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Unwilling Allies - the Polish-Prussian Alliance of 1790

Almost two decades after the First Partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Prussia - one of its participants - became estranged from European powers. Meanwhile, the Commonwealth sought an opportunity to pass a series of to modernise the state. Both countries struggled to re-establish a diplomatic foothold in Europe amidst fluctuations caused by the political upheavals of the second to last decade of the 18th century.

The situation brought two former opponents together. Both states decided to negotiate a mutual defence alliance to secure their goals and establish a counterweight against Austria or Russia. Prussia's goal was to exploit Polish internal chaos and, during a series of drawn negotiations and debates, use the threat of such an alliance to exercise pressure on Austria and Russia. The Commonwealth, instead of stalling, quickly decided to enter the alliance which was seen by the establishment as an opportunity to break from the Russian sphere of influence and pass the reforms under the protection of one of the foremost military powers in Europe.

The treaty, signed on March 29th, 1790, quickly became void due to Prussia's lack of enthusiasm towards the Commonwealth's internal reforms known as the Constitution of 3 May 1791. Two years after signing the alliance Prussia declined assistance when Russian invaded the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, as well as participated in the Second Partition of the Commonwealth.

The Polish-Prussian Alliance of 1790 serves as an example of how an opportunistic conqueror can shift sides and use agreements with its former victims as leverage in diplomatic relations with other states interested in expanding their borders. Moreover, this alliance also illustrates how an insincere ally can hinder a state's defensive preparations due to false predictions of available forces and political situation in case of war.