

Catherine the Great, Voltaire, and the Russian intervention in Poland, 1767–1771

Jacek Kordel

1. Introduction

In the first years of the reign of Stanislaus II Augustus, the Tsarina of Russia, Catherine the Great, undertook a diplomatic and military intervention in favour of Polish evangelicals and members of the Orthodox Church. It was covered by a large-scale publicity campaign which aimed at explaining and justifying to the European public opinion the reasons for the court in St. Petersburg to be involved in Polish affairs, as well as the undertaken measures. The most opinion-forming writers of the Republic of Letters were recruited, among them Voltaire himself at the head. In the years 1767–1771, the philosopher of Ferney, based on the materials which were provided by Russian diplomats, wrote a number of brochures in which he supported the political and military involvement of Catherine II in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Thanks to his great authority he could influence many intellectual circles and prejudice them in favour of the Russian intervention in Poland. He could also build the authority of the Russian Empress as an enlightened ruler who put into practice the ideas of the Enlightenment.

In my article I would like to, firstly, present the inside story of Voltaire's conversations with Russian politicians (primarily with the envoy in The Hague Alexander Romanovich Vorontsov and with the Tsarina's close collaborator Andrei Petrovich Shuvalov, who both interceded in negotiations with the king of philosophers). Secondly, I would like to recount the materials prepared by the Russian diplomacy which, through the agency of Vorontsov, reached the philosopher of Ferney. Finally, I would like to analyse the philosopher's texts concerning the case, namely *Lettre sur les panegyriques*, *Essai historique et critique sur les dissensions des Eglises de Pologne*, *Le Sermon prêché à Bâle, le premier jour de l'an 1768*, *Discours aux confédérés catholiques de Kaminiek en Pologne*, *Le tocsin des rois*. I intend to consider the arguments used by Voltaire to justify the Russian intervention in Poland. How did he create and defend the Russian Empress' reputation? How did he portray Catherine the Great? This issue had already been discussed in

historiography but historians mentioned it incidentally while describing other issues: the dissident question (Maria Cecylia Łubieńska,¹ George T. Lukowski²), the depiction of Poland in the literature of the French Enlightenment (Stanisław Kot,³ Marian H. Serejski,⁴ Larry Wolff,⁵ Maciej Forycki⁶), or general deliberations on Voltaire's attitude towards Poland (Wanda Dzwigala,⁷ Emanuel Rostworowski,⁸ Stanisław Fiszer⁹). Voltaire's correspondence, which was the primary source for the recognition of his activity, was used only in a narrow scope. The authors did not analyse his brochures nor the Russian diplomatic correspondence (manuscript and printed). Therefore, these very texts are the basis of the present article.¹⁰

2. Historical Context

Before discussing the problem of Voltaire's journalistic texts for Catherine II, I want to briefly introduce the circumstances of the diplomatic and military intervention of the Russian Empress in Poland.¹¹ After Augustus III's death (1763), the faction led by August and Michał Czartoryski (the Familia), was running after the Polish crown. Their proposed sweeping changes were: a larger army, financial improvements in the revenue collection, the limitation of the liberum veto. Their candidate for the throne was their nephew, Stanislaus Antoni Poniatowski, the former Saxon envoy in St. Petersburg and at the same time Grand Duchess Catherine's lover (after the election and coronation he changed his name to Stanislaus Augustus).

1 *Łubieńska*, *Sprawa dysydencka*, 108–147.

2 *Lukowski*, *The Szlachta*, 64–198.

3 *Kot*, *Rzeczpospolita Polska*, 147–195.

4 *Serejski*, *Europa a rozbiory Polski*.

5 Wolff addressed the problem only in the margins of his remarks about the ideas of Eastern Europe in the French Enlightenment, *Wolff*, *Inventing Eastern Europe*.

6 *Forycki*, *Anarchia polska*, 122–153.

7 *Dzwigala*, *Voltaire and Poland; Dzwigala*, *Voltaire in 18th century Russia and Poland*, 7–29; *Dzwigala*, *Voltaire's sources*.

8 *Rostworowski*, *Voltaire et la Pologne*.

9 *Fiszer*, *L'image de la Pologne*, *passim*.

10 One cannot agree with Emanuel Rostworowski's opinion on Voltaire's works: „Cet engagement et la série des produits de ‚la fabrique de Ferney‘ sont suffisamment connus pour que l'on ne s'étende pas ici sur des libelles de Voltaire“, *Rostworowski*, *Voltaire et la Pologne*, 114.

11 For details on circumstances of the Russian intervention in Poland see *Kraushar*, *Książę Repnin*, vol. 1; *Lukowski*, *The Szlachta*; *Nosow*, *Установление*; *Zielińska*, *Polska w okowach*.

This candidacy was supported by Russia. Catherine the Great assumed that the new king would be her tool in gaining influence in Poland. However, this did not happen. From the point of view of Russian interests, this flawed political assumption made Russia lose a lot of its forces and means. The Russian Empress was in an alliance with the King of Prussia, Frederick the Great. In the years 1764 and 1769, subsequent Prusso-Russian alliance agreements were signed. They comprised clauses opposing any reforms in Poland and consequently sustained the anarchy in the country. The first two years of Stanislaus Augustus' reign (1764–66) were a test of forces in Polish-Russian relations. While the young king, named Stanislaus Augustus on coronation day, and his uncles, the Czartoryski brothers, intended to carry out the reforms, Catherine and Frederick were determined to actively oppose them. Furthermore, they expected that a new law would be introduced in the Commonwealth which would restore the political rights (i.e. political equality) for Protestant and Orthodox nobles. Although the political equality of dissidents was finally ended in 1733 when Protestants and Orthodox had been excluded from the Sejm, the Crown and the Lithuanian Tribunals as well, religious tolerance was not abolished.¹² In the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth various religious groups were living in harmony: not only Christians but also Jews, Karaims and Muslims.¹³

Initially St. Petersburg (with support from Berlin) did not specify the range of those desiderata. However, when in 1764 the coronation Sejm did not introduce any changes in favour of dissidents, Catherine, outraged with the „insubordination“, demanded from the subsequent Sejm (1766) that wide religious toleration and equal political rights be enacted. The

12 *Kriegseisen*, Postanowienia Sejmu Niemego, 177–188. More on the situation of the dissidents *Kriegseisen*, Die Protestanten; *Wajsbium*, Ex registro, passim; *Müller*, Anmerkungen zur Diskussion über religiöse Toleranz, 417–426.

13 *Tazbir*, A State without stakes, passim; Under a common sky, passim. Foreign travellers, who were visiting the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the reign of Stanisław Augustus wrote about deep-rooted tolerance; e.g. Louis-Antoine Caraccioli, who got to know Poland well, noted: „Je ne dissimulerai pas qu'on eut quelquefois un zélé amer contre les dissidens, sans cependant qu'il puisse être compare à celui des Suédois, des Danois, des Anglois et des Hollandois même, contre les Catholiques“, *Caraccioli*, La Pologne, 12. In another work he wrote: „Les Polonois, tolérans par caractère, donnoient asyle aux juifs, aux sociniens, aux dissidens, sans leur faire éprouver le joug d'une impérieuse domination“, *Caraccioli*, La Vie, 118. Even Georg Forster, who was reluctant towards Poland, noticed in his letters: „Die Toleranz ist vollkommen“ (Georg Forster to Therese Heyne, Vilnius, 24 January 1785, Georg Forsters Werke, vol. 14, 269) or „Pfafferei und Mönchen... [...] Hier sind sie auch, und doch daneben uneingeschränkteste Toleranz“ (idem to Samuel Thomas Sömmering, 3 February 1785, *ibid.*, 273).

latter were not applied in any other European country. That is why the St. Petersburg court as well as the Berlin court, for the use of Western Europe's public opinion, did not speak about equal rights but about denominational tolerance. In reality, a significant improvement of the dissidents' situation was desirable neither for St. Petersburg nor for Berlin. The Court in St. Petersburg feared that conferring political rights on dissidents could increase the number of Russian peasants escaping to Poland. The Prussian King was aware that the far-reaching changes of the legal status of Protestants could cause migrations of Prussian subjects to the Commonwealth.¹⁴ The Russian Empress and the Prussian King were invoking former political traditions and intended to use the Orthodox and Protestant minority to widen and entrench their impact in the Commonwealth. Catherine II's essential motive in forcing the dissident question in Poland was to become more credible in the eyes of the Orthodox hierarchy in Russia. She was born in an impoverished German princely family. Her baptism was in evangelical rite and despite the fact that she converted to the Orthodox faith, she still had to solicit the Orthodox hierarchs' support, especially because in the beginning of her reign she had sustained Peter III's decision on the secularization of Church wealth. Finally, the vital issue was to take into account European public opinion which was keenly interested in denominational issues and the problem of religious toleration. In the fall of 1764, the Empress wrote directly to the director of Russian foreign policy, Nikita Ivanovich Panin, that fulfilling her demands in the dissident question would bring her fame in Russia as well as in all of Europe.¹⁵ The Sejm of 1766 is a key to understanding the further history of the

14 In a letter from February 1767 addressed to Voltaire, Frederick the Great, king of Prussia, admitted: „Je voudrais que les dissidents fussent heureux, mais sans enthousiasme“, Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, to Voltaire, Potsdam, 20 February 1767, letter no. D13981. All of Voltaire's letters are quoted after Theodore Bestermann's edition: *Les œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 115–121, Correspondence and related documents, vol. 31–37). Only their numbers are written below.

15 „Что я вам теперь ни всё как рекомендую, чтобы вы старались диссиденты как возможно к нашему авантажу окончить, дабы нам и внутрь, как с наружи, славу иметь“, undated note from Catherine the Great to Nikita Iwanowicz Panin, director of Russian foreign policy (probably before 13th /24th October 1764). The thought was later developed in the instructions to the Russian ambassador in Warsaw, Nikolai Vasilyevich Repnin: The Russian success, Panin wrote, „определяет тот верх славы, на который счастливый успех великих предприятий при самом начале царствования Его Императорского Величества возводит отечество наше“, quoted after *Zielińska, Polska w okowach*, 203 f., footnote 29.

conflict. Contrary to Russia's and Prussia's categorical demands, Protestant and Orthodox nobility (*szlachta*) did not gain any political concessions. Catherine II's reaction was to use force. In March 1767, as additional Russian troops entered the Commonwealth (previously, Russian troops were introduced in 1764, before the election of Stanislaw Augustus, and they remained in the country afterwards), two confederacies of dissenting nobility were set up, at Thorn in Royal Prussia and at Sluck in Lithuania. At the same time, Russian ambassador Nikolai Vasilyevich Repnin persuaded Stanislaus Augustus' and the Czartoryski brothers' opponents to set up a Catholic confederacy (23 June in Radom), since they were hungry to come back to the helm of the state after being removed from power. Russia needed them because passing the pro-dissident bills required the nobility's approval.

These confederacies crippled regular political life effectively and, in consequence, it was ambassador Repnin who ruled the country. It is worth mentioning that the Catholic confederacy's leaders, though they were obedient to Russia in setting down the act of the confederation of Radom (the town was surrounded by the Russian army at that time), in reality they were against concessions for dissenters. They also hoped that the Sejm would not pass any of the concessions. Repnin predicted the opposite. In October 1767, he passed a political novelty during the Sejm summoned by Russia's orders. Decisions were supposed to be made not at the full strength of the parliament but by a „delegation“ which would consist of people chosen by the ambassador. When senators, who were resistant towards the dissident question, had been captured and banned to deep Russia, the terrorised delegation and later the Sejm *in pleno* enacted bills desired by the Russian Empress. Alongside conferring broad rights to the dissident nobility, the 1767–1768 Sejm adopted what had been imposed by Catherine II, namely immutable cardinal laws which indemnified so-called „noble liberties“ including liberum veto and free election. The Russian guarantee meant that the Commonwealth was formally deprived of sovereignty and henceforth any bills would have to be agreed upon with St. Petersburg. Russian actions, especially the kidnapping of the senators and the political equality of dissidents, met with resistance of a significant part of the Polish society. In late February 1768, the Confederacy of Bar had been set up by disgruntled nobles. Its leaders were against the Russian preponderance in Poland. For the next four years the Commonwealth became spectacle of civil war. It was pacified by the Russian army only

in 1772. The internal destabilization caused by Russian pro-dissident demands provided Catherine the Great with a pretext for partition (1772).¹⁶

3. *Voltaire as a champion of religious liberty and apologist for the Russian intervention*

The thought about engaging the most influential writers of the European Republic of Letters to explain the circumstances of the intervention towards Polish dissidents was gradually developing in the Russian Empress' mind, so no wonder the choice fell on Voltaire. The philosopher of Ferney was adverse towards all dogmatic religions and he protested against religious persecution under the motto „Écrasez l'infâme!“. He also fought against any forms of religious fanaticism, clericalism, and mocked superstitions. He took a stand in high-profile cases concerning religious persecution in enlightened Europe. He also took the initiative in investigating these cases and in fighting against unjust decisions. The 1760s were especially favourable to those kinds of speeches. After the death sentence for the Toulousian protestant merchant Jean Calas for killing his own son because he had been planning to convert to Catholicism, the interest in religious freedom was at its peak. The philosopher also spoke in defence of the Sirven family from the little town of Mazamet in Occitania. They had been sentenced to death in absentia for bullying their daughter who wanted to enter a Catholic convent. Voltaire also protested against the execution of a young noble from Abbeville in Picardy named Jean-François de la Barre who was blamed for profaning a cross and salacious readings.¹⁷

Members of the Russian diplomacy contacted Voltaire on this matter presumably by the late autumn of 1766. The fact that the Russian court approached the philosopher after the 1766 Sejm, which did not undertake the dissident question, is indicated by Voltaire's letter to the Empress from December 1766. The philosopher of Ferney assured Catherine that her actions in favour of Polish dissidents would bring her fame and that Voltaire himself would eagerly attempt to explain the Russian actions to the European public opinion: „Your generous care in establishing freedom of conscience in Poland is a blessing to be celebrated by mankind, and I

16 Many studies have been devoted to these issues. The most important study remains *Konopczyński*, *Konfederacja*, vol. 1–2. Among newer ones, it is worth noting: *Dukwicz*, *The internal situation*, 67–84.

17 *Chassaigne*, *Le procès*; *Garrison*, *L’Affaire Calas*; *Inchauspé*, *L’intellectuel fourvoyé*.

„dare to speak out on behalf of mankind“.¹⁸ He added that the Empress might count on the support of all „parti philosophique“: „There are three of us, Diderot, D’Alembert and me, who will set up altars for you“.¹⁹ Voltaire’s stand came largely from his personal admiration for the Russian ruler. Catherine the Great, in Voltaire’s opinion, was a real embodiment of enlightened monarchy in which she was ready to support the spirit of tolerance with all her strengths and not only in her own country but in the neighbouring ones as well. The brightest minds of the period were overwhelmingly impressed by the Empress, just as ten years before the most notable European intellectuals, like Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, were thrilled with Peter the Great.²⁰

The philosopher of Ferney had little knowledge about Poland, as did most Western European intellectuals. His views on the Commonwealth generally reflected the point of view of the French public opinion. Until the 1760s, its comments on denominational relations in the Commonwealth had mostly been favourable.²¹ In his 1756’s book *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit de nations* Voltaire pointed to Poland as an example of a tolerant country.²² Even in his 1763 *Traité sur la tolérance* the Commonwealth was presented as a positive reference point. The philosopher argued that the peaceful coexistence of many denominations was in the sphere of interests of Polish clergymen since the pragmatic issues had been of more value for them than the ultimate ones.²³

18 „Vos soins généreux pour établir la liberté de conscience en Pologne, sont un bienfait que le genre humain doit célébrer, et j’ambitionne bien d’oser parler au nom du genre humain“; Voltaire to Catherine the Great, tsarina of Russia, Ferney, 22 December 1766, D13756.

19 „Nous sommes trois, Diderot, D’Alembert et moi, qui vous dressons des autels“, *ibid.*

20 Cf. *Lortholary*, Les „philosophes“ du XVIIIe siècle, *passim*; *S. Karp / L. Wolff* (eds.), *Le Mirage russe au XVIIIe*; *Wilberger*, *Voltaire’s Russia*, *passim*.

21 *Wolozzyński*, *Polska w opiniach Francuzów XVIII wieku*, 76–80; *Forycki*, *Chorografia*. More about Voltaire’s relationships with the St. Petersburg Court, cf. *Gooch*, *Catherine the Great and Voltaire*; *Gooch*, *Voltaire as historian*; *Gorbatov*, *Catherine the Great and the French Philosophers*, 59–114. Voltaire’s works fitted into this trend.

22 *Forycki*, *Anarchia polska*, 126 f.

23 „Un évêque de Varmie, en Pologne, avait un anabaptiste pour fermier, et un socinien pour receveur; on lui proposa de chasser et de poursuivre l’un, parce qu’il ne croyait pas la consubstantialité, et l’autre, parce qu’il ne baptisait son fils qu’à quinze ans: il répondit qu’ils seraient éternellement damnés dans l’autre monde, mais que, dans ce monde-ci, ils lui étaient très-nécessaires“, *Voltaire*, *Traité sur la tolérance*, 34.

At the end of 1766, the issue took on a new meaning. By expressing himself on the subject of the Russian involvement towards Polish dissidents, Voltaire started acting strangely. It was no longer about local French church affairs, like Calas, the Sirven family or de La Barre's cases, but the beginning of a crackdown on the Church in general. In the first weeks of 1767, Frederick the Great made it clear to the philosopher that by supporting the Russian intervention with his intellectual authority he would participate, to a greater extent, in a fight against tradition: „Here, in my neighbourhood, the Empress of Russia declares herself the protector of dissidents; the Polish bishops are furious about it. What an unfortunate century for the Court of Rome! Philosophers openly undermine the foundations of the apostolic throne [...] tolerance is preached; all is lost. A miracle is needed to save the Church. You will still have the consolation in burying it and giving it his epitaph“.²⁴ That made Voltaire very enthusiastic. As he declared, the aim of his actions was to actively participate in combating all the manifestations of the old world which opposed the principles of reason: „Jean Jacques is writing only to write“ – he wrote to Jacob Vermees, a pastor from Geneva – „and I am writing to act“.²⁵

It seems that Voltaire initially assumed that the Russian Empress had agreed on her plans with Stanislaus Augustus. In the beginning of February 1767, a significant letter was sent by the philosopher of Ferney to the Polish king in which he expressed the appreciation for wise tolerance in Poland as if it had already been successfully implemented.²⁶ Stanislaus Augustus replied: „You assume that certain things, which remain projects for the time being, have already been put into practice“.²⁷ Then Voltaire asked the Empress whether she and the Polish King were collaborating. At the end of February 1767, he wrote to her: „I imagine that the two of you are as thick as thieves for the good of mankind and in order to laugh at the

24 „Ici, dans mon voisinage, l'impératrice de Russie se déclare protectrice des dissidents; les évêques polonais en sont furieux. Quel malheureux siècle pour la cour de Rome! [...]. Des philosophes sapent ouvertement les fondements du trône apostolique [...]; on prêche la tolérance; tout est perdu. Il faut un miracle pour relever l'église. [...] vous aurez encore la consolation de l'enterrer et de lui faire son épitaphe“, Frederick II to Voltaire, Potsdam, 10 February 1767, D13941.

25 „Jean Jacques n'écrit que pour écrire et moy j'écris pour agir“, Voltaire to Jacob Vermees, c. 15 April 1767, D14117.

26 Voltaire to Stanislaus Augustus, King of Poland, 3 February 1767, D13913.

27 „Vous m'y tenés compte de faits, qui ne sont encor malheureusement que des intentions“, Stanislaus Augustus to Voltaire, 21 February 1767, D13988.

intolerant priests“.²⁸ He was also trying to find an answer to the mind-boggling question among Russian statesmen, such as Catherine II’s representative in Versailles, Dmitriĭ Alekseyevich Golitsyn, to whom he wrote: „I firmly believe that everything will be arranged according to the wishes of the Empress and the King and that these two philosophical monarchs will set a great example of tolerance for the astonished Europe“.²⁹ The answer never came to Ferney. The important fact is that the philosopher lacked clarity in the issue since he had been looking for assurance. Regardless, he went into action by trying to convince the European public opinion that Catherine II’s intentions were nothing but peaceful and, together with Stanislaus Augustus, she was fighting for the religious tolerance for Protestants and Orthodox persecuted by the Catholic majority.

By the end of April or the beginning of May 1767, soon after receiving news about dissident confederations in Thorn and Sluck (in today’s Belarus, located south of Minsk) coming to life, Voltaire wrote the *Lettre sur les panégyriques*, his first eulogy for the Russian Empress,³⁰ under the name of Irénée Alethès. In his letter, Catherine II’s concern about the freedom of all people went beyond Russia’s boundaries: „Not only is this princess tolerant, but she also wants her neighbours to be tolerant. This was the first time that the supreme power was used to establish freedom of conscience. It is the greatest era in the modern history“.³¹

In the light of the 1766, 1767 and 1768 events in the Commonwealth, it has to be stated that Voltaire intentionally confused fighting for freedom of conscience with the fight for political equality for the dissident nobility. This understanding was contradictory to the reality: the aim of the Russian Empress was not to restore the confessional tolerance but to bring back the political rights for the dissident nobility. Voltaire broke with a long tradition of justifying interventions by referring to the former state of law or to the obligations arising from international treaties. He brought

28 „J’imagine que vous vous entendez tous deux comme larrons en foire, pour le bien du genre humain, et pour vous moquer des prêtres intolérants“; Voltaire to Catherine II, 27 February 1767, D13996.

29 „Je crois fermement que tout s’arrangera au gré de l’impératrice et du Roy, et que ces deux monarques philosophes donneront à l’Europe étonnée le grand exemple de la tolérance“; Voltaire to Dimitri Alekseyevich Golitsyn (Bestermann wrongly named Dimitri Mikhailovich as a recipient), Ferney, 11 April 1767, D14102.

30 Cf. *Mervaud*, *Lettre sur les panégyriques*... Introduction, 203–213.

31 „Non-seulement cette princesse est tolérante, mais elle veut que ses voisins le soient. Voilà la première fois qu’on a déployé le pouvoir suprême pour établir la liberté de conscience. C’est la plus grande époque [...] dans l’histoire moderne“; [*Voltaire*], *Lettre sur les panégyriques*, 227.

tolerance, one of the central points of the Enlightenment discourse, to the forefront.³² Under Voltaire's pen, Catherine II fought primarily for religious tolerance. What were the reasons for this? Did Voltaire assume that it would have been more difficult to justify and defend the armed intervention that aimed at extending political freedoms and privileges of dissident nobility? Or perhaps he wanted to show that the Enlightenment broke with old traditions and established new ones, including justifications for interventions.³³

In his treaty, printed four years earlier and titled *Traité sur la tolérance*, Voltaire himself pointed out explicitly that representatives of religious minorities should not always participate in political life.³⁴ In his *Lettre sur les panégyriques* he assured that the aim of the St. Petersburg court was to implement religious toleration in the Commonwealth: „I am aware that all spirits must one day be united in the love for this precious freedom that teaches men to look upon God as their common Father, and to serve Him in peace without worrying, without demeaning, without hating those who worship Him in a different way than we do“.³⁵ The work met with kind reception among European elites and it was rightly perceived by tsarist diplomacy as a useful instrument to propagate the Russian vision of the events in the Commonwealth.³⁶

32 A lot of work has been devoted to this question, cf. Toleration in Enlightenment Europe.

33 For terminology, see especially *Kriegseisen*, Between State and Church, 13–29.

34 „Je ne dis pas que tous ceux qui ne sont point de la religion du prince doivent partager les places et les honneurs de ceux qui sont de la religion dominante. En Angleterre, les catholiques, regardés comme attachés au parti du prétendant, ne peuvent parvenir aux emplois: ils payent même double taxe“, *Voltaire*, *Traité sur la tolérance*, 33.

35 „Je n'ignore pas que tous les esprits doivent être un jour unis dans l'amour de cette liberté précieuse qui enseigne aux hommes à regarder Dieu comme leur père commun, et à le servir en paix, sans inquiéter, sans avilir, sans haïr ceux qui l'adorent avec des cérémonies différentes des nôtres“; [*Voltaire*], *Lettre sur les panégyriques*, 228.

36 Aleksandr R. Vorontsov, Russian envoy in The Hague, to Alexander Mikhailovich Golitsyn, Russian vice-chancellor, The Hague, 17 April 1767, in: Сборник Императорского Русского Исторического Общества, vol. 10, 181 f., Catherine the Great to Golitsyn, *ibid.*, 182; Cf. *Zielińska*, *Głos*, 335–344.

4. *Voltaire's misinterpretation of Russian politics as a fight for religious freedom*

In the first days of May 1767, Voltaire sent a copy of *Lettre sur les panégyriques* to Jean le Rond d'Alembert. In the attached letter, the philosopher justified bringing Russian troops to the Commonwealth. In his view, the actions of the Russian Empress were unique in human history: „The example given by the Empress of Russia is unique in the world. She sent forty thousand Russians to preach tolerance with a bayonet at the end of the gun“.³⁷ Again and again, Voltaire expressed his opinion that Catherine's support for dissidents was sincere and that the Empress' policy towards the Western neighbour was not aggressive: „It is a slander for the Empress of Russia when it is said that she only favours the dissidents of Poland in order to gain possession of a few provinces of this republic. She swore that she didn't want an inch of land, and that everything she did was only for the glory of establishing tolerance“.³⁸ The picture of the Russian army introducing religious freedom to persecuted dissidents by force became a recurring motif in Voltaire's letters and propaganda texts. „It is a rather pleasant and contradictory thing to support indulgence and tolerance with weapons in hand, but intolerance is so odious that it deserves to be put on its ears“.³⁹ He continued the thread in his letter to Marquise du Deffand, who was running a literary salon in Paris: „It was the Semiramis of the North, which decided to bring fifty thousand men to Poland to establish tolerance and freedom of conscience. This is something unique in the history of this world [...]. I brag to you that I am a little in her good graces. I am her knight in shining armour against all“. In advance to the easily predictable question about Catherine's role in her husband's murder he stated: „These are family matters which I will not interfere in“ and added, „her naughty husband would not have done any of the great things that

37 „L'exemple que donne l'Impératrice de Russie est unique dans le monde. Elle a envoyé quarante mille Russes prêcher la tolérance la bayonette au bout du fusil“; Voltaire to Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, 3 May 1767, D14157.

38 „On calomnie l'impératrice de Russie quand on dit qu'elle ne favorise les dissidents de Pologne que pour se mettre en possession de quelques provinces de cette république. Elle a juré qu'elle ne voulait pas un pouce de terre, et que tout ce qu'elle fait n'est que pour avoir la gloire d'établir la tolérance“; Voltaire to Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, 23 May 1767, D14194.

39 „C'est une chose assez plaisante et qui a l'air de la contradiction, de soutenir l'indulgence et la tolérance les armes à la main; mais aussi l'intolérance est si odieuse qu'elle mérite qu'on lui donne sur les oreilles“; Voltaire to Frederick II, 3 March 1767, D14012.

my Catherine does every day“.⁴⁰ Voltaire, like other writers and authors who, in the times of Peter the Great's and later Catherine the Great's reign created a coherent but not real picture of Russia, was more eager to ignore some facts and events than to revise his own views and opinions. That is what made „le Mirage russe“ so strong.

In mid-February 1767, before the dissident confederacies were formed, Voltaire asked encyclopedist Jean-François Marmontel to learn about the state of affairs in Poland and then present his findings.⁴¹ He was supposed to do that through Marie-Thérèse Geoffrin, one of the managers of the Paris literary salon, who stayed in Warsaw during the summer of 1766. The key information did not arrive to Ferney until the beginning of August 1767. Marmontel reported to Voltaire on obtained information from a „well-informed source“, Russian diplomat Kaspar von Saldern, Panin's right hand and a Protestant, whose identity Marmontel did not reveal to Voltaire. According to the report, the legal position of dissidents had been getting worse overnight. When they turned to the Russian Empress for help, she „asked the King of Poland not for favours but for justice for the dissidents, and that everything that had been decided to their detriment by the previous Sejms was revoked“.⁴² The king was to put the Tsarina's request to the Sejm, as well as dissidents' postulates. As described by Marmontel, the Polish ruler emphasized that the dissidents were also his lieges and that their complaints were legitimate, therefore he felt obliged to represent them during the Sejm, the institution that had done them harm in the past. Then „a great uproar arose in the Sejm [...]“. She was informed of this violent deliberation, and then she instructed the dissidents to confederate, since the laws allowed them to do so. However, a friend of humanity pointed out to the empress that if the dissidents form a confederation without the support of sizeable forces, a civil war would

40 „C'est la Semiramis du nord, qui fait marcher cinquante mille hommes en Pologne pour établir la tolérance et la liberté de conscience. C'est une chose unique dans l'histoire de ce monde [...]. Je me vante à vous d'être un peu dans ses bonnes grâces. Je suis son chevalier envers et contre tous. [...]. Mais ce sont des affaires de famille, dont je ne me mêle pas [...]. Son vilain mari n'aurait fait aucune des grandes choses que ma Catherine fait tous les jours“; Voltaire to Marie Anne de Vichy-Charmond, marquise du Deffand, 18 May 1767, D14187.

41 Voltaire to Jean François Marmontel, Ferney, 12 February 1767, D13950.

42 „Cette auguste souveraine fit demander au roi de Pologne, non pas faveur mais justice pour les dissidents, et que tout ce qu'on avoit décidé à leur préjudice dans les précédentes diètes fût révoqué“; Jean François Marmontel to Voltaire, Aachen, 7 August 1767, D14343. Regarding Kaspar von Saldern see *Brandt*, Caspar von Saldern.

break out in Poland; he also pointed out that it is better to support them in advance than to avenge them later. This advice obliged the Tsarina to send (I believe) twenty thousand men to Poland to protect the dissidents if necessary⁴³. The encyclopaedist was trying to convince Voltaire that the Polish king acted as a mediator and was in no case blaming the Tsarina for protecting his lieges who were being oppressed in their own country against his will. He added: „The learned man from whom I have these details does not doubt that in the next Sejm the case will be over to the benefit of the dissidents and that their rights will be restored“⁴⁴.

There are no signs that Voltaire was questioning Marmontel's explanation. The reasons for the Russian intervention in Poland, expounded by Saldern, became a fundamental pivot in the argumentation to authorise the action of the court in St. Petersburg. The dissenters, who had been experiencing hostility from the more and more intolerant Catholic majority for generations and could not find justice in their own homeland, had to appeal to foreign forces. Political privileges or religious rights, of which they were being gradually and consequently deprived of in the past decades, were not the only issues. The dissidents' existence was in danger if they would have attempted to recover their rights. The Russian Empress stood up for the Orthodox and Protestants who had been living in peace and enjoying their rights and liberties for many centuries. Saldern deliberately ignored the division into political and religious rights in order to distort the real demands of Catherine. Voltaire also only stressed the issues of religious toleration. The King, aware of his non-Catholic lieges' difficult position and his impossibility to help them, warmly welcomed the actions of the Empress. Even if he had not collaborated directly with the Russian leadership which saved his country from fratricidal war and innocent bloodshed, he must have been grateful to the court of St. Petersburg for sending the imperial army to Poland.

43 „[I] s'éleva dans la diète un si grand tumulte [...]. Elle fut instruite de cette délibération violente, et alors elle fit dire aux dissidents de se confédérer, comme les lois les y autorisaient. Mais un ami de l'humanité représenta à l'impératrice que si les dissidents se confédéroient sans avoir pour les protéger des forces présentes et imposantes, il s'élèveroit en Pologne une guerre civile [...], et qu'il valoit mieux les secourir d'avance, que d'avoir à les venger. Ce conseil obligea la czarine d'envoyer (je crois) vingt mille hommes en Pologne pour protéger les dissidents en cas de besoin“, *ibid.*

44 „[L]'homme instruit, dont je tiens ces détails, ne doute pas qu'à la prochaine diète l'affaire ne soit terminée à l'avantage des dissidents et qu'ils ne soient rétablis dans leurs droits“, *ibid.*

The account reported by Saldern was based on misleading assumptions. It is true that the dissidents addressed foreign powers, seeking protection, but they hoped to gain a way to secure and extend not only religious freedoms but also – and probably most of all – political rights.⁴⁵ The exercise of a dissenting religion was not actually punishable in Poland (especially compared to the religious situations existing in other European countries), and the concerns for health and life were all the more unfounded. A king who opposed the Russian demands for granting dissidents equal rights understood that imposing a new legislation regulating the legal rights of people of another faith in a way that was not practised anywhere else in Europe would neither strengthen the country nor consolidate society. Saldern's arguments, having little to do with reality, embellished with words of praise addressed for the Empress, were reproduced on the pages of the subsequently published pamphlets covering the Russian intervention in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. The distortion involved, in short, this distortion came about by omitting the duality of Catherine II's demands, which were steered – as Voltaire also accepted – onto the issue of religious toleration only.

While the philosopher of Ferney sought to obtain information on developments in Poland, Nikolai V. Repnin, Russia's ambassador in Warsaw, was working on a memorial which was to become the basis for another pamphlet of the philosopher („Mémoire sur les affaires des dissidents en Pologne“).⁴⁶ In mid-July the paper was ready. Repnin sent it to Vorontsov and asked him to pass it on to Voltaire: „If Monsieur Voltaire would like to give his immortal fame, which he already enjoys, a new brilliance by enlightening fanatical mankind and if he would like to achieve with his pen what the Empress could not achieve with her army I enclose a memorandum on dissidents“.⁴⁷ The motif of the fight against religious fa-

45 The dissidents wrote directly about their demands. *Confederation faite par les dissidens du Royaume de Pologne à Thorn; Acte de la confédération des nobles et citoyens du Grand Duché de Lituanie du rit grec et de deux confessions evangeliques fait à Sluck.*

46 [*Repnin*], *Mémoire sur les affaires des dissidents en Pologne*, Российская национальная библиотека, Библиотека Вольтера, 9–335, no. 7828.

47 „Si Monsieur de Voltaire qui l'a désiré, souhaite d'acquérir un nouveau lustre à la renommée immortelle, dont il jouit déjà, en éclairant l'humanité fanatique, et s'il vent faire par la plume, ce que l'Impératrice de Russie a tant de peines de faire avec ses armées même, je joins ici un mémoire sur les affaires des dissidents, que j'ai fait dresser exprès, avec des annexes relatives à ces mêmes affaires“, Nikolai Vasilyeich Repnin, Russian envoy in Warsaw, to Aleksandr Romanovich Vorontsov, Warsaw, 18 July 1767, Архив внешней политики

naticism, already known from Frederick II's letter to Voltaire, has returned here. Repnin convinced the philosopher that by supporting the Russian military intervention in Poland, he was able to implement his motto: „*Écrasez l'infâme!*“ Additionally the Russian diplomat flattered Voltaire, suggesting that the power of his words was much greater than the force of the Russian army. The philosopher was to highlight two circumstances in particular: Firstly, that the Empress' involvement had no political motives whatsoever. The goal was never to create a pro-Russian party in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, as argued by opponents. Non-Catholics, as Repnin explained, were a small group. They were too insignificant in terms of both their political and economic power to play any part in the political scene of the Republic of Nobles.⁴⁸ Secondly, that the aim of Russia's intervention was to restore the rights of dissidents. However, he did not specify whether this was about political rights (political equality) or religious rights (religious tolerance which Protestants and Orthodox Christians were enjoying in Poland). It seems to have been intentional and the aim was to blur the borders between these two areas. While stressing that the fight was directed against religious fanaticism, Repnin insinuated that the restoration of the freedom of conscience, which was one of the fundamental values of the Age of Reason, was at stake. This was not far off from formulating the thesis that the overriding aim of Catherine II was to embody the ideas of the Enlightenment.⁴⁹

Around the end of August, Voltaire was contacted by Russia's envoy in The Hague, Alexander R. Vorontsov, who handed him Repnin's „several printed and handwritten memoirs about all the great things the empress did for the glory of Russia and for the happiness of Poland“.⁵⁰ The philoso-

Российской империи, Moscow, Fond 80, Варшавская миссия, оп. 1, no. 1096, fol. 5–5v.

48 „Ils [le dissidents – J. K.] ne peuvent jamais faire un parti puissant: ce sont des raisons chimériques et imaginaires“; *ibid.*, fol. 5v.

49 *Ibid.*, fol 5–5v.

50 „[P]lusieurs mémoires imprimés et manuscrits concernant toutes les grandes choses que fait l'impératrice pour la gloire de la Russie et pour le bonheur de la Pologne“, Voltaire to Dimitri Alekseyevich Golitsyn, Ferney, 7 October 1767, D14470 (Besterman was mistaken assuming that the philosopher addressed this letter to Dimitri Mikhailovich). Voltaire (contrary to the supposition of *Dzwigala*, Voltaire's sources, 190) had been aware since the very beginning that all of the resources he received came from Repnin. „Tout ce que je sais bien positivement, c'est que le prince Repnin lui même a fourni tous les mémoires à Mr Bourdillon“, Voltaire to Élie Bertrand, Ferney, 7 May 1770, D16333, and *Beauvois / Rostworowski*, *Essai historique et critique...* Introduction, 241–260.

pher of Ferney, upon collecting the package with the materials sent by Russians, focused completely on the treaty explaining the Russian involvement in the affairs of the Commonwealth. He sent his *Essai historique et critique sur les dissensions des églises de Pologne*, signed by Joseph Bourdillon, a professor of law at the University of Basel, to The Hague in mid-September: „I was very ill when I received the materials. I worked promptly, as if I was making my will. [...]. You will see that my last wishes are freedom of conscience for all men, and statues for the empress. May she live long“. ⁵¹ By 1785, twenty-two editions and translations of the work were already available, including four editions in Russian. There was no Polish edition, though. ⁵²

Having become familiar with the pamphlet, Vorontsov informed Voltaire in early October 1767 that the work was being printed in the Hague from where it was going to be distributed to Russia and Poland. The Russian diplomat praised Voltaire for his fine writing skills: „How could you do such a charming piece, and get the essence of all the pedantry of the Polish chancelleries?“ ⁵³ Voltaire's work was praised by Melchior Grimm, known also for acting in favour of the Russian Empress. In his *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, he wrote: „We have only one copy of this Essay... in Paris, and it is a great misfortune: such writings should be the food for the people“. ⁵⁴

In *Essai historique et critique*, the philosopher argued in general that the matter of religious toleration played the main role in the life of a state and a society. ⁵⁵ As we know, it was not only a battle for religious freedom but more for equal political rights. Voltaire, upon Repnin's clear instructions, attempted to find a *iunctim* explaining why the problems of the Protestants and members of the Orthodox Church living in Poland should be consid-

51 „J'étais fort malade, quand je reçus les mémoires en question. Je travaillai sur le champ, comme si je faisais mon testament [...]. Vous verrez que mes dernières volontés sont la liberté de conscience pour tous les hommes, et des statues pour l'impératrice. Puisse-t-elle vivre longtemps“, Voltaire to Aleksandr Romanovich Vorontsov, Ferney, 22 September 1767, D14435, cf. *Fiszler*, *L'imagine de la Pologne*, 27, 79–95.

52 *Lukowski*, *Unhelpful and unnecessary*, 645.

53 „Comment avez vous pû faire un si charmant ouvrage et tirer l'essence de tout ce fatras de pédanterie des chancelleries polonaises...?“ Aleksandr Romanovich Vorontsov to Voltaire, Spa, 4 October 1767, D14467.

54 „Nous n'avons qu'un seul exemplaire de cet Essai... à Paris, et c'est und grand malheur: de tels écrits devraient être la nourriture du peuple“, *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, vol. 7, 421.

55 *Bourdillon [Voltaire]*, *Essai historique et critique*, 271.

ered jointly.⁵⁶ To this end, the writer dedicated a lot of thought to the development of the religious relationships in Poland, which, as he strongly emphasized, had never been a uniform state in terms of denomination. Much of the country was inhabited by members of the Orthodox Church, with Protestant movements gaining a strong following in the 16th century. When the significance of the Catholic Church started decreasing, Polish bishops tried to actively oppose the approaching Reformation. The discrimination, manifested in the limitation of political rights and in a considerable impairment of the judiciary system, was ended by Sigismund II Augustus, „ce héros de la tolérance“.⁵⁷ His rule started an era of tolerance, mutual understanding, and religion had no impact on the civic life of Polish society.⁵⁸ The interregnum after the passing of the last of the Jagiellons brought religious tolerance (Warsaw Confederation).⁵⁹ Although the monarchs ruling Poland had to acknowledge the act of the Warsaw Confederation, guaranteeing religious freedom, some of them made attempts to evade this law and make it useless. „Everything changes over time. The Polish king, also called Sigismund [...], finally wanted to destroy what the great Sigismund, the last of the Jagiellons, had established“.⁶⁰ When in the first years of the 17th century Sigismund III Vasa had lost the throne to his Lutheran uncle, Charles IX of Sweden, he had directed his anger against the Protestants in Poland. Although people of another faith were not de-

56 Nikolai Vasilyeich Repnin to Aleksandr Romanovich Vorontsov, Warsaw, 18 July 1767, fol. 6.

57 *Bourdillon [Voltaire]*, *Essai historique et critique*, 275.

58 *Ibid.*, 274 f. It is hard to agree with the argument of Daniel Beauvois and his follower, Maciej Forycki, who claimed that Voltaire's output should not be treated only as propaganda, especially with the claim that the philosopher's pamphlet is a glorification of tolerance stipulated in the Polish constitutions, *Beauvois*, *Voltaire était-il antipolonais?*, 41–55; *Forycki*, *Anarchia polska*, 126–128. Historical arguments were to prove clearly that the Russian intervention was absolutely necessary. This aimed to create the impression that the court in St. Petersburg and Berlin wanted only to restore the former law, and not to establish a new order. It seems, however, that this line of argumentation did not catch on in further pamphlets. Voltaire was rather willing to underline the pioneering nature of the Russian Empress' initiatives.

59 „Cette loi humaine qui regardait tous les chrétiens comme des frères, et qui devait servir d'exemple aux autres nations“, *Bourdillon [Voltaire]*, *Essai historique et critique*, 275. Cf. *Korolko*, Klejnot, *passim*.

60 „Toute change avec le temps. Un roi de Pologne nommé aussi Sigismond [...], voulut enfin détruire ce que le grand Sigismond, le dernier des Jagiellons, avait établi“, *Bourdillon [Voltaire]*, *Essai historique et critique*, 276. This means, of course, Sigismund III Vasa (1587–1632).

prived of their political rights, new restrictions appeared, preventing them from holding public functions.⁶¹ According to Voltaire, the breakthrough in the approach to people of another faith occurred in the Commonwealth ruled by Augustus II the Strong. Recalling the political events accompanying the Great Northern War, he wrote that Augustus „was dethroned by the arms of a Lutheran king [Charles XII, king of Sweden – J. K.], and restored by the victories of the Orthodox tsar [Peter the Great, tsar of Russia – J. K.]“.⁶² The Catholic Church started repressing Protestants, protected in turn by Charles XII of Sweden. The year 1717 was the worst as it brought about an unprecedented restriction of the rights of religious minorities. It needs to be stressed that the philosopher did not mention Russia as an active participant in the process of amending the regulations (it seems likely that Voltaire simply did not know the course of these events). Augustus II the Strong himself tried to be loyal to his non-Catholic lieges, making attempts to block the unjust legislation. Despite the King's efforts to maintain religious peace, „the strongest party prevailed over the weakest and violence has taken its toll“.⁶³ Voltaire admitted that compared to the situation of other European countries, the situation of people of another faith living in Poland was not that bad: „It is true that the stakes that once turned the whole province into ashes during the time of the Albigenes were not lit. [...]; The wheels and gallows against the Orthodox and Protestants have not yet appeared in public squares as they had in France under Henry II. There has not yet been any talk in Poland of replicating the St Bartholomew's Day massacres“.⁶⁴ The main point of reference Voltaire adopted was the tumult of Thorn from 1724 (the Bloodbath of Thorn), which became almost symbolic in its meaning. In a letter to Andrey Petrovich Shuvalov, sent soon after finishing the *Essai historique et critique*, Voltaire wrote the following when thinking about the Russian Empress:

61 „On les vexa par une persécution sourde et lente; et si on les tolérait, on leur fit sentir bientôt qu'on ne les tolérerait plus dès qu'on pourrait les opprimer impunément“, *ibidem*, 277.

62 „[I] fut détrôné par les armes d'un roi luthérien [Charles XII, king of Sweden – J. K.], et rétabli par les victoires d'un czar [Peter the Great, tsar of Russia – J. K.] de la communion grecque“, *ibid.*, 277.

63 „Le parti le plus fort l'emporta sur le plus faible; la violence se donna carrière“, *ibid.*, 279.

64 „Il est vrai qu'on ne ralluma pas les bûchers qui mirent autrefois en cendre toute une province du temps des Albigeois [...]; les roues et les gibets ne furent point d'abord dressés dans les places publiques contre les grecs et les protestants comme ils le furent en France sous Henri II. On n'a point encore parlé en Pologne d'imiter les massacres de la St Barthélemi“, *ibid.*, 279.

„The true system of the machine of the world [heliocentrism – J. K.] came to us from Thorn, the city where blood was shed because of the Jesuits. The true system of the morals and politics of princes will come to us from Petersburg“.⁶⁵ The philosopher blamed the Jesuits and the students of the college run by the monks for the Thorn event, arguing that they provoked their Protestant neighbours, and then demanded a punishment disproportionate to the actions committed.⁶⁶ Trying to prove what difficulties people of another faith had to face, Voltaire referred to specific cases, exciting the imagination of the readers much more than general descriptions. He also mentioned the case of Sigismund von Unruh of the Unity of the Brethren, accused of blasphemy and sentenced to death. He failed to add, though, that the tribunal’s verdict was not enforced and that von Unruh was defended by representatives of the Catholic environment, including an apostolic nuncio. He mentioned the case of Andrzej Piotrowski, a sword-bearer of Wieluń, because of his confession not being let to take part in the Sejm session in 1718.⁶⁷ He recalled many cases of Protestants being persecuted and, to an increasingly greater extent, of members of the Orthodox Church as well. The most evocative images seemed to be the acts of violence against Protestant clergymen, in which Catholic priests played the leading role. When describing the case of Andrzej Moczulski, the preacher in Biržai, beaten on a public road by a Catholic priest from Biržai in 1745 and then left to die, the philosopher did not mention that the ecclesiastical court in Vilnius administered justice to the offender by punishing him by suspension. The acts of assault on non-Catholic communities were a fact but their gravity was incommensurable to the horror depicted by the au-

65 „Le vrai système de la machine du monde nous est venu de Thorn, de cette ville où l’on a répandu le sang pour la cause des jésuites. Le vrai système de la morale et de la politique des princes nous viendra de Petersbourg“, Voltaire to Andrei Petrovich Shuvalov, Ferney, 30 September 1767, D14450.

66 „C’était une grande faute d’avoir pris les images des jésuites, et surtout celle de la Ste Vierge. [...]. L’image de la Vierge Marie est très respectable; mais le sang des hommes l’est aussi. La profanation d’un portrait de la Vierge dans un catholique est une très grande faute; elle est moindre dans un protestant qui n’admet point le culte des images. Les jésuites demandèrent vengeance au nom de Dieu et de sa mère; ils l’obtinrent malgré l’intervention de toutes les puissances voisines“, *Bourdillon [Voltaire]*, *Essai historique et critique*, 281. The Blood-Bath of Thorn is covered broadly but ambiguously in literature. The Catholic side emphasises the Protestant provocation aimed at the Jesuit students; the Protestant side underlines the bloody repressions experienced by townsmen. For bibliography see: *Baranowski*, *Bibliografia*, 60–72.

67 *Bourdillon [Voltaire]*, *Essai historique et critique*, 279 f., cf. *Kriegeseisen*, *Sprawa Andrzeja Piotrowskiego*, 147–160.

thor of the pamphlet. The philosopher of Ferney also failed to mention the violence experienced by Catholics. An example can be the case of Reverent Samuel Pawłowicz, a reformed minister from Sidra. The event happened before 1736, when the clergyman was staying overnight at one of his parishioner's home. When he noticed a drunk nobleman trying to force his way into the household, he took a gun which hung on the wall and shot the intruder to death without hesitation. As a result, the clergymen was dismissed from his function.⁶⁸ This proves that solving religious conflicts by open aggression was approved neither by Catholics nor by those of another faith.

Voltaire concluded that Protestants or Orthodox people could not handle the increasingly frequent acts of aggression, more every day, or the constant uncertainty. They would seek support in Russia and at Protestant courts. Voltaire thought that Stanislaus August Poniatowski was a great supporter of agreement.⁶⁹ We know that Stanislaus Augustus was indeed willing to make some concessions to dissidents as he did not agree to equal political rights. The claim that Stanislaus Augustus collaborated with neighbouring states in dealing with the issue of dissidents — next to equating the battle for political rights with religious toleration — is yet another evidence for Voltaire's detachment from the Polish reality of the time.⁷⁰ In such circumstances, the philosopher argued, the persecuted Protestants and members of the Orthodox Church, hoping to improve their situation, established a confederacy to demand justice. He did not mention, however, that it was at Russia's initiative and under the aegis of Russian bayonets. Voltaire considered it a special circumstance that the Evangelist nobility signed its memorandum in Thorn, „where the fumes of bloodshed by the Jesuits were still hovering over the city“.⁷¹ In reality, there was no *iunctim*. The Protestant confederacy was set up in Thorn

68 *Kriegseisen*, Die Protestanten in Polen–Litauen, 178–240, cases described above: *Bourdillon [Voltaire]*, Essai historique et critique, 281 ff.

69 Under Voltaire's pen Stanisław Augustus was presented as an outstanding Enlightenment monarch: „tolérant par humanité et par principe, religieux sans superstition, citoyen sur le trône, home éclairé et homme d'esprit, il proposa des tempéraments qui pouvaient mettre en sûreté tous les droits de la religion catholique romaine et ceux des autres communions“. Roman Catholic hierarchs were objecting to these plans: „La plupart des évêques et de leurs partisans opposèrent la zèle de la maison de Dieu au zèle patriotique du monarque“, *ibid.*, 284.

70 Cf. *Eubińska*, Sprawa dysydencka; *Kraushar*, Książę Repnin, *passim*.

71 „[Q]ui fumait encore du sang que les jésuites avaient fait répandre“, *Bourdillon [Voltaire]*, Essai historique et critique, 284.

because it was, next to Danzig, one of the major towns of Royal Prussia, where Protestants were a force to be reckoned with. According to the French author, the motivation of the 1767 confederates were by all means legitimate, presented as very rational arguments: „The substance of their manifestos was that they were men, citizens, nobles [...]; that religion has nothing in common with the State. That it is a relationship between God and man, and not between citizen and citizen [...]; that they are all born free, and that freedom of conscience is the first of the freedoms, without which the one called free would be a slave“.⁷² The neighbouring superpowers intervened to help the non-Catholic minorities but it was only when Catherine the Great joined in that the desired outcome was achieved. To justify the Russian military operations, Voltaire followed in von Saldern’s footsteps in his words. The Empress, he wrote, „foresaw a civil war in Poland, and with her army she sent the peace. This army appeared only to protect the dissidents in case they were to be [?] attacked. [...] It was enriching the country instead of devastating it, it was there only to protect tolerance; it was necessary that these foreign troops set an example of wisdom, and so they did“.⁷³ The philosopher added: „We were astonished to see the Russian army living in the middle of Poland with much more discipline than the Polish troops ever had“.⁷⁴ To help Polish dissidents, Catherine the Great established „les ministres de paix“ within the borders of the Commonwealth.⁷⁵ In the already cited letter to Shuvalov from 30 September, the philosopher of Ferney wrote: „This is the first time that the war banner has been unfurled only to give peace and to make people happy. This era is undoubtedly the most beautiful in the history of the world“.⁷⁶

72 „La substance de leurs manifestes contenait, qu’ils étaient hommes, citoyens, nobles [...]; que la religion n’a rien de commun avec l’État. Qu’elle est de Dieu à l’homme, et non pas du citoyen au citoyen [...], qu’ils sont tous nés libres, et que la liberté de conscience est la première des libertés, sans laquelle celui qu’on appelle libre serait esclave“, *ibid.*, 284 f.

73 „Elle prévint une guerre civile en Pologne, et elle envoya la paix avec une armée. Cette armée n’a paru que pour protéger les dissidents en cas qu’on voulût les accabler par la force. [...]. Elle enrichissait le pays au lieu de le dévaster, elle n’était là que pour protéger la tolérance; il fallait que ces troupes étrangères donnassent l’exemple de la sagesse; et elles le donnèrent“, *ibid.*, 286.

74 „On fut étonné de voir une armée russe vivre au milieu de la Pologne avec beaucoup plus de discipline que n’en eurent jamais les troupes polonaises“, *ibid.*

75 *Ibid.*, 289.

76 „Voici la première fois qu’on déploie l’étendard de la guerre uniquement pour donner la paix, et pour rendre les hommes heureux. Cette époque est sans con-

Voltaire concluded: „[A]nd if the majority of the North owes its Christianity to women, it is to the extraordinary woman that we owe the true spirit of Christianity, which consists of tolerance and peace“.⁷⁷ Voltaire elaborated on this image, depicting Catherine the Great as the founder of a new order, a wise monarch turning the ideas of the Age of Enlightenment into reality, in his further pamphlets about the Russian military intervention in Poland.

Having no sufficient knowledge about Polish affairs, Voltaire made a wrong judgement of the actions of Kajetan Sołtyk, the bishop of Kraków, in his *Essai historique et critique*. He wrote: „[T]he bishop of Cracow and the new primate [the Russian client, Gabriel Podoski – J. K.], these two men of outstanding minds, have joined in such a salutary plan [...] There was also a need for a philosopher on the throne, a wise Primate and bishops; there was also a need for an Empress who declared herself an apostle of tolerance, in order to reverse the disasters that were threatening Poland“.⁷⁸ The philosopher could not have foreseen that Sołtyk and three other opponents of concessions made to people of another faith, Józef Jędrzej Załuski (the bishop of Kiev), Waclaw Rzewuski (the great Crown hetman), and his son Seweryn, would be arrested by Repnin and deported to Kaluga, from which they would return only in 1773. This oversight led to two hundred pamphlets sent to Poland in December 1767 (immediately after they reached Gdańsk) being confiscated and destroyed following the order of the Russian ambassador, Nikolai V. Repnin.⁷⁹ The philosopher had to make profuse apologies for the error. He ensured the Empress that he had been provided with false information: „The poor Bourdillon complained bitterly to me that he had been deceived about the bishop

treidit ce que je connais de plus beau dans l’histoire du monde“, Voltaire and Andrei Petrovich Shuvalov, 30 September 1767, D14450.

77 „Et si ne grande partie du Nord a dû son christianisme à des femmes, c’est à une femme supérieure qu’on devra la véritable esprit du christianisme qui consiste dans la tolérance et dans la paix“, *Bourdillon [Voltaire]*, *Essai historique et critique*, 289. Voltaire had already addressed the problem of women’s influence on the development of Christianity in this part of Europe in the 1750s. See, *Voltaire*, *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations*, 370 f.

78 „L’evêque de Cracovie et le nouveau primate, tous deux génies supérieurs, entrent par cela même dans des vues si sautaires [...] Mais il ne fallait pas moins qu’un roi philosophe, un primate, des évêques sages, une impératrice que se déclarait l’apôtre de la tolérance pour détourner les malheurs qui menaçaient la Pologne“, *Bourdillon [Voltaire]*, *Essai historique et critique*, 289.

79 *Lukowski*, *Unhelpful and unnecessary*, 652.

of Cracow“.⁸⁰ And he wrote as follows to Vorontsov: „This old man, Bourdillon, is even astonished that you were not good enough to correct his mistakes“.⁸¹ Reading between the lines, one could say that the philosopher suggests he would not mind his future texts dealing with issues concerning Polish people of another faith being corrected by Russian diplomacy in order to present the covered matters in the right way. He added that Repnin did the right thing in those circumstances; withdrawing the pamphlets containing positive opinions regarding the bishop of Cracow was absolutely necessary.⁸² In the next editions of the publication, Voltaire consistently omitted not only Sołtyk’s case but also the actions of the Russian client, Primate Gabriel Podoski.

The legitimacy of the Russian intervention to aid people of another faith living in Poland was a recurring theme in the philosopher of Ferney’s writing. Voltaire’s correspondents could get the impression that the case ended happily. In January 1768, in a letter to Michel Paul Guy de Chabanon, a musicologist, Voltaire wrote: „Tolerance has just been solemnly established in Poland and Russia“.⁸³ When writing to Charles-Augustin de Ferriol d’Argental, a French envoy in Parma and Piacenza, he asked the following question: „Don’t you feel comfortable that the Polish affair was being settled to the greater glory of God and reason?“⁸⁴ In February of the same year, he wrote to Charles Jean François Hénault, a writer and historian: „The King of Poland established freedom of conscience in a country twice the size of France“.⁸⁵

Did Voltaire really still assume that Stanislaus Augustus collaborated with Catherine the Great?⁸⁶ The philosopher’s letters from the last months

80 „Ce pauvre Bourdillon s’est plaint à moi amèrement de ce qu’on l’avait trompé sur l’évêque de Cracovie“, Voltaire to Catherine the Great, Ferney, 29 January 1768, D14704.

81 „Ce vieux bonhomme de Bourdillon est même tout étonné que vous n’ayez pas eu la bonté de réparer sa faute“, Voltaire to Aleksandr Romanovich Vorontsov, Ferney, 16 February 1768, D14759.

82 Ibid.

83 „La tolérance vient d’être solennellement établie en Pologne comme en Russie“, Voltaire to Michel Paula Guy de Chabanon, 11 January 1768, D14661.

84 „N’êtes-vous pas bien aise que l’affaire de Pologne soit accommodée à la plus grande gloire de dieu et de la raison“, Voltaire to Charles Augustin Ferriol, comte d’Argental, 15 January 1768, D14676.

85 „C’est lorsque le roi de Pologne établit la liberté de conscience dans un pays deux fois aussi grand que la France“, Voltaire to Charles Jean François Hénault, 26 February 1768, D14779.

86 *Rostworowski*, Voltaire et la Pologne, 114f.

of 1767 reveal more and more doubts. In December 1767, he shared his thoughts with Marmontel. Although he declared: „I revere, esteem and love him as a philosopher and as a benefactor“.⁸⁷ he understood that Stanislaus Augustus was in a very difficult situation. In mid-March 1768, Voltaire asked Vorontsov once again about Stanislaus Augustus' intentions, assuring that he would keep everything to himself independently of the answer. He also expressed a hope that „these two philosophical heads [Stanislaus Augustus and Catherine II – J. K.] seem to me to be made to be united“, adding wistfully that „friendship is not a matter of the state“.⁸⁸ Regardless of whether he actually understood the real motives of the St. Petersburg court, seeing that the goals of Russia' foreign policy were not in line with Poland's *raison d'état* (especially after Sołtyk, Załuski, and Rzewuskis were deported to Kaluga), and that they actually concerned people of another faith only to a small degree, he still used his pen to support St. Petersburg, making it clear in his pamphlets and correspondence that Stanislaus Augustus supported Russia's intervention in Poland.

5. *Empress Catherine as embodiment of Enlightenment in the Sermon prêché à Bale*

This is proven in his next letter, written in the first weeks of the year 1768. Sent to Vorontsov in mid-February 1768, the letter came enclosed with another of Voltaire's texts: *Sermon prêché à Bâle, le premier jour de l'an 1768 par Josias Rosette*. Voltaire hoped it would find recognition at the court of St. Petersburg: „I am sending you, Sir, a sermon preached in Basel which perhaps you are not yet familiar with. It may well be burned in Rome but I don't think it will be burned in Moscow“.⁸⁹ He revealed his objective in writing the pamphlet in a letter to Andrey Petrovich Shuvalov: „The preacher boldly indicates the world's largest empire as an example

87 „Je le révère, l'estime, et l'aime, comme philosophe, et comme bienfaisant“, Voltaire to Jean François Marmontel, 2 December 1767, D14565.

88 „Ces deux têtes philosophiques me semblent faites pour être unies [...]. L'amitié n'est pas affaire d'État“, Voltaire to Aleksandr Romanovich Vorontsov, Ferney, 28 March 1768, D14759.

89 „Je vous envoie, Monsieur, un sermon prêché à Bâle, que peut être vous ne connaissez pas encore. Il pourra bien être brûlé à Rome, mais je ne crois pas qu'il le soit à Moscou“, Voltaire to Aleksandr Romanovich Vorontsov, Ferney, 16 February 1768, D14759; cf. *Renwick*, *Sermon prêché à Bâle... Introduction*, 13–26.

for a small nation“.⁹⁰ He expressed this thought more clearly in *Sermon prêché à Bâle*. The Protestant preacher demanded that „the small nations should learn their duty from the large ones“.⁹¹ Hoping that his comments would reach the Empress via Shuvalov, Voltaire added: „I am an old fool who is in love with Catherine. This is the sermon that shows that she is a saint. I revere St. Theresa and St. Ursula very much, but I prefer St. Catherine“.⁹² Although Polish affairs provided Voltaire with a pretext to write the *Sermon prêché à Bâle*, almost the entire pamphlet, just like the next writings of the philosopher of Ferney, abounded with critical remarks aimed at the Catholic Church and with words of praise addressed to the Russian Tsarina. At that time the issue of restoring political rights to Polish dissenters was already resolved in accordance to the demands of the Russian court. The desired changes were passed under the dictates of Nikolai W. Repnin by the extraordinary Sejm in 1767–1768 which was terrorised by the abduction of the rebellious senators. The Sejm had adopted laws that introduced full political equality for dissidents and which extended the catalogue of religious rights.⁹³

It is reasonable to quote them here to find out that the religion-related problems in Poland at that time were not very prominent in the Enlightenment discourse. They were a background for a lecture on religious toleration and human rights, on the power of the papacy and on Jesuits – hated in the Enlightenment era, a starting point for stories of the Russian Empress’ noble acts. In his words addressed to Swiss Protestants, Voltaire called for the acknowledgement of the primacy of natural law.⁹⁴ He argued that religious matters were not the most important. Despite existing differences, one should see a human being in another human being and consider their background or denomination as of secondary importance. If reason is unable to recognise the right hierarchy of things, there is still the economic argument to be used: People of another faith coming

90 „Le prédicateur propose hardiment pour modèle à une petite nation l’exemple du plus vaste empire du monde“, Voltaire to Andrey Petrovich Shuvalov, Ferney, 12 February 1768, D14750.

91 „[Q]ue de petites nations apprennent donc leur devoir des grandes“, *Rosette [Voltaire]*, *Le Sermon prêché à Bâle*, 34.

92 „Pour moi je suis un vieux fou amoureux de Catherine. Voici un sermon dont il me paraît qu’elle est la sainte. Je révere fort s^{te} Thérèse et s^{te} Ursule, mais j’aime mieux s^{te} Catherine“, Voltaire to Andrey Petrovich Shuvalov, Ferney, 12 February 1768, D14750.

93 *Kraushar*, *Książę Repnin*, vol. 2, passim.

94 *Rosette [Voltaire]*, *Le Sermon prêché à Bâle*, 34.

from abroad usually brought prosperity with them, contributing to the economic development of their host countries.⁹⁵

To attain this state, according to Voltaire two conditions had to be met. First, it was necessary to reduce the significance of the papacy, and especially of the Jesuits. The Church was becoming weaker, and so was its influence, as argued by Voltaire through the words of the preacher. The turning point in the battle between reason and fanaticism was the crushing of the Jesuit power. The philosopher argued it was a good thing that the Jesuits had been banished from many countries. In his opinion, the battle against the Jesuits has not yet been completely won: „The followers of the foolish Ignatius, the knight errant of the Virgin, which were also the knights errant of the Bishop of Rome, are out of the picture; but the followers of a much more dangerous madman, a certain Francis of Assisi, flood a part of Europe; the children of the persecutor Dominic are triumphant“.⁹⁶ The ultimate victory of reason was in the opinion of Voltaire about to come: „Today, in Christianity, there is not a single slightly educated man who is truly a papist. No, the Pope himself is not. No, it is not possible for a weak mortal to believe he is infallible and endowed with divine power“.⁹⁷ Another essential factor in the argument against the old order is the active support for tolerance. What the ruler had to do was to create conditions favourable to the harmonious coexistence of people of different origins and faiths. This was also the goal of the Russian Empress.

Catherine II was depicted by the philosopher of Ferney as a ruler so fond of tolerance that she made it a fundamental law in her country. It was all the more difficult because, as Voltaire revealed in one of his letters, the Orthodox Church had always been much more intolerant than the Roman Catholic Church.⁹⁸ She gave clear evidence to this in 1767 by, establishing the Legislative Committee of several hundred members, as Voltaire explained using the words of Josias Rosette, representing almost

95 Ibid., 43.

96 „Les disciples de l'insensé Ignace, de ce chevalier errant de la Vierge, eux-mêmes chevaliers errants de l'évêque de Rome, disparaissent sur la terre; mais les disciples d'un fou beaucoup plus dangereux, d'un François d'Assise, couvrent une partie de l'Europe; les enfants du persécuteur Dominique triomphent“, *ibid.*, 29.

97 „Dans toute la chrétienté, il n'y a pas aujourd'hui un seul homme un peu instruit qui soit véritablement papiste: non, le pape ne l'est pas lui-même; non, il n'est pas possible qu'un faible mortel se croie infallible, et revêtu d'un pouvoir divin“, *ibid.*, 44.

98 „L'église grecque était encor plus intolérante que la nôtre, et cependant l'impératrice de Russie vient d'établir la tolérance universelle dans ses états“, Voltaire to Charles Manoël de Végobre, 25 February 1768, D14777.

all provinces of her huge country. Let us recall that in order to gain the acknowledgement of the enlightened public, the monarch set up a committee „to draw up a new code of laws“, writing a famous set of instructions to it herself, with its beginning reading as following: „Russia is a European power“.⁹⁹ In the *Sermon prêché à Bâle*, Voltaire repeated his letter sent to Catherine II, where he wrote „This is where the Muslim expresses his opinion next to the Orthodox, the pagan next to the Papist, and the Anabaptist next to the Evangelical and Reformed, all in peace, all united by humanity, although religion separates them“.¹⁰⁰ Voltaire explained that the world had to wait long for the genius of the Russian Empress. After all, she put all her heart into a battle aimed at making reason conquer the dark age of the past, reminding us of the forgotten evangelical truth of equality of all people. There were many before her to speak of tolerance, but it was only she who was brave enough to make it the foundation of her monarchy.¹⁰¹ Voltaire claimed that the Empress' desire was to support and promote tolerance not only inside her country but also in other countries. She was ready to offer solutions she herself made use of, supporting her neighbours with actions, promoting tolerance in Poland. Her army, as described in the philosopher's earlier texts, „the army of peace, which only serves to protect the rights of citizens, and to scare away the persecutors“.¹⁰² As usual, the text by the philosopher of Ferney asked no question

99 „Россия есть европейская держава“, Наказ данный комиссии о сочинении проекта нового уложения, с принадлежащими к тому приложениями [Moskva 1767], p. 4.

100 „C'est là que le musulman opine à côté du grec, le païen auprès du papiste, et que l'anabaptiste confère avec l'évangélique et le réformé, tous en paix, tous unis par l'humanité, quoique la religion les sépare“, *Rosette [Voltaire]*, *Le Sermon prêché à Bâle*, 31. Catherine II wrote to Voltaire: „l'ortodoxe assis entre l'hérétique et le musulman écoutent tous les trois paisiblement la voix d'un idolâtre, et se concertent souvent tous les quatre pour rendre leur avis supportables à tous“; Catherine II to Voltaire, 11/22 December 1767, D14611. When reporting on the course of the session to Pierre Michel Hennin on 17 January 1768, Voltaire wrote: „Ma belle Catherine m'a mandé qu'elle avait consulté dans la même salle des païens, des mahométans, des grecs, des latins, et cinq ou six autres menues sectes, qui ont bu ensemble largement et guaïement. Tout cela nous rend petits et ridicules“, Catherine the Great to Voltaire, 17 January 1768, D14684.

101 It was an example worth following by all means, which is why the preacher said as follows: „Élevons nos voix pour célébrer ce grand exemple; mais élevons nos cœurs pour en profiter“, *Rosette [Voltaire]*, *Le Sermon prêché à Bâle*, 32.

102 „[U]ne armée de paix, qui ne sert qu'à protéger les droits des citoyens, et à faire trembler les persécuteurs“, *ibid.*, 28.

about the real motives of the St. Petersburg court and about the principles of Russia's foreign policy towards the Commonwealth. In the light of the information about the capturing and deportation of senators from Poland reaching the West, Voltaire should have known – or at least assumed – that the Polish king had not been collaborating with the Russian Empress. Still, he did not express any doubts of this nature in his *Sermon prêché à Bâle*: „Two crowned heads have joined together to give mankind back this precious gift received from nature, namely the freedom of conscience“.¹⁰³ He concluded: „It was once, my brothers, an established opinion among the Greeks that wisdom would come from the East, while by the shore of the Euphrates and Indus it was said that it would come from the West. We have been waiting for her all along. Finally, she arrives from the North; she comes to enlighten us; she holds fanaticism in chains. This wisdom is based on the tolerance, which always walks alongside her, followed by peace, the consoler of the mankind“.¹⁰⁴ Polish affairs were given only a marginal mention in the *Sermon prêché à Bâle*. The main focus was on the Empress' achievements and personal involvement in initiatives to promote religious toleration. In the pamphlet, Catherine II was depicted as a monarch who put the ideas of the Enlightenment into practice, a ruler who put into practice the desires of great thinkers and whose country was equal in grandeur to the greatness of the minds of the wisest men of the time.

6. *From Creating a Reputation for the Empress to the Defamation of the Confederation of Bar and the Catholic Nobility*

Voltaire did not cease writing letters praising the acts of the Russian Empress. The issue of political equality of Polish dissenters, as mentioned before, was already resolved in accordance with the intentions of the Russian court. In this situation, Voltaire's aim was to discredit the Confederation of Bar, established on 29th February 1768, which was the movement of

103 „[D]eux têtes couronnées se sont unies pour rendre aux hommes ce bien précieux que la nature leur a donné, la liberté de conscience“, *ibid.*, 27.

104 „C'était autrefois, mes frères, une opinion établie chez les Grecs que la sagesse viendrait d'Orient, tandis que, sur les bords de l'Euphrate et de l'Indus, on disait qu'elle viendrait d'Occident. On l'a toujours attendue. Enfin, elle arrive du Nord; elle vient nous éclairer; elle tient le fanatisme enchaîné; elle s'appuie sur la tolérance, qui marche toujours auprès d'elle, suivie de la paix, consolatrice du genre humain“, *ibid.*, 30 f.

Catholic nobility against the political equality of dissidents imposed on Russian bayonets, and more broadly against Russia's growing interference in Polish affairs. Before the end of July 1768, another pamphlet made it to print, and was reissued three times the same year: *Discours aux confédérés catholiques de Kamieniek en Pologne, par le major Kaiserling au service du Roi de Prusse*. The title speaker could have been inspired by the figure of Hermann Carl von Keyserlingk originating from Courland, the ambassador of Russia accredited at the Warsaw court (1733–1744, 1749–1752, and 1762–1764), one of the teachers and tutors of the future King Stanislaus Augustus. Naming the Kamieniec castle as the garrison of the confederates could have been an association with the bishop of Kamieniec, Adam Krasieński, one of the leaders of the Bar Confederation.¹⁰⁵

Using the figure of Major Kaiserling, Voltaire wanted to first encourage others to reflect on the condition of the state. He tried to convince the Bar confederates to whom he addressed his words that it was essential to diagnose the international position of the Commonwealth and the social and economic situation of its people. While in *Sermon prêché à Bâle* he recalled that „all men are brothers [...], the Turks are our brothers“,¹⁰⁶ in *Discours aux confédérés* he claimed that the Ottoman Empire and the Holy See were the two biggest threats to the Commonwealth. In the opinion of the philosophers the Sublime Porte had long sought to annex the south-eastern territories, and the Holy See, in turn, had been depleting the Polish treasury and the resources of the country's inhabitants for a long time by demanding considerable donations to be sent to Rome. As Voltaire wrote, the Roman court was rich while the vast majority of the Polish people were poor. Moreover, Voltaire argued through Kaiserling that in order to satisfy the Holy See's financial demands, the Polish king's lieges had to borrow from Jews, which made their already difficult economic situation even worse.¹⁰⁷ „Other denominations“, as Voltaire argued, „promise you the same, but at least they don't tell you to pay for it“.¹⁰⁸ Since other religions and denominations gave hope of being awarded similar rewards

105 Cf. Davies, *Discours aux confédérés*... Introduction, 175–181.

106 „[T]ous les hommes sont frères [...], les Turcs sont nos frères“, *Rosette [Voltaire], Le Sermon prêché à Bâle*, 31 f.

107 „Vous avouez que si elle [the papal court – J. K.] vous promet le paradis dans l'autre monde, elle vous dépouille dans celui-ci. Paradis signifie jardin. Jamais on n'acheta si cher un jardin dont on ne jouit pas encore“, *[Voltaire], Discours aux confédérés*, 183 f.

108 „Les autres communions vous en promettent autant; mais du moins elles ne vous le font point payer“, *ibid.*, 183.

in the afterlife, a significant argument in favour of remaining loyal to the Holy See was the issue of credibility and authenticity of its teachings. However, the theological differences, as argued by the author of *Discours aux confédères*, were of no significance.¹⁰⁹ The philosopher implied that persecuting people of another faith was against the fundamental principles which the Polish nobility followed. The author wondered why a nation that loved freedom and defended it fiercely so many times wanted to take it away from others. He called on the Bar confederates to reflect: „So far you have only taken up arms to defend your freedom. Do you have to fight to enslave your fellow citizens? You hate oppression; you will probably not want to oppress your brothers“.¹¹⁰ The speaker referred to the idea of the Enlightenment, to the primacy of reason. He also emphasized the economic aspect.¹¹¹ In case these arguments did not appeal to the Bar confederates, he appealed to humanity itself. If reason may not come first, let human kindness take precedence. The philosopher of Ferney asked: „Would you like to be nothing more than bloodthirsty murderers, under the pretence of being Catholics?“¹¹² When recalling the Blood-Bath of Thorn of 1724 as an example of Catholic cruelty, he argued: „My dear Poles, don't you shudder at this story? This is the religion you are defending!“¹¹³ He attributed the terrible events that happened mainly to the Jesuits. The members of the Society of Jesus fuelled the dislike for people of another faith and fed on religious fanaticism. „It was a marvellous spectacle [...]. We gave a great supper to the judges, the executioners, the prison guards, the informers, and to all those who had cooperated in this

109 „Les Turcs croient en un seul Dieu, et ne le mangent point; les Grecs le mangent, sans avoir encore décidé si c'est à la manière de la communion romaine. [...]. Les Suédois, les Danois, les Prussiens mangent Dieu, à la vérité, mais d'une façon un peu différente des Grecs: ils croient manger du pain et boire un coup de vin en mangeant Dieu“, *ibid.*, 183 f.

110 „Vous n'avez jusqu'ici pris les armes que pour votre liberté commune; faudra-t-il que vous combattiez pour rendre vos concitoyens esclaves? Vous détestez l'oppression; vous ne voudrez pas, sans doute, opprimer vos frères“, *ibid.*, 183.

111 „Un bon tailleur, un bon fourreur, un bon fourbisseur, un maçon habile, un excellent cuisinier, ne vous rendraient-ils pas service s'ils étaient sociniens, autant pour le moins que s'ils étaient jansénistes ou hernoutres?“ *ibid.*, 190.

112 „Voudriez-vous n'être que des homicides sanguinaires, sous prétexte que vous êtes catholiques?“ *ibid.*, 184 f.

113 „Mes chers Polonais, ne frémissiez-vous pas d'horreur à ce récit? Voilà donc la religion dont vous prenez la défense!“ *ibid.*, 189.

holy work“ – these words Voltaire put into the mouth of the Jesuit.¹¹⁴ When Kaiserling started defending those sentenced to death as a result of the Bloodbath of Thorn,¹¹⁵ a Jesuit supposedly said that a similar fate may soon come upon the Polish king, the primate, and the Russian Empress. It was implied that blood would have to be shed for their infidelity.¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, the king, aware of the difficult situation of his non-Catholic lieges, as the author continued, making again *iunctim* between religious toleration and equal political rights, wanted to grant them religious freedom. He was supported by „les plus sages têtes de la nation“, and he could hope for aid from the Russian Empress, a monarch who made tolerance the predominant law in her vast empire.¹¹⁷ Kaiserling used benign words to also explain the reasons for the Russian Empress’ involvement in Polish affairs: „[T]his august [the] Empress [...] joins your king, your primate, your principal palatines, your most worthy bishops to make you human and happy“.¹¹⁸ She sent an army of thirty thousand to Poland: „It is the right of a neighbour to bring water to his neighbour’s burning house; it is the right of friendship, the right of esteem, the right to do good when one can“.¹¹⁹ The Russian army entered Poland only „pour protéger la liberté et la paix“.¹²⁰ *Discours aux confédérés* included a warning to withdraw from armed resistance. The Russian Empress, undefeated, would not accept any form of objection. Voltaire addressed the Bar confederates with the following words: „Know that the Russians can shoot better than you; don’t force your protectors to destroy you“.¹²¹ The St. Petersburg court had not only a stronger army but also stronger arguments. The Russian Empress was a monarch „who had just established tolerance as the first

114 „Ce fut un spectacle admirable, tout était plein; nous donnâmes, au sortir du théâtre, un grand souper aux juges, aux bourreaux, aux geôliers, aux délateurs, et à tous ceux qui avaient coopéré à ce saint œuvre“, *ibid.*, 188.

115 „Je lui dis que ce crime était horrible; mais que le châtement était un peu dur, et que j’y aurais désiré plus de proportion“, *ibid.*, 188.

116 „Qui n’écoute pas l’assemblée soit comme un païen ou un receveur des deniers publics“, *ibid.*, 187.

117 *Ibid.*, 185.

118 „Cette auguste impératrice [...] se joint à votre roi, à votre primate, à vos principaux palatins, à vos plus dignes évêques, pour vous rendre humains et heureux“, *ibid.*, 185.

119 „C’est du droit dont un voisin apporte de l’eau à la maison de son voisin qui brûle; c’est du droit de l’amitié, du droit de l’estime, du droit de faire du bien quand on le peut“, *ibid.*, 190.

120 *Ibid.*

121 „Sachez que les Russes tirent mieux que vous; n’obligez pas vos protecteurs à vous détruire“, *ibid.*

law in the largest empire on earth“.¹²² According to the speaker, the Polish had no moral right to oppose and stigmatize Russian actions. Their arguments, immersed in the depths of bygone times, were insignificant. Voltaire closed his *Discours aux confédérés* in an elaborate fashion: „You say the Empress is not your friend [...]; you complain that, she had not given you anything – and bought Mr Diderot’s library for fifty thousand francs [...]. Eh, my friends, you should start with learning to read, and then we will buy your libraries“.¹²³ The Polish, in the opinion of the philosopher, lost on the trails of civilisational progress, backward, old-fashioned, had no right to speak critically of the political and military activity of the court of St. Petersburg. According to the philosopher, they had no right to take part in an enlightened discourse, to present their arguments and defend their stance. Once again, we see an equating of the struggle for political rights with striving for religious freedom, as depicted in earlier letters. Stanislaus Augustus, supported by the brightest minds of his kingdom, was presented by Voltaire as the initiator of actions undertaken to aid dissidents, and the commendable actions of the Russian Empress were to be arranged with the Polish king. The Russian army entered Poland to protect people of another faith, who were threatened by fanatical nobles influenced by the Jesuits.

We know that the philosopher of Ferney’s library contained works that enabled him to learn about the real motives of the Russian Empress, or to at least confront his views on the Polish affairs with the perspective of the Warsaw court and the views of the Bar confederates. An analysis of Voltaire’s output makes it legitimate to claim that if the works he had at his disposal did not correspond to his theses, he was rather willing to reject them rather than to take them into consideration.¹²⁴ It seems therefore that the philosopher deliberately distorted the reality after he took on the role of Catherine the Great’s herald. Did Voltaire still believe in Russian assurances about cooperating with the Polish king, or did he really not see the need to revise his position, or was he simply not willing to change his point of view? Whether he was guided primarily by the idea of fighting against the Church and the dogmatic religion, which he treated as his

122 „[Q]ui vient d’établir la tolérance pour la première de ses lois dans le plus vaste empire de la terre“, *ibid.*, 185.

123 „Vous dites que l’impératrice n’est pas votre amie; que ses bienfaits [...]; vous vous plaignez que, ne vous ayant rien donné, elle ait acheté cinquante mille francs la bibliothèque de M. Diderot [...]. Eh! mes amis, commencez par savoir lire, et alors on vous achètera vos bibliothèques“, *ibid.*, 191.

124 *Dźwigala*, Voltaire and Poland, 106.

great commitment, or was led by the fear of losing his reputation because of his withdrawal from the earlier position, cannot be said.

Voltaire did not react to opinions questioning the fairness of Russian intentions. In mid-August 1768, a few weeks after publishing *Discours aux confédérés*, Pierre Michel Hennin appealed to Voltaire: „Your friend, the King of Poland is a little roughed up by your friend the Empress Catherine [...]. Cracow is likely to be plundered. Either I am very much mistaken, or this is not good and honest“.¹²⁵ The philosopher of Ferney replied to him in late September: „No matter what you do or say, the King of Poland will remain King of Poland, and I will always remain very attached to you for the short time I have yet to vegetate“.¹²⁶ Did Voltaire not hesitate at all in his ‚publicity campaign‘ for the Russian Empress? In one of his next letters to Hennin, sent in mid-January 1769, he admits: „I feel sorry for your Poland; its situation is worse than ever“.¹²⁷ In a letter to Charles-Augustin de Ferriol d’Argental, sent in early June 1768, in the period when he must have been working on *Discours aux confédérés*, he stated with some disappointment: „I expect much more from my Cateau of Russia and the King of Poland; they are excellent actors sur ma parole“.¹²⁸ This had to do with Voltaire’s conviction that all people, including monarchs, were mere puppets whose behaviour and actions could be easily controlled and manipulated.¹²⁹ Was it that Voltaire – considering himself to a great creator – was unhappy with the game played between Catherine II and Stanislaus Augustus, who failed to follow his orders well enough and thus did not live up to the ideas and intentions of the great director? Or was it perhaps a skilful attempt to evade the responsibility for intentionally distorting facts and reality?

In the autumn of 1768, just after the outbreak of the war between Turkey and Russia, Stanislaus Augustus decided to take an initiative aimed

125 „Votre ami le Roi de Pologne est un peu malmené par votre amie l’Impératrice Catherine [...]. Cracovie va vraisemblablement être au pillage. Ou je me trompe fort ou ce ne sont pas là des affaires bien et honnêtement conduites“, Pierre Michel Hennin to Voltaire, 15 August 1768, D15171.

126 „Vous aurez beau faire et beau dire; le roi de Pologne restera roi de Pologne, et moi je resterai toujours votre très attaché pour le peu de temps que j’ai à végéter“, Voltaire to Pierre Michel Hennin, 25 September 1768, D15222.

127 „Pour vôtre Pologne je la plains; c’est pis que jamais“, Voltaire to Pierre Michel Hennin, Ferney, 11 January 1769, D15419.

128 „J’attends beaucoup plus de ma Cateau de Russie et du Roi de Pologne; ce sont eux qui sont d’excellens comédiens, sur ma parole“, Voltaire to Charles Augustin Ferriol, comte d’Argental, 6 June 1768, D15059.

129 *Besterman*, Voltaire, 440–508.

at weakening the relationship between Voltaire and the Russian Empress. The king expressed his thoughts in one of his journals: „[S]uch a strong protection of the dissidents was only a fleeting reflex of the Empress' own love, ignited by Voltaire's flattery“.¹³⁰ The negotiations from April 1769 to January 1770, aimed at convincing the philosopher of Ferney to issue a public statement calling for the withdrawal of the Russian forces from Poland and for a compromise between Catholics and dissidents, came to nothing. Voltaire had no intention to jeopardise his standing for Poland: neither at the St. Petersburg court nor among the European public opinion.¹³¹ Moreover, when the Bar confederates published their manifesto in Paris in late 1770, announcing their objectives and intentions, also drawing attention to Poland's situation in the international arena, Voltaire was quick to come up with a rebuttal. The confederate pamphlet must have reached Ferney in late April. In early May, Voltaire was already working on a response thereto, on which he reported to Catherine II: „Someone could be under the charm of the typefaces' beauty and believe they come from the royal printing house in Paris. However, this work does not deserve the honours of the Louvre“.¹³² When he referred to the content of the manifesto, which described the brutal behaviour of Russian forces in Poland, he added: „[Y]our forces are said to had committed such acts of violence which could move anyone if they were true“.¹³³ But they did not move him. In early June of 1770, the Empress reassured him by placing the blame on the confederates.¹³⁴ Voltaire did not need the Empress' explanations. In mid-May, the response to the manifesto of the confederates, entitled *Sermon du papa Nicolas Chariteski, prétendu prononcé dans l'église de Sainte-Toleranski, village de Lithuanie, le jour de Sainte-Épiphanie*, was ready. „I have the honour, Madam, to send to Your Imperial Majesty the translation of a Lithuanian sermon [...]. It is a modest response to the

130 „Cette protection si vive en faveur des dissidents n'avait été qu'un mouvement passager d'amour-propre dans l'impératrice, aiguillonnée par les flagorneries de Voltaire“, *Mémoires du roi Stanislas-Auguste Poniatowski*, vol. 1, 553.

131 *Rostworowski*, *Une négociation*, 39–50.

132 „On croirait à la beauté des caractères qu'il vient de l'imprimerie royale de Paris. Cet ouvrage ne mérite pourtant pas les honneurs du Louvre“, Voltaire to Catherine II, Ferney, 6 May 1771, D17176.

133 *Ibid.* The text drew the attention of *Forycki*, *Anarchia polska*, 139, footnote 304.

134 „Ce n'est pas aux brigands de Pologne à parler sur cette matière, ce sont eux qui comettent tout les jours des férocités épouvantables envers tous ceux qui ne ce joignent pas à leurs clique pour brûler et piller leurs propre pays“, Catherine II to Voltaire, 24 May/4 June 1771, D17224.

rather crude and ridiculous lies which the Polish confederates had printed in Paris“.¹³⁵

The objective was clear. The aim was to disgrace the confederates and thus repudiate their accusations against the court of St. Petersburg. The Bar confederates were presented by Voltaire as plotting against their own monarch, „a wise king, a fair king who cannot be blamed for the slightest prevarication since he has been on the throne [...]. The confederates or conspirators persecute him; they want to rob him of the crown, and perhaps of his life as well“.¹³⁶ According to the philosopher of Ferney, all this was because Stanislaus Augustus wanted to be a tolerant king, one loyal to all his lieges, regardless of their denomination. When the Russian Empress decided to support Stanislaus Augustus, „the Sarmatians of the Latin Church declare themselves against Catherine II“.¹³⁷ Furthermore, in order to challenge the enlightened monarchs acting together and supported by the Prussian king (to which the title of the pamphlet refers, naming three wise minds: Catherine, Frederick, and Stanislaus Augustus), the confederates allied with Turkey, an eternal enemy of Poland and the entire Christianity. By manipulating the text of the Bar manifesto, Voltaire tried to prove that the only goal of the conservative movement of the nobility was to oppose religious toleration.

The confederate manifesto reads as follows: „The Sublime Porte, our good neighbour and faithful ally, moved by the treaties that bind it to the Commonwealth, and by the very interest that attaches it to the preservation of our rights, has taken up arms in our favour. Everything therefore invites us to join forces and raise the banner of freedom, to oppose the certain loss of our independence, the total overthrow of our constitution, the annihilation of our most precious prerogatives and the fall of our holy religion“.¹³⁸ Voltaire removed a passage describing some

135 „J'ai l'honneur, Madame, d'envoyer à votre majesté impériale la traduction d'un sermon Lithuanien [...]. C'est une réponse modeste aux mensonges un peu grossiers et ridicules que les confédérés de Pologne ont fait imprimer à Paris“, Voltaire to Catherine the Great, Ferney, 15 May 1771, D17191.

136 „[U]n roi sage, un roi juste, à qui on ne peut reprocher la moindre prévarication depuis qu'il est sur le trône [...]. Les confédérés ou conjurés le persécutent; ils lui veulent ravir la couronne, et peut-être la vie“, [Voltaire], Sermon du papa, 411.

137 „[L]es Sarmates de l'Église latine se déclarent contre Catherine II“, *ibid.*, 411.

138 „La Sublime Porte, notre bonne voisine et fidèle alliée, excitée par les traités qui la lient à la République, et par l'intérêt même qui l'attache à la conservation de nos droits, a pris les armes en notre faveur. Tout nous invite donc à réunir nos forces et à lever l'étendard de la liberté, pour nous opposer à la perte certaine de

of the fundamental goals of the Bar movement: the strive for Poland's sovereignty in the international arena, the freedom to establish laws in the country independently, the aspiration to maintain the foundation of the existing political system and to uphold the rights and privileges of the nobility. He reduced the goals and demands included in the manifesto as follows: „The Sublime Porte, our good neighbour and faithful ally, moved by the treaties that bind it to the Commonwealth, and by the very interest that attaches it to the preservation of our rights, has taken up arms in our favour. Everything therefore invites us to join forces for the fall of our holy religion“.¹³⁹ As depicted by the philosopher of Ferney, the Bar confederates were religious fanatics determined to defend the threatened Catholic Church. And they were to fight the threat with the help of Turks, „wolves who came to devour the whole sheepfold“.¹⁴⁰ Since the Bar confederates counted on Turkey, Poland's arch-nemesis, to aid them, it was obvious they either did not understand their own country's interest or chose to act to its detriment on purpose, becoming its enemies whether consciously or not. The philosopher finished his deliberations with words of praise addressed to Catherine II, whose army proved to be superior to Turkish forces.¹⁴¹ „Polish conspirators, go and kiss Catherine's hand. Nations do not tremble with fear anymore but admire. God is my witness that I do not hate the Turks, but I hate pride, ignorance and cruelty. Our empress chased away these three monsters“.¹⁴² The pamphlet, unsurprisingly, was warmly received at the court in St. Petersburg.¹⁴³

notre indépendance, au renversement total de notre constitution, à l'anéantissement de nos prérogatives les plus précieuses, à la chute de notre sainte religion“, Manifeste de la République confédérée de Pologne, 5. The problem has already been addressed by *Forycki*, *Anarchia polska*, 139.

139 „La Sublime Porte, notre bonne voisine et fidèle alliée, excitée par les traités qui la lient à la République, et par l'intérêt même qui l'attache à la conservation de nos droits, a pris les armes en notre faveur. Tout nous invite donc à réunir nos forces à la chute de notre sainte religion“, [*Voltaire*], *Sermon du papa*, 440.

140 „[D]es loups qui sont venus égorger toute la bergerie“, *ibid.*

141 *Ibid.*, 441 f.

142 „Conjurés de Pologne, allez baiser la main de Catherine. Nations, ne frémissiez plus, mais admirez. Dieu m'est témoin que je ne hais pas les Turcs, mais je hais l'orgueil, l'ignorance et la cruauté. Notre impératrice a chassé ces trois monstres“, *ibid.*, 442.

143 „Le Sermon [...] est admirable, la gaieté qui règne dans ses Sermons là, les rend bien efficace et préserve les auditeurs de l'ennuy que la plupart des autres prédicateurs inspirent. [...], mes ennemis bien sots, cependant une grande partie de l'Europe a beaucoup de peine à ce persuader que le grand Turk et les prétendu Confédérés ses amis soient aussi dépourvu du sens commun qu'ils le sont en

Voltaire reached for his pen once again after the Bar confederates' attempt on the life of Stanislaus Augustus of 3 November 1771. The philosopher of Ferney, shocked, wrote to Catherine II in early December of 1771: „The King of Poland was betrayed, assaulted, beaten by Latin-speaking gentlemen who had sworn him obedience“.¹⁴⁴ The philosopher's outrage seems honest; making an attempt on the life of the Lord's anointed one was considered a truly contemptible act. The coup disgraced the Bar confederates and made the courts and political elites of Europe turn away from them once and for all.¹⁴⁵ Taking advantage of the favourable international situation after the attack on Stanislaus Augustus, the St. Petersburg court made a decision in November to have Voltaire write another pamphlet. It was to be written according to strict guidelines of the Russian Empress in order to disgrace and ridicule the Bar movement as much as possible. Andrey P. Shuvalov sent Voltaire a list of points according to which the philosopher was to write the propaganda publication.¹⁴⁶ The legitimist Europe was to be offered the ‚correct‘ view of the actions of the Bar confederates, and Catherine the Great's act of partitioning Poland was to be justified. The case was long closed before the end of November 1771. Voltaire put Shuvalov's plan carefully into words in *Tocsin des Rois*. „Europe shuddered at the assassination of the King of Poland; the blows that hit him pierced all hearts“.¹⁴⁷ The confederates, allied with Turkey's sultan, considered the greatest enemy of European values and traditions,

effet. J'espère que la postérité déagée de passions me fera justice de ses gens-là, et vos écrits n'y contribueront pas peu“, Catherine the Great to Voltaire, 10/21 June 1771, D17256.

- 144 „Le Roi de Pologne a été trahi, assailli, frappé par des gentilhommes qui parlent latin, qui lui avaient juré obéissance“, Voltaire to Catherine the Great, Ferney, 3 December 1771, D17488.
- 145 About the propaganda initiated after 3 November 1771 by the Warsaw court *Ugniewski*, Szkaradny występek, 327–347, cf. *idem*, Media i dyplomacja.
- 146 „1. Sur l'horreur de l'attentat commis sur le roi Stanislas, 2. Rappeler à l'empereur des Romains que les Ottomans ont mis deux fois le siège devant Vienne, 3. Comment peut on supporter des garnisons turques dans des villes polonaises?, 4. Sur la manière indigne et contre le droit des gens, avec la quelle la Porte ottomane traite les missions des puissances étrangères et en citer quelques exemples, 5. Jetter en avant l'étonnement qu'aurait Jean Sobiesky de voir ses compatriotes alliés des Turcs, 6. Les folles croisades durèrent autrefois plus de cent ans; pourquoi aujourd'hui la sage union de deux ou trois têtes couronnées est elle impraticable?“, Andrey Petrovich Shuvalov to Voltaire, 9/20 November 1771, D17464.
- 147 „L'Europe a frémi de l'assassinat du roi de Pologne; les coups qui l'ont frappé ont percé tous les cœurs“, [Voltaire], *Le Tocsin des rois*, 465.

did not hesitate to make an armed attempt on the life of their own king only because he wished to grant religious freedom to all of his people. As usual, Voltaire remembers that only religious toleration was at stake. Moreover, he claimed, the Bar confederates were supposed to act with the support of the Blessed Virgin Mary because they vowed vengeance on Stanislaus Augustus before her image in Częstochowa. This way, the writer repudiated not only the conspirators themselves but also – to some extent – the religious foundation of the Bar movement. The Polish king, as Voltaire argued, could hope for the support of the strongest European country, and for the aid of the greatest monarch, Catherine II: „But which power has the duty to avenge him? Will it be the Blessed Virgin, before whom these murderers swore on the Gospel that a Dominican held in his hands, that they will kill the best and the wisest monarch that Poland ever had? It is true that Our Lady of Częstochowa works miracles every day but she did not prevent the plans of the conspirators; and so far Our Lady of St. Petersburg is the only one who avenges the honour and rights of the throne“.¹⁴⁸ Mocking and making fun of the sacred image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, worshipped in the Pauline monastery in Częstochowa, became a regular feature in Voltaire’s thoughts on Poland.¹⁴⁹

According to the philosopher of Ferney, it was not just about the life and health of Stanislaus Augustus; it wasn’t even about religious toleration in Poland. There was much more at stake. It was the independence and territorial integrity of the Commonwealth, followed by the independence and sovereignty of entire Europe. The Russian army, as Voltaire explained, could be credited only because the Turkish forces failed to capture War-

148 „Mais quelle puissance se met en devoir de le venger? Sera-ce la sainte Vierge, devant laquelle ces assassins jurèrent sur l’Évangile, entre les mains d’un dominicain, de tuer le meilleur et le plus sage souverain qu’ait jamais eu la Pologne? Il est vrai que Notre-Dame de Csentochova fait tous les jours des miracles, mais elle n’a pas fait celui de prévenir les desseins des conjurés; et jusqu’ici Notre-Dame de Pétersbourg est la seule qui venge l’honneur et les droits du trône“, *ibid.*, 466.

149 For example: „Il y a une de vos âmes qui fait plus de miracles que notre dame de Czenstochow ou Czenshatowa, nom très difficile à prononcer. Votre majesté impériale m’avouera que la santa casa di Loretto est beaucoup plus douce à l’oreille, et qu’elle est bien plus miraculeuse, puisqu’elle est mille fois plus riche que votre sainte vierge polonaise. Du moins les musulmans n’ont pas de semblables superstitions [sic! – J. K.]“, Voltaire to Catherine the Great, Ferney, 2 November 1772, D17993; echoed by Catherine II: „Les chalans de la Vierge de Czenstochow se cacherons sous le froc de St: François, où ils auront tous le tems nécessaire pour méditer au grand miracle opéré par l’intercession de cette Dame“ Catherine the Great, to Voltaire, Peterhof, 6/17 July 1772, D17833.

saw. Subduing Poland was to be, as the writer explained, the first step in the subjugation of the entire Europe, which was a dream still dreamt by Turkish rulers.¹⁵⁰ All European monarchs should therefore join forces and put themselves at the disposal of the Russian Empress.¹⁵¹

7. Conclusion

The aim of Russian diplomatic and military intervention was to extend the political influence of the St Petersburg court in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Frederick II wrote about it straightforwardly, and it was also acknowledged by observers of the Polish political scene.¹⁵² From autumn 1766 to spring 1767, by order of Catherine II, a number of writings intended primarily for Polish dissidents were prepared, explaining the legal position of Polish Protestants and Orthodox.¹⁵³ The brochures described the legal basis for dissident claims relating to political equality, with less emphasis on cases of persecution on grounds of faith. They referred to the Olive Peace Clauses (1660) and the Polish-Russian Treaty of Perpetual Peace (in Polish tradition Grzymułtowski Peace, 1686) which guaranteed the monarchs of neighbouring countries the right to intervene in religious conflicts in the Commonwealth.¹⁵⁴ These arguments were not being exploited in the propaganda directed at Western European countries. The Russian right to intervene, resulting from the Treaty of 1686 or other agreements (e.g. the Treaty of Warsaw, 1716 or the Prussian-Russian

150 [Voltaire], *Le Tocsin des rois*, 467.

151 „Laissez au temps le soin de vous armer ensuite les uns contre les autres: vous ne manquerez pas d'occasion de vous égorger“, *ibid.*, 468.

152 „En toute Europe on en dit publiquement, que l'imperatrice de russie voudrait mettre la Pologne sur le pied de la Courlande et y établir un roi qui gouverne le pays sous sa direction, et qui ne fasse nul pas sans sa permission“, Frederick II to Victor Friedrich von Solms-Sonnenwalde, Prussian Privy Legation Councillor in Petersburg, Potsdam, 12 February 1767, *Politische Correspondenz Friedrichs des Großen*, vol. 26, 53.

153 I. a. Exposition des droits des dissidents, joints à ceux des puissances intéressées à les maintenir, St. Petersburg 1766; Déclaration de la part de Sa Majesté, l'impératrice de toutes les Russies à Sa Majesté le roi et à la République de Pologne, St Petersburg [1767]; Lettre de monsieur Panin au prince Repnin, [s. l.] [1767].

154 A similar content was featured in a brochure published in 1764 by Polish dissidents. The emphasis was on political equality: *Fundamenta liberae religionis evangelicorum, reformatorum et graecorum...Deduction fondamentale des libertés de religion dont les luthériens, les reformes et les grecs...*, [s. l.] 1764.

alliance, 1730), was not emphasized.¹⁵⁵ The focus was on Catherine II, the ruler of tolerance, who put the idea of tolerance into practice in her own country, and who wanted to implement it in the other states as well. The Empress understood that this was the key to win the favour of Enlightenment public opinion. It is worth repeating the words of Catherine II addressed to Panin in autumn 1764: The Empress was aware that fulfilling her demands in the dissident question would bring her fame in Russia as well as in all over Europe.

Catherine the Great's literary weaponry included not only Voltaire's pen, but also his standing as his support was of great importance to the court in St. Petersburg. When speaking on the matter of dissidents, Voltaire and other representatives of the „philosophers' party“ committed serious acts of misrepresentation. They tried to convince the European public opinion that the matter at stake was putting an end to religious persecution and establishing a new religious freedom. The philosophers tried to prove that the battle against fanatics was taken up by Stanislaus Augustus, who received support from a neighbour from the East (another version implied that the Russian Empress initiated the battle but in consultation with the Polish king). Voltaire's repeated claims that St. Petersburg's policy in and towards Poland was not aggressive, and that the Russian forces garrisoned in the territory of the Commonwealth did not cause the locals suffering and loss, were simply false. He distorted the image of the Bar confederates, depicting them as half-wild anarchists ready to defend the prerogatives of the Catholic Church by joining forces with the Ottoman Empire. Voltaire, writing his pamphlets on the basis of information received from Russians, also simplified the nature of the religious relationships in Poland of the time. The philosopher failed to consider the many tensions related to the case of the dissidents, e.g. that the more extensive political rights granted to dissidents would certainly increase the foreign control over Poland's internal affairs. He believed that the country needed a strong, enlightened monarch who would eradicate religious intolerance and grant dissidents relevant rights. His own battle for religious toleration in Europe, his blind admiration of Catherine the Great, and his limited contact with Polish intellectuals made him pass over the questions about the real internal condition of the Commonwealth. Did he really not see the true motives of the Russian political and military intervention in Poland? Or perhaps as a man critical of the Catholic Church – he

155 *Gierowski*, Wokół mediacji, 513–522; *Kordel*, The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, 219.

chose not to see them, taking advantage of the situation to spread his anti-Catholic views? Finally, there is the motive of self-importance, which can be a factor in Voltaire's conduct. Voltaire's views on the matter of dissidents correspond, to a great extent, with the clichés popularised in the Western European literature of the 18th century.

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