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HIS 112 (E80L)

Digital Project

Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

References

[Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth](#)

Great Wikipedia entry that provides a detailed overview of the events that composed the Commonwealth.

[Union of Lublin](#)

Encyclopedia Britannica article that states the details of how the Commonwealth was formally established.

[The Commonwealth](#)

Excellent Encyclopedia Britannica article that provides a detailed overview of the Commonwealth; comparable to Wikipedia's entry.

[Polish-Ottoman War \(1672-1676\)](#)

Wikipedia entry that provides basic information on the Polish-Ottoman War and how it impacted the Commonwealth.

[Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century –](#)

Excellent **book** that focus on how the Global Crisis affected different European countries. Especially focuses on the relations between the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Russia.
*need to be signed in to NOVA to access

[Citizenship and Identity in a Multinational Commonwealth: Poland-Lithuania in Context, 1550-1772](#)

Another great **book**. Provides background information on the different monarchy types, the Union of Lublin, the nobility, and the various citizens who lived in the Commonwealth. I recommend Part One for more of an overview of essential information and Part Two for detailed information about different religions and nationalities.

*must be signed in to NOVA to access

**not to be confused with a review of this book that can also be found through NOVA's library database

[Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth](#)

A surprisingly information packed entry from New World Encyclopedia. Comparable to Wikipedia and EB's entries. Format of this entry may read more fluidly than Wiki's.

["Why did the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth Collapse?"](#)

Truly outstanding video. While it focuses on specifically what caused the collapse of the Commonwealth, it also provides great background information. Two downside: auto-generated subtitles as well as a few spelling errors in the video.

Timeline

1386 - De facto personal union with the marriage of the Polish queen Hedwig and Lithuania's Grand Duke Jogaila

1569 - Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth formally established by the Union of Lublin

1606 - Zebrzydowski Rebellion; armed Polish nobles attempted to overthrow the king

1648 - Ukrainian Cossacks in the southeastern portion of the Commonwealth rebelled; fell under protection of the Russian Tsar at the Ukrainians' request

1652 - Practice of liberum veto (free veto) appeared; a single negative vote could block all political proceedings; contributed to the decline of the Commonwealth in the late 1600s and early 1700s

1655 - Swedish invasion known as the Deluge began; did not end until 1660

1672 – Start of the Polish-Ottoman War; Turkish forces invaded the Commonwealth; lasted until 1676

1675 - Austro-Russian accord promoted the weakness of the Commonwealth

1683 - Austria and the Commonwealth defeated the Turks but the Commonwealth was only a secondary partner and received very little despite their war efforts

1686 - Swedish-Brandenburg pact promoted the weakness of the Commonwealth; an additional pact again in 1696 promoted the same

1768 - Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became a protectorate of the Russian Empire

1772 - First Partition of Poland; occurred after the balance of power shift in Europe

1793 - Second Partition of Poland; occurred in the aftermath of the Polish-Russian War of 1792

1795 - Third Partition of Poland; remaining land of the Commonwealth was split among Prussia, Austria and Russia; the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was completely erased from the map of Europe

Essay

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was unofficially formed in 1386 with the marriage of Polish queen Hedwig and Lithuanian Grand Duke Jogaila. From the time of Commonwealth's formal union in 1569 to its total erasure in 1795, several factors contributed to its downfall. Four factors that led to the collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were its geographical position, constant warfare during the seventeenth century, the downward shift of trade and economic decline, and the involvement of other countries in political decisions.

A crucial factor that led to the collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was its geographical position. At its greatest, the Commonwealth "was one of the largest and most populous countries of sixteenth to seventeenth century Europe" (*YouTube.com*). While the Commonwealth's "Golden Age" was reached in the beginning of the seventeenth century (*New World Encyclopedia*), the rebellion of the Ukrainian Cossacks in 1648 marked the beginning of the nation's downfall (*Wikipedia*). Despite the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth avoiding involvement in the Thirty Years' War, enemies surrounded the dual state on all sides. With Sweden to its north, the Habsburg Empire to its southwest, an increasingly powerful Russia to its east, the Ottoman Empire to the southeast, and German states to its west, the Commonwealth faced military threats on all sides. In addition to its less than ideal geographical position, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, while large, was not equally populated throughout. Following famines and epidemics, along with loss of life associated with hostilities, the Commonwealth's population dropped from 11 million people to 7 million people (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). The eastern side of the Commonwealth, where Lithuania once stood individually as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, had a much lower population density than its western counterpart. Such uneven population distribution accounted for some of the military vulnerabilities within the state.

A second factor that led to the collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was the constant warfare the nation was subjected to during the seventeenth century. Such warfare was not limited to outside threats but also included internal ones. In 1606, armed Polish nobles attempted to overthrow the Polish-Lithuanian king, King Sigismund III Vasa (r. 1587-1632). King Sigismund III wanted to reduce the nobility's power by abolishing the elective monarchy that, in turn, gave nobles more power. This nearly successful attempt was known as the Zebrzydowski Rebellion. Roughly four decades passed before

great turmoil would begin. In 1648, Ukrainian Cossacks in the southeastern portion of the Commonwealth rebelled. Dissatisfied with the Commonwealth but also fearful of the consequences of their actions, the Ukrainians requested the protection of the Russian Tsar which they were granted. Following the Ukrainian Cossack Rebellion, the Deluge (1655-1660), and the Polish-Ottoman War (1672-1676), the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth found itself at one of its weakest points. The Commonwealth dealt with constant warfare until 1720 (*YouTube.com*) which caused irreparable damages such as loss of land, loss of life, destruction of farms, and loss of morale. The dual state that once flourished was now in shambles.

A third factor that contributed to the collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was the nation's downward shift of trade and economic decline. As a direct result from the constant warfare, the Commonwealth's economy drastically declined. The economy of the Commonwealth was fueled by "feudal agriculture based on serfdom" (Wikipedia). At its peak, the Commonwealth was Europe's largest grain producer. However, with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth constantly under fire during the seventeenth century, grain exportation significantly declined. The productivity of agriculture was severely impacted as many farms were destroyed by warfare and farmers were scarce. The "unfavorable balance of trade with western Europe" (Encyclopedia Britannica) could not be overcome, furthering the Commonwealth's economic decline. Additionally, many of the Commonwealth's treasures were lost forever as a result of Swedish invasion and looting.

A fourth, and perhaps the most influential factor in the decline of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, was the involvement of other countries in the political decisions of the Commonwealth. When the Jagiellon dynasty ruled (1386-1596), the Commonwealth flourished and was at its peak. As such, the end of the Jagiellon dynasty marked the establishment of an elective monarchy which increased the power of the nobility. The Zebrzydowski Rebellion was practically repeated when war broke out in 1715 between the Polish-Lithuanian King and the nobility. This war only furthered the political instability of the nation. Russian Tsar, Peter the Great, acted as mediator between the Polish-Lithuanian King and the nobility. This allowed him to further weaken the already unstable nation. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became a protectorate of the Russian Empire in 1768 (Wikipedia) which ultimately resulted in the partitions that completely erased the Commonwealth. Now under the Russian Empire, the

Commonwealth had no real say over itself. Attempts to save the Commonwealth through political and economic reform came much too late. Reforms that were established were simply undone by the Russian empire. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was partitioned in three different stages from 1772 to 1795. The Polish Sejm, part of the Commonwealth's parliament, "was obliged to give its consent" (Encyclopedia Britannica) at each partition as they fell under the Russian Empire. Following the Third Partition of Poland in 1795, the remaining Commonwealth land was annexed, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was completely erased from the map of Europe.

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth went from a powerful and successful nation to an unstable and weak state in a short period of time. The General Crisis of the seventeenth century greatly impacted a majority of Europe, the Commonwealth being a prime example. The geographical position of the Commonwealth, the constant warfare it was subjected to during the seventeenth century, its downward shift of trade and economic decline, and the involvement of other countries in political decisions all contributed to the collapse of the once great Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Images

Portrait of St. Jadwiga . Fine Art. Britannica ImageQuest, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 May 2016. quest.eb.com/search/108_225380/1/108_225380/cite. Accessed 12 Apr 2019.



Wladyslaw II Jagiello King of Poland (1362-1434). Photography. *Britannica ImageQuest*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 May 2016.
quest.eb.com/search/300_2281673/1/300_2281673/cite. Accessed 12 Apr 2019.



BATTLE OF WARSAW, 1656. - Polish-Lithuanian forces, led by King John Casimir II, fight invading Swedish forces. Line engraving, 17th century.. Fine Art. Britannica ImageQuest, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 May 2016.

quest.eb.com/search/140_1667956/1/140_1667956/cite. Accessed 12 Apr 2019.



1387: Poland + Lithuania – Graphic by M.K.
<http://cosmopolitanreview.com/polish-lithuanian-commonwealth/>



Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at its greatest extent (ca. 1630)

http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/File:Rzeczpospolita_1600.png



Topographical map of the Commonwealth in 1764

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polish%E2%80%93Lithuanian_Commonwealth

