Catherine II’s Armed Intervention in Poland: Origins of the Political Decisions at the Russian Court in 1791 and 1792

Exactly one week after 3 May 1791* — on the tenth — St. Petersburg received the news of the great and unexpected event in Warsaw, the passage of the new Polish constitution, proclaimed by the Diet for establishing a new political system for the Polish Commonwealth. A courier from the Russian envoy in Warsaw, Iakov Bulgakov, brought a short and hurriedly written report of the recent events, which gave a somewhat hysterical and exaggerated picture of what had occurred. At first Catherine was shocked. For the last three years the empress had observed with great anxiety and helpless rage the evolution of a policy of the Diet’s patriotic majority, which took advantage of Russia’s current troubles (the Russo-Turkish War) to regain and stabilize national independence. Now her immediate reaction was that it was most inevitable and necessary to overthrow the new system supporting the Polish anti-patriotic opposition with Russian armed forces.1 But after several days her impetuosity began to abate, in part to the strong pressure of Austrian diplomacy which, until the death of Emperor Leopold II (1 March 1792) worked intensively to persuade her that the new Polish system (and, above all, the integrity of the Polish Commonwealth’s territories in the new boundaries established after the First Partition of 1772) was completely compatible with the real political interest of both the Austrian and Russian courts.2 But the major cause of the empress’s hesitation, which wo

* All dates, if not double, are given in the new calendar.
1. Catherine II to Grimm, 10 and 21 May 1791, Сборник Императорского Русского исторического общества [hereafter СИРИО], XXIII (СПб., 1878), 534-535.
2. Walerian Kalinka, “Polityka dworu austriackiego w sprawie Konstytucji 3 Maja”, Przegląd Polski, VII (1872-1873), 42-97; П. Митрофанов, Леопольд Австрийский, внешняя политика (II, 1916), стр. 443-445; Robert Howard L. The Second Partition of Poland (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), pp. 211-242. L. L. excellent study has remained until now the best analysis of the international diplomatic interplay which preceded the Second Partition of 1793; but it should be remembered that Lord, who utilized the Austrian, Prussian, Saxon and Russian foreign policy archives very carefully, was not well acquainted with the Polish archives, and did not study the internal political conflicts of Russia in 1791. Therefore, he did not see that the Russian decision for armed intervention was preceded by many heated discussions and contestations among the political coterie of St. Petersburg.
about eleven months (until April, 1792), was the great divergence of opinion on the Polish problem among the representatives of the most important and influential elements of Russian political life. Statesmen belonging to the different political cliques that were actively vying for influence had conflicting views of the significance and the potential results of the projected intervention. In 1791 the question of whether or not to undertake armed intervention in Poland was considered above from the point of view of who would benefit most from the operation, and which political group would be reinforced by war against and the overthrow of the patriotic regime.

Therefore, intervention was not decided upon as easily and simply as St. Petersburg, as one might conclude from the rather perfunctory policy of the many authors who treat Russian policy toward Poland in 1787 to 1792 as constant and unchanging and aimed directly at obtaining Russian protection over the Polish Commonwealth — at all costs and by any means. Unfortunately for these historians, Catherine, especially at the end of her reign, was not autonomous in major political decisions, nor was Russian foreign policy conducted on the basis of a raison d'état which was understood in the same way by the entire court and government. At Catherine's court, old favorites' titles were always, after several years of dominance, disgraced and moved from political power, but they retained their fortunes and moral position, and thus were still able to struggle and compete against more fortunate successors. Due to this system, the empire's icky was at the time only a resultant of the contradictory tendencies several "pressure groups." The interest of one of these groups was identical with another's; what one believed was most important for empress's "greatness" was denied by others.

The Polish problem of 1791-92 was no exception to this system of decision-making. Because armed intervention was supported by one of the competing groups, its opponents emphasised all the difficulties and dangers connected with it. The relative balance of power in St. Petersburg in 1791 rendered a decision in favor of intervention impossible. There was even a real chance that the Russian court would recognize the Constitution of 3 May. Only after Prince Potemkin's death, which upset the political balance of power during the autumn of 1791-92, did it become possible for the leaders of the dominant group (Zubov and his adherents) to initiate the anti-Polish operation. But even during the war of 1792 there was a visible divergence of opinion concerning Polish policy in St. Petersburg, and it was primarily the weakness of the Polish resistance that allowed the triumph of the extreme group, which refused all political negotiations with Stanislas-August prior to the unconditional surrender of