

PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

For readers outside Poland, the political system of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth may appear both impressive and difficult to understand. Created by the Union of Lublin in 1569, it became one of the largest states in Europe, stretching from the Baltic Sea almost to the Black Sea. Its territory, population, and cultural diversity placed it among the major powers of early modern Europe. Yet within less than a century this vast state entered a deep crisis that eventually led to its decline.

Understanding this paradox requires a closer look at the Commonwealth’s political structure. It was neither a typical monarchy nor a modern republic, but a unique hybrid of both.

A question of responsibility

For more than a century Polish historians and writers have debated the causes of the Commonwealth’s collapse. Two main interpretations gradually emerged.

One, associated with the so-called Warsaw historical school and strongly present in nineteenth-century patriotic literature, emphasized external aggression. According to this view, the Commonwealth fell primarily because it was attacked and eventually partitioned by powerful neighbours.

Another interpretation, associated with the Krakow historical school, stressed internal causes: weaknesses of the political system, shortsighted decisions of the elite, and the gradual erosion of public responsibility. This perspective found powerful expression in Stanisław Wyspiański’s drama *The Wedding*, where the famous line declares: “the cursed hand was our own.” The present work follows this line of reflection. It does not deny the importance of foreign intervention, but asks a more uncomfortable question: why was the state so vulnerable to that intervention?

A man who leaves his home unguarded should not be surprised when thieves enter. In politics, as in ordinary life, opportunity makes the thief.

Structural weaknesses of the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth was a federation of two unequal political traditions. The Crown of the Kingdom of Poland had developed a system of noble self-government and political liberties. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania, by contrast, had been shaped by a different historical experience – a vast state built through expansion over predominantly Ruthenian* lands and governed according to traditions closer to Byzantine and steppe despotism.

In the sixteenth century the Polish nobility attempted an unprecedented political experiment: transforming a large multinational monarchy into a republican* system governed by elected kings and powerful representative institutions. Inspired partly by the example of Italian city-states, Polish elites believed that noble liberty could sustain a vast state. What worked in a compact republic, however, proved far more difficult to maintain across a territory approaching one million square kilometres.

The Commonwealth differed from both major models of power that emerged in seventeenth-century Europe. In England, Parliament gradually gained predominance over the monarch. In France, royal authority became almost absolute. In the Commonwealth both powers remained weak: the King was restricted by the Sejm*, while the Sejm itself could be paralysed by procedural vetoes.

The state also lacked several institutions that were becoming standard in early modern Europe. It possessed no permanent political police, no developed intelligence service, and no effective counterintelligence. Intelligence, and internal security were often left to individual magnates rather than coordinated state institutions. The Commonwealth thus became a peculiar civilisational hybrid: a system of noble political liberty coexisting with political traditions closer to eastern despotism.

Such hybrids rarely endure. They tend toward despotism or anarchy; and anarchy often leads to despotism imposed from without. The history of Eastern Europe offers a telling example. Bohdan Khmelnytsky, who despised the weakness of the Polish government, later knelt before the tsar's representative and swore allegiance to Tsar Alexei without dictating any conditions.

This episode illustrates the deep civilizational divide within the Commonwealth itself: between a Western political culture based on negotiation and an Eastern tradition of unconditional submission to centralized authority. A state built on such tensions proved incapable of reform. By the end of the eighteenth century, it fell prey to its predatory neighbours.

Dynastic rivalries and foreign influence

Another weakness of the Commonwealth lay in the dynastic dimension of its politics. Unlike hereditary monarchies, the Polish–Lithuanian state elected its kings. What was intended as a safeguard of liberty gradually turned the royal election into a contest among the great courts of Europe.

From the late sixteenth century onward, the Commonwealth became an arena in which the Habsburgs, the Bourbons, and other dynasties competed for influence. Each election attracted foreign candidates, diplomats, subsidies, and political intrigues. The throne of one of Europe's largest states was effectively placed on an international market.

These rivalries did not end with the election. The interests of ruling dynasties often conflicted with those of the Commonwealth. The Vasa dynasty, which ruled Poland for most of the seventeenth century, was deeply entangled in conflicts connected with its Swedish claims and alliances with the Habsburg court. Royal marriages strengthened these ties: Queen Constance of Austria represented Habsburg interests, while Queen Marie Louise Gonzaga largely followed the policy of the French court. Thus, royal policy frequently became entangled in the ambitions of foreign dynasties rather than strengthening the state.

Defensive doctrine and military weakness

The political culture of the nobility strongly favoured peace and resisted the creation of a large standing army. This attitude stemmed less from pacifism than from political and economic considerations.

The nobility was reluctant to approve regular taxation for a permanent army and feared that a strong military would strengthen royal authority at the expense of noble liberty. As a result, the Commonwealth

relied largely on temporary mobilization rather than permanent military structures.

Geography further aggravated these weaknesses. The Commonwealth lacked strong natural defensive barriers, and mobilising the army required lengthy parliamentary procedures and taxation debates. For decades these weaknesses were masked by the brilliance of individual commanders and the determination of their soldiers. Victories such as Kircholm (1605) and Klushino (1610) created the illusion of lasting strength. In reality, the stability of the Commonwealth depended increasingly on exceptional individuals rather than durable institutions. When those individuals disappeared, the fragility of the system became impossible to ignore.

In the long run this system proved dangerously inadequate in an increasingly militarised Europe. Neighbouring states maintained standing armies, developed efficient fiscal systems, and reacted far more quickly to military threats.

The Commonwealth therefore often entered wars with a structural delay. Before an army could be assembled, parliament had to convene, taxes had to be approved and collected, and troops had to be raised and equipped.

The “Independent” Tribunal under Magnate Control

Even the judicial system reflected these structural weaknesses. In order to obtain the nobility’s consent for taxation during the war against Ivan IV the Terrible, Polish King Stephen Báthory from Transylvania was forced to renounce his exclusive right to judge members of the nobility. In its place the Crown Tribunal was created, later joined by the Lithuanian Tribunal. Báthory is said to have warned the nobility: “May this self-will not destroy you.” His warning proved prophetic. Gradually dominated by magnate factions, the tribunal became a mirror of growing disorder in the Commonwealth.

The weakness of law enforcement could reach grotesque proportions. The nobleman Samuel Łaszcz reportedly accumulated more than two hundred court sentences against himself and had the written verdicts stitched into the lining of his ceremonial cloak – a parody of justice.

Thus, a state whose political culture once proclaimed that “Poland stands not by government but by the virtue of its citizens” transformed this principle into a bitter pun. In Polish the difference is only a space between two words: *nie rzqd* and *nierzqd* – yet the meaning shifted from the absence of oppressive rule to the presence of disorder, corruption, and public lawlessness.

Thus, the Commonwealth moved toward its tragic end.

History as the Work of Individuals

Beyond the political and constitutional system, which may be judged in many ways – from uncritical admiration to severe condemnation – the decisive force shaping reality was always human agency.

Within the narrow framework of that system, King Stephen Báthory and Chancellor and Hetman Jan Zamoyski found room to raise the Commonwealth to great-power status. Barely seventy years later, however, a handful of individuals sufficed to bring it to ruin. After internal decay and heavy blows from external enemies, the state – weakened, divided, consumed by its own disorder – vanished from the map of Europe by the end of the eighteenth century.

Political systems and geopolitical circumstances create conditions and constraints. Yet the fate of individuals, societies, and states depends above all on people – on their competence, their will, and their sense of responsibility.

Which individuals bore the greatest and most destructive influence on the fate of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in the mid-seventeenth century? Judge for yourselves. And consider what might have happened, had even one of them been absent.

The drama of the Commonwealth in that time was not an abstraction, but the work of specific men. My task is to present it in its most plausible form – to reconstruct a reality shaped by clashing ambitions, private interests, and, at times, astonishing shortsightedness and neglect.

For this reason, the work takes the form of a drama, in which each act becomes a step leading further – INTO THE ABYSS.