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The Enlightened Monarchy of Stanisław August Poniatowski (1764–1795)

Richard Butterwick

Stanisław August Poniatowski sought nothing less than the ‘new creation of the Polish world’.¹ The new Poland was to be enlightened, prosperous and well governed. Briefly, he seemed to succeed. The Constitution of 3 May 1791 ushered in a year of unprecedented national harmony and euphoria. However, for most of his 31-year reign, the Commonwealth was effectively a Russian protectorate, diminished twice by the partitions of 1772 and 1793 and finally eliminated by that of 1795. The gap between aspiration and reality, familiar to all Polish-Lithuanian monarchs, could not have been greater.

We will consider the ‘Stanislavian monarchy’ on two interacting planes. First, what can we know about the kind of monarchy that Stanisław August wished to create? The king’s public declarations, notably his numerous speeches to the Sejm, were not always in accordance with the more allegorical messages conveyed by his patronage of the arts. But are portraits, panegyrics and architecture a more reliable guide to his aims than his private correspondence and papers? Second, in whose hands did power reside during the different periods of his reign, and how did the role of the monarchy in the political system change? Stanislaw August should also be considered in the context of his predecessors on the Polish-Lithuanian throne and his European contemporaries. The first 25 years of his reign coincided with the heyday of ‘enlightened absolutism’, the last six with the French Revolution. All this would herald a fat book, so what follows is very much an introduction to the subject.
The king elected on 7 September 1764 knew the workings of the Commonwealth more intimately than any of his predecessors except John III Sobieski (1674–96). Not coincidentally, he also had the humblest origins. Admittedly his mother was Konstancja, Princess Czartoryska, who claimed descent from the Jagiellons. More importantly, however, his father was the freshest of parvenus among the magnates. Despite his meteoric rise from obscurity to Castellan of Cracow, the first lay senator of the Commonwealth, Stanisław Poniatowski the elder (1676–1762) could not assure his children the same precarious status. As the fourth son, born on 17 January 1732, Stanisław had to make his career in public life. Between the years 1749 and 1763 he participated in and helped prepare sejmiks, observed the Crown and Lithuanian Tribunals, served as commissioner of the Crown Treasury Tribunal, and was elected to the Sejm on six occasions. By the early 1760s he had become the leading spokesman of the Czartoryski and Poniatowski ‘Family’ in the chamber of envoys. He climbed the ladder of office, successively becoming colonel of a regiment, Starosta of Przemyśl and Stolnik (which literally translates as table-master) of Lithuania. Yet he was no mere provincial politician.

He began to travel Europe in 1748, at the age of 16, and during the following six years he visited the Netherlands, Berlin, Saxony, Vienna, Hanover, Paris and England. Although his education was unsystematic and he was not accompanied abroad by a governor, he emerged as far more than the shallow dilettante depicted by some historians.² A great deal of attention was devoted to European history, both ancient and modern. He learned much of his Polish history from Gottfried Lengnich.³ His knowledge of six languages in addition to Polish was probably intended to equip him for diplomacy. He noted the prosperity of Holland and fell under the cultural spell of France. In England he was introduced to a polity and society that for all its eccentricity (which sometimes slid into egoism and political corruption) combined political and civil liberty with effective government. Indeed, a persuasive case can be made out that it was primarily through his English friends that he learned to appreciate the thought of the French Enlightenment. Charles Yorke (1722–70), second son of Lord Chancellor Hardwicke and briefly Lord Chancellor himself, would have explained the theories of his friend and correspondent Montesquieu. Yorke may also have introduced Stanisław to Freemasonry. Poniatowski gained a great deal from his friendship with the English envoy to Poland and Saxony in 1747–55, Sir Charles Hanbury Williams (1708–59), who became a ‘second father’ to him.⁴ He profited from Williams’s common-sense advice on how