

Robert Frost, *The Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania*. Volume I: *The Making of the Polish-Lithuanian Union, 1385–1569*, Oxford University Press, 2015. 564 p. ISBN 978-0-19-8208-69-3

Robert Frost's book about the history of the 400-year-long (1386–1795) period of the union between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania will most likely receive considerable attention from historians of the Middle and Early Modern ages, and those interested in the nations and states of Central and Eastern Europe. This is because the author examines an issue of great relevance to today's Europe: the co-existence of nations of different confessions and cultures, and how they managed to live together in one union.

This is the first time the history of the union between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania is being presented to an international audience in English, within the framework of the well-known 'Oxford History of Early Modern Europe Series'. The author of this body of research is a British historian who is free of the agendas and preconceptions nurtured in the historiographies of the modern nation-states that inherited the union's legacy (Belarus, Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine). This position has allowed Frost to overcome the restrictions imposed by national historiographies, and to try to see the union between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania not just from the national perspective of a nation-inheritor of the union. In the preface, he presents the main objective of his work: 'This book is an attempt to provide a history of the making of the union that eschews any national perspective, and which suggests that the non-Polish peoples within the union state played as great a part in its formation as the Poles. It therefore tells the story from multiple viewpoints in order to explain the success of the union, which remains, despite its inglorious end, one of the longest-lasting political unions in European history, whose cultural legacy is evident to this day' (p. viii). The author's aim is not new in the context of the union's historiography, as ideas similar in form in one way or another have been developed by Polish historians. However, Frost's interpretation has been supplemented by a new approach to the political community of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

The monograph covers the first stage of the union's creation and implementation, from the gestation of the idea in the late 14th century until the creation of a new state in the Central East European region, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, in 1569. The text is divided into

seven chapters, each one based on a different issue, where various aspects of the union's creation are analysed in chronological order. The author's choice of this particular structure allows him to illustrate consecutively his determined objective of how the idea of the union was matured, defended and embodied, the forces of which political community of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania participated in the process, and which external factors came into play. Another advantage is that the author makes use of a very good awareness of multi-lingual historiography and published sources on the topic.

From a practical sense, Frost's decision, writing in English, to give the original versions of names of individuals and place names in the national languages of the Central East European region is rather important. In doing so, he has achieved an enormous and meaningful task. Language is part of every historical culture: in this case, it introduces the culture of Central East European nations of the Middle and Early Modern ages to an international audience. At the same time, his work is a recommendation of how translators can work with the complicated and hitherto unresolved question of how to write names of individuals and place names of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in English. He has presented the principles for writing names in a separate section of the book: A Note on Personal and Place Names, p. xx–xxi; proper noun forms of individuals and place names are given in various languages here: *Gazetteer*, pp. 527–529).

The content of the monograph consists of two closely-related themes. The first encompasses the theoretical concept of a union in the Middle and Early Modern ages, its origins, types, and features of different unions (e.g. Scandinavia's Kalmar Union, the unions of Castille and Aragon, England and Scotland), the reasons for their formation, and other theoretical matters that are important in discussing the union between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. This is an innovative theoretical approach, giving a wider international context and a comparative perspective to the union analysed in the book, allowing us to step beyond the national framework set by the discussion in Polish and Lithuanian historiography. All the hitherto existing studies on the union have lacked this kind of comparative context. The author's decision to show the roles of Prussia and Mazovia in the creation and development process of the union is an important factor that extends the scope of his research (see: pp. 209–221, 374–402).

The meaning of the subject comes across most strongly in the part of the monograph that covers the Middle Ages, where he models the union between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and its transformations. The author presents and analyses arguments to back his assessment of the main documents that formed the political and judicial basis of the union, and discusses the insights and assessments of other

historians. It would be impossible to discuss all of them in this review, but I would like to single out one in particular, which testifies to the historian's analytical abilities: the analysis and interpretation of the Horodło Treaty, signed in 1413 between two rulers, Jogaila, the King of Poland and Supreme Duke of Lithuania, and Vytautas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania (see: 'Horodło', pp. 109–121).

Historians studying the union agree that the agreements signed in Horodło in 1413 determined relations between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and their political communities for a long time to come. On the other hand, the content of the treaty between the two rulers and the outwardly contradictory formulations of its separate articles continue to raise numerous questions among historians. Thus, we do not necessarily have to agree with some of Frost's insights, but, in terms of research on the union, the importance of his analysis of the rulers' document cannot be denied.

It is a shame that, having identified the latest publication of the Horodło acts prepared by historians in Poland and Lithuania,¹ the author pays no attention to nor discusses the research articles by Edmundas Rimša and Jan Wroniszewski on the theme of the heraldry of the nobility in the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. These contemporary researchers' insights would almost certainly have made it possible to enhance Frost's deliberations on the internal situation in the two political communities and their interrelations, and their participation in the union's creation, which are based on the studies by Władysław Semkowicz published a hundred years ago (pp. 115–116). After all, the author's main aim is to show that the union was not created by closer bonds between the states themselves, but between the political communities of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and their eventual conglomeration, culminating in the Union of Lublin in 1569. A deeper knowledge of the nobles' communities is necessary to realise this aim, and heraldry is an important source facilitating that knowledge.

The idea that after the 1413 Horodło agreements the nobility of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania started to grow closer to the Polish nobility, and that in the second half of the 15th century and the first half of the 16th century, Lithuania's political community adopted the culture and values of the nobility of the kingdom, and started to demand a formal union that would create one common state, is not new. As has already been mentioned, it has been developed by Polish historians. However, Frost not only accepts this interpretation, but goes further in trying to expand it, and to show that in 1569 in Lublin, a new state was created by the already-existing united Polish and Lithuanian political community of nobles, and to

¹ *1413 m. Horodlės aktai (dokumentai ir tyrinėjimai) / Akty Horodelskie z 1413 roku (dokumenty i studia)*, eds. J. Kiaupienė, L. Korczak (Vilnius/Kraków, 2013).

name what political force played such an important role in bringing the political communities closer together.

Frost makes a critical assessment of the (allegedly unfounded) approach prevailing among Lithuanian historians that prior to the Union of Lublin of 1569, the political community in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was independent, that relations between its members, the magnates and ordinary nobles, and their position regarding the union, even their value orientation, differed from the situation in the political community of the Kingdom of Poland. It would seem that the author does not accept the idea of Lithuanian historians who claim that the Lithuanian political community's rapprochement with their Polish counterparts and the formation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's political community only began in the last decades of the 16th century (see: 'Execution Achieved' and 'Failure', pp. 446–494).

On the other hand, the way the author has chosen to present the Union of Lublin of 1569 is also less than convincing. Having described the events at the Lublin Sejm in 1569, already covered quite well in historiography, the historian declares that this was the will of the political communities, first of all, of the ordinary nobles who were its constituents. However, having read parts of the book dedicated to the political community that existed in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania at the time of the Lublin Union, we soon notice that much is said about 16th-century political leaders, magnates, and the highest state officials, but not about the political community's ordinary nobles, concentrated in the districts. This is not so surprising. The sources available and our current knowledge of them prevents researchers from doing differently.

I should add that it is quite difficult to provide a basis for either of these approaches. The main problem is the sources themselves. Sources from the late 14th to the first half of the 16th-century about the Grand Duchy of Lithuania are rather meagre, and their fragmented nature complicates attempts to reveal comprehensively the political community's participation in the process of the union's creation, compared to the situation of the community in the Kingdom of Poland. The existing sources do not allow us to give well-thought-out descriptions of the extent of participation in the process of the creation of the union of the Ruthenian nobility of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

The author does offer a new insight, in that the stance taken by the nobility in the Ruthenian lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania played a special role in the creation of the union and its allied political community. However, his claim that the Orthodox nobility of Rus' were actually the 'driving force' behind the union is based on known facts and the author's theoretical analysis of the situation (see: '*Shliakhta*' pp. 291–308; '*Litva*', pp. 309–323). On the other hand, these deliberations by the author should not be ignored. They open a perspective that allows us to take a new look

at the ducal political community's internal dynamics, and prompts the need to search for new sources.

To summarise these brief observations, I would like to repeat again and highlight the fact that Frost's book has unveiled the weaker aspects of our knowledge about the union between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. He gives us the opportunity to re-think many concepts of the union and its definition, and to overcome the narrow image created by national historiographies, reviving discussions of the union's assessment at a new level. Meanwhile, the unconventional concept of the union he offers requires time, deeper analysis and contemplation: 'For all that two realms had come together in pursuit of common interest, and for all that material and self-interest had played a large part in the deal-making that formed the union, it ultimately reached fruition on account of the idea not of a union of realms or states, but of a fraternal union of peoples, a community of the realms' (p. 494).

This first acquaintance with Frost's book leaves the reader pleased that it arouses creative scientific thought and discussion, and provides a great impulse to search for new sources and continue research on the topic of the union.

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