

Dorota Dukwicz

The Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History
Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw
e-mail: ddukwicz@ihpan.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-1135-589X

THE MOST RECENT STUDIES ON THE POLISH-RUSSIAN RELATIONS IN THE FIRST PARTITION ERA, 1760S-1770S¹

Abstract

The last thirty years have seen a fundamental change in Polish historiography of the 18th century, with new archival research into resources hitherto inaccessible to researchers and the raising of new research questions to the already known sources. This change has resulted in a new description of the relations of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth with its neighbours, particularly Russia. The article points to books that present the new state of research. It also discusses the problem of the direct genesis of the first partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth studied by the author.

Keywords: partition, Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Russia, Prussia, new studies.

For 30 years since the 1990s, Polish historians have had a unique opportunity to access Russian archives. The results of their research based on Russian materials changed the state of knowledge about Polish-Russian relations towards the end of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. As throughout the 18th century Russia was a power that gradually increased its influence on the Commonwealth up to a take-over of complete control in the second half of the century, understanding and describing Polish-Russian relations is crucial to understanding Poland's fate. The combination of Russian materials along with what was found in archives of Berlin and Vienna enables a full picture of the international position of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 18th century.

¹ This article has been prepared as a part of the National Science Centre's (Poland) project OPUS 2018/29/B/HS3/01149 'Between St. Petersburg and Berlin. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the light of Prussian-Russian relations in the era of the Bar Confederation and the first partition' and is a presentation of some of the theses contained in the book, which is the result of the project: D. Dukwicz, *Na drodze do pierwszego rozbioru. Rosja i Prusy wobec Rzeczypospolitej w latach 1768-1771*, Warszawa, Instytut Historii PAN, 2022.

I should start from the very end and say that a certain summary of the current state of knowledge is the edition of the correspondence of the last Polish King Stanisław August with Russian Empress Catherine II (published twice: first in French² and then in Polish³). It was Zofia Zielińska, one of the pioneers of archival research in Russia, who published this correspondence. Her introduction, annotations and commentaries to the letters are a must-read for those interested in Polish-Russian relations. And the edition can be considered a kind of synthesis of Polish-Russian relations during the reign of Stanisław August. Professor Zielińska's students and colleagues have conducted and still continue research on both the Saxon era and the period of the last king's reign. Here, I would like to point in particular to the work of Urszula Kosinska⁴ and Jacek Burdowicz-Nowicki,⁵ whose research has contributed most to spreading the knowledge concerning Polish-Russian relations during the reign of August II (1797-1706, 1709-1733) – the beginning of the first half of the 18th century.

The knowledge we have got allows to make some summaries about Polish-Russian relations in the 18th century. We are able to present the mechanisms of Russian domination in the Nobel Republic quite precisely. The most important element was Russia's decisive influence on the election of the Polish king. In addition to this, one should point out the continued efforts to keep Poland-Lithuania in internal weakness and isolation on the international stage. Control mechanisms had been discovered and introduced during the reign of Russian emperor Peter the Great.⁶ Under Catherine II they were simply developed up to near perfection.

² Z. Zielińska (ed., intro. and comment.), *Correspondance de Stanislas-Auguste avec Catherine II et ses plus proches collaborateurs (1764–1796)*, Kraków, Arcana, 2015.

³ Z. Zielińska (ed., intro. and comment.), *Korespondencja Stanisława Augusta z Katarzyną II i jej najbliższymi współpracownikami (1764–1796)*, vol. 1–2, trans. K. Zaleska, Warszawa, Muzeum Łazienki Królewskie, 2022.

⁴ U. Kosińska, *August II w poszukiwaniu sojusznika: między aliansem wiedeńskim i hanowerskim (1725–1730)*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Neriton, 2012. And many other detailed contributions by this autor.

⁵ J. Burdowicz-Nowicki, *Piotr I, August II i Rzeczpospolita: 1697–1706*, Kraków, Arcana, 2010.

⁶ U. Kosińska, 'Mechanizmy rosyjskiej polityki imperialnej w Polsce od Piotra I do Anny Iwanowny (1697–1740)' in A. Nowak and Ł. Dryblak (eds.), *Metody i środki oddziaływania imperiów: ideologia i praktyka polityczna państwa rosyjskiego/sowieckiego/rosyjskiego w latach 1689–2022. Polityka rosyjska na dawnych terenach Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów – aspekt porównawczy*, Warszawa, Instytut Historii PAN, 2024, pp. 97-120; eadem, "Aby zrozumieli potrzebę protekcji Waszego Imperatorskiego Wielicestwa dla siebie..." – metody uzależniania polskich elit przez dyplomację

We also know now that domination in Poland-Lithuania was not an end in itself for Russia. The subjugation of the vast Commonwealth and its reduction to being a buffer state separating Russia from Prussia and the Habsburg Empire were considered necessary to build Russia's imperial position in Europe. Moreover, in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which until 1760s was ruled by a foreign dynasty from Saxonia, a conviction that foreign domination was a threat was only very slowly arising. It was only after the First Partition, in the second half of the 1770s, that a mental change among *szlachta* took place, paving the way for a revival of sovereignty in the era of the Four-Year Sejm. Before this happened, throughout the 18th century, political parties sought foreign support in internal disputes.⁷ This facilitated foreign powers (mainly Russia, but also Prussia and France) to interfere in the country's internal affairs.

In 1764, thanks to Russian support Stanisław August Poniatowski became the last King of Poland-Lithuania. He and the Czartoryski Princes, being his closest collaborators, did not understand that Russia's policy towards the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was a negative policy. Thus, they had vain illusions. The years 1764–1766 were marked by the hope of the Polish court to cooperate with Russia and use this cooperation to reform the State. The following years, 1767–1775 belong to a period when the Polish court acted under the pressure of Russia's outright dictate – the central element of that era was the first partition.

I shall turn to the issue of the first partition in order to present the results of my latest research. First, I would like to underscore that owing to the most recent studies on Russia's policy towards Poland we are aware that at least from the beginning of 1730s there was some permanent dualism in the Russian approach to the Commonwealth. Along those seeking to dominate the entire Poland-Lithuania, there were people at the Russian court who sought to partition its territory. It would only become the dominant tone when Russia found it to its advantage. As long as Russia was able to control the situation in Poland on its own, partition ideas remained on the margins of mainstream politics. Similar ideas regarding the partition have been conceived in Prussia and Austria from the beginning of the 18th century. Still, the German powers did not

rosyjską w dobie bezkrólewia 1733 roku' in A. Barwicka-Makula et al. (eds), *Miedzy obowiazkami, przywilejami a prawem Rzeczypospolitej XVI - XVIII wieku. Elity w panstwie polsko - litewskim*, Warszawa, Muzeum Historii Polski, 2023, pp. 115-141.

⁷ A. Grześkowiak-Krawawicz, *Regina libertas. Wolność w polskiej myśli politycznej XVIII wieku*, Gdańsk, Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2006, about changing the concept of freedom, especially: pp. 229–248.

question the Russian position in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and expected final decisions to be taken in St. Petersburg.⁸

From 1764 onwards, the partition party's activity grossly intensified in St. Petersburg. It was that year that military circles promoted an annexation plan, which was discussed by Catherine's advisors.⁹ Just three years later, in 1767, military geometers launched an action of surveying and mapping the territories claimed by the plan of 1764.¹⁰ Those days the Russians exploited an opportunity provided to them by an armed action in Poland-Lithuania in favour of non-Catholics, whose full religious and political rights were loudly promoted by Russia.¹¹ Neither in 1764 nor in 1767, however, did the annexation of the Polish-Lithuanian lands take place, because Russia succeeded in achieving its political objectives. In 1764, Saint Petersburg easily installed Stanisław August on the throne. As a result of the 1767-1768 intervention, the Russians imposed on the Commonwealth not only the equality of non-Catholics, but also the formal Russian guarantee of the Polish-Lithuanian State's system. By the beginning of 1768, it seemed that Russia had achieved all its goals in the Republic and consolidated its exclusive control and domination over whole Commonwealth.

In February 1768, however, the outbreak of the Bar Confederacy (i.e. a revolt of the nobility against both Russia and the collaborating Warsaw court) derailed success.¹² In 1768-1770, before the decision on

⁸ U. Kosińska, *Sondaż czy prowokacja? Sprawa Lehmana z 1721 r., czyli o rzekomych planach rozbiorowych Augusta II*, Warszawa, Neriton, 2009; eadem, 'Niezrealizowany rosyjski projekt wojny z Rzeczpospolitą i jej rozbiór z 1732 roku' in J. Bajer and J. Kordel (eds.), *Pierwszy rozbiór Polski w świetle najnowszych badań*, Warszawa, Instytut deRepublika, 2023, pp. 65-84; eadem, 'Niezrealizowane projekty rozbioru Rzeczypospolitej z czasów Augusta II - ich konsekwencje polityczne i mentalne' in S. Achremczyk, E. Figura-Osełkowska and J. Kielbik (eds.), *Miedzy Barokiem a Oświeceniem. Czasy Rozbiorów*, Olsztyn, Instytut Północny im. Wojciecha Kętrzyńskiego, 2024, pp. 7-18.

⁹ Z. Zielińska, *Polska w okowach "systemu północnego": 1763-1766*, Kraków, Arcana, 2012, pp. 44-45.

¹⁰ G.T. Łukowski, 'Guarantee or Annexation. A Note on Russian Plans to acquire Polish Territory prior to the First Partition of Poland', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, vol. 56, 1983, no. 133, pp. 60-65; Z. Zielińska, 'Przygotowanie do rozbioru? Rosyjska lustracja ziem nad górną Dźwiną z lata 1767 roku' in A. Mączak and M. Kopczyński (eds.), *Gospodarka, ludzie, władza. Studia historyczne ofiarowane Juliuszowi Łukasiewiczowi w 75. rocznicę urodzin*, Warszawa, Krupski i S-ka, 1998, pp. 129-135.

¹¹ W. Kriegseisen, 'Dysydenci i dyzunicy w Rzeczypospolitej epoki stanisławowskiej' in Z. Zielińska and A. Soltys (eds.), *Stanisław August i jego Rzeczypospolita. Dramat państwa, odrodzenie narodu*, Warszawa, Zamek Królewski, 2013, pp. 57-59.

¹² The rest of the text is based on my studies presented in the book D. Dukwicz, *Na drodze*, passim.

the first partition was made, Russian hegemony in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was in a deep crisis. Initially, the Russians were convinced that a military defeat of the Confederacy was only a matter of time. The St. Petersburg ruling elite, not expecting long-term resistance in Poland, was unwilling to withdraw the laws and the guarantee imposed on the Commonwealth in 1767–1768. Such demands were formulated by the Polish side, both the Warsaw court and the Confederacy. The situation was complicated by the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish war and the crisis of Russian domination in Sweden. Russia found itself in dire straits experiencing a heavy crisis on three major diplomatic fronts. Prussia, ruled by Frederick II, Russia's closest ally at the time, saw the opportunity. The Prussian king had been hoping for years to annex part of the Polish territories, but knew that without a decision from Catherine II he could not count on acquisitions. The secret Russo-Prussian convention of 1767 guaranteed the territorial "compensation" (*dédommagement*) at the expense of the Commonwealth if Frederick II engaged in a war in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. But at first, he was not invited to fight in Poland-Lithuania, as Catherine II needed the co-operation of Prussia only in the Russian-Ottoman war (1768–1774).

The Empress and her advisors attempted to calm the situation in Poland-Lithuania on their own trying to re-confederate pro-Russian elements through a new confederacy, which would be essentially the anti-Bar party able to take control over the Commonwealth with the support of the Russian troops. The entire year of 1768 and most of 1769 was spent by Russian diplomacy in an unsuccessful attempt to implement this scenario. The main reason for this lack of success was Russian unwillingness to make real concessions to the Polish side although the Russian court was aware that some concessions would be crucial. For example, renouncing the political and religious equality of dissenters could make a major contribution to the pacification of the Commonwealth.

For most of 1769, Russian-Prussian relations focused on the most important objective which was at the moment the renewal of their alliance. The Polish issues were an important element of these negotiations. During the negotiations, while requested by the Russians, Frederick II presented his desired *dédommagements* in the Commonwealth in the form of the so-called Lynar's Plan. It was also then that for the first time the question of a St. Petersburg-Berlin-Vienna triple alliance was raised by the Prussian side. In October 1769, the alliance was renewed, as Russia, concerned about the situation in Sweden (a deep crisis of Russian domination 1769–1771) and in the Commonwealth, found it desirable from her point of view.

What happened in the Commonwealth at that time? Well, the Senate Council held in late September/early October 1769 in Warsaw decided

that the Commonwealth should resort to the mediation of the European powers (like France, England and Austria) in order to restore internal peace in the country and alleviate the conflict with Russia. These decisions shocked the Russian court and were perceived in St. Petersburg as an overt attempt to break with Russia.

I found some premises in Russian sources that crucial decisions regarding partition, especially an admission of Prussia to participate in pacification at the price of territorial *dédommagements*, were being made in St. Petersburg from the late 1769 onwards. Once the decision was made no later than first weeks of 1770, the only important thing from the Russian perspective was to wait for the most opportune moment to reveal the plans to the Prussian ally.

The partition decision was followed by a gradual rapprochement in Russian-Prussian relations, demonstrated by Catherine's enthusiastic attitude to the idea of a visit to St. Petersburg by Prince Henry (Frederic's younger brother). The informal invitation was issued in March 1770. Russia also opened up the prospect for Austria to be included in the cooperation. In September 1770, with the prospect of Prince Henry's upcoming visit, Catherine II formulated a formal invitation for Frederick II to participate in the pacification of the Polish-Lithuanian State. The matter was discussed with Prince Henry, whose visit marked the beginning of the partition negotiations, still informal. In December 1770, Prussia informed Austria of the agreement reached. And in March 1771, Prussian-Russian negotiations on the extent of bilateral territorial annexations began. Then Austria joined the talks. It took another two years for the three partitioning powers to negotiate and prepare the field for the partition of the Commonwealth.

The question is whether Russia could have pacified the Commonwealth without Berlin's (and Vienna's) participation? In light of the analysis I carried out, it seems that the failure of the negotiations conducted in the Commonwealth by Russia in 1768 and 1769, together with the Polish attempt to reach for external mediation, determined the fate of the Polish-Lithuanian State, and gave rise to a conviction in St. Petersburg that the previous options for independent action in the Commonwealth were no more realistic. The sense of having run out of options concerned the political rather than the military sphere. Prior to Prince Henry's talks in St. Petersburg, the problem of the Bar Confederacy occupied relatively little space in the diplomatic correspondence circulating between Warsaw and St. Petersburg, while compared to the problems of the resistance of Polish court to the Russian dictate and the essentially fruitless search for an alternative political camp on which St. Petersburg could base its policy in the Commonwealth.

To summarize, the decision to partition the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was both a result and a manifestation of a crisis of the Russian policy towards Poland. The partition itself was a breach of the fundamental principle of Russian foreign policy that the Commonwealth is a Russian sphere of sole domination. The partition shows that the annexation tendency, which for many years had been present in Russian policy towards Poland, became dominant at the turn of 1769 and 1770. Owing to a fresh analysis of Russian policy and Polish-Russian relations adding to the previously known evidence entirely new sources, it has been possible to move back the dating of the partition decision and to identify the immediate cause of this decision. It was possible, too, to situate this decision in the long process of establishing Russian domination over the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth throughout the 18th century.

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