

HISTORY OF THE POLISH-LITHUANIAN COMMONWEALTH  
1453-1795

IN THE SHADOW OF THE GREAT POWERS

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries cast a long shadow over the political historiography of Europe. Historians often search for earlier precedents for the accidents of nineteenth century political geography. The "national" interests of sixteenth- or seventeenth-century states are often defined, unconsciously in most cases, in terms of the geographic entities of the nineteenth century. The general histories of Europe examine the parameters of states and of action in light of the great power structure of modern times.

This approach has many inconveniences, not least of which is that it plays fast and loose with the historical record. While three of the nineteenth century powers, i.e., Austria, France and England, had played a major role in European politics for many centuries, the other two, Russia and Prussia, were of much more recent vintage. Their absence from the center stage of European politics leaves a gaping power vacuum in northeast Europe, one that can only be filled by abandoning the mindset of the nineteenth century.

From the middle ages, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – not Russia or Prussia – was the great power of northeastern Europe. This remarkable state, which was the largest republic on a continental scale after Rome and before the United States, dominated the politics of the region from the early fifteenth century until the late seventeenth, yet it is rarely mentioned in general treatments of European history and its development remains obscure to almost all American students, and often even scholars.

The contemporary consequences of state development in early modern northeastern Europe can be seen in the current nationality problems at the western edge of the Soviet Union. The Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Bielorussians were all part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Poles have a long tradition of political and cultural influence in the region. The current uncertainty in the area can only be understood by examining the long-term development of its political and cultural traditions: an exclusive concentration on the nineteenth

century, in many ways atypical rather than normative, can be extremely misleading.

The absence of serious monographs on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that is so characteristic of Western historiography has been reinforced by a very slanted selection of articles and monographs translated from Polish. Polish historians, particularly those of the Krakow school reacting to the blow of the Partitions of the late eighteenth century, tend to be hypercritical of the Commonwealth's history and culture. They regard the history of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries as an unbroken chain of failed monarchical reforms, the success of which they are prone to judge as the sine qua non of a successful state. My own research on the republican nature of the Commonwealth's institutions and culture links up with the much less popular Warsaw school that claims the great historians Joachim Lelewel and Tadeusz Korzon as its founders.

#### POLITICAL THEORY AND STRUCTURES

By concentrating on the progress of parliamentarism, republican theories and the mixed form of government, as well as on the multi-national, multi-religious and multi-cultural character of Poland-Lithuania, we can see how the seventeenth century observations (e.g., the writings of Bernard Connor, an Irish physician to the Polish court) on the mixed form of government were later discarded by Polish historiography. That historiography continues to present the Commonwealth in terms of a noble democracy steadily degenerating into oligarchy. The *szlachta* in general and the magnates in particular have become, for most Polish historians, the scapegoat for all of Poland's subsequent economic, social, and political ills, the ultimate cause of the collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian state.

The government of the Commonwealth amounted to a viable model of *forma mixta*, in that it combined elements of monarchy, aristocracy (the Senate), and democracy (the Commons). Three different political "camps" or "parties" supported the representatives of monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy, respectively. Democracy was championed by direct republicanism, which was based in the county *sejmiki* (county councils); constitutionalism was supported by those active on the higher levels of the state administration; and monarchism focused on the king and some of his followers in the Senate, court, army, and administration.

The constitutionalists, the king, and the republicans were caught up in an unending struggle over the ultimate source of power in the Commonwealth. In the name of the fatherland, law, and liberty, the constitutionalists sought to win the support of the counties in order to gain control of the government. Their drive to strengthen the government was consistently viewed with scepticism by the masses of county *szlachta*, who did not consider any institution of the Central government (including the Commons) representative of their interests.

Clashes at the county level between constitutionalists and republicans have not yet been researched. The fact that both constitutionalists and republicans held seats in the Senate, yet competed on the county level, demonstrates once again that neither group had control over any one institution. In neither group can we discern any clearly differentiated social groupings that hold true for all the territories of the state. In order to identify the social basis for these two tendencies, it is essential to analyze the enormous economic and cultural disparities that existed among the *szlachta* of the Polish Crown and to describe the rather formidable differences in the *de facto* political status of the *szlachta* of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Ukraine.

Poland-Lithuania was not a state with a strong constitutional order and a government founded upon a parliament, but a state based on the ardent adherence of its citizens to a constitution and the power of county councils capable, with the support of armed confederations, of ruling not only alongside but even in opposition to the king and his ministers. A reexamination of the second half of the eighteenth century is particularly relevant to a better understanding of the popularity of republicanism as political theory in Poland and Western Europe.

What Polish republicanism lacked was not theory, but a broadly based social participation. When the rights and privileges of the noble citizenry were extended to the urban burghers and even the peasants (during the Kościuszko Uprising of 1794), then "finis Poloniae" was heralded by the invading armies of the neighboring absolutist states. The rulers of these same states had since the seventeenth century been carefully buffering their subjects from the "deadly Polish sickness" that was infecting Prussians, Ukrainians and Russians and that was known as *libertas*.

#### DISTORTION OF A COMMON LEGACY

The Poles were not successful in defending their multi-national empire. They were more successful, however, in developing another form of imperialism:

they claimed for themselves the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Religious tolerance, *paradise iudeorum*, universities and colleges, literature and science, victories and heroic uprisings were all transformed by the pens of nineteenth and twentieth century historians into Polish achievements. Social uprisings, endemic banditry and a separatist culture were all ascribed to the Ukrainians (e.g., Khmielnitsky, but not Kisiel or Ostrogsky) the Lithuanians and the Bielorussians.

In an attempt to break with Poland, the historians of Lithuania, the Ukraine, and Bielorussia have adopted a similar attitude by selectively acknowledging as their own heritage separatist movements, social uprisings, and any indications of the alienation of the "exploited masses" of the local population from the state. They have adamantly denied the accomplishments of the state and culture that their peoples built and defended together with the Poles. Such an attitude is understandable during periods when nationalist feelings are running high, as for example when threatened by Polish nationalism but is not, however, amenable for evaluating the history of a state that was not, in contrast with its twentieth century namesake, built on the premise of a dominant nationality. It seems to me that it is time to balance our assessment of the Commonwealth. After all, the national movements of Ukrainians and Lithuanians of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, fighting for independence and rejecting any bonds to Russia, the Soviet Union or to ethnic Poland, used the Commonwealth tradition of *libertas et leges* for promoting their own individual, corporative, religious, and national interests.

The culture of the Renaissance, the Baroque, universities (at Kiev and Vilnius), multi-lingual publishing houses, parliamentarism, and the execution of laws movement, county self-government and city self-government: all these composite elements of the Commonwealth were created and fought for by the different nationalities of Poland-Lithuania. All together they constitute, despite protestations by modern day scholars, the national heritage of all these peoples. Not only the people of the borderlands of western civilization but their history as well needs to be freed from Polish and Russian hegemony.

A little known incident that took place in Vitebsk – renown as the birthplace of Chagall – will illustrate my point. In 1654, the town of Vitebsk was besieged by the Moscovite armies launching a grand scale invasion of the Commonwealth. After an entrenched four-month defense, led by the Bielorussian burghers with the aid of the local nobility and the Jewish community, the town was forced to capitulate. The conditions of surrender were not honored by the invaders: scores of townspeople were taken prisoner and deported to Russia. Some of the nobles and Jews were taken to Kazan. During their captivity, the

nobles signed a testimony attesting to the bravery of the Jews in defending the town fortress and ramparts and their commitment to the security of their common fatherland, the Polish-Lithuanian Republic.

The defense of Vitebsk was not an isolated incident. Though the Russians perceived of themselves as the liberators of the Orthodox population from the Polish Catholic oppressors, many of the citizens of Bielorussia defended themselves from these liberators, in one case for over two years (Old Bychow). The defense of Bielorussia by the largely Orthodox population with the assistance of the nobility and Jews occurred during the same period that the ethnic Polish territories were struggling against the Swedish invasion. The end of the Swedish and Russian "deluge" and retraction of the partition treaty signed at Randot in 1656 were brought about thanks primarily to a strong popular movement at the grassroots level. Whether one cares to acknowledge it or not, it cannot be denied that this movement existed and that it is very much a part of the history of Eastern Europe. None of the peoples who took part in it has claimed it yet, which is not only a shame but a distorted view of history that is the bitter legacy of the age of nationalism in Eastern Europe.