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REVIEW ESSAY

How Multicultural Was A Multiethnic Commonwealth?

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Ed. Stanley Bill and Simon Lewis. *Multicultural Commonwealth: Poland-Lithuania and Its Afterlives*. Russian and East European Studies. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023. xii, 383 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Maps. $50.00, hard bound.

Tomasz Grusiecki. *Transcultural Things and the Spectre of Orientalism in Early Modern Poland-Lithuania*. Rethinking Art's Histories. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023. xviii, 242 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. Maps. £85.00, hard bound.

Beginning in the 1970s, and reaching its apotheosis in his 2000 book, *Historia Rzeczpospolita wielu narodów, 1505–1795*, Andrzej Sulima Kaminski propounded a revolutionary idea.[1] According to conventional wisdom, the requirement that all decisions be unanimous, with the liberum veto hanging as a constant threat, had made governing the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth impossible. Due to the "magnate egotism" of the elites, the "nobles republic" had turned into the "magnate oligarchy" of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As such it was feckless and collapsed when faced with its better organized neighbors who, in three stages, took its territory and erased it from the map.

To this Kaminski said, in effect: you are focusing on a few weak institutions, but what held the Commonwealth together was a common political culture resting on republicanism and constitutionalism. The Commonwealth rested on a "Forma Mixta" style of government. A King ruled not by virtue of a presumption to power based on a supposed divine right, but because he was chosen by his peers. He was entrusted to administer the Crown, not to claim it as his dynastic possession. His power was defined by the constitution and limited by the need for consensus. All appointments, taxes, and decisions of war or peace, while proposed by the monarch, were subject to approval by the Sejm. The result was that monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy were entwined in a perpetual dance, balancing each other in a way that avoided the extremes of tyranny, oligarchy, or anarchy.

The twin innovations of required unanimity to make a decision and the liberum veto that empowered any Sejm delegate to torpedo the Sejm's session are often pointed to scornfully as a source of indecision and legislative paralysis. This represents an anachronistic bias in favor of majority rule. Majority rule presumes numbers, rather than arguments, should determine outcomes. The Polish rule of unanimity is based on a belief in the persuasive power of argument. Convincing or coopting opponents is a better recipe for obtaining the ultimate political goal, the common good, rather than factionalism and confrontation. In the pursuit of truth, compromise is a better expedient than the tyranny of the majority. Beyond institutions, the Polish system was based on a strong civil society, which addressed

[1] Andrzej Sulima Kaminski, *Historia Rzeczpospolita wielu narodów, 1505–1795: Obywatele, ich państwa, społeczeństwo, kultura* (Warsaw, 2000).

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the competing interests of the various political, ethnic, and religious groups. In this telling, the partitions of Poland came about due to the failure to live up to the ideal of multiculturalism. From the second half of the seventeenth century on, Catholicism was prioritized and made into the state's religion. The Orthodox and Protestant sects were subject to discrimination and persecution. The charge that they were disloyal, representing foreign interests, became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Kaminski presented a multiethnic, pluralist society that put into practice foundational beliefs in liberty and tolerance, expressed in the ability of its elites and commoners to mediate and compromise. This was a society that was pluralist in practice, where people of different faiths and ethnicities could subscribe to a common political ethos and consider themselves members of the same political, economic, and social entity. The adoption of Sarmatia, an expanse of ancient territory roughly between the Vistula and Don rivers, as a geographic area that all noblemen, no matter what their ethnicity, were descended from, made it possible for Poles, Lithuanians, Prussians, Belarusians, and Ruthenians to claim a common origin while clinging to their separate identities.

In their enthusiasm for this novel interpretation of Polish history some of Kaminski's students (full disclosure: I am one of them) have referred to the Commonwealth as "protomodern." They have spoken of contemporary Poland having to choose the "real" Poland, between the First Commonwealth, with its pluralism, and the Second, with its chauvinism. They have also spoken of its relevance as a model for Poland and other states today. For example: "[E]ven if the historic context in which the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth existed was very different from today, the creative solutions and compromises it negotiated to integrate many faiths and ethnicities may still be a relevant one."[2]

With this as background we can now turn to the two books under review. Tomasz Grusiecki's, *Transcultural Things and the Spectre of Orientalism in Early Modern Poland-Lithuania* is an attempt to deconstruct Polish national historical identity.[3] He is alarmed by a world that is "turning once more towards nativism and cultural essentialism" (20). He employs the history of "transcultural" Poland in the fight against "toxic myths of national purity, which often underpin atavistic ethnonationalisms that purge the imagined community of dissenting views" (20). (Here's looking at you: Prawo i Sprawlidowość, Fidesz, and Make-America-Great-Again Republicans).

"Transculturalism," borrowed from Fernando Ortiz, is the synthesis of different cultural artefacts to create a new culture. Grusiecki focuses on the "demi-Orientalism" of early modern Poland, specifically the adoption of Ottoman fashions of dress and "Polish carpets" that were actually a complex product mostly produced in Iran for Polish customers, as evidence of "well-known foreign things that became the vessels of a vernacular tradition" (10). "The alleged uniqueness of a cultural community is often built on the adaptation (not only the rejection) of foreign elements" (17).

This book focuses on foreign things that came to be regarded as hallmarks of Polishness. Grusiecki considers the paradox of nativism's reliance on foreign elements. Having identified these most traditional Polish cultural artefacts as actually foreign, he asserts that it is time to "dispense with the tendency to treat the (modern) nation-state as the most fundamental unit of art-historical investigation" (20). The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, then, was not "distinctly Polish." What was it? Here Grusiecki adopts Kaminski's notion that the Commonwealth was not a nation-state in-the-making. However, in place of Kaminski's analysis of the political

[2] Karin Friedrich and Barbara M. Pendzich, eds., *Citizenship and Identity in Multinational Commonwealth: Poland-Lithuania in Context, 1550–1772* (Leiden, Netherlands, 2009), xvi.

[3] "Thing" is a technical term: "When objects and artefacts make a real impact on entire nations and peoples, they are better described as 'things': material forms with the capacity to act upon the world. . . . To engage with materiality is thus to participate in what Martin Heidegger calls 'thinging': a process of moving beyond cerebral reference . . . that defies language and buries itself in the world of lived experience" (Grusiecki, 14), quoting Martin Heidegger, '*The Thing' in Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1971), 161–83.

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culture, he presents cartography. The map of the Commonwealth by Andrzej Pograbka, printed in Venice in 1570, one year after the Union of Lublin cemented the Commonwealth of the Two Nations, presented it as European Sarmatia, subject to Zygmunt August, King of Poland, with the areas of Polish, Lithuanian, Prussian, and Ruthenian Sarmatians duly labelled.[4] There was one Sarmatia but different kinds of Sarmatians. All noblemen could claim a common heritage, stretching back to the republic of Rome, while maintaining their separate ethnic identities. "This is the precise rhetorical function of Sarmatia: to act as the spatial container of a dualistic polity comprising two composite states and at least four different peoples who all—at least at times—called themselves Sarmatians" (49).

Grusiecki goes onto analyze the late sixteenth century adoption of Ottomanesque dress as another unifier of "Poland's" disparate elements. All noblemen adopted the Ottoman style hairstyle, cape, and boots so that, again, Poles, Lithuanians, Prussians, and Ruthenians, whether Orthodox or Catholic could feel loyalty to Poland. Their dress was "Polish," distinguished from styles of the west. It signified their noble status and political allegiance, not their ethnicity.

Grusiecki takes this one step further than Kaminski. The identifier of Polish culture was of Turkish provenience. For him this deconstructs Polish identity (and by analogy all national identities), "tainting all subsequent discussions of the imagined purity of local and national culture" (5). Obvious foreign elements like Ottomanesque dress, despite efforts to obscure their foreign origin, can "serve as a model for de-ethnifying culture, emphasizing its entangled character and weakening its ability to signify as an unalterable cohesive whole" (5). If the identifier of Polishness was so obviously of foreign nature, then Polishness is perforce counterfeit. The imagined community is not a community at all.

Ethnic culture, however, does not need to be "de-ethnified" in order to emphasize its "entangled character." It can still be cohesive, but not unalterable. Polish culture, or any culture, can be deconstructed into its constituent parts, but that deconstruction deconstructs a constructed culture, one that has integrated the foreign elements into a whole, cohesive culture. Once adopted and adapted it ceases its connection to its origin and fits into the new culture. The members of the culture have fully adapted it to fit the other elements of their culture (many probably also transcultural in origin) and it is theirs. Grusiecki is so intent on fighting right-wing political views that he de-polonizes Polish culture.

The wondrously complex story of the "Polish Carpets" is used by Grusiecki to contrast nineteenth century "binary thinking" with early modern "doublethink." Many of these carpets were manufactured in Persia to Polish specifications. Some of them were made in Anatolia and perhaps some were manufactured in Poland itself in the Persian style. These carpets were in the possession of Polish kings and some wealthy magnates (and other European royalty and nobility). They were an elite collectible and used to represent the status and power of their owner. As such, they could be used in displays of wealth or as gifts. Grusiecki has some fun tracing the desperate attempts of nineteenth century art historians and museum curators to classify these carpets by geography. The fact is that these carpets were bespoke orders from Poland to workshops in Persia (or in Anatolia): made in Persia, but using materials originating from many places, even dye from Poland.

To the early moderns, the nineteenth century insistence on classifying things by their geographic origin was meaningless. They knew they had ordered the carpets from Persia, yet they could use them to represent Polish culture. Grusiecki calls this doublethink: believing a thing was something and something else at the same time.

> To properly describe these heterotopic things we need to scrap the modern binary notion of their epistemic status as Oriental decorative arts and embrace the early modern (double) thinking of their owners, who did not see a contradiction in perceiving Iranian or Turkish objects as belonging to Polish tradition (183).

[4] This chapter in slightly different form also appears in Multicultural Commonwealth.

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Here I think he has hit upon a real difference between early modern and modern. Except these carpets were limited to a tight circle and thus everything we may say about them can only be applied most selectively.

Once again, Grusiecki fails to account sufficiently for the Polish owners of these objects having appropriated them to Polish culture. From the examples he gives, they are almost never called Persian carpets, but rather carpets in the Persian style. That is, the "Persianness" of these carpets was subordinate to their representative function for their owners. Their foreign origin merely added to their Polish cachet: look at what we can afford to import. This utilization of distinctive Polish manners and customs, derived from the east, as a means to demonstrate Polish power and status is apparent from two examples that Grusiecki devotes a chapter to: the entry of Jerzy Ossolinski to Rome in 1633 as the Polish King's emissary to the Pope and the entry of Krzysztof Opalinski to Paris as ambassador in 1645. Both noblemen chose to enter flamboyantly with a huge retinue, orchestrating a sumptuous parade replete with lavish costumes and curious customs.

The Poles made every effort "to flaunt Poland-Lithuania's idiosyncratic customs and self-asserted military strength, effectively transforming the ceremonial pomp of an ambassadorial entry" (114) into a memorable public pageant. The spectacle conflated Polishness with exoticism. In their dress and customs the Poles appeared as "close others" (112), simultaneously different and recognizable, dressing exotically but at the same time signaling their Europeanness. The magnificent "Orientalness" (136) of the Poles marked them as innovative, exciting; while their dress was just different enough from the real Orientals (the Turks) to signal that the Poles were both Europe's entrée to the east and bulwark against it.

Once more, Grusiecki has buttressed one of Kaminski's assertions, from a different direction. Kaminski showed Poles to be powerful political actors. Grusiecki agrees but adds that this political power was also based on the clever manipulation of their image and their resourceful consuming and creating of European culture. Stanley Bill and Simon Lewis's *Multicultural Commonwealth: Poland-Lithuania and Its Afterlives* also takes its cue from Andrzej Kaminski. Kaminski objected to the "historical imperialism" that considered the Commonwealth to be "Poland." In reality, he averred, it was, as the title of his book asserted, "A Commonwealth of Many Nations." *Multicultural Commonwealth* drills down into that conception:

> Our aim is not to idealize the Commonwealth as a uniquely tolerant land of harmonious relations between groups—though we will show that this view has formed an attractive way of presenting its legacy for some of its modern inheritors. At the same time, we do not dismiss the existence of a deep political tradition of relative toleration in its institutions and social practices (3).

This statement reveals ambivalence with regard to the nature and legacy of the Commonwealth. The editors are adamant that "multicultural" applied to the Commonwealth is not to be confused with a modern ideology of different groups sharing equal status and resources. To them, the Commonwealth was a "hierarchical multiculturalism" with Polish Catholics on top. Yet they assert that political and legal norms were established that enabled a diversified, internally differentiated, composite state to exist. They hesitatingly grant that such norms constituted "perhaps even a kind of ideology" (3). The essays in the first part of the book take different stands with respect to the ambivalence about Polish multiculturalism and multiethnicity.

Magda Teter goes beyond Kaminski with respect to the Jews. Kaminski wrote an article titled, "Poland as a Host Country of the Jews."[5] Teter begins her analysis by insisting that rather than being a *host*land, Poland was a *home*land for Jews: "Jews were intrinsic to and

[5] See John S. Micgiel, Robert Scott, and Harold B. Segal, eds, *Proceedings of the Conferences on Poles and Jews: Myth and Reality in Historical Context* (New York, 1986), 16–31.

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inseparable from the country's social, political, and economic landscape" (30). The Jews were not apart from but a part of the Polish system. In a society where each estate was governed by a special set of laws, the Jews were just one more estate. She calls the much-vaunted institutions of Jewish autonomy in Poland proof that the Jews were part of the Polish system. The terms used to describe the symbol of Jewish autonomy, the Vaad Arba Aratzot and its head, were Sejm and Marszałek, imitating the Polish parliament. Polish representatives were present at Vaad meetings, and the order of communities mimicked the order of cities in the Sejm. On the local level the palatine or magnate had to approve Jewish elections. They often intervened in rabbinical appointments. Both Jews and Christians in royal towns sometimes conflicted with their respective co-religionists in private towns.

Jews were indeed valued and considered integral to the economy of cities, individual estates, and royal domains. They were a major force in the towns' prosperity, to the extent that they needed to be supported and protected. With respect to Jews, the Commonwealth was indeed a commonwealth of tolerance and freedom, in line with the Kaminski school. This integration comes with a kind of transculturalism. Jews adopted Polish views of government, economy, and esthetics on a fundamental, unspoken level. Rather than the conscious adaptation of foreign ways, like the adoption of Ottomanesque fashion by the nobility, these Polish, really European, ways of thinking insinuated themselves in Jewish culture.

Another advocate of the Kaminski position is Karin Friedrich, although she refines it. She traces the fate of multiconfessionalism and interconfessionality in Royal Prussia, the Lithuanian Grand Duchy, and Ruthenian lands from the sixteenth through the late seventeenth century. In all these multiethnic and multireligious territories, she discovers the yin of civic identity paired with religious freedom pitted against the yang of political forces trying to enforce religious uniformity. In Royal Prussia the powerful Lutheran factions succeed in monopolizing the larger city councils and in excluding the Catholics. In Lithuania in 1572, there were sixteen Protestants, three Orthodox, and three Catholics among the senators. By 1660, the last Calvinist senator had died (and he had converted to Catholicism four years earlier). This reflected a general trend of conversion due to increasing restrictions on Protestants paired with the reservation of royal appointments for Catholics. The idea that a non-Catholic could not be a patriot became dominant.

In Ruthenia, beginning from the Union of Krewa in the fourteenth century, discrimination against Orthodoxy as a peasant religion existed. Things came to a head in 1596 when the Uniate or Greek Catholic Church was created, by which the Orthodox accepted the authority of the Roman Pope but retained their liturgy and rites. The traditional Orthodox, led by Petro Mohyla and Adam Kysil, contested the new Church, resulting in the mid-seventeenth century Cossack wars, which were, at least partly, struggles for recognition of traditional Orthodoxy.

What is notable in the present context, however, is not only the endeavors for and against Catholic dominance but the hybridity among Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox usages. In Royal Prussia, there were such practices as shared Catholic and Lutheran funeral rites, and Protestant ministers blessing Catholic marriage vows. Many Lutheran churches took on the aspect of Catholic material culture with ornate altar pieces and images of the Virgin Mary. In Lithuania, there was the shared church in Vilnius, and Calvinist ministers allowed celebrations to be observed twice in recognition of the Orthodox calendar. Lutherans accepted the Catholic calendar and saints' images. The Uniate Church personifies the amalgamation of religious practices. Even the attempt by Petro Mohyla to resist it wound up incorporating Catholic images as shown in his remodeled Church of the Savior on the Berestovo Hill in Kyiv, which was a careful blend of Catholic and Orthodox elements, as demonstrated by Olenka Z. Pevny. Through it all there was significant intermarriage across denominations in all three venues.

This was yet another type of transculturalism. Rooted in the social practice that emerged from daily interaction, it consisted of, with the exception of the Uniate Church, largely ad hoc arrangements by which people of different faiths could live together. Even Lithuanian Tatars

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managed to live for centuries in the Commonwealth without losing their Muslim religion. Officially discriminated against, restrictions were observed more in the breach. Culturally they were conversant in Polish culture, symbolized by the translation of the Qur'an into Polish. But, like the Jews, as Dariusz Kołodziechyk shows, this conversance coexisted with their own culture, influencing it, but not overwhelming it.

Finally, Richard Butterwick stands Kaminski's thesis on its head by showing that the idealism of the 1573 Warsaw Confederation, which declared mutual support and tolerance of all the major Christian religions, was undermined "from below" (141) with encouragement "from above" (141). The retreat of Protestantism and Orthodoxy was an insidious process that stretched over the seventeenth century. In Butterwick's estimation it was due to

> the excellence and availability of Catholic schooling, the sensuality of Catholic worship, the approachability of the heavenly company of interceding saints, the zeal of some of the post-Tridentine bishops, most kings' decided preference for Catholics in their distribution of patronage, the divisions among the Evangelical confessions, their failure to attract petty nobles and to accustom peasants to changes, and in the east, the social prestige of Latin-rite Catholicism vis-a-vis Orthodoxy (141).

The result was a progressively coherent "Polish nation" expressed in "performative Catholicism, with an intense baroque repertoire of pilgrimage, penance, processions, and pomp" (143).

Ironically, it was in the partition period when the ideal of the 1573 Confederation of Warsaw of civic culture above confessional differences was consolidated as a policy encompassing burghers, Jews, and peasants. The Constitution of the Third of May guaranteed all people of any confession peace in faith and the protection of the government. It was not the failure to live up to the ideals of multiculturalism that resulted in the final partitioning of Poland.

The second section of Multicultural Commonwealth examines how the multiculturalism of the Commonwealth has been (mis-)construed from the nineteenth century until today by various descendants of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth. Stanley Bill's analysis of nineteenth century literature reveals the tendency for nations to homogenize in service of nationalist ideology and to see groups that once shared their country as aliens. Nineteenth century literature reflects this tendency. Poles tended to see the Commonwealth as "Polish" with the magnanimous Poles exercising a "civilizing" regime on Ukraine. Ukrainians saw the Poles as nineteenth-century style "colonizers." However, the authors on both sides still could not deny the essential historical, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic hybridity that was the legacy of the Commonwealth to both of them. This made for paradox in their writing.

Oscar Halecki's and Lewis Namier's positions, as presented by Robert Frost, shows nationalist homogenization still incomplete in the early twentieth century, with Halecki seriously suggesting a return to the Polish Commonwealth with the other nations autonomous but still under Polish tutelage. Namier championed a strict nationalism with regard to the Poles, advocating their inheriting only the ethnically Polish parts of the Commonwealth. The Ukrainians should be happy to be part of the great Russian empire.

The claims of modern Lithuania and Belarus, each to be the exclusive heirs of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, are analyzed by Rustis Kamuntavicius. Both marginalize the Grand Duchy's multiethnic character, and especially any Polish element. They are limited by their nationalist blinders to emphasizing the history of that part of the Grand Duchy that they currently occupy. Lithuanians study the history of Kaunas, Šiauliai, Samogitia, and Aukštaitija, while Belarusians dig into the history of Polatsk, Viciebsk, Minsk, and Hrodna. Yet both historiographies referred to the same entity—the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. As a result, there appeared two different narrations of the same history.

Simon Lewis shows how the Poles view Belarus: with condescension, while Belarusians feel victimized by Poland. Belarusians emphasize their national identity while the Poles

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view them as part of the untamed eastern realm of the Commonwealth. Polish culture has a certain attraction today, however, for its signaling western Europe. Contemporary literature indicates that both Belarussian and Polish intellectuals are sensitive to the shared legacy of the Commonwealth.

Magdalena Waligórska, Ina Sorkina, and Alexander Friedman assert that those who curate exhibitions, performances, and monuments, or who arrange the unmediated presence of ruins or human remains in the public space provide points of "intrusion" of traumatic histories into the present. Projects like the Potemkin shtetl in Bilgoraj or the museum in Iuje are attempts to honor the Jewish past of these places, but wind up promoting silences, myths, and taboos within the nostalgic frame of harmonious coexistence, colorful diversity, and good neighborly relations—a vision that occludes antagonisms and violence. However, they do also help to establish the causal connection between the postwar ethnic homogeneity, absence, destruction, and neglect of multicultural heritage and the implication of local populations in the historical injustices that have led to it. Thus, they provide narratives that can both soothe and unsettle contemporary inhabitants.

Ewa Nowicka's research demonstrates that for most "ordinary" Poles living in an era of migration-based diversity, the extent to which attitudes to the current cultural pluralism draws inspiration from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's diversity is very limited. The Ukrainians who are entering en masse and often settling permanently in Poland are building their integrational plans economically and practically, not on memories of the political community of yore.

The upshot of these essays is that in the postwar period the multiculturalism of the Commonwealth had no meaningful resonance. Only Poles represent it as "a uniquely tolerant land of harmonious relations between groups" (3). The successor states are so set on "proving" their legitimacy, that they refer to the multiethnic heritage ironically, only as a means of promoting their claim to be its authentic heirs. This contrasts with views of the actual Commonwealth. Kaminski asserted that the Commonwealth's political and civic ideology was key to its ability house a multitude of ethnicities and religions successfully. The authors here range from Teter's and Kołodzieczyk's expansion of that tolerance to include Jews and Muslims, to Friedrich's demonstration of how it worked in social practice, to Pevny, who described how it did not work for the Orthodox, to Butterwick, who argued that strong forces undermined it until it was too late. Finally, for Grusiecki, Kaminski was correct (for the nobility), although not because of ideology, but thanks to a borrowed culture.

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