Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to WDF’s examination of Poland in the 18th century, in this our fifth episode of the PM. Last time we unwrapped exactly how deadly the underestimations of Frederick IV of Denmark, Peter of Russia and Augustus of Saxony had been, when they attacked Charles XII of Sweden and opened the first phase of the GNW. This first phase essentially involved everyone getting massively owned if their name wasn’t Sweden, and when we left our coverage last time the Battle of Narva had just occurred, wherein Charles’ Swedish legions had utterly smashed their Russian enemy in their failing siege. The loss was a critical blow toe Peter, who had made his way to Novgorod in the days’ before to ensure the defence of Narva ran smoothly, having absolutely no idea that Sweden’s 18 year old King would be crazy enough to launch such a daring attack against such overwhelming odds. Narva was the first taste for both Peter and his Saxon ally that all was not going to be as straightforward as had been expected. Denmark was forced from the war, Augustus had not formalised Poland-Lithuania’s status, so far acting only in his position as Elector of Saxony, and Peter now lacked any substance of any army since losing the guts of 25k men in a single day.

It would take some time for Peter to rebuild, but while he did so in December 1700, he was aware that Charles XII was considering carefully his next move – should he move with a vengeance against his Saxon cousin, and sort out this confusing business with the Polish Commonwealth, or should he turn his attention to Russia and finish her off? While insisting that all must not lose their heads, Peter indeed feared that the triumphant Swedish king would focus his attentions on him. Considering this, Peter moved his agents abroad, particularly to The Hague and Vienna, while Augustus was moved to talk properly with his Commonwealth nobles. These nobles suspected that Charles would take offence to the shielding of Augustus’ Saxon forces, when the Polish Commonwealth’s status in the war had not been confirmed, and they were right. All these events and overlapping concerns were compounded by the news that the utterly miserable Carlos II of Spain had recently died, and in his will had left all of Spain’s goods to Louis XIV’s grandson Philip. With Western Europe gearing up for a response, it seemed that conflict might reign everywhere. Still, camped in his Baltic provinces, the person of Charles XII remained resolute, as he determined where to focus his wrath next. Let’s have a look at these latest developments then, and how they came to impact Poland-Lithuania’s supremely unprepared King…

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Try as he might, Andrei Matveev could not find success. Sent by his master Tsar Peter to The Hague to seek an audience with William of Orange, and to plead Russia’s case in the hope that Dutch mediation could be brought in, Matveev found his Dutch hosts distracted and sunken with despair. The King of Spain, it was said, had granted everything to their great enemy, and now war was destined to erupt on the continent yet again. Finally, when granted an audience with William, Matveev found the Stadtholder-King both single-minded and exhausted. The process of ruling both polities in the Dutch Republic and the British Isles weighed heavily upon him, and the issue of the Spanish throne which had plagued European relations for decades added further stresses to the process. The Spanish Habsburg dynasty, which had so dominated Europe in the past, was now extinct. William of Orange’s very ancestors had fermented a rebellion against that very dynasty; now their much-celebrated son was forced to acknowledge how much the tables had turned. Spain was a non-entity compared to the supremacy of Louis XIV’s France, and it would take a herculean joint European effort to defeat it in a third coalition war.

William was dedicated to such a task, as he had been for the previous two wars, but this focus meant that he had little time or sympathy to spare for Matveev. Perhaps Peter had hoped that the meeting between the two during his Great Embassy would have softened the Stadtholder-King, but all William could do was promise a better deal of Dutch produced flintlock muskets. Matveev ordered 15k of them, solving at least one of problems Peter faced, but William could offer little else but supportive words; Dutch diplomats were far too busy organising an anti-French coalition in Europe to bother with soothing the burden of war on Russia, and in any case, the low estimation of Moscow in most European minds after Narva made such efforts less than worth William’s while. Matveev wasn’t the only Russian agent to suffer from the impact of Narva; his colleague in Vienna wasn’t doing much better.

Prince Peter Golitsyn had been sent to Vienna in Peter’s name at the same time as Matveev had journeyed to The Hague. Urgently requesting an audience with the Emperor Leopold, Golitsyn also found the Emperor deeply distracted and troubled by events in Spain. What was worse, Golitsyn represented a power which was now held to be so ineffectual and backward after Narva, that he found it immensely difficult to be taken seriously in his capacity. Leopold put him off for seven weeks while he dealt with more important things, and in the meantime Golitsyn faced jokes and ridicule from the French and Swedish ambassadors, both of whom reminded the Russian of his country’s failings and of his master’s impending doom. Golitsyn finally got the audience with Leopold that he had desired, but as we saw all the waiting and endurance was for naught, as Leopold too was utterly preoccupied with the looming war over Spain to care much for Peter’s woes. In any case, Leopold likely looked upon Peter’s actions as foolish and impetuous, since they disrupted the status quo and removed potential allies for the struggle against France – such as Denmark, Sweden and the Commonwealth. Perhaps appreciating the low stock of his homeland, Golitsyn wrote home in spring 1701 to the Russian premier, saying:

It is necessary in every possible way to get a victory over the enemy. God forbid that the present summer should pass away with nothing…it is absolute necessary for our sovereign to get even a small victory by which his name may become famous in Europe as before. Then we can conclude a peace, while now people only laugh at our troops and our conduct in the war.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Indeed, Peter could well have benefited from such a victory, but to gain one he needed both a new army and the resources with which to supply it. He lacked both of these in the immediate aftermath of Narva in November 1700, and it would be some time before his realm was in a position to strike effectively at Charles. This was why Peter so feared an attack from Charles, yet Charles was himself facing his own problems in his Livonian bastion, even if he didn’t wish to admit it. The flashes of tenacity, impatience and intransigence which seemed to characterise Charles as a boy remained strong in his character; by the age of 18 he was resolute, convinced of his mission which had been pre-ordained by God to dethrone his enemies and bring justice to their realms. The thought that this triple alliance had moved so nonchalantly against him and had so underestimated his abilities must have rankled him further, while his crushing victories first against the Danes and then the Russians would have added additional weight to this belief system. It created in Charles an uncompromising desire to push for total victory, even at the expense of everything. A quick glance at the striking Wikipedia record of his many victories reveals that Charles won virtually every battle he engaged in before the disaster at Poltava, establishing himself as a glittering genius of European renown in the process; yet Poltava would scarcely had been fought at all had Charles been willing to adhere to the standards of the era and not seek such high-minded conclusions to his wars.

He had little to prove after Narva, and could certainly have made a peace with Russia, and likely Augustus, if he desired. Both the Russian and Saxon elements in the war now appeared on shaky ground, and the known reluctance of the Commonwealth nobles to support their Saxon King further undermined the position of both rulers. Yet Charles did not think in small measures; rather than simply attack and defeat his enemies, he intended to dethrone and destroy them, to humiliate them in revenge for seeking his downfall. He must be remorseless, merciless and fearless in this campaign, because giving ground would provide the opportunity for his enemies to rise again in the future. In Russia, he planned to depose Peter and acclaim his sister Sophia as Empress of the Russians, while the trickier Polish and Saxon situations required greater thought, and another candidate for the Polish throne. As Charles pondered how to make best use of his position of mastery after November 1700 then, he was faced with a set of problems that struck him more as the whingeing complaints of lesser men than as genuine flaws in his overall scheme.

Simply put, the army which Charles had marched to Narva was suffering from the want of forage, the depredations of disease and the weakness which came from starvation. By spring 1701, less than half the original force was battle ready, with over 1k succumbing to the awful diseases. Charles was intensely irritated at this state of affairs, and the dispatches of some of his aides and ministers back in Stockholm only add to this picture of the impatient Swedish King. ‘The king now thinks about nothing except war’, claimed one such aide in December 1700, a Magnus Stenbock, who continued to note that:

He no longer troubles himself about the advice of other people and he seems to believe that God communicated directly to him what he ought to do. Count Piper [the King’s chief minister] is much troubled about it because the weightiest things are resolved without any preparation and in general things go on in a way that I dare not commit to paper.

Also in December 1700, an officer of the Guards wrote back to Stockholm that:

In spite of the cold and scarcity of and although water is standing in huts, the King will not let us go into winter quarters. I believe that if he had only 800 men left, he would invade Russia with them, without even the slightest thought as to what they would live on. And if one of our men is shot, he cares no more about it than he would for a louse, and never troubles himself with such a loss.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Notwithstanding the bleak opinions, Charles did relent as the full force of winter bore down on his men, and for five months he resided in a castle near Narva, in anticipation of his next move in the spring. Only once the snows had melted did Charles then feel able to resume his war, yet he no longer felt as strongly about pursuing the war with Russia; instead, it seemed more sensible to pursue Augustus and defeat his Saxon armies in the field, as well as clarify the position of the Polish Commonwealth. In a purely strategic sense, Charles could not have comfortably invaded Russia with Augustus lurking behind him, yet the elements of the personal characteristically entered into the equation too, as Charles outrage over his cousin Augustus’ perfidy and dishonesty in his conduct compelled him to make an example of the Saxon Elector-King. Moved by the fact that, at the very least, Peter had shown honour by making a declaration of war whereas Augustus had merely invaded Livonia as though launching a military manoeuvre, Charles determined to focus the full extent of his fury towards Augustus, but first he would have to clear up who he was fighting – was he at war with Saxony, or could the Polish Commonwealth be expected to join their king?

While Charles had regrouped and bided his time, Peter and Augustus had reaffirmed their relationship and alliance. Meeting in person in February 1701, at the fortress town of Birze in Saxon controlled Livonia, Peter wished to ensure that his sole remaining ally would be reinforced with a new steel if a mediated peace was not possible. He found Augustus shaken over the recent losses, but otherwise in reasonable spirits. Charles had yet to face Augustus’ Saxon armies, and the Polish King was able to play off this fact to present Peter with some hard truths and tough sells. Declaring still his confidence in eventual victory, Augustus insisted that Peter’s losses had reduced his relative power, and that therefore the Tsar was entitled to less at the peace table when victory was achieved. It was a stark and daring declaration to make to a man he had once gotten on so well with, but Augustus was merely acting in his position as the de facto leader of the military alliance to remind Peter where he stood. It must have stung especially hard for Peter considering the fact that he knew he could not afford to offend the Saxon Elector King and send him into Charles’ arms. As his sole ally, Peter would have to pay a high price for Augustus’ continued friendship, but the Tsar proved absolutely willing to, placing a far higher stock than was perhaps wise in both the vaunted mettle of the Saxon soldier, and the untapped potential of the Polish Commonwealth’s manpower reserves, which Augustus seemed to blithely believe he could get on side for the war against Sweden.

Now confident in his unbeaten status, Augustus insisted that Saxony would take both Livonia and Estonia above it, reducing the original spoils in the Baltic which Russia had been entitled to. Furthermore, Peter agreed to supply Augustus with as many as 20k Russian infantry, paid for and clothed etc. by Russian monies, while an annual subsidy of 100k roubles was also promised to Augustus’ person.[[3]](#footnote-3) The stark terms of this agreement represented a surprising fact of the era which is often forgotten. In spite of the way events would transpire over the coming decades, Augustus’ position was technically stronger than that of Peter’s, and he could apparently command and expect to be treated as the superior in the relationship so long as this fact remained in place. It had been Augustus after all that had originally posed the idea of war against Sweden in 1698; his idea had led to some catastrophic defeats, but like his Russian counterpart he believed in eventual victory. Hoping to use Russia to exhaust the Swedes, Augustus was still capable of imagining that the best days of his House and that of Poland-Lithuania were still to come. Indeed, if he had acquired those two provinces from Sweden, Augustus may have been capable of at least forestalling the Commonwealth’s eventual destruction. That Augustus soon lost out and that Poland-Lithuania entered into a rapid and chaotic decline over the next five years can be attributed above all to the decision of Charles XII. Far from continue the Russian advance, as Augustus may well have expected, the Swedish King instead wanted to personally ensure the end of Augustus, and in the process Charles may well have ensured the end of the Commonwealth as a sovereign state.

The true force behind Charles’ decision came after his crushing victory of Russo-Saxon forces in the battle of Duna, in June 1701. Facing the joint ambitions of Augustus and Peter for the first time, Charles led his infantry in person over a wide river and under the cover of smoke, so outclassed and punished the coalition forces that they left the field under withering fire. Charles lost barely 600 men from his army of 9k, while the coalition lost nearly 5k men out of their army of 20k. The trend had set in; Charles was plainly content to defy the laws of war by attacking head on with an army of far smaller size than his enemies. Such daring and tenacity earned Charles widespread fame, but as July 1701 approached Europeans could only look on as events in Scandinavia faded from their view and war in the west once again broke out. With the WSS running parallel to Charles’ vendetta, no participants in the GNW could expect much in the way of foreign aid or interest; it was instead to be a titanic struggle to the finish, and only the strongest power in the Baltic could survive.

With both strategic and personal concerns then, as well as the recent crushing victory at Duna seared into his mind, Charles set about with a single-minded determination to pursue and ruin Augustus. For the next five years, he would proceed to chase Augustus without compunction across the map of Europe, in the process setting ablaze vast portions of the Commonwealth and Germany in pursuit of his prey. The Commonwealth hadn’t seen such fury hit its lands since the Deluges five decades before; indeed, many portions of the country still hadn’t recovered from that experience. Yet, here came the Swedes again, just as in 1655, and the ability of the Commonwealth to defend itself and remain intact was again exposed as sadly lacking. Conveniently for historians who have attempted to report on the GNW since, Charles did manage to formalise exactly who he was at war with, when he began a correspondence with the Primate of Poland in a bid to seek the Commonwealth’s rejection and ejection of their Saxon King through diplomacy, before hostilities would have to begin. Campaigns in the Baltic were one thing, but Charles believed that, even with his personal mission against Augustus, that his subjects deserved the chance to repudiate their King before the war came to them. Augustus’ election in 1698 had after all been characterised and marred by civil infighting and dubious arguments, wherein the thoroughly Protestant House of Wettin apparently committed itself to Catholicism in the name of the Polish Crown, and where Augustus marched with his own Saxon army to seize the throne from his French rival.

Interpreting these events as evidence of Augustus’ shaky support base by 1701, Charles sought to reason why the Polish Primate in a letter on 30th July 1701 that Augustus had already forfeited his crown by making war without Poland’s proper approval. To Charles, the fact that Augustus had not sought to glean his Commonwealth nobles’ support for war meant that he had violated that Commonwealth’s constitution, even while Augustus could argue that he technically made war as the Elector of Saxony rather than as the King of Poland, so there should be no issue. Yet this *was* an issue to Charles by 1701, because he needed to know where he stood with respect to the Poles. If they would repudiate Augustus’ rule now, then Charles would essentially have his job done for him. Yet, Charles suspected that the Commonwealth would hold on its king, mainly because Augustus had already made great use of the willing hospitality of many Commonwealth magnates in the border regions of Livonia while he quartered and prepared his army. Furthermore, Augustus was also said to have the support of most of the army, a strange fact which would save his reign on several occasions.

Considering this, Charles likely expected that war against the Commonwealth *would* be necessary, and that a military invasion against the Poles would be required to dethrone their King. Charles had to be sure though, and so he granted a great deal of time to the Primate of Poland as the religious head of the country took over seven weeks to respond. By the time the aged Cardinal gave Charles his expected answer, it was approaching the end of the campaigning season of 1701, and Charles was furious for having waited. Now at least, he had the answer of the Commonwealth, and his subsequent invasion of that polity could at least be legitimised in the courts of Europe and in Charles’ conscience on the grounds that he had no choice. What the Primate had actually said was something to the effect that the King of Sweden should leave Livonia and leave the Commonwealth to its own affairs, rather than instructing its citizens on how to deal with its King. Objectively, this was a fair piece of advice, yet Charles could never abide by it because in his mind King Augustus was little better than a scheming criminal; by acting in collusion with him, or at least failing to repudiate his reign when asked, those Commonwealth citizens that now supported him were little better than criminals too. Charles’ conscience was clear – he would launch his invasion of Augustus’ royal patrimony after all, even if this effectively forced Augustus’ subjects into the war.

Wintering over 1701-02 in the Duchy of Courland, a vassal of the Commonwealth but terrified into submission by Charles’ presence, the King of Sweden plotted a devastating campaign for the spring of 1702 to punish the villainous king and his sinful subjects. According to one of Charles’ generals, it was whispered in the King of Sweden’s camp that ‘he believes that he is an agent of God on earth, sent to punish every act of faithlessness.’ Such a belief was once again reinforced by stunning victory in the battle of Klissow on 9th July 1702. Charles once more faced a larger allied army; this time consisting of Commonwealth soldiers as well as Saxons and Russians, and he routed them once more with minimal losses to himself. Such a victory inspired Charles onwards, as he took his vendetta still deeper into Lithuania and then the Polish heartland itself, capturing Warsaw and Cracow both in rapid succession in the autumn of 1702. While he had at first promised not to make war feed war by pillaging the countryside of the Commonwealth, Charles lasted only a few months in this hostile land before declaring his intentions to make the Poles pay. His leniency in the previous months had been mistaken, Charles insisted, and now the perfidy of Augustus’s subjects in the Commonwealth – demonstrated for all to see when Polish units had fought at Klissow – persuaded Charles of the justice of his cause. ‘The Poles must either be annihilated or forced to join us’, Charles declared, reflecting the fact that by 1702, the war had entered a new, desperate phase.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Charles’ invasion of the Commonwealth proved only slightly less traumatic than that launched by his grandfather; from Cracow alone, which had been taken without a shot being fired after Charles forced the gate in person with only 300 men, the Swedes extracted much resources and monies. Charles demanded 130k thalers, 10k pairs of shoes, 10k pounds of tobacco, 160k pounds of meat and 60k pounds of bread for each month he remained in Cracow’s suburbs. 1702 reached an end after a year of great victory and prestigious triumphs which added to the King of Sweden’s legend, but Charles could not seem to tie King Augustus down. The capture of the Commonwealth’s critical cities and the repeated defeat of her armies could not hide the fact that Augustus continued to escape his cousin’s wrath, and that the countryside remained as volatile and dangerous as it had been for Charles X’s troops fifty years before.

If he couldn’t force a decisive victory which would paralyse Augustus’ war effort, and if he couldn’t persuade Augustus to lay down his arms, do the right thing and abandon his claims on the Polish Crown, what could Charles XII realistically hope to achieve in the Commonwealth? 1703 was to be an especially trying year for both the Commonwealth and for Charles; not only did the Swedish legions continue to bleed the countryside dry, but the Swedish King was hit with repeated bouts of bad news from the north. The anticipated Russian counterattack had come and proved far more formidable than Charles had expected; what was worse, the Tsar continued to make steady progress and build up additional strength, punctuated by the bizarre decision to establish a new port on the marshy swamplands surround the River Neva in the upper Baltic. The Russia he had discounted in the aftermath of its shattering defeat in November 1700 seemed, two years’ later, to have been utterly transformed. In October 1703 the Tsar sailed from his new port for the first time, insisting on taking to the grey waters of the Gulf of Finland before the worst of the ice set in. The following month the first commercial ship to ever service St Petersburg arrived; unsurprisingly it was a Dutch merchantman, and Peter greatly honoured and celebrated its arrival by gifting its captain with 500 roubles, and declaring its future trades totally free from all customs tolls.

With the establishment of St Petersburg in the early summer of 1703, Peter had in fact driven a tactical wedge between the northern and southern portions of Sweden’s Baltic Empire. By so doing, he had ensured that both his Empire and that of his enemy would be forever affected. In the months that followed the port’s establishment Peter had to personally lead Russian soldiers against probing Swedish assaults, and the experience of living in the port town was a miserable one for its early inhabitants. The town flooded virtually every autumn, there was no large game to be found nearby and the swampy soils around the town provided no guarantee for quality crops. That said, Peter’s perseverance in the face of Swedish opposition led eventually to that port town’s consolidation. Christening the place St Petersburg after his family’s patron saint, Peter ensured that the port became Russia’s critically positioned capital and a symbol of his Empire’s defeat of Sweden. Hundreds of miles to the south in his Polish quagmire, Charles could do little more than steadily defeat the tired Polish armies set against him and hope that, in time, the Commonwealth would grow weary of the war which had been launched without their full consent. 1703 was thus a year of great victory on paper, with the battle of Pultusk in April and the seizure of Thorn in October being particular highlights, but by the time the February Sejm of 1704 seemed to indicate a willingness to listen to Charles’ offers, the Swedish King was near the end of his rope.

The assembly of the Polish Diet at Warsaw in February 1704 embodied the confused and devastated state of affairs which the Commonwealth had descended into over the last few years. Several noble families had been utterly ruined by Augustus’ war against the Swedes, and while a declaration of war had come from the nobles loyal to Augustus in 1702, who declared war on Sweden in the Commonwealth’s name, this declaration was not accepted by all. Many nobles were divided and resentful of the war, seeing it as one brought upon them by Augustus’ naked ambition, while they declared that their loyalties to the Saxon Elector were never particularly strong to begin with, on account of Augustus’ purchase of the crown in the heady election days of 1698. The suggested replacement for Augustus had been Jakub Sobieski, the original Austrian selection, who had been forced to withdraw from lack of funds from that troubled leadership race. This son of their most successful monarch in recent memory brought much emotion to the debate, but when it was learned that Augustus had pre-empted their moves and imprisoned Sobieski in the weeks before, their outrage increased. Predictably, it tended to be the nobles closer to the conflict with the Swedes that favoured deposing Augustus, while those residing traditionally in the east and associated with the Commonwealth army tended to favour him. As the Diet deliberated, an invitation was sent to Charles XII to attend in person.

The invitation was auspicious, and to Charles represented the best chance so far in impressing upon the Commonwealth the treachery and sins of their King. On 15th February 1704, to protect themselves and the secure their position against Augustus’ loyalists, those nobles in support of deposing their King formed the Confederation of Warsaw, with the intention of electing a new King in Augustus’ stead. In response, those nobles and military officers still free from the Swedish presence formed their own Confederation at Sandomirez in mid-May. With these two factions established in the Commonwealth, the stage seemed to be set for civil war. After appointing a 27 year old nobleman named Stanislaus Leszchzynski as the candidate to succeed Augustus in July; it appeared to foreign observers as though Charles XII had done it. By mid-1704, the PLC had, for all intents and purposes, ceased to exist as a stable Republic; instead it was a divided, conflict-ridden wasteland, where loyalties and ambitions were pursued with a ruthless vigour, and sovereignty itself seemed up for sale.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Next time, we will trace the course and impact of this civil war in the Commonwealth, examining its wider implications for the future of Augustus’ reign, and for the independence of the Polish people. I hope you’ll join me then – my name is Zack and you have been listening to the fifth instalment of WDF’s PM. Thanks and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. Cited in Robert K. Massie, *Peter the Great*, p. 344. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Both extracts cited in *Ibid*, p. 345. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Ibid*, p. 344. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*, p. 399. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Angus Konstam, *Poltava 1709: Russia Comes of Age* (London; Osprey Publishing, 1994), pp. 10-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)