Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to the 18th episode of our PHM. Last time we examined the turning point of Polish history, when the Commonwealth nobles, for a combination of reasons, declined to ratify the Treaty of Vienna, and thus forced the proposed anti-Russian league back to the drawing board. There was no indication that Peter would never face any opposition to his gains, as George of Britain-Hanover was still on the case, but certainly the Tsar had gone to great lengths to ensure his security, and the attempts to dislodge him from his new positions along the Baltic would be immensely difficult. As spring faded into summer 1720, we saw how King Augustus of Poland reconciled himself to his status as a de facto vassal monarch of the Tsar. Though still presented ostensibly as an alliance, the Russo-Polish agreement ensured the security of one to the detriment of the other. The entire experience had taught Peter that Russia needed a friendly Commonwealth on its border, and now that this could be achieved by force, this was all the better, while Augustus had learned of the difficulties in branching out on his own. There could now be no question of allowing Poland to drift, and the best way to further consolidate this relationship and cement his own legacy would be to end the war with Sweden once and for all. So it was that Peter sought to do just that in the summer of 1720. Let’s examine how he managed it, as we take you to June 1720…

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The GNW was twenty years old by the time Tsar Peter learned of the diplomatic defeat of the Treaty of Vienna. Over the course of the conflict, everything had changed. When Peter had been persuaded to join the war in 1698 by Augustus, the King of Poland had been secure in his position and by far the stronger power. Not only that, but Augustus ruled over a Commonwealth which was recognised as the de facto end of civilisation in Europe; beyond the Polish-Lithuanian border there existed backward, barbaric states, still Christian or at least some uncouth version of it, but leagues away from the cultured splendour of the West. The Polish penchant for oriental trends and fashion added to the mystique and grandeur of Augustus’ Kingdom, even while deep down it was dangerously brittle, as Charles XII of Sweden would prove. Over the course of the struggle, Augustus’ fragile power base had vanished, replaced by one reliant on Russian money and soldiers for its security. Just as Russia replaced Sweden as the predominant power in the North, so too did Peter replace Augustus as the most important partner in the alliance. Peter had been the last power standing after Charles XII’s initial rampage.

Having weathered the initial storm, Peter had managed to inflict the worst defeat upon Sweden since its capitulation to Denmark at the beginning of the 17th century. Then, Sweden had been at war on all fronts, and King Gustavus Adolphus had elected to make a costly peace with the Danes rather than fight on against hopeless odds. Adolphus’ great grand nephew, if I’m getting the tricky Swedish family tree correctly, was quite unlike him, even if Charles XII’s conquering brilliance echoed that famous Swedish King of the TYW. Charles’ ultimate weakness, his literally fatal flaw, was his unwillingness to compromise and recognise when he was beaten. As shocking and defining as Poltava had been in 1709, Charles never regarded that crushing defeat as anything more than a momentary setback. To his credit, Charles continued to find men to send against his enemies once he returned from his Ottoman vacation, and even while he had been in that exile, his machinations with the Ottomans can be seen as directly responsible for forcing Peter to drop his Black Sea ambitions. In this, at least, Charles could tell himself that he had succeeded, that he had hurt Peter’s pride just like Peter had so wounded his. Yet the best opportunities Charles had for peace were always turned down, and because the king viewed the entire experience as that of an unjust war forced upon him by his neighbours, the thought never seemed to have crossed his mind that peace, however hard to swallow, would be the best option.

We have spent a great deal of words already trying to explain Charles’ behaviour. His incredible stubbornness, even when it was blatantly obvious to all that the war was not winnable, probably lost the Swedish Empire more than Peter’s victories did. Another king would have made peace immediately after Poltava, but Charles was not another King – he was the closest thing that the early 18th century had to a military genius; perhaps only Marlborough came close to his tactical skill and ingenuity. He was the last of the great Swedish warrior kings, and his death in battle by some unknown Norwegian hand completed the picture of mystique still further. The stunned Swedish soldiers didn’t know how to respond to their king’s death; for so long he had seemed invincible, not affected or touched by the realities of the battlefield. His death essentially tore the heart out of Sweden, even though the war did not end for another three years.

He wasn’t exactly mourned, because by the time of his death the Swedish people had been enduring the equivalent of total war for nearly two full decades. The treasury was empty, the country was emptied of young men and the harvests went repeatedly uncollected. A succession of plagues over 1715-18 had wiped out a third of Stockholm’s population, while freezing winters in the interim locked the country to its perpetual misery. With the king dead, the average Swede would surely have hoped that this end of an era would represent an opportunity for change in the fortunes of the war. Maybe under the new regime of his sister, peace would be at hand. Because of this, Charles’ citizens found themselves almost despite themselves thanking God for their King’s death.

Fully in tune with the expectations of the people, Ulrika and her husband Frederick of Hesse set about dismantling the anti-Swedish league one player at a time. Baron Georg Heinrich von Goertz had established a set of ideas and daring opportunities during his feverish diplomacy between 1714-18. Goertz had been killed by the misplaced grief of the Swedish people, but these same citizens were perfectly happy to see his initiatives developed for their own benefit. After his death and that of his master, the new regime made much of its new position to its enemies, and attempted to use this renewed willingness to bargain as a kind of credit which its war weary neighbours would be eager to avail of. Peace was made in rapid succession with the Danes, Hanoverians, Saxons, Poles and Prussians from late 1719-20, but the price was high. Under the auspices of Georgian planning, the give away of Swedish lands had been made easier by the explanation that Sweden would receive its compensation from Russia in the Baltic. This had been the plan, and George of Britain-Hanover appeared on course to make this plan a reality. Rousing all potential allies, George used his strong position and the spectacle of the Royal Navy to compel Sweden’s neighbours to join a series of interconnected alliances. With these set up, and with the HR Emperor also on side, it now remained merely to get the PLC on board. Once this was done, the league would become anti-Russian in all but name.

As we saw last time though, the Polish enterprise misfired once the Sejm of early 1720 failed to approve the Treaty of Vienna. The Republic’s nobles resented what they saw as their king’s creeping attempts to bypass their constitution and in particular, to establish his family in an absolutist position. These fires were gleefully fanned by the Russians, who reasoned that in the event of war with Russia – which seemed a possibility by early 1720 – the Commonwealth would be vulnerable to Augustus’ schemes of hereditary absolutism. Through a combination of factors; be they bribes, threats or manipulation, the majority of the Sejm refused to approve what could have been a great step towards independent action in the Commonwealth, and the Russian noose around the Poles was further tightened. Georgian diplomacy had relied upon the Polish partnership, and with this up in smoke, there was no discernible way to make the Treaty of Vienna work. Its promises and aims to guard the Commonwealth against Russian incursions and soldiers sounded hollow when that very Commonwealth would not approve its measures.

The HR emperor's assessment of the situation was a sober one: no anti-Russian league could be effective without Poland and Prussia, for without Prussia it would not have enough troops and, moreover, it was dangerous to seek out the Russians so far away and leave the powerfully armed Frederick William behind without being sure of his intentions. If money failed to hinder the Russians from intriguing in Poland and to deprive them of the dangerous ascendancy that they were gaining there, the Swedes could land in Royal Prussia, the anti-Russian nobles would join them and all factions would cease. In October 1719 the emperor had stated definitively that he could not participate in any plans for a northern alliance before Poland had acceded to the treaty of Vienna prior to joining such an alliance herself. The whole scheme was fraught with too many difficulties, the Poles were unwilling to pull their weight and it was impossible to drag them in. The imperial court therefore, having discerned the effects of the plan for reducing Muscovy to her former bounds and having reached the conclusion that military action against the tsar was doomed to failure, was going to try and gain his favour while keeping the plan alive in so far as this was necessary for bringing pressure to bear upon him.

As the Emperor sought to keep the plan somehow alive, George sought to keep the threat of war alive. He still had an alliance with Sweden, and was confident that some determined displays of force in the Baltic would persuade the Tsar to see sense, and at least agree to British mediation. Mediation became the new order of the day in Georgian diplomacy, and in May 1720 the endurance of the Elector-King’s policy was given another shot in the arm when Queen Ulrika of Sweden essentially abdicated in favour of her husband, Frederick of Hesse. Frederick’s coronation as King of Sweden meant that Hesse and her German allies were tied closer to Sweden, which was a positive, but the factor which George took most encouragement from was Frederick’s rampant Russophobia. Frederick despised Russia, and believed emphatically that the best course open to Sweden, now that she faced Russia alone, would be to court British military aid in addition to the financial aid she had already received. With this accomplished, there was no reason why Sweden could not bring about a turnaround in her fortunes, and force Peter to agree to mediation.

But Peter had been playing the northern game for far too long by now to allow some minor German prince to turn the tables. Seeing British collusion with the Swedes at sea over the spring of 1720 as an inherently hostile act, Peter still refused to take the bait and simply ignored the action. Under the advice of his admirals, most of whom hailed from Europe, Peter determined to continue the attack on Sweden with his more mobile galley fleet than to actually engage with the 20 English and 11 Swedish man of war vessels, but the perceptive Tsar made efforts to advance his case on the diplomatic front as well. He made it abundantly clear to all English merchants and envoys who could be found that his quarrel was with King George, and not the British people. Such clarification was possible because even while Peter had expelled the British and Hanoverian ambassador from St Petersburg, he had ensured this city remained open to British trade and in July 1720 stopped blockading Swedish ports altogether. Clearly Peter was trying to send a message to the British people, and fortunately for the Tsar external events further shaped the situation in Britain which favoured Russia still further. In an era of seismic personalities and events, we should not be surprised to see the first glimpse of perhaps the most famous British politician of the 18th century – Sir Robert Walpole.

Robert Walpole was a highly-educated Whig statesman in the old style; short and round, with several double chins to spare, his appearance was less important than his phenomenal skill for governance and direction. Walpole had come to power in Britain in the aftermath of the bursting of the South Sea Company’s bubble, a somewhat complicated event wherein everyone essentially lost a lot of money and lampooned the government and the King for what had occurred. In a Britain before the era of PMs or even properly defined cabinets, Walpole deserves the distinction of the first PM of Britain, and this status was thanks in large part to sheer level of responsibilities which were laid at his feet, as George I and eventually George II discerned in this portly gentleman a skill and political acumen which only came around once in a generation. Walpole’s foreign policy is where he truly interests us though, fascinating as his rise and political career is. Perhaps best described as something of a realist, with a smattering of ideological baggage in reserve, Walpole viewed Russia as a potential trading partner and friend, viewed partnership and subsidies with Sweden as a waste, and considered war with Russia an absolute catastrophe. War, in Walpole’s mind, was pointless unless it could bring Britain some tangible advantage.

That he was in opposition to his King’s wishes was a blow softened by Walpole’s deft handling of matters in Parliament, where he expertly parried and defended the King and the government in all affairs. Emphasising the encouragement of trade and the economic benefits which would come from colonial expansion, Walpole embodied the later obsession London would have for its Empire and then its commonwealth of nations. The best way to ensure that trade flourished was to avoid war at all costs, and for the next two decades Walpole would hold Britain back from continental commitments as the colonial commitments were expanded; that is until everyone piled on in the WAS in 1740. In summer 1720, George and Walpole were attempting to find a compromise over their vastly different interpretations of British foreign policy obligations. George perhaps accepted that he couldn’t win the political battle against Walpole, but he still hoped that the fleet already sailing in the Baltic would have the desired effect.

Walpole did not waste time; by the end of August 1720 he had sent word to the ambassador in Sweden that he wished to cancel Britain’s treaty obligations, barely six months after they had been signed. The Anglo-Swedish alliance would expire in January 1721, and so George informed King Frederick of Sweden that he had until then to persuade Peter to come to terms; George informed the new Swedish King that Britain could no longer mediate or guarantee anything, and that Sweden’s only hope would be to somehow stun the Russians with an unexpected victory. In short, nothing but a miracle would save Sweden now. The Tsar was already aware of the changing political winds underway in Britain, and sought to drive the point home further in Sweden by welcoming the Duke of Holstein into his lands. The Duke of Holstein, you may remember, was the nephew of the late Charles, and the Holstein party had been the other pretender to the throne alongside the Hesse grouping, which was now in power. By welcoming the Holstein party into Russian protection, Peter signalled that he was willing to go below the belt, and suddenly a raft of possibilities were opened, wherein a nightmarish scenario of arrest and exile was imagined by Frederick. This blow was severe, but the terrible raids along the Swedish coast and further inland by Cossack and Russian marines eroded the King’s will to fight on even further. Frederick did hold out one last bit of hope in Poland though; while George still maintained a shaky hold on his foreign policy before Walpole’s influence was fully felt, he had instructed his envoy to the Commonwealth to argue for a new campaign of pressure as the Sejm gathered in Warsaw in September 1720 to discuss the Treaty of Vienna yet again.

Convening on 30th September, the nobles and potentates of the Commonwealth gathered in a far less defiant mood than they initially had in January. With the Russian influence thoroughly entrenched by this point, the Tsar had spent the summer of 1720 eagerly and warmly welcoming those nobles back into their Russian friendships from which they had recently swayed. In addition to this reconciliation, King Augustus had also called on the Russian envoy in his Polish residence and expressed his sincere desire to maintain his friendship with the Tsar. In the tradition of 18th century diplomacy, Augustus feigned ignorance over the question of whether his recent conduct had offended the Tsar, and he reasoned that he had sought a policy which would enable the Commonwealth to remain friendly with both Britain and Russia. Caught in the middle of these two powers, or more accurately between the personalities of George I and Peter, Augustus insisted that he only wished his Kingdom to be a friend to all. He then picked the worst possible time to try and gain some leverage from his position.

Unaware of all the facts, Augustus sent a mission to Russia with the aim of posing as a fair intermediary for Anglo-Russian diplomacy. Presenting Poland as a friend to Europe, Augustus’ Polish embassy was actually led by Sergei Dolgoruky, the son of the Russian ambassador whom Augustus had only recently called on, but the strange episode did not end there. The sums Augustus had given Dolgoruky for the sake of greasing the wheels in Russia were spent in an all-night bender in St Petersburg, and Dolgoruky treated the sojourn back to Russia as a chance to meet with old friends and relatives than to actually pursue any of Augustus’ diplomatic aims. This was because, as Dolgoruky well knew, Augustus’ aims were naïve in the extreme. Advising Dolgoruky to pose as some kind of priceless intermediary, Augustus didn’t seem to understand that by September 1720 the Tsar was in an unassailable position. The Tsar knew of Walpole’s rise and of his conflict with George; he knew of the HR Emperor’s unwillingness to commit to an anti-Russian alliance without the full agreement of the Poles and he knew of the Swedish desperation for peace. Dolgoruky was wined and dined by the Tsar as though he was a privileged Russian noble returning home, which of course he was. This last attempt at gaining some kind of leverage ended in farce for Augustus, and Peter saw right through his old friend’s efforts, sending Dolgoruky with a large gift worth three times as much as the stipend Augustus had given the Russian when he had left for St Petersburg. The message was clear, if somewhat playful; whatever Augustus could muster, it was a drop in the bucket to what Peter held at his fingertips.

Chastened by this failure and receiving the message loud and clear, it is at this point that Augustus seems to have switched his focus. From early 1721 onwards, Augustus would invest his energies not in attempting to pursue some kind of independent policy in the Commonwealth’s name, but in having his son approved for the succession to the Polish crown. In this quest, Augustus had the Tsar’s eager support, and thus the contract between the two men became even more important to the Polish King, as familiar concerns superseded national ones. After this flutter in independent policymaking, Augustus withdrew into the subdued and pliable relationship with the Tsar which he has become so infamous for. The recent years had been both enlightening and depressing for Augustus. Considering all that he had experienced, can we blame him for giving up on the Commonwealth and investing his energies in more tangible projects? Augustus had been halted in his efforts to bring the Commonwealth out of its Russian supplication by the same nobles and potentates whose descendants would later curse the Saxon King’s name.

It is an uncomfortable fact that during this period of the Commonwealth’s history, Augustus was only partially to blame for what befell Poland. Bitter infighting, self-interest and unwarranted suspicions were the illnesses that had plagued the Republic since the middle of the 17th century; Augustus’ tenure as King only went to show exactly how far such cancers had spread. In the same vein, the frustration experienced by Augustus and his potential allies taught Europe a lesson about Poland which it would never forget – the Commonwealth could not be relied upon as an ally, and its people cared more for their archaic constitution than they did for practical promises of aid and friendship. The Treaty of Vienna was the last time the PLC would be viewed as so important to the balance of power in Europe; never again would its powers rely upon the deliberations of the Sejm when considering their alliances. In the space of 20 years, the GNW had torn an irreparable hole in Polish independence and freedom of action. Far from interacting with the agents of the Sejm, in the future the diplomatists of Europe would cynically conclude that it made more sense to simply negotiate directly with the true master of affairs: the Tsar of Russia. Lewitter put it best in his conclusion on the Treaty of Vienna when he noted that:

The republic's failure to accede to the treaty of Vienna could only have shown her up as an unreliable and unrewarding partner in the game of international power politics and it is surely no coincidence that her status on the European chess-board was henceforth reduced to that of a mere pawn.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A pawn indeed, and as we saw last time it is more accurate to demark 1720 rather than 1717 as the year in which this status truly began. From late 1720 onwards, Augustus would abandon any semblance of interest in furthering his adopted domain’s position; with the Russian threat unsurmountable and the Commonwealth magnates crippled by their self-destructive obsession with their constitution, it made sense to look out for number one.

As the sun began to set on the Commonwealth’s sovereignty, it also began to set on the GNW. We opened the episode by denoting that the war had been waged for two full decades. During that time other powers had come and gone, but Russia and Sweden had, incredibly, remained in a state of incessant war without any truces or gaps for 20 terrible years. I cannot emphasise enough how transformative the GNW had been, because in its duration all the weaknesses of Sweden were exposed, all the strengths of Russia emphasised, and all the clichés of history brought to bear. It had taken one King, Charles XII, to bring Sweden to unimaginable heights of supreme triumph and power. It had taken one battle, Poltava, to crush this power and eliminate forever the Swedish military initiative. It had taken one conflict, one desperately long conflict concerning several external powers and vast swathes of territory, to turn the balance of power on its head. As 1721 dawned, Peter planned to put the exclamation point on this shift, with the greatest maritime invasion of Sweden yet seen. Blithely ignoring the Anglo-Swedish naval presence which now hid in Stockholm’s natural defences, Russian forces swarmed ashore in overwhelming numbers, and burned their way north and south in their quest for a peace.

Peter had never been so militarily or diplomatically supreme, and he knew there was nothing for Sweden to do but sue for peace. Frederick, seeing his Kingdom’s sufferings and understanding that all potential allies including Britain were due to fall by the wayside, sent some depressed Swedish agents out in search of a peace. The price would be high; Peter would be granted Livonia, Ingria and Estonia in perpetuity, while Finland save its southern portion would be handed back to Sweden. Russia would pay 2 million thalers to Sweden over four years in exchange for these gains, and Sweden could purchase grain from Livonia without the usual tolls, but the agreement was a stunning demonstration of what had come to pass. Just as Sweden had never seemed so helpless, Russia had never seemed so unassailable. The Peace of Nystad was signed on 14th September 1721, bringing to an end the 21 year war which punctured Sweden’s imperial aspirations, ushered in a new balance of power and represented a dramatic passing of the torch. Sweden went from the echelons of the premier league of European powers to the second or even third tier of states. The Swedish Empire, established during Gustavus Adolphus’ 20 year reign as King, was brought down low after a twenty year war. As quickly as it had arrived and changed absolutely everything about European relations, it was now gone, replaced by an Empire larger and more resplendent than anything that had ever emerged from the east before.

We have spent a lot of time detailing Sweden’s course in the series, which you may feel is strange considering its status as a PHM. The incredible fact about Polish history though is that it touches off so many other states as it progressed, and ventures into different epochs as it waxes and wanes. Sweden had been the great rival and foe of Poland, on both a dynastic level with the House of Vasa and on a military-strategic level after so many ruinous wars and deluges. The relationship had defined Poland as much as it had defined Sweden, so it was only right to give it a proper send-off. A lot can of course change in twenty years, but not even the greatest of imaginations in 1698 could have envisioned the map of Europe in 1721. A watershed moment had occurred, and Europe would never be the same again. Russia had begun its meteoric rise, and the bear had plenty of growing left to do.

In a joyous ceremony, the Tsar’s family, close political friends and the clergy all passed immense blessings and praises upon Peter in the week of celebrations and drunken revelry which followed the Peace of Nystad. On 31st October 1721, Peter appeared before the Senate and explained that he would pardon all criminals except murderers, only to be greeted by the plea that he accept the titles of Peter the Great, Emperor and Father of his country. The 47 year old Tsar hesitated, but said he would think it over. A few days later, during a church service conducted by his favourite clergyman, the Russian chancellor rose to the pulpit to address the Tsar, and performed the followed speech:

By your tireless labours and leadership alone, we your loyal subjects have stepped from the darkness of ignorance into the theatre of fame of the whole world, and, so to speak, have moved from non-existence to existence, and have joined in the society of political peoples. For that and for winning a peace so renowned and rewarding, how can we render our proper gratitude? And so that we may not be with shame before the whole world, we take it upon ourselves in the name of the Russian nation and of all ranks of the subjects of your majesty, humbly to pray you to be gracious to us and agree, as a small mark of our acknowledgement of the great blessings that you have brought us and the whole nation, to take the title Father of the Fatherland, Peter the Great, Emperor of all Russia.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Peter now nodded his head – he would accept the honours, henceforth claiming the title of Emperor over all the Russians, a title which was justified by the discovery of a cache of texts from the early 1500s that contained a reference made by HR Emperor Maximilian to Tsar Vasily Ivanovich as ‘Great Lord, Emperor and Dominator of all the Russians’. Whether Maximilian was, at that point, merely trying to flatter the Tsar in question in order to induce him to join the Habsburgs in an alliance did not matter – here was an example in history of the Tsar’s being given imperial honours by a HR Emperor, and so the Romanov claims to the title of Emperor would be declared historically legitimate and justified. Legal lingo aside, the world had indeed turned. The spotlight which for so long had shined on Russia’s neighbours, be they Poland, Sweden or the Habsburgs, would now be turned towards her Empire, and would illuminate the Tsardom for the next two centuries. Russia would prove greedy in its hogging of the spotlight, and as we’ll see, the lighting up of its lands plunged its neighbours, above all Poland, into a desperate national darkness.

Next time, we’ll row back our narrative a bit and finally analyse that significant event in Polish history, the SS of 1717. Having brought our coverage up to the end of the GNW, we’ll be able to examine the infamous capitulation in the context of the era, with some revelations which will probably surprise you, so I hope you’ll join me for that. Until next time, my name is Zack, and you have been listening to the PHM; thanks for listening and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. Lewitter, ‘Poland’, p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cited in Robert K Massie, *Peter the Great*, p. 741. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)