

BOOK REVIEW

In den Augen der Anderen. Die Wahrnehmung von Jan III. Sobieski in den Korrespondenzen von Habsburg und Hohenzollern

By Kathrin Dorothea Paszek. Vienna and Cologne: Böhlau, 2022.
Pp. 356. Hardcover €55.00. ISBN: 978-3205215752.

Karin Friedrich 

University of Aberdeen

Historical work on the “image of the other,” as reflected in correspondence, ego-documents, memoirs, chronicles, pamphlets, and newspapers, remains popular. Cultural historians of diplomacy, such as André Krischer, Hillard von Thiessen, and Christian Windler, have applied this emphasis fruitfully, tracing how perceptions and stereotypes motivated political behaviors and influenced decision-making between friends and foes on the diplomatic parquet. Kathrin Dorothea Paszek’s book—the result of her doctoral thesis under the guidance of Peter Thorau, a specialist on medieval crusades and Ottoman history—extends these scholars’ work to perceptions of Jan III Sobieski, King of Poland, in diplomatic correspondences.

In den Augen der Anderen begins with a summary of the events of the battle on the Kahlenberg near Vienna on September 12, 1683, at which Sobieski broke the Ottoman siege of the Austrian capital. This account, based on contemporary reports, is accompanied by a summary of the relevant historiography, which has emphasized Sobieski’s decisive leadership in guaranteeing the victory of Polish and allied Austrian, Saxon and Brandenburg troops over Kara Mustafa, grand vizier, and leader of the Ottoman army. The introduction then provides a useful overview of the relationship between Poland-Lithuania and the Habsburg Empire, particularly with Emperor Leopold I and Brandenburg-Prussia’s Elector Friedrich Wilhelm. Among other things, Paszek contests the long-standing accusation that Sobieski, due to his close relations to Louis XIV, through his French wife Marie Casimire, was slow to cultivate an understanding with the house of Habsburg. Paszek’s evidence includes materials from Saxon and Bavarian archives rarely used by historians working on Polish-Habsburg diplomacy, as well as extensive diplomatic writings from resident ambassadors and chroniclers, much of the latter in printed format.

The book is a gold mine of rich details, presented in a dense, chronological narrative, which guides the reader through Sobieski’s career as hetman, grand marshal of the Polish crown and leader of the opposition during the reign of king Michał Korybut Wiśniowiecki (1669–1673), victor of the battle of Chocim (Khotyn) in 1673, elected king from 1674, ending with the triumph of Vienna in 1683 and its immediate aftermath. Following the gossip that many reports and memoirs contain provides a rich collection of material which can easily overwhelm. The author reflects on every change of opinion, tactic, and intrigue, which often leads to conflicting messages. At times, Sobieski and his image move considerably into the background as diplomacy changed direction, particularly during the long debate over the numerous candidates to the Polish throne in 1673–1674.

The narrative is not always easy to follow. On the one hand, the text sometimes changes abruptly, and unconnected events are listed without being linked (e.g., 193 or 225 f.). On the

other, the author often provides contextual information without explaining its significance (e.g., the peace of Nijmegen, the treaty of Bakhchysarai, the role of Lorraine, the participation of the Polish and Lithuanian armies' powerful circles (*koła*), the influence of the pro-Brandenburg faction, the changing allegiances of the Lithuanian magnates, the political goals of the Hungarian rebels, the Scanian war of 1675–1676, etc.). For readers unacquainted with the period, the detail-heavy narrative can present a test of endurance. A stronger focus on the depiction of Sobieski, the book's actual topic, would have helped clarity.

Additionally, there are some fundamental mistakes which can occur in a PhD thesis but should have been corrected before the text was published as a monograph. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was not based on a federation but a union (the Union of Lublin 1569), an important constitutional difference; offices were not shared but remained separate within the two parts of the union state (35–38). Wielkopolska and Małopolska did not have the same status as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania within the union, palatines were not elected but nominated by the king and were members of the senate, and the monarchy was elective even before 1573, just not elective *viritim* (by the entire nobility). All of this is correctly explained in the recent volume by Robert (not Norbert, 337) Frost, the Oxford History on the Polish-Lithuanian Union, which Paszek did not consult. The Swedish-Polish war (“Deluge”) of 1655–1660 began with a Swedish invasion, not by mutual declaration of war. Jan Kazimierz did not “escape into exile” (43) but abdicated despite the pleas of a majority in the Diet asking him to stay. The habit of alternatively calling Sobieski grand marshal and hetman adds confusion, and the use of Lithuanian for the names of the nobles from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (e.g., Mykolas Pacas instead of Michał Kazimierz Pac), who were all Polish-speakers, and rather knew Ruthenian than Lithuanian, is inconsistent, especially as Ukrainian placenames, such as Khotyn, are only given in Polish. I could not locate Starogard Podlaski, only a Starogard Gdański and a Starogród Mazowiecki (83), and Jan Pasek would have been insulted if he had been told that he was pro-Lithuanian (97–98). I shall not list more.

The best chapter is the last, which zooms in on the image contemporaries formed of Sobieski, his behavior, and his relationship to the Emperor. The most important result of this work—which too often reads like a PhD thesis rather than a monograph—is the insight we gain from the details of diplomatic papers, particularly from the Habsburg, Saxon, and Bavarian archives. These interesting reports say much about the perception of Sobieski, both as king and as military leader. Unfortunately, in previous chapters, they disappear among an information overload whose significance is not well defined. A revision of the king's political talents, often condemned by older historiography, does not succeed. Yet the book will still benefit historians who wish to learn about the complicated entanglement of much of east-central Europe during the decade before the Battle of Vienna.