Conze, 2005, pp. 187–188). In our opinion, in order to “Obenbleiben”, their aim was not only to maintain social influence through wealth, political positions, and posts, but also in order to achieve these, obtain a special knowledge, acquire an attitude and behavior. Thanks to this, they managed to remain a model for an extended time for other social strata, as well. Education thus contributed to preserving their identity. Besides the theoretical writings, numerous social history-oriented works were composed by German authors regarding the aristocrats that also dwelt on the subjects of family life and/or education. (cf. Demel, Schraut, 2014; Menning, 2014; Wienfort, 2005, 2007).

But why is the research subject examined in the present journal issue important for educational historiography? As a result of the Enlightenment, an actual social transformation began and unfolded. Under the aegis of “Liberté, égalité, fraternité”, birthrights were eliminated, and a legal act declared equality before the law. All this entailed the change of the old social system, with civil society taking its place. Wealth and income increasingly determined the place of individuals in society, instead of inherited privileges. Parallel with this, knowledge and education gained value.

For individual countries, the pace and volume of transformation varied. Regarding some, certain typical characteristics of the old social structure temporarily remained. For example, bearing inherited (high) nobility titles was permitted, and even granting new titles occurred.



These continued to mean a social rank. Due to their higher prestige, typically large fortune and political privileges, high nobility stood in a more advantageous position in this aspect than did average nobility. However, the formal and informal privileges that accompanied the title gradually disappeared.

The question is: to what an extent did their education contribute to preserving their positions – at least temporarily? Did knowledge and good behavior help them stay on top of the social hierarchy? This is the key question in the present journal issue. Along what ideals and values did the nobility raise their children? Which locations served as the scenes of education: their home or schools? If it took place in their home, according to what aspects did they choose the home tutors (or governesses in the case of girls)? What content elements did their studies have? Did a difference exist between boys' and girls' education? These constituted the research questions that we delineated preliminarily, and out of which the authors answered one or the other in their studies.

In the present thematic issue, we publish four studies. All of them were completed via the traditional method of historic research: they are based on primary sources, which the authors analysed using the already published literature. Among the primary sources, personal narratives dominate. The researched period spans from the end of the 18th century to the first half of the 20th century. Iveljić scanned the largest part of the whole period (1790–1918), Virág (1790–1848) and Sani (first half of the 19th century) surveyed the first half, and Rébay perused the second half (from the 1860s until 1947). The studies focus on individual European countries: Iveljić deals with Croatia and Slavonia, Sani describes Tuscany, while Virág and Rébay inspect Hungary.

The subject's most significant Hungarian researcher, the already mentioned Irén Virág – whose study was first published online as early as June 2023, but who tragically didn't live to witness the birth of the complete issue, since after a long and determined struggle with her illness, she passed away in September 2023, at the age of 51 – examined the educational peculiarities that formed the basis for Hungarian aristocrats' education. Summarizing her results¹ reaching back several decades, based on a sample consisting of 141 family members belonging to 33 families, she pointed out that it was a foreign governess or nanny who first managed the children's education, the main goal being to acquire foreign languages. Hungarian national spirit, Hungarian language and culture, obtained a stronger emphasis in the boys' education from the 1820s. Parents also joined into this process, with some of them elaborating their own educational programs. Reaching school age – adapting to Locke's concept – the boys continued their studies privately under the leadership of an educator or home tutor for whom the position meant a temporary employment, usually as a means of financing their further studies. These people were hired for a defined time after determining a previously fixed remuneration and obligations (such as meeting the parents' expectations, regularly briefing the parents). The boys also mostly completed their secondary studies privately, or possibly as students in one or more boarding school(s). Catholics preferred secondary schools run by religious orders (Piarist, Benedictine), while Protestants opted for more significant school centers (such as the boarding school at Sárospatak, Debrecen, Kolozsvár [Cluj], or Nagyenyed

¹She published her research results not only in Hungarian but also in German (see Virág, 2007a, 2007b). In the last decade, her interest turned towards the pedagogy of philanthropism and its influences in Hungary.



[Aiud]). They completed their compulsory study material with elements of knightly education – arts and sports. Later, as a rule, they pursued philosophical, then mostly legal studies, at times abroad, typically within the framework of a grand tour. The orientation and philosophy of their education was primarily determined by family traditions and individual skills.

The knowledge of foreign languages and foreign culture (mostly German and French) shifted even more to the foreground for the girls of aristocratic families. In their case, home schooling was also completed frequently with foreign-language studies, in a foreign spirit, often in foreign educational institutions. They never learned Hungarian or only at an older age. The first institution with a markedly national spirit was established for them only in 1846. Arts also served as determining elements of their education.

Filippo Sani analysed the history of distinguished educational institutes for girls in the territory of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany during the first half of the 19th century. Due to the reforms implemented by Leopold II, the Holy Roman emperor, who was the grand duke of Tuscany by the name of Peter Leopold between 1747 and 1797, schools run by religious orders gained an important role in girls' education. These institutions, in spite of being closed as a result of the Enlightenment, began growing in number again from the 1810s. Their target group and thus, the study contents and the tuition fees, varied. Institutes chosen (also) by the most distinguished Tuscan and even foreign nobility and high nobility, the “conservatories” (such as the *Istituto della SS. Annunziata* [Florence] or the *Conservatorio di S. Raimondo* [Siena]) placed a great emphasis on religious education. Girls stood under strict supervision in order to preserve impeccable morals. The aim was to prepare them for family life. Besides needlework, they also devoted much time to arts, since they deemed these skills suitable to develop the girls' personalities to meet the target established for them and improve their marriage chances. Furthermore, they studied subjects by means of which they could enrich their overall education. Their study material thus possessed a number of elements that were different from parallel boys' schools: it was more diverse and adapted to different roles in society.

Iskra Iveljić analysed the education of Croatian and Slavonian aristocracy from the end of the 18th century until 1918. In her opinion, high nobility also had to react to the social changes launched by the Enlightenment if they did not want to remain left behind. Namely, educational modernisation offered the chance of social elevation, an opportunity to acquire elite positions for lower social strata. Therefore, aristocracy transformed their educational strategy, striving towards a formal education of a higher degree than before. Thus, from the end of the 18th century, increasingly more men pursued academic-level legal studies. Nineteenth century processes, however, rather reflected a kind of conservative outlook. Their interest in natural science, medical, technical and agrarian training did not increase even by the end of the century. On the lower levels of education, they even had to take an ever-growing competition into account, so their representation proportionally decreased considerably. On top of this, they were less dependent on scholarships, which negatively affected their successful performance. Nevertheless, their education remained fairly diverse, including the knowledge of foreign languages and arts. They deemed these skills as the conditions for preserving their socially elite position. Variegated education, however, did not allow for them to become experts in any individual field, which began burgeoning into a disadvantage for them in the modern world.

Croatian and Slavonian girls' education in aristocratic families differed from that of the boys. Private tutors first taught these girls at home; their subjects included religion, literature, history, foreign languages and arts. From their adolescence onwards, many of them studied in boarding



schools run by religious orders. Similarly to Tuscany, strict education based on religious morals was considered extremely important in their case. Besides the institutions of female religious orders that had been founded earlier (such as the Salesian Sisters' Vienna institute), numerous new ones were established as well, among which the schools maintained by the *Dames du Sacré Coeur* and *Congrégation de Notre-Dame de Sion* were especially sought after in these social strata. In academic education, however, which opened up for women at the end of the century, they were initially barely represented.

Magdolna Rébay also examined the education of girls belonging to high nobility, focusing on the period starting from the 1860s until the elimination of nobility titles (1947) based on subjective sources, primarily memoirs. Girls' education mainly targeted preparing for marriage: they had to master the skills necessary for an advantageous marriage matching their rank. Great emphasis was placed on moral education, good manners, and becoming behaviour. The girls moved around in their own social circle, standing under constant supervision. The families hired nursemaids to care for the infants, then entrusted them to nannies, governesses, or often home tutors. The parents themselves chose the individuals caring for their children, and these educators' work progressed according to parental instructions, under parental control. Intergenerational relationships generally became more informal and intimate by the 20th century – which of course varied depending on the family. However, they continued to insist on keeping the rules. In the 19th century – with a few exceptions – the family home provided the educational scene. Mother-tongue-level foreign language command remained a primary task for girls. Therefore, depending on their financial situation, the families hired German, French and/or English governesses to care for them. There were some girls who even learned Italian. They all acquired the Hungarian language, as well. As for the school subjects, the girls learned them in Hungarian almost without an exception. Physical exercise, sport and practical skills weren't lacking from their education, either.

Later, following World War I, increasingly more girls of high nobility attended schools already at primary level, and the duration of formal education extended more and more. The girls continued their education in secondary schools in Hungary or abroad, with increasingly more of them completing their Matura exams or acquiring a Language Master certificate, and some of them even participating in professional training. They also attended arts at home, guided by a private tutor; then later, in case of a further interest and talent, in school. Occasional examples exist for university studies, as well, although these are rather scarce in number. Typically, they did not work, the acquired school grades serving more as a safeguard for threatening bad times to come.

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