

**JOHN SOBIESKI:
LOTHIAN PRIZE ESSAY
FOR 1881, PP. 3-69**

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LOTHIAN PRIZE ESSAY

FOR

1881.

BY

EDWARD H. R. TATHAM, B.A.

BRASENORSE COLLEGE.

"Non perchè re sei tu, sì grande sei,
Ma per te cresca e in maggior pregio sale
La maestà regale."

VINCENZIO DA FILICAJA, *Canzone.*

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JOHN SOBIESKI.

1344 in 1875

THE Kingdom or Republic of Poland has always seemed a strange phenomenon in European history, partly from the aboriginal character of its population, and partly from its exceptional constitution. The ancient Sarmatians, who occupied the same territory, had no share in the old Roman civilisation, but rather, by their constant irruptions upon the empire, were mainly instrumental in its downfall. Christianity was introduced in the tenth century; but, until recent times, no other civilising force has ever effected a permanent conquest of the country. During the eight following centuries the Poles, surrounded by enemies—on the north and east by more barbarous tribes, on the south and west by a superior civilisation—were exclusively confined to the defensive; and so missed those humanising influences to which a conquering nation has so often had to submit. As late as the eighteenth century they might truly be called the lineal descendants in race, in character, and almost in habits, of the hunters and shepherds of the ancient North. Throughout their history there were two great classes in the State; the so-called noble class—the heirs of the savage in their desire for equality, and of the nomad in their love of freedom—and the peasant class—the descendants of captives taken in war—whose lives and properties were at the absolute disposal of their masters. Only in the western portion of the kingdom was there a burgher class, and this was on the same political footing with the serfs. The union of two great evils arising from such a system—licence and servitude—made the Polish constitution as disastrous as it was unique. Poland thus differed so widely, both socially and politically, from every other European state, that it would be impossible to examine any important period of her

¹ The burghers, however, were under a separate civil jurisdiction. A tribunal for administering this foreign or Teutonic law was established in 1347 in six principal towns.

history without explaining alike her position in Europe and some of her internal peculiarities.

Although considerably¹ larger than France, Poland took scarcely any part in the general history of Europe before the end of the sixteenth century. Once only, just before the taking of Constantinople, we find her with Hungary striving to check the advance of the Turks, when she lost in battle her king Wladislas VI. (1444). As she was the north-eastern outpost of the Church, the Popes took care that she should

European position of Poland, always be remarkable for her submission to the Holy See. But it was beyond their power to check the turbulence of the nobles or to instil any love for a higher civilisation. During the sixteenth century, chiefly through the enterprise of foreigners, commerce made rapid advances in the country. English and Italian merchants, favoured by treaties between the king and queen Elizabeth, settled in the prosperous town of Dantzic, and spread a moderate knowledge of Poland in western countries. That this knowledge was only moderate may be judged from a valuable geographical work² published in London early in the seventeenth century, in which we are told that the Lithuanians still worshipped idols, and that in another province they had not learned the use of the plough. The reformed doctrines were widely disseminated before the year 1600; but their progress was checked by the activity of the Jesuits. The Papal

At first inconsiderable, Nuncio of that time³ complains of the exclusiveness of the Poles and their distrust of foreign nations. They used commonly to boast that alliances were of no service to them, for, if the country were conquered, they could, like their ancestors, recover in winter what they had lost in summer. Yet very early in their history they had lost the rich province of Prussia⁴ by neglect and mis-government. When, in 1573, they allied themselves with France by electing as their king Henry of Valois, they bound him by such a crowd of onerous restrictions that he fled the country in disgust at their wild and barbarous freedom. During the next three quarters

Owing to exclusiveness, of a century (1573-1648), under three princes of conspicuous ability, Poland began to rank among the second-rate powers of Europe; but her internal condition was all the while fruitful. Unceasing struggles between the greater

Anarchy,

¹ Poland in the seventeenth century measured 2600 miles in circumference, while France measured only 2040.

² *Cosmography*, by Peter Heylin, published in 1648, reprinted from his *Microcosmus*, published in 1621.

³ *Relatione di Polonia* (1598), quoted by Ranke (App. No. 66 to his *History of the Popes*). The same Nuncio says the Poles confessed to him that they preferred a weak monarch to an able one.

⁴ The whole of the country called Prussia once belonged to Poland. Part of it, after being lost in the eleventh century, eventually came into the hands of the Elector of Brandenburg, who acknowledged the nominal suzerainty of Poland; the other part—Polish Prussia—was not lost till the eighteenth century.

and lesser nobility, and the cruel oppression of the peasants by both alike, distracted the kingdom. Then followed thirty years of desolating war, in which the country was several times on the brink of final subjugation by a foreign invader. The Poles themselves attributed their survival to God alone¹, who had preserved them to form a barrier against the Turks.

At the close of this period, instead of finding Poland exhausted almost to death, we see her occupying the proud position of the saviour of Europe. At a most critical moment, when the last great wave of barbarian invasion was rolling over Europe, and seemed likely to overwhelm the ancient empire of the Hapsburgs, this little republic stood firmly in the gap, and became the bulwark of Christendom against the infidel. Nay more, by her own sacrifices no less than by her opportune intervention, she was the main instrument in setting the final

limit to the Ottoman advance. This extraordinary character and exploits of her patriot king, John Sobieski. Rising to the throne by his personal merits alone in spite of the most malignant envy, he was the first native king unconnected with the old royal line. It may be said that his life from his early manhood is at no time the history of a private man; it rather comprises the whole contemporary annals of his country. Yet it forms the most destructive comment on her institutions, both social and political, and on the character of the national nobility. While we must admire a conservative constitution which admits of the supremacy of the best man, we cannot but deplore those faults in its working which had the effect of nullifying his authority. In Poland there was neither a republic nor a monarchy, but the sovereignty of one man under the control of an unrestrained class, which mistook licence for freedom. In order to understand the position of Sobieski and the difficulties with which he had to contend, a short account of the Polish constitution is indispensable.

The authority of the king was originally absolute, but in a nation of fierce warriors he was easily controlled by armed assemblies of his subjects. His consulting them, though at first only a mark of favour, was soon looked upon as a right; and in course of time they even claimed the disposal of his dignity. Two great dynasties successively reigned in Poland. During the first, founded by Piast, a native Pole (850-1386), the dignity was hereditary; during the second, that of Jagellon (1386-1573), though in practice

Monarchy generally becomes elective.

¹ See Dr. South's letter to Dr. Edward Pococks, Hebrew lecturer at Oxford, describing his travels in Poland. (p 71.) He mentions that he had heard them make this remark: and it is curious that his letter bears date Dec. 15th, 1677—six years before the relief of Vienna.

hereditary, it was in theory elective. After the latter period the whole nobility met in arms to elect a king, and, though a relation of the old line was preferred, he was considered to have no claim. This assembling of the Pospolite, as it was called, was in an emergency the prerogative of the king, and during an interregnum of the Primate, the Archbishop of Guesna, who acted as interrex. The election was not legal unless it was unanimous; and when this was accomplished, seldom without violence, the republic imposed upon the new monarch a contract styled "pacta conventa," the conditions of which he swore faithfully to observe. His privileges

His privileges. were few. He always presided in the national assembly, and he might if he chose command the army. But his most important function was the appointment of officers of state. These are said to have amounted in all branches to the astounding number of 20,000; but only the most important, about 140, composed the Senate, which was the middle estate of the realm and the real executive.

Besides the bishops there were three great orders in the administration, of which only the first two had seats in the

How composed. Senate. These were the palatines, the castellans, and starosts. Each palatine, like a Norman baron, was the military commander and supreme judge in his province or palatinate; he was also its recognised political head. The castellans were his deputies, who discharged the same functions in a more confined area. The starosts were inferior magistrates, with military and judicial duties, whose chief privilege was the high

The officers of state. value of their benefices. There were twelve great dignitaries who were entrusted with the higher executive,—six for the kingdom of Poland, viz., the Grand Marshal, the Grand General, the Second General, the Chancellor, the Vice-Chancellor, and the Grand Treasurer, and six parallel officers for the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The latter, when incorporated with Poland in 1386, had insisted on a distinct administration; but the arrangement proved most unfortunate, for the Polish magnate had no authority over his Lithuanian compeer. In the army, as in the administration, they might act quite independently of each other, and the very equality made a collision inevitable. Over the Senate as a whole the king had no real power, but the Diet exercised a rigid supervision.

This body—the third estate of the realm—had originally been composed of the whole adult nobility. So jealous were the Poles of their privileges that it was not till

¹ This is denied by Salvandy, *Histoire du Roi Jean Sobieski*, vol. ii. p. 52, ed. 1876, though he has elsewhere admitted it by implication (vol. i. p. 402-3).

² The generals had no seat in the Senate by virtue of their office, but the king always made them palatines or castellans. DALRYMPLE, *Polish Manuscripts or Secret History of the reign of John Sobieski*, ch. i. p. 9.

1466—two hundred years after the foundation of the House of Commons—that they consented to form a representative system. A Diet of 400 deputies met every two years, and was liable to be

Its dependence upon the nobility. summoned on extraordinary occasions. The members of this assembly were absolutely without discretionary powers. They were elected in the dietines or provincial assemblies, and received minute instructions as to their course of action. After the dissolution of the Diet they had to appear again before their constituents and give an account of their stewardship. Those who had offended found their lives in peril. Thus the Diet took its stamp from the prevailing temper of the nobility, and, as this was almost always quarrelsome, the place of meeting often resounded with the clang of sabres. During the period which we shall have to consider, this

Results of this dependence. dependence will explain the constant neglect of proper means for the national defence. The cavalry of the nobles—the flower of the troops—displayed all the disadvantages, and none of the merits, of a standing army. They were always under arms, and ready to use them in any feud; but they could not brook strict discipline, and as they grew more luxurious their disinclination to a long campaign was duly reflected in the ranks of the Diet. The national haughtiness found its vent in intestine strife.

The veto. A most disastrous provision made it necessary for every resolution of the Diet to be unanimous. Any deputy might, without reason assigned, pronounce his veto upon the subject under discussion; nay, more, by a refinement of this privilege,² he might by withdrawing declare the Diet dissolved, and until he was induced or compelled to return public business was suspended. This power, though very ancient, was not exercised till 1652, but was afterwards repeated with increasing frequency. It would once have been dangerous for an individual to defy the mass, but when the republic was in a state of anarchy it was easy to find supporters, and the gold of France or Austria often proved a powerful incentive. Another mode of

Obstruction. obstruction was called drawing out the Diet, which could not³ sit for more than six weeks. This consisted in the proposal and tedious discussion of irrelevant matter, until the day of dissolution arrived. In this state of things a resort to force was very common, and the public streets were often the scenes of a sanguinary fray.

When the Diet was not sitting, the Senate, with the king as its president, was responsible for the government. But if the nobles were dissatisfied with their measures, or if the veto had hopelessly clogged the wheels of state, recourse was had to an extraordinary assembly called a “confederation.” This

Confederations.

¹ DALEYRAC, ch. i. p. 84.

² The first was simply “veto,” the second “veto, sicut activitatem.”

³ They were always prolonged, however, when public business was pressing.