

**DARIUSZ KOŁODZIEJCZYK**NATIVE NOBILITIES AND FOREIGN ABSOLUTISM: A POLISH-  
OTTOMAN CASE

In 1986 an inspiring book was published by Orest Subtelny, who revisited the origins of absolutism in some Central-Eastern European countries. The new political system was often enforced by foreign dynasties upon the local nobility. Subtelny focused his interest on the famous noble refugees of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century – Ferenc Rákóczi, Dimitrie Cantemir, Johann von Patkul, Ivan Mazepa, Pylyp Orlyk, and Stanisław Leszczyński as well as the reasons and circumstances of their involuntary emigration. According to Subtelny, the success of the East-European nobilities in stemming the rise of absolutism in their midst resulted in their subsequent vulnerability to absolutism from abroad. To quote this author: “*East European historians like to explain the Polish Deluge, the Ukrainian Ruin, the Ottoman invasion of Hungary, and the devastation of Livonia and Moldavia in terms of external factors akin to natural disasters. But it is clear that most of these catastrophes were brought on by structural weaknesses in East European societies, in particular by their inability to centralize power.*”<sup>1</sup> Though we do not have to accept Subtelny’s thesis unconditionally, it certainly merits some consideration. The Polish-Lithuanian case is very instructive. After having successfully fought against any efforts to centralize power by their own kings, the Polish-Lithuanian nobility proved unable to defend their state against foreign absolutisms in the time of partitions.

In the 16th century Polish nobles perceived the Habsburg absolutism as the main foreign threat to their liberties. Not by accident, they had never elected a king from the Habsburg dynasty in spite of frequent Habsburg candidacies to the throne. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, France of Louis XIV replaced the Habsburg Empire as the most imminent danger to Polish republicans. Perhaps even Muscovy ranked above the Ottoman Empire in the plebiscite of most dreadful European tyrannies. Contrary to a stereotype, cherished by the Polish nobles (and some historians even today), the Commonwealth’s role as an *antemurale Christianitatis* was highly questionable and Polish-Ottoman wars took up little time in the history of mutual, mostly peaceful relations.

Having tacitly accepted the Ottoman domination in Moldavia and Hungary by the mid-sixteenth century, Poland-Lithuania secured a lasting peace with the Porte and remained beyond the scope of direct Ottoman expansion.

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<sup>1</sup> Orest Subtelny: *Domination of Eastern Europe. Native Nobilities and Foreign Absolutism, 1500–1715*. Gloucester, 1986, pp. X and 51.

Apart from Podolia, temporarily conquered in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottomans never tried to transform the noble society of Poland-Lithuania. Yet, the ominous image of the sultan and his authoritarian rule played an important role in the internal propaganda of the Commonwealth. Some propagandists went even so far that they produced fake letters attributed to Ottoman statesmen, whose authors disclosed their plans to suppress the political liberties of the Polish nobility.

In this article I would like to present two such letters, originating from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The first one was produced in 1646 during the violent debate between King Ladislaus IV, who wanted to push the Commonwealth to join Venice in her war against the Ottomans, and the noble diet opposed to the war. The letter, issued in the name of Sultan Ibrahim, warned the Polish king against breaking the peace with the Porte: “You have been asking for our favor [...]. Now you want to rob the land of Jerusalem from our power. Thus, you are an unreasonable and insensible man. Don’t you fear death with your meager followers, once you’ve decided for a war? [...] Don’t count on my friendship anymore [...] as I will take your capital of Cracow along with your subjects and crush it without mercy, and I will leave my bloody sword in memory. [...] I will trample your priests and your crucified God and I will root out your faith forever, and I will pull your ordained ones with horses.”<sup>2</sup> The letter was dated on 26 May in Constantinople and provided with a quite correct intitulation. It circulated in numerous Polish copies until the forgery was discovered. “Postea fraus apparuit et inventor detectus” -noted the Lithuanian chancellor Albert Radziwiłł in his diary in January 1647.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> “Żądałeś łaski naszej przez Samuela Otwinowskiego, Piotra Ożgę, Stanisława Żółkiewskiego, który był otrzymał za przyczyną wielu Panów Naszych Radnych, a teraz masz radę o Nas, i chcesz Jeruzolimską Ziemię z mocy Naszej wydrzeć. Przeto nierządny i nieradny jesteś człowiekiem, czyli się nie boisz śmierci z temi małemi ludźmi, kiedyś już wojnę umyśleł? Jawna tobie będzie, dopiero wtenczas zrozumiesz moc moję, którą mam w Państwie swoim. Przeto zachowaj umysł swój aż do lata. Już tedy więcej nadzieje i przyjaźni nie miej we mnie, i w słabych murach twoich, gdzie i Kraków stolicę z twemi poddanemi potłukę, bez wszelkiego miłosierdzia wezmę, i pamiątkę po sobie zostawię krwawy miecz mój, którym posłał. Księża i Ukrzyżowanego Boga twego podepcę, i na wieki wiarę twoję wykorzenię, i poświęconych twoich końmi targać każe”; Wrocław, Biblioteka Zakładu Narodowego im. Ossolińskich [hereafter, Ossolineum], ms. 224, p. 883–884.

<sup>3</sup> Albrycht Stanisław Radziwiłł: *Memoriale rerum gestarum in Polonia 1632-1656*, vol. 3: *1640-1647*. Wrocław, 1972, p. 301; cf. Ludwik Kubala, *Jerzy Ossoliński*. vol. 2, Lwów, 1883, pp. 58 and 351. To my surprise, while preparing a final version of this article for publication I was able to identify the origins of this forgery. In his biography of Hetman Stanisław Żółkiewski, published in 1988, the late Polish historian Leszek Podhorodecki mentioned a letter by Sultan Osman II announcing the war to King Sigismund III and dated on 26 July 1618 [(Leszek Podhorodecki, *Stanisław Żółkiewski*. Warsaw, 1988, p. 265]. This information raised my suspicions since in 1618 the Polish-Ottoman relations had been peaceful and the armistice of Busza, concluded in September 1617, was followed by the solemn treaty document (*ahdname*) issued by Osman II in spring 1619 [cf. Dariusz Kołodziejczyk, *Ottoman-Polish Diplomatic*

As King Ladislaus did not give up his war plans easily, the debate was resumed during the Diet, called in October 1646. The unpopularity of the war among the nobility cannot be explained merely by the fear of Ottoman power. A no less important factor was related to domestic policy. The nobility feared that King Ladislaus, once authorized to build a strong army, would later use this army to introduce the *absolutum dominium* in Poland-Lithuania. A most interesting speech during the Diet was delivered by a famous defender of the noble liberty, the deputy from Czernichów, Jerzy Ponętowski, who claimed that even a victory over the Turk and a conquest of Constantinople would be harmful to Poland. As the king treated the Turkish war as his private enterprise, it was unlikely that he would share his spoils with the Republic. And even if he did so, argued the deputy, how different were these peoples [i.e., the Ottoman subjects] from the Poles! Accustomed to slavery, after their admission to the Republic they would bow easily before the throne thus gaining the royal favor. “As for us -he concluded- we would share the fate of the [ancient] Macedonians, who led to war as free people would have returned slaves if not the death of Alexander.”<sup>4</sup> Like in the forged letter, quoted above, the image of oriental tyranny served Ponętowski to mobilize the nobility against the king. The confrontation between the throne and the Diet ended with a public humiliation of King Ladislaus, who was forced to openly resign from his war plans.

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*Relations (15<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> Century). An Annotated Edition of ‘Ahdnames and Other Documents.* Leiden, 2000, p. 130]. Moreover, just in July 1618 Osman II sent a friendly letter to Sigismund III, announcing his accession to the throne, thus completely different in tone from the letter mentioned by Podhorodecki [Ryszard Majewski, *Cecora. Rok 1620.* Warsaw, 1970, p. 27; the letter’s translation is preserved in the copy book by the official crown translator, Samuel Otwinowski (Ossolineum, ms. 3555), thus its authenticity is unquestionable]. An examination of the letter, mentioned by Podhorodecki, leaves no doubts that it is yet another forgery, intended to serve internal propaganda. Moreover, it is almost identical with the faked letter of 1646! The author of the latter one apparently used the old matrix, changing only the date and the names of the sultan and king. To give the reader a proof, I quote the same fragment, cited already in n. 2, from the earlier letter dated in 1618: “Żądałeś łaski naszej przez Samuela Otwinowskiego, Piotra Ożgę, Stanisława Żółkiewskiego hetmana swego, któraś był otrzymał za przyczyną wielu Panów Radnych, a teraz masz radę o nas i chcesz ziemię naszą Hierosolimską z mocy naszej wydrzeć. Przecie nierządnym i nieradnym w tej mierze jesteś człowiekiem. Czyli nie boisz się śmierci z temi swemi ludźmi małemi, kiedym już wojnę umyślił? Jawna będzie i to wszystko stanie się, za czym wtenczas dopiero zrozumiesz moc naszą, którą mamy w Państwie naszym. Zachowajże umysł twój aż do przyszłego lata, w krótkim czasie poznasz mocy potęgę naszą. Nic tedy więcej nadzieje w przyjaźni naszej ani w słabych murach twoich (które poddanemi twemi potłukę) nie miej. Kraków stolec twój bez wszelkiego miłosierdzia wezmę, a pamiątkę po sobie zostawię. Teraz krwawy mój miecz tobie posyłam. Część ziemi twojej podepcę. Ukrzyżowanego Boga twego i wiarę tu i na wieki wykorzenię. Więc i poświęconych twoich koźmi targać każę”; Cracow, Biblioteka Czartoryskich, ms. 2731, p. 109–110.

<sup>4</sup> Karol Szajnocha, “Dwa lata dziejów naszych” in: idem, *Dziela.* Warsaw, 1877, vol. 9, p. 118.

The second letter presented in this article was composed on the eve of the Polish-Ottoman war of 1672. Unlike the first one, it has been long believed to be genuine. As late as 1968, a prominent Polish historian treated this letter as an original document by Sultan Mehmed IV.<sup>5</sup> Yet, from the Ottoman chronicles we learn that in May 1672, once the war had already been decided on, the sultan ordered his grand vizier to respond to the Polish vice-chancellor, but the letter from the Polish king was deliberately left unanswered by the Ottoman Padishah.<sup>6</sup> Thus there was no imperial letter addressed to the Polish king in spring 1672.

In spite of the imminent danger, the Commonwealth was divided between the proHabsburg party of King Michał Wiśniowiecki and the proFrench party of Grand Hetman Jan Sobieski. Both parties prepared for a civil war and almost ignored the Turkish threat. The royalists even feared that a strong army of Sobieski could overthrow the throne instead of fighting the Turks. An anonymous author of our letter apparently tried to reconcile and mobilize both sides to face the common enemy. He did so by exposing the Turkish sultan's vicious plans to suppress the noble democracy.

The letter began with the sultan's intitution, including Greece, Egypt, Amasya, and Buda, but also... Brazil and America! Though ridiculous, it could not be a sufficient proof of forgery as the geographic knowledge of Polish crown translators was rather poor and they made errors while rendering genuine Ottoman documents as well. Then the sultan announced war, accusing the Polish king of breaking the peace. The most incredible fragment announced the dissolution of the noble tribunals of Lublin and Piotrków, abolition of noble liberties and emancipation of peasants from their serfdom.<sup>7</sup> Considering rather poor knowledge of Polish institutions on the side of Ottoman dignitaries, it is hard to believe that the sultan bothered with such details while writing to the king. Yet, the message must have had tremendous bearing on its noble recipients. The Polish nobles treated their tribunals, founded by Stephan Báthory in 1578, as the most important warrant of liberty along with the diet, the principle of free election and the *liberum veto*. In spite of all its inventiveness, the faked letter did not change the result of the war as the campaign of 1672 was lost by the Poles.

<sup>5</sup> Zbigniew Wójcik, *Między traktatem andruszowskim a wojną turecką. Stosunki polsko-rosyjskie 1667–1672*. Warsaw, 1968, p. 304; the forgery is already discussed in my book *Podole pod panowaniem tureckim. Ejalet kamieniecki 1672-1699*. Warsaw, 1994, p. 52–53. Nevertheless, in a most recent study the aforementioned letter is still treated as an original imperial document; see Andrzej Gliwa, "Najazd tatarski na ziemię przemyską podczas wojny polsko-tureckiej w 1672 r." *Rocznik Przemyski* 39 (2003), no. 4: 37–64, esp. p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> Kołodziejczyk, *Podole pod panowaniem tureckim*, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> "Trybunał Lubelski i Piotrkowski limitować rozkażę, od was samych panów wolności odejmę i w poddaństwo obróczę, a poddanych waszych z niewoli wykupię," Kórnik, Biblioteka PAN (Polskiej Akademii Nauk), ms. 372, fol. 378a-379b, esp. 379a.

In the two quoted letters, forged with the purpose to serve the Polish domestic propaganda, the Ottoman sultan was presented as the prototype of an Oriental tyrant. Yet, when compared with genuine Turkish letters, preserved in the Polish archives, this model proves completely false. The Ottomans consequently defended the noble Republic from any efforts to change its political system, be it from inside or from outside. In the 16th century, they openly sided with the Polish noble republicans, supporting antiHabsburg candidates, first Henri de Valois, then Stephan Báthory, finally Sigismund Vasa.

One century later, a characteristic event occurred during the negotiations following the Karlowitz treaty. The new Polish king, Augustus II, tried to strengthen his position in Poland-Lithuania by building his own army and private diplomacy as he had already done in his native Saxony. Yet, when the royal document, confirming the Karlowitz treaty, was sent to Edirne in 1699, the Porte refused to accept it, stating that it had been issued merely in the name of the king and not in the name of the whole Republic. To end the stalemate, a new document was prepared in the royal chancery including such Latin expressions as *nos inclytamque Republicam Poloniae* and *nostro atque totius Reipublicae nomine*. In the perennial conflict between the royal *maiestas* and noble *libertas*, which dominated internal politics in Poland, the Porte chose to act as a guarantor of the traditional noble institutions.<sup>8</sup>

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Porte vigorously defended traditional noble liberties in Poland-Lithuania against foreign attempts, especially by Russia of Peter the Great. The first article of the treaty of Edirne, concluded between Russia and the Porte in 1713, stated as follows in the Turkish version:

*“The tzar of Muscovy should remove his troops from Poland within two months of the date of this temessük. No Muscovian troops should remain in Poland. Before and after signing these articles [the tzar] should not give reason and excuse for their remaining [in Poland], by saying: ‘I cut the pay of the aforementioned soldiers. They are not my soldiers [any more];’ he should certainly withdraw them from Poland within two months and he should not interfere in the matters of the Poles. Henceforth, he should not send his troops to Poland under any pretext; and he should completely withdraw his hand from Poland.”*<sup>9</sup>

Following the pacification with Russia of 1711-1713, the Porte withdrew its support for Stanisław Leszczyński and concluded a new treaty with his rival to the Polish throne, Augustus II, freshly reinstated as the king of Poland. The first article of the new Polish-Ottoman treaty, concluded on 22 April 1714, stated that:

<sup>8</sup> Kołodziejczyk, *Ottoman-Polish Diplomatic Relations*, p. 155–156.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 161.

*“Whatever in relation to Poland was contracted and fixed by the Muscovian deputies in the first article of the temessük concluded between the high state and the Muscovian tzar in Edirne on the thirteenth day of June in the year 1713 since the birth of his excellency Jesus, has [now] been contracted that the ‘Polish article’ be observed by the Polish king and republic as well.”<sup>10</sup>*

On the one hand, it would be hard to find a better example of the decline of the international position of Poland at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Ottomans did not even bother to compose an original treaty with the Commonwealth, they just inserted a cross reference to their treaty with Russia. Yet, on the other hand, the contents of the quoted article clearly demonstrate their concern for the independence of the noble republic. Needless to say, they did not do it for altruistic reasons; nevertheless, till the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century they consequently fought to prevent Poland-Lithuania from becoming a Russian satellite. Not by accident, the first and second partitions of Poland were preceded by Ottoman failures in their successive wars with Russia.

To sum up, it seems that the factual role of the Porte in the internal and external policy of the Commonwealth was very far from the one expected of an “oriental tyranny.”

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 642.