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Edmund Burke, Poland, and the Commonwealth of Europe

Edmund Burke's reputation largely rests on his impassioned attack against the French Revolution, including his controversial call for Britain to wage war against the French Republic. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that studies of Burke's views on state relations and conflict have primarily focused on the revolutionary era.¹ Attempting to categorize Burke's interventionist stance, scholars of international relations have described him as an early proponent of the "English" school of international relations theory and a proponent of political realism.² In a more historical perspective, attempts have been made to contextualize Burke's calls to war against France by highlighting his complex engagement with jurisprudential theories of reason of state, and reading him as a politician and polemicist who identified France's democratic and egalitarian aspirations as the modern embodiment of the age-old ambition for "universal empire".³

By contrast, this article re-examines Burke's decades-long interest in the "Polish question" to reframe his doctrine of intervention in longer chronological perspective, and in broader intellectual context.⁴ Shifting the focus away from both the French Revolution and international relations theory, it suggests that Burke's most famous and controversial 1790s positions were rehearsed in the previous decades through his practical engagement in long-

¹ Richard Bourke, 'Edmund Burke and International Conflict', in Lisa Hill and Ian Hall, eds., *British international thinkers from Hobbes to Namier* (Basingstoke, 2009), p. 91. The debates surrounding Burke's views of the British Empire do however span a broader period. For two competing assessments, see Daniel O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire* (Oakland, 2016); David Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).

² The pioneering work is R.J. Vincent, 'Edmund Burke and the Theory of International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 10 (1984), pp. 205–218. See also Jennifer M. Welsh, *Edmund Burke and International Relations* (Basingstoke, 1995); Jennifer M. Welsh, 'Edmund Burke and the Commonwealth of Europe: The Cultural Bases of International Order', in Ian Clark and Iver B. Neumann, eds., *Classical Theories of International Relations* (Basingstoke, 1996); David Boucher, 'The Character of the History of the Philosophy of International Relations and the Case of Edmund Burke', *Review of International Studies*, 17 (1991), pp. 127–148.

³ David Armitage, 'Edmund Burke and Reason of State', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 61 (2000), pp. 617–34; Bourke, 'Edmund Burke and International Conflict'; Ian Hampsher-Monk, 'Edmund Burke's Changing Justification for Intervention', *The Historical Journal*, 48 (2005), pp. 65–100. For an argument that Burke's interventionist doctrine reflected "traditional Whig thinking" see Brendan Simms, "A False Principle in the Law of Nation": Burke, State Sovereignty, [German] Liberty, and Intervention in the Age of Westphalia', in Brendan Simms and D.J.B. Trim, eds., *Humanitarian Intervention: A History* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 109.

⁴ Gaetano L. Vincitorio has presented Burke's views on Poland in the context of diplomatic and parliamentary history. Gaetano Vincitorio, 'Edmund Burke and the First Partition of Poland: Britain and the Crisis of 1772 in the "Great Republic"', in Gaetano Vincitorio, ed., *Crisis in the 'Great Republic': Essays Presented to Ross J. Hoffman* (New York, NY, 1969), pp. 14–46.

running eighteenth-century discussions about the Polish state, which acted as a lightning rod for disagreements surrounding the nature and future of the European state system.

Eighteenth-century Europe was marked by a long-running and increasingly global conflict between Britain and France, fuelled by Britain's formidable capacity for public credit.⁵ As the rivalry between the French and British empires escalated in the middle of the century, several models of international order emerged that aimed to break Europe's seemingly endless cycle of war, without resorting to the age-old idea of universal monarchy. One approach was to hope for the internal regulation of the European states' propensity for violence: this could be achieved either via domestic republican political reform, as Rousseau suggested, or through the peaceful influence of commerce, as Montesquieu and Scottish Enlightenment writers hoped.⁶ An alternative proposal, famously proposed by Abbé de St Pierre, was to establish a "league of nations" ruled by a permanent council that would act as an external arbiter on conflicts and enforce judgements against individual states.⁷ But such plans for perpetual peace were primarily counter-proposals to what remained the dominant approach: the principle of the "balance of power", which considered Europe as a system (or "commonwealth", or "republic") of self-interested states, and relied on the coordinated self-regulation of their violent instincts. The states' competing interests could never be reconciled, but they could be kept in delicate balance, for the common good of all. A guiding principle of eighteenth-century British foreign policy at least since the peace of Utrecht (1713), and theorised by the Swiss jurist Emer de Vattel in his highly influential *Droit des gens* (1758), this "balancing system" was tailor-made to contain the expansionist ambitions of Bourbon France, and counter the traditional threat of universal dominion.⁸ While Burke is usually squarely associated with this last approach, this article will suggest that he also shared substantial overlapping areas of agreement with Montesquieu, Rousseau, and the Scottish Enlightenment.

⁵ Stephen Pincus, *1688: The first modern revolution* (New Haven, CT, 2009); Patrick O'Brien, 'Fiscal Exceptionalism: Great Britain and its European Rivals from Civil War to triumph at Trafalgar and Waterloo', in Donald Winch and Patrick O'Brien, eds., *The political economy of British historical experience, 1688-1914* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 245–67.

⁶ Céline Spector, 'Who is the Author of the *Abstract of Monsieur l'Abbé de Saint-Pierre's "Plan for Perpetual Peace"?* From Saint-Pierre to Rousseau', *History of European Ideas*, 39 (May 2013), pp. 371–393. See also Bela Kapossy, Isaac Nakhimovsky, and Richard Whatmore, eds., *Commerce and peace in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2017); Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005). On the intellectual premises shared by Rousseau and Smith, see Istvan Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith*, eds. Bela Kapossy and Michael Sonenscher (Cambridge, MA, 2015).

⁷ Stella Ghervas, 'Balance of Power vs. Perpetual Peace: Paradigms of European Order from Utrecht to Vienna, 1713–1815', *The International History Review*, 39 (2017), pp. 404–25.

⁸ For Vattel's discussion of Europe as a "kind of republic", see Emer de Vattel, *The Law of Nations, or, Principles of the law of nature, Applied to the Conduct and Affairs of Nations and Sovereigns* (London, 1797) III-47, II-3.

One reason why Burke's decades-long engagement with the "Polish question" provides a fruitful entry point into his account of state relations, is that Polish politics raised some of the same fundamental questions as the French Revolution later would about the nature of European civilisation, the rules of progress and the conditions for long-lasting peace. The first section of the article therefore examines contemporary accounts of the Polish state in the mid-eighteenth century, starting with Montesquieu's influential account of eastern Europe as a transitional space between European liberty and Oriental despotism. The second section focuses on the partition crisis of the 1770s, and shows that the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was discussed by Burke and others from two different perspectives: in terms of Poland's internal politics (as an example of a dysfunctional polity in dire need of reform), and in terms of the international order of Europe (as an example of the failure of the balance of power). Like the French Revolution later would, these two complementary perspectives went to the crux of the tension that characterized Vattel's *Droit des gens*, which combined a doctrine of sovereignty and non-intervention with the ambiguously broad claim that "one state owes to another state whatever it owes to itself, so far as that other stands in real need of its assistance".⁹ Burke's interest in Poland led him to hone in on this tension and reflect on the relationship between internal and external politics. It also crystallised his analysis of the balance of power as not only the guarantor of continental peace, but also as the historical source of the unique "spirit" of European civil society.¹⁰ The third section shows how the previous points were later taken up again by Burke, in the much better-known circumstances of the French Revolution, to argue that the expansionist ambitions inherent to democratic republicanism warranted an exception to the Vattelian inscription of the internal integrity of states into international law, because they threatened the unique nature of European civilisation.¹¹ The last section traces the heritage of Burke's commentary on the Polish partitions into the nineteenth century, in the writings of James Mackintosh. Contrary to the main thrust of existing scholarship, this article therefore argues that the French Revolution did not fundamentally transform Burke's assessment of the European state system. Rather, the debates surrounding the Polish question from the mid-century onwards directly informed his controversial stance in the 1790s, because they were a

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Welsh, 'Edmund Burke and the Commonwealth of Europe: The Cultural Bases of International Order'.

¹¹ Bourke, 'Edmund Burke and International Conflict'; Hampsher-Monk, 'Edmund Burke's Changing Justification for Intervention'; Simms, "'A False Principle in the Law of Nation": Burke, State Sovereignty, [German] Liberty, and Intervention in the Age of Westphalia'. On the use of Vattel by Burke and other proponents of war in the 1790s, see Richard Whatmore, 'Vattel, Britain and Peace in Europe', *Grotiana*, 31 (November 2010), pp. 104–106.

test case for broader disagreements about the nature of European civilisation and the conditions for peaceful state relations.

I.

While Burke's impassionate defence of Poland in the 1770s is well-known, it has been analysed in relative isolation, in the context of Burke's career as a polemicist, parliamentarian and philosopher.¹² This section therefore presents Burke's discussion of Poland in the broader perspective of several eighteenth-century discussions about the Polish state, the progress of Europe's civilisation, and the future of the European state system.

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had once been a prosperous and influential state, whose ruling nobility proudly upheld notions of liberty and equality modelled after classical ideas of the *res publica*.¹³ By the early eighteenth century however, it had become mired in internal conflicts, ineffective government structures (embodied by the infamous rule of unanimous voting, the *liberum veto*) and political manipulation by foreign powers. The long reign of Augustus III (1733-1763) witnessed the deepening of these issues, including increasing dependency on Russia. In the period, Poland was commonly depicted in Britain and France as a land of religious intolerance, political anarchy and corruption, slavery-based society and economic misery.¹⁴ Poland thus provided a striking exception to the pattern of increasing commercial exchanges, liberty and civilisation which eighteenth-century theorists of commercial society identified with modern European society.¹⁵ As often, it was Charles de Montesquieu who first provided an explanatory framework for the Polish exception, and attempted to diagnose structural causes for the failings of the Polish state.

¹² Vincitorio, 'Edmund Burke and the First Partition of Poland: Britain and the Crisis of 1772 in the "Great Republic"'.
¹³ Jerzy Łukowski, *Disorderly Liberty: The Political Culture of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2010), p. 2-3; Tomasz Gromelski, 'Liberty and liberties in early modern Poland-Lithuania', in Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen, eds., *Freedom and the Construction of Europe* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 215–234.

¹⁴ Norman Davis, "'The Languor of so remote an interest": British Attitudes to Poland, 1772-1832', in J.L.I. Fennell and J.C. Stone, eds., *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, XVI (Oxford, 1983), pp. 80–81.

¹⁵ For Burke's intellectual debt to French and Scottish theories of commercial society, see Daniel O'Neill, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy* (University Park, 2007), chap. 2; Richard Bourke, *Empire and revolution: the political life of Edmund Burke* (Woodstock, Oxfordshire, 2015), pp. 161–64; J.G.A. Pocock, 'The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution', *Historical Journal*, 25 (1982), pp. 331–49; James Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler: Edmund Burke and the Politics of Progress* (Albany, 1994), chaps 2, 3.

While Montesquieu did not have a concept of “eastern Europe”, his *Spirit of the Laws* (1748) described Russia and Poland as occupying a transitional space between European liberty and Oriental despotism.¹⁶ He identified the root of Poland’s problem in the very “spirit” of its laws: the object of the laws of Poland was not natural liberty of the savages, nor was it national glory (as in monarchies), or the ruler’s pleasure (as in despotic states), but rather “the independence of [aristocratic] individuals ... from thence results the oppression of the whole.”¹⁷ Against the accepted wisdom of the day, which held that the Polish state was a classic mixed constitution that had become “corrupted” over the last two hundred years, Montesquieu therefore argued that Poland was in fact, an aristocratic republic, in which sovereignty rested entirely in a small aristocratic caste. This was why he repeatedly singled out Poland for being the “most imperfect” type of aristocracy, combining a small sovereign body (while the “best” type of aristocracy would exclude as few as possible from the legislature) with a “state of civil servitude” for the rest of the population, leaving the peasantry “slaves of the nobility”.¹⁸ Poland’s political system, therefore, combined both extreme liberty and despotism. It illustrated the worst tyrannical tendencies of aristocratic regimes, with its oppressive political system rigging trade in favour of the aristocracy and preventing the progress of commerce and its pacifying, civilising influence.¹⁹ In turn, Poland’s poverty had negative repercussions on Europe as a whole, considered as a commonwealth of inter-dependent states, or “a state composed of many provinces”.²⁰

Montesquieu’s analysis of the European commonwealth, and of Poland’s place within it, provided the impetus for much discussion in the following decades, including commentaries by Burke, but also Adam Smith and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Burke was a great admirer of the *Spirit of the Laws*, and in the 1750s he was analysing Poland as having maintained a primitive republican species of government, even after progressing from the shepherding to the agricultural stage.²¹ He repeated much of Montesquieu’s political analysis, classifying Poland

¹⁶ Charles Louis de Secondat Montesquieu Baron de, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne Cohler, Basia Miller, and Harold Stone (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 287, 316. On Montesquieu and the idea of “eastern Europe”, see Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, 1994), p. 204.

¹⁷ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, p. 156.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

²⁰ Charles Louis de Secondat Montesquieu Baron de, *My Thoughts (Mes Pensées)*, ed. Henry C. Clark (Indianapolis, 2012), p. 132.

²¹ Edmund Burke, ‘Abridgement of English History (c. 1757)’, in T.O. McLoughlin, James T. Boulton, and William B. Todd, eds., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. 1: The Early Writings* (Oxford, 2014), p. 429. On Montesquieu as an “enduring presence in the mind of Edmund Burke”, see Bourke, *Empire and revolution: the political life of Edmund Burke*, pp. 19–20. See also Cecil Parker Courtney, *Montesquieu and Burke*.

not as a mixed constitution but rather as an aristocracy. In his 1756 *Vindication of Natural Society*, he pointed to Poland as exemplifying an especially imperfect form of aristocracy: the people were completely excluded from legislative powers (because sovereignty was exclusive to the aristocratic caste), while the aristocracy held a direct and absolute power to govern.

Poland has at present the Name of Republick, and it is one of the Aristocratick Form; but it is well known, that the little Finger of this Government, is heavier than the Loins of arbitrary Power in most Nations. ²²

Burke thus followed Montesquieu in seeing Poland as an aristocratic state, while also taking Montesquieu's point that the aristocracy was both a "sovereign" to the rest of the people, and a democracy among themselves.²³ The bigger issue by far, in Burke's view, was the latter element, since the liberty exercised by Polish nobles was so extreme as to allow for despotic government that bestowed neither political rights nor the most basic civil liberties to the Polish people, who were "not only politically, but personally Slaves".²⁴

The death of Augustus III in 1763 was the occasion of further hand-wringing about the state of Poland. The *Annual Register* for 1763, which Burke edited, provided an account of Polish politics that followed the broad lines of his 1750s commentary.²⁵ Poland was a republic giving "the most disadvantageous idea of liberty, by the extreme to which it is carried, and the injustice with which it is distributed." Indeed, each member of the ruling aristocracy "[seemed] rather an independent sovereign than a citizen", because they were not bound by any sort of legal restraint.²⁶ Because of the system's inherent instability and vulnerability to foreign influence, Poland was as one of two elective monarchies that "not only occasion many mischiefs to those

(Oxford, 1963); Seamus Deane, 'Montesquieu and Burke', in Graham Gargett and Geraldine Sheridan, eds., *Ireland and the French Enlightenment, 1700–1800* (London, 1999), pp. 47–66.

²² Edmund Burke, 'A Vindication of Natural Society (1756)', in T.O. McLoughlin, James T. Boulton, and William B. Todd, eds., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. 1: The Early Writings* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 159–160.

²³ Burke, 'Abridgement of English History (c. 1757)', p. 429.

Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, p. 15.

²⁴ Burke, 'A Vindication of Natural Society (1756)', pp. 158, 160.

²⁵ On Burke's central role in the *Annual Register* until at least 1763, see Thomas W. Copeland, 'Edmund Burke's friend and the "Annual Register"', *The Library*, 18 (1963), pp. 29–39. On the likelihood that Burke wrote significant parts of the "Historical Article" in each issue in the 1770s, see Vincitorio, p. 15.

²⁶ *The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politicks, and Literature, for the Year 1763*, (London, 1765), p. 45.

who live under them, but have frequently involved a great part of Europe in blood and confusion.”²⁷

What the Polish constitution required, consequently, was to strengthen its monarchical element in order to enforce a common rule of law onto its aristocracy, thereby curbing the individual power of the nobles and no longer making Poland “one of the great objects of politics to most of the considerable powers in the north”.²⁸ In support of this argument, the *Annual Register* cited at length “a very striking and pathetic description of the mischiefs [the Poles] suffer from this ill-contrived plan of liberty”: this was *La Voix libre d’un citoyen*, published in French in 1759. While the *Annual Register* appeared unaware of the identity of its author, this was in fact the French translation of a 1743 work by the former Polish king Stanisław Leszczyński, an ally of France who had been twice deposed as king by the Polish Diet under the joint pressure of Austria and Russia.²⁹

La Voix libre (or *Głos Wolny*) theorised the existence of a “general will” (years before Montesquieu or Rousseau considered the notion), and argued that Poland’s issues stemmed from the free reign given to “particular will”, understood as the nobles’ self-interested will standing in obstacle to necessary reform. Leszczyński’s recommendations therefore focused on curbing the power of the aristocracy, centralizing the Polish state and modernising its army. These were all suggestions taken up by the *Annual Register*.

La Voix libre, however, was less well received by another of Montesquieu’s famous readers.³⁰ Rousseau knew the French translation, and in the early 1750s he had in fact become embroiled in a public exchange with Leszczyński, triggered by the latter’s critique of his *Discourse on the Arts and Science* (1751).³¹ His *Social Contract* (1762) proposed a very different remedy to the problem of “particular will”, suggesting that the general will would transcend particular will, and force self-interested individuals to work towards the common good. While the *Social Contract* did not explicitly analyse the Polish constitution, it did obliquely refer to it in a passage critiquing the inherent instability of democratic government: arguing that only a “people of Gods” would be able to govern themselves democratically, Rousseau subverted a

²⁷ Ibid, p. 44.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 44.

²⁹ On the question of authorship see Łukowski, *Disorderly Liberty*, p. 44.

³⁰ On Rousseau as a reader of Montesquieu see Catherine Labro, ‘Le débat Rousseau/Montesquieu dans le premier Discours: réception et médiations’, *Revue Française d’Histoire des Idées Politiques*, 35 (2012), pp. 135–145.

³¹ Łukowski, *Disorderly Liberty*, p. 51; Jan Květina, ‘The Polish Question as a Political Issue within Philosophical Dispute: Leszczyński versus Rousseau’, *Oriens Aliter* (2014),.

quote by Rafał Leszczyński (Stanisław's father) extolling the "perilous freedom" of citizen virtue in order to illustrate his point. In his *Considérations sur le gouvernement de la Pologne* (1772), Rousseau would again propose remedies directly contrary to Leszczyński's proposals, arguing for a democratic regeneration based upon federalisation and the encouragement of citizen virtue.³²

Rousseau's diagnosis of the Polish state was, like that of Burke, directly inspired from Montesquieu's view that Poland's aristocratic government was the source of both its political and economic woes. Like Burke, he followed Montesquieu in rejecting the traditional account of Poland as a mixed constitution, and in locating sovereignty in its aristocracy, which he also analysed as forming an internal democracy. Why then did he formulate such different proposals for the regeneration of Polish politics? This was largely based upon his own reading of Montesquieu's theory of aristocracy as an intermediary governing body.³³ Indeed, Rousseau proposed to maintain the very element which Burke found problematic in Poland (i.e. the absolute power of the sovereign aristocracy), while broadening its current basis to include the entire people. Perhaps more importantly however, Rousseau's never-enacted plan hoped to turn Poland into a test case for Europe: against both the realist doctrine of the balance of power, and utopian plans for externally-imposed perpetual peace, Rousseau saw the internal republican reform of sovereign states as a means to reduce their propensity for violence, thus opening up the path for a peaceful federation of sovereign states.³⁴ This was in direct contrast to the *Annual Register's* analysis of Poland as a weak link in Europe's balancing system: in Burke's view, expanding sovereignty beyond the aristocratic caste would have done nothing to curb the "extremes" to which the liberty of government was currently carried, or stabilize Poland's government. Therefore, it was the republican element of Poland's aristocratic republic that was in most urgent need of reform (although its aristocratic element also certainly deserved to be moderately expanded). A stronger, more centralized monarchy would stabilize the Commonwealth, reigning in both internal abuses and external interference by foreign powers. Meanwhile, Montesquieu's analysis was taken in yet another direction by his Scottish readers. Both keen admirers of *Spirit of the Laws*, Hume and Smith proposed the same basic reading of

³² Łukowski, *Disorderly Liberty*, p. 51. On the question of mutual influence between Leszczyński and Rousseau see Květina, "The Polish Question as a Political Issue within Philosophical Dispute: Leszczyński versus Rousseau."

³³ For a reading of Rousseau's proposals in the *Considérations* as a response to Montesquieu, see Graham Clure, forthcoming monograph.

³⁴ Spector, 'Who is the Author of the *Abstract of Monsieur l'Abbé de Saint-Pierre's "Plan for Perpetual Peace"?*'

eastern Europe as a transitional zone between Europe and Asia.³⁵ But in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (1762-63), Smith shifted the emphasis away from the “despotic” spirit of Poland’s aristocratic government, to provide a more structural and historical explanation for Poland’s economic and political backwardness. The case of Poland was presented as a counter-example to optimistic readings of stadial theories of societal progress: unlike the large monarchies of western Europe, parts of eastern Europe, including Poland, had not transitioned from feudal to centralized, commercial society.³⁶ In the case of Poland, this was in large part due to its system of elective monarchy. Since elective kings have by nature “much less power than those who are hereditary”, Poland had not benefitted from the advantages of centralized government in establishing the conditions for the rise of commerce and industry - including breaking with the system of slavery, an inefficient means of production inherited from ancient society and whose abolition played a role in the rise of commerce.³⁷ It therefore remained stuck in an intermediary stage of development: a poor, feudal society with inferior cultivation methods, little commerce and a lack of manufacturing development. Poland was in fact the “poor” country Smith chose to illustrate his exposition of differentiated trade between rich and poor nations in the *Wealth of Nations* (1776):

The corn of Poland, in the same degree of goodness, is as cheap as that of France, notwithstanding the superior opulence and improvement of the latter country. ... the corn-lands of France are said to be much better cultivated than those of Poland. But though the poor country, notwithstanding the inferiority of its cultivation, can, in some measure, rival the rich in the cheapness and goodness of its corn, it can pretend to no such competition in its manufactures; at least if those manufactures suit the soil, climate, and situation of the rich country. ... In Poland there are said to be scarce any manufactures of any kind, a few of those coarser household manufactures excepted, without which no country can well subsist.³⁸

The problem highlighted by the Polish example was that of structural economic inequality between nations: given the competitive advantages enjoyed by manufacturing nations over

³⁵ David Hume, ‘Of Refinement in the Arts’, in Eugene F. Miller, ed., *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary* [1777] (Indianapolis, 1987), p. 276.

³⁶ Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (Indianapolis, 1982), p. 288.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 189.

³⁸ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (2 vols, Indianapolis, 1981), 1, pp. 16–17.

agricultural ones, there was no natural or obvious path available to the latter towards commercial opulence, at least in the short term.³⁹ Foreign trade had led some parts of Europe on the “retrograde path” to modernity, but could no longer function in the same way for those lingering in pre-commercial feudalism. This left little hope that Poland could partake in the healthy and peaceful “commercial emulation” which Smith hope could replace the warlike “commercial jealousy” that characterized eighteenth-century Europe.⁴⁰ As we will see, it was Smith’s emphasis on economic structures in his reading of Montesquieu’s account of European liberty that led him to formulate a response to the Polish partition of 1772 that differed starkly from Burke’s.

II.

It was almost ten years before Burke wrote on the topic again, prompted by the political crisis unfolding in Poland. Following the election of Catherine the Great’s protégé Stanisław August Poniatowski in 1764, Polish nobles had rebelled against Russia’s influence and formed the Bar Confederation, hoping to overthrow Stanisław August and restore the “Golden Freedoms” of the Polish nobility – approaching Rousseau for advice in the process, which would eventually result in the *Considérations sur le gouvernement de la Pologne*. By late 1772 however, the rebellion had been crushed, and a weakened Poland was carved up between Russia, Prussia and Austria, losing a third of its territory.

The events attracted Burke’s attention, even before the final defeat of the Confederation and the partition treaty of September 1772. In June 1772, as the last Bar-controlled Polish fortresses was under siege, he wrote to a friend about Prussia’s move into Poland and Danzig, and complained about the British government’s inaction. In October 1772, he noted that the partition had “put all Europe in a ferment”.⁴¹ On 7 December 1772, in his only public intervention on the topic he satirically compared the allied powers’ ambition to make the

³⁹ On Smith’s engagement with the “rich country-poor country” debate, see Reinhardt Schumacher, ‘Adam Smith and the “rich country-poor country” debate: eighteenth-century views on economic progress and international trade’, *The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 23 (2016), pp. 764–793.

⁴⁰ Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, pp. 111–124.

⁴¹ Burke to John Cruger, 30 June 1772, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* (10 vols, Cambridge, 1967), vol. 1, p. 310; Burke to John Stewart, 30 October 1772, Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. 2, p. 359.

Kingdom of Poland a “glorious kingdom” to the English Parliament cutting off Charles I’s head in order “to make him a great and glorious king”.⁴²

Burke’s interest in Polish affairs did not reflect the broader public mood. The Partition did not lead to the same outcry in Britain as it did in some European circles: Poland was considered too remote to be of real significance to Britain’s interests; it was also largely viewed as a bastion of Catholic intolerance and a traditional ally of France.⁴³ John Lind’s *Letters concerning Poland*, likely commissioned by Stanisław August and published in four instalments between December 1772 and April 1773, may have become “the moving spirit in the whole range of anti-partition literature” throughout Europe,⁴⁴ but they failed to mobilize British public opinion, and were given scant attention in the periodical press. As we will see, the work did however provide at least some of the material for Burke’s public defence of Poland.⁴⁵

A lifelong friend of Jeremy Bentham, and the son of a prominent Scottish merchant family with business interests in Warsaw, Lind was established at the Court of Poland as Privy Councillor and Governor of the King’s nephew. Presumably because of his unofficial role as a propagandist for the Polish court, Lind’s assessment of Polish politics was more optimistic than most. Stanisław August, he argued, was an enlightened monarch, a reformist striving to rid the Polish state of its worst inefficiencies and abuses. In his account Poland had originally been a moderate monarchy, whose constitution had become corrupted over the years. The infamous *liberum veto*, he argued, was “by no means a part of the ancient constitution of Poland”, and it was gradually that an “oligarchical tyranny [... had been established] on the ruins of the regal authority.”⁴⁶ This was an argument calculated to resonate with British moderate Whigs: what Poland needed was to restore the purity of an ancient constitution that allowed the executive enough power to enact moderate reform, and therefore undermine the appeal of radical political reform or revolution.

Lind was also careful to differentiate Poland’s ruling nobility from the moderate aristocracy praised by Montesquieu: this was no “intermediate [power] between the majesty of the throne, and the liberty of the people”, but rather “a few great officers, who, having no legal check ...

⁴² Brit. Mus., Egerton MS 243, f. 91-92, Debates of the House of Commons on the East India Company (1772-73). Cited in Bourke, *Empire and revolution: the political life of Edmund Burke*, p. 909.

⁴³ Vincitorio, p. 21; D.B. Horn, *British Public Opinion and the First Partition of Poland* (Edinburgh, 1945).

⁴⁴ Horn, *British Public Opinion and the First Partition of Poland*, pp. 23, 26. Lind also published French and German versions of the Letters in early 1773.

⁴⁵ The four letters were given short summary reviews in the December 1772 (the same month as Burke’s only public intervention in Parliament), January 1773, March 1773 and April 1773 issues of the *Monthly review*.

⁴⁶ John Lind, *Letters Concerning the Present State of Poland*. (London, 1773), pp. 15–16, 31.

served their own private advantage”.⁴⁷ Poland therefore directly illustrated Montesquieu’s critical depiction of aristocratic regimes, as naturally leaning towards instability and tyranny in the absence of both legal oversight of the nobles, and of a virtuous spirit of moderation. Against the famed “Golden Freedoms”, Lind cited Montesquieu’s observation that “L’indépendance de chaque particulier est l’objet des Loix de la Pologne ; et ce qui en résulte, l’oppression de tous”, concluding that it constituted “the best picture of the Polish constitution that ever was drawn”.⁴⁸

Beyond Lind’s critique of Poland’s aristocracy and his defence of Stanisław’s ability to reform the Polish state, however, the bulk of the *Letters* focused on putting forward a case for British intervention in Poland, built on two complementary lines of arguments. The first appealed to Britain’s commercial interests, and argued that the Prussian move onto Danzig would be particularly damaging to British trade. The second used the language of the law of nations and balance of power to place the partition of Poland in the broader context of European peace and prosperity. The partition of Poland, Lind argued, was a warning shot. The real underlying danger lay in the alliance between Russia, Prussia and Austria, which threatened the existing balance of power. Therefore “[t]he cause of Poland is now become the cause of all Europe”, and Lind pleaded to reverse the traditional anti-Bourbonian logic of the doctrine and engineer an alliance between France and Britain (“however unnatural that alliance may seem”), in order to resist the coalition of the three eastern powers.⁴⁹ Both Lind’s commercial and political lines of arguments were thus geared towards countering Britain’s apathy towards continental affairs – the notion that “We are an island, and what have we to do with the affairs of the continent?”⁵⁰ As the most significant anti-partition work published in Britain, it is likely that Lind’s *Letters* would have attracted Burke’s attention.⁵¹ In April 1773, Burke reflected privately on the British government’s failure to react to the Partition, and weighed in on the dilemma articulated by Lind in the previous months: Britain now had to choose between accepting the status quo, or seeking a politically dangerous and unpopular alliance with France.⁵² Burke believed the first

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 32.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 12.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 305.

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 189, 303–304.

⁵¹ In addition to the thematic cross-over between Lind’s *Letters* and the *Annual Register* for 1772 discussed below, the next issue of the *Annual Register* also included a curious common reference: compare Lind (“Were the daemon of discord to arise ... he could not have broached a doctrine [more] fatal to the peace of mankind”) to the *Annual Register* (“the demon of discord [could not] have thrown out bitterer seeds of contention, than it is now likely to produce”). *The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politics, and Literature for the Year 1773*, (London, 1774), p. 4; Lind, *Letters Concerning the Present State of Poland.*, p. 179.

⁵² Burke to John Cruger, 16 April 1773, Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. II, p. 429.

option to be potentially highly damaging to the Balance of Power, yet also the most likely, given the lack of interest of British political elites for European affairs. While he appeared to have favoured the second option in principle, he was sceptical about its practical feasibility: it was unlikely to come to pass given the lack of support from the government as well as from public opinion, and “without much probability of success ... considering the situation of the Theatre of war.” Perhaps more importantly, it was rife with a different kind of danger: as Lind had acknowledged, it would mean “[joining] in an alliance with those whom we have the most reason to fear”.⁵³

A few months later, similar points were made in the *Annual Register* for 1772 (published in July 1773). The issue opened with a lengthy analysis of the Polish crisis which, Mackintosh later asserted, “could scarcely have been written by any man but Mr Burke”.⁵⁴ But at its core, the *Annual Register* was not expounding new arguments. It was following in Lind’s footsteps, making similar points about the immediate threat to the Balance of Power as well as to Britain’s commercial interests. Like Lind’s *Letters*, the article placed the partition not on the plane of Poland’s internal politics and liberty, but rather on the plane of Europe’s peace and liberty. And echoing the views expressed by Burke in his personal correspondence, it considered the suggestion of an alliance with France with a wary eye:

It will be always a question, whether on the whole consideration, the late proceedings can become a proper motive to Great Britain for departing from the system, which has hitherto made her consider her nearest neighbours as the first objects of jealousy All these considerations, render this a problem in the British politics of no easy solution⁵⁵

For the *Annual Register*, the specificity of Europe as a political entity lay in its common adoption of the principles of the balance of power, which had allowed liberty and commerce to flourish in individual states, and prevented the rise of universal monarchy and despotism in

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ James Mackintosh, ‘Partition’, *Edinburgh Review*, 37 (1822), p. 513. See also earlier attributions by Henry Brougham, ‘Appeal of the Poles’, *Edinburgh Review*, 22 (1814), p. 308; ‘Restoration of the Emperor Napoleon’, *The Critical Review: Or, Annals of Literature*, 1 (1815), p. 541. For discussions of Burke’s role in the *Annual Register* for 1772 see Vincitorio, p. 15, William B. Todd, ‘A Bibliographic Account of the Annual Register, 1758-1825’, *Library*, 16 (1961), p. 104, Daniel O’Neill, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy* (University Park, 2007), p. 65.-120 (p. 106).

⁵⁵ *The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politics and Literature for the Year 1772*, (London, 1773), p. 6.

its “vast commonwealth”: “It is owing to this system [balance of power], that this small part of the western world has acquired so astonishing (and otherwise unaccountable) a superiority over the rest of the globe”.⁵⁶

Conversely, civilisations which had equally developed “arts, arms, commerce, and literature” eventually fell apart when they failed to develop or maintain such a balancing system, and allowed barbaric tribes to divide and conquer what should have been united commonwealths:

[some barbaric tribe], has been suffered, unnoticed, to subdue his neighbouring tribes ; each new conquest was made an instrument to the succeeding, until at length become irresistible, he swept whole empires with their arts and sciences off the face of the earth.⁵⁷

In the *Annual Register*'s assessment, the main threat to European civilization was therefore a lack of coordination among nations against attacks threatening any one member.⁵⁸ This allowed powers either internal or external to Europe to slowly incorporate the territories of other states and accumulate power, until they were finally able to overrun the commonwealth as a whole. Historically, the threat had not been internal to civilisations, but rather external, in the shape of conquest by foreign barbarian tribes – the same fear voiced by Montesquieu in the *Spirit of the Laws*. Poland, due to its geographical situation, was a particularly important buffer separating western Europe from the despotic Russian power – itself a transition area between the civilisation of Europe and Asian barbarism.

Poland was the natural barrier of Germany, as well as of the northern crowns, against the overwhelming power and ambition of Russia. ... A great writer of a former age affirmed, that if ever the Turks conquered Germany, it must be through Poland ; it may now with great justice be affirmed, that it is the road by which the Russians will enter Germany.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ [about the rise of Rome] “Each state looked on with indifference, or enjoyed a malignant pleasure at the ruin of its neighbour, without reflecting that the weapons and power of which he was deprived, would be quickly employed to its own destruction” *Annual Register for the Year 1772*, p. 2.

⁵⁹ The “great writer” is Pufendorf, citing Melanchthon. Samuel von Pufendorf, *An Introduction to the History of the Principal Kingdoms and States of Europe. Translated by Jodocus Crull (1695)*, ed. Michael Seidler (Indianapolis, 2013), p. 402.

If Europe was a “commonwealth”, or a “great western republic” that required protection from both internal and external threats, it followed that each “citizen” of the commonwealth had a duty to watch over its neighbours, and keep the more powerful and ambitious states in check:⁶⁰

The same principles that make it incumbent upon the patriotic member of a republic to watch with the strictest attention the motions and designs of his powerful fellow-citizens, should equally operate upon the different states in such a community as Europe, who are also the great members of a larger commonwealth. ... to purchase present quiet, at the price of future security, is undoubtedly a cowardice of the most degrading and basest nature.⁶¹

This line of argument, which presents the European state system in terms of a commonwealth of citizen-states, has been associated with Burke’s late 1790s argument for intervention against France, and described as a significant shift away from his early 1790s conception of states as individuals subject to the Law of Nature.⁶² Clearly, in 1773 the *Annual Register* was already using a similar Vattel-inspired language to argue that war against the eastern powers would be justified in principle. But in the context of the Polish crisis, it was not only ambitious states that needed to be watched carefully: it was also the smaller states whose political instability could make them easy prey for powerful neighbours. The *Annual Register* suggested that the internal constitution of Poland was one of the reasons why Poland had become a brittle, easily dismembered buffer:

Some small alterations in the system of government, which might have been accomplished with little violence, and infinite benefit to the Poles, would have rendered this barrier inexpugnable. If the princes of Saxony, who so long governed this country, had profited of their advantage, this reformation in the government of Poland would have long since taken place.⁶³

⁶⁰ *The Annual Register for the Year 1772*, pp. 2, 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁶² See Hampsher-Monk’s argument that in *Regicide Peace* (1796) Burke “completely abandoned Vattel’s presupposition of states as individuals in a state of nature, and postulated a European juridical community within which intervention was a domestic, not an international, act”. Hampsher-Monk, pp. 66.

⁶³ *Annual Register for the Year 1772*, p. 4.

Here, the *Annual Register* was establishing an explicit link between domestic politics, and the stability of the European commonwealth: the failure of Poland's internal reforms, its partition, and the threat of universal dominion were all intimately linked. The distinction between internal politics and the law of nations was artificial, because the two spheres were interdependent, and therefore absolute interpretations of Vattel's doctrine of sovereignty could not be allowed to stand. While the *Annual Register* stopped short of advocating intervention in Polish internal politics, this was an argument Burke would later deploy to great effect in his justification of intervention against France's aggressive republican state.⁶⁴

The *Annual Register* concluded that the injustice of the partition of Poland was only a secondary consideration, when the safety and prosperity of Europe – and therefore of Britain – were in question, and that Britain needed to start considering the events in Poland in the context of general threat against Europe's civilisation, and therefore against Britain. Britain may fancy itself insulated from consequences due to its geographical position, but it was indeed part of the commonwealth of Europe, where “[no] single state, in the present political and physical state of Europe, could expect independence and safety, unconnected with all the others.”⁶⁵

Burke's comments on Poland in the following years continued to focus primarily on the Partition's international consequences: in January 1774 he worried about the ambitions of the eastern powers, writing that “their arms must have employment. Poland was but a breakfast; and there are not many Polands to be found. ... After all our love of Tranquility and all our expedients to preserve it – alas poor Peace.”⁶⁶ On 18 May 1774, he berated Parliament for “that conduct which saw ... Poland dismembered, with the most torpid indifference”, and warned that “the time will come when the new system will be seen in all its impotence and folly; and when the balance of power is destroyed, it will be found of what infinite consequence its preservation would have been.”⁶⁷ Almost twenty years later, he was still reflecting on Britain's failure to intervene in spite of the clear common interest it had shared with France in defending Poland: but “a languor with regard to so remote an interest, and the principles and passions which were then strongly at work at home, were the causes why Great Britain would not give France any encouragement in such an enterprise”.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Armitage, p. 629.

⁶⁵ *Annual Register for the Year 1772*, p. 3.

⁶⁶ Burke to Adrian Heinrich von Borcke, January 1774, Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. 2, p. 514.

⁶⁷ Edmund Burke, *The speeches of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, in the House of commons, and in Westminster-Hall* (4 vols, London, 1816), 1, p. 245. Cited in Vincitorio, p. 37.

⁶⁸ Edmund Burke, ‘Thoughts on French Affairs’, in L.G. Mitchell and William B. Todd, eds., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, 8 (Oxford, 1989),.

It was therefore not the sovereignty of Poland that Burke was primarily concerned about following the partition of 1772, but rather the stability of the balance of power, which he analysed as essential to the prosperity of the European commonwealth, and to the survival of Europe's uniquely civilised society. This was already a clear formulation of his better-known 1790s position as a "classic early modern theorist of reason of state within the natural-law tradition".⁶⁹ It was also in stark contrast to Adam Smith's analysis of the Partition of Poland in 1776. In his university lectures, Smith had argued that as a "poor nation" whose economic development had been hamstrung by its feudal structure and weak central government, Poland had no obvious path towards the commercial liberty that characterized its western neighbours. While Smith did not directly address the "rich country-poor country" debate in the *Wealth of Nations*, his analysis of Poland has been cited as part of a pattern of evidence suggesting that in the short to medium term at least, he leaned on the side of Josiah Tucker's theory of divergence, over Hume's insistence that the competitive advantage of rich nations would decrease over time.⁷⁰ Yet, his comments in the same work on the 1772 partition of Poland also suggested a way out of the academic disagreement between Hume and Tucker: writing as Great Britain was feeling the effects of loss of colonial trade with America, he listed the partition of Poland as one of the events "unforeseen and unthought of, [which had] very fortunately concurred to hinder Great Britain from feeling, so sensibly as it was generally expected she would, the total exclusion ... from a very important branch of the colony trade":

the late partition and consequential pacification of Poland, by opening the market of that great country, have this year added an extraordinary demand from thence to the increasing demand of the North.

As current events highlighted the artificiality of the *ceteris paribus* clause inherent to the rich country-poor country debate, Smith saw the partition as a political lightning bolt that would see positive economic development for Britain as for Poland. The annexation of Polish lands, and its passage under Russian and Prussian protectorate, would stabilize, centralize and pacify the country, allowing increased commercial exchanges and helping its transition towards commercial society.

⁶⁹ Armitage, p. 633. Armitage relates Burke's case for intervention in the *Reflections* to Vattel's international law. Ibid, p. 629.

⁷⁰ Schumacher, 'Adam Smith and the "rich country-poor country" debate: eighteenth-century views on economic progress and international trade"', p. 781.

The contrast between Burke's alarmist warning of complete overthrow of Europe's civilisation, and Smith's shrugging (and possibly optimistic) lack of concern at the 1772 partition, could not be more striking – and it is not without foreshadowing their respective reactions to the French Revolution. This is because they were based on related yet opposite explanations for the unique liberty and prosperity of Europe.

Indeed, while Scottish philosophy had greatly influenced Burke's moral theory and manners-based account of historical change, he diverged from Scottish narratives of commercial society on one fundamental point:⁷¹ he saw the progress of manners as driving the rise of commerce, civilisation and political liberty, as opposed to the Scots' narrative of commercial exchanges driving the progress of manners and civilisation.⁷² This meant that Burke understood religion, and its influence on manners, as being directly tied to the progress of civilisation. It also meant that he saw much more of a case for the uniqueness of European civilization, as deriving from its Christian identity - while the economic and commercial mechanisms examined by the Scots were potentially universal in nature. This is one reason why Burke was so strongly attached, significantly more so than Smith, Hume or even Montesquieu, to the idea of a European Commonwealth or Republic.

This fundamental disagreement between Burke and the Scottish Enlightenment has usually been presented in the context of Burke's reaction to the French Revolution, to explain his violent critique of the events in France: in his view, the revolutionaries' overthrow of civilised manners (exemplified in their rejection of religion, or in their treatment of Marie-Antoinette) endangered the very basis of the modern order, including commerce and political liberty.⁷³ Conversely, in the 1790s, the Scottish commentators who saw civilisation as a product of commerce often maintained faith in its ability to eventually soften and moderate revolutionary ardours.⁷⁴

However, the roots of the disagreement were already exposed in the 1770s. Burke's impassioned defence of Poland in 1772 has been sometimes been interpreted as a defence of the principle of national sovereignty, under attack when the language of the balance of nations was being manipulated to justify expansionism.⁷⁵ But it was really the cultural foundations of Europe that Burke was standing up for – because the balance of nations had historically been

⁷¹ For a detailed account of Burke's many personal and intellectual links to the Scottish Enlightenment, see O'Neill, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate*, pp. 53–55.

⁷² Ibid, p. 79; Pocock, 'The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution'.

⁷³ The seminal article is Pocock, 'The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution'.

⁷⁴ Anna Plassart, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 191.

⁷⁵ Welsh, *Edmund Burke and International Relations*, p. 55. See also Vincitorio.

of more momentous importance to the health, and survival, of the Commonwealth of Europe than the independence and sovereignty of any one nation. If Burke was so much more alarmed than Smith by the partition of 1772, it was because in his analysis, civilised manners and liberty were the precondition to commerce, not its product. On the international stage, these were made possible by the system of the balance of power, which guaranteed civilised relations between nations and protected free national constitutions from the ambitions of despotic powers. Therefore, to threaten the system of the balance of power was to threaten the very roots of European civilisation: the Partition “is to be considered as the first very great breach in the modern political system of Europe ... laying the axe at once to the root, in such a manner as threatens the total overthrow of the whole.”⁷⁶ Smith, conversely, saw the partition as an event that may have undercut Polish sovereignty, but which would promote internal political stability and foreign trade, and therefore in the long term would also promote the liberty and prosperity of Europe.

When the same disagreement reappeared twenty years later, it was to take on a slightly different shape – it was seemingly less focused on the mechanisms of international relations that allowed the rise and prosperity of the Montesquieuan “European republic”, and more narrowly focused on the internal workings of French politics. But, as will be shown, Burke’s insistence that international governance was historically linked the rise and prosperity of civilisation did not go away; it remained in fact central to his famous commentary on the French Revolution. In this sense, Burke’s 1790s writings on France were only the tip of a much larger iceberg, and the logical continuation of a debate about the mechanisms of progress and the future of Europe first articulated in the 1770s.

III.

British views on the Polish question shifted little in the two decades following the partition, even as a reformist parliament (the four-year Sejm of 1788-1792) was finally attempting to address the political and economic problems plaguing the Commonwealth. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Burke was still citing Poland as an example of the sort of

⁷⁶ *Annual Register for the Year 1772*, p. 2. The passage has been widely attributed to Burke since the early nineteenth century. See Simms, “A False Principle in the Law of Nation”: Burke, State Sovereignty, [German] Liberty, and Intervention in the Age of Westphalia’, p. 99; Vincitorio; Bourke, *Empire and revolution: the political life of Edmund Burke*, p. 909.

“ill-constructed system of government” that fostered constitutional instability.⁷⁷ While Rousseau’s *Considérations* had been published in an English translation in 1782, the work did not attract much attention in Britain and it is unclear whether Burke read it. He was however familiar with the *Social Contract* (and most likely *Emile* and *Letters to d’Alembert*), and in 1790 his assessment of Rousseau still closely mirrored his 1776 description of Rousseau as a “flighty madman [who entered] at the same time so profoundly into Human Nature, that the solemn mind may collect points of infinite value from the <treasury> of his fine Phrensy.”⁷⁸ Yet one notable exception to Britain’s lack of interest for Rousseau’s constitutional project for Poland was an anonymous pamphlet published in January 1791. Entitled “Comparison of the Opinions of Mr. Burke and Mons. Rousseau”, the pamphlet offered a detailed comparison of Rousseau’s project for a Polish constitution with Burke’s *Reflections*, to argue that the two authors’ views on government reform were much closer than generally assumed.⁷⁹ The anonymous author, who claimed to be an acquaintance of Burke’s and an admirer of his *Reflections*, sent him a copy of the pamphlet. Burke wrote back a note of thanks for the “very ingenious and well written pamphlet”, but didn’t comment on the substance of the argument, except to forcefully deny a passing claim regarding his religious opinions.⁸⁰ (Atypically and rather intriguingly, the *Annual Register* for 1791 did reference the *Considérations*, to note Rousseau’s gradual approach to reform in Poland – although it is unclear whether Burke remained involved in the publication at that stage.⁸¹)

The author of the pamphlet has remained anonymous until now, but can in fact be identified as Captain William Bentinck (1764-1813), later Vice-Admiral Bentinck.⁸² Captain Bentinck was related to Dutch and Russian nobility, as well as to the Duke of Portland through his father.

⁷⁷ Edmund Burke, ‘Reflections on the Revolution in France’, in L.G. Mitchell, ed., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, 8 (Oxford, 1989), p. 273.

⁷⁸ Edmund Burke, ‘On Education [June 1776]’, in W.M. Eofson, John A. Woods, and William B. Todd, eds., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, 3 (Oxford, 1996), p. 244. On Burke’s ambiguous fascination with Rousseau, see Bourke, *Empire and revolution: the political life of Edmund Burke*, pp. 756–59.

⁷⁹ The pamphlet is briefly discussed in F.P. Lock, *Edmund Burke. Volume 2, 1784-1797* (Oxford, 2009), p. 359. See also Patrick Thierry, ‘Le Socrate malsain de l’Assemblée nationale: Burke et Rousseau’, *Philosophiques*, 21 (1994), pp. 125–135.

⁸⁰ Cited in Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. 6, p. 214.

⁸¹ *The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politics, and Literature, for the Year 1791*, (London, 1795), p. 207. For an argument the Burke still made occasional contributions in the early 1790s see Copeland, ‘Edmund Burke’s friend and the “Annual Register”’.

⁸² The evidence for this claim is a copy of the pamphlet, held at Yale’s Beinecke Library, which shows the handwritten note “by Cpt Bentinck” on the title page. This is backed up by an early twentieth-century biographer of the Bentinck family, who cites Bentinck’s journals as evidence for his friendship with Burke, and for having written “a pamphlet in connection with Mr. Burke’s famous one”. Aubrey Le Blond, *Charlotte Sophie, Countess Bentinck: her life and times 1715-1800* (2 vols, 1912), 1, p. 162.

His family ties to eastern Europe may help explain his interest in Poland – in his pamphlet he indicated that Rousseau’s *Sur le Gouvernement de la Pologne* had “very much occupied [him], before Mr. Burke’s book was published”.⁸³

Bentinck’s pamphlet was not particularly successful, if only because it was potentially embarrassing both to Burke’s supporters and to French Revolution sympathizers. It only garnered short reviews, while its author was accused of “labouring under the grossest of prejudices”.⁸⁴ Yet this mixed reception was arguably unfair. Bentinck was merely pointing out what modern Rousseau scholars later would: the contemporary identification of Rousseau with abstract *philosophie*, and even more so with the agenda of the French revolutionaries, was more politically expedient than it was accurate. What was more, it obscured a number a genuine convergences between his and Burke’s moral and political philosophy. When twentieth-century scholars first highlighted these convergences, at its core their argument was merely developing Bentinck’s three main insights: Firstly, Rousseau’s *Considérations* displayed a prudent, gradual approach to reform that “[bore] many marks of similarities with Burke’s ideas”, as did his insistence on the need to build reforms upon existing social and legal foundations.⁸⁵ Secondly, Rousseau’s plan devoted much attention to the necessity of developing and nurturing Polish patriotism and national sentiment (understood in terms of shared language, manners and history), and to this end insisted on the value of tradition and religious institutions. Thirdly, like Burke, Rousseau differentiated between abstract (natural) liberty, and moral (social) liberty, with both writers holding that “moral freedom entails freedom from another’s will, and that it entails freedom from one’s lower nature”, and that “political activity in an imperfect world must often involved the positive *making* of men and citizens, not merely the neutral regulation of their relationship”.⁸⁶ Bentinck readily admitted to a selective reading of Rousseau, and like many modern commentators he interpreted the *Considérations* as Rousseau’s practical adaptation of the abstract principles of the Social Contract.⁸⁷

⁸³ *Comparison of the Opinions of Mr. Burke and Mons. Rousseau, on Government Reform, and Strictures on the Answers to Mr. Burke* (London, 1791), p. 8.

⁸⁴ *Monthly Review, or Literary Journal* (London, April 1791), p. 455.

⁸⁵ David Cameron, *The Social Thought of Rousseau and Burke* (London, 1973), p. 126; Thierry, ‘Le Socrate malsain de l’Assemblée nationale: Burke et Rousseau’.

⁸⁶ Cameron, *The Social Thought of Rousseau and Burke*, p. 106.

⁸⁷ For a different interpretation, see Clure.

where Monsieur Rousseau is cautious and circumspect, and moves upon fact, he generally agrees with Mr Burke, and differs only where he enters into theory; when he makes Poland rich without money, strong without armies, inaccessible without barriers⁸⁸

In this passage, however, Bentinck (perhaps unwittingly) touched on the root of Burke's disagreement with Rousseau. Both writers understood the internal constitutions of states, and Europe's peace and prosperity, to be mutually interdependent factors – like Montesquieu and Smith, they rejected the idea that lasting peace could be achieved via the authority of an external arbiter, especially not a despotic one. But, while Rousseau hoped that internal republican reform of Europe's states would in turn reduce their appetite for violence, Burke preferred to look at the flip side of the coin, and emphasized the need to protect Europe's uniquely peaceful balancing system from the aggressive tendencies of despotic states. The Balance of Power had allowed for the emergence of Europe's existing liberties, including Britain's free constitution, and should therefore be preserved at all costs. As Bentinck pointed out, no country could successfully achieve political reform if it was overrun by powerful neighbours. This was why Burke's priority was not the independence of even the liberties of any individual state, including Poland. Rather, his guiding concern, in the 1790s as in 1772, was the stability and survival of the European Commonwealth, as a necessary condition for the existence of free domestic constitutions.

Yet, even as the old threat of universal dominion was shifting away from eastern Europe and back towards republican France in the 1790s, Burke continued to closely observe political developments in Poland. This was because, as France's internal politics threatened to endanger the entire republic of Europe, the case of Poland was providing the ideal counter-example, and allowing Burke to illustrate that he was more than happy to support political reform, when it strengthened rather than weakened the European state system and the existing balance of power.

Burke's first substantial post-revolutionary commentary on Polish politics came as the Polish Sejm concluded a two-and-a-half year process of reform, with the formal adoption of new constitution on 3 May 1791. The reform sought to address some of the most unpopular aspects of the previous constitution by abolishing the *liberum veto*, introducing a hereditary monarchy,

⁸⁸ *Comparison of the Opinions of Mr. Burke and Mons. Rousseau*, p. 39.

and extending a number of civil protections (including to serfs, although the constitution stopped short of abolishing slavery).⁸⁹ Even before details of the new Constitution were known in Britain, both critics and admirers of the French Revolution praised the reforms, which were hailed by the former for avoiding violence, and by the latter as another European uprising against aristocratic privilege.⁹⁰ Stanisław August was widely praised as a moderate, enlightened monarch, with the help of a press network directed by Franciszek Bukaty (his ambassador in London – only appointed after British authorities opposed the appointment of John Lind).

The new Polish constitution became available in full in the summer of 1791, as two editions of the *New Constitution of the Government of Poland, established by the Revolution, The Third of May, 1791* were published in London. This was likely the source of Burke's knowledge, as he publicly and enthusiastically praised Polish reforms in his *Appeal of the New to the Old Whigs* (August 1791). Clearly aware that he was opening himself up to accusations of hypocrisy, Burke was at pains to explain why he believed Polish reforms “in all points, to be the Reverse of that of the factions in France.”⁹¹ The French reforms were, in his view, unnatural because they were destroying the foundations of a flawed yet fundamentally stable and civilised national society. Conversely, Poland was following the natural order of progress towards civilisation, by pursuing civil liberties, central authority, and morality.⁹²

Poland was therefore solving the very problem Burke had outlined in the 1770s, by aligning itself with other commercialised, civilised European nations on a path to progress that would stabilize its institutions and strengthen the balance of power.⁹³ In addition, the reforms were gradual and effected without violence, without violation of individual rights, and without subverting existing religion and manners.⁹⁴ This was all the more remarkable as Poland had faced fundamental enough issues to justify “bold enterprize and desperate experiment”, “even

⁸⁹ Zofia Zielińska, ‘Poland between Prussia and Russia in the Eighteenth century’, in Samuel Fiszman, ed., *Constitution and reform in eighteenth-century Poland: the constitution of 3 May 1791* (Bloomington, 1997), pp. 87–111.

⁹⁰ Butterwick p. 142.

⁹¹ 29 July 1792, to Richard Burke. Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, p. 158.

⁹² Edmund Burke, ‘Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs’, in P.J. Marshall and Donald C. Bryant, eds., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, 4 (Oxford, 2015), p. 464.

⁹³ The same arguments were later echoed in the Annual Register for 1791 (published in 1795), whose ‘History of Europe’ article contained a similar comparison of the French and Polish revolutions. *Annual Register for the Year 1791*, pp. 204–207.

⁹⁴ Burke, ‘Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs’, p. 464.

at some expence of blood”.⁹⁵ Indeed, the potential consequences of Poland’s failure to reform went beyond its national borders, to threaten the stability of the European state system:

A king without authority; nobles without union or subordination; a people without arts, industry, commerce, or liberty; no order within; no defence without; no effective publick force, but a foreign force, which entered a naked country at will, and disposed of every thing at pleasure.⁹⁶

Because Poland was lagging behind the rest of Europe in terms of civilisation, order and liberty, it had been a threat not only to itself but also to European stability, by encouraging and facilitating the aggressive ambitions of its neighbours. But it had now established a stronger and more secure executive power, and put an end to the instability and foreign intervention inherent to the previous system.

By the time Poland was partitioned for a second time in 1793, Britain’s political climate had changed. The French Revolution had turned to regicide and Terror, and Britain was now at war with the French Republic as well as allied to the Eastern powers. The fate of Poland had fallen down even further in British public opinion’s list of priorities, and Burke’s next comments came as a response to one of the few widely-read publications on the Polish partition: a series of anonymous letters by Benjamin Vaughan. Vaughan was an Edinburgh-educated reformer and a lifelong friend of Dugald Stewart who had helped negotiate the American peace for Lord Shelburne, and advocated commercial treaties as a means to prevent mercantile wars.⁹⁷ Now a newly-elected MP for the borough of Calne, he published his letters on Poland in the *Morning Chronicle* between July 1792 and June 1793.⁹⁸

Burke read Vaughan’s pamphlet in the *Morning Chronicle*, and wrote to his son Richard to rail against the work. Vaughan’s real purpose, he surmised, was to trick Britain into “bringing in the French evil by the back door”: “You will see, that the French system is the main Object, and that the whole Tendency of the work evidently written in subserviency to this Scheme is

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 462.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 462.

⁹⁷ On Vaughan, see Richard Whatmore, ‘Benjamin Vaughan and the consequences of anonymity: an introduction to Kenneth E. Carpenter’s Benjamin Vaughan’s Contributions Unveiled: A Bibliography’, *History of European Ideas*, 44 (2018), pp. 292–296.

⁹⁸ The letters were republished later that year as the *Letters on the subject of the Concert of Princes, and the dismemberment of Poland and France*. The work was widely noticed at the time, reaching a 4th edition in 1794 and receiving French and German translations. McLean, pp. 25-26

to defend the French whom we can assist, and not the Poles”.⁹⁹ Vaughan was merely the mouthpiece of Fox’s Whig friends, and “the great and leading purpose of this introduction of Poland into the debates on the French war, was to divert the public attention ... from a steady co-operation against France, to a quarrel with the Allies”.¹⁰⁰

If this was indeed Vaughan’s real purpose, it was not formulated directly in his *Letters*. He did, in fact, share some important philosophical premises with Burke – perhaps unsurprisingly so, given his close ties to the Scottish Enlightenment.¹⁰¹ Like Montesquieu, he identified Russia as a dangerous transition zone between European civilisation and Asian despotism, a “modern northern hive ... rendering barbarians her immediate instruments, and the rich her certain victims”. He also saw a direct link between the liberty, commerce and peace of Europe: not only was the political liberty of each country a necessary condition to Europe’s prosperity (because “the savage despot ... kills the hen which lays his golden eggs”), but so was the existence of a balancing system (“the peace of Europe [requires] for its safety the existence of many equal and disconnected powers”).¹⁰²

Like Burke, he therefore argued that regulated international relations and the progress of civilization were dependent on each other, and that a breach in the balancing system threatened not only individual countries, but the very existence of Europe’s civilised society. But unlike Burke he argued that in post-revolutionary Europe, the most immediate threat of universal military despotism came not from the French republic, but rather from the eastern partitioning powers. Britain, Vaughan feared, was supporting partitioning powers that would eventually turn against it. It would then have played an unwitting part in a conspiracy that would “eventually become one, against the whole human race”, and enabled “the ruin not only of Britain, but of *mankind*”.¹⁰³ The behaviour of the allies in the war with France was thus confirming all the fears of those who had already denounced the ease with which the principles of the Balance of Power had been breached in 1772.¹⁰⁴ This was a discourse that was to find renewed strength in the early 1800s, in the pages of the *Edinburgh Review*.

⁹⁹ Burke to Richard Burke, 29 July 1792, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, p. 159.

¹⁰⁰ Edmund Burke, ‘Observations on the Conduct of the Minority’, in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, VIII (Oxford, 1989), p. 423.

¹⁰¹ Benjamin Vaughan, *Letters, on the subject of the Concert of Princes, and the Dismemberment of Poland and France* (London, 1793), p. 45. Vaughan had been elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh on Dugald Stewart’s proposal.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 40.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 31–32.

¹⁰⁴ Albert Sorel, *Europe and the French Revolution: The Political Traditions of the Old Régime* (New York: Anchor Books, 1971), p. 27. For a similar argument, see also John Millar, *Letters of Crito, on the Causes, Objects, and Consequences, of the Present War* (Edinburgh, 1796).

Burke's failure to take up the cause of Poland, when it was partitioned again by Russia and Prussia in 1793, has usually been discussed in the narrow context of his campaign against revolutionary France.¹⁰⁵ Yet Burke and Vaughan were, in fact, largely speaking the same eighteenth-century language: they both agreed that the unique nature of Europe's civilisation depended on the preservation of the balance of power and the liberty of individual states, both of which were being threatened by aggressive powers.

It is not merely the case, indeed, that Burke's commentary on Poland after 1789 "illustrates the degree to which his mind has become obsessed with the Jacobin conspiracy", or that he was sacrificing the balance of power to the altar of his fight against revolutionary France.¹⁰⁶ While the internal politics of Poland had indirectly endangered the stability of Europe in the 1770s by making it easy prey for the ambitions of the eastern powers, French domestic politics were now directly threatening the preservation of the balance of power, and therefore the roots of European civilisation. In Burke's view, the traditional danger of universal monarchy stemming from the aggressive ambitions of powerful states had now been eclipsed by a new kind of danger: that of a universal military despotism directly rooted in French internal politics, and in the French republic's universal application of abstract rights of men. It was the exceptional nature of republican aggression which justified not only war, but also intervention in domestic politics.¹⁰⁷

The destruction of Poland was certainly to be regretted – 'No Cause in the world can, as a Cause, be more clear in my Eye, or can have more of my warm wishes than that of the Poles.'¹⁰⁸ But Britain was not, "by itself, ... in a situation to afford Poland any assistance whatsoever", and alliance with "its old enemy, France", was more unthinkable than ever.¹⁰⁹ As far as Britain's ability to rescue it, "Poland might be, in fact, considered as a country in the moon", and its demise was a price worth paying for the maintenance of the European alliance against France.¹¹⁰

Burke's position on Poland was highlighting a reasoning that would become enshrined in the treaty of Vienna: the idea that the overall stability of Europe took priority over a nation's right

¹⁰⁵ Scholars looking to delineate a Burkean "philosophy of international relations" have used Burke's 1790s commentary on Poland as evidence to assess his case for anti-revolutionary intervention against various "schools" of international relations theory. Boucher, 'The Character of the History of the Philosophy of International Relations and the Case of Edmund Burke'; Welsh, *Edmund Burke and International Relations*, pp. 36–37, 55.

¹⁰⁶ Welsh, *Edmund Burke and International Relations*, pp. 227, 155.

¹⁰⁷ Bourke, 'Edmund Burke and International Conflict'.

¹⁰⁸ Burke to Richard Burke, 29 July 1792, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, p. 158.

¹⁰⁹ Burke, 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', p. 423.

¹¹⁰ Debate on Mr Fox's motion, 17 June 1793. Cited in Vincitorio, p. 45.

to self-determination and existence. This was a position he most famously outlined in his 1796 *Regicide Peace*, relying on additional arguments borrowed from Roman public law.¹¹¹ However, as this article has outlined, Burke had in fact developed this position over many years, in the context of his decades-long interest in the Polish question, which had seen him deploy the language of manners in the realm of international policy, to build upon Vattel's ideas of Europe as a "Commonwealth" or "republic" brought together by shared manners and religion.¹¹² In 1772, Poland's partition had prompted Burke to argue that the constitution and domestic politics of individual states mattered greatly for the stability of the European state system – which every member of the European commonwealth was duty-bound to protect. From this premise, it followed naturally that states had a duty to intervene, when domestic politics threatened to endanger the stability of Europe. This was exactly the argument that Burke seized on again to justify intervention against revolutionary France in the mid-1790s.

IV.

After the death of Adam Smith in 1790, Scottish theories of commercial society lived on in the works of a wide network of Scottish historians, politicians and journalists. Ironically, the positions adopted in the 1770s were now reversed: Burke's relative lack of interest for Polish liberty and independence in the 1790s echoed Smith's indifference to the Partition of 1772, while Smith's heirs were now advocating for the right to national independence and sovereignty.¹¹³ One Scot who explicitly targeted Burke's subordination of national independence to European-wide reason of state was James Mackintosh, a young lawyer who had found fame attacking Burke's *Reflections* in the early 1790s. His 1791 pamphlet *Vindiciae Gallicae* presented a Scottish-inspired account of the progress of liberty in Europe, viewed as a "Christian Commonwealth", a "society of nations ... so closely united as to resemble the union of the provinces of a State".¹¹⁴ This Commonwealth, Mackintosh agreed with Burke, was built upon shared manners – but he stood explicitly with the Scots, and against Burke, as he argued that these shared manners were not rooted in chivalry but rather in commerce, which

¹¹¹ Hampsher-Monk, p. 93.

¹¹² Hampsher-Monk recognizes that Burke had a conception of Europe as a "community of states", but also identifies his use of the language of manners to "dispense with the constraints on intervention so firmly embedded in the principles of international law" as a radically new argumentative strategy. *Ibid*, p. 97.

¹¹³ See for instance Millar, *Letters of Crito*; Brougham, 'Appeal of the Poles'.

¹¹⁴ Mackintosh, 'Vindiciae Gallicae', p. 158.

“[presented] a broader basis for the stability of civilized and beneficent manners”.¹¹⁵ Therefore Burke’s fears that he was witnessing “a Revolution, in which the sentiments and opinions that have formed the manners of the European nations are to perish” were unfounded.¹¹⁶ By 1796 however, Mackintosh’s critique of Burke had shifted substantially, from a defence of the French revolutionaries towards a defence of Vattel’s law of nations: correctly identifying the new anti-Vattelian argumentative thrust of Burke’s *Regicide Peace* in his review of the work, Mackintosh argued that “the sacred principle of national independence [was the] great master-principle of public morality”, and the very reason for the existence of the law of nations and of the principle of the Balance of Power.¹¹⁷ In 1799, Mackintosh was still linking his Vattel-inspired conception of international law to the notion of a European commonwealth held together by “that general mildness of character and manners which arose from the combined and progressive influence of chivalry, of commerce, of learning and of religion”, and which “gave to the law that regulated their intercourse greater importance, higher improvement and more binding force”: in this sense, he was making the very point Burke had been arguing in 1772.¹¹⁸ This was not because he had belatedly converted to a Burkean analysis of international relations, but rather because both men shared a similar manners-based understanding of the European commonwealth, which they each deployed to re-interpret, in different directions, Vattelian conceptions of international law.¹¹⁹

Yet the disagreement between Burke and Mackintosh could not have been starker. In his eagerness to undermine Burke’s argument in *Regicide Peace*, Mackintosh now identified “the sacred principle of national independence”, rather than the peace of Europe, as the aim of the balance of power. In doing so he was heralding a concern that would come to dominate nineteenth-century Europe. Burke, conversely, continued to uphold the eighteenth-century consensus that peace, especially in its relationship with manners, commerce and liberty, was the central issue of modern European politics.¹²⁰ Burke’s version of this discourse was always firmly in line with the traditional Balance of Power principle which identified universal

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p. 88.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p. 86.

¹¹⁷ Mackintosh, 'Burke 'on a Regicide Peace', Ctnd', 441.

¹¹⁸ James Mackintosh, 'A Discourse on the Law of Nature and Nations', in Donald Winch, ed., *Vindiciae Gallicae' and Other Writings on the French Revolution* (Indianapolis, 2006), p. 211.

¹¹⁹ Hampsher-Monk points out Mackintosh and Burke’s similar conceptions of the international order, but interprets the “surprising” similarities in terms of Mackintosh recanting previous views to rejoin Burke. Hampsher-Monk, p. 99.

¹²⁰ Bela Kapossy, Isaac Nakhimovsky, and Richard Whatmore, 'Introduction: Power, Prosperity, and Peace in Enlightenment Thought', in Bela Kapossy, Isaac Nakhimovsky, and Richard Whatmore, eds., *Commerce and peace in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 4–6.

dominion as the main threat to peace, and therefore argued that a delicate equilibrium of power must be enforced by the members of the Commonwealth of Europe. But he also shared with enlightened Scots the conviction that the exceptional success of Europe's civilisation was due to its peaceful, commercial and refined manners, which could not have developed without the beneficial influence of the Balance of Power; equally, he agreed with Rousseau that the domestic constitution of each member of the European Commonwealth was directly related to their propensity for peace or violence. Where Burke differed was in his belief that Europe's uniquely peaceful balancing system must be protected at all costs, because it was the cornerstone that would eventually allow all European states to develop the same free constitutions as Britain enjoyed - and it was through his decades-long engagement with the Polish question that this position was crystallised, before it was fully deployed in the context of French republicanism. Unquestionably, Burke's defence of a European Commonwealth reason of state rang true to many of his contemporaries: it was not Mackintosh's "principle of nationality", but rather a modified version of the eighteenth-century's concern for peace - as embodied in the traditional Balance of Power - that was to be enshrined in the Treaty of Vienna in 1815.¹²¹

¹²¹ Ghervas, p. 417.