

The Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania. Volume 1: The Making of the Polish-Lithuanian Union, 1385-1569

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It is dangerous for historians to know the future. The seductive power of seeing ‘how it all came out’ too often warps the way the process of change in the past is understood and can result in the classic version of a Whiggish view of history. Among the examples of this that can be cited is the way the Polish-Lithuanian union has been evaluated. In the end, the union, achieved with great labor and debate between the late 14th and late 16th centuries, failed. The great powers of late 18th-century east central Europe simply carved up the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Not a few historians have seen this fate as the inevitable result of the union itself.

The problem of why the union failed is not the focus of this volume by Robert Frost (though he certainly will have to deal with it in the projected second volume of *The Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania*). Rather his intent is to look at the way the union was created and also to understand what kind of union it was. It has been nearly a century since there was a fully-rounded evaluation of the first of these issues, and in some respects the second has not ever been fully addressed. Thus this volume, especially since it stands in an entirely different historiographical lineage from that shaped either by the partners in the union or by scholars standing in the tradition of those who perpetrated the 18th-century partitions, is particularly welcome.

Frost makes it clear from the very beginning that what he is examining is ‘not the history of a state, or a nation ... but of a political relationship’ and that in its origin it was ‘a classic late medieval composite state’ (p. vii). Moreover, he seeks to approach his topic in a way that avoids any national perspective, and argues that it was not only the Poles that played an important role in creating the union but that the effort included, in very important ways, the efforts of non-Polish people in the union. He is also quite clear in indicating that his effort can not be any kind of total history; it is rather a political history, dealing with cultural, religious, economic, and social matters only when they directly impacted the story being told.

Section one of seven in the book sets the scene on the eve of the Act of Kréva/???/Krewo in 14 August 1385 (Frost is successfully consistent in using place and personal names that privilege neither one cultural or national tradition nor another.) An evocative short chapter that depicts the town where the treaty was signed as it appears today is followed by background chapters on the Polish and Lithuanian political traditions in

the generations before the 1380s. Next Frost turns in an analytic chapter to the question of unions and composite states, in which various categories and types are examined with reference to previous scholarship. The strength of 19th-century scholarship, especially that by Georg Jellinek, and more recent efforts are carefully considered, as are examples of unions and composite states (England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland are of course treated, along with continental and North American examples). While this chapter is brief in comparison to the length of the rest of the text, it is crucial, for it sets the intellectual and conceptual framework within which Frost sets his larger story, that of a union ‘driven from below as much as from above’, that

‘established a framework within which mutual hostility was contained and channeled, and in which a powerful political fusion gradually developed, forming a unique political culture, yet one that was also truly European.’ (p. 46)

The final chapter in this section focuses upon the Krewo act itself and teases out all the controversial aspects it reflects. The pagan Grand Duke of Lithuania Jogaila (known eventually in Poland by his Christian name Władysław and as Jagiello, the Polonized form of his Lithuanian name) promised ‘to apply’ his Lithuanian and Ruthenian lands to the Kingdom of Poland ‘in perpetuity.’ Did he mean ‘incorporate’ or ‘attach’? Was Lithuania to be subordinated or was it to be a partner? We are here deep into contentious historiographical debates, and Frost is excellent in laying out what the issues were – and in some ways still are – in terms of the ways in which the several peoples of the Polish-Lithuanian union see that union and their own histories.

In the seven chapters of the next section, Frost first traces structures that obtained between the two states, especially the status of their respective nobilities. His treatment of the emergence of the Polish *szlachta* (nobility) is straightforward, but – in part due undoubtedly to constraints of space and time – does not go as deeply as it might into the controversies in Polish (and to some extent German) scholarship about the way in which this *stratum* of society had developed by the end of the 14th century. This complicated situation is somewhat the same with respect to the Lithuanian boyars, who came from a variety of disparate territories that had been gathered during the generations of rule by Jogaila’s predecessors. This condition was to be complicated after Krewo and Jogaila’s conversion to Christianity as he sought to utilize Polish models as the basis for granting privileges to the boyars. The extension of the Catholic Church’s institutions into Lithuania is at the heart of the next chapter, with one of the difficult issues being the cultural barrier that was to a degree erected between the existing Orthodox population of the Duchy and the Catholics. Equally crucial, and controversial, was the relationship between Jagiello and his cousin Vytautas (known traditionally in Polish scholarship as Witold). The latter had his own ambitions (and there had previously been conflict between the two) and often challenged Jagiello’s authority. Frost spends some time teasing out the details of the relationship between the two and, while he reaches conclusions that not all will agree with, it seems to me his interpretation of Vytautas’ policy is sound: at this point Vytautas did not seek Lithuanian independence, that is, to break the union. Frost also takes issue with widely accepted interpretations of the agreement of Vilnius-Radom in 1401, namely that the union was merely a personal one. He sees it instead as reflecting the growing reality that the Polish community of the realm constituted a distinct element and effectively establishing for the next quarter century a stable working relationship between Jagiello and Vytautas, and, by extension, Poland and Lithuania. This section ends with three chapters that treat first the war between Poland-Lithuania and the Knights of the Teutonic Order, with its decisive battle in 1410 at Grunwald/Tannenberg/Walgrinis (Frost’s conclusions touching the battle itself seem to me to be sound); second, the subsequent Union of Horodlo in 1413, which, Frost argues, in contrast to much other scholarship, clarified the nature of the union and recognized Lithuania as a composite polity (the Ruthenian lands were not mentioned); and third (entitled ‘Defending the Union’), the way in which Jagiello and Vytautas both ‘stressed their personal and dynastic authority ... [and] emphasize[d] that the union was based on the consent of the community of the realm’ (p. 124). By 1422, with the treaty of Melno, the union – whatever it was and however it was understood – thus can be seen at this point in Frost’s presentation as something which had survived its difficult birth and early challenges.

The next quarter century brought challenges, the interpretation of which has been highly controversial in scholarship. Frost's treatment relies on a close and critical reading of the sources and a careful analysis that can only be admired. The issues faced in this period included the [possible] ambitions of Vytautas to seek a royal crown for himself in Lithuania (eventually resolved without his coronation), the subsequent machinations of Švitrigaila (Jagiełło's youngest brother) to further his own interests, and the divisive politics of the Ruthenian lands and their elites. In addition, questions touching the endurance of the union following Jagiełło's death in 1434, the subsequent involvement of his eldest son and successor Władysław III in Hungarian affairs, the election of his younger brother Casimir as Grand Duke and – following Władysław's death in the Crusade of Varna in 1444 – the grudging election of Casimir as King of Poland while preserving his Lithuanian title as Grand Duke all served to roil waters that had seemed calmed in the 1420s. Nevertheless, Frost's conclusion at the end of the five chapters in his third section is that Casimir's royal coronation 'symbolized the reconciliation of the parties that had squabbled, fought, and disputed the nature of the union for nearly two decades' (p. 195).

The next section (five chapters) begins again with historiography, and again Frost demonstrates his magisterial control of these materials. He looks briefly at debates and their interpretation in the first years of the reign of Casimir IV (known traditionally as the Jagiellonian), when efforts were made from both the Polish and the Lithuanian sides to reinterpret or even redraft the union treaties. This process made no real changes, however, in part due to developments described below, but discussing them gives Frost the opportunity to affirm that by this period – contrary to the traditional view that the union remained merely a personal one – it was in reality a real union as Jellinek defined such a status. The developments that followed included Poland's attention to the incorporation of (some of) the Prussian lands of the Teutonic Order following the Thirteen Years War (1454–66) and changes in the rights of the *szlachta* and the peasantry in this same period that were later of great import in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth after 1569/1572. One important chapter in this section reflects Frost's foray into an extremely perceptive social history of the peasantry and an analysis of the rural economy in this period.

The long reign of Casimir the Jagiellonian, who died in 1492, was followed in succession by three of his sons, John Albert (king in Poland only), Alexander (first Grand Duke in Lithuania, then from 1501 to 1506 also king in Poland), then Sigismund, called the Old (both Grand Duke and king). The first three of these have traditionally been judged rather negatively and Frost offers no significant revisionist picture of them, except in some respects for Casimir. In the fifth section of his book Frost's concern is primarily upon the way royal power was strengthened during Casimir's reign, upon the process by which the union was consolidated, and upon significant parliamentary and constitutional changes, especially in Poland. The section concludes with a well-done analysis of similar changes in Lithuania and Ruthenia and the elites therein (the *shliakhta*). It is in this period that the great magnates there begin to emerge as political forces whose ideas in opposition to closer union were to have such an effect in the mid-16th century. Some of these same themes are developed in Frost's sixth section. He particularly emphasizes, as not all scholars have, the importance of the formula of union discussed at Mielnik in 1501, which in some ways foreshadowed events at Lublin in 1569. At this stage the alternatives touching the union were increasingly seen to include the potential of the notion 'that the two realms could, within a union, fuse themselves into an entity that transcended both of them.' (p. 343). In treating this period Frost includes, to a greater degree than before, elements of culture and religion. This is highly appropriate, for this is the era when Renaissance and Reformation influences were to have their greatest impact upon Polish society and politics. The continued rise of parliamentary government is the focus of one chapter, the question of the status of the Prussian lands of the Teutonic Order following the secularization of these territories in 1525 is the core of another. The latter in particular is important in Frost's eyes, for debates about the incorporation of Prussia reflected some important Polish views about incorporation in the context of the larger question of the Polish-Lithuanian union.

With the accession as king in 1548 of Sigismund Augustus (Sigismund the Old's son [1520–72], Grand Duke after 1522 and *vivente rege* from 1529), the making of the Polish-Lithuanian union entered its final

stage. The passions among the participants over the issues touching the union have been reflected in subsequent scholarship, and there has been wide variance in interpretation. Frost's treatment is careful and precise. The final section of his book opens with a chapter in which the ideal of 'equal partners' is analyzed, showing the growth of powerful Lithuanian magnates and their views (in particular the Radvila/Radziwi?? family – Rudy the Red and Rudy the Black especially) and the emergence also of the 'executionist movement', which sought fundamental reforms in political practice and ecclesiastical appointments and which, as Frost points out, found to its surprise that by 1562 'the king was on their side' (p. 445). There were ups-and-downs in this run-up to the meeting of parliament (the *Sejm*) in 1569 and some of the disappointments from the Polish side were, as Frost concludes, their own fault. At some points it appeared that the king was clearly on the side of the Polish incorporationist outlook. In the long run, however, that is not the way it turned out, and Sigismund Augustus eventually forced the issue. In 1569, the Union of Lublin was agreed at the Sejm held there. All issues of incorporation, including any of the original ideas from the time of Jagie??o and Vytautas, were dropped, and the idea of one common republic in which there were two separate nations was agreed. Neither side got what it had hoped to achieve, but the end result, in Frost's eyes (and those of many others) was that it created 'not a union of realms or states, but of a fraternal union of peoples, a community of the realms' (p. 494).

In tracing these details, Frost is constantly in conversation with the documents – some of which have rather recently been edited or re-edited – and with great scholars of past and present generations. This is reflected in his dedication of the book to the memory of four of them: Oskar Halecki, a Pole; Adolfas Šapoka, a Lithuanian; Matvei K. Liubavskii, a Russian; and Mykhailo Hrushevsky, a Ukrainian. But in his larger conclusions, as in his analyses of individual documents and developments, Frost is (to steal a trope from the European Middle Ages) literally seeing further and clearer than the giants upon whose shoulders he stands. Not all scholars will agree with everything he has written and concluded. In particular, those wedded to national traditions may find themselves discomforted. But there is no finer treatment of the topic of this book in English and as it becomes fully appreciated it should become the standard in any language.

Not everything that could – or perhaps should – be in a book that is the first volume in The Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania is contained in this book. As noted above, Frost did not intend to write a comprehensive history, concentrating instead on political history broadly defined. As he put it, 'there will be a fuller, thematic treatment of important issues such as religion, The Renaissance, and the influence of humanism, and the union's unique urban world in volume two' (p. viii). But this hope to include more of these matters from the era included in this volume in his intended second volume, seems to me to present difficulties. Let me provide here just a very few examples. While there is material in his chapters that bears on Polish intellectuals in their involvement at the Council of Constance (Paul Vladimiri especially), his treatment is contextualized within the framework of Polish-Lithuanian relations with the Teutonic Order. Other intellectual developments at the University of Cracow at this period and after, from which most of these individuals came, do not fit this context and so are untreated. In the second volume of this series, intended to cover the era from 1569 to the 1790s, it will be difficult to go back and pick up some of this earlier material. This is also true of the role these intellectuals played in church reform in the mid-15th century, especially in the context of the conciliar movement, where Polish academics made some important contributions. Whether there will be space and place in the second volume when matters of political consent as part of the Polish parliamentary tradition are being treated to go back to the 15th century will challenge the author. In the social and economic sphere, the 'noble tradition' that has often been attributed to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 17th and 18th centuries has roots in the late Middle Ages that Frost was able to explore only briefly in this volume; it may be difficult for him to backtrack in much depth in the forthcoming second volume. Much the same can be said for the status of cities – both economically and politically – in the Commonwealth; the late medieval background may fit uncomfortably in a treatment devoted primarily to the two centuries before the partitions. Thus some things that could be said about Poland-Lithuania in the 15th and 16th centuries may fall by the wayside.

Be that as it may, it should be emphasized that this volume is an outstanding contribution to the history of east central Europe in the late medieval and the beginnings of the early modern period. Moreover, by his

conceptualization of what a 'union' is in the context of political theory, and how the Polish-Lithuanian example fits into this, Frost make a nicely original contribution. Most importantly, his focus on a 'union' rather than a nation enables him to write with a refreshingly balanced and judicious outlook that contrasts sharply with the more passionately presented work by some – but not all – previous scholars. Finally, the text of this volume is written in a prose that is not just fluid, but often graceful and eloquent.

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