CHAPTER 14

Education: The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

Michael Tworek

Introduction

Across Central Europe, educators believed that humanist learning went hand in hand with religious reform and that education provided the best way to instill true religious and civic piety among the ruling elite. Humanism had set down substantial roots in Central Europe by the beginning of the 16th century, as the enthusiastic reception of Erasmus across the territory made clear. In 1524 Erasmus wrote to England’s Archbishop Warham that the Polish kingdom was devoted to him although he had never even visited the territory. Nevertheless, for Erasmus, Poland numbered among those realms where his educational activities had won him the friendship of kings and prelates as well as made the pursuit of humanist learning a worthy endeavour.1 Erasmians could be found among nobles, clergy, and scholars at court and the university in the royal capital, Cracow.2 Though previously considered “barbarian”, Erasmus believed that Poles now flourished “in letters, laws, character, and religion” and could contend with the “most distinguished and praiseworthy of nations”.3 Indeed, for Erasmus, Poland remained a shining and peaceful example of how humanist-educated leaders could renew Christian society.

This chapter will survey how humanists and reformers sought to bring this ideal to fruition in the educational landscape of Poland, together with Lithuania and Prussia, from 1520 to 1656.4 The lands of Poland and Lithuania with their Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Antitrinitarian communities serve as a case study to examine how education and humanism shaped the impact of the Reformation in Central Europe. The picture of Poland-Lithuania’s relationship

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4 By Poland-Lithuania, I mean the lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: the Polish Kingdom, Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and dependent areas such as Royal Prussia, Ducal Prussia, and Ruthenia.
with humanist learning that emerges was hardly as peaceful or uncontested as Erasmus’s description implied. Yet, it still reveals the vital and vibrant place occupied by the largest contemporary polity in Europe in the intellectual world of humanists and reformers alike.

Cracow

As the sole university in Poland-Lithuania until the Reformation, Cracow played a central role in discussions of humanist educational reform, serving as a lodestar against which subsequent reformers reacted in the 16th century. Among the major centres of learning in Central Europe, Cracow was an important educational destination that attracted a significant number of German, Hungarian, and Ruthenian students up to the Reformation. Cracow had constituted an important axis of intellectual exchange in Central Europe with Prague and Vienna through their respective universities and courts since 1400. The oldest university in Central Europe, the Carolinum (Charles University) in Prague, had maintained extensive contacts and exchanges of students and professors with Cracow. Prague played a critical role in the re-founding of the Cracow University in 1400. Yet, the Decree of Kutná Hora of 1409 and subsequent Hussite upheavals weakened ties permanently between the two universities. The decree of Wenceslas IV gave the Bohemian faction at the university the decisive voice in university matters, and their decision to support the controversial teachings of John Wyclif prompted an exodus of primarily German students and masters who rejected Wyclif’s work. The departure of foreign students from the Carolinum thus contributed significantly to its dramatic decline and inability to become a major centre of humanist learning in the 16th century. This redirected many Polish students studying at Prague to Leipzig and especially Vienna. The Rudolfina in Vienna enjoyed closer ties, especially dynastically, with Cracow and served as an important conduit for

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5 Almost half of Cracow University’s student population was of foreign origin in a given year. For geographic and social origins of Cracow’s students, see Krzysztof Boroda, Studenci Uniwersytetu Krakowskiego w późnym średniowieczu (Cracow, 2010).


7 For the impact of Kutná Hora on the Carolinum, see František Šmahel, Die Prager Universität im Mittelalter: Gesammelte Aufsätze (Leiden, 2007), passim. More generally on the Charles University, see Dějiny Univerzity Karlovy, 4 vols. (Prague, 1995–8).