Hello and welcome history friends and patrons all to the PHM episode 8. Last time Charles XII vacationed in Saxony, meeting with several foreign deputations, including one led by the Duke of Marlborough, as he gathered his forces in anticipation for the push into Russia. Meanwhile, in Russia, Tsar Peter prepared his own people and his armed forces for the Swedish storm which was to come. It would not be an easy task, but first, Charles would be expected to cross through the pawn stuck in the middle of the powers – the PLC, which, by the way is supposed to be the major focus of our series here. I can assure you, the microscope will be focused more heavily on Poland in the near future, but it is important to detail these seismic events from the perspective of the two major actors, not least because it reminds us that, only a few years after he had begun the war with so much confidence, ex-King Augustus of Poland was now relegated to a mere spectator role, as he waited to see how his friend and supporter Peter would cope with what was to come.

After close to a decade of war, with little chance for the Commonwealth even to recover in the aftermath of the war fought against the Turks at the end of the last century, it shouldn’t surprise us to learn that things were not looking so hot in Poland. The Republic, divided as it had been since the election of Augustus, and in the aftermath of the civil war which had not been allowed to properly heal, remained under the sway of the Swedish-sponsored King Stanislaus. King Stan may have been Polish by birth, but those loyal to the old Saxon King Augustus, and by proxy allied to Russia, were determined to continue on the fight, even if it brought their homeland to its knees. As events unfolded, they would have a great opportunity to use their Commonwealth effectively. As Peter still did not know for sure where Charles would strike next, he sought to make his passage through the Commonwealth as costly as possible by ruining everything he could find. Scorched earth seemed to symbolise that the titanic struggle had begun; after eliminating his other rivals, Charles had finally turned his full attention to the Tsar in the east. With results which were to be of profound importance for the lands he was about to march through, Charles XII of Sweden and Peter of Russia faced off – each man the nemesis of the other, neither man willing to give ground. Let’s see how it all went down, as I take you to early autumn 1707…

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They were Russian soldiers, but with a difference. Their faces were torn and pained, they whispered only of their captivity and had little time for idle chit chat. They were distinctive in number, at exactly 46 men, but their real distinguishing feature were their hands. On the right hand, two fingers were missing, the two fingers needed to fire one’s weapon at the enemy. Captured by the Swedes as they advanced, these soldiers had been punished in the worst possible way. In a move akin to the medieval English practice of removing the Welsh rebel’s same two fingers, to prevent his future use of the longbow, the Russians had been horribly maimed and traumatised by the experience. Lined up and made to endure the ordeal one by one, the cries and screams of their comrades echoing into the inky blackness of the October night when it was carried out, the 46 men were then allowed to return to their comrades 50 miles to the east. After a miserable trek homewards, they linked up with their friends, and showed them first-hand what they could expect from the barbarous Swedes as they advanced. News travelled quickly up the chain of command, and when it reached Peter, he ordered that each of the 46 men be placed in an individual regiment of the Russian army, so that he could serve as living proof of the low moral fibre of the enemy, and of the great cruelty they could expect when captured. The story of the 46 Russians, true or not, provides us with ample proof of the desperate and dark nature of warfare in the early 18th century. One rumour had it that Peter ordered 46 loyal Russians to cut off their own fingers and pretend it had been the work of the Swedes, to have the same effect, but either way, the great struggle necessitated that nothing be spared, and that both sides understood fully what was expected of them and what the enemy’s success meant for them and their families.

Before the Swedes had even arrived, Russian auxiliaries had done their best to destroy whatever solid shelter or food which could be found. Scanning through the north western part of Poland, since that was where the Swedes were expected to pass through, Cossack regiments inflicted wanton cruelty on the native Commonwealth citizens, as they burned down villages, slaughtered livestock and poisoned wells, and then simply left the citizens to their miserable fates. With winter approaching in 1707, the average peasant could expect little mercy from the elements, and even less mercy from the enemy. Poland-Lithuania was by this point little more than a wasteland sandwiched between the two rulers. King Stanislaus was able to benefit from Charles’ decision to leave some 8k men behind to support his reign, but he had little control or say over how the civilians, which were technically his subjects, were treated. He certainly preferred to see a negotiated peace, and had been corresponding with Charles ever since Augustus had been deposed to make some kind of arrangement with Russia which would free the Commonwealth from any further suffering, but Charles, as we saw last time, was immovable on the subject of giving any ground. The war would continue, and just as it had for the last few decades, the PLC would suffer the lion’s share of the consequences.

Peter had begun recruiting and rebuilding from the moment Augustus had abandoned the war, but he really stepped up his efforts in spring 1707, when it was clear that Charles would soon be in a position to move east. Accompanied by nearly 40k men, Charles would be at the head of the largest Swedish army the King had ever controlled, though the story of its nationality was a testament to the nature of one’s armed forces in the era. Although Swedes made up a majority, German mercenaries were a close second, some one of whom had followed Charles all the way along, others who only joined up with the Swedish King when he stayed in Saxony. Charles’ army seemed like a shining beacon of opportunism for those that could serve, and in an atmosphere of constant conflict, where the WSS had militarised the continent already, Charles provided an additional chance for one to escape the demands of the day; to leave one’s battered town behind in exchange for something more enticing and rewarding. In Moscow, the end goal of Charles’ advance, whispers and rumours dominated the city. In June 1707 the known Russian engineer Ivan Korchmin arrived to advise the Tsar on the necessary improvements which the city would require if it were to resist a Swedish siege. There seemed no question, at least in the minds of its inhabitants, that Charles’ legions were unstoppable, and headed straight for them. The Austrian envoy in the city wrote that:

Nobody spoke of anything except flight or death. Many of the merchants, under pretext of going to the fair, took their wives and children to Archangel whither they had usually gone alone. The great foreign merchants and capitalists hastened to go to Hamburg with their families and property while the mechanics and artisans went into service. The foreigners, not only of Moscow but of all the neighbouring towns, applied to their ministers for protection, as they feared not only the harshness and rapacity of the Swedes, but even more a general rising and massacre in Moscow, where people are already embittered by the immeasurable increase in the taxes.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Although the inhabitants of Moscow were behaving as though the Swedes were already at their gates, Peter was travelling all across the vast swathes of his lands, ensuring that the different fortifications in the Baltic, along the border with Poland and within the critical rivers along the Ukraine, were all up to scratch. These activities reflected the fact that Peter was not certain where or how Charles intended to strike. The Swedish King deliberately kept him and many of his own men guessing as he marched his large host eastwards, fully intending to bypass the challenge posed by the Baltic, and to head instead for Peter’s heartlands. Peter spent the remainder of 1707 moving across his domains, ensuring that the different nuts and bolts were sufficiently tightened, before making for Moscow, and then the fateful town of Grodno in January 1708. It had been at Grodno two years before that the Russian army had abandoned their positions and fled further east, after learning of the defeat of the main Saxon army at Fraustadt. This time, with the Tsar in their midst, they were determined to hold the critical line of defence, buoyed by the River Neman which provided a formidable challenge to any attacker, be he aiming for Russia’s Baltic provinces or its central lands.

The second half of 1707 had proven tough, but manageable for Charles. Along the way he had seen first-hand how desperate the Russians were, as they burned and pillaged as many Commonwealth supplies and towns that they could find. Everywhere the bodies of Commonwealth citizens littered the countryside, dumped here and there as if to advertise the lack of compunction which the Cossack auxiliaries felt for their Polish neighbours. Their orders were to destroy everything and kill any who resisted. Peter would not have any resistance, since any land or supplies left were a potential mercy for the enemy. He would draw the power of the Swedes out by making the most out of their long march. Even had Charles ventured north into the Baltic, such a strategy would still have made sense. The cynical Tsar understood that the Commonwealth could not oppose his actions, and that Charles’ puppet king possessed barely the means to police his cities, let alone his eastern marches. Charles’ strategy was relatively straightforward, but quite unlike his old rash approach. Rather than waste his men on pitched battles in the approach towards Russia, Charles would seek to avoid a battle within Polish lands, and would instead outflank any Russian positions he came across. Once outflanked, the Russians would fall back out of fear of being cut off. This strategy enabled Charles to move quickly without great losses, but they also meant that the Russians were able to regroup and join with the larger portions of their comrades.

Charles believed with good reason that his advance alone would strike fear and loathing into the Russian psyche, and that the closer he came the more demoralised the enemy would be. He had good reason to expect little in the way of resistance from the average Russian soldier, since they hadn't shown him much to impress him so far. Charles’ strategy of repeated flanking manoeuvres gave the impression that he intended to strike at Russia’s Baltic possessions, since his army seemed to gradually curve towards the north east. Blocking Charles’ path by November 1707 were a set of lakes and marshlands known as the Masurian district. This portion of the Commonwealth was mostly inhabited, save for the collection of peasant villages hostile to all. When it came time to wresting the desperately needed forage from these hardy folk, Charles could not afford to give quarter. He would capture a child of the household, and attach a rope around its neck. If the citizens in the house would not reveal where the goods were hidden, then the child would be strangled right in front of them. If the goods were revealed, the child was freed, but the family was almost certainly destined to starve to death in the aftermath. It was a terrible, bitter advance, and it spoke to the horrific ordeal suffered by the entire Commonwealth in the period. It is important to denote that Charles could be as cruel as the supposedly more barbaric Tsar when he needed to be, but the merciless campaign seemed to do the trick; by late January 1708, Charles’ force had endured the trials of the Masurian region, and emerged a few miles from Grodno, that key fortress on the River Neman. By an incredible stroke of fortune, Charles happened to be about to focus an attack where, unbeknownst to him, the Tsar of Russia had temporarily called home.

Neither foreign observers nor the Tsar himself had expected Charles to move so far so fast, but his rapid progress seemed to confirm, at least in the eyes of the courts of Europe, that Peter’s days were numbered. Up to this point reluctant to give the nod to King Stanislaus’ regime, when news of Charles’ incredible feat of military organisation reached Europe, and in the months that followed when it was learned that he had captured Grodno and stood at the crossroads to Russia, good news began to reach Charles’ camp. Queen Anne had elected to recognise King Stanislaus as King of Poland, and with this act, the dominos began to fall across Europe, as even the Danes accepted that Stanislaus was King. Three once formidable rivers had been crossed, Lithuania now lay open, and Charles could pick with leisure whether the Baltic or the Russian heartland would now be his. Throughout Western Europe, few gave Peter much of a chance. His behaviour, when confronted with the Swedish advance up to Grodno, had been to flee in the face of Swedish flanking manoeuvres. Had Charles actually known that Peter was before him in the fortress of Grodno, he likely would have besieged it and led a frontal assault himself, but in the event, Peter and most of his army were able to escape largely intact from the close shave.

Both men felt the pressure by this stage, with Charles and Peter’ armies rocked by disease and shortage of forage. The destruction of much of the countryside, as it happened, also hampered the Russian ability to feed themselves, and as a result there could be little time for guerrilla warfare in the lands already left to the invader. With Charles’ capture of Grodno in early February 1708, Peter began his long march back to Moscow, and ordered that a deep belt of devastation 120 miles in depth stretching from Pskov to Smolensk would be inflicted upon the country. Peter’s decision to inflict such a wound upon his own lands surprised Charles, who hadn't expected the Tsar to resort to such measures outside of Poland. Peter was in a position to carry out this policy because he possessed by far the superiority in numbers, and commanded large bands of Cossacks who could rampage throughout the countryside. The main portion of his force, some 56k, were positioned to protect Minsk, while another 24k had been reserved for St Petersburg alone, demonstrating that Peter really, I mean *really*, liked his new city. Another 16k had been left to shadow the Swedish near Riga. All of these armies were meant to be able to act flexibly, to split off, to garrison different regions and, most importantly for Peter, devastate the Russian, Ukrainian and Polish countryside.

Facing down Peter’s scattered forces of nearly 100k were Charles’ main force under his command of 35k, stationed mostly around Grodno by spring 1708. One of Charles’ trusty lieutenants, a man named Lewenhaupt, had 12k men at Riga, ready to join him, while a further 12k were coming from Finland, and 8k resided in Poland. If commanded to, Charles could get these men moved up, bringing his numbers to 67k, if Stanislaus would free the Swedish units that is. Charles was of course used to being at a numerical disadvantage, but the campaign ahead would be his hardest yet. Not because of Peter’s tactical skill or superiority of command, but because the Tsar famously made use of the resources at his disposal. He may have had the larger army, but what he possessed above all was the larger Empire. The very long road to Moscow would run through the terrible depredations of the Russian and Cossack burning campaigns, and the scorched earth meant that Charles never had an opportunity to refill his stores or replenish his manpower. For every man Peter lost, another could be found, yet for every man Charles lost, that was another man gone, permanently. There could be no question of what Charles needed; he needed both supplies along a reliable rout, and a decisive battle which would rouse his troops and damage Peter’s efforts.

Yet even when the Swedish assaults came and victory was achieved, it did not possess the same sting as before. Even when the King personally led his army against a thinned out Russian line in the battle of Golovchin on 4th July 1708, 100 miles west of Smolensk, victory was his, but the Russians did not shatter and break as rapidly as before. Nor did they withdraw in a vulnerable disorderly mob which could easily be consumed. Finally, it seemed, the years of bringing the Russians up to the Western standard of military training had done the trick. A series of river lines bisected the vast countryside, which resembled little more than a smouldering wreck, with the red glow of fires lighting up the Swedish camps at night, and smoke visible in the distance at all times. Such fires spoke to the fact that Charles would find no relief or respite the further east he marched, and it is perhaps at this point, in August 1708, that the King of Sweden began to understand his difficult position. For two months, Charles quartered his men on the west bank of the river Dnieper while he waited for the reinforcements and badly needed supplies of Lewenhaupt. Charles was actually more concerned that his lieutenant would be left behind and cut off than he was desperate for the relief Lewenhaupt’s presence would bring.

The 12k men and wagons of supplies in his care in fact continued their drudging march through desolate wastes in an effort to catch up with their King, but by September Charles felt he had waited for too long. Much of the best months of the campaigning season had been spent staring menacingly across the river Dnieper, as Charles’ 35k men waited to make the final crossing. Eventually, impatient at waiting, Charles moved across with his men, moved due south in a bid to fool the Russians, and then moved north, apparently intending to attack Smolensk. Charles reached the settlement of Tartarsk, a fortress town some 50 miles south east of Smolensk. By the rough standards of the day, Charles was now poised on the technical state borders of the Russian Empire, the space in between having been the marchlands whereby Polish and Russian magnates had for so long striven for power and influence, and where Peter had, as we know, ordered the destruction of the land. Charles may have anticipated that reaching within two day’s march of one of Russia’s most important cities would represent a turning of the tide, or at the very least that the Tsar would now refrain from burning his Empire to the ground. Yet, as they reached Tartarsk, the road to Smolensk plainly illustrated that the Tsar intended to burn everything in Charles’ path. The Swedes could now not even be sure if Peter would leave Smolensk standing in his bid to chip away at Charles’ army. Furthermore, Charles had to admit that Peter’s strategy was working.

Although September 1708 resembled a great feat for the Swedish King, having marched his men over so many hundreds of miles of enemy ground, he was still no closer to victory than he had been when he started. With each day that now passed, Charles’ army grew hungrier and fewer in number, while the Russian presence outside the immediate Swedish positions grew stronger. It was now that Charles determined to make a bold strike south, into the Russian provinces thus far untouched by Peter’s scorched earth policy. Once in these lands, where the harvest was being cut and livestock was plentiful, Charles could receive Lewenhaupt and then move with greater determination and a refreshed army to Moscow, which itself was another 200 miles beyond Smolensk. The plan seemed the best Charles could muster on the fly, and the Swedish columns began moving south, rather than north east. Leaving Smolensk be came as a surprise to both its inhabitants and Peter, who expected Charles to begin a siege outside its walls. Yet Charles knew full well that he was in no position to besiege anything; so long as Peter continued to destroy everything, the Swedes could not feed themselves, and so they could no stay still.

Charles’ decision to march to the richer south effectively doomed Lewenhaupt’s baggage and reinforcement. On 28th September 1708, with his King moving still further away from him, Lewenhaupt’s critical columns of men and materials were attacked and effectively destroyed by a large Russian force led by the Tsar in person. Lewenhaupt had been isolated and picked off by the opportunistic Tsar, who, unlike Charles, had received word of how far out he had been from his King. Charles’ error was thus clear by the time Lewenhaupt’s wounded survivors returned to Charles’ camp, as Peter’s men pillaged the battlefield and did not follow. The Swedish King had not waited long enough, and had he only waited another fortnight, he could well have enjoyed Lewenhaupt’s bounties and made a fresh go of it against the Russians. Now, joined by 6k more starving and exhausted Swedes, Charles’ position seemed helpless. He combined these men into his own army, and continued his march south into the hopefully, more plentiful lands of Severia, a Russian province which effectively bordered the north of Ukraine. Approaching these lands, Charles was nearing the residence of the Cossacks, that horde of hardy, resolute cavalry who 50 years before had rebelled against Polish authority, setting in motion in the process a chain of events which had led, effectively, to the Commonwealth’s status as a hostage of the Russo-Swedish War.

Advance detachments of Charles’ army had moved south to secure the necessary bridges leading into Severia, and while on their way they learned of the stance of the Hetman of the Cossacks, Ivan Mazeppa. Mazeppa had led his people for over twenty years against all comers. Now at the ripe age of 63, the wiry leader remained as cunning and ruthless as ever. Pledged as he was to the Tsar, but led to imagine, as all Cossack Hetmans had been, of a united and independent Cossack homeland in the heart of the Ukraine, Ivan Mazeppa posed a great opportunity to Charles. If he could flip the leader of the Cossacks, then surely the entire region around the Ukraine, and all of Mazeppa’s men and materials would follow. Such a defection in the Russian camp would be a boon that could greatly offset Charles’ problems, especially with the news both of Lewenhaupt’s disaster, and of the further news that Sweden’s Finnish army had attempted and failed, with heavy losses, to seize St Petersburg.

Originally, Mazeppa had been a cautious observer of the war. Charles had sent him several warm messages, and promised that he intended to drive straight for Moscow, whereupon the Cossacks could be granted greater autonomy under the Swedish yolk. Charles also had to consider the Polish factor; if Stanislaus wished to be brought more on side with his Swedish paymaster, then the best way to do so was to grant him the loyalty of the Cossacks which his ancestors had once enjoyed. Nothing promised friendship more than the awareness of old wounds, and Sweden’s handing of the Cossack patrimony back to Poland would work wonders for their alliance, as well as grant greater popularity and prestige to Stanislaus’ reign. Because of this, Charles couldn’t simply promise Mazeppa complete independence, but the very presence of the Swedes persuaded the Cossack Hetman, almost despite himself, to throw his lot in with Charles, and on 27th October 1708, the Cossack Hetman switched sides. Far from panicking at such alarming news, Peter instead sought to trap Mazeppa’s rebellion and isolate it before it spread to other Cossack bands. Appealing to the common Orthodoxy of the Cossacks and the affinity which they thus held with their Russian protectors, Peter urged Mazeppa’s people to abandon him and remain loyal to the Tsar. Alluding to the Swedish friendship with the traditional enemy of the Cossacks – the Poles – Peter’s arguments seemed to have done the trick. He successfully persuaded the Cossacks to abandon their old Hetman, and then promised them great financial rewards for every Swedish officer or soldier killed or captured.

Another event of great fortune for Peter was that his forces managed to reach the Cossack capital, Baturin, before Charles could. Once Mazeppa’s defection became known, it was imperative that the richly provisioned Cossack stronghold not fall into enemy hands – in short, whoever commanded the bastion could expect to command the loyalty of the Cossacks. As Charles sought to move south as fast as he could, Peter took advantage of the pre-existing Russian presence in the region of the Ukraine, and a small force stormed the capital before much resistance could be sufficiently offered. Thus captured, the Russians burnt and destroyed Baturin, slaughtered all 7k of the inhabitants inside it, and made off to the east with its provisions. By the time Charles’ army arrived at the smouldering ruins of what had once been Baturin, he accepted that his army and his strategic position were in dire straits.

Yet, for Charles, all was not lost. With the heartbroken and desperate Mazeppa now in his charge, the Hetman informed Charles that, with winter approaching, his subjects would have taken in the harvest and stored their provisions in their farmlands to the south of the capital. Charles’ men could expect a battle to take these desperately needed resources off Mazeppa’s subjects, but since the latter had abandoned their old Hetman, Mazeppa felt little compunction in leading Charles to all the best places where plunder could be found. Finally, in mid-November 1708, Charles’ depleted and starving army had the opportunity to rest and refill their tanks. Bread, beer, honey, corn, tobacco, hay and oats all waited to be seized by the Swedes, and Charles left nothing tied down. Locals were even ordered to construct wagons so that Charles’ army could take away what and store for later what they could not consume on the spot. It was just as well he did so, for even while the Swedes’ appearance to the inhabitants of the rich Ukrainian plain must have seemed to them like an apocalyptic horde of locusts, this was the last bountiful experience this tattered army, now far from home, was to enjoy.

Charles’ Russian sojourn had taken far more out of him than he had expected. Now in enemy territory, with little hope of reinforcement and scant opportunity to deal the decisive blow he needed, Charles would have to hope that during the winter, he could deliver one of his famed surprise campaigns, and roll up the Russian army by the time spring came. Yet, unfortunately for Charles, he had the supreme unluckiness to be deep in one of the most exposed landscapes in Europe, as one of the coldest winters in historical memory approached the continent. In a devastating natural disaster felt all across the continent, and commented on by Europe’s major contemporaries, the horrific severity of the winter of 1708-09 brought some of the worst devastations on Charles’ forces. In Louis’ France, the wine would freeze in the cellars, rabbits would freeze in their burrows, and fashion was everywhere abandoned in Versailles as all struggled to keep warm. Exposed to the worst excesses of the artic conditions, Charles’ already worn men faced even greater trials. Some 3k men would die from the elements, and the army which emerged on the other side in the spring of 1709 resembled not the glorious legions of Carlos Rex, but the demoralised, traumatised train of men far from home, and eager to see their King’s adventure brought to an end.

Yet, these men, many of whom hailed from different corners of a continent now ravaged with war at both ends, were not led into Russia by a man who knew compromise. The 26 year old King of Sweden was adamant that any such losses be incurred with forbearance. As impossible to bear as the winter seemed, Charles insisted that, come spring 1709, he would lead his battered legions due south again, where a series of vulnerable targets lay, daring him to approach. Despite the pleas and urgings of his civilian ministers that had been brave enough to accompany him and his officers who had so eagerly followed him into Russia, Charles was determined to continue this grim duel with the Tsar even if it killed him. Envisioning a great reversal and the eventual defeat of Peter in which he still believed, Charles sent a succession of urgent messengers back to the west into the lands of King Stanislaus. Once, Stanislaus had regarded Charles’ invasion of Russia as the necessary evil, through which, after some additional suffering for his people, the Tsar would be comprehensively defeated and a lasting peace could return. News from his Swedish ally since the campaign began had been sketchy at best, but rumours of setbacks and searing Russian victories unnerved Stanislaus, surrounded as he was by enemies both foreign and domestic. With the arrival of Swedish messengers urgently calling Stanislaus into action, the gravity of Charles’ position seemed clear. For the sake of his own crown as much as Charles’, it was vital, Stanislaus understood, that he act to support the Swedes. As he examined the resources available to his parched, depressed and utterly depleted Commonwealth though, Stanislaus must have wondered to himself where and how the men and materials could be found.

Next time, we’ll continue our examination of Stanislaus’ most important patron, as the Swedes continue their push into the Russian lands for 1709. Hoping as he did for a battle which would save his position, Charles was relentless in his pursuit of his foe. His relentless would grant him the battle he desired, but with a result that the once resplendent Swedish King could scarcely have imagined. So I hope you’ll join me then as we continue to unpack this incredible story. Until then though, my name is Zack, and thanks for listening to the eighth instalment of our miniseries on Polish history, I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. Cited in Robert K. Massie, *Peter the Great*, pp. 427-428. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)