

The Polish-Lithuanian Union, 1386–1795

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IN LUBLIN CASTLE on 1 July 1569, Sigismund August, king of Poland and grand duke of Lithuania, formally enacted an act of union bringing his two realms, joined since 1386 in what the textbooks call a loose personal union, into a closer relationship with a common Sejm (parliament) and a common council. Lithuania preserved its own ministers, its own army and separate legal system. The negotiations had been stormy. On 1 March, the Lithuanian delegation stamped out in the highest of dudgeon after rejecting the terms on offer. The walkout was ill conceived, however. Sigismund August appealed to the local nobility, among whom there was much support for closer union, over the heads of the magnates who had led the walk-out, incorporating individual parts of the grand duchy into Poland and inviting local nobles to take an oath of loyalty. One by one Lithuania's southern palatinates – lands today largely in Ukraine – accepted the invitation. By June half the grand duchy was gone. The magnates, realising their mistake, scurried back to preserve what was left.

It was the roughest of wooings. Yet Lithuanian anger was relatively shortlived. Within a generation the union was venerated in Lithuania as it was in Poland, and its terms were not seriously challenged for two centuries, before what are universally if misleadingly termed the 'Partitions of Poland' wiped this great union state from the map of Europe between 1772 and 1795. Its forced demise, without the consent of its citizens, ended one of the most durable political unions in European history, lasting 409 years from

the election of the pagan Lithuanian grand duke Jogaila (Jagiello) to the Polish throne in 1386, until Prussia, Russia and Austria finalised the third partition in 1795. It is only in 2013 that it will be surpassed for longevity by the Anglo-Scottish union, forged in 1603, which may not outlast it by long.

Unions and nation states

The Polish-Lithuanian union is largely forgotten today, and is remembered with little affection across much of its former territory. For unions are the changelings of political history, widely unloved and suspected of interfering with the supposedly natural course of political development, identified since the 19th century with the unitary 'nation state'. In the popular view of history, national heroes – the Wallaces, William Tells and Joans of Arc – fight for national independence against foreign oppression. Political union – especially with a traditional enemy – is presented as a sell-out. This is certainly the case with the Polish-Lithuanian union. It disappeared in 1795 as French revolutionary armies carried the doctrine of the sovereign nation, one and indivisible, round Europe on the points of their bayonets. By the time the partitioning powers – Russia, Austria and Prussia/Germany – collapsed in 1918, the world had changed irrevocably.

As the cold winds of 'national self-determination' blew across eastern Europe, individuals were forced to choose



The Union of Lublin, painted by Jan Matejko (1838–1893) in 1869 to mark its 300th anniversary. The original is in Lublin Museum. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

where their loyalties lay, as nationalists and the largely ignorant western statesmen at Versailles sought to impose neat political borders round a vivid mosaic of ethnic, religious, historic and political loyalties. Neighbourhoods, communities and families were torn asunder. When Józef Piłsudski, a Polish-speaker from the historic grand duchy, sought to revive the union in 1918-19, he was opposed by nationalists from all sides. Piłsudski then chose the Polish nationalist route, seeking to include as many Polish-speakers in the new Polish national state as possible. In 1920 Poland's seizure of Vilnius, the capital of the old grand duchy, brought war with the new Lithuanian state. Despite their long common history, the former partners in union refused even to maintain diplomatic relations until both were crushed by Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in 1939-40. The price of independence was high, and even Hitler and Stalin's gruesome ethnic cleansing could not produce the uniform national states of which the nationalists dreamt.

The sour memories of these years have not wholly evaporated. Attitudes to the union in Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine – its successor states to the east – are overwhelmingly negative. More positive views survive in popular Polish

histories as a reminder that 'Poland' was once a great power, but there is a strong tradition that blames the union for interrupting the supposedly natural development of the Polish nation state, holding it responsible for the partitions.

Survival

Yet the union's creation and survival over more than four centuries raise important questions concerning the nature of European political development before 1789, when political unions were frequent, and the unitary state was the exception, not the rule. Political scientists and historians, however, have shown scant interest in many of these unions, dismissed as merely 'dynastic' or 'personal', and supposedly based on nothing more than dynastic marriage and the vagaries of royal succession, which brought together 'states' into unnatural associations that did not and could not last.

Some did, however. The longevity of the Polish-Lithuanian union raises questions about how and why unions were made, and challenges the notion that union was merely a matter for kings and dynasties. If it had been,



Union treaty of Lublin, 1569. Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw (AGAD).

this union would not have lasted. Poland in 1386 was part of the Latin Catholic world; Lithuania was a vast, loosely integrated polity, ruled by a small pagan elite whose Baltic tongue was very different to the eastern Slavic dialects spoken by some 80 per cent of the grand duchy's population. Since Lithuanian was not a written language until the 16th century, Ruthenian (*ruski*) became the language of government, but their Orthodox religion divided the Ruthenians both from their pagan overlords and their future partners in union. Before 1386 Poland had been plagued by Lithuanian raids which devastated wide areas and enslaved thousands. The union's prospects appeared very different from those of the 1397 Kalmar union between Denmark, Norway and Sweden, kingdoms that had experienced parallel historical and cultural development, possessed broadly comparable institutional structures, and spoke closely-related languages. Yet the Kalmar Union was plagued by disharmony and foundered after a mere 126 years.

Reading the standard histories of Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine and Belarus, it is hard to understand why the union did survive. Relations were tense long before the dramatic events of 1569. The Poles maintained that in 1386 Lithuania had been incorporated into the kingdom of Poland, and therefore was little more than a Polish province. The Lithuanians rejected this interpretation: between 1401 and 1447, and again between 1492 and 1506, they had separate grand dukes, the first of whom, Jagiełło's cousin Vytautas, extended his control across the grand duchy, conducted for long periods his own foreign policy, and, in the two years before his death in 1430, entered a fierce dispute with Jagiełło and the Poles over whether – on the suggestion of Sigismund of Luxemburg, the Machiavellian King of the Romans – he should be crowned king of Lithuania.

Stronger together

So why did the union last? Only part of the answer lies in the common explanation, that it survived because of the sparsely-populated and less developed grand duchy's need for Polish military support against its enemies: the Teutonic Order and then Muscovy/Russia. This factor was undoubtedly important, and the new union's greatest achievement was its crushing defeat of the Teutonic Knights, who, from their Prussian base threatened by 1386 to seize and dominate the pagan Lithuanian heartlands. Jagiełło's fulfilment of the promise he made at Krewo in 1385 that, in return for his election to the Polish throne, he would convert Lithuania to Catholicism, deprived the Order of its main justification for its bloody campaigns and made possible Poland's recovery in 1466 of the Prussian lands that the Order had seized from it in 1308-9.

The crushing Polish-Lithuanian victory at Tannenberg in 1410 was a blow from which the Order never recovered. In 1413, the union was renewed by Jagiełło and Vytautas at Horodło on the river Bug. The treaty again stressed that Lithuania had been incorporated into Poland, but the nature of that incorporation was complex, and should not be interpreted on the basis of modern ideas of statehood and sovereignty. Jagiełło, who retained the title of supreme duke of Lithuania, wished to stress that on the international stage

his dominions formed one legal entity. This enabled Poland-Lithuania to combat the propaganda campaign mounted by the Order at the Council of Constance, where it convincingly argued that its model of peaceful union had proven a far more effective means of converting the pagan Lithuanians than the Order's devotion to fire and sword.

Building a political community

Yet there was far more to Horodło than this. For it contained in embryo a different vision of union, one in which Lithuania was incorporated not into a unitary state, but into a decentralised political community: not the Polish *regnum*, but the *corona regni Poloniae*, the community of the Polish realm. For the Polish-Lithuanian union was, from the very outset, not a personal union that resulted from a cunning dynastic marriage policy and contingent royal deaths. Poland had effectively been an elective monarchy since the death of the last of the native Piast dynasty, Casimir III, in 1370. Casimir was succeeded by his nephew, Louis of Anjou, king of Hungary, on the basis of an agreement made with the Polish political elite. After Louis' death in 1382, the Polish community of the realm ignored his final wishes, and it was not until 1384 that his 10-year-old daughter Jadwiga, was elected queen regnant of Poland instead of Louis' choice, Mary, and her fiancé, Sigismund of Luxemburg. Thus although the 1385 Krewo treaty was in part a pre-nuptial agreement between Jagiełło, his pagan brothers and Vytautas, and the representatives of Jadwiga's mother, Elisabeth of Bosnia, there was a third party: the Polish community of the realm, which was determined to decide who ruled over it.

The idea that this community of the realm formed a republic of citizens with whom sovereignty ultimately lay developed strongly in Poland throughout the 15th century. The citizens elected their monarchs, who had to swear at their coronation to uphold the law and citizen rights. Poland developed as a decentralised, republican monarchy, in which, from 1454, the *sejmiki* – assemblies of local nobles – had to be consulted over a range of important matters, including taxation and the summoning of the noble levy to defend the realm. It was only in the 1490s that a bicameral Sejm was institutionalised, not as a representative institution like the English parliament, but as an assembly of envoys (delegates) from the *sejmiki*, with the upper chamber formed by the royal council of high officeholders, known as the Senate.

This political vision was to provide the principal driving-force in the process of union. Its influence was plain at Horodło. The treaty spoke of incorporation, but it also spoke the language of fraternal union, and of confederation – an important concept in Polish law by which the citizenry who assembled to decide on matters that affected the community of the realm formally confederated to provide a legal basis for their actions. In 1387, Lithuanian nobles who had accepted Catholic baptism had been granted legal privileges that represented the first breach in the patrimonial nature of the Lithuanian realm, but without the institutions to uphold them, or the political culture that underlay the Polish vision of citizenship, the impact was initially muted. Horodło, however, began to address this issue. Provision was made for

the election of a grand duke after Vytautas's death, and the palatinates of Vilnius and Trakai were created on the Polish model in the central territories of Lithuania proper—which contained substantial areas of what is now Belarus. In a striking clause, 47 Lithuanian noble families were formally adopted into 47 Polish heraldic noble clans. Although this measure had little practical impact – there was initially almost no contact between the families involved – its significance should not be underestimated. For it gave some shape to a vision that was as yet not yet fully worked out, but which was to prove of central importance for the process of union. For it signalled the ideal that the two parts of the Jagiellonian realms might constitute one political community, based around institutions of local self-government.

Citizenship and union

The Horodło agreement left many questions unanswered, and disputes over the nature of the union meant that Polish-Lithuanian relations were frequently tense. Yet this fact did not mean that Lithuanian attitudes to the union should be interpreted, as the Lithuanian nationalist tradition has tended to interpret them, as stemming from a desire to break the union. Local autonomy was written into the DNA of the Polish system, while the Lithuanian Catholic elite needed Polish support to sustain their dominant position with regard to the Orthodox, Ruthenian majority, especially as Muscovy emerged from a long period of political weakness to provide a possible alternative focus for Orthodox loyalty. Orthodox nobles were granted formal equality of rights in the 1430s, but remained in practice second class citizens until the 1560s. Yet the decentralised model of republican citizenship appealed far more to the majority of Orthodox nobles than the centralised despotism of Muscovy. The appeal of republican liberty was also strong among the lesser Lithuanian nobles, chafing at the domination of politics in Vilnius by a small group of magnates. In 1566, institutions of noble self-government on the Polish model were extended across the grand duchy; it was to them that Sigismund August was to appeal in 1569.

It is this republican concept of union, not the issue of statehood which has dominated the historiography, that

explains why the Lublin union succeeded. For 1569 represented a victory for the Lithuanian concept of union. The language of incorporation was abandoned: the treaty stated that the kingdom and the grand duchy 'form one indivisible and uniform body and are not distinct, but compose one common Republic, which has been constituted and formed into one people out of two states and two nations'. Thus was Lithuania's equality of status with Poland confirmed, and the ideal of a common political community – a nation of citizens – preserved.

Until at least the mid-17th century, this model provided the basis for a state that was powerful enough despite the complications that were inevitable, on account of its radically consensual and decentralised nature. The union state had many faults, but it perished largely because its decentralised, consensual system rejected aggressive wars fought outside its own frontiers, and it could not adequately defend itself after 1648 against the rapacious military systems built by its neighbours. At its peak, this decentralised, non-aggressive, multi-national, religiously tolerant, republican union stretched from the river Oder to Smolensk, just over 200 miles from Moscow. Had it survived, the blood-drenched sufferings of eastern Europe in the 20th century might well have been avoided. Yet it is the brutal rulers of Russia and Prussia – Peter I, Catherine II and Frederick II – who are venerated and accorded the title 'Great' in the popular histories. The nation state in eastern Europe emerged at a considerable cost from their unprepossessing empires. It is time that historians turned aside from their obsession with national statebuilding and looked afresh at the processes by which unions were formed in late medieval and early modern Europe.

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