Hello history friends patrons all and welcome to this, our first instalment and the introductory episode on the biography of Jan Sobieski. This intro is coming to all listeners and patrons, to give everyone a flavour of what’s to come. From next week onwards though, the story will be continued exclusively on the Xtra feed, which as we know is available to all patrons at the $5 level of higher. If you’d like to avail of this wonderful expansion of WDF’s content, which includes an hour of Xtra stuff a month, as well as early ad-free access to our regular episodic schedule, then be sure to go to the usual places, \_\_\_\_\_ For those of you just stopping by out of curiosity though, or for those of you who have already become lovely patrons, welcome, welcome, welcome, to this very exciting biography miniseries on the life and times of Jan Sobieski, military badass and king of the Poles, in an era when the Commonwealth was unfortunately lacking in either badasses or good quality kings. Since what follows Sobieski’s reign in 1698 is the Saxon House of Wettin, a somewhat unfavourably judged dynasty in the Commonwealth’s history which takes it into the 18th century, you can also see this series as a kind of prequel to the far larger and more ambitious Polish history miniseries on the 18th century in full, which will be released, all going according to plan, on the 1 year anniversary of this Xtra feed going live in March 2018.

As we’ll see over the next twelve episodes in this series, Sobieski was a profoundly important character not merely because he appeared at the last siege of Vienna in the nick of time. No – while in 1683 Sobieski’s contribution to that event is undeniable, the King had arrived to fulfil and continue the conflict or series of conflicts he had waged against the Ottoman Turks and their vassals for the majority of his life. It was a struggle which consumed his homeland from the late 1640s, and it was also a deeply personal one for him as it took the lives of many of his relatives. It of course dramatically shaped this homeland too, and over the course of those series of conflicts which the newly aggressive Ottoman Empire fought, the Poles gave as good as they got, until, tiring perhaps the uninspiring candidates, the Poles chose a man who had always been a leader of men. After that watershed election, Poland, or more accurately the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, enjoyed a boost in prestige and prosperity, bookended of course by the rescue effort at the last siege of Vienna.

As a story, Sobieski’s is one that clearly crosses over into our own and which has been in the background of our narrative as we looked at Anglo-Dutch Wars, Swedish Deluges and Franco-Dutch Wars, so I feel it would be wrong to leave it out altogether. That said – Patrons get it above everyone else because, again, keeping with my policy to induce as many history friends as possible to sign up, I feel like it’s a story worthy of your time and investment in WDF. If you use it as an accompaniment to the on-going narrative flowing concurrent to this which builds up to the last siege, then you’ll be well placed to gain as even-handed and broad a perspective on that seismic event as possible. This episode here, while identifying as an introductory episode, will also serve as a teaser and a handy introduction into the world of the PLC which we’re soon to be very familiar with. Yet, in this episode I’ll also have a chance to set out some historiographical context, which in normal person’s language means that I have to allude to my sources. While I possess the famous narratives of Davies and Zamoyski, I also am fortunate to have in my possession a biography of Jan Sobieski, written by a man whose name I will certainly butcher the pronunciation of, so I aim to say it as little as possible. The author’s name is Miltiades Varvounis, and his personal connection to Sobieski is that he claims to be Greek of Polish descent. You should know that Varvounis’ book, while sound in the research spectrum, could really have done with an editor before going to press. With that in mind, sometimes I will change words or phrasing around in the rare cases where citing directly from him didn’t quite make sense.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Other than that, it’s necessary to talk for a sec about terminology. For the record, the ‘state of Poland’ wasn’t exactly a thing in this era, in the same way that the state of Austria wasn’t really a thing until was defined as such later on in that curious polity’s lifecycle. In many ways the difficult to define PLC mirrors the HRE in several ways; both contained noble and ambitious democratic ideals in their own way, both ended up failing due to the individual ambitions of the persons meant to be looking out for their homeland’s interests, and nationalist historians since have alluded to both, particularly in the 19th century, as examples of why the so-called ‘nation-state’, is the natural order of things. History is typically messy, but for the sake of convenience we’re not going to delve into technicalities like that in this miniseries. You should know that most saw the state of Poland as a Commonwealth, or a nobles republic, or a monarchical republic, and referred to it often simply as a Republic or Commonwealth, so we’re going to largely do the same. The Polish element of that Commonwealth was referred to as the Crown, while the Lithuanian element was often referred to as the Grand Duchy or simply, again, the Commonwealth. Within the Polish Crown lands lived Germans, Slavs, Ruthenians, Russians and all sorts of individuals including Poles, so it would be just as inaccurate to call the whole arrangement Poland as it would be to call the Netherlands Holland all the time, although of course having stated that here, I am anything but consistent.

I am aware that it’s a bit confusing at the best of times, and I should add that for the sake of our own convenience, I will often refer to the Commonwealth as Poles if a majority fought in that sphere, while I will do my best to single out the other peoples where possible. Between its curious relationship with its nobility, its elective monarchy, its varied subject peoples and its incredibly varied cultures and contradictions, perhaps the only state more confusing and unusual to our nationalised senses in this era was the Commonwealth’s significant neighbour, the HRE. We’re not here to unpack how these polities worked – mercifully – instead we’re here to tell the story of one of its significant citizens, so I hope you’ll forgive if I sometimes abandon consistency for the sake of a tidy narrative.

Jan Sobieski was in fact a member of the nobility which dominated the Commonwealth. He would have the misfortune to reign just at the point where the previously sincere constitution of the Commonwealth had come to be manipulated by Sobieski’s peers, with the most infamous example being the liberum veto. Through the use of the liberum veto, nobles could literally paralyse the legislation and inner workings of the Commonwealth, and prevent anything from being done for the sake of their own interests. Such problems emerged during the rapidly deteriorating position of the Commonwealth in the second half of the 17th century, a period of time which is generally seen as the moment when the Commonwealth entered through the meat grinder and came out the other side utterly transformed, for all the wrong reasons. Yet one of the great and in many senses tidy things about Sobieski’s life is the fact that he served as a kind of weather vane of the Commonwealth’s practical power. If Sobieski was able to field an army, that meant the Commonwealth was doing well that campaigning season. If Sobieski was unable to field one, or if he had to make use of extensive favours in order to get a campaign off the ground, that probably meant that petty jealousies and factionalism had taken root for the moment.

We have to bear in mind that when Sobieski was born in 1629, the Commonwealth was the undisputed master of the eastern portion of Europe. It represented the crossroads between the cultured west and the barbarous Rus. Its very cultural experience reflects this; during Sobieski’s lifetime in particular it became vogue among Poles and other Commonwealth nobles, especially while on campaign, to emulate their more exotic oriental neighbours to the Far East in both dress and military tactics. Sobieski looked favourably upon the so-called Sarmatian style of dress, and many wealthier Poles liked to think of themselves as Sarmatian warriors when on campaign, since they could afford the striking robes and fashions which gave them that mysterious, oriental identity. Poles, Lithuanians, Ruthenians, Germans and others that lived under the Commonwealth’s banner defined themselves by their multiculturalism; their dress and favour shown towards the exotic and different were necessary characteristics of a polity which contained far too many disparate entities to define itself as one thing or another. The remarkable thing though is that there was no underlying national tension; no Poles keeping Germans down and no Lithuanians looking down upon Slavs – for the most part at least, the Commonwealth enjoyed an admirable degree of national harmony.

By the time of Sobieski’s death in 1696, the situation had utterly changed. The Commonwealth was no longer the undisputed power of the east-central crossroads of Europe. This mantle was now being actively challenged by Russia, while the Ottomans, though beaten back and relatively humbled in the war recently waged, had torn the heart out of the Commonwealth’s ability to effectively resist the enemy for the foreseeable future. This was because Sobieski’s lifetime saw over five decades of relatively constant warfare, from the moment of Bogdan Khmelnitsky’s Cossack revolt in 1648, to the signing of the Treaty of Karlowitz with the Ottomans in 1699. This period of warfare contained moments of respite for sure, but just as surely as the TYW contained its own moments of comparative inaction or rebuilding, there was rarely a time when, somewhere in the Commonwealth, a battle was not being fought, a raid was not being repulsed, or a campaign was not being planned. When we come to examine the life of Jan Sobieski in all this, it becomes clear just how pivotal a role the man played in the era. Several times over did Sobieski actually save the Commonwealth from being overwhelmed. At times the man was simply fortunate, but other times he displayed a kind of bravery, a kind of ingenuity, and above all a brand of patriotism, which would come to define his legend and persona for generations to come. Little wonder that Poles under foreign occupation from the 1790s onwards looked to the example set by their former king as the last great gasp of a patriotic figure who, defeating his enemies in virtually every sphere, came to be consumed by the very stately apparatus he attempted to serve.

In many ways Sobieski’s is a tragic story. Even while he waged his successful campaigns, ill-omens presaging the Commonwealth’s downturn and imminent doom were commonplace. The sheer unwieldiness of the PLC, combined with the growing power of its neighbours, the treaties made without due consideration of the consequences and the increasing jealousy of the nobles with regard to their ancient constitutional rights – all of these were symptoms of the disease which wracked the Polish-Lithuanian state. Kept in check in the past by rapid growth, economic expansion, military organisation and the accepted power of the monarchy, the Commonwealth found its neighbours relatively docile and easily coexisted alongside them in the first half of the 17th century. Successful wars against Sweden, the ultimate enemy as it was led by the Protestant House of Vasa rather than the Catholic Polish one, were combined with humiliations of Russia which culminated in the sack of Moscow and the placing of King Sigismund III’s son on the throne of Tsar. Sigismund of course was able to make great political capital out of Russia’s time of troubles, where phony Tsars popped up everywhere and loyalties were spread wafer thin amongst the impoverished Russian nobility. This Russian time of troubles seemed to uncomfortably mirror the Commonwealth’s domestic situation by the turn of the century. In 1700, just as in 1600, the European rule of law stated that if weakness existed, many would flock to exploit it.

If this biography will serve as an indication of where the Commonwealth was headed, it will also serve as a convenient glimpse into the military tactics of the age, and of the incredibly dazzling sight created by the winged hussars, cavalry most famous for their relief effort at the siege of Vienna. The fact that the siege of Vienna forms our penultimate episode should demonstrate that Jan Sobieski, and indeed his homeland itself, grants us far too much content and anecdotes to ignore. This is not simply a retelling of the last siege as we give in the main episodic schedule – instead it is designed to be a focused, unique and hopefully entertaining telling of the story of one of Europe’s most important, yet understudied figures. I say understudied, because while native and older literature does exist about the man, a surprising lack of recent efforts to study the man’s life and times does hamper us somewhat. It should also be added that at times this may seem more like Our Fake History than WDF, as we’ll be forced to deal with several myths surrounding Sobieski’s life and times. Did his birth really usher in a thunderstorm? Probably not. Was he universally loved and gratefully received by all of his subjects and nobles after the siege of Vienna? Unfortunately not. Was he always a force for good in the Commonwealth’s history. Not necessarily, as we’ll see.

So what lies before you is a story of a man, a myth and a homeland. At the same time, it’s also a love story and the story of dynastic ambition. Sobieski, married to one of the ladies in waiting of the former Polish Queen, would come to find his wife somewhat more politically active and ambitious at home than he was, by his nature. In addition, some have suggested that his wife Marie pushed him in the first place to seek the throne in the aftermath of his great victory, greater perhaps than any other in his life, at the battle of Chocim in November 1673. After the victory outside Vienna, Sobieski engaged in a policy which afterwards drew much criticism from both his contemporaries and subsequent historians. In his campaigns against the Ottomans, Sobieski attacked the Ottoman vassals of Moldavia and Wallachia in an effort to establish a secure inheritance for his sons. Furthermore, in the face of the unreliability of the Habsburgs, the king made efforts to empower and ally with the Hungarians at the Habsburgs’ expense. Such actions seem unjustifiable in light of what was at stake, but I will argue throughout this biography that we must, at all times, place ourselves in Sobieski’s shoes.

For example, he continued the costly war with the Ottomans after the last siege because he believed that his great enemy were on the ropes. He sought secure inheritances for his sons in an effort to ensure that they possessed the wealth and strength to hold onto the Polish Crown. He wanted to make this crown hereditary, at the expense of the indignant nobility, because he believed that this would override the lagging and weakened Commonwealth constitution. And Sobieski believed that such reforming and dynastic self-interest was necessary, because if it was not done, the Commonwealth would be overcome by its absolutist and more centralised neighbours. History has judged Sobieski harshly for this. For example in his great tome on the history of Poland Norman Davies noted that:

It is true that Sobieski did not possess much freedom of manoeuvre. He was constrained by the egoism of the magnates, whose stranglehold on political life could not easily be released, and by the obstinacy of the [Ottoman] Porte, which in this one period insisted on regarding the Republic as its enemy. But that is merely to enunciate the central political dilemma of Sobieski’s career. It does not excuse 17 years of ruinous warfare which banished all chance of repairing the Republic’s structural weaknesses. Sobieski entered the Holy League [in 1684] of his own free will. He must be held responsible for the consequences.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Throughout this bio I will do my utmost to place Sobieski’s actions, his decisions, his fears and his struggles in context. It must have been immensely frustrating for Sobieski to know and appreciate exactly what was wrong with the Commonwealth, and why its neighbours seemed to be surpassing it so speedily. To give an idea of what I mean, by the 1670s the Commonwealth’s financial clout was equal to that of Bavaria, even though its population was almost ten times that Duchy’s size. What was more; the Commonwealth was spending almost 90% of its incomes on defence, in comparison to the low 60s in France, Spain and even Brandenburg.[[3]](#footnote-3) These chasms in production, income and expenditure were exacerbated by far too many wars in such a concentrated space of time, which never gave the Commonwealth chance to regroup and catch its breath. This was despite the fact that the Crown had generally to depend upon the nobles to provide the soldiers, and to do so required lengthy legislative debates and processes at the Commonwealth’s parliament in Warsaw, the Sejm.

So to conclude here history friends, here’s how to know if this biography is for you. Here’s how to know, if you’re a listener, whether forking out that $5 a month is worth it, and if you’re a patron, whether you should bother listening at all. Three points really justify this whole project. First, if you want a better understanding and appreciation of the era in which our main narrative is passing through, this story here, told through the person of Sobieski and with a focus on a state largely aloof from Western European intrigues, then this bio will be perfect to add more meat on the bones of your 17th century. Second, the Commonwealth, the PLC, the Republic or whatever you want to call it, was a fundamentally important player in European relations, and it deserves analysis the same way that the Habsburgs or France or the Netherlands does. If we leave the Commonwealth out of the story we’re trying to tell, then we miss the additional details of the wider set of stories which taken together made up the very eventful second half of the 17th century. Third, and perhaps most obviously, you should listen to this because it is a truly great story, from which even those with a casual interest in European history or even Polish history can glean great benefit. We here at WDF love our stories, and Sobieski’s story is one of the best I have ever come across. The sheer stamina of the Sobieski, and the incredible tenacity and determination he must have possessed to engage in all the campaigns he did, tells us much about Jan Sobieski the man.

By the time he led his winged hussars to victory outside the gates of Vienna, Sobieski was 54, had been king for nearly a decade, and was reaching the peak not only of his military career, but of his torrid rivalry with the enemies of his homeland. Sobieski’s story is as inspiring and entertaining as it is frustrating and tragic. As is our want here at WDF, since I have yet to see anyone else cover this man in the kind of detail I plan to put out, I feel we have ample opportunities to make Jan Sobieski’s story our own. It is my personal hope that you guys will choose to join me for the ride. If for no other reason than when we do come to the Polish history miniseries next March, we’ll at least have some positive memories stored up when everything gets a bit severe and depressing for the unfortunate Poles.

So there you have it, Jan Sobieski, King of Poland, the Lion of Europe, the saviour of Christendom and all sorts of other lofty titles he went by, is about to become our sole focus on the XTRA feed for the next three months. If you want to see for yourself whether Sobieski really was all that, you know where to go, but for everyone else, my name is Zack and I will be seeing you all next week, when we detail the incredible birth and youth of one of Poland’s all-time favourite sons. Thanks and see you then.

1. See Miltiades Varvounis, *Jan Sobieski – The King Who Saved Europe* (Xlibris Corporation, 2012). Hereafter referred to as *Sobieski*.Varvounis’ work is academically solid, and the man is an accomplished historian, but this does seem to be his first work in English, so I will of course cut him some slack. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Norman Davies, *God’s Playground: a History of Poland* (New York, 2005), vol. 1, p. 370. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Figures given by Varvounis, *Sobieski*, pp. 105-106. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)