

Summary

The Commission of National Education (1773–1794) on Its 250th Anniversary: “...we need to mould men into Poles, Poles into citizens, therefrom all favourable prosperity shall come for the country...”

In 1773, deputies to the Partition Sejm stressed the need to establish a state institution overseeing the education of the Commonwealth's young generation. An opportunity to realize that idea arose with the decision to abolish the Jesuit Order, communicated in a Papal brief whose announcement in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth took place in September 1773. In reaction, during a seating on 14 October 1773 the Sejm, undoubtedly on the initiative of King Stanisław August, instituted the Commission to Oversee the Education of the Nation's Highborn Youth, or the Commission of National Education. Its first members counted eight politicians, both lay- and clergymen. From the Senate, these were: Fr Ignacy Massalski (1727–1794) – bishop of Vilnius, the Commission's Head; Prince Michał Poniatowski (1736–1794) – bishop of Płock; Prince August Sułkowski (1729–1786) – Voivode of Gniezno; and Joachim Litawor Chreptowicz (1729–1812) – Vice-Chancellor of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. From the House of Representatives (“from the knightly estate”) it included Ignacy Potocki (1750–1809) – Grand Clerk of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania; Prince Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski (1734–1823) – Crown General of Podolia; Andrzej Zamoyski (1716–1792) – the Great Crown Chancellor; and Antoni Poniatowski (1732–ca. 1830) – Starost of Kopyanica.

The overarching idea guiding the initiators and members of the Commission was to form a new citizen, one focused on the good of the homeland, thinking and acting on its behalf. As put by one of the Sejm deputies, Feliks Oraczewski (1739–1799), the later Provost of the Cracow Academy, “we need to mould men into Poles, Poles into citizens, therefrom all favourable prosperity shall come for the country”.¹

The material basis for the activities of the Commission and the school reform it undertook was the former landed estates of the Jesuits, which the Sejm temporarily entrusted to Distribution Commissions for inspection and appraisal. These commissions were abolished by the Sejm in

¹ F. Oraczewski, *Mowa trzecia. Dnia 11 Maja Miana*, 1773, <https://polona.pl/item-view/9c558fc8-8299-4fae-a1ce-2f88526c42a7?page=9> [accessed: 24.03.2024].

1776, as they proved unconscientious in managing the assets they were put in charge of, with the latter then passed directly to the Commission of National Education, whose General Cashier Office was held by Karol Maurycy Lelewel (1748–1830). Between 1778 and 1794 Lelewel along with two Commission members – Andrzej Zamoyski and Michał Mniszech – ensured proper management of the former Jesuit wealth now serving as an educational fund.

The Commission assumed oversight of all schools, including parish ones attended by peasant children; schools for sons of the nobility, which also accepted some sons of the bourgeoisie; as well as private and ecclesiastical boarding schools for boys and girls, which came to be treated as part of the education system. For these reasons many ex-Jesuits remained in schools and continued to instruct the youth.

Unlike in many European states, while reorganising education and designing new curricula, founders of the Commission afforded former Jesuits the choice to join in the new school system or retire.

The general outline of new school curricula was drafted very quickly, undoubtedly influenced by projects sent to the Commission, which resulted from a series of public consultations. The basic idea behind the curricula was that the language of instruction ought to be Polish. The curriculum was then refined by the Society for Elementary Books, set up by the Commission in 1775. For the first time, a wide array of natural sciences was introduced, comprising botany, zoology, mineralogy, agricultural sciences, physics, mechanics, hydraulics, chemistry, and introductions to medicine and hygiene. As concerns more traditional subjects, rhetoric was geared to the task of providing a national/patriotic and civic education. Latin was de-emphasised in favour of the mother tongue classes, aimed to familiarise the youth with the output of Polish literature and, again, strengthen the patriotic sense. Polish history was likewise meant to promote patriotism as well as awareness of the past. Additionally, instruction in law and lay moral teaching was introduced into the curriculum.

The principles of the reform came to be regulated by a set of school laws titled *Laws of the Commission of National Education Prescribed for the Academic Estate and Schools of the Commonwealth Countries* – the first school code of its kind that encompassed all matters of the school system, curricula, principles of instruction and teaching practices, treating that entire field as an area of state interest and responsibility. The *Laws* established the so-called academic estate, an institution incorporating teachers from all the Commission's schools, which, while by definition secular, included also every clergyman teacher. In practical terms, the academic estate was differentiated from the clergy by means of the principle of “joint living” in academic congregations and the obligation to wear clerical attire on part of secular teachers, primarily on school grounds. Another obligation of secular teachers was to partake in religious practices.

The teachers were educated in two thoroughly reorganised universities, now known as Principal Schools – the Principal School of the Realm (former Cracow Academy) and the Principal School of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (former Vilnius Academy). These two establishments became units of school administration and objects of school oversight subordinated to the Commission. Teacher candidates took the so-called submissions, or pledges to act in accordance with the rules set out the *Laws*. The instruction in the Principal Schools was funded by the Commission. The graduates were entitled to a retirement pension after having served for 20 years as well as to sickness benefits. The young teachers whose university costs were covered by the educational fund were obligated to work those off over a period of several years.

Not covered by the educational fund were monk teachers, but all teachers – in both academic and monastic schools – were bound by the Commission's regulations regarding didactics and youth formation. Likewise, all schools were subject to visitations by school authorities. The only exception was the Polish and Lithuanian Piarists, whose schools were overseen by superior authorities of their order. Efforts were undertaken to include the monk teachers, upon graduating from a Principal School, into the academic estate system. This was initiated in Cracow by Piarist Antoni Popławski (1739–1799) as soon as, following the introduction of the reform, the Principal Schools began training teachers. The first Principal School to graduate lay teachers was Cracow, followed a few years later by Vilnius.

In “national memory”, the Commission is celebrated as one of the great achievements of the pre-partition period. The education reform it instituted covered all schools of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and was well-considered and committed to patriotic and civic formation of the youth, in accordance with the Enlightenment state of the art. The graduates of the Commission's schools went on to become the intellectual elite of their generation, committed to giving their own children a patriotic upbringing and engaged in the struggle for national independence.

The great and original Polish thinker and educator Bronisław Trentowski (1808–1869) in evaluating the legacy of the Commission counted among its achievements securing funds for education and asserting state control over schools. At the same time, he criticised its curricula for placing insufficient stress on the humanities and being too influenced by their authors' fascination with the French Enlightenment. Nevertheless, in his opinion, “following Konarski's school reform” the Commission “constituted the second act of the great rebirth of Polish education”².

² B. Trentowski, *Chowanna, czyli system pedagogiki narodowej jako umiejętności wychowania, nauki i oświaty, słowem wykształcenia naszej młodzieży*, vol. 2, with introduction and commentary by A. Walicki, Wrocław 1970, p. 837.

The Commission's centenary celebrations in 1873 were organised by the Pedagogical Society in Lviv. In 1901 historian Teodor Wierzbowski (1853–1923) initiated the publication of the documentary sources of the Commission's work. Thirty-nine volumes were issued in 1901–1915, providing invaluable research material for generations of scholars.

The 150th anniversary of the Commission was celebrated in the early 1920s, already under the Second Polish Republic, resulting in rich literature on its history and the publication of additional sources. The next grand anniversary took place after War World Two, on the occasion of the bicentenary, again producing numerous occasional publications.

The year 2013 saw the 240th anniversary of establishing the Commission of National Education and a substantial growth in literature. A broad research project concerning the Commission's legacy was undertaken by Kalina Bartnicka and a team of education historians from a number of scientific centres throughout Poland. In 2018, the project delivered 14 volumes of works devoted to the Commission's history, including a volume of bibliography. The most significant contribution of this book series was its analyses of sources kept in libraries and archives of Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus and the Russian Federation.

The 250th anniversary abounded in conferences and further publications which attest to the lasting value of the Commission's work and its role in the making of the modern Polish school and Polish nation.

The present volume discusses the most important issues concerning the Commission of National Education – how it originated, its laying of foundations of school organisation, legislation and new curricula, developing of textbooks, training of teachers, reforming of universities, and introducing of changes leading to more inclusive schooling. Another intention was to present the people behind the reform, with special emphasis on their involvement in the Commission's activities. To better show their work and times, the book is richly illustrated.

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