



STANISŁAW KAZIMIERZ KOSSAKOWSKI/NACJONALINIS M. K. ČIURTIONIO DAILĖS MUZIEJUS IN KAUNAS

A group of peasants from the village Wojtkuny, in the eastern lands of prewar Poland, 1902

THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNDERPRIVILEGED STATUS

Could the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth have been rescued in the eighteenth century? If certain social strata had not been so excluded, might the partitions of Poland never have come to pass?

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Why did the devils tear Poland apart? We have been asking this same question, taken from the famous pamphlet against King Stanisław August, written after the downfall of the Constitution of the Third of May 1791 by those who had only just recently been his political allies, indeed until the present day. There are several hypotheses put forward by historians. The first is that the downfall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was caused by the aggressive policies of its neighbors, especially Russia and Prussia, later joined by Austria. In other words, it was these evil neighbors who tore Poland to bits. Other scholars, mainly affiliated with the so-called Kraków school,

have emphasized that the cause of the partitions lay in the internal weakness of the state, that the Noble Republic was in fact killed off by what is usually described as the Polish anarchy. A third explanation, one which was vibrantly discussed in the twentieth century, goes like this: the end of the Commonwealth was precipitated by its own backwardness, by its lack of modernization efforts. This stresses the responsibility of society, or of the political elite. We will examine a version of this third hypothesis here.

Two sorts

The society of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the eighteenth century was hierarchical, in which different groups had different legal statuses. There was no “general law” that applied to everyone. From this standpoint, society was divided into two strata: a privileged one – the nobility, and an underprivileged



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one – the plebeians, which included the peasants, the burghers, and from the mid-seventeenth century onward, also dissidents (i.e. non-Catholics).

The term “estates” was understood in the political language of the day as referring to the segments of society represented in the Sejm (the “Diet” or parliament). There were three such estates: the noble deputies, the senators (who in the eighteenth century were primarily magnates), and finally the king, the ruler of the Commonwealth constituting a separate, single-person estate.

Situated in the spaces between these groups were those who found it difficult to fit in with the above definitions: these included the clergy, whose members may have come from all the social estates, and soldiers, who were also recruited not only from among the nobility. There were also more loosely associated individuals – people who consciously or unconsciously tried to function on the fringes of the individual social groups. Jews, in turn, were not considered part of any estate: rather, they formed a separate group, governed by separate legal regulations.

Peasant dependent on master

Peasants were the most numerous group, and the most important from the standpoint of how state and society functioned. They represented most likely about 70–80% of the population of 12 million of the Commonwealth in the first half of the eighteenth century. They paid taxes and also other levies – and this represented the lion’s share of state revenue. Most of them worked land owned by someone else (most often by the nobility, but also by burghers or the clergy) and as a consequence had to do their feudal duty to work the land of their owners for free. A significant group consisted of quit-rent peasants, who were not obliged to perform such labor, but instead paid rent. The third element of this diverse community included the so-called *Olędrzy*, settlers who came from North-Western Europe, governed by a separate regime.

What was the legal situation of the peasant population like? In the early sixteenth century the justice system of the *Rzeczpospolita* (Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) had withdrawn from influence over them – instead turning them over to patrimonial jurisdiction, where judgements were made by the landowner or noble, his representative, or an administrator managing the assets on behalf of the monarch or Catholic Church. This was of great practical significance for the situation of the peasants living on the different types of assets. It is widely assumed that the peasants on private lands were treated the worst, that things were better on church lands, and best on royal estates. Various sources from the first half of the eighteenth century indicate that peasants living on royal lands, especially in the Małopolska region, did indeed have quite a high

level of awareness of their freedom, or liberties. Numerous peasant rebellions indicate that this stratum of society did indeed enjoy a certain margin of freedom.

Underprivileged, uninterested

How many plebeians were there living in the cities of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth? We do not know. Probably about 15–20% of the population. They came in three types. A certain few of them had the status of urban citizens, enjoying full burgher rights. There were more of those who resided in cities legally, but did not have full rights, particularly political rights, for instance not entitling them to participate in elections of city officials. The third group included those who came to the cities on various terms, as miscellaneous people.

One trait characterizing the burgher caste in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries was the vast discrepancies in terms of property. The residents of small cities were generally urban-agriculturalists: living in the city, but supporting themselves from plots of land. This status prevailed in the eastern territories of the Commonwealth – in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and in Ukraine – which were urbanized to a small degree. In the lands of the Kingdom of Poland itself (the western part of the *Rzeczpospolita*), the level of urbanization was greater, but here, too, there were significant disparities in terms of assets. Eighteenth-century Warsaw, for instance was home to Piotr Tepper and his partner Pierre Valentin, who were not in fact citizens – being non-Catholics – but were major financiers and bankers, two of the wealthiest individuals in the Commonwealth. At the same time it was home to very poor menial laborers, merchants, craftsmen, who also had the status of burghers.

We should also bear other differences in mind. One of the areas that formed part of the Commonwealth up until the partitions, Royal Prussia, had a separate status. The burghers in Royal Prussia, especially in the three large cities of Gdańsk, Toruń and Elbląg, were a property-owning elite but also a political elite: they exceptionally had the right to send their representatives to the Sejm and sat on the local senate of Royal Prussia.

Non-Catholics under pressure

One group that began to be a political problem at the end of the seventeenth century were the dissidents, in other words the non-Catholics. They experienced ever more numerous, and increasingly problematic, restrictions of their political, economic, and civil rights. This began with the Sejm’s passage of a law in 1669 which might seem to be the ideal of a short and clear legal act, consisting of just three words: *Rex Catholicus esto* – “the King will be Catholic.” In practice that of

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course meant that no nobleman of another faith could be elected king, yet the right to participate in free elections was one of the most high-profile rights enjoyed by this social stratum. Ultimately, a large share of the public rights, including political rights, of non-Catholics were taken away by laws enacted by the Sejm in 1717, 1733, 1735 and 1736. From that moment onward, the non-Catholic nobility and bourgeoisie, particularly in Royal Prussia, sought foreign protection, first from Prussia, later from Russia.

Ineffective reforms

A drastic worsening of the situation of the entire underprivileged population of the Commonwealth was brought by the political and economic crisis known as the “Swedish Deluge” of the years 1655–1660. There was vast depopulation and the degree of wartime destruction was vast. The need for reconstruction, with a lack of capital that could be “pumped” into the economy, entailed an ever greater fiscal pinch. This was further compounded by the attempts, ineffective ones (as would become clear in the latter half of the seventeenth century), to reform the state system and state institutions – such as a reform to elect the next king while the previous one was still alive, or the treasury-military reform. As a consequence, broader and broader circles of the society of the Commonwealth – its residents, not just its citizens – lost interest in the state, which had become unattractive to them, not a source of any benefits. The reformist rule of King Stanisław August Poniatowski in 1764–1795 and the Constitution of the Third of May 1791 did not manage to change those sensibilities.

This is particularly clearly visible in the case of the peasants, who did not gain much from the reformist programs formulated during the Stanisław August era – they were generally hazy promises for the future. The Constitution of the Third of May also gave them nearly nothing, apart from a promise of care from the government – it being hard to say here what the legislature specifically had in mind here.

As far as the burghers are concerned, things were better and more effective in that from the beginning of Stanisław August’s reign there was an idea for the economic modernization of the state institutions, in which the burgher stratum was meant to play a leading role. But as far as political rights are concerned, things were much worse. In the late 1780s, the only thing the Commonwealth had to propose to the burghers was the nobilization of the elite. It was concluded that a sizeable share of the burgher stratum deserved to be included into the political system of the state, but rather than giving them political rights, it was proposed that they, especially the wealthy individuals among them, should become nobles. Burgher commentators saw this proposal as insulting and as falling signifi-

cantly below the expectations of the urban population. Similarly, the Constitution of the Third of May did allow representatives of the cities to sit in the Sejm, albeit as “representatives,” not as deputies, and so they were without active voting rights.

Many of the serious problems of the state in 1766–1775 can therefore be seen as the result of the politically underprivileged status of the non-Catholics. The “dissident issue” provoked Russian, Prussian, Swedish, Danish, and British demands for their political rights to be reinstated in the Commonwealth, which later transformed into brutal pressure on the state, and after 1766 blocked Stanisław August’s political and economic reforms. Ultimately, therefore, the “dissident issue” proved to be one of the causes of the first partition. Recent research indicates that the first partition did not come as the same kind of shock to the noble society as was previously imagined, but in certain non-Catholic urban strata it did cause a certain polarization. In the 1770s and 80s this grew to become an open conflict: the Protestant burghers, particularly in Warsaw but also in the cities of Wielkopolska, voiced grievances against the Protestant nobility. They felt that the Polish Catholics were unjustly holding it against them that the dissident issue had become one of the causes of the first partition. It had been the dissident nobility, after all, not the dissident burghers, who had sought Russian and Prussian protection, notwithstanding the fact that in fighting for the rights of non-Catholics they were risking the interests of the state itself. Ultimately, through the end of the Commonwealth’s existence, the dissidents never actually achieved equal rights for those of different faiths. The Constitution of the Third of May preserved two principles that were inconsistent with it: the Roman Catholic faith was the state faith, and converting from Catholicism to any other faith carried the threat of punishment. This latter issue was a kind of safety measure to be used against the population in the eastern lands, as it was feared that the peasants there, being Greek Catholics, would convert in mass numbers to Orthodoxy.

The existence within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of three so numerous underprivileged social groups, which stood to gain relatively little from the state reforms proposed or carried out in the seventeenth century, had to become a source of serious problems. From the standpoint of social structures, the political system, and the economic situation, the purely Noble Republic, as it was in the seventeenth century, simply could not survive the existing political realities.

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This is a transcription of a lecture given by Prof. Wojciech Kriegseisen for the Center for Research on the Stanisław Era, Royal Łazienki Museum, as part of a series: “Could it have survived? The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the eighteenth century.”

Further reading:

Kriegseisen W. (2016). (ed.). *My i oni: Społeczeństwo nowożytnej Rzeczypospolitej wobec państwa* [Us and Them: The Society of the Modern Republic vs. the State]. Warsaw: IH PAN.

Kriegseisen W. (2010). *Stosunki wyznaniowe w relacjach państwo-Kościół między reformacją a oświeceniem (Rzesza Niemiecka, Niderlandy Północne, Rzeczpospolita polskolitewska)* [Interfaith Relations in the Ties Between Church and State, Between the Reformation and Enlightenment (the German Reich, Northern Netherlands, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth)]. Semper.