

The partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth belong to the most important themes of Polish, and more generally of Central-European history, which stir emotions even today, nearly 250 years after the First Partition (1772). A question of causes and responsibility comes back especially in the case of the first of the partitions. It is also fascinating to know how one of the greatest states of eighteenth-century Europe became a prey of predatory neighbours so easily. Who was guilty? Was it the Commonwealth itself, which was not able to defend itself against the neighbours? Or maybe one shall blame neighbours, who decided for predatory action to satiate their greed and to advance their own interests?

Fortunately, historians do not ask questions about the moral culpability of any of sides only, but rather are interested, from the 19th cent. onwards, in the circumstances and premises that led to the decision about the partition of the Polish territory. The first scholarly answers come from the researchers from Austria and France, who, however, had no access to the Russian and Prussian archives with their files essential for the circumstances of the partition (the official archives were not fully accessible for the historians at that date). In spite of these difficulties the researchers created a coherent narrative, which appeals to many historians even today, and was put into circulation in the popular discourse. To summarize it briefly: the main culprit was Prussia, which invented the idea of, and was the main driving force behind the partition, whereas Russia, and Catherine II especially, only reluctantly agreed to take part in the partition. The Polish historiography entered a serious scholarly debate on the partitions relatively late, i.e. after the restoration of independence in 1918.

It is a suitable time to come back to the study of the First Partition, especially given that we have opportunity to study sources coming from archives of all the three partition powers. Furthermore, the rise of new methods of historical analysis, with methodological loans from other branches of the humanities prompts new research questions, which should led to a better understanding of the historical process, and to more precise and accurate reconstruction of the events in the years 1768-1772, pivotal for the partition.

Since the main culprit of the First Partition is –according to the prevailing part of historiography – Frederic II, King of Prussia, one has to start a re-assessment of the partition from a study of Berlin's policies in that period. Did King Frederic II run an independent Polish policy or rather followed his Russian ally? Which problems were interesting to both allies, how did they exchange information on Polish affairs, what kind of data did they possess while making crucial decision in the Polish question? Along with the sources of Russian provenance, the Prussian diplomatic correspondence sent to Berlin by the ambassador in St. Petersburg is also a great material to study Russian policies, thus I am going to utilize these sources to study Empress Catherine's II actions in the time of the Partition. Prussia was the closest ally of Russia, and the Prussian ambassador was the best-informed foreign representative at the Russian court, hence the very value of these reports for analysis of the Russian policy.

The analysis of the diplomatic sources shall help us to verify a thesis, which I had suggested in a few texts already published, that all the decisions concerning the affairs of the Commonwealth, including the partition decision itself, were sovereign actions of St. Petersburg. I want to reconstruct the true motives of the partition decision taken by Catherine II and her advisors, which for Russia meant a temporary loss of sole control over the Commonwealth and an admission of Prussia and later also of Austria to the affairs of the Commonwealth. Was it a rational decision, reached on basis of all possible data? - Or perhaps was it influenced by an illusion of losing control over Poland and by a fear of losing superpower status of Russia in the international affairs due to a purported collapse in Poland? A new view of the First Partition is needed, and more – it is possible. My project is an attempt at such a new approach to a theme which is seemingly researched and understood for a long time.