



Workshop Report:

Between Religious Tolerance, Sarmatism and Multi-Ethnicity

The Legacy of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in Culture and Media

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The workshop “Between Religious Tolerance, Sarmatism and Multi-Ethnicity. The Legacy of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in Culture and Media” explored the Commonwealth’s cultural, religious, and multi-ethnic heritage. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (*Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów*, 1569–1795) was a significant and diverse political entity that encompassed vast territories in Central and Eastern Europe. Its internal heterogeneity manifested in socio-cultural perceptions shaped by interactions with neighboring powers – the Tsardom of Russia (later the Russian Empire), the Habsburg Empire, the Crimean Khanate, the Ottoman Empire, and Cossack groups. These interactions forged confessional and proto-national ideas, while the Commonwealth functioned as a transcultural hub bridging the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg empires and consisting simultaneously of various intern in-between peripherality, comprising numerous semi-peripheries with diverse (post-)colonial experiences.

Post-partition, it became a reference point for various social groups and political movements. This workshop explored these modes of reception, perception, and stratification in four panels. They primarily focused on the legacy of the *Rzeczpospolita* in different historical periods and media.

The first panel investigated “Sarmatism in a comparative perspective”. It thus analysed concepts of both self- and external perception and placed discourses on Sarmatism in perspective. MARTIN FABER (Freiburg) presented case studies related to Neo-Sarmatism from the 19th to 21st centuries. He interpreted Sarmatism as an ideology shared by the nobility, emphasizing peculiar social strata-bound freedom while containing the danger of resistance to reforms. In retrospective, the *Neosarmatians* emphasized in their political discourses the positively connotated aspects of the Commonwealth. Faber highlighted what they called *demokracja szlachecka* – the equality within the nobility as ruling elite by electing the king, their right to political resistance and emphasizing Poland in the past as allegedly first democratic European state entity.

NATALIA PAZNIAK (Gießen) focused on transformations of the Sarmatian myth in contemporary Belarusian literature and media using the examples of Maryia Martysevich’s “Sarmatyja” (2018) and Andrei Horvat’s “Dom” (2025). This constructivist cross-media perspective with postcolonial notations discussed the Sarmatian myth by revealing its militarization, commercialization, and adaptation in public history through the restoration of castles, in exhibitions or history parks. These modes of Public History depict an instrumentalization of the Sarmatian idea in its Belarusian prism. Uladzimir Karatkevich presents in his “Wild Hunt” modes of intellectual re-blending, whereas Maryia Martysevich in “Sarmatyja” rather focused on trauma. Andrei Horvat used nostalgia for constructing a Sarmatian home and social activism while combining the discourse with a transformative family history. This approach to Sarmatism as an identity project shows how its revival can be perceived as a trademark of its own.

ZOFIA ZÓLTEK (Warszawa) extended this approach by presenting the Sarmatian horror of Pawel Rzewuski’s “Krzywda” (2025). This dark fantasy novel takes place in different time and space ranges. By linking different actors’ and locations’ microcosms, the connections between historical details and supernatural elements not only shed light on borderlands but also on suppressed identities.

JAN BŁOŃSKI (Warszawa) completed the first panel by reinterpreting the Commonwealth’s Legacy in Netflix’s “1670”. By drawing on debates about history and identity, Błoński emphasizes, how the past keeps returning in performative and deconstructive media products. “1670” presents a new way of engaging through the past by readapting the “People’s Turn”. Therefore, the series uses the past to interrogate contemporary Polish identity – in a repertoire of iconic, meme-like scenes, it mocks the collapse of the state, heroic tropes like Sarmatism and related established media products like “The Deluge”. The series created a new conversation about the past by shared ironic and memetic vocabulary and phrases entering everyday speech.

The second panel focused on multi-religious practices and cultures of remembrance. JARED N. WARREN (Mainz) presented “Tolerance, Catholic Ultramontaniam, and the Multi-Religious Legacy of Poland-Lithuania” in an entanglement of Enlightenment ideas, confessionalisation, and utopian ideas. In the 19th century, various religious groups used tolerance as a political tool, often even appropriating the language of nationalism and thus using the modes of then-dominating political discourses to reconfigure them.

IZABELA ŚLIWIŃSKA SŁOMSKA’s (Warszawa) presentation investigated Jerzy Hoffman’s iconic film “The Deluge” (1974) and its depiction of religious materiality. Roman-catholic elements like votive plagues, crucifixes, personal patron saints but also the depiction of places of (religiously connotated) remembrance like Jasna Góra (sonically accompanied by the singing of religious anthems) present the matter of historical artefacts. Together they marked an audio-visual religious remembrance transforming into national identification via a cinematic gaze.

The third panel labelled as “Displaying history: social agencies and cross-media adaptations” focused on diachronic and transcultural perspectives. Contemporary observations about Poland-Lithuania in the peripheral regions and its subaltern voices were the focus of YURII ZAZULIAK’s (Leipzig) presentation. The tradition of local social banditry is virulently present in Ukrainian commemoration. Films like “Dovbush” popularize famous local mountain bandits of Huzulshchyna, the so-called “Pryshki”. These Hobsbawmian “Primitive Rebels” fought against the social oppression implemented by Polish nobility. Their local memory was institutionalized during Soviet times. Nowadays, this trope of *men against circumstances* is repurposed in a transtemporal perspective and linked to motivate present-day heroes.

ELŻBIETA NOWOSIELSKA, MICHAŁ RACZKOWSKI, ADRIANNA SZNAPIK (all Warszawa) presented an interactive online application containing two sources: the “Geographical Dictionary of the Kingdom of Poland”, edited between 1880 and 1902 and the intellectual geography of the Commonwealth. This historical mapping project and its encyclopedic depictions reflect non-neutral historical ideas (like e.g., Jagiellonian idea), socio-political circumstances (e.g., tsarist censorship), and territorial principles (e.g., the imagined territory of the former Commonwealth). These contested spatial imaginations depict modes of categorizing the environment within aspects of imperial measurement. They emphasize centers, regions, peripheries of imperial rule, local peculiarities, various overlapping language usages, and the application of time-bound intellectual concepts. Hence they view the past *through double mirrors* like intended by their presentation’s title.

The fourth panel being about “Media adaptations via literature, film, and video games” dealt with posthumous media reception and media-specific characteristics. MATEUSZ KURKOWSKI (Wrocław) spoke about the ludic image of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth depicted in “Europa Universalis IV”. Being constructed as an alternative history game, EU IV gamifies the Commonwealth’s history under the conditions of the Polish(-Lithuanian or -Ruthenian) elective monarchy. It frames the Szlachta as agent, instrumentalizing the Commonwealth’s peculiarities for in-game missions and quests and thus immerses history in the strategy game.

JAKUB NIEWIŃSKI (Poznań) interpreted Netflix’s “1670” through ethical and pedagogical approaches and focussed on the creation of atmosphere, intersectionality, and queer theory. Niewiński framed the humor of “1670” as a national valve reflecting of central historical topics.

JOANNA ORZEŁ (Łódź) completed this panel presenting various cinematic and literary representations of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Each medium works with differing modes for creating historical authenticity and (national) remembrance. Investigating “Pan Tadeusz” and its film adaptations (e.g., by Andrzej Wajda in 1999), Orzet emphasizes its nostalgic vision of a seemingly lost past. Henryk Sienkiewicz’s Trilogy instead merged historical facticity with dramatically useful fictional storylines for encouraging a national spirit by remembering crucial moments in primarily as Polish interpreted national history.

Concluding the panels, both a book presentation and a keynote concluded the workshop. TOMASZ RAWSKI (Warszawa) presented a jointly edited recently published volume about “Pathways to Agonism. Disputed Territories and Memory” that reflects case studies from regions in Eastern and Central Europe, the South Caucasus, and South Asia. Hence, they analyse memory practices applied by different social agents and institutions in confidence building between still divided communities.

In his keynote, MACIEJ PTASZYŃSKI (Warszawa) elaborated a set of various paradoxes when conceptualising uses of tolerance by Catholics and Protestants during and after the conclusion of the Warsaw Confederation in 1573. Contextualising this Confederation as milestone for the research on tolerance, Ptaszyński concludes that the matter was not about freedom (of faith) but about *pax* and *securitas* for all *dissidentes de religione*. Hence, the tolerance was linked to pragmatically regulating violence within a given political reality.

The concluding discussion wrapped up the workshop topic and emphasized the key aspects for further research. Most presentations depicted the Commonwealth as a (Polish dominated) imperial power varying in regional, local and peripheral experiences. Different modes of instrumentalization in films, literature or videogames gave insight into its understanding as multicultural and heterogeneous entity. Further research must place it and its (self-)perception into pan-European contexts, like Romanticism or Enlightenment. This could emphasize the Commonwealth’s role as a transcultural hub with mechanisms of (Euro-)Orientalism, both internal colonialism and colonization in its semi-peripheries. Its afterlife in collective memory turns the Commonwealth into a chronotope (Bakhtin) and spatial container. Media products like video games and films show, how history can be (re-)constructed, decided and (dis-)played. These modes should and could be emphasized also in a performative perspective – in actions like staging, queering and emotionalizing.

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