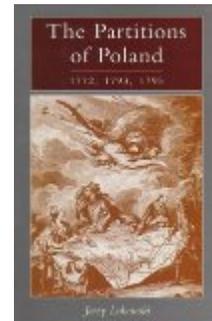


Jerzy Lukowski. *The Partitions of Poland 1772, 1793, 1795*. London and New York: Longman, 1999. xv + 232 pp. \$36.00 (textbook), ISBN 978-0-582-29274-1; \$82.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-29275-8.

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## Eastern Europe's Counterpoint to the French Revolution

Between 1772 and 1795, the second largest state in Europe, the Commonwealth of Two Nations, or as it is usually known in English the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, was wiped from the map. Such a development might well have been the defining point of late eighteenth century European history. Instead, it was overshadowed by the French Revolution, leaving the partitioning of Poland little more than a small sub-plot within eighteenth century European history. Thus, while whole chapters of Western Civilization textbooks are devoted to the French Revolution, the final years of Polish history are rarely given more than a one or two paragraphs.

The gap between the number of monographs written on the Revolution and the partitions grows every year. While virtually every year someone at an American university completes a dissertation on the French Revolution that will likely be turned into a book, this century has only seen three major English language works on the partitions prior to publication of the work at hand: Baron Eversley's *The Partitions of Poland* and Robert Lord's *The Second Partition of Poland* both dating from 1915, and Herbert Kaplan's *The First Partition of Poland*, published in 1962.

Given that none of these works is readily available outside of libraries, a general survey of the partitions comparable to Piotr Wandycz's highly regarded study of partitioned Poland was long overdue. This book deserves to be welcomed on that account alone. Lukowski's career spent studying the Polish nobility, or *szlachta*, in the de-

clining days of the Commonwealth also lends considerable credibility to the statement on the back of the book that it does "proper justice to the Polish dimension." Beyond that, references in the book's forward to materials long buried in the Russian archives, and the dedication to the late Lukasz Kadziela, the young Polish scholar who first gained access to them in 1994, bolster expectations that Lukowski's book will be not only thorough but also up to date.

To his credit, the fruit of Lukowski's labors is a work that could well be assigned to upper level undergraduates and graduates. In just over two hundred pages, he conveys both the peculiarities of the Commonwealth's political and social structure and the dynamics of great power diplomacy in the second half of the eighteenth century in a concise and generally readable manner. The first two chapters provide essential background on the basic structures of Polish politics, the dominance of the Polish nobility, the electoral process for kings, the *Sejm* and regional diets or *sejmniks*, the *liberum veto*, confederations, and the impetus for and against political and social reform under King Stanislaw Augustus. In chapters three and four, Lukowski effectively explains the great power diplomacy that allowed Austria's quasi-legitimate occupation of the Zips, a group of small Polish enclaves in the Hungarian Kingdom, now in northwestern Slovakia, to snowball into the unprecedented land-grab that Poland legitimized in a special *Sejm* in 1773. The remaining chapters each balance between efforts by the Polish nobility to reassert their independence using the ever di-

minishing opportunities available to them and the diplomacy between Catherine the Great, Frederick the Great, and Habsburg rulers from Maria Theresa to Francis II in a compelling manner. Finally, Lukowski closes with an epilogue briefly discussing how the idea of an independent Poland managed to survive the final partition despite the efforts of the great powers in East Central Europe to insure that the state of Poland would never rise again.

Beyond the basic organization, the argument of the book is reasonably easy to follow. Readers will be left in no doubt that the Commonwealth's demise was the result of a fatal combination of international intrigue and internal weakness stemming from the lack of unity among the *Szlachta*. But, while those unfamiliar with this story will doubtless learn a great deal, those who do know it will be struck by how little Lukowski's account differs from earlier versions. The details he has drawn from his own research, as well as from that of his late colleague Kadziela, only add nuance to our picture of how competing Austrian, Prussian, and Russian interests made the partitions possible. Lukowski apportions the guilt as others before him did, singling out Catherine the Great and Frederick the Great as the main villains, while the *szlachta's* failings are treated as more tragic rather than criminal.

Of course, sometimes old interpretations remain accepted for good reason; they make good sense of the evidence, and Lukowski's narrative is seductive. But the closer one reads, the less satisfying it becomes. All too often the reader is encouraged not to think too deeply about contradictions in the events presented whenever they might invite a reassessment of the conventional view about the factors that allowed the Commonwealth to be dismembered.

For example: having assigned Catherine the role as the Commonwealth's chief enemy, Lukowski does not consider why she was willing to promote the election of Stanislaw Poniatowski as King of the Commonwealth in 1764 even though she knew of his plans to reform the Commonwealth's political structures. Poniatowski's past as Catherine's lover is enough to convince Lukowski that she knew he was easy prey, and his subsequent reform efforts a naive misreading of Catherine. That she brooked any reforms at all, we are told, was because she recognized some reform was needed for the Commonwealth to be an effective vassal state. Thus for Lukowski, her intervention in 1766 to reverse reforms introduced by Poniatowski and all her subsequent moves that hindered reform in the Commonwealth, reflected her real inten-

tions.

Having published several books on this period, Lukowski knows a great deal more about these affairs than most scholars. But, as presented here, this line of argument is not entirely convincing. Can we really accept that Catherine's chief reason for supporting Poniatowski's candidacy for the Polish crown was because she he could be more easily manipulated than another Elector of Saxony from the Wettin house? True, the reigning Wettin Elector was only twelve years old, but this should hardly have been a disadvantage for Catherine if her main concern was being able to manipulate the King of the Commonwealth to do Russia's bidding. What is more, Russia had found the previous two Wettins amenable, and Russia had even played a major role in the election of the second Wettin as the Commonwealth's King. Moreover, Lukowski provides no substantive evidence that Poniatowski was really under Catherine's control. Indeed, we learn that Poniatowski was willing to challenge Catherine while it was his Polish backers, the Czartoryskis, who had to persuade Poniatowski to bow to her demands to the reverse the reforms.

No less problematic is Lukowski's argument that Catherine never would have allowed Poniatowski to pursue any serious reforms. While one cannot deny this was ultimately the policy she followed, it is noteworthy that according to Lukowski, she only intervened to stop Poniatowski's reforms after influential Polish opponents of her chosen king informed Russian diplomats of what Poniatowski was doing. Now, Catherine was a busy woman, and perhaps, as Lukowski suggests, the full implications of Poniatowski's reforms had simply escaped her and her diplomats. But knowing what she did about her chosen king's dreams, that seems unlikely. It seems at least plausible that her informants gave her reason to believe that resistance to reforms was greater than she realized and led her to see supporting Poniatowski's efforts as likely to increase the anarchy in the Commonwealth she had hoped the king would bring to heel.

Certainly such an interpretation squares with Lukowski's own contention that Catherine and her advisors had great difficulty grasping the importance the *szlachta* gave to their privileges. Furthermore, it is interesting that from 1767 on she increasingly focused her attention on manipulating and bullying the opponents to reform into doing Russia's will despite themselves, rather than relying on Poniatowski. Her support of Poniatowski's opponents undeniably increased the chaos that would allow the first partition to become possible, so

Lukowski's analysis works. Still, there is at least a hint of *ex post facto* logic here, and it seems plausible that she shifted her attention to Poniatowski's opponents, because she had come to realize how important they were within the Commonwealth's political system, and not out of a desire to destabilize it further.

If Lukowski's treatment of Catherine's motivations is not as satisfying as it might be, his discussion of the *szlachta's* attitudes raises even more questions. From the introduction of the book, he emphasizes the conservative nature of the *szlachta* and its tendency to see all reform as a threat to their privilege and hence to be avoided at all costs. This assessment seems to be verified by the depth of the *szlachta's* opposition regarding the rights of non-Catholic Christians and their consistent support of the *liberum veto*. Yet one of the undeveloped stories of this book is the growing consensus among the *szlachta* that reforms were necessary.

This is particularly evident in the account of the Confederacy of Bar, which was formed in 1768 to depose Poniatowski and place the young Saxon Elector on the Polish throne. Lukowski describes it as formed from diverse factions united primarily in their distaste for Poniatowski. Nonetheless, he notes that they did agree on the need to increase the size of the Commonwealth's miniscule standing army and paid lip service to the need for financial and political reforms. It is therefore all the more tragic that they allowed their distaste for Poniatowski to overshadow the possibility of achieving some political reform they themselves had recognized was necessary by working with Poniatowski. But Lukowski does not pick up on this point. Instead he dwells on the *szlachta's* ostensible inability to grasp the need for reform by referring to the conservatism of the instructions the regional *sejmniks* gave to delegates sent to the 1773 *Sejm*, which has been called to ratify the new boundaries created by the first partition.

This seems unfair to the *szlachta*. The *cahiers* prepared by the nobility as the *Etats-General* met in 1789 likewise focused on their traditional rights rather than presaging the renunciation of privilege by the nobles and clergy on the night of August 4. Perhaps, had Polish deputies been able to speak freely and develop their agenda, they might have shown a similar flexibility. As Lukowski recognizes, the so-called Four Year *Sejm* convened fifteen years later did show flexibility. In 1773, however, that was impossible given the partitioning powers' overriding concern that the new boundaries should be ratified and made permanent.

From that point, as Lukowski shows, the survival of Commonwealth depended almost entirely on the competing interests of the partitioning powers. It was only the distraction of another Russo-Turkish war that allowed the Four-Year *Sejm* to produce the bold reforms of the 3 May Constitution of 1791, while the Kosciuszko Uprising of 1794 showed the Polish nobility finally reasonably united, albeit at a time too late to make any difference. Thus, for Lukowski, the Kosciuszko Rising becomes the beginning of Poles' struggle to regain independence, and he elaborates this point in the epilogue summarizing Poles' struggle to revive their country over more than a century.

Poles have long taken comfort in the national humiliation that was the partitions by seeing them as the basis for a new found sense of unity that ultimately brought them independence over a century later. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that such an emphasis on a new unity among the *szlachta* does not really reflect the reality of the partitions at least until 1830, and arguably much later. Only a minority of Poles actually went into exile to fight for Poland in the 1790s. Even later, much of the tragedy of the November Uprising of 1830-31 rested in the fact that many of the Polish leaders, discontent as they were with Russian interference in the Congress Kingdom's affairs, found themselves leading a military rebellion they would have preferred to have avoided.

That over time Poles periodically were dissatisfied enough with the way they were governed to challenge Russian, and to a lesser extent Austrian and Prussian rule, cannot be ignored. Still, that such dissatisfaction would inevitably lead to the reestablishment of an independent and united Poland could not have been taken for granted in 1795. Lukowski's reluctance to expose the much of the *szlachta's* willingness to make peace with their new governments, however, perpetuates the great myth that the *szlachta* spent most of the nineteenth century scheming to reestablish an independent Poland.

The epilogue that would have been more useful here is a brief discussion of how members of the *szlachta* reconciled themselves to being subjects to the absolutist rulers they had once scorned. What are we to make of the ease with which Prince Adam Czartoryski, one of Poniatowski's original benefactors, became an active participant of Russian political life, or Count Jozef Ossolinski's activities at the Austrian imperial court in Vienna? Why was it that when Polish legions occupied Lwow/Lemberg, the Galician capital in 1809, there was not sufficient support to prevent the city and much of Galicia from re-

verting to Austrian Rule following the Treaty of Schoenbrunn?

Lukowski's book may not quite live up to the expectations it inspires, but it remains a valuable contribution. With the exception of a few momentary lapses that could easily be remedied in a later edition, the prose is easy to follow. The book will definitely acquaint readers with basic information regarding the Commonwealth and the diplomacy that made it possible to dismantle it. In the classroom, the weaknesses of its interpretation and the seductive nature of its narrative can be turned into learn-

ing experiences; perhaps inspiring a new generation to bring its perspective to the study of the partitioning of Poland. If that does happen, then Lukowski's book will have played an important part in reviving interest in a much overlooked event that helped shape the divide between early modern and modern Europe.

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