



Paintings by Dutch artist Philips Wouwerman (1619-1668) of Polish-Swedish "Deluge"  
Swedish soldiers in blue and yellow colors, Polish soldiers in red or crimson.

IMAGES: DARIUSZ CABALLETOS-BLOGGER

# 'THE DELUGE' (1655-1660) — When Sweden overwhelmed Poland

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## Note to our readers:

Our story involves states that are known today as Germany, the Netherlands, Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Turkey and France. Complicating our task is the fact that during much of early modern history these nation-states were still in the process of formation and, except for France, some were not well known by their current names. We also need to note at the outset that there are multiple spellings for all of the place and people names, such as Casimir and Kasimir, Khmelnitsky and Chmielnicki, tsar and czar, Tatar and Tartar, Hapsburg and Habsburg. Finally, a word of caution about dynastic names that include Roman numerals: the numbers in the names come from a variety of sources and do not necessarily indicate any birth order in the dynasty. So, Charles IX might have lived after Charles XI! Alternatively, there might be more than one John III. For this reason, I add the Roman numerals in parentheses or leave them out altogether if not necessary for reader comprehension.

The 17th century is considered one of the most catastrophic in global recorded history for warfare, religious hatred, famine, natural disasters, and disease. In Europe, only three of 100 years were without war! The 30 Years War, from 1618 to 1648, is generally considered one of the most depraved, barbarous, and useless conflagrations in the history of the world. It was as if the world had just achieved adolescence with a horrific, terminal case of acne. It was however, out of this boiling cauldron that Sweden rose as one of the great powers of Europe, and simultaneously the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, by far the largest state in Europe, began a long decline and eventually disappeared from the map altogether. The story of this 17th century brings us some surprises, explains a lot about how we got here, and also reminds us of a dismaying truth: the political boundaries and place names may have evolved, but human nature has not. We learn from history in our endless efforts to not repeat it.

In the early 17th century there was little centralized power, and in most regions power was loosely based on land forcibly occupied by knights and warrior leaders. Might made right, and the winners took all and hung on to their gains as long as they could. Mercenary armies fought wars, usually, unpaid soldiers whose reward was plunder. Even today in all parts of the world there exists vast family wealth that has its origins in and is a vestige of conquest and pillage of foreign territories from bygone generations.

Surprisingly, war did not interfere that much with daily existence in the 17th century, the period that is the focus of this article. Life during war was not that different from life in peace, except for the intensity and frequency of theft, murder, rape, cruelty, torture, and famine. Even in peacetime, travelers could lose count of all the gallows with decaying corpses or wheels with broken bodies they encountered on the road. People lived in small villages often vast distances from other communities. War was a lottery. News traveled very slowly, and existence would continue as usual—until it didn't, and unknown armed men showed up on horses in your village to rape, kill, and burn everything they couldn't steal, to the ground. Regardless of in whose name they

rode, plunder was their pay.

Serfs remained with the land when the property was bought, sold, traded, or confiscated. Peasants were equally poor but enjoyed greater autonomy to relocate if they could find the means to do so. All preferred to live near fortified castles behind whose walls they could flee for protection if word arrived, again on horseback, that trouble was on its way. Gangs of bandits, marauders, and ordinary murderers were distinguished from armies by the sheer numbers of the latter, their orderly formations, and their occasional possession of cannon for knocking down walls of castles.

Political identity and loyalty were more directed to the leader of the military unit rather than unformed or inchoate nationhood, and it was not uncommon for a Frenchman to lead an invasion into France, or a Pole to participate in subduing Poland. Soldiering was a way to eat and survive, and for the lucky few, to be rewarded with lands and peasants of their own. When Sweden invaded the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the mid-17th century, most of their soldiers were Prussians and other hired



Europe configuration at the beginning of the 17th century.

Germanic people. There was little that could be called patriotism.

For the nobles, the land was the currency of wealth, because with it came the peasants who tilled the ground and fed everyone else. The nobles counted and compared their

wealth by the number of the peasants on their land. There was a built-in incentive to invade neighboring areas as the only means to prosper. It was incumbent on the nobles to protect their peasants in exchange for their

(Continued on page 18)

MAP: SPAINFORUM



(Continued from page 17)  
 labor; this was the unarticulated social contract. Peasants generally accepted their lot in life, and envy of others was limited to those in one's social class. Fear, habit and predictability were the opioids that made servility sustainable.

### The rise of royal families

By the early 1600s, Europe had a population of perhaps forty million peasants and only a few hundred noble families. Marriages between such families were used to consolidate land ownership and power, and unsurprisingly, the supply of potential mates was limited. There were familial connections between all the royal families on the continent, and marriages within immediate family members were so common that cousins were also in-laws. You were expected to mate within your class.

Peasant loyalties attached to family names, and so the family names of Bourbon and Hapsburg meant more than France and Austria. Palaces provided not only protection for the masses, but also emphasized the social distance between classes. Nobility and royalty benefitted by the cultivation of adoration and otherworldly mystification; they may not have been gods, but they were next in line. Their ostentation and comings and goings provided distractions for the masses of peasants, and education was reserved for the noble families.

Keeping wealth within noble families was inevitable. By the early 1600s, the greatest of these was the Hapsburg Empire, based in Austria and which reached to Spain, Portugal, parts of the Netherlands, Poland, Hungary, Germany and the current Czech Republic, parts of northern and all of southern Italy, Chile, Peru, Brazil, and Mexico. The Austrian Hapsburgs were Catholic and they competed with the Italian Roman Catholics for control of territory and influence. The Catholic Church was divided, and their Protestant enemies were equally divided, between the Lutherans and Calvinists.

### Sweden

Sweden became a modern state about 1523, beginning with Gustav Vasa, also known as Gustav (I), the founder of the House of Vasa, and who broke Sweden's relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. Gustav's son, Eric (XIV), acceded to the Swedish throne. Eric's brother John's (III) greatest achievement seems to have been his marriage to Catherine, a strong-willed Polish Catholic and the sister of the then king of Poland, Sigismund (II). Eric was very opposed to their marriage because of Catherine's religion. The couple set up house in Turku, Finland, where John was the autonomous ruler, and she became the Duchess of Finland. Eric and John went to war over a dispute in what is now Estonia, and John and Catherine



The Hapsburg European Dominions at time of The Deluge.



King Gustav Vasa I



King Eric XIV



King John III



Queen Catherine, wife of John III



King Sigismund III



King Charles IX

ended up in prison in Sweden, with John being tried for treason. While in prison Catherine gave birth to a son, Sigismund (III, of course).

John was freed by the nobles, whereupon he deposed and imprisoned his brother Eric, and became king of Sweden, to continue the Vasa line. His wife Catherine exerted considerable influence in Swedish foreign affairs, had her own chapel, and maintained her own staff including monks and priests. She initiated a counter reformation in Sweden, even attempting (and failing) to convert her husband to Catholicism. As a matter of fact, after Catherine died, John married an ardent Protestant.

Sigismund (III) was raised a strict Catholic by his mother and his most trusted advisors were Jesuits (the Roman Catholic Society of Jesus). Already an heir apparent to the Swedish throne, Sigismund was elected by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to be their king. A few years later, when he also inherited the Swedish crown, Sigismund sought to return Sweden to the Catholic Church, and he briefly succeeded in creating a personal union between Sweden and the Commonwealth. If the political map of that time had endured to this day, Sweden, by whatever name, would extend from the northern Baltic south almost to Turkey, and would today include much of central Europe, Belarus, and Ukraine!

But it was not to be. Unfortunately for Sigismund, his Protestant uncle Charles (IX) got him removed from the Swedish throne and assumed his place. For almost the next 70 years, the Swedish House of Vasa controlled the thrones of both Sweden and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, beginning with Catholic Sigismund in Poland and his Protestant uncle Charles in Sweden.

Charles (IX) was succeeded in death by Gustavus, who rose to military prominence during the Thirty Years War. The lengthy conflict within the divided Swedish House of Vasa destabilized much of the rest of Europe. The Reformation and Counter Reformation were winding down, and Christendom was at war with itself. The

superheated embers burst into flames in an orgy of bloodletting that came to be known as the Thirty Years War.

Historians credit King Gustavus Adolphus with establishing Sweden as a world power, and he became famous with his military victories in Europe's Thirty Year War, from 1618 to 1648. He is considered the father of modern warfare, Sweden's warrior king. When he rose to power at the age of 16, Sweden was engaged in three different wars simultaneously.



King Gustavus Adolphus

King Gustavus was justifiably proud of his achievements, and he had an eye to his place in history and began collecting souvenirs of his victories, insisting on his blood-spattered battle garments remaining in the growing collection of the Swedish Royal Armoury Museum, Sweden's oldest museum, established four years before Gustavus' death in 1632. He encouraged looting as the just spoils of war and developed a reputation as an avid raider of book collections and antiquities from vanquished territories. Perhaps he saw himself as the creator of a new, northern Rome, humiliating his enemies, bringing plunder home to Sweden by the boatload to bestow as gifts to his friends, and founding cultural institutions filled with stolen goods.

As an interesting footnote to history, Gustavus was succeeded by his daughter Christina when she was six years old. She began to rule when  
 (Continued on page 20)





Queen Christina

she was 18, abdicated when she was 28, converted back to Catholicism and moved to Rome. It was Christina's successor, Charles (X) who invaded the Polish-Lithuania Commonwealth, known as The Deluge. History turns on such seemingly minor, unanticipated details! What would the map look like today if Christina had not abdicated?

### The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

In addition to the Swedes, Danes, Dutch, and the rapidly disintegrating Hanseatic League, there was only one other state on the Baltic. Poland and Lithuania had formed a Commonwealth



Crown Princess Christina, taking Oath of Fidelity to the States of Sweden.

in 1569, called the Union of Lublin, that encompassed 400,000 square miles, with a multi-ethnic population of ten million inhabitants, perhaps more. Lithuania sought protection from the restive and unpredictable Muscovy (Russia), and Poland was gifted the entire Ukraine by Lithuania in the Union. By the mid-17th century, the Commonwealth was more than twice the size of France and extended from the Baltic Sea in the north almost to the Black Sea and the Ottoman Empire in the south. This new Commonwealth had some unique characteristics.

The nobles of the Commonwealth feared a centralized government, so



King Charles X

they agreed on having a king, but he had to come from a foreign country; he could not be from the Commonwealth; he could not be one of their own! Moreover, he would be elected by the nobles; he could not become king by inheritance, and the election of his successor could only be held after his death so that there was no chance of a current king handpicking his successor. There was no bureaucracy, and no trained and skilled hands tending to the affairs of state. Foreign policy was whimsical and reactive, at best.

As you might imagine, every neighboring state and principality aspired to put their candidate on the throne of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to advance their interests. Thus the elected regents

advanced the interests of everyone but the Commonwealth. In no time at all, powerful and influential Polish and Lithuanian magnates were being assiduously courted, and bribed, by these neighboring states. In essence, the Commonwealth was up for sale to the highest bidder.

The Polish-Lithuanian magnates didn't seem to care, as long as one of their "own" didn't become too powerful. To make matters worse, sometimes they had contested elections resulting in interregnums lasting several years, with no king at all while the nobles argued with each other. Moreover, occasionally the Republic had a hung election, with two elected kings at the same time. The fate of the Commonwealth took a distant second place to personal enrichment and status of the noble families.

Once a king was elected, the magnates of the Commonwealth did everything they could to deprive him of the ability to form a centralized government. He had no right of taxation, and he could not conscript an army. He had to rely on the private armies of the nobles. The king could never be more than an emasculated figurehead reduced to negotiating before the magnates for favors.

Poland had a parliament of sorts, the Sejm, any single voting member of which could veto any measure approved by all others, thereby making any changes virtually impossible. One dissenting vote could kill any legislation. They called this the liberum veto, and the magnates referred to their system as the Golden Freedom; their freedom to maintain the status quo and existing hierarchical order, including keeping the rising merchant class and their king under control.

It seems as if the primary purpose for having a king at all in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was because many of the neighbors had one, and marriages between royal families was a time-honored way for families to grow in power and territory. With all these intermarriages between royal families, things could get very complicated. On no less than three occasions the Polish magnates voted

a member of the Protestant Swedish royal family as king of their Catholic Commonwealth. This system resulted in endless conflict between the two countries and even civil war. When royal families quarreled, thousands, even millions, died.

to two years for messages from the tsar to reach the farthest boundaries of the empire. Because of the daunting rural distances to be covered on horseback or navigable rivers, the tsar sometimes opted to give the distant regions more autonomy and risk weakening their



The Swedish Empire at its zenith included Finland, parts of western Russia, Estonia, Latvia, and parts of northern Germany. It had a well-trained military but little money with which to pay the soldiers. The population of Sweden at the time was about one million. The Poland-Lithuania Commonwealth included parts of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, western Russia, and Moldova with a population of ten million. It was not aggressively seeking empire which would require centralized power and coordination (a strong king), but the individual nobles were not above personal adventures and land grabbing. For the most part, the magnates of the Commonwealth were obsessed with protecting the status quo.

### Russia's Time of Troubles (1598-1613)

In the still-forming Russian empire, which was to eventually encompass six million square miles, it could take up

ties (and obedience) to the empire. In the game of rewards and punishments, if a local leader of a distant region got big ideas of rebellion, he always had to weigh the risk of Moscow eventually showing up with a large army in retribution.

This first decade of the 1600s came to be known as Russia's Time of Troubles (Russian: Смутное время, Smutnoe vremya), a period of Russian history comprising the years of interregnum between the death of the last Russian Tsar of the Rurik Dynasty, Feodor Ivanovich, in 1598, and the establishment of the Romanov Dynasty in 1613. In a period of interregnum, any state with no one on the throne provided an irresistible temptation for neighbors to engage in mischief.

One such opportunist was Sigismund (III), the Catholic Swede sitting on the throne of the Commonwealth. His ambitions thwarted by being deposed and forever barred from regaining the Swedish

(Continued on page 22)



The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at its peak, overlaid over modern map.



(Continued from page 21) throne because of his Catholicism, he looked elsewhere. He now saw the Russian interregnum as his chance to secure his place in history by conquering Russia and converting them from Orthodox Christianity back to Roman Catholicism. A look at the map reveals his notions weren't as far fetched as first appears.

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth already controlled Smolensk, a Russian city only 200 miles from Moscow. Sigismund III sent his army into Moscow on September 21, 1610, and backed by his troops, he pressured the local boyars, clergy, and citizens of Moscow to accept his 15-year-old son, the Polish Prince Wladyslaw (IV) Vasa, as the new Tsar. Clearly, the Polish magnates were not overreaching in their concerns about the propensity of monarchs to establish dynasties! They had gone to such elaborate lengths to prevent this from happening, and here is this Swede running their state and has them embroiled in Russia's internal troubles! The situation is further complicated by the rivalry and hatred between three religious empires, the Russian Orthodox, the Roman Catholic, and the Protestants (Lutheran).

Sigismund (III) reigned as the King of Poland-Lithuania from 1587 to 1632, when he was succeeded by his son Wladyslaw (IV). In 1648, Wladyslaw was succeeded by his younger brother Jan Casimir (II). This family spent most



King Wladyslaw IV



King Jan Casimir II

of their lives trying and failing to regain the lost Swedish crown. Altogether, Sigismund and his two sons managed to occupy the throne of three different empires during their lifetimes: Sweden for eight years (1592-1599), the throne of Poland-Lithuania for 80 years (1587-1668) and Russia for parts of two years. The father, Sigismund, was connected by marriage to a fourth, the Hapsburg Austrian Empire.

### The Holy Roman Empire mid-1600s

For clarity purposes, the Holy Roman Empire in the map below



The Holy Roman Empire in the mid-1600s.

occupied the modern-day territory of Germany and central Europe; Wallachia and Transylvania are both parts of modern Romania. This region, as Voltaire famously stated, was neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire. It was not comprised of nation-states but of hundreds of principalities and small communities that later organized into kingdoms. Many of these tiny fiefdoms were suzerainties of the Hapsburg Empire.

### The Khmelnitsky Uprising

In the 1600s, the areas now known as Belarus and Ukraine were parts of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Ukraine was and still is a borderland between Europe and Asia. (Please note: It is not The Ukraine any more than you would say The France. They are just Ukraine, France.) It was populated mostly by Slavic peasants and Tatars and other ethnic remnants of the Mongol hordes that had swept through the region centuries before. Ukraine extended almost to the shores of the Black Sea, where it shared a border



Khmelnitsky's entrance into Kiev by artist Mykola Ivasiuk.

with the Ottoman Empire.

The Ukrainian Cossacks were the Wild West of the Commonwealth, and the efforts of certain powerful Lithuanian magnates to colonize this far-removed region and acquire immense land holdings provoked violent uprisings that weakened the Republic. A rebellion of the Cossacks against the nobles of the Commonwealth turned into a mass movement and battles involving hundreds of thousands of foot soldiers raged back and forth. Khmelnitsky wanted an autonomous Ukraine, and it didn't seem to matter too much to him if this happened through Poland, the Ottoman Empire, Moscow, or Sweden. At first, Russia under Tsar Michael Romanov refused to get involved with the Cossacks, to avoid war with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. As the Cossacks scored victories against the Commonwealth, the Tsar reversed his position, joined with the Cossacks, and in 1654 they invaded Polish territory.

### Sweden invades the Commonwealth

With Russia invading the Commonwealth on its eastern border, the ever-vigilant Swedes considered this a favorable time to invade from the north. They felt they had good reasons. They wanted to protect their acquisitions from the Thirty Years War on the south side of the Baltic Sea, and they had a score to settle with the Polish branch of the Vasa dynasty, who

were still trying to regain the Swedish crown. Two Swedish armies entered from Baltic ports in 1655 under the direction of Charles (X).

The Prussians (northern Germany) joined the conflict in 1656, and the Transylvanians (Romania in the southwest) thought this was a good time to advance their territorial claims on Commonwealth land.

At the beginning it looked ominous for the Commonwealth. A number of the most prominent magnates laid down their arms and cut deals with the invading Swedes, and many of Polish King Jan Casimir's soldiers simply switched sides and joined the Swedish forces, which swept everything before them. They overran Warsaw, Krakow, and many other towns and principalities were destroyed.

Polish/Lithuanian resistance strengthened, and eventually, the Swedes realized they could not control the Commonwealth. They gradually withdrew, forming new alliances as they went, trading peace by giving away chunks of Commonwealth land. Jan (II) Casimir fled the Commonwealth and gave up his aspirations to regain the Swedish crown. Eventually he died alone in a French monastery.

Over a span of six years, the period remembered as the Swedish Deluge accomplished nothing except to weaken the Commonwealth and engrave an invitation to neighboring states to seek advantage. It cleared the path for the further development of the Russian Empire in the early 18th century. The Commonwealth, between the Swedes and the Russians, gave up a third of its original territory, and there were millions of non-combatant casualties due to the practice of massacring every man, woman, and child in villages and towns as the invaders swept through. It is estimated that the Commonwealth's population

were reduced from ten million to six million and that the overall devastation was only exceeded by what Poland experienced in WWI or WWII.

### Why The Deluge?

The Swedish invasion of 1655 to 1660 was nicknamed 'The Deluge' (Potop in Polish) because even though in the end it was something of a stalemate, it began a period of decline in Polish history. Eventually, Poland was carved up in its entirety by the three powers of Russia, Prussia, and Austria, and disappeared from the map of Europe for 123 years, from 1795 – 1918.

According to historical sources the Swedish invaders destroyed 188 cities and towns, 81 castles, and 136 churches in Poland. Some towns and cities like Warsaw dropped in population by 90%, and many were not rebuilt after the invasion.

Finally, in the legacy of Gustavus Adolphus, the Swedes scraped Poland clean of everything of cultural value as they left, from the bizarre (windows, chimneys, and stairs out of buildings) to the sublime (rare books, manuscripts, and fine art). What they did not steal, they burned or destroyed. According to Wikipedia, after The Deluge, Poland became a cultural desert.

Most of the stolen items were packed onto boats, floated down the Vistula River to the Baltic Sea and from there shipped to Sweden. Today, they may be found in the Swedish Royal Armory Museum, in private collections, Lutheran cathedrals and libraries, or even adorning public places. Many of the architectural finds from Poland today grace castles, palaces, and residences in Sweden. One authority says most cities in Sweden contain artifacts from Poland and don't know it.

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