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The genesis of the first election of Stanisław Leszczyński in 1704 in Voltaire's view

Summary: Voltaire devoted several passages from his *Histoire de Charles XII* (1731) to the history of the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania in the early 18th century. A comparative analysis of different editions of this biography of the king of Sweden – with a great influence not only on public opinion, but especially on historiography – as well as passages taken from marginal notes left by the philosopher at pages of books in his library (famous collection preserved since 1779 in Saint Petersburg) and finally insight in research conducted by Polish historians allowed us to investigate reasons and circumstances of the election of Stanisław Leszczyński in 1704 to the throne of Poland. Our analysis allowed us to confirm a connection between a meeting of Charles XII and Leszczyński in Heilsberg in Ermland (Pol. *Lidzbark Warmiński in Warmia*). The paper highlights also research problems that historians must currently overcome to use, interpret, and understand properly sources written by historiographers, who explored observations of eyewitnesses of the great events of their times.

Keywords: Voltaire, Stanisław Leszczyński, royal election

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There are few persons in the Polish history who could boast a biography so unconventional, so full of unexpected plot twists, its extraordinary ups and downs, vivid adventures – and so much intertwined with important developments in the Polish politics over a period of several dozen years – as that of the heir to a prominent family, Stanisław Leszczyński. This magnate from Greater Poland was elected the king of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – twice; he also got to be the father-in-law of one of the greatest monarchs of the Europe of his time – King Louis XV of France; later, he was awarded the title of Duke of Lorraine and Bar. A great manager, a ruler-philosopher – he has been attracting attention of scholars for centuries. His life events earned him several biographies and without him any account¹ of the two Polish rulers from the Wettin house – Augustus II and Augustus III² – would hardly be complete. The majority of scholars who study the life of Leszczyński have wondered what made him abandon the well-trodden path set by his ancestors and reach the peaks restricted for the greatest European rulers and heroes. Undoubtedly, the key would be the year 1704. It was then that the path of Leszczyński, the young voivode of Poznań, who had just been orphaned by his mighty father, crossed the path of one of the greatest European rulers of the 18th century, his peer – King Charles XII of Sweden. The consequences of this meeting were visible during the election in Warsaw, where, in addition to Augustus II, the ruler of the Commonwealth, another pretender appeared – Stanisław I. We do not know much about the circumstances in which the meeting took place; neither do we know about its immediate consequences – the

¹ J. Feldman, *Stanisław Leszczyński*, 1st edition – Warsaw 1948, 2nd edition – Warsaw 1959, 3rd edition, edited by J. Staszewski, Warsaw 1984; E. Cieślak, *Stanisław Leszczyński*, Wrocław 1994; M. Forycki, *Stanisław Leszczyński. Sarmata i Europejczyk*, Poznań 2006. The figure of Leszczyński attracted also the attention of French historians: L. Sechr-Zembitska, *Stanislas I. Un roi fantasque*, Paris 1999; A. Rossinot, *Stanislas, le roi philosophe*, Neuilly-sur-Seine 1999; A. Muratori-Philip, *Le roi Stanislas*, Paris 2000 (the last biography was also published in Poland: A. Muratori-Philip, *Stanisław Leszczyński. Król – tulacz*, Warsaw 2007) – not to mention numerous works devoted to selected aspects and periods of the king's life.

² J. Staszewski, *August II Mocny*, Wrocław 1998; J. Staszewski, *August III Sas*, Wrocław 1989.

majority of biographies have repeated the same story over decades, basing on a very limited number of sources, only shifting stress and explaining the facts in a slightly different manner.

For a long time, the two 18th century historical pieces served as main historical sources used for the reconstruction of the immediate causes and circumstances of the meeting of Stanisław and Charles XII. They were not long after the described events, and devoted to the Great Northern War and the figure of the Swedish ruler. Both of them, in addition to various available sources, use memories of eye-witnesses and main participants of the events. They are, of course, the books by the great thinker of the Enlightenment period Voltaire and the court chaplain of Charles XII, Jöran Andersson Nordberg.³ In addition to these two texts, 19th and especially 20th century historians used rather scarce documents and correspondence relating to this significant fact to shed some light, if only indirect, on the numerous doubts and hypotheses concerning the meeting.

One of the aforementioned texts deserves a longer investigation as it is an exemplary work of the 18th c. historiography. It exerted a tremendous impact on the formation of the memory of these events and was most likely based on the account of one of the two protagonists. It is worthy of attention, even though many facts, assessments or interpretations described therein were later subjected to criticism.

Ten years after the end of the Great Northern War, a two-volume printed work saw the light of day; it included a surprisingly detailed description and interpretation of the geographically distant conflict from the beginning of the century. The author of this monumental historiographic

³ J.A. Nordberg, *Konung Carl den XII-tes historia*, vol. 1, Stockholm 1740 – among others, this work, in addition to the monumental source edition prepared back in the 18th century by A.Ch. Załuski (*Epistolae historico-familiares*, vol. 1–3, Brunsbergae 1709–1711, vol. 4, Wrocław 1761), was a significant source for Kazimierz Jarochoowski, whose work is considered very important in the Polish historiographic literature and one of the pillars of our knowledge about the initial years of the Saxon period in Poland. It was also this work that Jarochoowski consulted when describing the meeting of Stanisław and Charles on 1 April 1704 and its consequences (K. Jarochoowski, *Dzieje panowania Augusta II od wstąpienia Karola XII na ziemię polską aż do elekcji Stanisława Leszczyńskiego (1702–1704)*, Poznań 1874, p. 566 and subsequent.

argument was Voltaire, 37 at that time and known almost exclusively as a poet. Admittedly, he was already a mature writer, if measured by the writing skill alone. However, he had not written much⁴ yet and there was very little to suggest that he would soon become one of the most versatile and influential propagators of the Enlightenment.

The publication of *Histoire de Charles XII roi de Suède* (*The History of King Charles XII of Sweden*)⁵ won him renown. The book became a huge success – in the 18th century alone it was re-published over sixty times.⁶ Furthermore, the author attended to the quality of his work for over four decades, amending it and changing the evaluation of the described events, as the growing time distance allowed him to form a more balanced judgement.

Voltaire probably never spent more time and effort on any of his works. In addition to extraordinary thoroughness he showed when collecting various source materials for the reconstruction and recreation of the armed confrontation between the Coalition and Sweden, he also used his poetic skills to enrich his narrative with accurate suggestive and interpretational power – which has become the very reason why the reliability of this argument is criticised today. But it is thanks to this combination of discourses – as rightly pointed out by Gunnar von Proschwitz – that the text is considered not only a piece of history, but also of art.⁷

Stanisław Leszczyński was a major figure in Voltaire's life and work. The discussion herein will resolve around the presentation of Voltaire's

⁴ Here one might stress the fact that this text, being one of the most important works of the philosopher, was written relatively early; one might imagine that in a 100-volume long collection of all Voltaire's works, the *History of Charles XII* would fit in the second or, at maximum, the third volume.

⁵ Voltaire, *Histoire de Charles XII*, edited by G. von Proschwitz, in: *Les œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. IV, Oxford 1996. All the quotations from the philosopher's works have been translated for the purposes of this article on the basis of the most reliable present collection of all Voltaire's works, published by Oxford.

⁶ The dozens of French editions can be complemented with numerous XVIII century and later translations, among which we also find Polish ones: by Augustyn Kandyi, *Dzieje Karola XII, króla szwedzkiego, przez Woltera*, Kraków 1800 as well as Zygmunt Światopełk Słupski's, *Drugi najazd szwedzki (Karol XII)*, Poznań 1905.

⁷ G. von Proschwitz, *Introduction*, in: Voltaire, *Histoire de Charles XII*, p. 84.

account of the determinants of Stanisław Leszczyński's rise to the throne of Poland in 1704. However, before we proceed to analyse the respective passages of the narrative, it is worth taking a deeper look at some issues which definitely had an impact on it.

Firstly, one should outline Voltaire's attitude towards the unexpected events in the life of Stanisław's family in the second half of the twenties of the 18th c. – and let us not forget that this was the time when the philosopher was thinking about the construction of his first historical work and collecting source materials for the description of the life of his Swedish protagonist.

The historical materials concerning the relations between Voltaire and Leszczyński which are known to us are ambiguous. Officially, the king of Poland treated the philosopher favourably, and the latter returned the affection with poetic support for the king.⁸ In this perspective, Voltaire saw Stanisław first and foremost as the father to the queen of France and the father-in-law to Louis XV; in short – a family head, the Polish patriarch of the French royal couple. In his characteristic subservient manner, he praised the marriage between the king and the Polish princess at the same time stressing the historical significance of the Polish-Sarmatian father and father-in-law:

Fille de ce guerrier qu'une sage province
Eleva justement au comble des honneurs,
Qui sut vivre en héros, en philosophe, en prince,
Au-dessus des revers, au-dessus des grandeurs [...].⁹

⁸ In the late forties of the XVIII century, Voltaire and his lover Émilie du Châtelet were three times guests at Stanisław Leszczyński's mansion in Lorraine (see P. Boyé, *La cour de Lunéville en 1748–1749 ou Voltaire chez le roi Stanislas*, Nancy 1891). During his visits to Leszczyński and throughout the subsequent decade, Voltaire treated Stanisław and his Polish company friendly and with esteem, which is reflected, for example, in the favourable treatment of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the *Essay on the customs* (Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, published by B. Bernard, J. Renwick, N. Cronk, J. Godden, vol. I–II, in: *Les œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. XXI–XXII, Oxford 2009).

⁹ “You, daughter of the warrior whose province so wise / Has been justly elevated with grandeur to the skies / And the mighty, understanding royal countenance / Puts it above

Off the record, however, Voltaire was not only more reserved, but also made rather sardonic comments on Stanisław Leszczyński or his daughter. The hypocrisy of the *claqueur*, who was interested primarily in winning the monarch's favour, is well preserved in a fragment of a letter from the same period, in which he ridiculed the idea of the marriage between Louis XV and Maria Leszczyńska: „Hier à dix heures et demie le roi déclara qu'il épousait la princesse de Pologne, et en parut très content”, making rather insolent remarks on the king and the court: „Il donna son pied à baiser à monsieur d'Epéron et son cul à M. De Maurepas, et reçut les compliments de toute sa cour”.¹⁰ This shows that even though the official relations between Voltaire and Stanisław were very good, the philosopher's attitude was characterised by duplicity, which was, to an extent, reflected also in the comments concerning the voivode of Poznań being elected the king of the Commonwealth in 1704.

The importance of the direct influence Stanisław Leszczyński had on the contents of the *History of Charles XII* – which is of immediate interest to us – is, however, much greater. That is because the king had an opportunity to recount the events to Voltaire, thus personally shaping the narrative and suggesting amendments to this seminal publication. The fact that we do not have any materials by Leszczyński himself makes it difficult to evaluate his impact on the contents of the French sources on the Great Northern War. The author himself makes repeatable comments to the effect that the king was one of his closest informants. When describing the events following the defeat at Poltava, Voltaire unanimously identified the main source

any obstacle, any importance [...]”, Voltaire, *Vers présentés à la feuë Reine, en 1725*, in: Voltaire, *Œuvres de 1723–1728*, edited by N. Cronk et al., vol. I, in: *Les œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. IIIA, Oxford 2004, p. 303.

¹⁰ “Yesterday at half past ten, the king announced that he will marry the Polish princess and he seemed to be extraordinarily happy about this. He let mister d'Epéron kiss his foot, and Mr De Maurepas – his back side, and then he accepted best wishes from the entire court”, *Voltaire's Correspondence*, edited by T. Besterman, vol. I, 1704–1725, Genève 1953, D 233.

of his knowledge: “le roi de Pologne Stanislas, qui m’a fait l’honneur de m’apprendre la plupart de ces particularités, m’a confirmé [...]”.¹¹

It shows clearly that when first constructing, and then amending, his first historical dissertation, Voltaire did not only use numerous published books and collections of materials, making accurate comparisons of their contents, but he also approached the participants of the events from different socio-political groups, starting with ‘small fries’ and ending with the Polish king. The extraordinary accounts of Stanisław Leszczyński and Stanisław Poniatowski¹² greatly enriched the immense body of material gathered by the author. On the other hand, the fact that Voltaire highlighted the historical role played by the most important Polish allies of the Swedish king definitely won them great renown in the West.

Voltaire’s first historical work focuses on the analysis of the eponymous figure and his actions as well as his conflict with Tsar Peter I. The Swedish-Russian conflict naturally dominates the narrative, but the Polish matters remain a necessary complement thereto. This hierarchy of priorities prompted the French writer to include a more detailed description of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (in particular, the peculiarities of its government system¹³) only later on in the narrative: specifically when

¹¹ “The Polish King Stanisław, who did me the honour of informing me about these details, has confirmed that [...]”, Voltaire, *Histoire de Charles XII*, pp. 466–467.

¹² The inquisitiveness of the historian Voltaire is well attested thanks to, for example, the list of questions he addressed to Stanisław Poniatowski (the survey included such issues as: *Did Augustus II and Stanisław meet personally in Altranstädt?*). Cf. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, F 9722, f. 136–139; [S. Poniatowski] *Remarques d’un seigneur polonais sur l’Histoire de Charles XII, roi de Suède [...] par Monsieur de Voltaire*, La Haie 1741. Cf. also: K. Kantecki, *Stanisław Poniatowski, kasztelan krakowski, ojciec Stanisława Augusta*, vol. 1, Poznań 1880.

¹³ On Voltaire’s attitude towards Polish matters, see in particular: E. Rostworowski, *Voltaire et la Pologne*, in: *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, vol. LXII, Genève 1968, pp. 101–121; in: idem, *Wolter a Polska*, „Kwartalnik Historyczny” 1968, vol. 74 (4), pp. 849–864; S. Fiszer, *L’image de la Pologne et des Polonais dans l’œuvre de Voltaire*, Oxford 2001; M. Forycki, *Anarchia polska w myśli Oświecenia. Francuski obraz Rzeczypospolitej szlacheckiej u progu czasów stanisławowskich*, Poznań 2004. For a discussion of the problem, cf. M. Forycki, *Emanuela Rostworowskiego badania nad polonikami Woltera*, in: *W kręgu badaczy dziejów politycznych XVIII wieku. Józef Feldman – Emanuel Rostworowski – Jerzy Michalski*, ed. W. Kriegeseisen, Z. Zielińska, Warszawa 2010, pp. 57–66.

Charles XII, after the victory at the Daugava (1701), stopped in Biržai and made plans concerning the country in which he found himself.¹⁴ The chronicler used a very interesting rhetorical device to present this episode. First – through a longish, general and statistics-based presentation of the country of the Polish nobility – he drew the reader’s attention away from the subject of his discussion, to focus it on the dynamics of the events in the years preceding the election of Stanisław. Thanks to this technique, for several pages, the Polish matters were presented as important enough, so that the Western European reader appreciated them when learning about Charles’s decisions in the period between the Battles of Narva and Poltava.

It must be admitted that Voltaire introduced the name Leszczyński into his narrative on Charles XII in a very unfortunate manner. He highlighted the figure of one of the family members – not called by his first name, unfortunately – as a key actor who had an influence on the politics of the state at the very beginning of the 18th century. For a Western European reader without an in-depth understanding of the Polish reality, the association with the French ruler’s father-in-law was self-evident. Thus, the figure of the future king seems to appear in the remote background of the events from 1701, which in Voltaire’s account are, so to say, the first accords of the genesis of the future election. The chronicler described the situation in the second half of that year as a state of chaos, in which Augustus II was dramatically in need of a strong army, however the Polish noblemen demanded that sejm be gathered.¹⁵ He explained to his fellow men – subjects of the absolute king – that Wettin had to concede, so as to avoid the entire nobility rallying against him. When the representatives were coming to Warsaw, Augustus II allegedly realised that among the gathered people, the king of Sweden had no less influence than himself. Among the silent supporters of Charles XII, the French writer listed the supporters of the princes Sobieski, the faction of the Sapieha and Lubomirski families and, indeed, “le palatin Leczinsky, trésorier de la couronne, (qui devait sa fortune au roi

¹⁴ Voltaire, *Histoire de Charles XII*, pp. 227–236.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that in order to explain the role of the Polish Sejm, Voltaire reminded his readers that similar situations took place in England, where in tough times the political elites asked the king to order a parliament meeting.

Auguste)”.¹⁶ Even the renowned publishers of the work were convinced that this was Stanisław. They did not realise that the first mention of the famous Greater Polish name in Voltaire's work referred to the father of the future king, unknown in the West, but very influential in that time's Commonwealth – Rafał Leszczyński, the voivode of Łęczyca, promoted to the high ministry office of Crown Treasurer as late as on 9 May 1702.¹⁷ It is clear that the author combined two unfamiliar offices, which could not be held simultaneously, into one. Similarly, it is difficult to agree with Voltaire's statement that Rafał Leszczyński owed his success to Augustus II. In fact, the position of the family had been established for many generations before.

Let us mention here a very interesting piece of evidence showing that Voltaire, even though erroneous at times, kept quite accurate information about Stanisław Leszczyński; for example, when reading the diaries of Vincent Bacallara y Saña concerning the history of Spain, the famous philosopher came across – in the year 1701 – the statement that Stanisław, as the new pretender to the Polish crown, fought Augustus.¹⁸ He marked it on the margin as an error: „il netait / pas encor / question / de Stanislas / jeune / gentilhome / qui fesait / le tour de / la france / avec le / messenger”.¹⁹

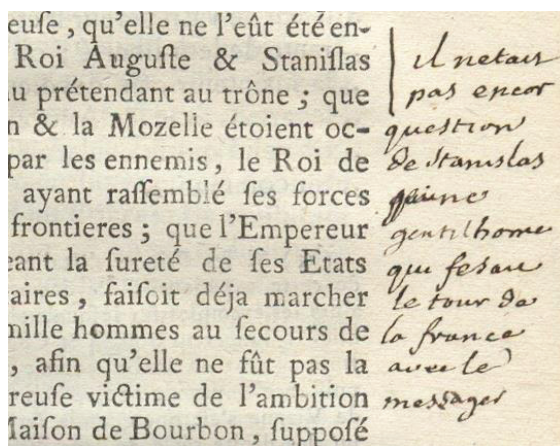
¹⁶ „[...] the voivode Leszczyński, Crown Treasurer (who owed his success to King Augustus)”, *ibidem*, p. 236.

¹⁷ Rafał Leszczyński held the office of the voivode of Łęczyca in 1692–1702 together with the office of the General Starost of Greater Poland (in order to assume the latter, which was considered very influential in the Greater Poland province, he gave up the high senator's office – that of the voivode of Poznań). By accepting the office of Crown Treasurer, he obviously automatically gave up the office of the voivode of Łęczyca (*Urzednicy województw łęczyckiego i sieradzkiego XVI–XVIII wieku. Spisy*, ed. E. Opaliński, H. Żerek-Kleszcz, Kórnik 1993, p. 99; *Urzednicy centralni i nadworni Polski XIV–XVIII wieku. Spisy*, ed. by the editorial collective, Kórnik 1992, p. 126).

¹⁸ V. Bacallar y Saña, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire d'Espagne, sous le règne de Philippe V* [...], trans. L.-L. de Féderbe, comte de Maudave, vol. I, Amsterdam 1756, pp. 94–95. The work is currently kept by the Russian National Library in Petersburg and belongs to the famous Voltaire's private collection, purchased by Catherine II. Cf. Библиотека Вольтера, П Ч И 4–46.

¹⁹ “There had been no mention of Stanisław, the young nobleman who travelled France with a valet (guardian), at that time yet”.

The poor handwriting and the evident mistake concerning Stanisław's tour of France in 1701²⁰ should not discourage us from making the crucial remark that when reading a text on a very remote topic, upon encountering a piece of information about the conflict between Augustus II and Leszczyński, Voltaire – almost certainly using his own memory and, as if, 'automatically' – pointed out a chronological mistake and also remembered that the young Polish nobleman toured France.



Voltaire's handwritten margin remark on Stanisław Leszczyński
From the collection of the Voltaire Library (Petersburg), П Ч И 4-46

²⁰ Thanks to the fact that a copy of the passport issued to young Stanisław Leszczyński by the Crown's Secretary Office on 27 April 1695 has recently been found in the Crown's Metric, we know when the journey – a significant stage of which the visit to France obviously was – could start (AGAD, Metryka Koronna, Sigillaty 15, p. 86 – the authors would like to thank dr Urszula Kosińska from the University of Warsaw for this information). The journey ended earlier than planned due to the death of Jan III Sobieski and the beginning of the interregnum period in June 1696 – Rafał Leszczyński called for his son to return to the country, because he knew that at that moment he could start his political career. Of course, back then, he could hardly foresee the bright future that was awaiting his son (J. Feldman, *Stanisław Leszczyński*, p. 41; E. Cieślak, *Stanisław Leszczyński*, pp. 33–34; M. Forycki, *Stanisław Leszczyński*, pp. 35–36). Let us also note in this case the lack of vigilance and knowledge of the otherwise reliable publishers of Voltaire's texts: *Corpus des notes marginales de Voltaire*, vol. I: *A-Buzonnière*, N. Elaguina (publishers), in: *Les œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. CXXXVI, Oxford 2008, pp. 184–185, 639 (note 117); unfortunately, this was typical of publications touching upon Polish issues.

Turning back to the narrative of the *History of Charles XII*, let us first note that in the eyes of Voltaire, the most influential figure on the Polish political scene in the years preceding the election of 1704 was Primate and Cardinal Michał Stefan Radziejowski (in Voltaire's transcription in the rather funny form *Radjowsky* [pronunciation: 'Razhousky']). The French writer presented this figure in more detail, highlighting in particular the dark side of his character; he did not miss the opportunity to stress the influence that his lover, *Madame la cardinal*, had on him; of course, she was his cousin, Konstancja z Niszczyckich Towiańska (Konstancja Towiańska née Niszczycka), the wife of the voivode of Łęczyca.²¹

Absent from this detailed account of the events in 1701, Stanisław appeared for the first time only (and truly as himself!) in a commentary on the meeting of Charles XII with Prince Aleksander Sobieski.²² The son of Jan III came to the victor of Narva in order to ask to avenge the seizure of his brothers, Jakub and Konstanty. Meanwhile, the king of Sweden, who was interested mainly in having an ally on the Polish throne, proposed the crown to Aleksander. Charles's allies, including the Polish magnates, welcomed this candidacy. However, Prince Sobieski turned it down, stating that nothing could make him take advantage of the misery of his brother.²³ It is in this solemn moment of Voltaire's narrative that "le jeune palatin de Posnanie, Stanislas Leczinsky"²⁴ appears, trying most fervently to convince Aleksander to go in his father's kingly footsteps. Like in a good theatre play, the act – filled with heroic and tragic deeds (here: volume II) ends with a total surprise to the audience (European elites), who – as the author himself notes – did not know whom they should admire more: "un roi de

²¹ R. Kawecki, *Kardynał Michał Stefan Radziejowski (1645–1705)*, Opole 2005.

²² Voltaire, *Histoire de Charles XII*, p. 261.

²³ In-depth information concerning the circumstances of the seizure of Jakub and Konstanty Sobieski as well as the proposal for Prince Aleksander to take the throne and his refusal to do so are known to us thanks to the recently published book: A. Skrzypietz, *Królewscy synowie – Jakub, Aleksander i Konstanty Sobiescy*, Katowice 2011, p. 406 and subsequent. The author suggests that there were other reasons for the prince's refusal in addition to reluctance to take up the position which his brother was entitled to.

²⁴ "The young voivode of Poznań, Stanisław Leszczyński", Voltaire, *Histoire de Charles XII*, p. 261.

Suède qui à l'âge de vingt-deux ans donnait le couronne de Pologne, ou le prince Alexandre qui la refusait".²⁵ For us, however, the most important thing is that the newly introduced character, Stanisław Leszczyński, will soon face a similar dilemma, further reinforced by the lack of allegiance to the Sobieski family.

The third volume of the *History of Charles XII* opens with a description of an event which is of key importance for our discussion here – the meeting of the Swedish monarch with the voivode of Poznań in Heilsberg (Lidzbark Warmiński) at the beginning of April 1704. Leszczyński was sent there for negotiations with Charles XII as the head of the deputation from the confederation gathering, held at that time in Warsaw under the command of Primate Radziejowski.²⁶ One should note that this is one of the parts of the work which Voltaire repeatedly amended; the changes which he introduced are important for his interpretation of the genesis of the election of 1704, which subsequently shaped the Western European view of these events. Our basic text must be the last edition reviewed by the author, i.e. the one from 1775.²⁷ although the earliest editions, i.e. two from Basil – dated 1731 and 1732 – and one from Amsterdam – dated 1739 – are important as well.²⁸

It is clear that the first meeting of Charles XII with Leszczyński was, in the opinion of Voltaire, of absolutely key importance for the election of 1704. A certain short conversation which took place at that moment was, in his view, truly extraordinary and constituted "l'unique brigade qui mit

²⁵ "The king of Sweden, who at the age of 22 nominated the Polish king, or Prince Aleksander, who rejected the proposal", *ibidem*.

²⁶ J. Poraziński, *Epiphania Poloniae. Orientacje i postawy polityczne szlachty polskiej w dobie wielkiej wojny północnej (1702–1710)*, Toruń 1999, p. 50. The mission, however, was a political fiasco due to the uncompromising attitude of Charles XII, which even temporarily threatened the unity of the party opposing Augustus II.

²⁷ Voltaire, *Histoire de Charles XII. Roi de Suède, avec les pièces qui y sont relatives*, in: *idem, Œuvres complètes*, vol. XXI, [Genève] 1775. All the differences in the narrative concerning the meeting of Charles XII with Stanisław Leszczyński have been very dilligently noted in the aforementioned, reliable Oxford edition (1996), to which we are referring our Reader in the selection of quotations from the 18th c. prints of the work.

²⁸ Voltaire, *Histoire de Charles XII. Roi de Suède*, vol. I–II, Amsterdam 1739.

Stanislas sur le trône”.²⁹ The unanimous statement that it was this short conversation which settled all the issues with the Polish crown – repeated with full force in all the several dozen editions of *Histoire de Charles XII* – had to become an axiom in the West. That is because its source was one of the key thinkers of Enlightenment, an unquestionable authority on the matters of the “North”, in particular on the conflict from the beginning of the century.

Voltaire's ‘sole intrigue’ began when a representative of the confederacy of Warsaw,³⁰ young Stanisław Leszczyński (in early editions of the work, i.e. those preceding Leszczyński's reign in Lorraine, the author made it clear that he was the son of the Grand Crown Treasurer who had recently died) came to Charles XII. The envoy was supposed to report to the Swedish king on Polish internal affairs since the seizure of Prince Jakub Sobieski.

Two things, in the opinion of the chronicler, contributed largely to the unexpected effect of the meeting. Firstly, the appearance and character of the magnate, which he described as good-natured, combining confidence with gentleness and, at the same time, emanating righteousness and honesty. The second decisive factor was wisdom with which the voivode of Poznań explained the intricacies of the Polish internal politics to the Swede. Leszczyński made a huge impression on Charles XII.

Then, the aforementioned foreground short conversation took place – which in the view of Voltaire was the sole reason for the election of Stanisław Leszczyński in 1704. In the early editions of the work, the author – not so popular and not so vain yet – made the reservation that “la postérité aura peine à croire ce que je vais raconter et ce que je sais à n'en pouvoir douter”.³¹ Allegedly, Leszczyński complained that after Prince Sobieski's refusal,³² no other candidate can be found who would deserve the throne, to which Charles XII allegedly asked, why should not Stanisław

²⁹ ”The sole intrigue which elevated Stanisław to the throne”, Voltaire, *Histoire de Charles XII*, p. 265.

³⁰ Voltaire calls the confederacy “l'assemblée de Varsovie” (the assembly of Warsaw), which in the broader context of the work can make the reader mistake it for the sejm, allegedly held in Warsaw.

³¹ “Future generations will hardly believe what I am about to say, but myself I have no doubts that it is true”, *ibidem*, quote from the 1739 edition.

³² Voltaire erroneously named Jakub instead of Aleksander.

become the king. In the eyes of the chronicler, the question was meant to be a figure of speech, but the answer soon became obvious, even though it came as a surprise to the public.

In the later editions, the matter turned out to be even graver, as Voltaire wrote that King Stanisław himself did him the honour and repeated, in Latin, the decisive words which were spoken during that meeting. Two decisive rhetorical questions were reported. Leszczyński asked how the election should proceed given that two princes Sobieski, Jakub and Konstany, were held in captivity. To this, Charles XII replied by asking the question whether the Commonwealth could be saved without holding the election?³³ In the seminal work of Voltaire, this short exchange of questions became the foreground cause of the election of Stanisław Leszczyński in 1704. Then Charles deliberately prolonged the meeting in order to get to know the voivode of Poznań better. He asked detailed questions about the young Pole, finding many traits that the two shared.

The 'sole reason' of Stanisław's election does not equal saying that Charles XII decided immediately, i.e. during the first conversation, that he should put the voivode of Poznań on the Polish throne. This issue is more complicated. It is true that in the early editions of the work, the Swedish monarch, when leaving the meeting venue, pointed Leszczyński out to his two generals, saying that this was the king he was going to give to Poles. The decision was as quick as it was unexpected; the words were elevated and prophetic – this particularly effective rhetorical device that Voltaire achieved came, unfortunately, at the expense (perhaps unknowingly) of the true account of the course of events. It was pointed out to Voltaire some ten years after the publication of the work by the chaplain of Charles XII, Jöran Andersson Nordberg, who described the life of his ruler on the instruction of queen Ulrica Eleanor.³⁴ The arguments offered by the Swede were logi-

³³ "Le roi Stanislas m'a fait l'honneur de me raconter qu'il dit en latin au roi de Suède: *Comment pourrons-nous faire une élection, si les deux princes Jacques et Constantin Sobiesky sont captifs ?* et que Charles lui répondit, *Comment délivrera-t-on la république, si on ne fait pas une élection ?* Cette conversation", *ibidem*.

³⁴ J.A. Nordberg, *Konung Carl den XII-tes historia*; for the edition which Voltaire consulted, cf. *idem*, *Histoire de Charles XII, roi de Suède*, trans. J.A. Nordberg [K.-G. Warmholtz], vol. I–III, La Haye 1742.

cal: how could the monarch have taken the final decision already at that moment, if not long after he offered the Polish throne to Prince Aleksander Sobieski. In the editions of the *History of Charles XII* published after 1748, Voltaire replaced the scene with the generals with no less spectacular, but historically more acceptable one:

Il [Karol XII] dit tout haut après la conférence : *Voilà un homme qui sera toujours mon ami*; et on s'aperçut bientôt que ces mots signifiaient : *Voilà un homme qui sera roi*.³⁵

One should remember that at the time of the meeting, other candidacies for the throne were still considered after the potential refusal of the Sobieskis: Prince Conti put forward by the Primate as well as Polish candidates, mentioned in numerous discussions: Castellan of Krakow and Grand Crown Hetman Hieronim Lubomirski, Leszczyński's uncle, Ruthenian voivode Jan Stanisław Jabłonowski, the voivode of Kiev Józef Potocki, the recently nominated Grand Lithuanian Hetman Michał Wiśniowiecki, Lithuanian Treasurer Benedykt Paweł Sapieha (relieved of his office by Augustus II in 1703) or the voivode of Sieradz Jan Chryzostom Pieniążek.³⁶ Some of them were still unable to give up their support for Augustus II, others were disqualified due to their elderly age, lack of political supporters or excessive ambitions, which were contrary to Charles XII's plans.

The interpretation given by Voltaire, which – we now know – was inspired to a large extent by Stanisław Leszczyński himself, was elaborated on by the Swedish historian Gustaf Jonasson, who stressed the fact that the cooperation with Sweden had already been established by Rafał Leszczyński and the son only continued it actively as the leader of the confederacy of Greater Poland. But he also mentioned the fact that Swedish sources confirm the friendly relations between Charles and Stanisław,

³⁵ “After the meeting [Charles XII] said aloud: *This man shall always remain my friend*, and it was quickly recognised that these words meant: *This man shall be the king*”, Voltaire, *Histoire de Charles XII*, p. 266.

³⁶ J. Feldman, *Stanisław Leszczyński*, p. 50; E. Cieślak, *Stanisław Leszczyński*, p. 42; J. Staszewski, *August II Mocny*, p. 154, 155 – he considered the candidacy of Hetman Lubomirski to be the only serious one.

which dated back to the meeting in Lidzbark Warmiński.³⁷ In the Polish literature, Voltaire's text was commented on by the unrivalled expert on the Saxon period in the Polish history Jacek Staszewski.³⁸ He stressed that thanks to the results of Kazimierz Jarochoński's studies, later developed significantly by Jarosław Poraziński, we know that after the death of his father, Stanisław Leszczyński naturally became the leader of the main, organised anti-Augusts political force in Greater Poland, which provided the foundation for the entire confederacy of Warsaw; by the way, its marshal was a politician from Greater Poland, Piotr Jakub Bronisz – the starost of Pyzdry and the secretary of the great deputation to Turkey in 1700, a fellow of Rafał Leszczyński. The young voivode was very active since the beginning of 1704 and in particular during the assembly of Warsaw. For this reason, after the fall of Sobieski's candidacy, previously supported by Charles, Leszczyński was the only alternative candidate to have a solid political support from the nobility.³⁹ Recent studies by Michał Zwierzykowski put this support in Greater Poland in a less favourable light, as Augusts still had quite a lot of supporters under the command of the Radomicki family; still, the Swedish ruler could be ignorant of the intricacies of the provincial power relations and believe the official propaganda of the proponents of the confederacy of Warsaw.⁴⁰

³⁷ G. Jonasson, *Karl XII und Polen 1700–1706*, in: *Changes in two Baltic countries. Poland and Sweden in the eighteenth century*, Poznań 1990, p. 143.

³⁸ J. Staszewski, he formulated these arguments already in the introduction to the 3rd edition of Leszczyński's biography, written by J. Feldman (J. Feldman, *Stanisław Leszczyński*, note on pp. 51–52), and then repeated them with much more force in his article: *Leszczyński – inny niż znany*, in: *Strefa bałtycka w XVI–XVIII w. Polityka – Społeczeństwo – Gospodarka*, Gdańsk 1993, pp. 63–70.

³⁹ J. Poraziński, *Opozycja wielkopolska na początku wojny północnej (1702–1703)*, „Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici, Historia” 1985, vol. 20 (158), pp. 97–111; idem., *Epiphania Poloniae*, p. 57. Cf. also: R. Martens, *Die absetzung des Königs August II. von Polen*, “Zeitschrift des Westpreussischen Geschichtsvereins” 1882, vol. 8, p. 76 and “Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici, Historia” 1985.

⁴⁰ M. Zwierzykowski, *Samorząd sejmikowy województw poznańskiego i kaliskiego w latach 1696–1732*, Poznań 2010, p. 190 and subsequent. Also the position of Stanisław Leszczyński's father, Rafał, in the last months of his life (he died in Oleśnica, on his way to Wrocław, 31 I 1703) was harmed by his overt opposition to the monarch, who was still

The details of the act of election of 1704 – a sad, grotesque event which was humiliating for the elect himself, as it was carried out exactly per the Swedish instructions – were presented by Jarochoowski and complemented by Ludwik Finkel and then subsequent biographers of Leszczyński,⁴¹ therefore they will not be discussed here. Still, even the small portion of Voltaire's work, when subjected to an in-depth investigation, shows how complicated the pursuit for truth about distant events is. It is perhaps even more difficult in the situation when historians undertook their work to describe the facts shortly after they occurred. Using accounts of witnesses and participants does not always make it possible to get closer to the truth, and sometimes it even makes it more difficult. Any historian who studies contemporary history would surely agree.

The study of the causes of the extraordinary election of Stanisław Leszczyński in 1704 still make us ponder on the role of chance in history. Ludwik Finkel wrote:

The meeting of the future king-maker with the future elect in Heilsberg (Lidzbark Warmiński) in early April 1704 is one of the episodes which offer a particularly attractive field for a chronicler interested in studying the role that chance can play in history. But for the purely accidental meeting of the two, Poland would not have had the double reign of Leszczyński; there would be no Lunéville and no subsequent reformatory and educational activities.⁴²

In spite of the lapse of decades and the progress made in the study of the Saxon period of the Polish history, we are inclined to agree with him. Chance and the meeting surely played an important role; however, the reasons which made the king of Sweden take the decision about the choice

quite broadly accepted, and his collaboration with Sweden. He was rather successfully presented as a traitor by the proponents of the Wettin monarch.

⁴¹ K. Jarochoowski, *Dzieje panowania Augusta II*; L. Finkel, *Elekcja Leszczyńskiego w roku 1704 wedle broszur współczesnych*, „Przewodnik Naukowy i Literacki” 1884, vol. 12 (1), pp. 40–59.

⁴² L. Finkel, *Stanisław Leszczyński*, p. 49.

of the candidate, and the role of Leszczyński in this process, still remain unclear.⁴³

⁴³ Already after the first publication of this article in Polish, in 2016, M. Zwierzykowski published another article in which, basing on new sources, he continued the discussion of the topic of the ‘making of’ of Charles XII’s decision concerning the election of Stanisław Leszczyński in 1704, cf. M. Zwierzykowski, *Elekcja Stanisława Leszczyńskiego w roku 1704 – wynik przypadku czy efekt działań politycznych?*, in: *Wokół wolnych elekcji w państwie polsko-litewskim XVI–XVIII wieku. O znaczeniu idei wyboru – między prawami a obowiązkami*, eds M. Markiewicz, D. Rolnik, F. Wolański, Katowice 2016, pp. 388–406. In the conclusion of that text, he wrote: “It is absolutely clear that today we cannot accept, as the only answer, the argument about the role of chance in history, pointing to the chief role of the meeting in Lidzbark, which took place around 30 March 1704. Today, we can be certain that without other significant reasons, Stanisław Leszczyński would never have become the king. Firstly, we should point to the traditions of the Leszczyński family and the heritage Stanisław received from his father in the form of a strong position on the political scene of Greater Poland. Equally important are actions of Augustus II, who, by choosing Greater Poland as his supporters, ultimately chose the opponents of the Leszczyński brothers – the Radomicki brothers as well as officials and noblemen affiliated with them. He showed this preference as early as during the council meeting in Malbork, shortly after the death of Rafał Leszczyński; later he stuck with this decision. Furthermore, Augustus II, as evidenced in the correspondence of Godlewski, made a series of mistakes, missing the opportunity to end the confederacy of Warsaw at any of its crisis moments; finally, the seizure of Jakub Sobieski, which successfully eliminated the Sobieski family from the candidates to the throne, was also important. In addition, the position of Stanisław Leszczyński was also reinforced by the activities of the confederacy of Greater Poland, even though its factual achievements and power were significantly neutralised by the opponents under the command of the Radomicki brothers. For Charles XII, Stanisław remained uninterruptedly the head of the confederates of Greater Poland (even though the first position, factually and justly, should be given to the more experienced and reasonable Piotr Bronisz), and the confederacy appeared to be the only serious political power to oppose the unfaithful ruler Augustus. Paradoxically, the illusory character of the power of the confederacy of Greater Poland was revealed immediately after the election, when Greater Poland was captured for many months by the proponents of the Wettin monarch. They were removed only by a Swedish intervention. It can definitely be said that all these elements together with the meeting in Lidzbark contributed equally to Stanisław Leszczyński’s success in the politics of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Europe which greatly exceeded that of any of his ancestors.”