

Introduction

Progress or Backwardness?

ENLIGHTENED CENTRALISM VERSUS
CIVIC REPUBLICANISM IN THE FORMER
POLISH-LITHUANIAN COMMONWEALTH

ON 27 MARCH 1971 Władysław Gomułka, former first secretary of the Polish People's Republic, fired off a lengthy letter to the Communist Central Committee, justifying the role of his government in the December 1970 strikes that preceded his dismissal. Gomułka argued that the violent protests of the Gdańsk shipyard workers, the prequel to the later Solidarity Movement, did not represent a response to rising prices, as the party subsequently determined, but flowed from "the worst historical traditions, deeply rooted in our society, and in the strong tendencies toward . . . unbridled anarchism, wild capriciousness, contempt for law and legality, [and] abandonment of any kind of accountability for our own country." He reminded the new party leadership, headed by Edward Gierek, that "the old, oligarchic Commonwealth lost its independence, ceased to exist, and was divided by neighboring countries due to the anarchy of the ruling Polish nobility," which "failed to keep up in development and fell behind, becoming weaker and weaker vis-à-vis its neighbors." In addition to his demands that the current leadership reverse course and return to his economic policies, Gomułka recommended that the Communist Party refocus its efforts on teaching

history, asserting that, “if the young Baltic workers were taught the history of the partitions of Poland, they would not have set out on those December days down the road to anarchy; they would have understood where that road leads.”¹

Gomułka’s history lesson may have served here to justify post-Stalinist repression, but the basic analysis reflected long-standing and broadly shared conventional wisdom about the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which was dismantled and ultimately abolished as a result of the partitions of 1772, 1793, and 1795. Even in the last decades of its existence, the Commonwealth served as a model of anarchic disorder and feudal underdevelopment for Enlightenment Europe, a cautionary tale about institutions and practices to eschew at all costs. In contrast to the centralized and bureaucratic states that dominated eighteenth-century European politics, the Commonwealth remained saddled with an “inconsistent, incoherent constitution,” which inspired, in the words of John Lind, “a spirit of unsocial selfishness.” Montesquieu and Voltaire found common ground in criticizing the Commonwealth for its poor institutional arrangements. For Voltaire, in particular, the Commonwealth embodied the backwardness and fanaticism of earlier epochs, and his epistles sharply contrasted the “anarchy” of the Poles during the Confederacy of Bar (1768–1772) with the beneficent and enlightened rule of his patron, Catherine the Great (r. 1762–1796).² The Commonwealth’s German-speaking neighbors were even more contemptuous, coining the term *Polnische Wirtschaft* (Polish economy) as a shorthand for backwardness and describing the inhabitants in the language of eighteenth-century cultural imperialism as “Iroquois.” The partitioning powers—Russia, Prussia, and Austria—made ample use of the Commonwealth’s reputation as a backward and anarchic state to justify their first incursion into Polish territory in 1772, which the propaganda of the various rulers presented as a favor that would bestow order, security, and rational government upon the newly acquired territories.³

After the first partition, the Commonwealth served as a warning to all reformers about the costs of delaying political modernization.⁴ The final two partitions, which occurred in response to the Commonwealth’s last-ditch attempts at building a more centralized and potent state—a process that culminated in the Constitution of the Third of May 1791—served only to confirm the general consensus that a fail-

ure to appreciate the necessity of political modernization had doomed the country. Throughout the nineteenth century, the state historians of the partitioning powers persisted in justifying the continued occupation of the Commonwealth's lands in part with references to the Poles' anarchic nature, inability to govern, and failure to modernize. From this perspective, the destruction of the Commonwealth conferred a kind of progress, which translated into development and opportunity for these benighted regions. Russian elites, outraged by Alexander I's decision to grant a small piece of the former Commonwealth a constitution and civil rights in 1815, applauded Emperor Nicholas I's abrogation of the constitution after the crushing of the November Insurrection in 1830 as proof that Poles were incapable of understanding or maintaining a modern government. Echoes of the view that Russian rule brought progress and stability to the Commonwealth continue to appear in Russian history textbooks to the present day.⁵

Poles of all political orientations took the apparent lessons of the partitions to heart. Gomułka's letter recommended that the history curriculum in Polish educational institutions adopt more texts from the nineteenth-century Kraków School, represented by Michał Bobrzyński and Józef Szujski (conservatives who would likely have been horrified by the association), whose books placed culpability for the partitions squarely on the Commonwealth and its elite.⁶ Despite Józef Piłsudski's federalist sensibilities, the model of the Commonwealth played only a negative role in the interwar Second Republic, while the postwar Polish People's Republic, purposefully drew upon negative images of the Commonwealth as a justification for promoting centralized and unitary government. The conviction that decentralization and local control played a role in the Commonwealth's destruction has endured into the post-Communist Third Republic, which has retained a powerful and bureaucratic central government under every ruling coalition. Neither the current Law and Justice Party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* [PiS]) nor the liberal opposition have any sympathy for the Commonwealth's political structure. Opposition daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* routinely makes unflattering comparisons to so-called First Republic, while PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński has often indicated his preference for centralized and unitary state, a structure in theory supported by Poles across the spectrum of political opinion.⁷

Underpinning this broadly shared negative attitude toward the Commonwealth lies the conviction that the so-called noble republic failed to develop into a modern state along with the other countries of Europe. In the sixteenth century, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth resembled its European neighbors, all of which were characterized by diffused power structures, overlapping personal loyalties, and estate-based self-governments, but in subsequent centuries, as Claude Rulhière observed in his 1782 *History of the Anarchy in Poland*, Poland-Lithuania increasingly diverged from other members of the club: “The Poles admired none of the progress being made in public administration. Everywhere else the military arts were being perfected. . . . The collection and administration of taxation came to be regarded as an exact science, and skill in trade became a source of power. The Poles alone conserved all the old ways.”⁸ The concept of the state as a permanent institution standing above society only entered European thought at the end of the sixteenth century, and for most of the seventeenth century arguments for constructing a state rested primarily on claims about military contingency and the necessity of collecting taxes. In the eighteenth century, though, state-building merged with Enlightenment criticism of received tradition and irrationality to produce enlightened centralism, a new governing philosophy that aspired to introduce rationalization, professionalization, and standardization over the pluralistic and unwieldy array of local powers that still predominated in the European countryside. Enlightened officials viewed the state not only as a structure providing defense and justice but as an agent of reason, which would improve the well-being and productivity of their country’s subjects. To this end, the state now aimed to acquire control over public health, sanitation, and urban planning as well as the finances of local governments.⁹

The chartered cities became particular objects of centralizing reforms as developments in science and technology brought issues of public health, sanitation, and urban planning to the attention of rulers. Further, as James Collins has emphasized, eighteenth-century centralism coincided with a “municipal revolution” in which cities received illumination, broad boulevards, as well as fire-fighting and waste-disposal infrastructure, reflecting the demands of an increasingly commercial and consumption-based society. City elites were not always willing to support these priorities without prodding from the central gov-

ernment.¹⁰ In addition to cleaning the streets and preventing disease, government officials endeavored to direct the energies and resources of their populations toward greater economic productivity and entrepreneurship. Taking note of the economic and social transformations in The Netherlands, England, and parts of France, which Jan de Vries has dubbed “The Industrious Revolution,” monarchs in central Europe, encouraged by the “Cameralist sciences,” sought to promote entrepreneurial and labor-intensive behavior through police regulations and other policies of the “well-ordered police state.” German Cameralism proposed that society should be ordered like a machine, in which each part played a role useful to the whole. Achieving this clockwork precision and implementing the numerous new regulations and policies of enlightened government required professionally trained administrators and civil servants who could advance the singular vision of the legislator over the competing and contradictory private interests of locally chosen magistrates. In propounding their arguments, rulers and their supporters drew upon legitimate grievances with the oligarchic and venal character of local elites, as well as the inconveniences of feudal inequality, the same resentments that propelled French Revolutionaries to dismantle the ancien régime.¹¹

After the French Revolution, the centralized unitary state administered by appointed, trained experts became the only conceivable political model, while the subordination of formerly autonomous or semiautonomous cities into the hierarchical powers structure could be represented as progress and one of the presumed prerequisites for the modern state. Even in the late eighteenth century, thinkers such as Adam Smith had struggled to comprehend how the inefficiencies and divided sovereignties of medieval Europe could have been allowed to develop. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith concluded that only the weakness of medieval kings and their need for allies against the feudal lords had generated the conditions that enabled medieval plurality. Hegel saw the post-Napoleonic triumph of the unitary state as the essential condition for the full realization of human individuality. The feudal monarchies of the pre-Revolutionary period, he argued, lacked the prerequisite unity, “since functions were vested in particular corporations and communities and offices belonged to persons.”¹² Several decades later, Max Weber also embraced the explanation of independent autonomous cities as a

historical aberration that arose because of the weakness and backwardness of medieval rulers. Once rulers possessed a corpus of educated and informed administrators, he posited, urban autonomy became unnecessary. Liberals saw the destruction of the urban autonomy as a victory for liberty, since the collective ties woven by oligarchic elites, Jewish community leaders, and particularistic authorities imposed formal and informal restraints on individual autonomy. Even Otto Gierke, who celebrated the medieval commune, nonetheless argued that mass democracy had no connection with feudal liberties.¹³ Further, the economic boom and rapid industrialization of the nineteenth century lent weight to Adam Smith's argument that unleashing the individual from guild restrictions, particularistic tolls, and price controls of medieval cities had benefited society as a whole.

This progressive view of history—the conviction that enlightened centralism and the eventual triumph of the unitary state were essential and necessary stepping stones on the road to the modern world—has remained an implicit assumption in conceptualizing Enlightenment Europe since the eighteenth century. Marc Raeff's *Well-Ordered Police State* offers a classic example of a historian presenting administrative and political change as necessary for economic and social progress, a conviction echoed in the many sympathetic portraits of Joseph II and Frederick the Great as progressive reformers.¹⁴ For example, C. B. A. Behrens, Brian Downing, and Christopher Clark have praised Frederick the Great's assault on local privileges as good statesmanship, while concurrently criticizing those countries (Poland-Lithuania, in particular) that retained their complex system of localized privileges intact.¹⁵ Martin van Creveld's synthesis of European state-building, now in its tenth edition, contains numerous cues to suggest that readers should sympathize with the monarchs battling to overcome the nobility, the clergy, and the feudal restrictions of the Holy Roman Empire. Economist S. R. Epstein has reaffirmed that industrialization required as a prerequisite the rise of the unitary state with the power to abolish particularistic privileges and complex webs of jurisdiction. According to this tradition, the costs of diminished city and local autonomy were more than repaid in the prosperity and development that ensued. More recently, Robert von Friedeburg has claimed that the rise of the state as a territorially defined "bearer of public order" based on law allowed the German states to integrate the

claims of the Enlightenment and take the lead in areas such as infrastructure, old age pensions, and social security.¹⁶ For both nineteenth-century and present-day adherents of the progressive tradition, then, the transition from the “anarchy” of the older, estate-based and pluralistic government to a unitary administration appears to represent a natural corollary to the progress of reason from the depths of medieval superstition and credulity, and countries that failed to make this transition—like the Commonwealth—were deservedly swept into the dustbin of history.

This transition, though, did not occur peacefully; the construction of an enlightened, centralized state demanded often violent confrontations between agents of the state and the privileged and self-governing corporate groups, local parliaments, and chartered towns that had enjoyed extensive political, judicial, and fiscal powers since the Middle Ages. Beginning in the seventeenth century, monarchs as diverse as Louis XIV, Charles II of England, and Frederick William of Prussia sought to wrest control over the appointments, responsibilities, and tax-collecting powers of local officials. While jurists and officials produced papers and memoranda that augmented the scope and purview of the central government, monarchs employed bribery, repression, and extortion to subordinate privileged elites and estates, facing down resistance and occasional revolts in the process.¹⁷ The chartered towns and cities of Europe became major targets of these reform efforts because urban autonomy, particularistic privileges, and political prerogatives bordering on sovereignty most interfered with the central government’s plans to rationalize and simplify government, as well as to promote uniformity in jurisprudence, law, and tax collection.¹⁸

In royalist propaganda and in the treatment of many sympathetic historians, those institutions and corporations that attempted to block or arrest the transition to the modern state frequently appear as backward, shortsighted, or wrongheaded. François Guizot, who provided perhaps the most unequivocal embodiment of this progressive interpretation of history in his *History of European Civilization*, summarized the conflict thus:

There is something profoundly melancholy in viewing the loss of these ancient European liberties. . . . The patriots fought with passion and bemoaned with despair this revolution, which . . . they had a right to call

despotism. . . . One can admire their courage and sympathize with their grief, but, at the same time, we have to understand that this was not only inevitable, but useful. The primitive system of Europe, the ancient feudal and municipal liberties had failed in the organization of society. . . . They could not produce either security or progress for society.¹⁹

Since citizens of the Commonwealth had more successfully defended their ancient feudal liberties than had others, progress demanded that the constitution of the country be dismantled from without. Indeed, as minister to King Louis-Philippe, Guizot vocally opposed French support for the Poles during the November Insurrection against Russia.²⁰ The view that the defenders of feudalism had to be supplanted continues to find favor among many historians of the Enlightenment. H. M. Scott, for example, in praising Joseph II's attempt to rationalize the Austrian monarchy even refers to the rights of the Hungarian estates to consent to taxation as a "ramshackle system of government." Echoing Weber's assertion about medieval communes, Friedeburg argues that the older associations of towns, knights, and princes never provided an alternative model of government to princely rule.²¹

This narrative of progress ignores the fact that city citizens and town residents possessed their own alternate conception of politics, which differed markedly in its assumptions, goals, and practices from the vision of enlightened centralism. Burghers and other urban groupings in the Commonwealth participated in a political culture informed by the ideas of civic republicanism, referred to by Quentin Skinner as the "neo-Roman theory of free states." Although characterized by a significant evolution over time, civic republicanism refers generally to a demand for self-government by the citizens of a city untouched by outside interference and dependent on the virtue of individual citizens to seek the common good.²² As such, civic republicanism was both individualistic and collectivist, idealizing collective action and grounded in the corporate structures that characterized life in early modern Europe. Such collective action could only come about, though, because of the privileges that individuals enjoyed. Civic republicanism idealized Isaiah Berlin's "positive liberty," that is, the freedom to participate in government over the absence of coercion, and citizens presumed such freedom to derive from a specific constitutional arrangement rather than any notion of

human rights. In the cities of the Commonwealth, civic republicanism depended less on the studied reading of classical authorities than the daily practice of politics in the sense described by Maurizio Viroli and Hannah Arendt.²³ It should be emphasized that civic republicanism presented an ideal (or a series of ideals) based on certain assumptions about human nature, but as an ideal and a worldview this conception presented city citizens with vocabularies, conceptual references, and predispositions that differed dramatically from those favored by enlightened reformers and statesmen.

The confrontation between enlightened officials and city elites pitted two contradictory and mutually incomprehensible political ideals against one another, but neither represented a neutral, dispassionate interpretation of reality. As Reinhart Koselleck argues, enlightened thinkers developed a progressive view of history for their own political ends, and their perspective emerged as the dominant discourse following the French Revolution. In other words, the most common interpretation of the eighteenth-century victory of enlightened statesmen was itself a polemical device used to undermine the position of city republicans no less than that of absolutist rulers.²⁴ In order to appreciate the motivations of local elites on their own terms, we must not judge them in terms of others' priorities. Instead we should follow Pierre Bourdieu and seek the habitus of city residents; that is we must endeavor to discover how seemingly irrational and backward reactions to well-intentioned policies flowed from a practical logic and a concrete awareness of a given community's interests and needs.²⁵ For example, enlightened thinkers emphasized material benefits and concrete objectives, and bureaucrats reacted with surprise and condescension when citizens united to prevent the paving of roads, the installation of sewer pipes, and the institution of measures designed to prolong life and improve health. Civic republicans, though, understood politics as persuasion and coequal decision-making. As Hannah Arendt affirms, the outcome of a given decision mattered far less than the ability of citizens to decide matters for themselves and preserve a constitution that guaranteed freedom.²⁶

The residents of northern European cities may not have all read Machiavelli or Harrington, but this did not prevent city citizens from acting in accordance with civic republican assumptions or using a civic

republican vocabulary. Heinz Schilling has argued that German cities demonstrated an implicit civic republican theory, shown in legal actions and pronouncements, and I propose that the same philosophy was present in the cities of Poland-Lithuania through the end of the eighteenth century. As Andrzej S. Kamiński has argued, the Commonwealth was a “civic space,” where the well-known republicanism of the nobility influenced the behaviors and ideas of other, less politically enfranchised estates, including both the Christian burghers and the legally separate Jewish communities.²⁷ Proceeding from this framework, in this book I examine the clash of the two values systems—enlightened centralism and civic republicanism—in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from the eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century, by which point civic republicanism had been extinguished and the citizens of cities had become the subjects of centralized states. The Commonwealth was home to hundreds of towns with extensive privileges and rights, the majority of which—the private towns—were the property of individual nobles. Most cities in the Commonwealth were small and economically insignificant on the European scale; in the eighteenth century many burghers practiced agriculture, while much trade and handicraft production was the preserve of the disenfranchised Jewish population, which often rivaled the burghers in size and clout.²⁸ Nonetheless, even the smallest cities maintained an intricate web of privileges and rights based on the foundational German charter of Magdeburg Law, the defense of which continually reinforced the assumptions and mentalities expressed in republican literature.

Enlightened centralism came to the Commonwealth during the last decades of its existence, embraced by King Stanisław August Poniatowski (r. 1764–1796) and his coterie of Russian-backed reformers. The partitions only accelerated the process over the next century and under various regimes. Stanisław August and his allies sought to improve, stimulate, and revitalize the towns under his jurisdiction in accordance with the Enlightenment-era faith in the efficacy of centralizing and rationalizing policies.²⁹ Russian oversight narrowed the scope of the king’s reform plans, and the royally controlled cities offered a space for experiments in enlightened government unlikely to provoke opposition from the ruling nobility. In addition, Polish cities were widely considered stagnant and underdeveloped, in need of revitalization and

stimulus. Several laws passed in the first decades of the Commonwealth sought to transfer decision-making and economic power from city elites to Warsaw. The Constitution of the Third of May in 1791 culminated the process by offering greater civil rights to burghers while placing city governments under the control of new state agencies.³⁰ After the partitions, each of the absolutist powers pursued its own centralizing and rationalizing agendas in the territory, the most radical implemented by agents of Napoleon, who re-created a tiny Polish state in 1807, the Duchy of Warsaw, modeled on the structure of the French Empire. Polish officials in the Duchy attempted to tie all cities into a hierarchical system of supervision and control, including those that belonged to individual nobles, and Napoleon's system endured in its successor state, the Congress Kingdom of Poland, established by Tsar Alexander I in 1815.³¹

Including the Duchy as a separate entity, four different blueprints of centralization attempted to modernize and revitalize the cities of the former Commonwealth after the partitions brought an end to Stanisław August's own efforts. The study focuses specifically on the fate of those territories, which were transferred either to the Duchy (with a brief interlude in Austria) or the Russian Empire, respectively representing one of the most energetic and one of the most languid versions of enlightened centralization, though comparisons to the Prussian and Austrian partitions will also be made. Rulers in all four states promised rational, efficient government, improvements to urban space, economic development, and even changes in human behavior, but if one examines the concrete achievements of Enlightenment government in the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth into the late nineteenth century, modernization and progress do not appear to enter the picture. Instead, we find that policies designed to bring order and simplicity provoked chaos and discord, in many cases adding additional layers of complexity and confusion. Rosters of salaried municipal officials as well as government-issued regulations multiplied, but old behaviors stubbornly persisted; the most prominent objects of government attention—the privately owned towns—stagnated and declined. Moreover, in straightening out the inefficiencies, overlapping jurisdictions, and disorderly chains of responsibility that characterized life for many citizens in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, enlightened centralism cordoned off the “civic space,” which had encouraged many citizens to

participate in self-government and attempt to influence their surroundings. In effect, I propose that Enlightenment government destroyed the remnants of medieval, positive liberty without offering much in compensation except for affirmations that this process constituted progress.³²

Few readers in the English-speaking world are familiar with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth except as an example of a country that failed to modernize. The story of centralizing and rationalizing reform in this part of east central Europe, however, suggests that the Commonwealth can yield an entirely different set of lessons to students of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment Europe. The reform experience in Poland-Lithuania argues against associating centralization and rationalization with progress and modernity and against inferring inevitability to the particular path of state-building upon which European rulers embarked. Fashionable ideas, unfounded assumptions, and unempirical convictions reflecting particular interests often played a decisive role in the plans and decrees of the enlightened absolutists, the French Revolutionaries, and the reformers surrounding Stanisław August and his successors. Like elites in developing countries seeking to “catch up,” reformers in the Commonwealth consciously imported the models of centralization, rationalization, and universalization from the practices and theories of neighboring states with the aim of engineering modernization and economic growth in the face of external pressure. In the nineteenth century, policies of enlightened centralism represented a kind of colonial development that sought to improve the territory in question with policies modeled on the heartland. In each situation, the abstract models, including a priori assumptions about what a city should be, and the rational designs of legislators encountered unexpected resistance and failed to realize expectations, even after the benchmarks of a modern state—centralization, hierarchy, and repressive capacity—had already been achieved.

Historians have long accepted that many projects of Enlightenment-era rulers failed to achieve success, and even policies that eventually prevailed had to be scaled back or quietly abandoned upon first attempt. Neither Louis XV's battle with the guilds nor Catherine the Great's attempt to decree vibrant municipal societies from above achieved the effect intended.³³ In the last decade, though, an emerging historiography has begun to challenge not only the outcomes of enlightened proj-

ects but also the underlying assumptions and potential of the ideas themselves. Andre Wakefield's *Disordered Police State* argues that Cameralism, rather than contributing to modernization, served primarily as propaganda to disguise disorder, mismanagement, and irrationality behind a pretense of scientific government. Wakefield's study suggests that the depiction of Cameralism—a branch of enlightened centralism—as a stepping-stone to progress and modernity actually reflects an image consciously manufactured by eighteenth-century propagandists. In fact, as Iryna Vushko's *The Politics of Cultural Retreat* illustrates, enlightened plans such as the Habsburgs' intention to reorder Galicia into a model province while reforming both Polish and Jewish society failed precisely because of the internal contradictions of the absolutist-bureaucratic system. Hans-Jürgen Bömelburg's study of the Prussian partition, which formed the basis of a comparative piece on the colonial policies of the three partitioning powers from 1772 to 1795, correspondingly demonstrates how the administrative assumptions of the enlightened officials, rather than the backwardness of the locals, undermined each state's proclaimed policies of bestowing economic and material improvement on the new acquisitions. Glen Dynner's examination of alcohol regulations in nineteenth-century Poland further suggests that decades of social-engineering programs, in this case attempting to direct Jews away from the alcohol trade, failed to achieve any significant results.³⁴

In the spirit of this emerging tradition I argue that, once untangled from the rhetoric of progress, modernity, and Enlightenment, the results of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century centralization in the cities of Poland-Lithuania achieved little beyond the transfer of political power and governmental control from several overlapping loci to one. There is no inherent reason to decorate this process with accolades of progress and modernity, nor to preclude the possibility of imagining alternative paths of development. A revaluation of enlightened centralism in the Commonwealth is particularly necessary, because since the partitions Poles have been perhaps the most ardent apostles of the progressive view of history that equates centralization with modernity. In 1790, the publicist of burgher origin Stanisław Staszic predicted that the future lay with absolutist monarchies, observing that the Commonwealth's neighbors more effectively encouraged their populations toward productive labor. After the partitions, many writers embraced the connec-

tion of centralization with progress and of local autonomy with backwardness.³⁵ Hugo Kołłątaj, a coauthor of the Constitution of the Third of May, welcomed Napoleon's creation of the tightly centralized and bureaucratic Duchy of Warsaw, which in his view eliminated the "spirit of provincialism" and "self-interest" of the old Commonwealth. Kołłątaj wrote approvingly of Napoleon's constitution, which introduced legal equality, uniformity, and centralized hierarchical control, as having surpassed the more democratic Constitution of the Third of May: "The Constitution of the Third of May was a great good, which we were able to achieve in that period when for the first time we dared to emancipate ourselves from eternal anarchy, but it cannot be compared with that, which the Great Napoleon has bestowed upon us."³⁶ Kołłątaj's contemporary Kajetan Koźmian, a memorialist who served in the government of Tsar Alexander's Congress Kingdom of Poland, even mused that Napoleon's strictly hierarchical and antidemocratic constitution better suited the Polish character and provided more effective checks against "our anarchic tendencies, our garrulousness, and our addiction to fractious quarreling with the government" than Alexander I's more liberal charter of 1815.³⁷

For generations of Polish historians, these positions have become self-evident. Joachim Lelewel, the Polish Romantic historian who found much to praise in the values of community rule (*gminowładztwo*) in the old Commonwealth, remained a singular voice. More typically, the interwar successors to the Kraków School, such as Stanisław Kutrzeba and Władysław Konopczyński, reaffirmed the assessment of the Commonwealth's weakness as a mistake justly punished, with Konopczyński negatively contrasting Poland's decentralization to the effective taming of local institutions in other European countries.³⁸ Even the more optimistic "Warsaw School"—personified by Tadeusz Korzon, Władysław Smoleński, and in the twentieth century Józef Andrzej Gierowski—argued that the reforms of the Four-Year Parliament and the Constitution of the Third of May represented a rebirth in decline, which saved Polish culture from extinction under the partitioning powers. In other words the necessity of centralization, or its equation with modernity, has remained largely unquestioned.³⁹ Anglophone historians of the Commonwealth have agreed that the primary shortcoming of the country was its failure to develop an administrative capacity similar to that

of the partitioning powers. Jerzy Lukowski's *Disorderly Liberty* offers the most recent iteration of this tendency in castigating the political culture of Commonwealth as hopelessly backward and unable to comprehend the necessity of wholesale reform.⁴⁰ As a result of this tradition, the term "progressive" has passed into Polish historiography as an analytical category, associated with the construction of modern state institutions and bureaucratic practices, and even Guizot's sympathy for those groups who resisted the state's encroachment on their powers and rights in the name of progress and centralization finds few sympathetic ears.⁴¹

Consistent with this view, Polish historians often describe the resistance of members of the nobility, burghers, and Jews to the reforms of Stanisław August as crankish, backward, and shortsighted. Voltaire's judgment of the Bar Confederates as "anarchists" and "fanatics," for example, has appeared in numerous accounts of the first partition, which often gloss over the legitimate grievances of the Confederacy.⁴² With regard to urban reform, historians such Andrzej Zahorski and Aleksander Czaja attribute the shortcomings and failures of central policies in the Stanislavian era to the backwardness of the country rather than to any deficiency in the reforms themselves.⁴³ Far less attention has been paid to the perspectives and motivations of urban residents themselves. Writers from Tadeusz Korzon to Krystyna Zienkowska have emphasized the civil rights granted to burghers by the reforms of 1791, neglecting to discuss the accompanying imposition of administrative supervision and central control. Only one, relatively obscure historian of Lublin, Józef Kermisz, observed this connection.⁴⁴ Although nationalist sentiments may have permitted a more critical analysis of reforms implemented by Russian, Austrian, and Prussian authorities (Russian historians have, by comparison, evaluated their own country's urban reforms much more critically), the reforms of Napoleon in the Duchy of Warsaw often receive approbation as "progressive" and "modern," despite the disenfranchisement of urban citizens and official abrogation of the Jewish population's civil liberties under Napoleon.⁴⁵

Cities in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth have the reputation of weakness, insignificance, and subservience to the ruling nobility, a judgment summed up in Rousseau's famous statement that "the Polish nation is made up of three orders: the nobles, who count for everything; the middle-class, who count for nothing; and the peasants, who count

for less than nothing.”⁴⁶ Excluded from national politics at the end of the fifteenth century, burghers appear in most treatments as living isolated in their towns, having been sidelined by their more economically effective Jewish rivals and made subservient to the customs and manners of the nobility. In particular, studies of political conceptions and behaviors have typically focused on the ruling nobility (*szlachta*), also known as “the political nation,” who dominated the institutions of national and local government, using their powers to monopolize international trade and oppress the towns.⁴⁷ Why should we care about the ideas and conceptions of the downtrodden and isolated burghers? Indeed, the *absence* of burghers from the national political stage and the unwillingness of urban residents to challenge the nobility, as representatives of the Third Estate did in France, has served for historians, particularly in the Communist period, as yet another indicator of the country’s backwardness.⁴⁸ Historians of Polish Jews such as Gershon Hundert have even used the “powerlessness” of the burghers as one explanation for the relative success and prosperity of Jewish communities within the towns. As Hundert notes, in contradistinction to Christian burghers, Jews benefited from national and international networks, as well as countrywide institutions such as the Council of Four Lands.⁴⁹

In fact, the burghers, the Jews, and other residents of both private and royal Polish towns still enjoyed extensive privileges and rights into the eighteenth century while cities in contemporary France and Prussia answered to centrally appointed officials. Centuries of self-government with republican institutions produced a civic republican culture of rights and assumptions about civic space that manifested itself in the everyday language of lawsuits, petitions, and in 1789 the written polemics sponsored by a collective protest movement of townspeople, which brought hundreds of city representatives to lobby the parliament in Warsaw. The rights of burghers and Jewish communities existed more in theory than in practice in the eighteenth century, and town residents faced extensive restrictions on their political activity by nobles, royal officials, and their own magistrates, but the language and assumptions of civic republicanism endured into the nineteenth century. More to the point, historians have often mistaken rhetoric for reality in attributing weakness and oppression to town residents, who adroitly manipulated their legal and political prerogatives to resist external burdens and taxes—in many

cases by overstating their inferior position to authorities and adjudicators. The narrative of the oppression of the weak by the strong, a convenient justification for centralization, further overstates the authority and abilities of the so-called oppressors, either royal officials or private town owners, who required cooperation and alliances with local authorities to enact any change. One could argue in fact that the ideal of the medieval urban republic stayed alive much longer in the Commonwealth (as well as in the German states) than in its Italian homeland, and echoes of civic activity persisted in the western borderlands of the Russian Empire until the middle of the nineteenth century.

Attempts to reform the urban landscape of the former Commonwealth have received periodic treatment in Polish historiography, but their implementation at the local level, the responses of the urban residents, and the government's subsequent policy adjustments have largely escaped attention. A focus on the plans and designs of the central government has tended to draw attention away from the fact that the burghers, Jews, and nobles who inhabited the Commonwealth's towns carried their own "unenlightened" political assumptions and preferences, which influenced responses to reform legislation.⁵⁰ City citizens were not simply reacting to reforms from ignorance but, rather, articulated concrete preferences based on their a priori expectations about the purpose and goals of politics. Jewish communities acted likewise, despite their formal exclusion from the urban power structure in most cities. Moreover, various central governments modified their regulations and plans in response to actions on the ground, so a genuine understanding of the efficacy of enlightened reform requires an investigation of the dialogue of reform, response, and counterresponse from the era of the Commonwealth and beyond the partitions, when many of the same policies reappeared with increased vigor and scope.

With a few exceptions, the partitions have often been treated as an inviolable threshold in Polish historiography, but the destruction of the Commonwealth offers a unique opportunity to test the consequences of multiple policies on the same subjects, as well as to observe continuities in assumptions and plans across time and place.⁵¹ Following this dialogue of central-to-local negotiation over more than a century of transformation requires a combination of macro policy studies and detailed explorations of individual cases. Legislative acts, minutes and

reports of central government bodies, and the statistical information collected by state agents provide the general picture for this book, while micro studies of the municipal records, protests, and petitions of over twenty towns in the period offer an opportunity to examine specific consequences at a local level.⁵² Eschewing the capitals in favor of the “typical,” small-to-medium sized town (under ten thousand people in the eighteenth century, with most under five thousand), this book is focused principally on royal and private cities from three regions: the Lublin province of contemporary southeastern Poland, which includes the cities of Lublin, Chełm, and Zamość as well as a number of smaller settlements, and the Volhynia and Podolia provinces of contemporary western Ukraine, including cities such as Luts’k (Łuck), Kamianets’-Podils’kyi (Kamieniec Podolski), Kremenets (Krzemieniec), and Dubno. In addition, Niasvizh (Nieśwież) and Slutsk (Śluck), capitals of the extraordinary wealthy and influential Radziwiłł family in present-day Belarus, will also feature prominently.

Examining both royal and private towns creates a useful control group, since private towns remained excluded from most state-led reforms until the nineteenth century. They also serve as the best illustration of the limitations of imagination imposed by the unitary and rationalistic assumptions of absolutist rulers. Private towns were characterized by a combination of public and private property, shared sovereignty, and a web of privileges and commitments that defied all attempts at classification according to the prevailing categories of unitary sovereignty and absolute property rights. The geographic region chosen further offers the possibility of comparing the experience of burghers, Jews, and other town residents across four distinct regimes, excluding only the Prussian partition. The Lublin region fell to Austria in 1795, only to join Napoleon’s Duchy of Warsaw in 1809. In 1815 Napoleon’s Duchy became Tsar Alexander I’s Congress Kingdom of Poland, a state that continued to follow the Napoleonic legal code and bureaucratic model throughout the nineteenth century. The Ukrainian and Belarusian territories, by contrast, fell under direct Russian control between 1793 and 1795, becoming part of the provincial structure of the Russian Empire.

In chapter 1 I illustrate the diverse and pluralistic urban model that persisted in the Commonwealth until 1764, focusing on the many inhabitants of the towns and the historical circumstances that led to Stanisław

August's ascension. As detailed in chapter 2, the reforms of the cities began in earnest after the first partition in 1772, when the Department of Police in the Permanent Council obtained legal authority over urban revenue and finances, and the new regime employed its limited powers to take control over magistracy spending and tax collection. In addition, Good Order Commissions descended on the principal cities and proceeded to rewrite urban constitutions, adjudicate property disputes, and rationalize budgetary procedures. As a result of the inherited assumptions of the Enlightenment, resistance and opposition to these well-meaning and beneficial reforms could only be labeled by reference to such shibboleths as the "legacy of inveterate disorder" and the "ignorance and simplicity of the people." The resistance was, however, significant and the reforms ultimately served as a catalyst for a countrywide burgher-rights movement, the subject of chapter 3.

As recounted in chapter 3, cities were far from unitary institutions but, rather, constellations of estates characterized by overlapping jurisdictions and mutually exclusive privileges. Urban residents of every estate nonetheless acted in accordance with a preexisting civic republican ideology that contravened the basic premises of the burghers' enlightened allies who supported urban reform during the Four-Year Parliament. What appeared to enlightened reformers as a messy, tangled system of incessant conflict and discord in fact concealed a system that continually readjusted the balance of power to prevent any group—burghers, Jewish communities, or noble officials—from completely dominating any city and successfully oppressing the "weak." The same could be said with regard to the relationship of private town owners and their citizens, the subject of chapter 4. Private cities remained largely unaffected by centralizing reforms, and owners continued to offer generous privileges and exemptions so as to encourage settlement. As an investigation of the Zamoyski and Radziwiłł properties reveals, attempts by owners to implement Enlightenment-inspired projects on their properties fared little better than reforms in the royal towns because of a combination of intransigence, inertia, and the impracticability of the measures themselves.

As the second partition overturned the reforms of the Third of May Constitution in the Commonwealth, French revolutionaries were pushing the principles of sovereignty, rationality, and uniformity to their

logical conclusion. The abolition of privileges, the reorganization of France into uniform departments, and the centralization of the Jacobin Terror achieved the dreams of monarchs across Europe. Napoleon's code consolidated most of these achievements and the Grande Armée exported unitary, rational government to every corner of Europe, including the territories of the former Commonwealth.⁵³ As discussed in chapter 5, Napoleon's system tightly controlled the appointment and authority of urban magistrates, and all decisions required written permission from superiors. At the same time, the orderly flow of information, budgets, and reports from the provinces to the capitals masked a fundamentally chaotic reality. Napoleonic officials struggled to subordinate the private towns into the state hierarchy while simultaneously maintaining respect for the private property of the owners as mandated by the Napoleonic Code. The hierarchic system established by Napoleon endured in Alexander I's Congress Kingdom, despite the liberal constitution promulgated by the new ruler. So, too, did the conflicts between state officials, private town owners, and burghers. From the perspective of urban autonomy, the November Insurrection of 1830 and the subsequent revocation of the Polish constitution only served to entrench the system, which pattered along under increased bureaucratic inertia and dysfunction until the Insurrection of 1863 inspired a new reorganization as well as a full-scale Russification campaign.

In western Ukraine and Belarus, as recorded in chapter 6, Russian administrators also struggled to incorporate the private towns into the hierarchical system, but the Russian state proper possessed a much smaller administrative presence than the Congress Kingdom, as well as much more limited ambitions. In fact, many private towns continued to operate largely without regard to the regulations of the state, which tolerated autonomy for landowners in exchange for professions of loyalty. Royal towns subject to Catherine's Charter to the Towns found their options and control much more strictly circumscribed, while Russian officials increasingly described urban underdevelopment as a function of the region's ethnic composition, in particular the large Polish and Jewish populations, the presence of which served as a pretext for denying the full range of self-governing prerogatives promised by the Charter in the Ukrainian towns. As a result, full administrative integration never occurred, and the western provinces remained distinct from the

Russian core provinces even after the 1870 urban reorganization. Separate laws and administrative procedures also characterized urban life in Prussian Poznanian and Austrian Galicia, where private towns, restrictions on Jewish populations, and administrative peculiarities persisted after 1848, while central officials undermined the autonomy of local self-government throughout the nineteenth century.

As subjects of foreign powers, Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians encountered unique challenges, but as members of centralized and hierarchical states urban residents in the cities of the former Commonwealth experienced the common European tide of Enlightenment and Napoleonic centralization. By the middle of the nineteenth century, urban autonomy, the Jewish *kahal*, particularistic privileges, guild restrictions, and other trappings of the medieval city republic had been abolished across Europe. Mid-nineteenth-century residents of Lublin, Zamość, Luts'k, and Dubno had more neighbors and different rulers than their predecessors in 1764, but this fact alone lends no credence to the conviction that this process represented progress, modernization, or liberalization. In some cases, conditions had improved and residents enjoyed greater equality with their neighbors, but in many respects the possibilities, economic rights, and protections had decidedly worsened. Centralization shifted power away from often corrupt and oligarchical local elites, who were at least subject to the influence of "tumults" and other informal pressures, to an often corrupt and capriciously legalistic bureaucracy, which faced much less pressure. Moreover, as Marcin Wodziński argues, the ambitious and enlightened goals of reformers in the eighteenth century dissipated in the nineteenth into minimalist concerns for order and security, with little regard for the economic and material welfare of town residents.⁵⁴ Tellingly, the Russian governor of Podolia province submitted a report in 1834 on town finances to his superior, the governor-general, in which he promised to send a separate dispatch on town cleanliness and construction, since no space on the prefabricated government form was allotted for this topic.⁵⁵

Further, centralization in both the Kingdom of Poland and Russia proper conspicuously failed to unleash economic growth or the entrepreneurial spirit. The state waged a continuous campaign against urban alcohol production as a source of drunkenness and indolence, for example, but alcohol sales continued to generate the lion's share of municipal

revenues and personal incomes throughout the nineteenth century. The Congress Kingdom's Minister of Finance tacitly admitted the absolutist state's inability to spur economically productive activity in 1822 when he wrote, "Unfortunately, the situation of the government in a country undeveloped as ours is that the government must take the initiative in everything and in every field."⁵⁶ Most demonstrably, centralization destroyed the conditions that allowed private towns the possibility of prospering. Napoleonic administrators and their Russian successors devoted enormous energy and resources to improving the lives of private town residents and protecting burghers from their owners, but the result removed all possible incentives that had once motivated owners to invest in their properties and offer concessions to residents. Private towns in both the Congress Kingdom and the western provinces declined relative to state-controlled towns, and most were converted into villages in an 1870 reform. The Enlightenment state and its officials, particularly in the Congress Kingdom of Poland, also proved much more unfriendly to Jewish populations, who could no longer count on the protection and alliances afforded under conditions of multiple and overlapping sources of power. In some ways, the inequalities, particularisms, and conflicting jurisdictions of the old regime provided more security and opportunity than the post-Enlightenment state.

One may object that this contention proceeds from an examination of territories annexed by the Russian Empire, among the most economically underdeveloped regimes in nineteenth-century Europe. Different conclusions might have resulted had the focus concentrated more on Prussian-occupied Poland, which enjoyed much greater economic prosperity even under conditions of bureaucratic oversight and Germanification. Indeed, the tightly centralized Duchy and its successor scored some notable economic achievements in the constitutional period prior to 1830, and as a result the Congress Kingdom remained the most industrially advanced region of the Russian Empire throughout the nineteenth century. Moreover, by focusing on the Russian Empire into the third quarter of the nineteenth century, I do not consider developments of mass democracy, parliamentary representation, and local self-government that reached Prussian Poland, Galicia, and even the Russian Empire. The appellation of progress and modernity might seem much more fitting in 1906, when residents of the former Commonwealth could

elect parliamentary representatives, and many enjoyed institutions of local self-government. Finally, one could contend that, where I speak of the problems, shortcomings, and failures of centralization, I really refer to the misfortunes of the partitions themselves. The lands of partitioned Poland became the periphery, the frontier territory of three regimes, and economic and social development naturally took a backseat to security, control, and state-building in the core. Following the residents of the former Commonwealth, therefore, simply confirms the unhappy fate of people who allow their state to fall prey to outside powers.

In fact, though, the Congress Kingdom of Poland possessed one of the most liberal constitutions of the era (if frequently violated in practice) from 1815 to 1830, and therefore this study does examine enlightened centralism within the context of a liberal parliamentary democracy. As will be evident, the existence of parliamentary institutions and an expanded suffrage offered only a putative political power to individuals in the face of hypercentralized bureaucratic structure. France, the original model of the Congress Kingdom, failed to overcome the contradictions between centralism and liberal democracy for the eighty-year period between the Jacobins' destruction of "federalism" and the birth of the Third Republic. Tocqueville could justly argue that the centralization of the state into the prefectural system meant that every French revolution in the nineteenth century had attempted to "graft the head of liberty onto a servile body."⁵⁷ Even in Britain, the birthplace of liberalism, the political structure differed not so dramatically from the Congress Kingdom, at least according to J. Toulmin Smith's 1851 polemic, *Local Self-Government and Centralisation*. Smith argued that Britain's national parliament and free press masked a despotic system of centralized control that was appropriating the functions of local government and the Common Law by "pretenses of the public good, sympathy for the poor, care for the public health, regard for economy, and so forth."⁵⁸ In this sense, the Russian state in the apogee of autocracy under Nicholas I represents only centralism in a period where local control, autonomy, and particularism had receded but liberalism and industrialization had yet to triumph. The Russian example highlights the fact that the methods, practices, and assumptions of enlightened centralism do not necessarily produce economic growth, liberal conditions, modernity, or progress. In fact, enlightened centralism could

and did lead to languid, paralytic provincialism, in which the state can succeed only in blocking initiative.

A more serious objection is that this study shows disproportionate sympathy for the city residents without just consideration of the genuine good-faith efforts of Enlightenment-era thinkers and officials to solve real, pressing infrastructural and hygienic problems, which plagued the cities of Poland-Lithuania with particular acuteness. Like enlightened officials, I too prefer clean paved streets, the sanitary disposal of waste, and fireproof buildings to the alternative that existed across eighteenth-century Europe, but the concerns of this book are not the intentions of officials, only the outcomes of their policies. The crucial question remains as to whether the means proposed by enlightened officials from multiple regimes to solve the undeniable problems of urban life in Poland-Lithuania justified the self-congratulatory narrative created by the partitioning powers and the self-critical story told by generations of Poles. I argue simply that it did not, and if I show particular sympathy for the perspective of anti-Enlightenment burghers, kahal elders, and nobles, I do so only because the continued hegemony of the Enlightenment narrative of progress, which has achieved the status of “common sense” in both popular and academic discourse, has so long dismissed the mentality of the townspeople as anachronistic and backward. I feel that a corrective is necessary and that the mentality of civic republicanism in the Commonwealth’s towns deserves its proper hearing in order for historians to evaluate both the significance of the eighteenth-century transformation and the costs of modernity.