

A Self-Portrait for Posterity



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Stanisław August achieved notoriety as the monarch responsible for Poland's demise in the 18th century. Could his memoirs change this unfavorable picture?

Stanisław August may have been the most tragic figure on the Polish throne. He began his reign at a time when his country was vast (covering 700,000 km²) yet already weakened, and ended when that country ceased to exist – and, according to the partitioning empires, was actually never meant to regain its independence. He was a monarch who sparked a great deal of controversy. Disputes over how his reign should be appropriately evaluated are still very heated, with specific opinions being often influenced not by knowledge of historical events but by the current political situation. For more than two centuries, Poland's last king has been portrayed as a traitor, as Catherine the Great's lover, and as a Russian puppet. That unfavorable picture, which emerged when the king was still alive after Poland's defeat in the Polish-Russian war of 1792, was reinforced following the failure of the Kościuszko Uprising (1794) and the Third Partition of Poland (1795). Despite being fully aware of that image, Poniatowski could do nothing to contest it, as he had been bound by Russia's "patronage." In defense of his actions, the monarch wrote his memoirs for posterity rather than for his contemporaries, probably with a European rather than Polish readership in mind, as the book was written in French, a language that the king knew perfectly.

In defense of the king

Stanisław August's memoirs present a picture of the author's complicated life, though by no means a complete picture. This is because they make no mention of such momentous events as the Great Sejm, the adoption of the Constitution of the Third of May, the Second Partition of Poland, the Kościuszko Uprising, and finally the Third

Partition, his abdication, and the last years of the king's life. The reason is simple: Poniatowski did not manage to finish his work. He started working on his memoirs in 1771 and returned to writing them on several occasions, creating a total of eight books covering a period from the author's birth to the late 1770s. The narrative breaks off in 1778, 20 years before Poniatowski's death, although preserved materials indicate that he intended to describe the whole of his reign.

King Stanisław August's memoirs are unique in many respects, and not just because history knows very few examples of genuine memoirs written by monarchs. While reading them, we should not forget even for a moment who the author was, as this is a political text in every respect. Aimed at defending a certain vision along with specific actions and political decisions, the memoirs should be seen as a great treatise in defense of Stanisław August. The king started writing his memoirs after a failed kidnapping attempt by the Bar Confederates amid an atmosphere of strong aversion on the part of many members of the Polish nobility and a very successful propaganda campaign launched against him by supporters of the Bar Confederation in Europe. He resumed writing after two resounding defeats, the Second Partition and Poland's complete demise, aiming to describe not so much his life as the history of Poland, using it as a background to present his account of events and his arguments.

A panorama of Europe and Poland

Rather complicated in terms of narrative, the structure of the memoirs follows from their purpose. In addition to a narrative typical of memoirs, the book includes almost stenographic records of conversations with powerful political players (especially Russian ambassadors) as well as many documents, including private or at least ostensibly private correspondence (such as letters to and from Catherine), diplomatic correspondence, initially between Poniatowski as Saxony's envoy at the Russian court and his patrons, later between him as the king and envoys of foreign courts, documents related to international policy (diplomatic notes from neighboring powers, partition treaties), and finally records of parliamentary proceedings in the Sejm. One gets the impression that Stanisław August attempted not merely to present his arguments but also to document them properly, thus explaining and demonstrating the inevitable nature of his decisions.

Such a structure sometimes makes it difficult to follow the storyline of the memoirs. As a whole, however, they are a truly fascinating read that intermingles the elements of a

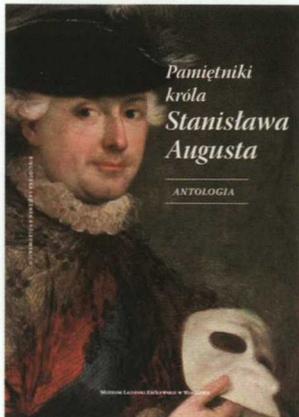
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Marcello Bacciarelli, "Portrait of King Stanislaw August with an Hourglass"

sentimental novel (Poniatowski's romance with Catherine), sensation (travel adventures, the king's kidnapping), descriptions of social and cultural curiosities, and high-society gossip. But the true value of the memoirs lies mainly in the fact that they present an extremely detailed panorama of Europe and

Poland in the Age of Enlightenment. The first books feature a description of Europe in the mid-18th century along with its culture, customs, and politics written by a careful observer who enjoyed free access to courts and high-society salons. A man who, from a very young age, had the opportunity to

King Stanisław August's memoirs as a sign of the times



The motto of King Stanisław August's memoirs: "Indeed, the situation of those who hold the highest-ranking posts in the Commonwealth is such that nothing that happens in the state without having consequences for them, but also nothing that happens to them remains without consequences for the state. From this it follows that even their private life is worth describing to future generations, as an example or as a caution."

observe diplomatic gamesmanship in the upper echelons of power. The king also sketches out a detailed picture of the situation in the Commonwealth under his predecessor, Poland's last Saxon king, its political and social life, its culture, and its economy. Such a portrayal is especially interesting in that it is presented from the perspective of both a person deeply involved in parliamentary and factional games at national and local level and someone who observes these games from a certain distance. All this is embellished by excellent portraits of various figures, described with great aptitude and insight. Such a structure alone would be enough to prove the value of the memoirs. But this is merely a prelude.

Further books feature some dramatic events that are crucial for Poland's history: Poniatowski's election (1764), the circumstances leading up to the Bar Confederation (1768 - 1771) and the Confederation itself, and finally the First Partition (1772) and its consequences, all described from the perspective of someone who was at the heart of those events (though did not necessarily have any influence over their course). Poniatowski's descriptions are multifaceted, extremely detailed, and illustrative of political infighting and factional gamesmanship, Poland's international situation, attempts to pursue subtle diplomatic games along with violent pressure and external interference. At the same time, the memoirs provide an intimate self-portrait of a politician and a monarch with his visions, hopes, dilemmas and failures, a man of his time who did not shy from self-assessments or intimate reflections – by no means "King Staś from Łazienki Palace," as the monarch was sometimes mockingly called, but King Stanisław August, an intellectual with a political vision who was defeated by the realities of his day and a politician who strove to prove that was trapped in a situation with no way out.

Words kept under lock and key

There is no doubt that the king built up his line of defense very carefully. As an undertaking of political propaganda, however, the memoirs unfortunately proved yet another failure for the king. Aimed at vindicating the monarch in the eyes of future generations, the memoirs never reached their intended readership. After Stanisław August's death

(1798), his documents were sealed and his memoirs were forwarded to the Imperial Study and later to the archives of the Russian Department of Foreign Affairs. Throughout the 19th century, they were treated as classified documents, ones that only Russian emperors could access. It is certain that they were read or at least borrowed from the archives by Nicholas I and Alexander III. The first two books, which came into the possession of the Czartoryski family when the king was still alive, were made public many years later. An abridged version of these books, in Polish, was published in Poznań in 1862, followed by a full version in Dresden in 1870 (translated and edited by Bronisław Zaleski). The publication of an unabridged version of the full memoirs kept in Saint Petersburg was finally approved in the 20th century, with the two-volume edition, in the original French, being prepared by Sergey Goryainov in collaboration with two Polish researchers: Władysław Konopczyński and Stanisław Ptaszycy, who also translated the first books into Polish (Warsaw, 1915).

Goryainov's edition was published in dramatic circumstances, as is strongly suggested by the dates and places of publication. Volume one was published in "Saint Petersburg" (soon to be Petrograd) in 1914, volume two in "Leningrad" in 1924, after the publisher's death. Available in a limited number of copies, that edition only reached a small group of researchers.

The first unabridged and critical edition of King Stanisław August's memoirs was not published until 2012, when the original French version was published in a single lengthy tome, together with critical commentary, prepared as part of a joint research project of the National Center for Scientific Research (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) and the Polish Academy of Sciences. It was based on the handwritten originals currently kept in the Russian State Archive of Early Acts (RGADA) and the Czartoryski Library.

That edition provided the basis for the publication of long excerpts of the memoirs in Polish by the Royal Łazienki Museum in Warsaw in May 2013, exactly on the day of the king's patron saint, St. Stanislaus. They are characterized by a somewhat more popular approach, being addressed to a broader audience. The editors (rightly) decided to omit most of the official documents quoted by the king, among other passages.

Today, we can say that Stanisław August's intentions have been fulfilled: at long last, the last king of Poland's own voice is audible in the still ongoing debate over how he should rightfully be remembered. ■

Further reading:

- Triaire D. [selection], Brzozowski W. [trans.], Dębowski M. [ed.], Grześkowiak-Krwawicz A. [intro.] (2013). *Pamiętniki króla Stanisława Augusta. Antologia* [The Memoirs of King Stanisław August: An Anthology]. Warsaw: Muzeum Łazienki Królewskie.
- Grześkowiak-Krwawicz A., Triaire D. (2012). *Stanislas Auguste. Memoires*. Paris: Institute d'Études Slaves, Société Historique et Littéraire Polonaise.