

= Great Sejm =

The Great Sejm , also known as the Four @-@ Year Sejm (Polish : respectively , Sejm Wielki or Sejm Czteroletni ; Lithuanian : Didysis seimas or Ketveri? met? seimas) was a Sejm (parliament) of the Polish @-@ Lithuanian Commonwealth that was held in Warsaw between 1788 and 1792 . Its principal aim became to restore sovereignty to , and reform , the Commonwealth politically and economically .

The Sejm 's great achievement was the adoption of the Constitution of May 3 , 1791 , often described as Europe 's first modern written national constitution , and the world 's second , after the United States Constitution . The Polish Constitution was designed to redress long @-@ standing political defects of the federative Polish @-@ Lithuanian Commonwealth and its system of Golden Liberties . The Constitution introduced political equality between townspeople and nobility and placed the peasants under the protection of the government , thus mitigating the worst abuses of serfdom . The Constitution abolished pernicious parliamentary institutions such as the liberum veto , which at one time had placed a sejm at the mercy of any deputy who might choose , or be bribed by an interest or foreign power , to undo all the legislation that had been passed by that sejm . The May 3rd Constitution sought to supplant the existing anarchy fostered by some of the country 's reactionary magnates , with a more egalitarian and democratic constitutional monarchy .

The reforms instituted by the Great Sejm and the Constitution of May 3 , 1791 , were undone by the Targowica Confederation and the intervention of the Russian Empire at the invitation of the Targowica Confederates .

= = Origins = =

The reforms of the Great Sejm responded to the increasingly perilous situation of the Polish ? Lithuanian Commonwealth , only a century earlier a major European power and indeed the largest state on the continent . By the 18th century the Commonwealth 's state machinery became increasingly dysfunctional ; the government was near collapse , giving rise to the term " Polish anarchy " , and the country was managed by provincial assemblies and magnates . Many historians hold that a major cause of the Commonwealth 's downfall was the peculiar parliamentary institution of the liberum veto (" free veto ") , which since 1652 had in principle permitted any Sejm deputy to nullify all the legislation that had been adopted by that Sejm . By the early 18th century , the magnates of Poland and Lithuania controlled the state ? or rather , they managed to ensure that no reforms would be carried out that might weaken their privileged status (the " Golden Freedoms ") . The matters were not helped by the inefficient monarchs elected to the Commonwealth throne around the start of the 18th century , nor by neighboring countries , which were content with the deteriorated state of the Commonwealth 's affairs and abhorred the thought of a resurgent and democratic power on their borders .

The Enlightenment European cultural movement had gained great influence in certain Commonwealth circles during the reign of its last king , Stanis?aw August Poniatowski (1764 ? 95) , which roughly coincided with the Enlightenment in Poland . In 1772 , the First Partition of Poland , the earliest of the three successive 18th @-@ century partitions of Commonwealth territory that eventually removed Poland from the map of Europe , shocked the inhabitants of the Commonwealth , and made it clear to progressive minds that the Commonwealth must either reform or perish . In the last three decades preceding the Great Sejm , there was a rising interest among progressive thinkers in constitutional reform . Even before the First Partition , a Polish noble , Micha? Wielhorski , an envoy of the Bar Confederation , had been sent to ask the French philosophes Gabriel Bonnot de Mably and Jean @-@ Jacques Rousseau to offer suggestions on a new constitution for a new Poland . Mably had submitted his recommendations (The Government and Laws of Poland) in 1770 ? 1771 ; Rousseau had finished his Considerations on the Government of Poland in 1772 , when the First Partition was already underway . Notable works advocating the need to reform and presenting specific solutions were published in the Commonwealth itself by Polish @-@ Lithuanian thinkers such as :

Stanisław Konarski , founder of the Collegium Nobilium (On the Effective Conduct of Debates in Ordinary Sejms , 1761 ? 1763) ;

Józef Wybicki , composer of the Polish National Anthem (Political Thoughts on Civil Liberties , 1775 , Patriotic Letters , 1778 ? 1778) ;

Hugo Kołłątaj , head of the Kołłątaj 's Forge party (Anonymous Letters to Stanisław Małachowski , 1788 ? 1789 , The Political Law of the Polish Nation , 1790) ; and

Stanisław Staszic (Remarks on the Life of Jan Zamoyski , 1787) .

Also seen as crucial to giving the upcoming reforms their moral and political support were Ignacy Krasicki 's satires of the Great Sejm era .

= = Proceedings = =

= = = 1789 ? 90 = = =

A major opportunity for reform seemed to present itself during the sejm of 1788 ? 92 , which opened on October 6 , 1788 with 181 deputies , and from 1790 ? in the words of the May 3 Constitution 's preamble ? met " in dual number " , when 171 newly elected Sejm deputies joined the earlier @-@ established Sejm . On its second day the Sejm transformed itself into a confederated sejm to make it immune to the threat of the liberum veto . Russian tsarina Catherine the Great had issued the approval for the sejm confederation a while ago , at a point she was considering that the successful conclusion of this Sejm may be necessary if Russia would need Polish aid in the fight against the Ottoman Empire . Stanisław Małachowski , a statesman respected both by most factions , was elected as the Marshal of the Sejm .

Many supporters of the reforms were gathered in the Patriotic Party . This group received support from all strata of Polish @-@ Lithuanian society , from societal and political elites , including some aristocratic magnates , through Piarist and Enlightened Catholics , to the radical left . The Party 's conservative , or right , wing , led by progressive magnates such as Ignacy Potocki , his brother Stanisław Kostka Potocki and Prince Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski , sought alliance with Prussia and advocated opposing King Poniatowski . The Patriotic Party 's centrists , including Stanisław Małachowski , wished accommodation with the King . The liberal left wing (the Polish Jacobins) , led by Hugo Kołłątaj (hence also known as " Kołłątaj 's Forge ") , looked for support to the people of Warsaw . While King Poniatowski also supported some reforms , he was initially not allied with this faction , represented by Potocki , who preferred a republican form of a government .

Events in the world appeared to play into the reformers ' hands . Poland 's neighbors were too occupied with wars to intervene forcibly in Poland , with Russia and Austria engaged in hostilities with the Ottoman Empire (the Russo @-@ Turkish War and the Austro @-@ Turkish War) ; the Russians also found themselves fighting Sweden (the Russo @-@ Swedish War) . At first , King Poniatowski and some reformers hoped to gain Russian support for the reforms ; they attempted to draw Poland into the Austro @-@ Russian alliance , seeing a war with the Ottomans as an opportunity to strengthen the Commonwealth . Due to internal Russian politics , this plan was not implemented . Spurned by Russia , Poland turned to another potential ally , the Triple Alliance , represented on the Polish diplomatic scene primarily by the Kingdom of Prussia . This line of reasoning gained support from Polish politicians such as Ignacy Potocki and Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski . With the new Polish @-@ Prussian alliance seeming to provide security against Russian intervention , King Poniatowski drew closer to leaders of the reform @-@ minded Patriotic Party . This alliance was also helped as the 1790 elections were more supportive of the royal faction than Potocki 's ; and the conservative faction gained enough new seats to threaten the reformers if they were to stay divided . With the mediation of Scipione Piattoli , Potocki and Poniatowski begun to reach a consensus on a more constitutional monarchy approach , and started to draft a constitutional document .

Overall , the first two years of the Sejm passed with few major reforms , and it was the second half of the Sejm duration that brought major changes .

== 1791 ? 92 ==

The elections of autumn 1790 resulted in a new group of deputies joining those already elected . A second Marshal of the Sejm was elected (Kazimierz Nestor Sapieha) . As Małachowski was seen as associated with the reformers , Sapieha was initially seen as a conservative , although he would later switch sides and join the reformers . The doubled number of deputies exceeded the capacity of the parliament chambers , and not all of the deputies could secure a seat ; public interest also grew and the entire building and the observation galleries were often overcrowded .

While the Sejm comprised representatives only of the nobility and clergy , the reformers were supported by the burghers (townspeople) , who in the fall of 1789 organized a Black Procession , demonstrating their desire to be part of the political process . Taking a cue from similar events in France , and with the fear that if burghers ' demands were not met , their peaceful protests could turn violent , the Sejm on April 18 , 1791 adopted a law addressing the status of the cities and the rights of the burghers (the Free Royal Cities Act) . Together with the legislation on the voting rights (the Act on Sejmiks of March 24 , 1791) , it became incorporated into the final constitution .

The new Constitution had been drafted by the king , with contributions from others , including Ignacy Potocki and Hugo Kołłątaj . The king is credited with authoring the general provisions , and Kołłątaj , with giving the work its final shape . Poniatowski aimed for a constitutional monarchy similar to the one in England , with strong central government based upon a strong monarch . Potocki wanted to make the parliament (Sejm) the most powerful of the state 's institutions , and Kołłątaj , for a " gentle " social revolution , enfranchising other classes in addition to the till then dominant nobility , but doing so without a violent overthrow of the old order .

Reforms were opposed by conservative elements , including the Hetmans ' Party . The reform 's advocates , threatened with violence from their opponents , managed to move debate on the new constitution forward by two days from the original May 5 , while many opposed deputies were still away on Easter recess . The ensuing debate and adoption of the Constitution of 3 May took place in a quasi @-@ coup d'état : recall notices were not sent to known opponents of reform , while many pro @-@ reform deputies arrived early and in secret , and the royal guard were positioned about the Royal Castle , where the Sejm was gathered , to prevent Russian supporters from disrupting the proceedings . On May 3 the Sejm met with only 182 members present , about a half of its " dual " number (or a third , if one was to count all individuals eligible to take part in the proceedings , including the Senate and the king) . The bill was read out and adopted overwhelmingly , to the enthusiasm of the crowds gathered outside .

The work of the Great Sejm did not end with the passing of the Constitution . The Sejm continued to debate and pass legislation building on and clarifying that document . Among the most notable acts passed after the 3 May was the Deklaracja Stanów Zgromadzonych (Declaration of the Assembled Estates) of May 5 , 1791 , confirming the Government Act adopted two days earlier , and the Zaręczenie Wzajemne Obojga Narodów (Reciprocal Guarantee of Two Nations , i.e. , of the Crown of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania) of October 22 , 1791 , affirming the unity and indivisibility of Poland and the Grand Duchy within a single state , and their equal representation in state @-@ governing bodies . The Mutual Declaration strengthened the Polish @-@ Lithuanian union , while keeping many federal aspects of the state intact .

The Sejm was disbanded on May 29 , 1792 . On that day , soon after learning that the Russian army had invaded Poland , the Sejm gave the commander @-@ in @-@ chief position to the king , and voted to end the session .

== Aftermath ==

Soon afterwards , the Friends of the Constitution , regarded as the first Polish political party , and including many participants of the Great Sejm , was formed to defend the reforms already enacted and to promote further ones . The response to the new Constitution was less enthusiastic in the provinces , where the Hetmans ' Party exerted stronger influence . The Great Sejm 's reforms were

brought down by the Targowica Confederation and the intervention of the Russian Empire . On 23 November 1793 the Grodno Sejm annulled all the enactments of the Great Sejm , including the Constitution of May 3 , 1791 .