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THE PORTRAYAL OF STANISŁAW AUGUST PONIATOWSKI IN DIARIES AND MEMOIRS

ABSTRACT: The purpose of the following article is to describe the portrayal of Stanisław August Poniatowski in diaries and memoirs written by British travellers who visited Poland-Lithuania during his reign (1764-1795). The travellers point out the king's openness and affability as well as his vast knowledge concerning English history and culture. He is seen as an Anglophile and is usually portrayed in a favorable light as a benevolent monarch trying to enact auspicious reforms with an intention of strengthening the state. His failures are blamed on turbulent nobility and intrigues of the neighboring powers striving to preserve Poland-Lithuania in a state of stagnant subjugation. Even the king's cooperation with Russia is defended and presented as a concession which was inevitable under the given circumstances. The one dissenting diarist is Nathaniel Wraxall, whose depiction is critical of what he saw as weakness as well as excessive prodigality and profligacy. It is also conspicuous for the travellers that it was Russia that controlled the machinery of the Commonwealth, not the king.

KEYWORDS: Stanisław August, memoirs, diarists, travel writing, travelogues, 18th-century Poland

PREFACE

The purpose of the following article is to describe and analyze the portrayal of Stanisław August Poniatowski in diaries and memoirs written by British travellers who visited Poland-Lithuania during his reign (1764-1795). Literary works of six authors have been collected for the analysis. William Coxe was a historian and a clergyman affiliated with the Church of England, who had graduated from King's College, Cambridge. He toured Poland-Lithuania as a

tutor to the future earl of Pembroke.¹ Companion of the aristocrat, he had letters of recommendation which facilitated his access to the king. James Harris, later raised to the dignity of Baron of Malmesbury and eventually promoted to the rank of an earl, served in an embassy in Spain at the turn of the 1760s and 1770s and then, in 1772-1776, as an envoy-extraordinary in Berlin. He visited Poland before the beginning of his diplomatic career – during a tour in northern Europe, in 1767-1768. Today he is remembered as “the first foreign diplomat to discover the intention of Frederick the Great and his ally Russia to partition Poland”.² Nathaniel Wraxall, prior to his visits in Poland-Lithuania, was a merchant and a clerk at East India Company. Pursuing a career in travel writing, he visited numerous European countries,³ one of them being Poland-Lithuania. During his stay in the Commonwealth, he spent much time with Thomas Wroughton, thanks to whom he was able to gather much information about the king. Another traveller is Joseph Marshall. Not much is known about his life but supposedly he was a merchant and visited Poland during the conflict with the Bar Confederation. In fact, there is much speculation as to his identity, with some claiming that “Joseph Marshall” was nothing more than an invented identity concealing the true author of the travelogue, who might have never actually travelled to continental Europe.⁴ Lady Elizabeth Craven was a travel writer and a good friend to Lady Izabela Czartoryska.⁵ She traveled around Europe with the margrave of Ansbach (1783-1786), whom she later married.⁶ With such connections it is by no means strange she was one of the diarists who met the king in person. John Lind, unlike the other authors listed in the paragraph, did not write a diary or memoirs. Instead, he penned a political pamphlet in a form of letters arguing against the partition of Poland. His observations are included in the article as his perspective is quite unique: Lind was a very close associate of Stanisław August, “a well known figure at the Polish Court, a Privy Councillor [sic], Governor of the King’s nephew, and a head of the newly established Warsaw cadet school.”⁷ His cooperation with

¹ J. Knight, *Coxe, William*, [in:] *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and B. Harrison, vol. 13, Oxford University Press, New York 2004, p. 878.

² H. M. Scott, *Harris, James*, [in:] *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and B. Harrison, vol. 25, Oxford University Press, New York 2004, p. 432.

³ K. Turner, *Wraxall, Nathaniel*, [in:] *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and B. Harrison, vol. 60, Oxford University Press, New York 2004, p. 396.

⁴ M. Laskowski, *Joseph Marshall: A Traveller of “Perfect Obscurity” in Stanisławian Poland and Other Parts of Europe*, “Polish-AngloSaxon Studies”, vol. 20 (2017), pp. 6-15.

⁵ Z. Gołębiowska, *W kręgu Czartoryskich. Wpływy angielskie w Puławach na przełomie XVIII i XIX wieku* (In the Circle of the Czartoryskis: English Influences in Puławy at the Turn of the 18th and 19th Centuries), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2000, p. 52.

⁶ K. Turner, *Elizabeth [née Lady Elizabeth Berkeley], Margravine of Brandenburg-Ansbach, Bayreuth*, [in:] *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and B. Harrison, vol. 18, Oxford University Press, New York 2004, pp. 94-95.

⁷ D. B. Horn, *British Public Opinion and the First Partition of Poland*, Oliver and Boyd Ltd., Edinburgh 1945, pp. 20-21.

the King continued after his return to England in 1773.⁸ Unfortunately, it seems that no English travel accounts from the period of the Great Diet (1788-1792), when the cooperation of the King with the reformatory movement resulted in the adoption of the Constitution of 3 May, have been published.

Stanisław August Poniatowski, the last monarch of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, ruled the country from 1764 until its downfall marked by the third partition in 1795. His reign was an almost uninterrupted string of turbulences for the state, which he was trying to reform despite constitutional constraints upon the royal prerogative as well as foreign intrigues. Up until this day he remains a controversial figure,⁹ criticized in the Polish historiography for the lack of resilience and praised for initiatives calculated to strengthen the Commonwealth, aborted by his watchful foes.¹⁰

The diaries written during this period are obviously full of references to the political involvement of the king and his style of governance. Nonetheless, there is much more to be found. An open and hospitable person, the monarch met some of the travellers in person and thus made it possible for them to draw conclusions about his personality and character as a private gentleman, not necessarily acting in the capacity of a king.

What these fortunate Britons were also quick to notice was the monarch's appreciation for and discernment of the English culture. The king had visited Britain as a young statesman and described his voyage in his own memoirs.¹¹ He admits there that he felt "an honest friendship towards the English, whose behavior and nearly all predilections I admired, which, however, did not make it impossible for me to hold opinions divergent from theirs on numerous issues" [translation mine – ŁN].¹² In all likelihood Poniatowski's own words must have been a frank remark: to the diarists he deigned to receive, he came across as a keen Anglophile. On the other hand, his Anglophilia was by no means boundless and the memoirs also contain passages critical of the English culture. Moreover, despite the words quoted above it cannot be said that his memoirs radiate with an amazement at Britain. Professor Wojciech Lipoński, on the basis of his diaries, concluded that his Anglophilia was "restricted to the culture of this country [England]. [...] [H]e was not passionate about its social

⁸ W. P. Courtney, *Lind, John*, [in:] *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and B. Harrison, vol. 33, Oxford University Press, New York 2004, p. 816.

⁹ A. Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, Wstęp (Introduction), [in:] S. Poniatowski, *Pamiętniki króla Stanisława Augusta. Antologia* (Memoirs of King Stanisław August: An Anthology), ed. M. Dębowski, Muzeum Łazienki Królewskie w Warszawie, Warszawa 2013, p. 10.

¹⁰ Cf. A. Zamoyski, *The Last King of Poland*, Jonathan Cape, London 1992, and J. Łojek, *Geneza i obalenie Konstytucji 3 Maja* (The Genesis and the Overthrow of the Constitution of 3 May), Wydawnictwo Lubelskie, Lublin 1986.

¹¹ S. Poniatowski, *Pamiętniki króla Stanisława Augusta. Antologia* (Memoirs of King Stanisław August), ed. M. Dębowski, Muzeum Łazienki Królewskie w Warszawie, Warszawa 2013, pp. 133-151.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 145.

arrangements or political ideas”,¹³ which is an opinion not shared by numerous historians¹⁴ (there is, however, an explanation as to the divergence of these opinions: his political and social Anglophilia might have changed with the passage of time¹⁵). Testimonies of his English guests, as signaled, are unequivocal.

Coxe states that Poniatowski’s Anglophile attitude had a practical dimension. Inspired by “a great veneration for the English constitution” (which allowed to vote in counties only those having a forty shilling freehold¹⁶), he “wished to introduce into the new code a law similar to ours relating to county elections, that no person should be intitled to a vote in the choice of a nuntio but those who possessed a certain qualification in land.”¹⁷ It is quite likely that the king’s proposal was somehow shaped by the English example. It is for instance known that Stanisław August wanted to model the parliamentary procedure on the English pattern during the Great Diet.¹⁸ However, contrary to Coxe’s pessimistic predictions expressed later, a bill curtailing the political prerogatives of the landless nobility was eventually passed by the Diet in 1791 and was also incorporated into the Constitution of 3 May.¹⁹

That the King was well acquainted with the British political system and had a good opinion about it, Coxe found out personally. As a companion of a British aristocrat carrying letters of recommendation,²⁰ he was presented to the king and subsequently met him a few times.

[...] [H]is Majesty now did me the honour to converse with me in English, which he speaks remarkably well. He expressed a very flattering predilection for our nation: he

¹³ W. Lipoński, *Polska a Brytania, 1801-1830. Próby politycznego i cywilizacyjnego dźwignięcia kraju w oparciu o Wielką Brytanię* (Poland and Britain, 1801-1830: The Attempts to Elevate a Country by the Intervention of Great Britain), Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, Poznań 1978, p. 19.

¹⁴ R. Butterwick, *Stanisław August a kultura angielska* (Poland’s Last King and English Culture: Stanisław August Poniatowski 1732-1798), Instytut Badań Literackich, Warszawa 2000, p. 16.

¹⁵ Prof. W. Lipoński notes that during his tenure as an assistant to Sir Charles Hanbury Williams, the British ambassador to Russia, Poniatowski learnt to “understand previously underappreciated issues” [translation mine – ŁN], only to become disillusioned with England later in life (W. Lipoński, op. cit., pp. 20-21). K. Zienkowska, having analysed the diaries written by Poniatowski, reached a conclusion similar to Prof. W. Lipoński’s: Poniatowski was then little interested in British politics and constitution. Over time, she continues, his attachment to England nonetheless developed and apparently also fuelled his appreciation of English political arrangements. By the time he became king, he had been inspired by the British constitution (K. Zienkowska, *Stanisław August Poniatowski*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1998, pp. 83-84, 98).

¹⁶ W. Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, vol. 1, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1765, p. 166.

¹⁷ W. Coxe, *Travels into Poland, Russia, Sweden, and Denmark. Interspersed with Historical Relations and Political Inquiries*, vol. 1, T. Cadell, London 1787, p. 183.

¹⁸ R. Butterwick, op. cit., p. 299.

¹⁹ J. Michalski, *Sejm w czasach panowania Stanisława Augusta* (The Diet in the Reign of Stanisław August), [in:] *Historia sejmów polskiego* (The History of the Polish Diet), vol. 1, ed. J. Michalski, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1984, pp. 404, 409.

²⁰ W. Coxe, op. cit., p. 253.

surprised me by his extraordinary knowledge of our constitution, laws, and history; which was so circumstantial and exact, that he could not have acquired it without infinite application: all his remarks were pertinent, just, and rational.²¹

Stanisław August's familiarity with the British system and history must have been truly extensive if it managed to make such an impression on a traveller who was a historian himself. It was not everything, though. As Coxe learnt, the king's interests transcended politics and the events of the past.

He is familiarly conversant with our best authors; and his enthusiastic admiration of Shakespeare gave me the most convincing proofs of his intimate acquaintance with our language, and his taste for the beauties of genuine poetry. He inquired much about the state of arts and sciences in England; and spoke with raptures upon the protection and encouragement which our sovereign gives to the liberal arts, and to every species of literature.²²

The king's curiosity about the state of science and art in England may explain why he devoted so much attention to his distinguished guests. It is also quite apparent he felt a connection with his fellow art patron, George III. Both monarchs acted similarly although the latter obviously on a much greater scale. The king of Britain established the Royal Academy of Arts in 1768 to educate artists and promote arts,²³ while Stanisław August held Thursday dinners to foster the flow of ideas between men of culture (the king's involvement in this form of patronage was noticed by Coxe; Craven even regretted that Poniatowski was a king – had he not been a monarch, he could have surrounded himself with “people, who, sacrificing only to the Muses, are better company”²⁴). Stanisław August probably also hoped that the Committee of National Education established with his support would one day play a role similar to the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge.²⁵ It seems the king also liked to think of himself as a reviver of science and improver of language which he claimed had degenerated over the preceding decades.²⁶ He managed to impart such an impression of himself on Coxe: “[t]he king zealously encourages all attempts to refine and polish his native tongue,

²¹ Ibid., p. 258.

²² Ibid., pp. 258-259.

²³ J. Marsden, *Patronage and Collecting*, [in:] *George III and Queen Charlotte: Patronage, Collecting and Court Taste*, ed. J. Roberts, Royal Collection Enterprises, London 2004, p. 184, date of access: 31 May 2020, <https://www.rct.uk/sites/default/files/file-downloads/George%20III%20and%20Queen%20Charlotte%20FINAL.pdf>.

²⁴ E. Craven, *A Journey through the Crimea to Constantinople, in a Series of Letters*, G. G. J. and J. Robinson, London 1789, p. 118; W. Coxe, op. cit., p. 256.

²⁵ R. Butterwick, op. cit., pp. 225-226.

²⁶ S. Poniatowski, op. cit., pp. 409-413.

which had been much neglected during the reign of his two predecessors”²⁷ (the Saxon monarchs). The diarist was appreciative of the king’s role in creation of the Committee, stating that the “advantages of this regulation have already been experienced.”²⁸

Another fortunate traveller who had the honor to converse with the king was lady Elizabeth Craven. She also noticed Poniatowski’s good command of English and his fondness of England. In her diary, however, the monarch is not simply depicted as an Anglophile but as an Anglomaniac: “he tells me he thinks men, animals, trees, every thing in short, that takes its birth or is produced by England, is more perfect than the produce of other countries – the climate, the soil probably, he says, may occasion this”.²⁹ The obvious question is how accurate Craven is when relaying the king’s words. In the light of the royal memoirs they seem rather incredible: Stanisław August was very critical of the lax upbringing of well born children as well as incomplete and unchallenging education, which he believed produced statesmen who were selfish, egoistic and conceited.³⁰ When switching the subject to the representatives of lower strata, i.e. deckhands, whom he considers crucial for England, he likens them to apes.³¹

Moreover, in a letter penned a few years before Craven’s visit in Poland, Stanisław August is very straightforward in denying his alleged Anglophilia. On the other hand, he also made it clear that it was his wish that the addressee of the letter should be the exclusive recipient of the information, which implies that Stanisław August wanted to come over as a sympathizer of England regardless of the intricacies of his true views (and whatever they were, he definitely succeeded): “you ascribe to me a strong predilection for England so I have to tell you, *for your personal information* [emphasis mine – ŁN], that reports about this are most false. I am nowadays very far from youthful enthusiasm, which falls in love and admiration without a reason because it does not know the reality. I admit I did not love France ruled by Mr Choiseul, who wanted to dethrone me, but I do love, even without any effort, France ruled by Louis XVI” [translation mine – ŁN].³² Yet, in another private letter written a decade later, he states that “I have always been English by inclination”.³³

A hint which may indicate some extent of Anglophilia is to be found in Marshall’s diary. The author did not meet the king but had a good fortune to sightsee the royal palace in Warsaw. There he noticed English-like interior

²⁷ W. Coxe, op. cit., p. 256.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 297.

²⁹ E. Craven, op. cit., pp. 119-120.

³⁰ S. Poniatowski, op. cit., pp. 145-147.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 150-151.

³² Stanisław August to Monet, 3 Nov. 1779, quoted in W. Konopczyński, *Anglia a Polska w XVIII wieku* (England and Poland in the 18th Century), “Pamiętnik Biblioteki Kórnickiej”, no. 4 (1947), p. 129.

³³ Stanisław August to Mazzei, 5 Feb. 1791, quoted in A. Zamoyski, op. cit., p. 328.

décor of some royal apartments, fitted up by English specialists brought from London.³⁴ There is, however, no evidence to corroborate this claim and in general the most conspicuous design pattern was French.³⁵

It is irrefutable that French aesthetics appealed much to the king. Although Coxe was impressed by the Poles' attachment to the traditional Polish attire, he singles out the monarch as a person who defied the custom and contributed to the popularization of foreign clothing among high nobility. So strong was his resistance to follow the local fashion, Coxe relays, that he refused to wear Polish clothing even for his own coronation and did not shave his hair according to the Polish habit.³⁶ Indeed, to the nobility's chagrin and despite their insistence, Poniatowski chose to present himself in clothes inspired by the style of Louis XV to charm the nation with the air of majestic pomp and make a statement about his alleged political independence. This, however, was not the only reason. His own vanity also played a part in his choices: the king was convinced that short hair did not suit him.³⁷ To excuse himself, however, he went as far as to acquire a number of medical notices advising him against trimming his hair.³⁸

What is quite striking is that the diarists were almost unanimous in their laudatory opinions about the monarch stirred so much controversy. Both his personal qualities and kingship elicited much praise and it was probably not because of his manifested Anglophilia since the sympathy towards the king was also common among travellers from other European countries.³⁹

Wraxall, who also met Stanisław August in person, speaks of him: "[t]he King is, of all the Princes whom I have ever seen, the most accessible, easy, and even captivating in his manners."⁴⁰ Stanisław August's approachability is a recurring theme. It has been already mentioned that Coxe and his companions were invited over a number of times after being presented to him (and also saw him once again at a party thrown by a royal brother). He bestowed the same honor on Craven at least once, asking her to listen to his translation of the letter from Walpole she had brought with her, which she clearly did not expect.⁴¹ When in company at a private gathering, he did not flaunt his superior station and was eager to set aside the principles of excessive formality to

³⁴ J. Marshall, *Travels through Holland, Flanders, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Lapland, Russia, Ukraine and Poland in the Years 1768, 1769 and 1770*, vol. 3, J. Almon, London 1772, p. 260.

³⁵ R. Butterwick, op. cit., p. 193.

³⁶ W. Coxe, op. cit., p. 254.

³⁷ H. Schmitt, *Dzieje panowania Stanisława Augusta* (A History of Stanisław August's Reign), vol. 1, Drukarnia Narodowa W. Manieckiego, Lwów 1868, p. 309.

³⁸ A. Zamojski, op. cit., p. 105.

³⁹ W. Zawadzki, Wstęp (Introduction), [in:] *Polska stanisławowska w oczach cudzoziemców* (Stanisławian Poland in the Eyes of Foreigners), ed. W. Zawadzki, vol. 1, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1963, pp. 12-14.

⁴⁰ N. W. Wraxall, *Memoirs of the Courts of Berlin, Dresden, Warsaw, and Vienna, in the Years 1777, 1778, and 1779*, vol. 2, T. Cadell and W. Davies, London 1806, p. 9.

⁴¹ E. Craven, op. cit., pp. 117-118.

accommodate visitors (for which habit, incidentally, he was criticized by his influential acquaintances⁴²), which Coxe experienced first-handedly when he was seated directly next to Stanisław August at supper.⁴³ The traveller sums up: “I never passed a more agreeable evening; the conversation was animated and rational; while the social ease and freedom, which diffused itself through every part of the company, realized this beautiful convivial picture: *La liberté convive amiable / Met les deux coudes sur la table* [liberty, an amiable guest, places both her elbows upon the table]”.⁴⁴ Craven’s impressions were the same: “[w]e were only fourteen people at the King’s dinner, and we conversed as cheerfully [sic] and as rationally as if we had not been at court.”⁴⁵

One of the reason why travelers felt so much at ease when they were in the royal presence must have also been the king’s open-mindedness and willingness to discuss even the most difficult problems that his interlocutors found appalling and ideas so controversial that many other monarchs would doubtlessly not tolerate: “[i]t is curious to hear me converse on these subjects [peasant slavery and ignorance of nobility] with the King; to hear me advance my doctrines, not the most favourable to monarchy, to defend even the beheading the martyr Charles [Charles I of England – ŁN]; but it is still more curious to hear his opinions, which are singular for a crowned head; in short, he is as warm an advocate for the natural rights of mankind, as was Algernon Sydney himself.”⁴⁶ Coxe must have felt similarly when, having timidly presented his criticism of the penitentiary system, he heard in reply that “[h]e who pleads the cause of the unhappy [...] is always listened to with pleasure”.⁴⁷ The king’s openness might have resulted from his background. He was not born as an heir to the throne but a regular nobleman whose ascent could not have been predicted. As such he had gained first-hand experience of political machinery in the province and was well aware of the realities of life outside the court. He was harshly critical of the narrow-mindedness and factionalism among the nobility and its harmful effects on the Polish political culture and public sphere⁴⁸ (on the other hand, before becoming a king he also took part in factional conflicts and succumbed to populism whose result was a dissolution of a Diet session⁴⁹).

The only diarist of the period who formulated any accusations against the king concerning his conduct and character traits was Wraxall. The diarist put the blame for a widespread promiscuity in Poland on Stanisław August’s habits

⁴² K. Zienkowska, op. cit., p. 132.

⁴³ W. Coxe, op. cit., p. 260.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 263.

⁴⁵ E. Craven, op. cit., p. 118.

⁴⁶ C. Lee, *The Lee Papers*, vol. 1, New-York Historical Society, New York 1872, p. 41.

⁴⁷ W. Coxe, op. cit., p. 271.

⁴⁸ Cf. for instance S. Poniatowski, op. cit., pp. 96-97.

⁴⁹ K. Zienkowska, op. cit., p. 67.

emanating on the high society surrounding him: “Stanislaus’s example tends not a little to encourage the depravity of his Court; and during his reign it has attained to a point, unexampled since the time of Augustus the Second; an area remarkable for the corruption of manners.”⁵⁰ Indeed, Stanisław August led quite a frivolous sex life and was known to have numerous mistresses even at the same time.⁵¹ It is also hinted at by Charles Lee in his correspondence; he considered the King’s behavior excessively indulgent, too.⁵² As a royal agent willing to promote the king’s designs abroad and otherwise charmed by him,⁵³ he could be hardly said to have had an interest in denigrating the monarch or feigning a righteous disgust. It is thus fairly evident that the king’s behavior in this respect did not add to his good reputation. Of course erotic libertinism was not unknown at the British court. Although George III cannot be accused of promiscuity, his close relatives were known to lead a life of quite relaxed standards. Such a behavior, however, was not treated with indifference; the Puritan mentality still lingered in Britain and extramarital sexual exploits drew the criticism of the press and were considered sinful to such an extremity that even the loss of American colonies was sometimes believed to be a punishment for them.⁵⁴

Moreover, Wraxall’s disapproval went beyond the private dimension of his love affairs and touched upon what he believed to be its public consequences. The diarist also criticized the king on the account of his financial prodigality, deemed by the author to be connected with Stanisław August’s predilection to surround himself with female courtiers. Yielding to their tastes and expectations, Wraxall elaborates, Poniatowski spent tens of thousands of pounds annually on artistic performances and entertainments just to run up debts, meanwhile neglecting the state affairs. So immoderate was his extravagance, he says, that it provoked the intervention of Thomas Wroughton, a British resident in Poland with whom Wraxall spent “a considerable part of the summer of 1778” and whose knowledge he greatly valued.⁵⁵ If Wraxall’s words are to be trusted, Wroughton, acting not in a formal capacity but as a friend of the monarch, tried in vain to impress on Stanisław August how destructive his approach was, only to hear that it was in fact a political measure supposed to endear the king to his subjects by imitating the style of Augustus II, who had preceded him on the throne of Poland⁵⁶ (reigned in 1697-1706 and 1709-1733). The explanation provided by the diplomat may seem credible.

⁵⁰ N. W. Wraxall, op. cit., p. 111.

⁵¹ A. Zamoyski, op. cit., pp. 125-126, 261; K. Zienkowska, op. cit., p. 247.

⁵² C. Lee, op. cit., p. 41.

⁵³ R. Butterwick, op. cit., p. 145.

⁵⁴ W. Lipoński, *Dzieje kultury brytyjskiej* (History of British Culture), Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2003, pp. 336-338.

⁵⁵ N. W. Wraxall, *Historical Memoirs of My Own Time*, vol. 1, T. Cadell and W. Davies, London 1815, p. 177.

⁵⁶ N. W. Wraxall, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, op. cit., pp. 52-55.

The resident (Wroughton) was not the only one who tried to intervene; Poniatowski's powerful uncle Michał Czartoryski, who had much experience with the management of great fortune, as well as Andrzej Zamoyski offered to help him with the task just to be crudely dismissed.⁵⁷ Wroughton's explanation is consistent with the reasons why the king disregarded pleas of nobility to dress in a Polish manner. Perhaps there is also a shadow of criticism regarding the indecency of royal luxury in Marshall's narrative, when he notices that the terrible situation of the state occasioned by the civil war did not diminish the magnificence and brilliancy displayed at the king's court.⁵⁸

Stanisław August's rule also won him much appreciation among the travelers despite the ultimate failure of many of his designs. Coxe states he "seemed calculated by his virtues and abilities to raise Poland from its deplorable state" and the reason why he failed was the interference of foreign powers and the conflicted nation.⁵⁹ Likewise, Linde praises his qualities such as good education, eloquence, worldliness, extensive knowledge and connections, all of which rendered him the best candidate available for the throne.⁶⁰ Coxe has no doubts that the king possessed the skills needed by a good reformer: "every part of this conversation impressed me with the highest opinion of the king's benevolence, patriotism, and legislative abilities" as well as his frank interest in the wellbeing of his subjects and objectivity of the judiciary.⁶¹

Monetary reform and creation of the Corps of Cadets are invoked by Linde as proofs of his sincere intentions and generosity while extended protection of a peasant life – a sign of the intention to pave the way for emancipation.⁶² Quite similarly, Coxe mentions the abolition of torture, passed by the Diet thanks to the royal initiative, and regards it to be a "regulation as expressive of his majesty's judgement as of his benevolence."⁶³ Coxe's comment, on the other hand, is just as much expressive of the diarist's progressive views – the Commonwealth was the second state in continental Europe to terminate the practice of torture in criminal cases.⁶⁴

Coxe describes the first reforms of Poniatowski's reign which quickly followed his election as "excellent" and capable of improving the internal administration of Poland and helping to shake off foreign influence.⁶⁵ What

⁵⁷ A. Zamoyski, op. cit., pp. 126-127.

⁵⁸ J. Marshall, op. cit., p. 260.

⁵⁹ W. Coxe, op. cit., p. 22.

⁶⁰ [J. Lind], , *Letters Concerning the Present State of Poland. With an Appendix Containing the Manifestoes of the Courts of Vienna, Petersburg, and Berlin. And Other Authentic Papers*, T. Payne, London 1773, pp. 14-15.

⁶¹ W. Coxe, op. cit., pp. 271-272.

⁶² [J. Lind], op. cit., pp. 37-42.

⁶³ W. Coxe, op. cit., p. 300.

⁶⁴ T. Korzon, , *Wewnętrzne dzieje Polski za Stanisława Augusta, 1764-1794* (Internal History of Poland under Stanisław August), vol. 4, Księgarnia L. Zwolińskiego i S-ki, Kraków 1897, p. 19.

⁶⁵ W. Coxe, op. cit., pp. 22-23.

these reforms were he does not specify but the most groundbreaking changes effected during the first Diets of the Stanislavian period were the curtailment of the power and unaccountability of the Grand Treasurer and Hetman (by assigning them to the newly created Treasury and Military Committees, respectively) as well as an introduction of majority voting on economic and military matters in bills submitted by these committees⁶⁶ – the reforms which are also singled out by Harris as “advantageous”.⁶⁷ These, among some others, are also the changes noticed and praised by Lind, who seeks their origin in the king’s scheme of improvement.⁶⁸ The approval of these measures among the British seems easy to explain. In the constitution of the United Kingdom, which was by no means an absolute monarchy (it was commonly described in Britain as a limited or parliamentary monarchy⁶⁹), *liberum veto* was obviously unknown and royal prerogative was incomparably more extensive in regard to the king’s control over his ministers, who could be appointed and dismissed by him at his own discretion.⁷⁰ In Poland, on the other hand, offices were held for life (with just few exceptions)⁷¹ so collegial institutions like the committees were crucial in order to remedy the neglect or abuse of officeholders, Lind insists.⁷²

In practice, however, Stanisław August’s plans were foiled – not because of his sabotage, neglect or poor execution but, as the diarists seem to agree, due to his isolation both within the country, where he had to struggle against turbulent nobility, and outside, i.e. internationally, being surrounded by governments scheming against the recovery of the Commonwealth.

Coxe and Harris defend the king against possible criticism even when talking about the developments in the Commonwealth which they wholeheartedly oppose, implying that the monarch had no power to prevent them or simply stating that under the circumstances he was constrained by there was no better solution to choose. The first strategy is employed by Coxe when he states that the king, who was “strongly inclined to toleration, was yet *obliged* to concur with the general sense of the Diet; and to confirm in their full extent all the laws which had been promulgated against them [dissidents]”. And subsequently: “the king, without influence, and consequently without a shadow

⁶⁶ H. Schmitt, op. cit., p. 268; J. Michalski, op. cit., pp. 351-354, 356.

⁶⁷ J. Harris, *Diaries and Correspondence of James Harris, First Earl of Malmesbury, Containing an Account of His Missions at the Court of Madrid, to Frederick the Great, Catherine the Second, and at the Hague; and of His Special Missions to Berlin, Brunswick, and the French Republic*, ed. [J. Harris] the Third Earl of Malmesbury, vol. 1, Richard Bentley, London 1844, p. 12.

⁶⁸ [J. Lind], op. cit., pp. 29-43.

⁶⁹ H. T. Dickinson, *The British Constitution*, [in:] *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. H. T. Dickinson, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, n.p. 2002, p. 6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

⁷¹ U. Augustyniak, *History of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth*, Peter Lang GmbH, Frankfurt am Main 2015, p. 89.

⁷² [J. Lind], op. cit., pp. 32-36.

of authority (...) was *forced* by the mediating powers to accede to all the conditions which they laid before him [emphasis mine – ŁN].”⁷³ The second strategy (but also the first, to some extent at least) is utilized by Harris when he comments on the changes implemented by the Diet of 1767-8 (when it was decided that the basis of the political system – the cardinal laws – were to remain unchangeable whereas the most important economic and military matters, called *materiae status*, such as tax increases, army increases, declaring war and making peace, forming alliances and concluding economic treaties required unanimity⁷⁴).

[...] [T]he king, with the most upright and righteous intentions, was obliged to choose the party of the Russians, as the least of two evils; for, had he embraced the other, the consequence would have been a most bloody and cruel civil war. [...] The knowledge of this [Russia’s determination to keep Poland subjugated and lack of any allies elsewhere abroad], joined to the perversity and restless jealousy of the nation itself, which, had it been let alone, would have done worse things by oversetting the most salutary steps the King had taken, such as establishing a mint, composing a military school, &c; this, I say, augmented still farther by the Russians being not only masters of the whole kingdom, but even the metropolis itself, induced his Majesty to enter into the views of the Empress, as the only power capable of defending him from foreign insults, and at the same time to curb the mutinous and unquiet disposition of his own people.⁷⁵

The quote above shows most clearly how the King’s cooperation with the Empress could be excused. As Harris claims, other states de facto consented to Russia’s hegemony in Poland, which was easily evident from its troops’ presence therein, so Stanisław August could not count on their support against the Russian intervention and demands. Moreover, as the argument goes, had he not sided with Catherine, the nobility themselves would have destroyed much more than Russia intended to have repealed so his decision was a tactical maneuver to save at least something of his previous achievements. In his opinion, it was a choice of a lesser evil, which exactly corresponds with the king’s professed sentiments articulated by him in a speech to the Diet.⁷⁶ It is also interesting to note that a similar argument was used by Nikolai Repnin, a Russian diplomat, when trying to convince the King to summon Russian forces for help to quench the Bar Confederation: Repnin intimated that if the King did not comply with his wishes, Russia would allow the opposition to undo his beneficial projects.⁷⁷

⁷³ W. Coxe, op. cit., pp. 28, 35.

⁷⁴ J. Michalski, op. cit., p. 364; J. Harris, op. cit., p. 22.

⁷⁵ J. Harris, op. cit., pp. 22, 24.

⁷⁶ A. Zamoyski, op. cit., p. 159.

⁷⁷ K. Zienkowska, op. cit., p. 178.

Both Coxe and Harris are immensely appreciative of the royal attempts to reform the state and their narrative is very apologetic when it comes to his choices. The nobles, conversely, are blamed by them. It was because of the dominant anti-dissident sentiments that Poniatowski had to yield and allow for discrimination, as Coxe argues. It was because of the ferocious intensity of selfishness and reactionary blindness among the nobility that he eventually had to side with Russia and countenance the introduction of the cardinal laws and *materiae status*, as Harris maintains.

Lind strongly defends selflessness of the king and purity of his motives when he argues that the bills reforming the executive branch (the creation of Treasury and Military Committees) were not calculated to and did not increase the royal power, contrary to what the opposition insisted, but only curbed the oligarchy and made laws operational and executable, thus contributing to the wellbeing of the whole nation. He also had no doubts that his words were for all intents and purposes a vindication “of a great and amiable character, from the aspersions thrown upon it by ignorance and party rage”.⁷⁸

In his admiration for the king, Coxe even revealed himself as an adherent of the royal policy. During his visit at a local dietine in Lithuania, the following exchange took place between him and local noblemen:

I then inquired whether the elected nuntios were of the king’s party; and they answered, “We have in this instance complied with his majesty’s recommendation.” – “You have acted,” I replied, “with great propriety: is he not a good prince?” – “A good prince!” returned the Poles, “yes, the most excellent that ever filled a throne.”⁷⁹

Well aware of the king’s failures as they were, almost none of the diarists suggested that Poniatowski was not cut out to be a king; they rather believed that he fought an unequal battle and faced insurmountable difficulties at home and abroad, with the political system itself working against him. Marshall admitted he was powerless to shield his country despite his genuine patriotism and intelligence, quickly adding that he had the greatest lords of his realm actively warring against him (it was being written during the Bar Confederation). Thus he thought it a smart move of the king to have recruited common people to a loyal regiment at his personal service, in which he saw a possible harbinger of hope.⁸⁰ No wonder, then, that with all her sympathy to Stanisław August, Craven felt sorry for him being the king of Poland, a country “where the monarchy rests on absurdity – an elected sovereign from among a numerous and proud nobility, every individual of whom thinks he has a better right to sit on the throne than the one elected. From such a basis springs every thing which can make mankind unhappy; their lives are passed,

⁷⁸ [J. Lind], op. cit., pp. 53-54.

⁷⁹ W. Coxe, op. cit., p. 340.

⁸⁰ J. Marshall, op. cit., pp. 261-262.

their minds employed, only in caballing or regretting.”⁸¹ It is one of many opinions pointing to the defects of the political system and of the ensuing vices of Polish nobility: their vanity and disloyalty. It is worth noting here that Craven’s close friend, companion and eventually a husband, the margrave of Anspach, belonged to the House of Hohenzollern, headed by the Prussian king Frederick the Great – an ardent enemy of Poland.⁸² There is nothing to indicate, however, that her remarks were somehow shaped by this acquaintance. Similar opinions were not unusual. It should be also remembered that at the time of her visit in Poland she had not yet married the margrave, nor had she been introduced to the Prussian king by her princely companion.⁸³

The only diarist who expressed opposite sentiments, convinced that Stanisław August lacked what was required to be a monarch, was Wraxall: “His Polish Majesty appears to great advantage on such occasions, from which ceremony is banished; for which he seems more designed by nature, than for public life and situations of difficulty.”⁸⁴ The king is seen by Wraxall as a puppet monarch owing the maintenance of his throne solely to the Empress.⁸⁵ On the other hand, it seems that Wraxall does not regard him as a traitor or an avid accomplice willing to preserve Russian hegemony in Poland of his own volition. Whenever the author speaks of him facing developments harmful for the Commonwealth or his position, he describes him as an “unfortunate” monarch, eg.: “[t]he unfortunate King, who retained little more of royalty than the name, was only an engine in the hands of the Court of Petersburg.”⁸⁶ Therefore, in Wraxall’s narrative Stanisław August appears to be guilty of political ineptitude, weak character, negligence and recklessness or even insufficient determination to become an independent ruler:

Instead of adopting measures which indicated any vigour of mind, and which might eventually lead to his emancipation, Stanislaus confirmed his political chains, by manifesting a disposition at once yielding, indolent, and submissive. No economy was observed in his expences [sic], no limits were affixed to his profusion. [...] If the present King had possessed a strong and vigorous mind; if to economy he had added policy, decision, and energy of character; it is probable that Poland might have been preserved from total ruin.⁸⁷

⁸¹ [E. Craven], *Memoirs of the Margravine of Anspach. Written by Herself*, vol. 1, Henry Colburn, London 1826, p. 140.

⁸² Not only did he play an active part in the dismemberment of Poland but he also sought to defame and humiliate the Poles in the eyes of Europe, as he did in a slanderous poem “La guerre des confédérés” (W. Konopczyński, *Fryderyk Wielki a Polska* (Frederick the Great and Poland), Universitas, Kraków 2010, pp. 149-152).

⁸³ [E. Craven], *Memoirs*, p. 145.

⁸⁴ N. W. Wraxall, *Memoirs*, vol 2, p. 105.

⁸⁵ N. W. Wraxall, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, p. 405.

⁸⁶ N. W. Wraxall, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, p. 21. Other examples: cf. *ibid.*, pp. 26, 85, 141.

⁸⁷ N. W. Wraxall, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, pp. 48-51.

He is presented as a king clinging to his throne despite being incapable of rising to the challenge before him. While the situation called for a strong leader, he proved to be irresponsible and meek. Thus he falls short of the demands of his difficult position. His main fault is that he allowed himself to be reduced to a tool of national subjugation and became resigned to it, lacking the talent and dedication to extricate his fatherland from such a tragedy.

How weak his position was internationally is vividly illustrated by Harris' anecdotes. As a diplomat having an access to the royal court, the diarist vividly describes the dynamics of power between Stanisław August and Nikolai Repnin. It clearly shows the level of Russian influence in Poland and Stanisław August's dependence on the will of Catherine's envoy. Harris is shocked by the extent of humiliation that Poniatowski silently suffers at his hands.

I was the unfortunate go-between to them at a masquerade at Prince Radzivil's, concerning dancing. His Majesty had a mind to stay till the room wherein we had supped was cleared, &c., it being larger, before he began the dance. Prince Repnin [the ambassador] was more impatient, and was for immediately beginning in another. The King desired me, on my telling him that the dance was going to begin, to say to Repnin that he chose to wait till a larger apartment was prepared. Repnin told me by way of answer to say to the King, "Cela ne se peut pas, et s'il ne vient pas, nous commencerons sans lui" ["it cannot be so, and if he does not come, we will begin without him" – translation mine ŁN]. The consequence of which was, his Majesty quietly coming to dance.⁸⁸

On another occasion Stanisław August was publicly told he could become a dancing teacher to make a living were he ever to be deposed. "What should we think if we heard an ambassador tell our King, 'If all trades fail, your Majesty may turn dancing-master'?", Harris concludes pointedly.⁸⁹

Not much changed with the passage of time. The period after the first partition is often referred to in Polish historiography as an ambassadorial-royal co-rule.⁹⁰ Wraxall, whose main informant seems to have been Wroughton, reports that as of 1778 Poniatowski was set aside by Russia and the real management of royal prerogatives lay with Otto Magnus von Stackelberg, a Russian ambassador to Poland.⁹¹ Such a statement does not differ much from

⁸⁸ J. Harris, op. cit. pp. 18-19.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

⁹⁰ Cf. for instance T. Cegielski and Ł. Kądziela, *Rozbiory Polski, 1772-1793-1795* (Partitions of Poland, 1772-1793-1795), Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, Warszawa 1990, p. 161; J. Łojek, *Ku naprawie Rzeczypospolitej. Konstytucja 3 Maja* (Towards the Reconstruction of the Commonwealth: The Constitution of 3 May), Wydawnictwo Interpress, Warszawa 1988, pp. 39-41.

⁹¹ N. W. Wraxall, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, p. 104.

the king's own complaints noted in his memoirs about Stackelberg's threats and blackmail used by him to have a say in the appointment of offices.⁹²

To sum up, the general consensus was that the king was an affable person with broad horizons and excellent manners, an Anglophile conversant in English culture, politics, history and innumerable other subjects; a good, patriotic monarch, whose reformatory attempts would have strengthened the state had they not been thwarted by the difficulties posed by the political system, exacerbated by aristocratic cliques and foreign influence. It was an image of him that overlapped with his depiction in the British press from 1772.⁹³ The only diarist with a negative assessment of his rule was Nathaniel Wraxall.

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⁹² S. Poniatowski, op. cit, pp. 447-450.

⁹³ Z. Libiszowska, *Życie polskie w Londynie w XVIII wieku* (Polish Life in London in the 18th century), Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, Łódź 1972, p. 141; magazines such as "Gentlemen's Magazine" or the "Oxford Magazine", however, were also very critical (cf. D. B. Horn, op. cit., pp. 39-41).

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