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THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE POLISH - LITHUANIAN COMMONWEALTH *A Commentary*

A Question of More Than Historical Significance

The federation of Poland and Lithuania, which survived for more than four centuries (1385 - 1795), is worthy of scrutiny not only by historians studying the problems of Eastern European history, but also by statesmen seeking political solution in Eastern Europe. Apparently, few agree that the soviet solution is final. Most important, the interested nations themselves would not accept the soviet solution if they could only express freely their will.

The present soviet design in Eastern Europe, which is also *formally* based on a federal principle, is unacceptable for at least three basic reasons. First, the soviet design has been imposed from outside, and not freely chosen by the nations concerned. Insofar as the Baltic States are concerned, N. S. Khrushchev himself, while visiting Scandinavia in the spring of 1964, had to admit indirectly that those nations did not freely join the Soviet Union. Attempting to justify the occupation of these states, Khrushchev tried to whitewash it with economic and cultural achievements, which allegedly were brought to the Baltic States by the soviet government.

Secondly, the Russian nation is all too clearly predominant in the soviet federalism of Eastern Europe. No one can deny this; it is clear to anyone who is acquainted in some measure with the Soviet system and there is no need to substantiate this fact. That a domination of one partner is dangerous to any federal association is evident even in such a free alliance as NATO, where some (de Gaulle, for example) object to the much less evident predominance of the United States.

Finally, soviet federalism in Eastern Europe is based on communist ideology, which is alien not only to most of the East European nations, but to the Russian nation as well. In general, introduction of ideological aspect in international relations is inconsistent with the modern principles of freedom, democracy, and progress. Communism today is nothing more than a convenient instrument of soviet domination. In fact, soviet federalism relies on this, for it is more an empire of one nation than a true federation of several nations.

Recent Reevaluation of Polish - Lithuanian Federalism

The nature of the Polish - Lithuanian federalism is quite different from that imposed by present - day Soviet Russian domination in Eastern Europe. The September, 1963 issue of *The Slavic Review* presents a new evaluation of the Polish - Lithuanian federalism by noted scholars in the field. Prof. Oswald P. Backus III has contributed an interesting leading article — "The Problem of Unity in the Polish - Lithuanian State." The Polish - Lithuanian federation has survived more than four centuries. Of the known historical federations, only the Danish - Norse Union (1357- 1814) surpassed it in duration. In the middle of the seventeenth century (1658) it was attempted to transform the Polish - Lithuanian federation into a federation of three equal states — Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine — but, because of intervention by Moscow and because of the disagreement among the interested parties, the plan was never realized.¹

The fact that at the end of the eighteenth century this Polish - Lithuanian federation hopelessly disintegrated against the combined efforts of Russia, Prussia, and Austria, cannot deny its previous long - flourishing existence. It seems to me that the essential question in analyzing the phenomenon of Polish - Lithuanian federalism is not "why this state disintegrated before the machinations of the great powers," as prof. O. P. Backus III formulates it, but why was it able to survive so long and why there were so many supporters of its renewal in Poland as well as in Lithuania throughout the entire nineteenth century. These supporters were especially active during the period of 1918 - 1920, while under the leadership of the future marshall of Poland, Josef Pilsudski, who stemmed from Lithuania.[2](#)

Prof. Oscar Halecki, writing in the just - cited *The Slavic Review* and attacking vigorously and not always with sufficient basis the theses of prof. O. P. Backus III, has correctly noted that "the positive approach to the problem" is not why Poland - Lithuania disintegrated at the end of the eighteenth century, but "how the Polish nation survived." Probably an even more interesting question would be "how did the Lithuanian nation survive?" We must search for answers to the first and the second question in the tradition of Polish - Lithuanian federalism.

Insofar as the events of the end of the eighteenth century are concerned, I tend to agree with the conclusion of prof. Backus, that "foreign intervention was more a *coup de grace*" than a realistic reason for the collapse of the Polish - Lithuanian republic. Parenthetically, we completely agree with prof. Halecki's suggestion that the designation "Polish - Lithuanian Commonwealth" is more appropriate than "Polish - Lithuanian state," used by prof. Backus, for it more precisely expresses the idea of the Polish - Lithuanian republic. This is vigorously attacked by prof. Halecki, who called the entire article by prof. Backus "so definitely unfavorable to Poland" (as if a historian should be concerned at all what is "favorable" or "un-favorable" to one or the other nation). Dr. J. Jakštas, formerly professor of history at Kaunas and Vilnius Universities, who also writes on the problem in the cited *The Slavic Review*, disagrees with prof. Backus' interpretation of the end of the eighteenth century. In other respects Dr. Jakštas positively values prof. Backus' study and states that it presents "a new view of the fateful events in the history of the Polish - Lithuanian state and deserves the most careful consideration."

Lack of Unity or Breakdown of Federalism?

Agreeing with the conclusion of O. P. Backus III,, that foreign intervention was more a *coup de grace* than anything else, it is hardly possible to agree with certain of his reasons for the collapse of the Polish - Lithuanian republic at the end of the eighteenth century. Throughout the entire article, as well as in the closing paragraphs, prof. Backus appears to regret the insufficient unity as well as lack of stronger central (federal) government in the Polish - Lithuanian federation, which perhaps could have saved the republic from the tragic events of the late eighteenth century.

For example, speaking about the period of agony of the republic (the second half of the eighteenth century), which was also a period of trial of great reforms, he writes: "Unfortunately, while unity had been strengthened, the union itself was declining."

It is true that the reform of the latter part of the eighteenth century led to the strengthening of unity. It is also true that in the final, though by no means perfect and hastily accepted, expression of these reforms — the Constitution of May 3, 1791 — the central federal government was substantially strengthened by the introduction of hereditary monarchy and the elimination of the famous *liberum veto* right. But it is also true, that the Constitution of May 3 seriously violated the basic principles of federalism. Lithuania was not even mentioned in the Constitution. Although soon, as a result of opposition to the Constitution of May 3, it was attempted to correct some of the provisions against Lithuania's rights and against the principle of federalism itself, but it was already too late. And it was too late not just because of foreign intervention, but, what was more important for the question being analyzed, because of historical opposition.

By the way, this opposition appeared in the so-called Confederation of Targowica, whose supporters — of whom there were many in Poland as well as in Lithuania — considered not entirely without basis the May 3 Constitution as the grave of the Commonwealth and incessantly requested Catherine II to intervene. Some of them even agreed to lead Moscow armies, which were sent to occupy Poland and Lithuania. These are tragic and very unpleasant events to recall, but it is not the task of a historian to hide them. The Confederation of Targowica reinstated the old dualism of the republic and even considered introduction of a trialism, similarly as in 1658. That the supporters of Targowica Confederation were not just blind instruments of Moscow is evident in the fact that even the king joined it. The so-called spirit of, Targowica permeated political life in Poland and Lithuania throughout the nineteenth century. Traces of this spirit can probably be encountered even today.

Without analyzing deeper the complexity of all these problems, it must be admitted that any attempt of reform was dangerous to the federation of Poland - Lithuania, as it is to any federal union of states. The basic principle of any federation is *sint uni sunt sive non sunt*. The famous veto right is also an almost inescapable ingredient of any federation. The eighteenth century publicists and supporters of reforms in Lithuania and Poland used a lot of ink against this right, but it was difficult for them as it is today for the critics who object to the veto right of the great powers in the Security Council of the United Nations. Elective monarchy and veto were the basic pillars of the federation, and it was very difficult to shake them. Their elimination, through the eyes of the time, meant nothing else but an introduction of absolute government (*absolutum dominium*). Election of the king and veto right were the bases of Polish - Lithuanian federalism. That is why, when the May 3 Constitution eliminated both of these provisions, quite an effective opposition arose against the

Constitution, an opposition which was not afraid to invite Moscow's aid. It must be noted in passing that, in the public opinion of Poland and Lithuania of that time, Moscow was not such a scarecrow as it became during the nineteenth century. This opinion was prevalent not just in Poland and Lithuania, but also among the intellectual strata of Western Europe. Even such an agnostic as Voltaire prayed to Catherine II : "*Te, Caiharinam laudamus, Te, dominus, confitemur.*"

This is why the collapse of the Polish - Lithuanian republic was not such a great tragedy in the eyes of the leading strata as we attempt to imagine these events at present. It must be recalled that the possibility of a division of the republic had been present since the middle of the seventeenth century. There was a grain of truth in the popular saying of the time that "the republic thrives on disorder." The more sophisticated contemporary analysts of the state of the republic attempted to show that the weakness of the republic and her inoffensiveness toward the neighbors were the best guarantees of her survival. That is why they viewed with alarm all attempts at reforms, in which they saw, among other things, a plot against the federal principle in favor of unity. The May 3 Constitution was a step in this direction. However, it not only failed to save the republic, but perhaps only accelerated its downfall. As already emphasized, the final collapse was not a result of foreign intervention alone, but also a result of internal opposition to reforms.

Social and National Factors

In analyzing the disintegration and downfall of the republic, we cannot omit another dimension of this problem. A new historical factor, factor of nationality and national state, arose together with the French Revolution and other events of the period. Along with liberalism and democracy, this factor dominated the entire history of the nineteenth century. The American Revolution had a notable influence on its formation. To this day the europocentric historiography of the old world paid too little attention to this American influence. The United States, after all, was the first trailblazer of the national emancipation movement, which was followed in the nineteenth century by South American and European nations, and which is followed in the twentieth century by most of the African and Asian nations.

It is notable that one of the gallant fighters of the latter half of the eighteenth century for the liberty of Poland and Lithuania — Thaddeus Kosciuszko — considered himself, and was considered by others, a student of George Washington. Actively participating in the American Wars of Independence, he embraced not only the common spirit of national emancipation but also other ideas of democracy, social progress, and economic reforms. He understood that national liberation is a task of all its people, not just the work of the leading strata — the boyars and nobles. "Liberty," claimed Kosciuszko, "can be defended only by the hands of free men, or by those, who are acquainted with the rightness and sweetness of their government." Since the larger part of the inhabitants of Poland and Lithuania — the peasantry — still were under the heavy yoke of feudalism, however, the first task was the emancipation of the serfs in order to persuade them to fight for the freedom of their country.

The leaders of the Lithuanian revolt of 1794, Jokūbas Jasinskis and Karolis Prozoras, were even more radical. The former, deliberating the calling of the peasants to revolt and the ways of financing the rebels, openly wrote: "The army in America was not paid at all for so many years, and we will not be behind those, who, like we, themselves earned their liberty."³

However, in order to draw the peasantry into the struggle for freedom it was very necessary to abolish serfdom, which was not done by the May 3 Constitution. Other freedoms also should have been granted, for, as Kosciuszko would say, only having tasted "the sweetness of liberty" could they have become true fighters for freedom. One correspondent, writing from Lithuania soon after the proclamation of the May 3 Constitution to the newspapers *Gazeta Narodowa* (Warsaw), correctly noted: "I cannot see in your constitution the guarantee of freedom and property to the poor peasant against the mortifying greed (of the boyars) . . . Why is it that in the same district one peasant has to work only two days for a good lord, while another six days for a wicked lord and in addition be beaten by him." No doubt, such a peasant could not be expected to be a good fighter for freedom. Because of this, it is possible to completely agree with the historiosophic conclusion of the cited correspondent, that the Spartan republic was destroyed by the suppression of helots and that the republic of Poland and Lithuania cannot boast about freedom until there are millions of helots within its borders.

A more active participation of the peasantry in the defense of the state, however, would have led it to a deeper national consciousness and would have raised the language question. Although at the end of eighteenth century the boyars of Lithuania, Ukraine, and Belorussia could already communicate in Polish, this was by no means true of the peasantry of Lithuania, Ukraine, and Belorussia. Appeal to the peasantry could be made only in their native tongue. The leaders of the 1794 revolt understood this well, appealing to Lithuanian peasants and inciting them to join the revolt through proclamations in the Lithuanian language. Even Moscow grasped this basic fact. Seeking to isolate the peasants from the revolt, Moscow also appealed to them in proclamations, written in the Lithuanian language, in which she attempted to explain the hard life of the peasants in the republic and even promised to better their situation. It must also be admitted that such propaganda from Moscow had a certain success, even though, having occupied Lithuania in 1795, Moscow soon forgot the promises. The situation of Lithuanian peasant not only did not improve, but even deteriorated ; serfdom itself flourished until 1861, carefully protected by occupation administration, often against a clear desire of the Lithuanian manor lords to abolish it.

The rise of the national question would have put the Polish - Lithuanian federalism in a completely new light. Neither the reform supporters of the eighteenth century, nor the critics of the order of the republic grasped this, for the national question had not arisen yet. The nineteenth - century historians also failed to give due attention to the question, for they

sought reasons for the downfall of the republic in state decentralization, in the right of *liberum veto*, in the moral degeneration, and elsewhere. The Russian occupation, of course, notably slowed down the movement of national awakening which would have inevitably arisen with the social and economic reforms in the nineteenth century. A foreign occupation postponed the passage of the reforms for more than a century. On the other hand, Russian "occupation of Lithuania not only did not hamper the spreading and growth of the influence of Polish culture in Lithuania, but indirectly even aided this process. At least until 1831, the old University of Vilnius (1803-1831), under special patronage of the Czar, became a true center of Polish civilization. It is, therefore, hardly possible to agree with the view of present-day soviet Lithuanian historians, that the 1795 Russian annexation of Lithuania turned out to be beneficial to the Lithuanian nation.

Despite earlier statements made in this paper, in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Russia started social and economical reforms, also the Lithuanian national awakening began manifesting itself almost at the same time. National awakening appeared almost completely independently, seeking its basis not in the eighteenth-century federation with Poland, but in thirteenth - and fourteenth - century Lithuania; in other words, in the pre-federalist period.

Of course, it would be a pure speculation to attempt to guess what would have happened if the social and economic reforms at the end of the eighteenth century in the Polish-Lithuanian republic had not been annulled by a foreign occupation. One thing we can be sure of, however, is that the social and economic reforms would have produced the national problem not only in Lithuania, but also in the Ukraine and, perhaps, even in Belorussia.

That this would have affected Polish - Lithuanian federalism there can be little doubt. Even if the national problem would not have destroyed federalism from within, neither would it have contributed to greater centralization and stronger federal government. It seems to me that prof. Backus has no foundation for claiming that the disintegration of the Polish - Lithuanian state was caused by lack of strong central government. It is also doubtful whether the strengthening of the central government would have maintained the union.

NOTES

1 Cf. M. K. Dziewanoski, "Dualism or Trialism? Polish Federal Tradition", *The Slavonic and East European Review*, June, 1963. It is regrettable that Dziewanowski, in his otherwise interesting article, adheres too much to the traditional pro-Polish interpretation, as is evident even from the title of the article.

2 Cf. L. Lewandowski, *Federalizmu, Litwa i Bialorus w polityce obozu belwederskiego*, Warszawa, 1962.

3 H. Moscicki, *General J. Jasinski*, 1917, p. 298.