

With Fire and Sword

Military Factors in the Disintegration of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

Mikołaj Dueholm
University of Minnesota

Abstract

This article discusses seventeenth- and eighteenth-century circumstances that adversely affected the armed forces of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It identifies lack of a professional army, overreliance on cavalry, failed attempts at reform, funding problems, and unrestricted power of the magnates as the primary military factors leading to the eventual partition of the Commonwealth. These factors have been relatively unexplored in previous literature and serve to highlight the importance of synthesizing diverse perspectives and experiences in understanding the fraught history of Eastern Europe.

Article

Introduction

The year 1569 is one of the most critical dates in Polish and Lithuanian history. This year marks the Union of Lublin, a constitutional settlement that brought the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania together into a loose confederation known as the Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów, or the Commonwealth of Both Nations, the largest polity in Latin-Christian Europe.¹ This state occupied the eastern edge of Europe and was distinctive from its western neighbors in a number of important ways. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth covered a much greater land area, stretching from the Black Sea to the Baltic and encompassing much of what is today Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic States (see figure 1). This unique geographic position contributed to a cosmopolitan blend of East and West visible in everything from language to dress, combining a largely feudal economic and military system with relative religious toleration and political freedoms, at least for the aristocracy. This nobility, known as the *szlachta*, was a social class particular to the Commonwealth, comprising a higher share of the population than in any other European nation and enjoying an unprecedented array of rights and privileges.²

¹ Satoshi Koyama, "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a Political Space: Its Unity and Complexity," *Regions in Central and Eastern Europe: Past and Present*, eds. Tadayuki Hayashi and Hiroshi Fukuda (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2007), 137-153, doi: src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no15_ses/08_koyama.pdf.

² Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland in Two Volumes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 202. For more discussion of the *szlachta* and their unique nature, see for instance: Anna Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Queen Liberty the Concept of Freedom in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth*, trans. Daniel Sax (Leiden: Brill, 2012). For comparative analysis of other European aristocracies, see Jonathan Dewald, *The European Nobility, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Similarly unique was the religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the Commonwealth. Its vast territory incorporated Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Orthodox Christians, and Protestants. It also included trader communities from as far afield as Armenia and Persia. These people used a variety of languages, including Latin, Polish, Ruthenian, German and Yiddish, and maintained a high standard of literacy and education, even among women and the non-aristocracy.³



Figure 1: Map of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1648⁴

Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1648

The Commonwealth’s political system was also distinctive. As Norman Davies aptly observed, “Its laws and practices were inspired by deeply rooted beliefs in individual freedom and civil liberty which, for the period, were exceptional.”⁵ The *szlachta* considered themselves citizens rather than subjects and, despite wide disparities in wealth and power, were legally equal. A common phrase captured this sentiment well: “A nobleman on his garden patch was any Wojewoda’s [administrator’s] match.”⁶ This equality extended all the way up to the throne, as the Commonwealth’s government was predicated on the concept of joint rule between the *szlachta* and the king. Therefore, unlike the more absolutist monarchies emerging in France and Spain, the Commonwealth maintained a weak central

³ Koyama, “The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a Political Space,” 139.

⁴ Mathias Rex, “Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1648,” *Wikipedia*, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Polish-Lithuanian_Commonwealth_in_1648.PNG, accessed November 6, 2021.

⁵ Davies, *God’s Playground*, 321.

⁶ Benedict Wagner-Rundell, *Common Wealth, Common Good: The Politics of Virtue in Early Modern Poland-Lithuania* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 75. See also p. 1.

authority and functioned essentially as a republic. Within this unique arrangement, local decisions were left to the *sejmiki*, or dietines, which then nominated delegates to the Sejm, or diet, in order to represent the Commonwealth as a whole. The king governed alongside the Sejm, which held the exclusive power to make laws, wage war, levy taxes, and determine foreign policy. Since decisions of the Sejm had to be unanimous, this put a strong emphasis on agreement through consensus-building.⁷ It also resulted in a climate where, “the nobility constantly suspected the ruler of machinations to extend his powers.”⁸ These potentially competing dynamics of consensus and suspicion were a hallmark of the Commonwealth’s political system and set it apart from its neighbors. Together, these unique geographical, social, and political factors made the Commonwealth perhaps Europe’s strangest state. Nevertheless, it operated as an important player on the European stage and earned the admiration of both foreign and domestic observers.⁹

Despite enjoying general peace and prosperity for approximately the first eighty years of its existence, the Commonwealth was soon beset by a variety of threats, both foreign and domestic. Consequently, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw Poland and Lithuania’s gradual decline, as the central government was unable to defend its borders and the political system was co-opted by powerful magnates and foreign powers for their own agendas. Though the Commonwealth eventually produced Europe’s first written constitution and conducted a series of important reforms in its final years, it was partitioned three times between 1772 and 1795 at the hands of Austria, Prussia, and Russia, ceasing to exist as an independent nation until its rebirth in 1918.

Many historians studying what exactly caused this fall from an influential European power to a casualty of rising nation-states have made a connection to the concept of the Golden Liberty. This rather nebulous term was used both to encapsulate the impressive array of rights and privileges guaranteed to the *szlachta* and to define the political system of the Commonwealth. These included freedom from taxation and arbitrary arrest, as well as religious toleration and restrictions on the power of the monarch to raise troops, levy taxes, or declare war without the consent of the nobility. The Golden Liberty also ensured the right of *rokosz*, or insurrection, in response to perceived infringement of these rights. Finally, there was the *liberum veto*, or ability for any single delegate to veto the decisions of a particular Sejm, which was seen as the capstone of the Golden Liberty.

The foundational privileges of the Golden Liberty in many cases predated the establishment of the Commonwealth itself and tended to expand in scope over time. For example, the Privilege of Koszyce in 1374 virtually exempted the Polish *szlachta* from taxation.¹⁰ Consequently, the *szlachta* generally opposed efforts to levy taxes of any sort on

⁷ Jerzy Lukowski, “‘Machines of Government’: Replacing the Liberum Veto in the Eighteenth-Century Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 90, no. 1 (2012): 66, doi:10.5699/slaveasteurorev2.90.1.0065.

⁸ Lukowski, “Machines of Government,” 66.

⁹ Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Queen Liberty*, 2.

¹⁰ These concessions also made the *szlachta* exempt from building and repairing castles, towns, and bridges, as well as paying for the travel of the royal court, while also guaranteeing the gentry compensation for military service and restricting foreigners’ access to certain royal offices.

their estate, even for the purpose of national defense. Similarly, statutes in 1430 and 1433 ensured the *szlachta's* freedom from arbitrary arrest. Religious toleration had also enjoyed a long tradition in Poland and Lithuania, but it was not a formal guarantee until the 1573 Confederation of Warsaw. Fears of religious persecution had been validated by events elsewhere in Europe, specifically the 1572 Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre and the strife of the Thirty Years' War abroad. Consequently, many considered toleration essential to preserving liberty.

Since the Golden Liberty extended many rights to the nobility, it also necessarily prevented the monarchy from infringing on those privileges. The Nihil Novi Act of 1505 ensured that the king could not pass laws without the consent of the gentry, cementing the power of the *szlachta* in the political system. This prerogative was jealously guarded; members of the 1702 Sejm asserted that King August II's (1670-1733) waging of war without a declaration of the Sejm trampled upon their freedom. The nobility opposed countless military reforms, tax proposals, and other attempts to centralize power on behalf of the king on the grounds that they limited the power of the gentry and thus endangered their liberty. In addition to these formidable shackles on the king's authority, the *szlachta* still had at their disposal a mechanism to protect their liberty by force. The *rokosz*, which was essentially an armed lobby formed in protest to perceived infringements on noble rights, was perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the Commonwealth's political system. It was also regularly exercised to protect perceived attacks on the Golden Liberty; the orchestrators of both the Zbrzydowski and Lubomirski *rokosz* in 1606 and 1666-1667 respectively saw themselves not as rebels or rival claimants to the throne but as protectors of the *szlachta's* freedom from absolutism.

While all of these noble privileges were key components of freedom in the Commonwealth, its culmination was the *liberum veto*, or the right of a single member of a Sejm or *sejmik* to veto a piece of legislation by exclaiming, "Nie pozwalam!" ("I do not allow it!"). The implications of such a tool are not difficult to realize; as the Commonwealth entered its twilight years, the *liberum veto* began to loom large. Previously, it had been used to raise objections to individual pieces of legislation that were quickly resolved, but it began to disrupt entire Sejms, blocking not only the legislation directly vetoed but everything else that had been previously decided. Although finally abolished by the Constitution of the 3rd of May in 1791, it was far too late at that juncture.

Historians are largely in agreement that the legislative paralysis induced by the use of the *liberum veto* and jealous preservation of privileges had a detrimental impact on the Commonwealth and contributed to its fall.¹¹ More generally, they have identified the Golden Liberty as a source of weakness if not an outright catalyst for the decline of the Polish-Lithuanian state. According to this narrative, the Golden Liberty fostered a system of government unable to reform itself in response to societal and political challenges, vulnerable to interference by foreign powers and powerful domestic interests. This in turn

¹¹ Wagner-Rundell, *Common Wealth, Common Good*, 4. This perspective was posited by Władysław Konopczyński and members of the nineteenth-century "Kraków School."

resulted in an environment of competition between different organs of government and denied the monarchy the authority necessary to function as an effective European state.

Consequently, it is well-supported that the Golden Liberty exerted a significant impact on the fall of the Commonwealth, and modern evaluations of this decline have thus focused on the influence of the Golden Liberty on political factors within Poland and Lithuania. However, the impact of the armed forces on the disintegration of the Commonwealth has received less attention. This is an important topic for discussion, as the last century and a half of the Commonwealth's history saw it involved in a series of exhausting conflicts that weakened it considerably. Consequently, this article considers how military factors, specifically lack of a professional army, overreliance on cavalry, failed attempts at reform, funding problems, and unrestricted power of the magnates contributed to the Commonwealth's fall.

In order to chart the Commonwealth's military decline, I rely on a variety of primary sources in both Polish and English, most notably Jan Chryzostom Pasek's *Memoirs of the Polish Baroque* and Stanisław Żołątkowski's *The Beginning and Progress of the Muscovy War*. Both are diaries of politically and militarily active seventeenth-century Polish nobles. These works provide first-hand accounts not only of perceptions of the Golden Liberty but also its influence on military developments. These will be supplemented by primary texts on political and military reform, including the writings of Andrzej Fredro and Stanisław Karwicki, which provide different perspectives on the political system and reforms within the Commonwealth. I will also draw on secondary sources, including Norman Davies's *God's Playground*, for historical context. My analysis will also build on the work of previous researchers, such as Robert Frost and Benedict Wagner-Rundell, who explore the military state of the Commonwealth in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The period of decline and eventual fall of the Commonwealth coincided with a series of unsuccessful wars against Muscovy, Sweden, and the Crimean Tatars. Additionally, during this same period, the Cossacks in what is today Ukraine led a series of revolts against the Commonwealth. These setbacks on the battlefield contributed in their own way to the collapse of Poland-Lithuania. The factors that contributed to military failure were both causes and symptoms of the broader malaise affecting the state. This article examines five of these variables: the lack of standing troops, the predominance of cavalry, unsuccessful attempts at military reform, chronic underfunding, and the outsized autonomy of magnates. A close examination of these issues helps us understand the Commonwealth's military failings specifically but, more generally, offers important insights into its most glaring weaknesses leading to its ultimate dismemberment in the eighteenth century.

Absence of a Standing Army

One of the overarching themes in the history of the Commonwealth's military are efforts to create a large, permanent army. Although its forces consisted primarily of a variety of levies and private military units, the elected monarchs of the Commonwealth realized the need for a standing professional army to protect their borders and enact their will. This standing army was important in light of changes happening in the rest of Europe, as the military revolution of the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries brought about a series of

profound changes in organization and structure of the armed forces. Gone were the days of feudal levies and small cores of heavily armored knights. Instead, the fledgling nation-states of Europe began fielding successively larger standing armies of predominantly pike and musket-armed infantry. For example, Louis XIV modernized the French army and turned it into a professional force, growing it from 70,000 men to approximately 400,000 men by 1700, making it the largest army in Europe.¹² Similarly, the Spanish army swelled from 20,000 in 1470 to approximately 300,000 in the 1630s.¹³ While conflicts as late as the Thirty Years' War were fought primarily by mercenaries, rulers quickly realized that a standing domestic army strengthened the power of monarchs. Kings would no longer have to rely on hiring expensive foreign soldiers who would pillage both friend and foe or slow and unreliable feudal levies of peasants and knights. Instead, professional standing armies were directly loyal to the crown and always available, meaning rulers had substantially more freedom to pursue their goals, safe in the knowledge that their troops could bring both foreign and domestic opposition to heel. This swelling of royal power precipitated the growth of nation-states in France, Spain, England, and elsewhere and fostered loyalties to a state and ruler rather than to a family or region.¹⁴ Though the aristocracy may have resented this vast accumulation of power by the monarch, they were happy to no longer see their lands looted by mercenary companies. Additionally, the new army provided myriad opportunities for advancement based on merit.¹⁵

While other European powers were busy raising these professional armies, the Commonwealth largely stuck to its older military structure, relying on general levies, small standing forces, and cobbled-together support from private and mercenary units. The permanent forces known as the *wojsko kwarciane* and its successor, the *wojsko komputowe*, were often ill-paid and small, something which would plague the Commonwealth, particularly after 1648. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the *wojsko komputowe* numbered only 24,000 men, which paled in comparison to the hundreds of thousands of troops the soon-to-be partitioning powers of Prussia, Austria, and Russia could bring to bear.¹⁶

Some have argued that this failure to modernize the military stemmed from a close-minded resistance to reform among the nobility.¹⁷ While this perspective does not necessarily make an explicit connection to ideals of the Golden Liberty, many members of the *szlachta* felt the Commonwealth had reached its zenith in terms of freedom and prosperity and bitterly opposed any changes to the status quo.¹⁸ Others argue for a more nuanced

¹² John A. Lynn, "Recalculating French Army Growth during the Grand Siècle, 1610-1715," *French Historical Studies* 18, no. 4 (1994): 881-906, doi:10.2307/286722. Rene Chartrand, *Louis XIV's Army, Men-At-Arms Series 203* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1988), 8.

¹³ M.S. Anderson, *War and Society in Europe of the Old Regime 1618-1789* (London: Fontana Press, 1988), 17.

¹⁴ Robert Ian Frost, "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the 'Military Revolution,'" in *Poland and Europe: Historical Dimensions: Selected Essays from the Fiftieth Anniversary International Congress of the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences of America Vol 1*, eds. James Pula and Marian Biskupski, East European Monographs 390 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 37.

¹⁵ Frost, "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the 'Military Revolution,'" 38.

¹⁶ Frost, "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the 'Military Revolution,'" 24.

¹⁷ Frost, "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the 'Military Revolution,'" 23.

¹⁸ Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Queen Liberty*, 56.

perspective, positing that the failure to expand the standing army did not represent simple opposition to military reforms per se, but a conscious rejection of the power such innovations would give the monarchy.¹⁹ Historians cite many examples of innovations the Commonwealth was willing to make without having to modify its political structure, for instance the establishment of weapon foundries and penning of influential treatises on siege craft.²⁰ Essentially, the nobility was happy to adopt certain aspects of the military revolution as long as they did not change the political status quo.

Regardless of the motivation behind the *szlachta's* rejection of a large standing army, the impact was essentially the same. Robert Frost has rightly noted, "For it was the failure of the noble citizens of the Commonwealth to cross this psychological watershed [establishment of a permanent army] which doomed it to a decline which was by no means inevitable."²¹ The nobility perceived a standing army as a fundamental threat to their liberty, since it would allow the monarch to bypass the diet, which was normally required to levy and pay troops as well as declare war. As a result, the gentry were generally opposed to efforts to enlarge the military and remained more concerned about the threat of absolutist monarchy than foreign invasion.²² This was rationalized by the military successes of Poland and Lithuania at the end of the sixteenth and in the first half of the seventeenth century, which prevented many nobles from recognizing the threat posed by their neighbors.²³ Unfortunately, this myopic perspective would have disastrous consequences when the outdated, underpaid, and untrained military of the Commonwealth—far from being able to serve as a tool of monarchical oppression—was unable to defend the nation against foreign invasion.

The history of what has become known as the Cossack Register is an excellent example highlighting the impact of the *szlachta's* reluctance to enlarge the army. Established in 1572, the Register was a list of names of Cossacks, a people inhabiting Ukraine. The Register integrated these individuals into the army of the Commonwealth, granting them special privileges and wages in an attempt to discourage raiding and turn them into a regular fighting force.²⁴ This was conceptually an excellent solution; it converted the Cossacks from a potential threat into highly loyal and fierce troops able to defend the Commonwealth from Tatar and Muscovite incursions. In practice, it was significantly less effective, as the Crown was not able to pay the Cossacks consistently, who continued raiding and plundering with little regard for whether they were part of the Register or not.²⁵ Additionally, local diets tended to be resentful of the rights granted to the Cossacks and consistently tried to shrink or abolish the Register. This hostility is typified by one Polish noble in the Sejm, who quipped, "You [Cossacks] say that you are like all others, members of the Commonwealth and thus demand the rights of the nobility. Verily, you are

¹⁹ Frost, "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the 'Military Revolution,'" 24.

²⁰ Frost, "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the 'Military Revolution,'" 25.

²¹ Frost, "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the 'Military Revolution,'" 38.

²² Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Queen Liberty*, 36.

²³ Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Queen Liberty*, 36.

²⁴ Linda Gordon, *Cossack Rebellions: Social Turmoil in the Sixteenth-Century Ukraine* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 90.

²⁵ Gordon, *Cossack Rebellions*, 95.

indeed members of this Commonwealth, but like fingernails, meaning you must from time to time be trimmed.”²⁶



Figure 2: Ilya Repin, *Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks to Sultan Mehmed IV of the Ottoman Empire*, 1891²⁷

This arrogance belied a fear that the king would use the Register in order to limit the *szlachta*'s freedoms.²⁸ Not only would the Register provide the monarch with a larger standing army, but it would eliminate the Cossack's dependence on the local *szlachta*, since their wages and privileges would come directly from the king. This concern that the Cossacks could not be controlled by the magnate regime was typified by Ilya Repin's painting, *Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks to Sultan Mehmed IV of the Ottoman Empire* (see figure 2). It portrays the writing of a defiant and profanity-ridden letter the Cossacks allegedly sent in response to the Ottoman Sultan's request for submission. While the story is largely a legend, it demonstrates the perception of the Cossacks as free-spirited and fiercely independent, unwilling to submit to the yoke of foreign control, much less the power of magnates. These fears about royal power and Cossack autonomy may have been exaggerated, however, since despite nominally being part of the royal standing army, the Register Cossacks reported to local magnates, who deployed them in conjunction with their own private troops without having to pay for their upkeep.²⁹ Nevertheless, families such as the Wiśniowiecki or Kalinowski saw a large, organized force of Cossacks as a threat to their interests. Consequently, the *szlachta* and powerful magnates tried to limit the size of the

²⁶ Zbigniew Wójcik, *Dziki Pola w Ogniu; o Kozaczyźnie w Dawnej Rzeczypospolitej* (Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 1968), 110. Author's translation. As cited in Davies, *God's Playground*, 446.

²⁷ Ilya Repin, *Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks to Sultan Mehmed IV of the Ottoman Empire*, 1891, oil on canvas, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, http://en.rusmuseum.ru/collections/painting-of-the-second-half-of-the-xix-century-beginning-of-xxi-century/artworks/zaporozhye-cossacks/?sphrase_id=259736, accessed November 6, 2021.

²⁸ Gordon, *Cossack Rebellions*, 94.

²⁹ Gordon, *Cossack Rebellions*, 94.

Register once any immediate threat had passed, while the Cossacks, who maintained their loyalty to the throne and instead saw the local nobility as oppressors, tried to permanently enlarge the size of the Register.³⁰ Since the king generally strove to increase Cossack recruitment and the Cossacks lacked direct representation in the Sejm, the political struggle over the Register primarily pitted the *szlachta* against the monarchy.

In the rare instance that the interests of the magnates and monarch concerning the number of troops coincided, the former were known to oppose efforts to expand the army on the grounds that they were illegal. This occurred most notably in 1646, when King Władysław IV (1595-1648) attempted to recruit Cossacks for a war against the Ottomans and Tatars without approval of the diet. Despite saying that he supported the king's policy, Great Chancellor Jerzy Ossoliński (1595-1650) and other magnates refused to sign off on the recruitment on the grounds that it was not legal.³¹ Legalism was a common feature of *szlachta* political thought, and respect for the laws was seen as the duty of every noble.³² Thus, both personal interest and a concern with preserving "the rule of law" could put the magnates at odds with increasing the Register.

These various tensions came to a head with the Khmelnytsky Uprising in 1648. Poor relations between the Polish Catholic nobility and their Orthodox Ukrainian subjects prompted the Ukrainian peasantry to ally themselves with the Cossacks and revolt. The leader and namesake of the revolt was Bohdan Khmelnytsky, a minor noble who had significant ties to the Cossacks. His forces won a series of victories, plunging Ukraine into chaos and permanently damaging Commonwealth-Cossack relations. As a result of this conflict, the Register essentially ceased to function after 1648, leaving behind a void that was never successfully filled. The Cossack's absence would be felt when Sweden invaded in 1655, and the beleaguered Commonwealth, beset by threats from Muscovy, Sweden, Transylvania, and the Ottoman Empire, began to cede territory to its rivals. Soon, Poland and Lithuania had to face internal threats in the form of the Lubomirski Uprising, a response to attempts at reform from King Jan Kazimierz (1609-1672) that saw much of the army revolt against the king. These costly conflicts slowly sapped Poland-Lithuania's strength, leading to the eventual partitions starting in 1772. One cannot but wonder if the enlargement or preservation of the Cossack Register may have served to delay or even prevent the collapse of the Commonwealth, especially considering that in the aftermath of the Khmelnytsky Uprising, many of the disillusioned Cossacks switched their allegiance to Russia, one of the eventual partitioning powers.

The controversy surrounding the Cossack Register and the subsequent Khmelnytsky Uprising deprived the Commonwealth of a large force of excellent infantry that would be sorely missed in the coming years. Additionally, it resulted in the loss of lands used for extensive taxation and recruitment.³³ This crippling blow to Poland-Lithuania became apparent during the Swedish invasion of 1655. Though the tide was eventually turned, this

³⁰ Frost, "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the 'Military Revolution,'" 41.

³¹ Koyama, "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a Political Space," 147-148.

³² Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Queen Liberty*, 43.

³³ Frost, "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the 'Military Revolution,'" 41.

was in part due to foreign pressure, as the Commonwealth desperately cast about for allies willing to contribute much-needed infantry and artillery required to reduce Swedish garrisons and actually drive out the invaders. In previous conflicts, these forces had been supplied by the Cossacks, giving the Commonwealth's armies the vital ability to take and hold ground.³⁴

Predominance of Cavalry

This lack of infantry and preponderance of cavalry was itself a factor leading to the Commonwealth's decline. Both Polish and Lithuanian forces included a much higher ratio of cavalry and significantly fewer pikemen than their European neighbors. This was because the Great European Plain along much of the Commonwealth's southern and eastern borders offered little in the way of natural barriers, and there were few fortresses that would require infantry or artillery to attack or defend. Additionally, opponents such as the Tatars fought as light cavalry, meaning a highly mobile, decentralized force of cavalry was required for defense.³⁵

However, this preference for horsemen was more than tactical; it represented the conscious reflection of cultural and philosophical ideas into the military sphere. Traditionally, the *szlachta* believed that they had received the rights and privileges of the Golden Liberty in return for their military service to the crown.³⁶ Thus, allowing foreign mercenaries or non-nobles (such as the Cossacks) to fight in the army potentially jeopardized the nobles' liberty. Consequently, warfare, like many other things in the Commonwealth, was seen as the prerogative of the gentry, who almost exclusively fought mounted. In fact, Andrzej Fredro (1620-1679), a notable supporter of the Golden Liberty, talked about horsemen being soldiers of a free republic, while infantry were a tool of autocracy.³⁷ This penchant for mounted warfare was also supported by cultural traditions among the nobility. Well-bred horses were both plentiful and highly prized, and horsemanship was learned from a young age. Similarly, fencing both on foot and horseback was taught to young nobles by experienced veterans, ensuring that the Commonwealth was known far and wide for its excellent swordsmen.³⁸ This, coupled with a lack of formal military academies, meant that *szlachta* culture bred independent and accomplished horsemen and fencers rather than the trained and disciplined members of an officer corps or infantry formation. Considering all these factors, it is hardly surprising that the Commonwealth armies tended to consist primarily of horse.

Despite the varying reasons for the dominance of cavalry, Commonwealth military reformers and leaders recognized the need for more and better infantry, particularly in response to facing more "Westernized" militaries such as Sweden's. Though Fredro had

³⁴ Frost, "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the 'Military Revolution,'" 38.

³⁵ Frost, "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the 'Military Revolution,'" 27.

³⁶ Wagner-Rundell, *Common Wealth, Common Good*, 2.

³⁷ Andrzej Maksymilian Fredro, *Militarium, ad Harmoniam Togae Accommodatorum* (Amsterdam, 1668), 180-181.

³⁸ Bartosz Sieniawski, "From Szabla to Saber: the Polish Saber, its History, and Impact on Swords East and West" (Online Event, University of Minnesota Center for Early Modern History and the Oakeshott Institute, March 26, 2021).

been an ideological supporter of cavalry, he authored a 1670 treatise that seemed to largely reverse his stance from two years prior. He advocated for greater use of infantry and encouraged the gentry to fight on foot, referencing the effectiveness of an all-noble infantry regiment during the 1581 campaign against Muscovy.³⁹ The notable reformer Stanisław Karwicki (c. 1640-c. 1725) was also a great proponent of infantry, arguing that it should constitute a higher ratio of the Commonwealth's armies. He stated that more infantry was necessary to compete with more Westernized armies because they were better suited to siege warfare and more dependable.⁴⁰ He also criticized the Commonwealth's noble cavalry: "But in the cavalry of our army, a soldier is known as *towarzysz* [comrade], inflated with his own opinion and even more with his property, considers himself equal to his officers, even the *Hetmans* [military commanders], and coolly tolerates commands of his superiors. Infantry in regiments, by contrast, much more diligently applies itself to the orders of its superiors."⁴¹ The term *towarzysz* was used throughout the Commonwealth's military, regardless of rank, and was intended to represent equality among the nobility.⁴² In addition to this preoccupation with equality, Karwicki also accused the gentry of campaigning with lavish baggage trains and being more interested in taking part in *sejmiks* as opposed to fighting for the Fatherland.⁴³ All these critiques imply that the nobility's priorities were political influence and social standing as opposed to warfare. It was not just Karwicki who harped on these vices. Fredro likewise spent much of his overview of the military discussing methods for improving discipline and training, demonstrating that the poor behavior of the army and cavalry in particular was common knowledge.⁴⁴

These calls for change did not fall completely on deaf ears. Infantry played an increasingly prominent role in the armed forces, acquitting themselves particularly well in the Swedish wars, but the Commonwealth struggled to deploy and pay substantial and well-trained infantry units.⁴⁵ In his memoirs, *Początek i Progres Wojny Moskiewskiej (Beginning and Progress of the Muscovite War)*, Hetman Stanisław Żółkiewski (1547-1620) recounts how the siege of Smolensk in 1609 was delayed because of a lack of infantry and artillery. Crucially, it was the arrival of allied Cossacks that finally allowed the Commonwealth to make headway.⁴⁶ A similar problem would face Żółkiewski's forces a year later during the Battle of Kłuszyn (see figure 3), when Polish winged hussars were forced to break through picket fences and charge dug-in Russian infantry, a task normally reserved for infantry.⁴⁷

³⁹ Andrzej Maksymilian Fredro, *O Porządku Wojennym i o Pospolitem Ruszeniu Małym* (Sanok: Kazimierz Józef Turowski, 1856), 42.

⁴⁰ Stanisław Dunin Karwicki, *Dzieła Polityczne z Początku XVIII Wieku* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1992), 139. Author's translation.

⁴¹ Karwicki, *Dzieła Polityczne z Początku XVIII Wieku*, 140. Author's translation.

⁴² Davies, *God's Playground*, 239.

⁴³ Karwicki, *Dzieła Polityczne z Początku XVIII Wieku*, 158.

⁴⁴ Fredro, *O Porządku Wojennym i o Pospolitem Ruszeniu Małym*, 5. Even contemporary authors were themselves guilty of occasional rabble-rousing: Jan Chryzostom Pasek (1636 - 1701), a noble and important diarist who also took part in many military campaigns, recounts many armed altercations he had, frequently over matters of honor. These invariably left behind substantial casualties.

⁴⁵ Frost, "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the 'Military Revolution,'" 30.

⁴⁶ Stanisław Żółkiewski, *Początek I Progres Wojny Moskiewskiej*, 2nd ed. (Kraków: Nakładem. Krakowskiej Spółki Wydawniczej, 1925), 26.

⁴⁷ Żółkiewski, *Początek I Progres Wojny Moskiewskiej*, 42.

This deficiency in foot soldiers was further on display in 1656, when a Polish force attacked Brandenburg in an effort to induce it to sever its alliance with Sweden. However, the invasion force consisted primarily of cavalry and was unable to capture any cities. As a result, it contented itself with raiding and failed to put any significant pressure on Brandenburg to desert the Swedish cause.⁴⁸ These examples serve to illustrate problems facing the Commonwealth's military operations owing to its lack of infantry. Overall, the increased cost of cavalry and its inability to compete with modernized armies made largely mounted forces just another symptom of the decline of the Commonwealth.



Figure 3: Szymon Boguszowicz, *Battle of Kłushyn*, 1650⁴⁹

Attempts at Reform

While there were many forces opposing changes to the military status quo, there were also attempts at reform. The reigns of Jan Kazimierz (1648-1668) and August II (1697-1706, 1709-1733) represent two concerted efforts at structural reform of the Commonwealth's military. They also highlight the dynamics that made reform so difficult in the Commonwealth. Jan Kazimierz was very popular with the army and proved himself a canny general, leading royal troops to a resounding victory over the Cossacks at the Battle of Beresteczko in 1651.⁵⁰ However, like most of the Commonwealth's elected monarchs, he chafed at the power of the diet and tried to use the army in order to bypass its authority. To this end, he attempted a variety of military reforms, designating many army units as "royal"

⁴⁸ Robert Ian Frost, *After the Deluge: Poland-Lithuania and the Second Northern War, 1655-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 98.

⁴⁹ Szymon Boguszowicz, *Battle of Kłushyn*, 1650, oil on canvas, Borys Voznytsky Lviv National Art Gallery, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/hetman-battle-of-klushino-szymon-boguszowicz/8gG2NoK9AwvWvA?hl=en>, accessed November 6, 2021.

⁵⁰ Frost, "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the 'Military Revolution,'" 43.

and making sure they were paid by and directly loyal to the monarch.⁵¹ He also tried to enlarge the *wojsko komputowe* directly and through an increase in the size of the Cossack Register. He also attempted to centralize military power in his own person by not nominating new *Hetmans*, or military commanders.⁵² These military reforms were also coupled with a variety of plans surrounding the impending royal election.

Nevertheless, his reforms met resistance. This controversy eventually led to the Lubomirski *Rokosz* of 1665-1666, which left the Commonwealth unable to successfully execute the ongoing war with Muscovy. Jan Chryzostom Pasek (1636-1701)—a noble, soldier, and diarist who experienced the revolt firsthand—described it as uniquely calamitous: “Our villages are shuddering, our poor are weeping, our bishops and senators are urging the king to take pity on the country, seeing that we are plainly displeasing to God if luck is not with us.”⁵³ While the material damages caused by the Lubomirski *Rokosz* were significant, perhaps even more important was the fact that Jan Kazimierz’s efforts forever tainted plans to enlarge the military in the eyes of the nobility, largely condemning future desultory efforts to increase the size of the army. According to Frost, “The greatest danger to Polish liberties, it seemed, was the Polish monarchy and its alleged wish to introduce *absolutum dominium* by force of arms; it was therefore vital to prevent it building up the sort of military powerbase which Jan Kazimierz had attempted to construct.”⁵⁴ Consequently, his reign represented perhaps the last real opportunity to modernize and reform the military of the Commonwealth.⁵⁵

The reign of August II also saw the thwarting of efforts to enlarge the standing army. The Sejm of 1712-1713 proposed a variety of reforms, including a permanent force of 36,000 troops and the necessary permanent taxes to pay them.⁵⁶ Interestingly, this proposal seems to have met little opposition, as the *szlachta* resented the increasing presence of Swedish, Russian, and Saxon armies in the Commonwealth, which were known for exacting “contributions” from the local populace. Consequently, August II’s supporters were quick to represent this new force and the associated funding as a way to protect the ever-important Golden Liberty from foreign encroachment. However, many envoys to the Sejm saw the main problem to be not the lack of appropriate military funding but the damage to *szlachta* property from marauding armies.⁵⁷ These excesses were pinned on the *Hetmans* for not maintaining better behavior among their troops, echoing concerns held by Fredro surrounding discipline and likely influencing Karwicki’s proposals to limit their power.⁵⁸ As a result, the focus of the Sejm shifted from military reforms to curbing the power of the *Hetmans* and restricting licentious and immoral behavior. This shows that even when the

⁵¹ Frost, “The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the ‘Military Revolution,’” 43.

⁵² Frost, *After the Deluge*, 32.

⁵³ Jan Chryzostom Pasek, *Memoirs of the Polish Baroque: The Writings of Jan Chryzostom Pasek, a Squire of the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 187.

⁵⁴ Frost, “The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the ‘Military Revolution,’” 44.

⁵⁵ Frost, *After the Deluge*, 179.

⁵⁶ Wagner-Rundell, *Common Wealth, Common Good*, 80.

⁵⁷ Wagner-Rundell, *Common Wealth, Common Good*, 85.

⁵⁸ Fredro, *O Porządku Wojennym i o Pospolitem Ruszeniu Małym*, 15. Karwicki, *Dzieła Polityczne z Początku XVIII Wieku*, 161.

gentry were willing to enlarge and modernize the army, it was seen as tangential to the preservation of property rights. Commissions to address property damages and the culpability of the *Hetmans* were proposed, but negotiations quickly bogged down. Eventually, supporters of one of the *Hetmans* exercised the *liberum veto*, breaking the Sejm and dooming the entire package of legislation, including the increase to the size of the army.⁵⁹ The nobility were primarily concerned with the threat to their private property rather than the threat of foreign encroachment. As a result, they seized on immorality and the power of the *Hetmans* as the fundamental issue, rather than the need to strengthen the army.

Thus, it is evident that both the gentry and the monarch were engaged in a zero-sum battle for power with the military as a key institution affecting the struggle. Even militarily successful kings such as Zygmunt III (1566-1632) or Jan Sobieski (1629-1696) were perceived by the gentry as a threat, since their attempts at expanding the Commonwealth were seen as warmongering and a dangerous step towards absolutism.⁶⁰ By keeping the *wojsko komputowe* small, the nobility ensured that the monarch was dependent on the senate and diets, giving the *szlachta* power and thus by extension liberty. Though both Jan Kazimierz and August II sought to introduce serious reforms to the military, they were unable to garner sufficient support for their efforts. In the end, the reforms failed for political rather than military reasons.

Underfunding of the Military

While the calls to enlarge and modernize the army were constant, the Commonwealth's military was frequently unable to pay the soldiers it already had, leaving commanders with only emotional appeals to secure their troops' continued cooperation. The memoir of Hetman Stanisław Żółkiewski routinely deals with chronic problems of underfunding during the Commonwealth's invasion of Russia in 1609. Originally, Żółkiewski advised King Zygmunt III against the campaign, as few troops had arrived and those that had were unpaid.⁶¹ Since the king personally assured the *Hetman* that he would gather the necessary funds, it can be inferred that Zygmunt III was independently funding the army through his own channels, given that the slow-moving Sejm had yet to authorize the war and thus the requisite fiduciary resources. This situation was far from unique; not only did the diet have to approve funds to pay troops, but the next diet had to ratify the resolution. According to Fredro, this whole process of debating, approving, and gathering taxes took at least five months.⁶² Even when a monarch was able to secure the necessary funding from the diet, the local dietines lacked the political infrastructure to actually enforce collection of taxes it decided on, meaning that the troops still frequently went unpaid. This was compounded by the nobility's refusal to agree to a survey of land, which made tax rates hard to enforce.⁶³ All this meant that money to pay troops was extremely hard to secure, a factor that would continuously hamper the military efforts of the Commonwealth.

⁵⁹ Wagner-Rundell, *Common Wealth, Common Good*, 94.

⁶⁰ Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Queen Liberty*, 70.

⁶¹ Żółkiewski, *Początek I Progres Wojny Moskiewskiej*, 15.

⁶² Fredro, *O Porządku Wojennym i o Pospolitem Ruszeniu Małym*, 58.

⁶³ Frost, *After the Deluge*, 23.

These financial problems continued well into Żółkiewski's campaign. After winning a great victory at the Battle of Kluszyn and leading his forces to the gates of Moscow, Żółkiewski began negotiating with prominent boyars. He tried to convince his soldiers to continue to serve during the negotiations without pay: "Because with such perseverance, one could with God's help induce this nation [Muscovy] to offer more advantageous conditions for the Commonwealth."⁶⁴ However, the troops demanded their wages (which the shrewd Muscovites offered to pay in exchange for peace) and an end to the conflict, forcing Żółkiewski to broker a suboptimal peace for the Commonwealth. Any potential gains from this campaign were soon reversed as the Polish garrison in the Kremlin was forced to surrender in 1612.⁶⁵ This lack of funding continued to plague the reign of Zygmunt III. Since the diet was unwilling to approve the taxes necessary to continue paying the army, he was forced to surrender Livonia to Sweden as part of the Peace of Altmark in 1629, another "disadvantageous" outcome for the Commonwealth.⁶⁶

These problems would resurface during the reign of Jan Kazimierz thirty years later. Despite military successes in 1660-1661, the diets responsible for voting and collecting taxes to pay the army were broken. This left the military, much as it had been during the 1609 campaign, unpaid and unwilling to press its advantage by attacking Muscovy and regaining lost territory. Jan Chryzostom Pasek documented the formation of a union by unpaid troops in 1661. Though Pasek was sympathetic to the cause of the union, he wrote, "Our division opposed it, seeing therein great *detrimentum* to our country."⁶⁷ Consequently, his memoirs include a speech he gave to discourage his fellow soldiers from joining the union and exhorting them to exhibit public virtue. Public virtue, or the sacrificing of private interest for the sake of the public good, was a central value in *szlachta* culture, and similar appeals to Pasek's were made by reformers in the mid eighteenth century.⁶⁸ The speech highlights one of the responses to the ills facing the Commonwealth: a call for moral reform, either in addition to or even instead of institutional reform. Thus Pasek began by urging patriotic self-sacrifice: "I know not how any man could call himself a son of this fatherland, who could wholly forget its public interests for the sake of his private ones."⁶⁹ He then continued by urging an attack on Muscovy in order to press the Commonwealth's advantage: "Let us consider how these deceitful people [the Muscovites] plundered three-quarters of our fatherland with fire and sword. Let us consider how many outrages against God they committed in His churches. Let us show them that we too are capable of finding our food abroad in the country which robbed us of so much of it."⁷⁰ Calls for crusade against the Muslim Ottomans were a frequent tool in attempts to reignite the martial virtue of the nobility through religious warfare, and Pasek appealed to a similar sentiment by mentioning desecration of presumably Catholic churches by the Orthodox Muscovites.⁷¹

⁶⁴ Żółkiewski, *Początek i Progres Wojny Moskiewskiej*, 54.

⁶⁵ Davies, *God's Playground*, 346.

⁶⁶ Frost, *After the Deluge*, 23.

⁶⁷ Pasek, *Memoirs of the Polish Baroque*, 95.

⁶⁸ Wagner-Rundell, *Common Wealth, Common Good*, 1 and 34.

⁶⁹ Pasek, *Memoirs of the Polish Baroque*, 97.

⁷⁰ Pasek, *Memoirs of the Polish Baroque*, 97.

⁷¹ Wagner-Rundell, *Common Wealth, Common Good*, 39.

The exhortation to fight strove to unite the fractious gentry against a common foe and alleviate financial strain on the Commonwealth, since its troops would sustain themselves by looting in foreign lands. Additionally, since the *szlachta* saw their privileges as a reward their ancestors had received from a grateful monarch for military services, it made sense to engage in warfare in order to return the Commonwealth to its golden age and reignite the patriotic virtue of the nobility.⁷² Within Pasek's speech, we see a call to moral reform through a renewal of public virtue and religious warfare. Despite Pasek's impassioned speech, the paralysis induced by the lack of funding led to the signing of the Treaty of Andrusovo in 1667, which made significant territorial concessions to Muscovy in exchange for token sums of money.⁷³ This continued the pattern of the Treaties of Moscow in 1610 and Altmark in 1629, with the Commonwealth gaining a military advantage only to sign unfavorable treaties when the military was starved for money.

It is important to note, however, that Poland and Lithuania were hardly the only countries struggling to pay their armies. Especially in the first half of the seventeenth century, even countries undertaking the so-called "military revolution" still relied heavily on mercenary forces and the pillaging of enemy territory, as they had not developed the sophisticated bureaucracies necessary to finance their growing armies.⁷⁴ However, this problem was more acute in the Commonwealth, since it never developed the mechanisms necessary to consistently pay its troops. Furthermore, attacking foreign territory and living off the land was also not possible, since the *szlachta* were inherently suspicious that foreign wars were a way for their monarchs to increase their power at the expense of noble liberties.⁷⁵

Polish reformers were hardly blind to these financial problems. Stanisław Karwicki advocated for a smaller army but with regular wages, rather than pay requiring ratification by the Sejm, noting, "Thus we would avoid so many discomforts, which have during our time grievously afflicted the Commonwealth due to the halt in wages. The nation's jewels are dispersed, cities and provinces appropriated, in the end the very free election for the price of what is to be paid to the soldiery as wages, extended for sale."⁷⁶ Karwicki and other reformers were acutely aware that the necessity of the Sejm's approval for wages led to an ineffective military that was unable to defend the Commonwealth. However, the *szlachta* feared that an army that did not require approval of the Sejm for its wages would be too independent and could easily be used by a monarch to fight wars or enforce his will without consent of the nobility, trampling on their liberties and leading to the dreaded *absolutum dominium*. As a result, reformers such as Fredro were eager to suggest improvements in discipline and training, identifying license and insubordination as the true problems plaguing the armed forces and effectively ignoring funding issues in favor of calls for moral reform.⁷⁷ Even those such as Karwicki who advocated financial reform were unsuccessful. This was because the lack of a comprehensive land survey and the

⁷² Wagner-Rundell, *Common Wealth, Common Good*, 2.

⁷³ Frost, *After the Deluge*, 170.

⁷⁴ Frost, "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the 'Military Revolution,'" 37.

⁷⁵ Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Queen Liberty*, 70.

⁷⁶ Karwicki, *Dzieła Polityczne z Początku XVIII Wieku*, 138. Author's translation.

⁷⁷ Fredro, *O Porządku Wojennym i o Pospolitem Ruszeniu Małym*, 10. Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, *Queen Liberty*, 83.

requirement for diet approval and dietine execution of the new tax levy made collection of wages time-consuming and inconsistent. This fostered an incredibly fragile system of military funding that made it nearly impossible for the army to maintain the initiative. Consequently, the Commonwealth's leaders were left appealing to their soldiers' patriotism. Unfortunately, this was no substitute for regular pay, and efforts at reviving public virtue fell largely on deaf ears. Ultimately, the *szlachta's* unwillingness to relinquish political control over the armies' purse-strings would be ruthlessly exploited by the partitioning powers, as the Commonwealth's languishing military proved ineffective at protecting its borders.

Power of Magnates

While the royal army's effectiveness was hampered by lack of funding, the private armies of magnates had no such troubles. This was because the political system of the Commonwealth gave a significant amount of power to the magnates, which in large part contributed to the Khmelnytsky Uprising and the disastrous settlements of the seventeenth century, most notably the Treaty of Kiejdany. While subsequent claims that in its latter years the Commonwealth was a magnate oligarchy are to some extent reductionist, it is undeniable that families such as the Potocki, Radziwiłł, Sapieha, Lubomirski, and Czartoryski wielded a tremendous military and political power in Poland and Lithuania. Their power in large part stemmed from the royal court's difficulty in securing funding from the diet. This meant that the crown was heavily dependent on loans from wealthy magnates. In return, the powerful clans were leased royal lands and the associated revenue.⁷⁸ While the 1567 diet established that a quarter of the revenue from these lands would go towards national defense, the lack of an effective bureaucracy and land survey meant that monarchs were able to collect substantially less in practice.⁷⁹ This compounded the issue of magnate power, as they became even wealthier and the monarchy lost access to regular revenue from crown lands. Additionally, while the royal bureaucracy was often unable to even collect the taxes from its own lands effectively, the magnates developed efficient systems for collecting taxes and labor, enslaving the peasants and provoking anger and resentment.⁸⁰ In fact, the Khmelnytsky Uprising was at least partially due to exploitation of the peasants and Cossacks by regional magnates and *szlachta*.⁸¹

This situation was bemoaned by many within the Commonwealth, and Karwicki proposed the return of all leased lands to the crown upon the renter's death. This would give the monarchy a solid base of revenue from which to collect the funds necessary to pay the army.⁸² However, this was never put into practice, and the vast revenue from appropriated crown lands gave many magnate families the ability to establish private armies to defend their vast domains all over Poland and Lithuania. Immediately after the Khmelnytsky Uprising, the entire royal army numbered 5,400 men, while the palatine of Ruthenia Jeremi Wiśniowiecki (1612-1651) could muster up to 12,000 men to defend his lands in the

⁷⁸ Frost, *After the Deluge*, 142.

⁷⁹ Frost, *After the Deluge*, 20. A quarter, known as a *kwarta*, provides the linguistic root for the *wojsko kwarciane*, theoretically paid with a quarter of the revenue from royal lands.

⁸⁰ Gordon, *Cossack Rebellions*, 41.

⁸¹ Davies, *God's Playground*, 446.

⁸² Karwicki, *Dzieła Polityczne z Początku XVIII Wieku*, 145.

southeast.⁸³ Similarly, the “Alban Band” of Prince Karol Stanisław Radziwiłł (1734-1790) consisted of 6,000 retainers lavishly dressed in snow white.⁸⁴ These troops were frequently used to further the interests of the magnates. For example, the early response to the Khmelnytsky Uprising was almost exclusively from the private army of Jeremi Wiśniowiecki, who possessed substantial land holdings in the regions affected by the revolt.⁸⁵ This type of private military intervention naturally did little to soothe the existing tensions between the Cossacks and peasants and their magnate overlords, whose power was so extensive that they, not the king, were perceived by Khmelnytsky’s followers as the enemy. During the beginning of the revolt, Khmelnytsky maintained his loyalty to the king, insisting that his quarrel was with the magnates and not the Crown.⁸⁶ This conceptual disconnect of the king from the de facto rulers of the southeast of the Commonwealth illustrates the extent of magnate power and independence. Unfortunately, this freedom would be a significant catalyst for the woes befalling the Commonwealth after 1648.

While contributing to tensions with the Cossacks and peasantry, the power of the magnates also allowed them to conduct their own foreign policy and diplomacy, which often pitted rival families against each other. For instance, Stanisław Żółkiewski was a lifelong enemy of the powerful Potocki family on account of their support for the Austrian faction at court. He went so far as to lay the blame for the deterioration of the Commonwealth’s position after the 1610 Russian campaign at their feet. He accused them of convincing King Władysław IV to violate the treaty with Muscovy so that Żółkiewski would not get all the glory for brokering the peace.⁸⁷ Żółkiewski also criticized the king for acting in bad faith and being amenable to arguments of the Potocki’s, since “facile creditur quod desideratur” (It is easy to believe what you desire [to believe]).⁸⁸ The fact that Żółkiewski would be bold enough to include such an insult in his account illustrates hostility vis-à-vis not only other magnate clans but also the monarch himself. These tensions and even military dangers stemming from magnate influence were perhaps best illustrated by the period from 1648 to 1660. This era represented a time of unique crisis for the Commonwealth as it conducted a war against Muscovy before being invaded by Sweden in 1655. Lithuania in particular had been devastated by the Muscovites, and the local nobility felt abandoned by the Poles as the diet refused to approve the necessary funding for its military defense.⁸⁹ These ill feelings were exacerbated by anti-Protestant sentiment targeted against Janusz Radziwiłł (1612-1655), one of the premier magnates in Lithuania and also a Calvinist (see figure 4).⁹⁰ Not surprisingly, the troops sent to face Sweden had extremely low morale and capitulated at Ujście after a brief struggle. This, coupled with a resumed Muscovite offensive, convinced Radziwiłł that the Grand Duchy needed to beg for Swedish protection in order to preserve the liberties of its gentry. Consequently, he signed a treaty at Kiejdany in 1655, which

⁸³ Frost, *After the Deluge*, 17-18.

⁸⁴ Davies, *God’s Playground*, 226.

⁸⁵ Frost, *After the Deluge*, 18.

⁸⁶ Davies, *God’s Playground*, 446.

⁸⁷ Żółkiewski, *Początek I Progres Wojny Moskiewskiej*, 66.

⁸⁸ Żółkiewski, *Początek I Progres Wojny Moskiewskiej*, 67. Author’s translation of Polish translation of Latin phrase.

⁸⁹ Frost, *After the Deluge*, 44.

⁹⁰ Frost, *After the Deluge*, 44.

effectively abolished the Polish-Lithuanian Union and established Lithuania as essentially a Swedish vassal.



Figure 4: Daniel Schultz, *Portrait of Janusz Radziwiłł (1612-1655)*, 1654⁹¹

The surrender at Ujście and the subsequent Treaty of Kiejdany set off a chain reaction of military disasters, leading to the occupation of most of Poland by Sweden. The Polish *szlachta* were reluctant to contribute their own funds to the war effort in Lithuania, and Radziwiłł subsequently allied himself with Sweden in order to protect his own interests and those of the local nobility. While there were a variety of factors leading up to the Khmelnytsky Uprising and the Treaty of Kiejdany, the power and influence of prominent magnate families can be seen as a major contributor to these disastrous events. Both saw the military effectiveness of the Commonwealth severely hampered by the independent

⁹¹ Daniel Schultz, *Portrait of Janusz Radziwiłł (1612-1655)*, 1654, oil on canvas, National Art Museum of Belorussian Republik, Minsk, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Janusz_Radziwi%C5%82%C5%82_by_Daniel_Schultz.PNG, accessed November 6, 2021.

actions taken by these magnates acting in their own self-interest or in the interests of some subgroup within the Commonwealth.

Conclusion

A variety of military factors contributed to the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. These included suboptimal composition of the armed forces, underfunding, and power of the magnates, which all served to stymie attempts at reform and restrict the Commonwealth's ability to establish a strong standing army. This failure to create such a force was caused in part by the controversy and eventual dissolution of the Cossack Register, which would permanently cripple the ability of Poland and Lithuania to wage war. Similarly damaging was the Commonwealth's reliance on cavalry, which would prove ineffective against more Westernized armies, especially Sweden's. While there were concerted efforts at reform during the reigns of Jan Kazimierz and August II, they were doomed by political controversy. All these challenges left an army that was not only antiquated and small but also underpaid, as inefficient bureaucracy and competing interests confounded efforts to regularly pay the Commonwealth's soldiers. Consequently, commanders in the field such as Hetman Stanisław Żółkiewski and Jan Chrysostom Pasek were forced to appeal unsuccessfully to sentiments of patriotism and self-sacrifice in order to induce their soldiers to fight. Finally, the outsized power of magnates allowed them a degree of autonomy that precipitated the catastrophic Khmelnytsky Uprising and the Treaty of Kiejdany. All of these factors made a significant but perhaps understudied contribution to the partitions of the Commonwealth.