



The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, 1733–1795: Light and Flame

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BOOK REVIEW

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The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, 1733–1795: Light and Flame, by Richard Butterwick, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2020, 512 pp., US\$45.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780300252200

Richard Butterwick's *The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, 1733–1795* brings the history of the eighteenth-century Commonwealth to a wider audience. It does so in an eminently readable manner with lively pen portraits of individual political actors and memorable depictions of specific events, such as the festivities occasioned by the meeting of the last king of Poland, Stanisław August and his Russian imperial 'master' and former lover, Catherine the Great, in 1787. It is a beautifully produced book with excellent maps, colourful illustrations, helpful glossaries and even a handy pronunciation guide.

The 'flame' of the title refers to the demise of the Commonwealth after its Third Partition in 1795, the end date of Butterwick's book. The 'light' represents the Enlightenment, which is the context of the main argument of this monograph. The author convincingly contends that the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was not, as is often claimed, a failed state waiting to be put out of its misery by its three powerful neighbours, Russia, Prussia and Austria. Rather, against very long odds, an unlikely cooperation between the anti-Russian 'patriotic' opposition and King Stanisław August 'refreshed a broadly republican set of civic values with elements of limited and parliamentary monarchy'. The manifestations of this new dawn – the Four Years' Sejm (1788–91) and the resulting Constitution of 3 May 1791 – are the focus of this book. The spectre of a strong(er) Commonwealth this Constitution raised, so suggests the author, led to the Second and Third Partitions.

In 1791, this break with the dysfunctional political practices of the preceding era, famously embodied by the *liberum veto*, argues Butterwick, was thanks to the insights and activities of enlightened 'men and women born in the middle years of the eighteenth century, educated and matured during the reign of Stanisław August'. Naturally, of the two, men dominate the pages. Socially, this enlightened group represented a widening elite with the inclusion of the middling elements of the *szlachta*. This was a very important constituency, indeed to be found all over Europe and its colonies. It formed the bedrock of enlightened absolutism in all its permutations, and that of various revolutionary regimes, be it in their American, French or other forms. In fact, Butterwick using the term in its broadest meaning as a fundamental change of the political system refers to the Four Years' Sejm as the Polish Revolution. Thus, rightly, he puts the Commonwealth bang in the middle of the European mainstream.

That said, the real 'hero' of this thick volume is the ultimately tragic figure of Stanisław August. The book starts with his above-mentioned, cringeworthy audience with Catherine the Great in 1787 and closes with his death in St Petersburg in February 1798, a spent and redundant man, a king without a kingdom. Obviously, Butterwick finds a great deal to like in Stanisław August and his sympathetic portrayal is convincing. The choice of Stanisław August is also fortunate because several main themes converge on this malleable person. Butterwick is a good narrator, but he manages to transcend mere storytelling. It is no small feat that he explains the complexities of the Commonwealth and its constituent parts, the changing social and economic landscape as well as the complicated confessional issues without ever being dry.

Having read this book with pleasure and having learnt from it a great deal, I have only two critical points to make. First, the title page gives the start date of 1733 but the story really only stretches back to the 1760s. Second, Butterwick formulates his ideas very clearly and forcefully. This is not a problem in the sense that he substantiates his statements. Nonetheless, sometimes his choice of expression jars. The best example of this is his assessments of the confederates of Targowica of 1792, politicians who acted as Russian pawns in the Second Partition. It might well be that subsequently Targowica entered the Polish consciousness as a symbol of treason. I am sure it is also true, as the author painstakingly shows, that these political actors committed treason by the letter of contemporary law. However, in a region where political opponents or anyone expressing an opposing opinion have been, and are, routinely branded traitors, it is not a term to be used lightly.

These minor criticisms notwithstanding, *Light and Flame* is a worthy read and, given the disappearance of the Commonwealth from the political maps in 1795, a surprisingly optimistic one. It is a pity that there was no space to expand on the remarkable post-partition scientific and educational achievements that grew out of the fertile intellectual climate of the late eighteenth-century Commonwealth. The subject, perhaps, of a second book?

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