Hello and welcome history friends patrons all, to part six of the Jan Sobieski biography. Last time we brought our narrative up to 1667, where Jan Sobieski reached the height of his powers in the military, even while the Commonwealth seemed in dire straits. Seriously weakened by internal as well as external conflict, the ageing king John Casimir appreciated that what his realm needed most of all was peace. Peacetime would give the Commonwealth the chance to rebuild, to regroup and perhaps, if given the chance, to reform. Yet, John Casimir was an old man by this point, and it was rumoured that he planned to abdicate the throne before his death – something which hadn’t been done in living memory. This would pave the way for another election and a potential era of political instability at home, but the greatest concern to Jan Sobieski and his new and pregnant wife Marie by this point was the news that the Ottoman Empire had taken its turn to wage a destructive new campaign in the Commonwealth, through everyone’s favourite vassal, the Cossacks.

Although the Ottomans refrained so far from declaring war, they were more than willing to give their blessing to their new protectorate, the Hetmanate of Ukraine. With Ottoman backing, the newly unified Cossacks under Peter Doroshenko teamed up as usual with the opportunistic Tartars, and renewed their raids into Eastern Commonwealth lands. They defeated a small force kept there for national defence, and rolled up all settlements along the way, leaving the region essentially unguarded. Then, Sobieski was given the news that 20k more Tartars under their opportunistic Khan had crossed into the frontiers of the Commonwealth with the intention of laying waste to the region. Such actions demanded a swift response, yet the Commonwealth treasury was empty, its soldiery was exhausted, and the nobles were hesitant to act, perhaps hoping that a deal could be struck with the Ottomans that would end this period of endless war. Accepting the limits of the day as much as of his office, Jan Sobieski packed his wife off the Paris and set about trying to resurrect his homeland’s spirit, as much as its defences. Now more than ever, the PLC needed Jan Sobieski, so let’s see how he got on. I will now take you to mid-1667…

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The standard protocol in the Commonwealth in the event of war stated that the nobles should begin preparing their horses, armour should be fitted, swords and other melee weapons sharpened, and gunpowder gathered. Yet, after over a decade of nearly constant warfare, all that greeted the Cossack Tartar invaders, was a depressed silence. It must have seemed like the Commonwealth was positioned in the most volatile place in the world, as a proper peace had not been known in Poland’s eastern lands or across the Commonwealth proper in over 20 years. Bogdan Khmelnitsky’s Cossack revolt had opened the way for this period of turmoil, so now it was perhaps only appropriate that these Cossacks challenge the endurance of the Commonwealth yet again. Having recently lost his wife the Queen, King John Casimir was in a deep state of mourning and couldn’t even get out of bed. He entered a depression that spared no thought for Sobieski or the demands of the Crown, which he grew increasingly disgusted with as news of the continued attacks on the Commonwealth reached him. Waving away advisors and nobles, he shut his door to the problems facing his realm and asked simply to be left alone.

Under such circumstances, it was necessary for the constitution of the Commonwealth to kick in, and for the nobles to take matters into their own hands. In each region that a noble house controlled, levies were ordered raised and funds were requested. In the threatened eastern reaches, provisions were sent to ensure that the sets of strongholds could hold out against the enemy raiders. The chasm in monies desperately needed and monies actually on hand presented everyone with a problem. Jan Sobieski, as the man charged with leading and directing the defence of the Crown lands, took it upon himself to get personal with the Commonwealth’s expenses. He borrowed funds on his own credit from international financiers, and he pawned off some of his possessions to meet bills. He pulled in favours from friendly nobles, so that he could count on their horses, or their levies, but above all their service. For all the shortages, what the Commonwealth truly lacked after so many years of war was a steady supply of bodies willing to serve in the military. An eerie silence seemed to greet the calls for levies at the Sejm, and the western nobles seemed content to bury their heads in the sand, pleading exhaustion or poverty or both. Rousing these individuals would be no easy task, but Sobieski set to work in his procession due east, raising as many men and monies as he could. It was plainly up to him to set the example, in this great test of his mettle, his finances and his connections.

Sobieski’s biographer describes the army as being in a ‘miserable condition’, but noted that there was always some leftover veteran troops that could be relied upon. These were more expensive than raw recruits, but their experience was so desperately needed that Sobieski couldn’t afford to pass them by.[[1]](#footnote-1) In his march east, he managed to collect 3k heavy cavalry and collected about 2k foot on top of this. These would form the bulk of his army, while he also came to rely on minor nobility looking for distinction, former mercenaries out of work, and finally, as if demonstrating the desperate times in which Sobieski operated, peasants and young boys made up the final portion of his force. Two priests, perhaps sensing the need for counsel, accompanied the curious army, as it made its way steadily east. On his way, Sobieski built up his reserves and supplies with magazine drops, and fortified some castles as fall back lines in case his position became untenable.

As ready as he would ever be, Sobieski and his ragtag force arrived in the southern part of the Province of Podhajce on 4th October 1667. Positioned here, in what were essentially the wild lands of the Commonwealth, Sobieski knew he could expect to see the raiders soon. There was evidence everywhere the soldiery looked that Cossacks and Tartars had already been. Slain farmers and peasants dotted the countryside, and in the distance smoke rose from some of the minor villages and settlements that had stood in their wake. This certainly angered the men accompanying Sobieski, but division remained intense at the top level of the command. Sobieski, after all, was better known at this point for losing several men under his command during Lubomirski’s rebellion the previous year. He had yet to win a great victory as Hetman, and thus his men had to rely merely on his words rather than his example. When he outlined his defensive plans, all his officers, with few exceptions, objected on the grounds that they were outnumbered by such a large margin and could not hope for reinforcement. Arguing against Sobieski’s tactics to stand and fight in this place, the camp seemed destined to divide amongst itself at the worst possible time. Then, Sobieski rose to speak, and after hushing his men, delivered one of his by now trademark rousing speeches, saying:

Soldiers, I am determined to make no change in my plans. The event will show it be well laid or not. As to what remains, I lay not restraint upon such as have not the courage to face a glorious death. Let them retire and die in flight by the sword of a Tartar or Cossack. For myself I shall remain here with those brave soldiers who love their country. This crowd of robbers makes no impression upon my mind. I know that God often gives the victory, in a just cause, to the small number. Nor do I doubt by that he will protect us against these infidel invaders.[[2]](#footnote-2)

At this, Sobieski seemed to inspire confidence in the brave and shame in the defeatists, and all resolved, come what may, to stand and fight against apparently hopeless odds. If they failed here, each man knew, their Commonwealth would be utterly exposed to the enemy. It was thus imperative that they either repelled the invader, or died trying. ‘As midnight neared and the fatal day – 6th October 1667 – began, one could have imagined all of the Commonwealth holding its breath’, so said Sobieski’s biographer.[[3]](#footnote-3) As daylight came, the Tartars began the attack on the camp, and were gleefully met with the artillery, which the Poles had made great pains to ensure was brought. The effort proved worth it, as the cannon did horrific damage to the light horse archers that constituted the bulk of the Tartar raiders. If they broke through gaps in the Polish lines, they were met with charges of heavy cavalry, and until noon the battle continued in this way, until the Tartars drove off, for the moment repulsed. The Poles had lost 400 precious men, but all believed that the Tartars had suffered greater losses, even though they couldn’t be sure.


Polish-Lithuanian forces numbering no more than 9,000 defeated Cossack-Tartar forces numbering at least 35,000. It was a stunning victory, and set the stage for what would be a stunning military career for Sobieski.

For ten brutal days this process was repeated. Try as they might, the combined enemy forces couldn’t break the Commonwealth army. Sobieski by the end of the week had sent the word out for all garrisons in outlying forces to accompany him in the embattled camp, and this influx of soldiers on 13th October suggested that the Commonwealth had more soldiers than they actually had. The total numbers for the Commonwealth barely reached 9k, including the peasants conscripted to literally stand their ground. Tiring of these failing tactics, the Cossack Tartar force determined to attack the town of Podhajce, but this proved a mistake as well. Well-guarded with solid walls, the citizens within the town resisted and sent the word to Sobieski, who personally led 3k of his own men forward to relieve the semi-siege. When the enemy saw Sobieski’s reinforcements approaching, they withdraw further up a hill and began taunting, shrieking and hollering, in an attempt to intimidate Sobieski’s force.

The following day on 16th October, the enemy attacked down this hill in large numbers. Again, Sobieski held his ground in the makeshift camp set up outside the town’s walls, and this time he was joined by over 2k enraged villagers. Armed with pikes and even bows dropped by fallen Tartars, the villagers proved invaluable to Sobieski’s defence. When the enemy seemed to flounder, he then launched his surprise attack. From out of the town did 1k fresh cavalry ride, smashing into the right flank of the Cossacks and sending them reeling. These men were chased off the battlefield, and when the Tartars grasped what was happening, they were set upon by the villagers, who charged forward ahead of Sobieski. Somewhat taken aback, Sobieski ordered his own cavalry forward to accompany this impassioned advance. By the end of the day Sobieski had ensured that thousands of the enemy lay dead, while the town of Podhajce was totally saved. It had been a stunning victory, and demonstrated to the Cossacks and Tartars as much as the Ottomans, that the Commonwealth may have been down, but it was certainly not out.

Confirming the de facto promotion of the previous year, Sobieski was finally approved as Grand Hetman of the Crown on 5th February 1668. The sheer devastation within the Commonwealth had massively slowed all manner of bureaucratic functions, so that promotions like Sobieski’s had taken far longer than normal. Sobieski didn’t let the delay phase him, and he launched what was essentially a week-long party in Warsaw to celebrate his promotion. 1k troops participated, and Sobieski designed the triumphal procession so as to impress upon the population of Warsaw that the Commonwealth could still command the allegiance of several peoples, as Wallachian mercenaries, Polish janissaries in Ottoman dress and splendidly adorned dragoons made up the military parade. Part triumph, part celebration, part an attempt to raise the moral of the once despairing city, Sobieski’s act seemed to be just what the doctor ordered. He was then informed that Marysienka had given birth to a healthy boy, named Jakub after his father. The godfather, incidentally, was to be Marie’s personal friend, Louis XIV. Perhaps expecting that her husband would allow her to dally longer in Paris, where glorious parades like Sobieski’s were a daily occurrence and wealth seemed to flow from every orifice, Marysienka requested that she be allowed raise her son among her French relatives. Sobieski objected, ordering her to return home so that Jakub would be raised as a ‘proper Sarmatian’. As Marie returned home, she would have been given the same grave news as Sobieski. On 16th September 1668, King John Casimir, grief stricken and utterly disconnected from the goings on in the Commonwealth, had determined to abdicate the throne and retreat to a monastery in France. It was time to elect a new king. As a noble with a vote, Sobieski was required to participate.

The candidates put forward were a veritable who’s who of European royalty, as the second sons of royal houses or minor princely estates all seemed to consider themselves worthy of the throne. The French candidate, Louis, prince of Condé and the Habsburg candidate, Philip William duke of Neuburg were the principle competitors for the throne, but also in the running was the second son of the Russian Tsar, James Stuart, Duke of York and Charles of Lorraine. All candidates could be accused of having ulterior motives for seeking the Crown, and thus it was perhaps because the nobility felt the Commonwealth in need for a true protector and benefactor that a Polish candidate was insisted upon. The election was fraught with divisions as the Habsburgs and Bourbons once again made their rivalry felt. Again, perhaps because the nobility sensed that any candidate from either camp would become a pawn of that House, they determined upon an obscure son of a great Hetman. Michael Wisniowiecki was elected King Michael I of Poland on 19th June 1669.

Michael’s father Jeremy had been known as the Hammer of the Tartars, and had spent much of his career fighting as Hetman in the eastern reaches of the Commonwealth. Michael’s family claimed lineage from Korybut, the brother of Jagiello, the founder of Poland’s Jagiellonian dynasty. Yet, from the beginning his reign got off to a bad start. Michael was perceived by the nobility to be weak and passive, and thus no threat to their traditional liberties as John Casimir had been. Furthermore, although he was believed to be a neutral candidate, Michael tended to sympathise with the Habsburgs, thus drawing the Commonwealth closer to Vienna and away from Paris. This displeased Sobieski, as his family tended to side with the Bourbons, and his son counted the Sun King as godfather after all, but it also gave rise to discontent among the nobility, who began to regret their choice. Before long, this dissatisfaction escalated into the creation of several different confederations, as the nobility in certain spheres of the Commonwealth banded together and declared their unwillingness to accept Michael as King.

These troubles notwithstanding, Sobieski returned following Michael’s coronation in July 1669 to finally see his wife and son for the first time. It had been two years since Sobieski last saw his wife, and much had changed. Now the crown was in the hands of a malleable young man with no experience of governing or military affairs; King Michael preferred to leave the issue of governance in the hands of more experienced families, which would have been acceptable had he not chosen the one family with whom Sobieski had never been able to see eye to eye – the Pac family. It was this family of Lithuanian magnates that Sobieski had once fought a duel against out of rage. That duel ended up saving his life, since it meant Sobieski hadn’t been present during the horrific massacre after the battle of Batih, but the resentment remained. Further concerns abounded as the Cossacks under Doroshenko became concerned at the news of the new king’s election. They feared that because the truce had been made with John Casimir, the Commonwealth would seek to now break it and invade the Ukraine, compromising their independence. So it was that the Cossacks sent a deputation to Warsaw, demanding a great deal of territory in return for their passivity in the future. Sobieski urged Michael to exercise restraint and attempt to get a better deal through diplomacy, to save either he or more exhausted nobles from having to go out on campaign yet again against the Cossacks. Michael, influenced by the Pac family and the vengeful Sejm, determined to expel the Cossack representatives, thus missing one of the few chances to reconcile the Cossacks back into the Commonwealth. What was worse, this insult to Cossack honour pushed Doroshenko and his men straight back into the eager arms of the Ottomans. Again, Mehmed urged his vassals on. Again, Sobieski prepared himself for campaign.

In the meantime, the anger at Michael’s appointment bubbled over, with the royal camp and the so-called French camp butting heads. The lead primate of Poland refused to accept Michael as king, and opposition forces tended to rally around him with Sobieski cautiously looking on. It was correctly believed that Sobieski did not believe Michael to be a good candidate for the throne, but Sobieski by no means wished to take the crown for himself. Faced as the Commonwealth was with grave threats to its security in the east, all Sobieski really wanted was a stable monarchy willing to provide the necessary funds and resources to fight the apparently never-ending Cossack threat. When it became apparent that the Tartars were willing yet again to rally to the Cossack side, Sobieski urged King Michael to provide troops and funds. Yet the Pac family remained suspicious of Sobieski, and for the next few years Sobieski found himself terminally unable to confront the Cossack-Tartar threat. This enabled the enemies of the Commonwealth to raid with relative impunity, though not as fiercely as before, since their numbers had been depleted by repeated defeats. In 1670, Sobieski faced revolt from the nobility’s ranks, as those nobles loyal to King Michael and the Habsburg faction sought to bring a Sejm lawsuit against Sobieski for the misappropriation of funds. Sobieski’s forces and several other nobles rallied to Sobieski’s side, forming a Confederation at Trembowla in an effort to defend the Hetman’s honour and security. They recognised that the last thing the Commonwealth could afford was to see its commander in chief flung in prison on trumped up charges. Sobieski suspected that the accusations were politically motivated and came from the Pac family, and so he avoided Warsaw, seeking instead to launch a successful campaign against the Cossacks and Tartars in 1671 which would increase his standing and grant him greater political credit.

Indeed, in February 1671 the Cossacks began to raid with greater daring into the eastern Commonwealth, even capturing and holding a few towns, apparently in an effort to expand their domains. Sobieski once more funded another procession eastwards, gathering men and horses as he went. Displaying an incredible reserve of energy and patience, as he no doubt dreaded to leave his family again, Sobieski finally managed to pin down the combined Cossack Tartar force at the battle of Braclaw on 26th August 1671. It was here that 4k of Sobieski’s best cavalry surrounded and massacred the majority of the Tartar force accompanying the Cossacks, sending a clear message yet again to that people. ‘We hit them so hard’, Sobieski wrote, ‘that some were drowned in the river, others hid in the forests and the rest returned back to their lands, pursuing them for a further four miles.’[[4]](#footnote-4) Sympathetic nobles ordered through 5k men and cannon for Sobieski’s force, and through this reinforcement the Hetman was able to besiege one of the few remaining towns taken by the Cossacks, the town of Kalnik. On 20th October 1671, after learning that Doroshenko himself was approaching the region with a large force, and Sobieski moved out to finish the job once and for all. His forces lined up against the Cossacks and attacked over the course of the day ‘like a swarm of bees’ in the words of Sobieski’s biographer,[[5]](#footnote-5) before long initiating a route in the Cossacks that spread through their ranks.

Sobieski had won another triumph in the Commonwealth’s time of need, and yet his enemies continued to whisper that he had not gone far enough, and that he had refrained from pursuing the Cossacks in the hope that they could be hired for service against the stirring Ottomans. Such disobedience went against the royal instruction, even though Sobieski had generally operated ahead of the instructions of the court, as King Michael was frequently behind on the latest news. Acting independently of Michael’s court, Sobieski’s triumph in Warsaw was perhaps meant as a warning as much as it was a celebration. The anti-court faction plainly had their champion in Sobieski, and yet they could not persuade him to openly break with the King. Sobieski was adamant that civil war was the last thing that the Commonwealth could afford. Mindful of how devastating the Lubomirski rebellion had been, Sobieski urged the conspirators to refrain from making their grievances or intentions public. At such a fraught time, it was surely vital that the Commonwealth be as unified as possible. However, insulted by King Michael’s refusal to negotiate with them and by his openly pro-Habsburg stance, the Sejm planned for January 1672 looked set to be a divisive and potentially self-destructive one if the rumours regarding the Ottoman preparations for war turned out to be true. Jan Sobieski, appreciating the challenges that lay ahead, returned home to Zolkview Castle to spend the Christmas period with his family.

Surrounded in snow, with a perfect quiet setting in around his ancestral home, Sobieski could perhaps imagine that conflict and danger were far from his future. He engaged in hunting, where the wild deer proved a great challenge for Sobieski and his party of friends. After the event, they returned home victorious, ready to swap stories over a roaring fire in the great halls of the castle, as an army of servants prepared their kill. Much talk was given to the threat posed by the Ottomans, and opinions were openly shared about the King. Among friends, Sobieski insisted that Michael did not know how to rule, and exclaimed that if the Turks attacked the Commonwealth in its present state, then the very Commonwealth itself would crumble under the weight of its own exhaustion and division. What was needed, all decided, was a strong leader who could overcome the divisions of the nobles, and simultaneously unite the great families in their defence of the Crown. As ever Marie insisted that her husband would be the saviour of Poland, having saved it already so many times before. Sobieski took great comfort from her words, but even he would have reason to doubt the Commonwealth’s ability to resist, if yet another enemy entered the fray. It was one thing to evict the rampaging Cossacks and Tartars; it was quite another to defeat and destroy the organised and disciplined professional forces of the most fearsome Empire in the east, and perhaps in the world.

Determined perhaps to take their mind off such affairs, Sobieski and his party made a plan to wake hibernating bears in the course of a hunt. While preparing to leave for the inner-quiet of the great forests, a memorandum was received complete with a royal signature. It was from King Michael’s court and was addressed with all urgency to the Hetman of the Crown, Jan Sobieski. It requested his immediate aid and presence in court. The result Sobieski and his friends so feared had come to pass. Sultan Mehmed IV, not content with seeing his Cossack and Tartar vassals repeatedly fail to get the job done, vowed to do the job himself. News had arrived from Vienna on 18th January 1672 that the Ottomans were gathering at Adrianople, strongly suggesting that they were massing for a new European campaign. Then a Polish spy brought word to Sobieski a week later that the Turks were actively building bridges across the River Danube. The message couldn’t have been clearer – the Ottomans intended to strike in the next campaigning season; it was critical that Sobieski returned to the divided court and rouse his countrymen to battle once more.

Arriving in Warsaw in late February 1672, Sobieski was met with a deputation of the anti-court faction, who made it plain to Sobieski that they could not follow King Michael any longer, least of all into a great campaign such as the one which seemed to be building against the Turks. Sobieski urged them to think of the Commonwealth above all, and to hold off from making their grievances public, for fear of igniting yet another ill-timed civil war, but they did not listen. After gathering their supporters, the anti-court faction led by the Primate of Poland addressed the Sejm on 18th May and put forward a long list of complaints. Instructing King Michael to abdicate at once, the Primate argued that if he did not do so he would be forced to at the point of a pike. Perhaps counting on Sobieski’s allegiance, the Hetman bitterly felt forced into siding with Michael’s faction against the Primate, who was arrested along with much of his followers. A bloodbath was at least prevented, but the gauntlet had plainly been thrown down – King Michael could not command the loyalty of his subjects even in the Commonwealth’s darkest hour. After pleading with the King in the months before to soften his stance against the Cossacks, to negotiate with Moldavia and Transylvania and to seek an audience with the Habsburg ambassador, Michael demonstrated a distinct unwillingness to take the Ottoman threat seriously. An ultimatum had been passed to the Royal Court in early March 1672 from the Sultan, demanding nothing short of the Commonwealth’s total submission to the Ottoman yolk upon pain of destruction. The loaded offer was left hanging in the air in the months between, and this inaction had been the last straw for the anti-court faction, who finally aired their grievances, as we saw, in mid-May 1672.

By that point the trigger had already been pulled. On 23rd April 1672, at the same time when, thousands of miles away another devastating invasion was taking place under the direction of the Sun King, the Ottoman Sultan finished concentrating at Adrianople. By 2nd June, the first contingent of his army left the city, and within a week the Sultan was marching at the head of an army 100k strong. In early July, the Sultan crossed the Danube, where they were met by Cossacks, Moldavians, Tartars and Wallachians as vassals. Just a few hundred miles now stood between the Sultan’s immense force and the Polish heartlands, and just a few men remained in that heartland to meet the Ottoman threat. Considering this development, it is little wonder that the HR Emperor Leopold had attempted to pacify Louis XIV and remain aloof from the Franco-Dutch War which had just erupted. Once again, Christian Europe had divided against itself, and once again the Turk sought to take advantage. Understanding that this massive force greatly outnumbered anything he could muster, Leopold sought an accord with France so that he could focus on the Turks. This was bad for the Dutch, but potentially good for the Poles if the HRE’s attentions could be directed against the menacing Ottoman force. At this stage, there was no guarantee that the Commonwealth alone was Mehmed’s target – with an army that size, he could afford to strike in several places at once for greater effect.

In the event, Mehmed proved singularly focused on the target of the PLC, while Leopold’s own Western concerns drew him to focus more intently on Louis XIV than the Ottoman designs. Soon, thanks mostly to events in the Dutch Republic, the Commonwealth would be left to face the might of the Ottoman Empire alone, and few men in that realm could claim to be qualified to stand against this threat, than the Grand Hetman of the Crown, Jan Sobieski. Once again, Sobieski prepared himself for war.

1. Varvounis, *Sobieski*, p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid*, p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid*, p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid*, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)