The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, 1733–1795: Light and Flame. Richard Butterwick. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. 2020. xxiii + 482 pp. $45 Hardback ISBN 9780300252200.

The year 1795 saw the final removal from the map of Europe of what had once been its largest polity, over a million square miles at its height in the 1640s. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was a multi-ethnic, multi-religious consensual parliamentary system, based on the consent of its citizen body as expressed through a network of local elective bodies, the *sejmiks*, which sent envoys to a central *sejm* (parliament) in Warsaw. Until the mid-seventeenth century, this system had dominated east-central Europe. Its borders included much of modern Poland, all of modern Lithuania and Belarus, most of modern Ukraine and Latvia, and some of what is now western Russia. A century later, however, it was in precipitate decline, its economy in ruins after a series of devastating wars, mostly fought on its own territory, between 1648 and 1721. Its political system was paralyzed by the notorious *liberum veto*, first cast in 1652, by which a single envoy from one of the sejmiks could break a session of the sejm. In the reign of Augustus III (1733–1763) only one sejm was successfully completed. Since most taxes had to be agreed by the sejm, this had reduced the once-proud commonwealth to an insolvent laughingstock.

The Commonwealth's neighbors had every interest in maintaining the political anarchy in which some Poles and Lithuanians took a perverse pride, since it meant that they were not subject to monarchical absolutism, which most regarded with horror as a threat to their liberties. By the 1730s, Austria, Prussia, and Russia, agreed to keep matters as they were by intervention in the Commonwealth's internal affairs where necessary. Augustus III spent most of his time in Saxony, occasionally scuttling into Poland to hold meetings of the Polish-Lithuanian senate council in Wschowa (Fraustadt), the nearest town across the border, to conduct essential business, before returning to Dresden. In his absence, the most significant political force in the Commonwealth was the Russian ambassador.

The partitioning of Poland-Lithuania in three stages (1772, 1793, 1795) did not occur because of the decline of the Commonwealth, but on account of its revival, which began with the election of its last king, Stanisław August Poniatowski, in 1764, and climaxed in the reforms of the Four-Year Sejm (1788–1792), which in turn culminated in the constitution of May 3, 1791. This remarkable document was influenced by enlightened ideas and has a good claim to being the first modern constitution in Europe. It reformed the sejm; abolished the *liberum veto*; incorporated a law on towns that opened the way to the extension of full citizen rights, previously limited to nobles, to burghers; introduced a hereditary monarchy, and established the basis of a proper system of executive government. The Four-Year Sejm's decision to raise a professional standing army of 100,000 represented a real threat to the Commonwealth's neighbors, especially Prussia. They responded by removing it from the map.

Richard Butterwick has spent years researching this story in considerable depth. He has published excellent studies on the influence of British culture on Poniatowski, and of the Polish-Lithuanian Catholic church during these turbulent years. He has an unparalleled knowledge of the sources, which is reflected on every page of this new study which, while very scholarly, is also directed at a wider audience. After a brief introductory chapter laying out the nature of the Commonwealth and its history down to 1733, he looks at the reign of Augustus

III and considers the main economic, social, and cultural developments as the Commonwealth began to recover from the long cycle of wars.

As Butterwick observes, Polish historians have, since the late nineteenth century, been divided over the extent to which the *szlachta*, the noble citizens of the old Commonwealth, were to blame for the partitions. The "Cracow School," while not exonerating the cynical manipulations of the partitioning powers, argued that by selfishly trumpeting their love of liberty and refusing to countenance the strengthening of central authority, they doomed their commonwealth to its fate. The "Warsaw School" took a more optimistic line regarding the nature of the political system, reluctant to condemn what could be seen as a precursor of modern democratic systems predicated on liberty. Butterwick takes a balanced and thoughtful approach to this long-running argument, although, generally speaking, he is on the side of the optimists. He is certainly not blind to the problems and faults of the system, but his emphasis is on the way in which reformist currents developed after the election of Poniatowski, and recounts well the story of the dramatic coming together of parties with radically differing visions of how best to solve the Commonwealth's problems during the Four-Year Sejm. It was this coming-together of republican and monarchical visions at the last moment in April and May 1791 that produced the remarkable compromises which resulted in the Constitution.

The book's subtitle, "light and flame" is derived from a comment made by Charles Yorke, the later Lord Chancellor, about his friend Poniatowski, whom he had met ten years before the latter's elevation to the throne: "I can assure you…both of his judgement and his virtue, there is matter in him capable of catching light and flame." This is apposite, because although the book is not a biography, it essentially focuses on Poniatowski, who was at the center of the political drama, and is really a history of his reign, which takes up over two-thirds of the book, with the chapter on the reign of Augustus III acting as context and a prologue. Poniatowski is a controversial figure, not least because, although he was dedicated to reform inspired by the enlightened ideas of the day, he was also a political realist, who in consequence sought to persuade Empress Catherine II of Russia, his former lover, that a reformed Commonwealth would provide Russia with a powerful ally. This was a highly controversial policy, that earned him the enmity of many, and not just among the avid supporters of the republican status quo, who sparked the anarchic Confederation of Bar in the late 1760s. Poniatowski's decision to abdicate his throne on November 25, 1795, thereby effectively sealing the partition, and the fact that he was granted a generous financial settlement and lived out his days in comfort in Russia compounded his crimes in the eyes of his detractors, leading to accusations that he was nothing more than a Russian stooge by historians such as Tadeusz Korzon and the populist rabble-rouser Jerzy Łojek.

Poniatowski has already been ably defended by Adam Zamoyski in his 1992 English-language biography. Butterwick is also sympathetic to Poniatowski, and skilfully presents the problems that he faced. He takes a wider lens than Zamoyski, and provides a clear-sighted, thoughtful, and balanced account of the Commonwealth's demise, focusing on the light emanating from the enlightened Catholicism that Poniatowski espoused, and the flame of resistance to Russia sparked by the second partition. He is not blind to the faults of the Commonwealth's political system, but his account is more balanced and positive than that given in Jerzy Lukowski's English-language works on eighteenth-century Poland-Lithuania, in which Lukowski, while recognising the positive influence of the Enlightenment on the

Commonwealth, makes little attempt to conceal his contempt for the "parish-pump" politics of the old system.

One of the many virtues of Butterwick's book is that, by complicating the picture on the basis of deep and up-to-date research, the work will facilitate the teaching of eighteenth-century Poland-Lithuania to Anglophone students. It is written with verve and color, although at times, Butterwick's profound knowledge of the period and personalities involved means that he assumes a little too much from a less-informed readership. The overall themes of the book are, however, expressed with clarity and insight. It deals well with the historiographical arguments concerning the period and provides a convincing picture of the political manoeuvrings of the Commonwealth's last years. There is little to criticize. The Constitution was far more than the product of political manoeuvring during the Four-Year Sejm, and Butterwick might have devoted more attention to the external cultural influences which transformed Polish political philosophy in the age of the Enlightenment. Montesquieu and Rousseau are given their due, but more might have been said concerning the 1780s debates on the American Constitution, which were fundamentally concerned with the nature of republican government and were closely followed in Poland-Lithuania. They had much to do with the transformation of the older forms of republican thought that underpinned the old political system. This is a minor quibble, however; there is only so much that can be covered in such a synthesis, and this book, which has just been awarded the *Pro Historia Polonorum* prize for the best foreign-language book on Polish history published between 2017 and 2022 is an outstanding achievement.

Robert Frost, University of Aberdeen