

*Edward Opaliński*

GREAT POLAND'S POWER ELITE UNDER SIGISMUND III,  
1587 - 1632.  
DEFINING THE ELITE

The power élite is always closely bound up with the political structure of the society. In the second half of the 16th century, the Polish Commonwealth had a rather peculiar political system for it was a mixed monarchy (*monarchia mixta*). Since the *Nihil novi* constitution, voted in 1505 by the Seym (Diet) in Radom, all decisions concerning structural changes had to be passed with the agreement of all the estates taking part in the Seym i.e. the King, the Senate and the House of Deputies. Thus, the Polish Kingdom or rather the Commonwealth of Two Nations (Poland and Lithuania) since the Lublin Union of 1569, became a state which, by compromise, blended together the features of monarchy, rule of aristocracy (Senate) and democratic rule (House of Deputies). The further development of the system legally strengthened the democratic element. Here of essential importance were Seym resolutions of 1562 - 1564 which laid the foundations for the Public Treasury controlled by the Seym, and weakened the economic and political position of the Senate through partial revindication of Crown estates illegally held by the magnates. Upon the death of the last of the Jagellons, the King became a sovereign elected by the whole of the gentry (*viritim* election) for the duration of his life. The source of his

power was established in the social contract concluded between him and the gentry at the election (*Pacta Conventa*, the Henrician Articles). The nature of this contract, particularly the article about the renunciation of obedience towards a ruler who had broken the law (*de non praestanda oboedientia*) shows that it was the gentry which made the true sovereign. At the same time the very fact of the existence of a monarch enabled the state to function. For in the lack of a King the state machinery stopped altogether; in order to put it again in motion a special confederation of the gentry had to be set up. The system of gentry democracy, based on the principle of equality, meant that the gentry was the subject not the object of political manoeuvres. Together with the King, it exercised power both directly and indirectly. In the first case, through its participation in the *viritim* election and in the special kind of Sejm called *Sejm konny* or *rokosz* (the assembly of the whole of the gentry convened without the monarch's agreement and directed against a King who had broken the rights and privileges of the gentry) as well as through the district assemblies of the gentry. But, apart from the latter, the circumstances had to be very specific like the interregnum or infringements of the order of the law by the King. Indirectly, the gentry exercised its power through a small active group which will be called here *élite* of power or political *élite*.

The weakness of the administrative frame of the Polish Commonwealth and the forms of direct democracy functioning in it caused that the ability to persuade the gentry to accept a political decision and not the constraint became an attribute of power. Another fundamental element of power was the possibility of influencing the distribution of assets in demand by the society such as Crown estates and all kinds of offices. Also the judicature was a source of power. Thus, it took institutionalised forms though of no great importance, or stemmed from prestige or the royal trust, finally it had roots in political status, grounded in tradition, often bound up with the economic superiority of certain social groups. Thus the political *élite* in the Commonwealth should be regarded as a community whose

members enjoyed all or some of the above mentioned possibilities.

What social groups formed the élite and what were the sources of their power? Because of the weakly developed administration machinery, there were few offices in the Commonwealth which gave real power. Among them were, first and foremost, the posts of ministers who could influence the government policy or the administration of justice, the Grand and Field Hetmans (*supremus dux exercitum, campiductor*), general and borough starostas (*capitaneus generalis, capitaneus castrensis*) who administered justice, and some officials connected with the justice such as sub-chamberlain (*subcamerarius*), district and borough judges (*iudex terrae, iudex castrensis*), subjudges (*subiudex terrae*) and district and borough notaries (*notarius terrae, notarius castrensis*). All these officials were certainly members of the élite.

Then there were secular and ecclesiastical senators, and political leaders of the gentry. The former had authority over the plebeian groups of the population<sup>1</sup> and based their power on the fact that they were members of the upper house of the parliament; hence their prestige which, enhanced by personal qualities, made it possible for them to exert influence on the gentry's political decisions. On the other hand, the gentry leaders, Sejm deputies of long standing, drew their influence upon their own great personal prestige, which meant respect and popularity. It stemmed from their personal traits, particularly from their specific identification with attitudes in accordance with the generally accepted system of values. This prestige was the starting point for gaining authority based on trust which caused

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<sup>1</sup> The voivodes in Royal Prussia were an exception; they administered their province and exercised judicial powers in criminal cases. Cf. Z. Kaczmarek, *Historia państwa i prawa Polski* [History of Poland's State and Law], Part 2, Warszawa 1957, p. 207; also the Lithuanian voivodes, except those in Brześć Litewski, Mińsk and Mścislaw (these voivodships were created after 1566), who had the rights of borough starostas in the chief district of their voivodship—S. Kutrzeba, *Historia ustroju Polski* [History of the Political System and Law in Poland], vol. II; *Litwa* [Lithuania], Lwów 1921, p. 120.

that the gentry listened to its leaders whose political position in the system of gentry democracy was often very high.<sup>2</sup>

The power élite also encompassed the royal favourites who had the ear of the monarch. They exerted considerable influence on the distribution of Crown lands and offices as well as on strictly political affairs, albeit to a lesser degree.

Thus three principal groups formed the power élite during the reign of Sigismund III: officials whose functions were of genuine political significance or meant prestige, leaders of the gentry, and royal favourites.

We shall discuss here the territorial power élite in the Poznań and Kalisz voivodships<sup>3</sup> (*palatinatus posnaniensis*, *palatinatus calisiensis*) or Great Poland proper.<sup>4</sup> Because of the accumulation of some offices by one person, the particular groups forming the power élite there overlapped to a considerable extent. This was particularly true of the borough *starostas* and gentry leaders. The first subgroup, together with the general *starostas*,

<sup>2</sup> A similar view is expressed by I. Kaniewska who writes that "the [oft-elected deputies] were endowed with this dignity because they had great experience and personal prestige. The gentry trusted them as the spokesmen of its interests and aspirations"—I. Kaniewska, *Małopolska reprezentacja sejmowa za czasów Zygmunta Augusta 1548 - 1572* [*Sejm Deputies in Little Poland under the Reign of Sigismund Augustus, 1548 - 1572*], "Zeszyty naukowe UJ", *Prace historyczne*, vol. XLVIII, Kraków 1974, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> So far, only some groups of the territorial power élite have been studied, above all the gentry leaders. Mention is due here of W. Dworzaczek's *Skład społeczny wielkopolskiej reprezentacji sejmowej w latach 1572 - 1655* [*The Social Make-up of Great Poland's Sejm Deputies in 1572 - 1655*], "Roczniki Historyczne", vol. XXIII, 1957, and I. Kaniewska, *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> It numbered 201 persons including the following groups: ecclesiastical senators—Gniezno Archbishop and Poznań bishop; grand lay senators (*senatores magni*)—voivodes of Poznań and Kalisz (*palatinus posnaniensis*, *palatinus calisiensis*), Poznań, Kalisz and Gniezno castellans (*castellanus posnaniensis*, *calisiensis*, *gnesnensis*), lesser castellans (*castellani minores*) of: Biechów, Kamień, Krzywiń, Łąd, Międzyrzecz, Nakło, Przemęt, Rogoźno, Santok, Srem; borough *starostas* (*capitanei castrenses*)—Great Poland's general *starosta* (*capitaneus posnaniensis*), *starostas* of Nakło, Wałcz and Wschowa; district judicial officials: Poznań and Kalisz chamberlains (*succamerari*), Poznań, Kalisz and Wschowa judges (*iudices*), subjudges and notaries of Poznań, Kalisz and Wschowa (*subiudices et notarii*); borough judicial officials (*castrenses*): surrogates in law courts of Poznań, Kalisz, Wschowa, Nakło and Wałcz (*surrogatores*), notaries in Poznań, Kalisz, Wschowa, Nakło, Wałcz, Kcynia, Konin, Kościan, Gniezno and Pyzdry, and gentry leaders.

numbered twenty-seven persons ; twenty-one of them were members of other groups as well (ten grand senators and twelve lesser castellans). The gentry leaders numbered thirty, twenty-three of whom held also other offices which made it possible to count them as belonging to the power élite : ten lesser castellans, five borough starostas, including one general starosta, fourteen district court officials (*succamerarius*, *iudex terrae*, *subiudex terrae*, *notarius terrae*), and seven lower borough officials (*surrogator-iudex castrensis*, *notarius castrensis*, *vicecapitaneus*). The accumulation of political functions was responsible for the fact that the groups were not uniform, each of them being made up of a certain number of persons who were members of other subgroups. This was an important factor because it integrated the entire social category under survey.

#### POLITICAL POSITION OF POWER ELITE WITHIN THE SYSTEM OF GENERAL POLITICAL MECHANISMS

At the turn of the 16th century the democracy of the gentry was based on two prime political forces : the King and the gentry. Any study of the power élite is possible only with reference to them.

Mutual relations between the sovereign and the gentry formed the basic system of political mechanisms, its integral part being the power élite which constituted a link between the ruler and the gentry. Both the King and the gentry not only accepted its existence but also endowed it with strictly determined roles which fitted its character of intermediary and servant. In the social consciousness the Senate was to stand guard over the laws of the Commonwealth in the broadest meaning of the term, the judicial officials were to assure the citizens their legal protection, finally, the leaders of the gentry were to present the people's demands in the Sejm or, outside it, to the King. Likewise, the rulers saw the élite as a representative and intermediary group in their contacts with the gentry, or as a group which made it possible to rule without the participation of the society. Naturally, the élite received certain assets in

exchange. The gentry invested it with prestige, sometimes it even enjoyed considerable authority which enhanced its importance *vis à vis* the ruler. On his part, the king could offer promotion, crown lands and participation in the government ; this, in turn, strengthened the élite's position in the eyes of the gentry. But, despite those unquestionable advantages, was the élite satisfied with its service role and the lack of independence? Did it not try to alter this state of things ? Taking the country as a whole, different trends could be observed. In principle, a change in the legal position was sought where the political standing of the gentry was strong and its activity to a large extent independent ; elsewhere, the struggle went on for the maintenance of the status quo.

The vertical system of political mechanisms, which functioned in the Commonwealth, had two levels. The first was the district assembly at which the gentry put forward its own proposals and accepted or rejected the programme proposed by the King. Because of the moral duty to take part in the assembly, the gentry's political influence was exercised directly at this level. The other level was that of the national Sejm at which political decisions were made. Here the gentry exercised its power indirectly. In the second half of the 16th century this vertical system of political mechanisms underwent a vital transformation. In 1589, the custom was introduced of reporting the Sejm debates to the district assemblies. A new type of the latter emerged, at which the Sejm decisions were accepted. Thus the district assembly became the most important plane of political activity. Theoretically at least, the influence exercised by the gentry on politics was increased. At the same time, the power élite came under increased social control, its intermediary role growing, and because of the lengthening of the assemblies' duration the political activity of both the opponents and supporters of royal politics became more lively. Another consequence of such a state of affairs was the decrease in the importance of the state élite in favour of the territorial élite. The process of increase in the élite's significance was favoured by the ruling system under the Vasa kings, which consisted in attempting to reduce the gentry to the status of object of

political manoeuvring. Thus the real position of the power élite depended on the strength of the gentry and the society, the King's personality and his conception of government.

The cohesion of the territorial élite conditioned the effectiveness of its influence on the members of the gentry. The division into supporters of royal politics and oppositionists is not sufficient. An important basis of the formation of smaller groupings was the tie of kinship. In principle, throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, particular families acted in harmony in all the parts of the Commonwealth, often trying to safeguard their interests through the participation of their members in opposing parties. It was an attitude towards the King's particular measures rather than towards the whole of his policy that determined the divisions. Besides, an important role was played by personal animosities which often turned into family feuds in their vying for influence. In the Poznań and Kalisz voivodships political parties were formed around local senatorial families. Besides the Górkas and Opalińskis there were also the Czarnkowskis, Leszczyńskis and Ostrorogs. Also ecclesiastical senators tried to form their own parties, above all the Gniezno archbishops whose role, because of their functioning as primates, was of particular national significance. There were, e.g., groupings led by Stanisław Karnkowski (primate in 1581 - 1603) and Wawrzyniec Gembicki (primate in 1615 - 1624). Other Gniezno archbishops, despite many efforts, did not succeed in forming parties whose importance would spread beyond the borders of the province. The Poznań bishops, because of the great authority exercised by the primates, did not really play any independent role. They moved within the orbit of the archbishops or the party of their own family. Another reason for the divisions within the élite in Great Poland was the rivalry between the Kalisz and Poznań voivodes on the one hand, and Great Poland's general *starosta*, on the other. Sometimes this rivalry resulted in sharp political fighting. In this context we can quote the example of the conflicts between Stanisław Górka, Poznań voivode, and Andrzej Opaliński, general *starosta*, which during the third election (1587) turned into an armed fight. Later, in the years 1642 - 1655, there occurred

the sharp political conflict between the Poznań voivode, Krzysztof Opaliński, and the general *starosta*, Bogusław Leszczyński. Many lesser families were connected with those groupings, among them those of Potulicki, Przyjemski, Radomicki, Rozdrażewski, Mielżyński, as well as some leaders of the gentry. The latter, using the support of the gentry and playing up to various camps of the “great” families, tried to preserve their political independence. It is worth noting that the break-up into small political groups and the family nature of the parties of the royal political supporters or even of the radical opponents, was a factor undermining the position of the élite *vis à vis* the local gentry.

The possibilities of influencing the society were also determined by the level of political consciousness of the Great Poland gentry. Its traditions of fighting for freedom and rights went back to the times of the Koszyce Privilege (1374) and Cerekwica Privilege (1454). Thanks to the firm stand of the Great Poland gentry, King Aleksander was able to rescind the Mielnik Privilege, issued in 1501, which not only limited the power of the monarch in favour of the Senate but also struck at the rights of the gentry. Later events when, for instance, the gentry, summoned in 1537 by King Sigismund the Old to the expedition against Moldavia, attempted to force the king to respect the laws of the state, or the execution—of—the—law movement, showed that the Great Poland gentry followed a specific line of political activity. This was also obvious under Sigismund III. Tradition and political judgment caused that Great Poland’s gentry consistently sought to strengthen its role and very thoughtfully refuted the political arguments used against it.

The economic structure of a given region conditioned the material base on which the power élite operated. Both the earlier studies by W. Konopczyński<sup>5</sup> and the contemporary ones by

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<sup>5</sup> W. Konopczyński, *Wielkopolska w dobie Rzeczypospolitej szlacheckiej* [Great Poland in the Age of the Gentry Commonwealth], “Roczniki Historyczne”, vol. I, 1925, p. 77/78.



W. Dworzaczek,<sup>6</sup> L. Polaszewski,<sup>7</sup> and U. Piotrkowska,<sup>8</sup> as well as those by the author,<sup>9</sup> have confirmed the assertion that in the Poznań and Kalisz voivodships there were no large landed estates, standing out prominently against the background of average holdings. Only two estates, of Stanisław Górka and Zygmunt Grudziński, voivode of Kalisz, numbered both some 100 villages. On the other hand, there was a fair number of estates counting ten to thirty villages, their size placing them on the borderland between medium and large landed properties. The negligible number of fragmented villages belonging to several owners was a vital feature of Great Poland's economic structure. As a result, small squires, who elsewhere made up, to a considerable extent, the ranks of the clientèle of the senatorial families, were rather few.

Thus, the position of the Great Poland power élite with regard to the local gentry was not very strong. The situation was similar in the nearby voivodships of Łęczyca, Sieradz,<sup>10</sup> Brześć Kujawski, Inowrocław, Płock and Rawa, where the level of political consciousness, tradition and economic structure did not differ much from the situation observed in Poznań and Kalisz lands. Somewhat higher was the position of the power

<sup>6</sup> *Dzieje Wielkopolski [History of Great Poland]*, vol. I., Poznań 1969, p. 515.

<sup>7</sup> L. Polaszewski, *Własność feudalna w województwie kaliskim w XVI wieku [Feudal Estates in Kalisz Voivodship in the 16th century]*, Poznań 1976.

<sup>8</sup> U. Piotrkowska, *Struktura i rozmieszczenie własności ziemskiej w powiecie kościańskim i ziemi wschowskiej w drugiej poł. XVI w. [Structure and Distribution of Landed Estates in Kościan District and Wschowa Region in the Second Half of the 16th century]*, "Rocznik Leszczyński", 1977, No. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Doctoral thesis entitled: *Elita władzy w województwie poznańskim i kaliskim za Zygmunta III [Power Elite in Poznań and Kalisz Voivodships under Sigismund III]*.

<sup>10</sup> The independence of the Łęczyca and Sieradz gentry has been emphasized by J. Włodarczyk, *Sejmiki jako szkoła wychowania obywatelskiego (na przykładzie sejmików sieradzkiego i łęczyckiego) [District Assemblies as Schools of Civic Education (On the Example of Sieradz and Łęczyca regional assemblies)]*, in: *Dzieje kultury politycznej w Polsce*, Warszawa 1977, p. 71.

élite in the Mazovia voivodship,<sup>11</sup> in Little Poland and in the Russian voivodship. In this context Mazovia seems most interesting. The last of its voivodships was incorporated into the Crown (i.e. Poland) only in 1526, so its gentry did not take part in the earlier struggles for privileges, and its political consciousness was, consequently, rather low. Mazovia was predominantly inhabited by the small gentry (some 40 per cent of the population), often unable to read and write.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the Mazovians, the inhabitants of Little Poland were seasoned politicians and fighters for the rights of their estate. A similar high level of political consciousness was displayed by the inhabitants of the Russian voivodship (*palatinatus Russiae*), although they joined the general movement of the gentry against the big lords somewhat later. It is probably the financial structure that in Little Poland and the Russian voivodship decided about the balance of power unfavourable to the gentry. The differences between the medium and the big estates were bigger there than in Great Poland. In Little Poland and the Russian voivodship, the numerous Crown lands, better-off than those in Poznań and Kalisz regions, constituted an additional economic basis for the senatorial families. Moreover, under Sigismund III the most important senatorial office in Little Poland, the Cracow castellany (*castellaneatus cracoviensis*) was held in turn by the exceedingly wealthy families of Volhynian dukes: the Ostrogskis and the Zbaraskis.

A specific situation arose in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania

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<sup>11</sup> The access to the elective functions of speaker or deputy was evidence of it. J. Gierowski has established the hierarchy of the criteria which determined their discharge: "family affiliation, financial status, holding an office in the district hierarchy," and lastly, personal merit and popularity among the gentry (*Sejmik generalny księstwa mazowieckiego na tle ustroju sejmikowego Mazowsza* [District General Assembly in the Dukedom of Mazovia against the Background of Mazovian District Assembly System], Wrocław 1948, p. 55).

<sup>12</sup> "The less knowledge a nobleman had, the lower his social and financial status, the more often he followed the better educated or better-off 'nobleman brother'" (J. Maciszewski, *Mechanizmy kształtowania się opinii publicznej w Polsce doby kontrreformacji* [Mechanism of the Formation of Public Opinion in Poland during Counter-Reformation], in: *Wiek XVII. Kontrreformacja. Barok. Prace z historii kultury*, Wrocław 1970, p. 64). The authority of institutions in Mazovia and Podlasie played a particularly important institutional role (*ibidem*, p. 65).

and in the Lithuanian voivodships which were incorporated into the Crown in 1569 (Volhynia, Braclaw and Kiev). The descendants of King Jagiełło ruled the Grand Duchy of Lithuania through great families. Formally, following the Lublin Union (1569), the Lithuanian gentry received the same rights as the gentry of Poland. Yet, these rights had not been fought for but obtained thanks to the policy of the last two Jagellons who wanted the Crown and Lithuania to be unified in law. So in Lithuania there was no tradition of struggle with the big lords and the king for rights; moreover, traditionally the great senatorial families played also a vital role in politics. Their very strong position resulted from their owning immense landed estates, several times bigger than the gentry's holdings. For instance, the entail founded in 1609 by Janusz Ostrogski, a Volhynian duke and Cracow castellan, numbered twenty-four towns and 593 villages.<sup>13</sup> Another Volhynian duke, Jerzy Zbaraski, came to the camp near Busza with three thousand own troops.<sup>14</sup> In 1645, the estates of Duke Jeremi Wiśniowiecki were inhabited by some 230,000 serfs.<sup>15</sup> In the eastern borderlands the lords were so powerful that they had significantly been dubbed "kinglets". That is why the position of the power élite was extremely strong in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the border voivodships of Volhynia, Braclaw and Kiev. The great feudal lords were also the leaders of the gentry, a thing rarely found in the Crown. These were leaders whom the gentry did not choose; on the contrary, they themselves imposed their leadership, although even this had to conform to the gentry's system of values. During the rebellion of 1606 - 1607, Janusz Radziwiłł failed to win over the Lithuanian masses of the gentry which were noted for their attachment to the authority of the sovereign and the House of Jagellon. It seems that the Lithuanian gentry, in contrast to the Polish one (the eastern borderlands

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<sup>13</sup> *Volumina Legum*, vol. II, ed. J. O h r y z k o, St. Petersburg 1859, p. 1668.

<sup>14</sup> W. Dobrowolska, *Książęta Zbarascy w walce z hetmanem Żółkiewskim* [*The Zbaraski Dukes in their Struggle with Hetman Żółkiewski*], Kraków 1930, p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> W. Tomkiewicz, *Jeremi Wiśniowiecki 1612 - 1651*, Warszawa 1933, p. 93.

excepting), as a rule obeyed the will of their great leaders but in moments of special importance was sufficiently strong to preserve its own political convictions.

All those comparisons serve to underline the minor position of Great Poland's élite with regard to the local gentry. Consequently, and this applies mostly to senators, it tried to alter this unfavourable legal situation in order to improve it at the expense both of the gentry and the king. The congress of Great Poland's and Kujawy's senators, called to Łowicz in July 1572 during the first election by Primate Uchański, tried to impose its authority on the gentry during the interregnum. The sharp opposition of the Great Poland's inhabitants, supported by the gentry from other provinces, foiled this attempt. Part of the power élite also took the side of the gentry, led in that by the Poznań voivode, Łukasz Górka, as well as the élite from other provinces, mainly from Little Poland. The gentry won a tremendous victory. Not only did it prevent its own exclusion from political decisions during the interregnum but it also forced through the *viritim* election. The Great Poland power élite also pinned great hopes on the election of a Hapsburg to the Polish throne. This stemmed from the observation of the activity of that dynasty in the countries which came under its rule after 1526. Both in Hungary and in Bohemia the Hapsburgs strengthened their power by restricting the privileges of the gentry and seeking support among the local élite.<sup>16</sup> The same kind of transformation could be expected in Poland. During the second election (1575 - 1576) nearly the entire élite with Primate Uchański, Grand Crown Marshal A. Opaliński, and general *starosta* of Great Poland, Wojciech Czarnkowski, supported the candidature of Emperor Maximilian. Like at the previous election, these attempts were frustrated by the party of the gentry, led by the families of Górka, Przyjemski and Orzelski. But during the third interregnum (1587) the political balance of power in the Poznań and Kalisz voivodships was more complicated. Although part of the élite, led by the Czarnkowskis and the Zborowskis, supported the Hapsburgs, and despite the

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<sup>16</sup> In the imperial part of Hungary the centralistic drive of the Hapsburgs was more strongly opposed than in Bohemia.

accession to them of the voivode of Poznań, Stanisław Górka, the majority, with the Opalińskis and Primate Karnkowski, gave their votes to the Swedish prince, Sigismund. Those leaders of the gentry, such as the Przyjemskis and Orzelskis who traditionally opposed the Hapsburgs, carried the rest of the undecided gentry along with them. So the Austrian candidatures fell through, due to the very strong opposition of the gentry which was perfectly aware of the consequences of putting a Hapsburg on the Polish throne. Besides, even at the second election the members of the power élite in Great Poland were unable to get together to carry out what was in their common interest. After this negative experience, the Great Poland élite decided to strengthen its position at the King's expense. This is clear from the resolutions passed at the meeting in Koło, convened in August 1590. Attempts were made there to weaken the King's power of appointment in favour of the Senate as well as to restrict his right to close the Senate debates. This caused a sharp protest on the part of the sovereign as well as the gentry which did not want the strengthening of the political role of the senators at the king's expense. At Koło, the Great Poland gentry put forward its own demands restricting the importance of the power élite. The Sejm of 1590/91 rejected the proposals both of the élite and of the gentry. In spite of that, Great Poland's power élite won a considerable success as the illegal meeting at Koło, convened by its leaders but without the king's approval, had not been outright condemned by the Sejm. Moreover, ever since gentry meetings had often been convened without the King's consent, using the meeting of Koło as a precedent. What was the reason of such a durable success? It seems that the possibility of convening a congress of the gentry without the royal initiative suited both the interests of the élite and of the gentry. Such arbitrary meetings may have constituted an additional instrument of control over the King by the gentry.

After 1590, the power élite, except the radical opponents, did not any longer pursue its goal of weakening the position of Sigismund III. This concerned the entire Commonwealth and it is interesting to note that the majority of the supporters of

royal politics came from Great Poland (voivodships of Poznań, Kalisz, Łęczyca, Sieradz) and Mazovia. Among them were such fervent supporters of the King as Hieronim Gostomski, Szczęsny Kryski or Wacław Leszczyński. Out of 34 central Crown officials there were 18 from Great Poland and Mazovia, i.e. 53 per cent. These figures speak a lot, considering that Sigismund III mostly appointed from supporters of royal politics to those offices. Thus the central Crown officials (ministers) came mainly from regions where there was a lack of dominance of the big landed estates over the medium ones, and where the political position of the power élite was not very high. So it would seem that the élite's support of the King was connected with its minor significance in the region, and with Sigismund III's wish to strengthen his own power. In exchange, the royal supporters in Great Poland consolidated their position with regard to the local gentry with the King's help. In turn, the most intransigent opponents of Sigismund III were persons from Lithuania and the eastern borderlands. Here mention should be made of the brothers Janusz and Krzysztof Radziwiłł, or Jerzy and Krzysztof Zbaraski. It was precisely the power élite of the borderland voivodships that most persistently opposed all attempts at reforms. The financial domination and political traditions of those areas combined to build up a strong position of the élite with regard to the local gentry and the King as well. The existing system suited this élite perfectly, so it did not see the need for any change. It not only opposed the attempts at reforms undertaken by the King but also expressed no interest in the reformist attempts of representatives of the power élite of other regions.

#### ELEMENTS DISTINGUISHING AND CONSOLIDATING POWER ELITE

Let us now take a close look at the power élite, considering the elements which distinguished it from the rest of the gentry, and the factors working for its integration.

The members of the power élite received some remuneration for their offices either in cash or in revenues from royal demesnes. But there was a tremendous gap between particular

incomes. For instance, the Archbishop of Gniezno owned estates (1512) composed of 14 towns, 313 villages and 74 manorial farms<sup>17</sup>; thirty villages went into the remuneration of the general *starosta* of Great Poland; while chamberlains, judges, subjudges and notaries received small incomes from law court fees.

What distinguished the élite was its exercise of power. Although its scope was differentiated, yet all the members of this social category had a daily contact with strictly political affairs or matters connected with the administration of justice. The rest of the gentry concerned themselves with politics only sporadically, at elections, regional assemblies or rebellious meetings. The term of office was also differentiated. All the senatorial and district offices, including those of the *starostas*, were life offices; they could be resigned from or abandoned because of promotion. But the term of lower borough offices, like borough judge (*iudex castrensis surrogator*) vice-*starosta* (*vicecapitaneus*) or borough notary (*notarius castrensis*) was limited. These officials were appointed by borough *starostas* and could be dismissed at any time. Also the functions of Sejm deputies were limited in time, the term of office oscillating from three to six weeks. The leaders of the gentry who attended several Sejms as deputies functioned only as long as they were popular. In this situation, the members of groups whose position was not very good tried to obtain posts which assured their irremovability.

It is interesting to note that in Great Poland, as elsewhere in the Commonwealth, the power élite was also a prestige élite. A good illustration of this phenomenon, spectacular and formalised, was the titles which isolated a whole social category from the rest of the gentry. In 1587 - 1632, in the records of the Crown Register, a grand senator was titled *magnificus*, a lesser castellan and every other official and Sejm deputy—*generosus*, while a nobleman without an office was

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<sup>17</sup> J. Topolski, *Rozwój latyfundiów arcybiskupstwa gnieźnieńskiego od XVI do XVIII wieku* [Development of Gniezno Archbishopric's Latifundium from the 16th to the 18th Century], Poznań 1955, Table I, p. 136.

simply *nobilis*. Łukasz Opaliński, Court Crown Marshal, wrote about the sources of prestige: "For all dignity results from the offices held, and public service".<sup>18</sup> In the ideology of the Polish gentry, concern for the good of the Commonwealth ranked very high indeed. So public activity was held in high esteem. Because the power élite was to a large extent composed of individuals active in this sphere and ready to sustain expense for the good of the state, it constituted a group much respected by the public. The prestige with which it was invested became also the factor which integrated it and distinguished from the common run.

Another factor integrating this social category was the ties of kinship. They went much beyond blood ties within a given community; this applied not only to old senatorial families but also to those which obtained a high social status only recently. The old Opaliński family was closely related not only to such senatorial families as the Czarnkowskis, Zborowskis, Leszczyńskis or Kościeleckis, but also to gentry families. More distant relations were, besides grand senators like the Krotowskis or Rozdrażewskis, less notable families, e.g. the Gostyńskis or Stadnickis, and finally members of the middle gentry occupying modest district or borough judicial posts. Of course, new families, e.g. the Gembickis, were related more to a gentry whose members occupied lower rungs in the power élite. The inner ties were strengthened by the fact that members of particular families filled offices in various groups. For instance, representatives of the senatorial family of Czarnkowski were grand senators, lesser castellans, borough *starostas*, district judicial officials and leaders of the gentry.

The religious affiliation of members of the power élite or rather the proportion between Protestants and Catholics within the group was a factor distinguishing it from the rest of the gentry community. Because of lack of relevant sources, the religion professed by sixty persons could not be identified. But the religious affiliation of 141 members of the élite is known. There were 51 Protestants and 90 Catholics (including twelve bishops), which means 36.1 and 63.9 per cent respectively. Such

<sup>18</sup> Ł. Opaliński, *Obrona Polski [Defence of Poland]*, in: *Wybór pism*, Wrocław 1959, p. 221.



a high percentage of Protestants was not the result of the denominational make-up of Great Poland's gentry where the protestants were definitely in the minority. It was evidence of the gentry's great religious tolerance and its recognition of the Protestants' political activity, and it also markedly distinguished the élite from the rest of the gentry. Except for Mazovia, this was true of the whole of the country.

The different life style of the power élite, thanks to which individuals could identify themselves with a group, was reflected in education and foundations. Stanisław Żółkiewski, Grand Crown Hetman (*supremus dux exercitum Regni*) and chancellor (*cancellarius Regni*), told his son in his testament: "Polish up your young years with learning, do not let anybody draw you away from it while you are young. Believe me, you will have in learning a great support and great salvation of dignity, for service to the Commonwealth, for all honest life".<sup>19</sup> Education was universally thought essential in preparing for public service, but the members of the élite attached even more importance to it than the rest of the gentry. This is clearly reflected in the following figures: 73 persons, that is 36.3 per cent of the social group under survey, had secondary and university education, 63 of them having studied abroad. This is a relatively high percentage and it probably much exceeded the average for the whole of the Commonwealth gentry. The Table 1 contains figures illustrating the level of education in particular groups of Great Poland's power élite in the years 1587 - 1632 (all its members have been placed in particular groups, so those who were promoted are included in other groups as well).

The particularly small percentage of people with higher and secondary education among the district court officials is rather striking. Although they were not wealthy people, yet they had to have some elementary education supplemented with legal knowledge because of their very functions. They could obtain it either at home secondary schools or through practice. So it may be assumed that the number of persons with higher and,

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<sup>19</sup> *Pisma Stanisława Żółkiewskiego, Kanclerza koronnego i hetmana [Writings of Stanisław Żółkiewski, Crown Chancellor and Hetman]*, ed. A. Bielowski, Lwów 1861, p. 174.

Table 1: The Level of Education of Great Poland's Power Elite 1587 - 1632

Groups	Total	Higher education		Secondary education	
		foreign and domestic	persons	foreign and domestic	persons
Episcopate	12	12	100	—	—
Senators	35	22	62.8	1	2.9
<i>Starostas</i>	27	13	48.1	1	3.7
Cast. lesser	56	24	42.8	1	1.7
District judicial officials	49	12	24.4	—	—
Gentry leaders	30	6	20	—	—
Lower bor. officials	74	4	5.8	1	1.4

Sources: *Polski słownik biograficzny [Polish Biographical Dictionary]*, vol. I, No. 21; J. Korytkowski, *Arcybiskupi gnieźnieńscy, prymasowie i metropolici polscy od roku 1000 aż do 1821 r. [Gniezno Archbishops, Primates and Polish Metropolitans from the Year 1000 to 1821]*, vol. III, Poznań 1889; T. Wotschke, *Polnische Studenten In Aldorf*, „Jahrbücher für Kultur und Geschichte der Slaven”, vol. IV, Breslau 1928; idem, *Polnische Studenten in Frankfurt*, *ibidem*, vol. V, 1929; *Album studiosorum Universitatis Cracoviensis*, vol. II, III, ed. A. Chmiel; vol. IV, ed. J. Zathej, Cracoviae 1892, 1896 - 1904, 1950; *Archiwum nacji polskiej w Uniwersytecie Padewskim [Archives of the Polish Nation at Padua University]*, vol. II, Wrocław 1971, ed. H. Barycz; *Metrica nec non liber nationis Poloniae univ. Lipsiensis*, in: *Archiwum do dziejów literatury i oświaty w Polsce*, ed. S. Tomkowiak, Kraków 1882; *Polacy na studiach w Ingolstadtzie z rękopisu uniwersytetu monachijskiego [Poles Studying in Ingoldstadt, from a Manuscript of the University in Munich]*, ed. P. Czaplowski, Poznań 1914; *Polacy na studiach w Rzymie w epoce Odrodzenia (1400-1600) [Poles studying in Rome during Renaissance, 1400 - 1600]*, ed. H. Barycz, Kraków 1938; *Studenci polscy na uniwersytecie bolońskim w XVI i XVII w. [Polish students at Bologna University in the 16th and 17th centuries]*, ed. M. Bersohn, Kraków 1894.

particularly, secondary education was much higher than it is possible to deduce from the available sources. Thus, the power élite differed very much from the rest of the society whose certain groups, e.g. some of the small gentry and yeomen, did not even read or write.

Considering the spread of foundations throughout the Commonwealth, it seems that it constituted one of the more important means of emphasizing one's belonging to a group. Although foundations were, naturally, dependent on wealth, some politically more active members of the élite engaged in them irrespective of their financial means as far, of course, as that was possible at all. For instance, Piotr Opaliński, voivode of Poznań, who towards the end of his life owned two towns and 43 villages, set up the Academy school in Poznań, laid the foundations for the endowment of the Bernardine monastery at Sieraków and built there the parish church; Wacław

Włostowski, on the other hand, who had barely two villages, built a timber church at Chwałkowo. Although many of the foundations, such as monasteries, churches, or hospitals were motivated by religious feelings, yet prestige reasons tied up with political activity were uppermost. Witness the case of the Czarnkowskis and Opalińskis, two families vying for influence in Great Poland. The majority of Czarnkowski foundations were established in 1603 - 1620, that is, during their greatest political influence-wielding. Likewise, the Opalińskis established most of their foundations in the years of their particularly strong political influence in Great Poland. Despite local differences, for instance the prevalence of fortified places in the Ukraine as compared with Great Poland, all the foundations reflected the wealth of the founders and their readiness to spend money on public facilities.

#### OPENNESS OF POWER ELITE

"Well-tested nobility is more esteemed than a little-known family," wrote in mid-16th century Stanisław Orzechowski, a gentry ideologue,<sup>20</sup> suggesting the existence of obstacles making access to the power élite difficult for new people. Let us begin by explaining the notions of new and old people. A new man would be one who did not have any ancestors among the members of the power élite. A two-generation gap was considered sufficiently long to warrant the building up anew of the social and political position of the family.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, the son or grandson of a chamberlain would be a new man as a lesser castellan, borough *starosta* or grand senator. Next, a person who had a grandfather or father among the power élite would be a representative of old men. In accordance with the feelings of his contemporaries, the son of a man who was the first of the

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<sup>20</sup> S. Orzechowski, *Mowa na pogrzebie Zygmunta I* [Speech at the Funeral of Sigismund I], in: *Wybór pism*, ed. J. Starnawski, Wrocław 1972, p. 39.

<sup>21</sup> A. similar criterion was assumed by T. Zielińska, *Magnateria polska epoki saskiej* [Polish Great Lords under the Saxon], Wrocław 1977, p. 43.

family to accede to the élite, would be treated here as a representative of old people. Nearly 40 per cent of the members of this social group were new people (Table 2).

Table 2: Social Origin of Members of Particular Groups of Great Poland's Power Elite in the Years 1587 - 1632

Groups	Total	Persons for which social origin data are available		Entirely new families		Families new in the given group		Old families	
		persons	%	persons	%	persons	%	persons	%
Episcopate	12	12	6	50	—	—	6	50	
Great senators	35	35	6	17.1	6	17.1	23	65.8	
Lesser castellans	56	56	18	32.1	1	1.7	37	66.2	
Borough <i>starostas</i>	27	27	6	22.2	—	—	21	77.8	
District judicial officials	49	37	21	56.7	—	—	16	43.3	
Lower borough officials	74	25	17	68	—	—	8	32	
Gentry leaders	30	28	14	50	—	—	14	50	

Sources: *Polski słownik biograficzny* [Polish Biographical Dictionary], vol. I, No. 22; Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych [Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw, hence AGAD]; *Metryka Koronna* [Crown Register], Books from 133 to 179; *Wojewódzkie Archiwum Państwowe* [Voivodship State Archives in Poznań]; *Resignationes* books, G. 23 - 40 Poznańskie, G. 7 - 12 Wschowskie, G. 3 - 23 Waleckie, G. 7 - 12 Kaliskie, G. 6 - 10 Nakielskie.

Considering the fact that persons for whom there are no genealogical data probably did not have officials among their ancestors, the majority would be composed of individuals who were the first in their families to enter the élite. But not everywhere the proportions between the new and the old men were similar. Old men definitely prevailed in the subgroups whose members wielded relatively much power (*starostas*) or enjoyed high prestige (senators). Such a high percentage of new men within the élite is, on the one hand, evidence of personnel policy conducted by Sigismund III who favoured representatives of little-known families much more than his predecessors, and on the other, show the real functioning of gentryocracy, at least in Great Poland. In the second half of the 16th century, the importance of the barrier of social origin fell markedly. This

was due to the dying-out, during the 16th century, of the majority of senatorial families and the victory of the "execution-of-laws" movement, as well as the consequent strengthening of the gentry throughout the Commonwealth. That the strong position of the middle gentry had been instrumental elsewhere in lowering the barriers of social origin, is well illustrated on the example of Lithuania and Volhynia where, despite the disappearance through death of several old families, the careers of new people were rare. Volhynia is a case in point, for in 1566 - 1680 only dukes, descendants of Rurik or Giedymin, held there the office of voivode.

Table 3: Financial Stratification Within Particular Groups of Great Poland's Power Elite at the Outset of Political Activity (1587 - 1632)

Groups	Number of estates surveyed	Financial stratification			Number of estates above 20 vill.
		from	—	to	
Great senators	22	1 village	—	50 vill. 4 towns	8
Lesser castellans	29	1 village	—	27 vill.	1
Borough <i>starostas</i>	24	3 villages	—	50 vill. 4 towns	7
District judicial officials incl. chamberlains	45	1 village	—	71.5 vill. 4 towns	2
District judicial officials excl. chamberlains		1 village	—	10 vill. 0.5 towns	—
Lower borough officials		0.5 vill.	—	10 vill. 0.5 town	—
Gentry leaders	18	0.5 vill.	—	62.6 vill. 3 towns	2

Sources: *Draft Records of Kalisz Voivodship, 1618 - 1620*, ed. A. J. Parczewski, Warszawa 1879; *Źródła dziejowe [Historical Sources]*, vol. XII, XIII, XVI, Warszawa 1883, 1892, ed. A. Pawiński; AGAD, Draft records of particular districts of Poznań and Kalisz voivodships, 1578 - 1591: ASK O.1.3, ASK O.I.6, ASK O.1.13; Extr. 80 mcf. 54, mcf. 55; Kórnik Library Ms. 1817, 1831, 1902, 2691, 7905, 7868, 7877; Raczyński Library in Poznań: Ms 1320/4; Archiwum Państwowe [Voivodship State Archives] in Cracow: Archiwum Sanguszków [Family Archives of Sanguszko] 14, 15, 17, 54; Wojewódzkie Archiwum in Poznań: *Resignationes Books*, G. 23 - 40 Poznańskie, G. 7 - 12 Wschowskie, G. 3 - 23 Waleckie, G. 7 - 12 Kaliskie, G. 6 - 10 Nakielskie.

Table 3 shows the financial stratification within the particular groups of Great Poland élite. In the highest subgroup, that of the grand senators, the differences in the property status at the outset of political activity amounted to from one to fifty villages and four towns. A clergyman, Primate Baranowski, was the owner of one village. Three persons, Andrzej and Rafał

Leszczyński, and Jan Ostroróg owned more than thirty villages. Five people were in the 20 - 30 village bracket, while the remaining fourteen had less than twenty villages (the conventional lower limit of big landed estates in Great Poland), including six with less than ten ! So it is clear that the lack of a big estate did not constitute an obstacle to the highest political promotion. Yet, no one who did not own at least fifteen villages at the moment of nomination would become a grand senator. Thus, in the case of new people, their career was conditioned by the attainment of the necessary economic status. This was possible to quite a fair number of persons ; moreover, economic advancement was acknowledged and accepted by political promotion. Naturally, this strengthened the social and political standing of new people. Thus, social origin was more of an obstacle to obtaining high political promotion than financial status. As far as other groups are concerned, such as lesser senators or borough *starostas*, the economic barrier was even lower ; in the subgroups of district and borough judicial officials, and among the gentry leaders, it was virtually non-existent.

Religion might have constituted a barrier hampering or even making it impossible to enter the power élite. The figures quoted earlier seem, however, to suggest that religious denomination was not of much importance. The table 4 contains figures concerning the religion of members of particular groups of Great Poland élite in 1587 - 1632.

In those groups the membership of which was not determined by royal decision (lower borough officials, gentry leaders) or was only partially determined (district court officials), the number of Protestants exceeded 40 per cent. But in the subgroups where the King appointed all their members, the percentage dropped below 33. So the difference is quite clear between the gentry's personnel policy (including *starostas*) and that of Sigismund III. He was probably guided in his decision by a denominational key, matching more the actual numbers of Protestants among the gentry than among the power élite. Moreover, there was also the fact of a considerable number of Protestant senators becoming Catholic converts of their own free will. If they did not, the proportions between Catholics and

Table 4: The Religion of Members of Great Poland' Elite, 1587 - 1632

Groups	Total	Protestants		Con- verted	Catholics		No data
		persons	%		persons	%	
Lower borough officials	26	14	53.8	—	12	46.2	48
District Officials	40	20	50	2	20	50	9
Gentry leaders	25	10	40	4	15	60	5
Lesser senators	51	16	31.3	6	35	68.6	5
Borough <i>starostas</i>	24	8	33.3	2	16	66.7	3
Great senators	33	7	21.2	7	26	78.8	2

Sources: *Polski słownik biograficzny* [Polish Biographical Dictionary], vol. I-XXII; F. Siarczyński, *Obraz wieku panowania Zygmunta III* [Description of the reign of Sigismund III], Lwów 1928; W. Dworzaczek, *Oblicze wyznaniowe: senatu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w dobie kontrreformacji* [Religious Aspect of the Senate of the Polish Commonwealth during Counter-Reformation], in: *Munera litterariat* Poznań 1962; J. Dworzaczek, *Kontrreformacja we Wschowie w latach 1577 - 1632* [Counter-Reformation at Wschowa in 1577 - 1632], „Roczniki Historyczne”, vol. XXXVI, 1970; J. Łukaszewicz *O kościołach braci czeskich w dawnej Wielkopolsce* [Churches of Bohemian Brethren in Old Great Poland], Poznań 1835; H. Merczyng, *Zbory i senatorowie protestancy w dawnej Rzeczypospolitej* [Protestant Churches and Senators in the Old Commonwealth], Warszawa 1905; A. Strzelecki, *Udział i rola różnowierstwa w rokoszu Zebrzydowskiego* [Participation and Role of Dissidents in Zebrzydowski Rebellion], „Reformacja w Polsce”, vol. VII - VIII, 1935/1936; J. Tazbir, *Spoleczny i terytorialny zasięg polskiej reformacji* [Social and Territorial Range of Polish Reformation], „Kwartalnik Historyczny”, 1976, No. 4; J. Tichy, *Walka protestantów na sejmie w 1611 roku* [Protestants' Struggle in the Sejm of 1611], „Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce”, vol. XII, 1967; W. Urban, *Z dziejów reformacji, w dawnym powiecie kaliskim* [History of the Reformation in Former Kalisz District], „Rocznik Kaliski”, vol. II, 1969; Akta sejmikowe województw poznańskiego i kaliskiego [District Assembly Records of Poznań and Kalisz Voivodships], vol. I: 1572 - 1632, ed. W. Dworzaczek, Poznań 1957, pp. 1, 2.

Protestants in the highest subgroups would have come up with each other. Sigismund III did not discriminate the Protestants, although he certainly did not favour them (except at the beginning of his reign). At the same time, the gentry itself, which would not accept intolerance and excessive preference for Catholics, had its impact on the King's appointment policy. So Protestant affiliation, though it did not facilitate, did not obstruct promotion and great careers either. For instance Zygmunt Grudziński, son of a lesser castellan, had, to begin with, some ten villages. He became the voivode of Kalisz without changing his religion, and at the same time increased his estates ten times!

What factors, then, were most instrumental in the making of a great career, that is, in achieving the office of grand senator? Of vital significance was here the fact of fulfilling

public functions, such as deputy to the Sejm, speaker of the Sejm or of a district assembly, to which one had to be elected by the gentry. This was of paramount importance for achieving the next rungs in the official hierarchy. At the lowest rung of the élite, that is in the group of lower borough officials, they were the condition *sine qua non* of a further career. Among the 55 borough officials who had never discharged elective public functions only two were promoted, and only to district judicial offices; on the other hand, from among 19 borough officials who did fulfil elective public functions eleven were promoted, two of whom even to the office of lesser castellans. Let us look at this question from the point of the highest group, that is the grand senators. There were 35 of them, and only four had never been a deputy or a district assembly speaker. Thus, big careers were to a large extent conditioned by public service. This is proof of the correct functioning of the system of gentry democracy.

The promotion of an individual to the power élite depended largely on his own merits. In the various provinces of the Commonwealth there were, however, different types of career. The greatest family or individual careers were achieved through the *pro publico bono activity*. In Great Poland this meant the discharge of elective functions; in Little Poland the situation was similar. The differences consisted in that in the former the status was reinforced through increased wealth, primarily thanks to own economic activity and financial ability (this was partly caused by the small size of Crown lands), while in the latter, the estates were increased through obtaining Crown lands which were many and lucrative (the Lubomirskis, Ossolińskis, Zamoyskis). But in the eastern borderlands, because of the continuous threats on the part of the Tartars, careers were made thanks to military achievements (the Daniłowicz, Żółkiewski, Potocki, Gulski families, Stefan Chmielecki). Of less importance were the careers made through relationship with bishops. They were neither big nor durable (Baranowskis, Karnkowskis, Szyszkowskis). The Gembickis were an exception but they numbered several mitred relations and also fulfilled elective public functions. Similarly, careers made exclusively with the help of the court were not very great or durable



(Kielczewskis, Kazanowskis, Bobolas). All these careers had two features in common: support of royal privileges, albeit of various hues, and protection. There was practically no family in the Commonwealth, belonging to the middle or small gentry, which would enter the higher strata of the social and economic élite from the ranks of the opposition to the King. Protection, whether familial or royal, though essential, did not bring permanent results without *pro publico bono* activity. Later, especially under the Saxon rulers, the careers based on the court rose in importance; there was also a growth in the role of the Crown lands in increasing one's estates. This was possible mainly because of a loosening of social control over the power élite.

#### CONCLUSION

Studies on power élite lead to the conclusion that the correct functioning of the system of gentry democracy depended, on the one hand, on a political equilibrium maintained between the gentry, the élite and the King, and on the other, on a continuous change among the holders of high offices. This could be observed both in Great Poland and, in various degrees, throughout the Crown. But the situation was entirely different in Lithuania and the eastern borderlands, particularly in Volhynia. From 1569, the Polish Kingdom and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were united in a single state organism. A confrontation of completely different political traditions followed. The example of the Crown (Polish Kingdom) prompted the democratisation of relations in Lithuania and some political emancipation of its gentry from the influence of the great senatorial families. After a time this process was stopped. Moreover, a kind of Lithuanisation of the Crown followed, so that around the mid—17th century an oligarchy of the big lords emerged in the Commonwealth. It was not an oligarchy in the full meaning of the term, for the big lords, who made up the majority of the power élite, did not in fact govern the state. But they obtained such a supremacy over the gentry that they could effectively block the King's policy. Great Poland, although the

transformations occurring in the whole of the country concerned it very little, lost its role of the province which often imposed its own political solutions on the whole country (Kolo meeting in 1590, renewed rebellion in 1607). The main political groupings of the 18th century had their roots in the eastern borders and Lithuania, and that was also where their leaders came from.

*(Translated by Krystyna Dunin-Kępcicz)*